

4. Questions to Ministers without Notice - The Chief Minister

4.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

In the written answer to me this morning, Sir, the Chief Minister said in reference to senior appointments: "Where the person requires specialist experience and it is considered that a suitable appointment may not be made from local applicants, then an advertisement may also be placed outside the Island." Could the Chief Minister please tell us, Sir, who makes the decision that an appointment is going to be made from outside the Island?

Senator F.H. Walker (The Chief Minister):

If an appointment is made outside the Island it is generally speaking for a very high level job; not always because there may be positions where particular expertise - in health for example or education - is simply not available in Jersey. But generally speaking it will only be for senior appointments, and of course the decision then is taken by the interview panel advised by and assisted by and working to the rules of the Appointments Commission.

4.1.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Could the Chief Minister identify the role that a Minister plays in this process?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Ministers tend to play little part in the process and rightly so. That is why the States appointed the Appointments Commission to set up procedures and all senior appointments adhere rigidly to the procedures of the Appointments Commission. The Appointments Commission are directly involved in the process and there is always a member of the Appointments Commission involved in the interview panel.

4.2 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Members were presented with this document yesterday, which was the Social Policy Framework for Jersey, and I have not had a proper opportunity to read it from cover to cover, but the question I would like to ask the Chief Minister is that this document no doubt contains words such as "inclusive", "fair" and "equitable". The States of Jersey is the biggest employer in the Island and the question I would like to ask is when does the Chief Minister intend to bring to the House a policy that promotes the employment of people with special needs in the States of Jersey?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I cannot give the Deputy a specific date. What I can say to her is that the Council of Ministers will be receiving a major presentation by the Director of Human Resources next month and that is one of the topics that he has been asked to address. So the Council of Ministers will be discussing it and I would hope I would be in a position to come back to this House very shortly thereafter.

4.3 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

We have heard this morning from the Treasury Minister that we have no control over the investments made into the P.E.C.R.S. I would like to ask the Chief Minister what control we have over other States investments and when will the report on ethical investments be made available to the House?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The control that I have over States investments is limited at probably nil. From a political point of view it is very much a matter for the Treasury and Resources Minister but, of course, there are some investments that come under specific funds which are administered differently, not least, for example, the Social Security Fund where there are different controls. There are trustees in place, as the Treasury and Resources Minister said, also for other funds. So far as the report on

ethical investments is concerned, I still await it. I am anxious... and it is not the first time the Deputy has asked me the question. She knows that I have been attempting to get an answer to her question. I am saddened and disappointed that that has not yet come through. I will continue to apply pressure.

4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

At the Council of Ministers on 4th May a decision was made to further delay the Income Support Scheme. Could the Chief Minister inform Members what the major reasons were for implementing such a delay and will he state to us what minutes are available of this particular decision?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The minutes dealing with that second point: the minutes are available as always. They are standard Council of Ministers minutes and the Deputies are well aware of the rules governing those. I think the Social Security Minister has already dealt with this point. The major reason for deciding to defer the introduction was to give the Social Security Minister and his team and, more importantly, the beneficiaries of the Scheme and the public generally and, of course, not least States Members more opportunity to consider all the ramifications of what is an extremely complicated Scheme. I believe the Deputy is seeking to suggest that the Scheme was not ready to go according to the original start date; it was, and that was not the reason it was deferred. The reason it was deferred was to make use of the additional time the States now has at their disposal because of the delay of introducing G.S.T. That is the principal and, effectively, the only reason.

4.5 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Would the Chief Minister, in elaborating upon the appointments process, say at what point a department is asked to produce a succession plan so that evidence is produced that a thorough process of development of candidates has occurred but none of those is eligible?

Senator F.H. Walker:

That will depend on the situation. It will depend on whether a retirement is known to be occurring within a certain period of time and/or depend on whether there is a sudden resignation or illness or whatever, so I cannot give a specific process there. What I can say to the Deputy is that there are robust processes in place and I would invite him to either discuss them with me or with the Director of Human Resources so that I can fully apprise him of how they are implemented.

4.5.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

As a supplementary, Sir, would he not accept that a lot of the concern about recent appointments is that particularly in the discipline services matters like retirement dates are, generally speaking, highly predictable and there is enormous latitude for preparation in those cases?

Senator F.H. Walker:

No, Sir, I do not accept that at all. I think the States have a very good record of late in appointing the right people to the right job, and there is no doubt in my mind at all that the quality and the ability level of chief officers and other senior officers has gone up considerably in recent years. Now, should local people be given priority? Yes, wherever possible. But quality is what we are looking for, and ability. I am constantly reminded by the Deputy and other Members of this House of the need for efficiency. You only get efficiency with able senior officers, and we can all remember - we do not have to cast our minds too far back - a couple of occasions at least where local candidates have been chosen against candidates with more ability to the detriment of their department and the States.

4.6 Deputy A. Breckon:

I wonder if the Chief Minister would like to comment on the present high level of inflation, the rumoured double digit rise and the overheating of the residential property market. Does he think this is good news for residents, the economy and economic growth?

Senator F.H. Walker:

High inflation is never good news, at least not for the majority. But I do not know where the Deputy gets his concerns about double digit increase in house prices from. That is not borne out by the facts. What we are facing here, of course, as I think the Treasury and Resources Minister has made clear, is a great deal of our inflation being affected by circumstances completely beyond our control, i.e. bank interest rates. R.P.I.X., which is within our control, has been within half a percent of our target of 2.5 per cent now for I think it is the last 9 quarters.

4.7 Deputy J.B. Fox:

The Chief Minister has just referred in succession planning to the quality of candidates and giving assurance about local succession planning, but I wonder if the Chief Minister could identify - not necessarily today - that some departments in their cutbacks that were submitted have deleted training and succession planning commitments in their budgets. That part concerns me. I wonder if the Minister would arrange for having an answer as to how many departments and how much and did that affect that some of our candidates for recent applications have not been successful because of lack of training.

Senator F.H. Walker:

I absolutely acknowledge the point the Deputy is making and it would concern me as well if there was a general trend throughout the States to cut back on training and management development. I think the written answer I have given to his question confirms that that is most definitely not the case and the Human Resources Department is moving in exactly the opposite direction, seeking to ensure that as many internal candidates as possible are eligible and capable of taking on more senior positions. But I will look into the question he has raised and provide him with an answer as soon as possible.

4.8 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

Would the Chief Minister not agree with me that the fact that there is no requirement upon Ministers to answer questions from Back-Benchers during a debate makes a mockery of Ministerial accountability?

Senator F.H. Walker:

No, Sir. I think the fact that most of my Ministers are on their feet at every sitting of the States absolutely renders the question frankly superfluous and irrelevant. Basically wrong.

4.9 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I will try and get an assurance from the Chief Minister. He seems to have informed the House to a question from one of my members of the Sub-Panel that Low Income Support is not being delayed because they are not ready. Sir, there are concerns; there is not even one service level agreement signed with the Parishes and from our point of view it has just been lifted from the Poor Law as being put into the Regulations and it will not float. What I am asking the Chief Minister is we should not be chasing G.S.T. to bring in something that has taken 10 years. It must be gotten right and it must be passed by this House. We have heard this morning...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Sorry, your question please, Deputy.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

My question is I want an assurance from the Chief Minister that G.S.T. will not be introduced until we have had Low Income Support in at least 6 months as originally planned, or 4 months.

Senator F.H. Walker:

There is a difference between 4 months and 6 months but, Sir, the principle has been, I think, an absolute pledge has been made to this House and through this House and the media to the public that G.S.T. will not be introduced until Income Support has been introduced and is up and running, and I confirm that position.

4.10 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Following the Chief Minister's absolute assurance that the Income Support proposals are ready to go, will he seek to ensure that his Minister gives those proposals and the Regulations drafted to the Income Support Sub-Panel in the shortest possible timescale - within the next 10 days - so that we can properly scrutinise them?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes. The Social Security Minister will make that information available not only to the Scrutiny Panel concerned but other relevant parties at the earliest possible date. Sir, I just have a slight inkling that there may be a sub-plot being worked out here through one means or another to delay the introduction of G.S.T. and I assure any Member who is seeking to follow that plot that that will be vigorously resisted.

4.11 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

The theme of today seems to have been succession training and I wonder whether or not the Chief Minister might follow up on that theme of succession training by letting us know whether or not there is going to be a new chairman at W.E.B. (Waterfront Enterprise Board) any day soon? We were told that there was an interim appointment and we have not had any news on that front and I wondered what was happening.

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, I will be coming back to the House with proposals in the very near future.

4.12 Deputy J.B. Fox:

The Chief Minister recalls he started off in No. 3 and 4 district, and going back to La Pouquelaye, does the Chief Minister recognise that there is and always has been an urgent need to improve the community facilities within that area? Does he also recognise that upfront monetary finances are not the only way to assess the true value of the community centre? It is not only the community but the planning gains that can be had for providing more houses and less other centres around there. To have one comprehensive centre in the centre is far more beneficial.

Senator F.H. Walker:

I do, and not only do I do that but the entire Council of Ministers takes that view. But as the Treasury and Resources Minister has said, he has - and the Council of Ministers has, indeed every Member of this House has - a duty not just to protect the ratepayers and look after the ratepayers and the people of the area but a duty at the same time to protect the interests of all taxpayers. The Treasury and Resources Minister has said very clearly he is meeting with the Constable of St. Helier tomorrow to seek to negotiate a compromised solution where the absolutely necessary community facilities in that district are provided but in some way a deal is put together which protects the interests of the taxpayer as well, which has to be surely the objective of every Member of this House.

4.13 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I wonder if the Chief Minister will advise how the succession planning is going for the role of Chief Minister? **[Laughter]**

Senator F.H. Walker:

The appointment or election of the next Chief Minister will be entirely out of my hands because I will not be a Member of this House when it takes place, and I might very well ask the Deputy how she is doing in her planning for the succession of the Chief Minister. **[Laughter]**

4.14 Deputy J.A. Martin:

As we could not get an answer from the Housing Minister because under the new system of population office (j)s are going to licences, could the Chief Minister shed any light on what is a so-called 'Baby (j)' that is being offered to the finance industry? I would just like to ask him that, thank you, Sir.

Senator F.H. Walker:

Let us be clear, let me correct what the Deputy has just asked in her question. No 'Baby (j)' category has been offered to the finance industry. Now, the finance industry apparently are talking among themselves about 'Baby (j)' categories. We have heard from the Housing Minister; he has not been approached by it, certainly I have not been approached about it and, indeed, until this morning I had never even heard of it.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That completes the questions to the Chief Minister.