

STATES OF JERSEY



COMPOSITION OF THE STATES: FURTHER DEBATES BEFORE THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Lodged au Greffe on 17th May 2011
by Deputy T.M. Pitman of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

to refer to their Act dated 15th March 2011 in which they agreed that an Electoral Commission should be established, and –

to agree that it is undesirable that further proposals seeking to change the composition of the elected membership of the States Assembly, or to overturn decisions already taken in relation to the composition of the elected membership, should be debated by the States until after the findings of the Electoral Commission have been reported to, and considered by, the States (other than any proposition(s) needed to take forward the Commission's recommendations) and to agree that all members be requested not to lodge any propositions on these matters until the Electoral Commission has concluded its work.

DEPUTY T.M. PITMAN OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

In lodging this proposition I feel it is important to stress that no-one is more committed to States reform than me; equally, to the view that further reform is desperately needed. Nevertheless, after what can only be described as an incredibly long and laborious process – though many I suspect would add ‘painful’ – this Assembly has at last arrived at a point where we have some good and solid reforms now in place in time for the October 2011 election. I was not a part of the committee at the time, of course, but I believe PPC deserve real credit for making such progress possible.

As a consequence I believe that given this long overdue step forward; our wise and welcome decision to implement a fully independent Electoral Commission; and possibly of even greater importance still, the huge and complex economic situation in which we currently find ourselves the time has come however to say that until the work of this Commission has been completed; and its findings been debated by the States further debates on reform should be put on hold.

I am obviously fully aware that this Assembly cannot in fact bind those who sit in the next: hence the wording of this proposition. What we can do – and I would suggest surely *should* do – is send out a clear political message of intent, i.e. recognizing that there are undoubtedly more important issues to try and tackle over the time that it is likely to take the Commission to conclude its work, we, at least, will focus on doing what we can in the 6 remaining months of this Assembly. In sending out such a message it seems highly unlikely to say the least that our successors would not see the logic of following suite.

Having made this commitment to an Electoral Commission it is surely clear that any proposals brought forward now would almost certainly fail confronted with the objection that we don’t yet know what the Commission will suggest within their findings. It is after all one thing to follow through debates many months in the making as we did with PPC’s proposals last year – and which we re-affirmed more than once only earlier this year. The subsequent commitment to an Electoral Commission I would suggest sets in place a different picture all together.

To do otherwise would at best distract the Assembly from areas where its energies could be used more pressingly. At worst would give the public the impression that – perhaps scared that an independent Commission will find that our system of current government is far from fit for purpose and needs serious reform – some within the Assembly are actually primarily concerned about their own self-interest.

Indeed, as we have seen only recently, endless and repetitive debates arising from a tiny, but vociferous minority not wishing to respect an effectively thrice confirmed decision; this being the issue of reducing the number of Senators by 4, has, in the eyes of many both within and without the States reduced the democratic process to a mockery. Like most Members I regularly disagree with some decisions – often vehemently so. However, the time surely comes when all must accept such decisions passed, and re-passed on a number of occasions: leaving further debates for a later date when circumstances might have changed.

So why not ask members not to lodge proposals to debate the issues surrounding GST some might well ask? Well, firstly I would point out to any raising such a question that it is in any Member’s remit to bring forward a proposition seeking such a

commitment. Secondly, I would have to add the real reason the matter of GST refuses to go away is that, thus far, many both within and without the Assembly are only all too aware that under 2 Council of Ministers there has been a flat refusal to both fully investigate every alternative taxation avenue open to us; or to ensure that glaring, unfair anomalies such as 1(1)(k) residents and non-local companies are made to share the tax burden borne by others.

We must, I subsequently suggest, move on. Any potential future reduction or increases in the number of elected members outside the reduction to 49 we have already agreed should be left until after the findings and recommendations of the Electoral Commission. We have, in a nutshell, far more important matters on which we need to focus in ensuring the economic and social welfare of our community.

Of course, by the time we would be due to implement the further reduction of 2 members from the cut to 51 we have agreed for the election this coming October, the reality is that the work of the Commission will have been completed. Dependent on the findings this would allow the Assembly of the day to either proceed or not accordingly. Maybe there will be greater cuts recommended; perhaps none at all or even an increase?

Thus it is these other issues of economy; population; housing and taxation etc., that I believe we must all collectively now give our full attention whilst the Electoral Commission does its work. Once this has been completed, hopefully with a full and committed input from all Members, we can return to the reform debate with information that will allow us to make the most informed decisions possible.

Consequently I urge all those Members who have regularly complained about being 'reformed out' to support these sensible proposals until the Electoral Commission has delivered its report and recommendations: and instead give precedence to the social and economic matters that I highlight.

Financial and manpower implications

There are no financial or manpower implications arising from this proposition. Indeed, if supported, it will likely save money by allowing us to focus fully on the most pressing issues of the day.