

2020.06.16

14 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding the publication of the results of the Income Distribution and Household Expenditure Surveys (OQ.159/2020):

What assurances, if any, can the Chief Minister give to Members that the results, whether partial or complete, of the income distribution and household expenditure surveys will be published in sufficient time to enable a debate on the reduction of income inequality in the upcoming Government Plan?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

As set out in the answer to Written Question 226, the estimated completion date for the surveys is quarter 4 of this year, 2020. Statistics Jersey is an independent body and, as such, it is a matter for the chief statistician to decide the release date when he deems the results are ready for publication. Given the extent of the complex analysis that is required, that is the best estimate the chief statistician can currently provide us.

3.14.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

That may be the best estimate, but it is not an answer to the question, in that what we need to do is assess what is going to be the new Government Plan in terms of our primary aim to reduce income inequality. There is an enormous difference between receiving that information so we can have an informed debate on this issue, either on 1st October or on 31st December. That is all quarter 4, and if it does not come in October, we are not going to be able to have this debate.

The Bailiff:

This is rather a speech. It does have to be a question.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

The question is: can he not do better than sometime in quarter 4, because that simply will not enable a proper debate?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

As I am sure the Deputy and other Members are aware, Stats Jersey are an independent body as far as I am concerned and as we treat them. In particular, given the impact of COVID-19 on the work that Stats Jersey have been doing, that is the best estimate they can give me at this stage. I can certainly undertake to sit down with the chief statistician and see what else can be done, but this is the problem. It is not deliberate, it is the consequence of the COVID-19 crisis that we have been facing and the impact on, shall we say, business as usual. I will in fact just take the opportunity to praise the Statistics Department for the sterling work they have been doing providing objective information to Ministers, Members and the public. We must not lose sight of that.

3.14.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Would this not leave a gap in the formative information that is being used, particularly to the groups ... and forgive me, but I have forgotten the name of the groups that have been set up for recovery now and there seem to be a number of them. But is this survey not an integral part of the information that must be considered when planning for any recovery? How will you respond if it is not there?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The trouble is to an extent I agree with the Deputy in the ideal world, but we are not in an ideal world; we are dealing in a world of uncertainty and of imperfect information. That is not through any deliberate act. That is because for the last 2 to 3 months - I think we are in week 14 now - the Island has been in effective lockdown and that has had major impacts on all sorts of programmes of work. That will continue to be a knock-on effect through the rest of this year at least. So although I have sympathy for the Deputy's comments, there is very little one can do. Part of the issue, if it was a matter of, say, throwing resource, is one that then has the issue of experience in terms of recruitment time, bringing someone in who then understands where all the data has been coming through. It is, I would suspect, in the hands of one or 2 members of that department who are very skilled in what they do and any change in additional resource would not necessarily achieve the benefits that we are trying to achieve. Although I am sympathetic to what the Deputy is stating, it is one of the unfortunate consequences - of which I am sure there are going to be many others - as a result of the crisis we have been in and still remain in.

3.14.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Given the fact the Chief Minister has stated that they may be working with not an ideal situation and imperfect information, does this mean that we will necessarily have poor judgments being made on what the nature of the recovery would be, not through anybody's fault, but just simply because we are asking the wrong questions perhaps of the wrong people without the right information?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I was tempted to make reference to playing all the right notes but just in the wrong order. I think the point is that all decisions made will be based on the best information we can get at that point in time. There is always a risk in all worlds that we very rarely have perfect information, certainly not in the real world, and I think in this particular point in time we are going to have more that is going to come more to the fore than would normally be the case. We are dealing with fast-moving events and changes in information and research and data and everyone would be doing the best they can based on the best professional advice that we can get and based on the best data we have at the time. That data continues to shift.

3.14.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Chief Minister mentioned that it was a matter of resource and it is indeed, because the expert, the officer who deals with this area, has been moved to different tasks. Now, it is possible, I understand, that the first 9 months through to March has been resourced and could be published. Will he discuss with the Stats Department the publishing of a 9-month report and leaving the remaining 3 months of COVID up to further analysis? Would he at least do that so we can have a decent debate?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I am very happy and always look forward to having a discussion with the chief statistician and I will very happily undertake to do that. But what I will say is that the Stats Department absolutely and rightly pride themselves on the quality of the information they produce. For the sake of argument, if the suggestion the Deputy has made, which sounds reasonable, would have some flawed impact on the interpretation of the data and if the chief statistician was of the view that was not an appropriate methodology to follow, I would certainly report that back to the Assembly that that would be his professional advice as head of an independent body, but I am very happy to have that discussion.