

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Chief Minister

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings questions to the Minister for Treasury and Resources to an end. We now come to the second question period, which is of the Chief Minister.

4.1 The Connétable of St. John:

Firstly, I must say I am surprised there has been no statement about the fire last week at the gas works but can I ask the question of the Chief Minister of the following? Given the fire at the gas company last week and the 2 previous big falls for the J.E.C. (Jersey Electric Company) power cable, which have both caused problems within the Island in recent weeks, will thought now be given to a combined cable/pipeline with both gas, electricity and oil being brought into the Island from undersea? Therefore, our storage facilities would be kept off Island and brought in via a pipeline? Will thought be given by the Council of Ministers to that, please?

Senator L.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

Yes, there is a statement that I would hope the Member would already have on his desk. He might just have not seen it. I am not sure that the solution put forward by the Connétable is the answer because it seems to be premised, perhaps, on storage elsewhere rather than us having the ability to have energy, either generation capacity or at least storage capacity, for things if emergencies were to happen elsewhere, to be in control of our own destiny. I do not think that that, necessarily, is a suitable solution. As the Minister for Treasury and Resources said, plans for the pipeline or the cable from Jersey Electric, as far as I understand it, are reasonably well advanced. There are planning issues to be resolved on the French side. But, of course, I am always prepared for emergency planning, *et cetera*, and the Environment Department, to consider any proposals that might come forward from Members. Of course, the Environment Department is, in due course, going to be launching, I think, or at least producing, its energy policy.

4.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Would the Chief Minister like to comment on a perception that is going around this House and also outside in the Island that we have a 2-tier Council of Ministers. There seems to be an inner circle and the rest, and also that he appears to have lost control of his Council of Ministers?

Senator L.J. Gorst:

Sad pup. I can put his mind at rest. I am not sure I ever had control of the Council of Ministers. [Laughter] We sometimes look to other jurisdictions with an envious eye to believe if only we had the party discipline without the parties then our Government would be far better. I am proud that I have been called by this Assembly to lead a coalition government. Does it make it more difficult? Of course it does. Is it the right thing? It absolutely is the right thing because we are all independents, we all stand on our own manifesto and we come together and we agree ways forward and we agree solutions to problems that our community faces in the best interest of, I hope, all members of our community. But it is not easy. Sometimes messages can be translated in a way that they were never intended and the picture is given of a Council of Ministers which is not unified. That is not the case. We are agreed on the issues which have received publicity recently but, of course, again some of them are quite delicate. With regard to the 2-tier Council of Ministers, I believe that perhaps this has arisen from a conversation that I had with my colleagues in the media when I was asked about who made decisions with regard to international affairs and I was quite clear that that is my responsibility, as the Deputy of St. Ouen has reminded the Assembly this morning.

[12:15]

But, of course, I take appropriate advice from senior Ministers, as Members would expect, because we are a coalition and it would not be right for me to be solely making those decisions on my own. That is something that is called the External Relations Group and, as I said, other Ministers can be co-opted on to that as issues arise like with the L.V.C.R. (low-value consignment relief) issue when the Minister for Social Security was involved in that decision making as well.

4.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

In the light of that then, following the publication of the Lime Grove report, did the Chief Minister at any point, informally or formally, ask the Minister for Treasury and Resources to resign?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

No, I did not. I have confidence in the Minister for Treasury and Resources. The Minister for Treasury and Resources has performed I believe strongly over the last 8 months and I do not need to rehearse what were sometimes difficult challenges of getting Ministers into position last November and since then, I believe, the Council of Ministers has worked well and the Minister for Treasury and Resources has been a strong member of that team.

Deputy M. Tadier:

A supplementary, if I may?

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy. It is Questions without notice. I am going to give all Members a chance to ask a question.

4.4 Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Given that there has been a lot of allegations made around the Lime Grove and the C.A.G. (Comptroller and Auditor General) report, would the Chief Minister undertake to meet with the former C.A.G. in order to have a proper understanding of what has happened and also in order to hear both sides of the argument rather than just possibly one side?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I sometimes find myself in uncomfortable positions. I think it is very important that politicians and certainly senior Members of the Government are not seen to be politically involved with what are independent officers, and one of my guiding principles has been to try to ensure that the independence of the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General is preserved. As Members might be aware, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and myself have responsibility now of finding a new person for that office. We are also in the process of writing to the former Comptroller and Auditor General and to the former Interim Treasurer for further clarification of issues.

4.5 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Has the Chief Minister noticed and is he concerned about what appears to be a trend under ministerial government, and I use example of the former Treasurer, the former Chief of Police and now the Comptroller and Auditor General, where if there is something uncomfortable we do not want to look at them, we rubbish them and force them from office?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Absolutely not. The Comptroller and Auditor General wrote a very short letter to me saying that he had resigned. He resigned, in his words, in the best interests, he felt, of the office and if that was his opinion then that was the right thing to do. There is no doubt that sometimes in a small community like Jersey, we think that we need to import. In this instance, of course, because it is

an independent office we absolutely have to, but we need to import people from outside because they can do the job better than somebody in Jersey. I hope that perhaps we are starting to learn the lesson and the challenge is for us to grow our own for us to be able to have suitable succession planning to move forward, so that the people in our community have the best possible opportunity for taking up the posts if they are available within the public sector and that is what I am committed to delivering.

Deputy T.M. Pitman:

A supplementary, Sir?

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, I will add you to the list at the end.

4.6 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

I think this question follows on nicely. Be they home grown or imported, what problems, if any, does the Chief Minister anticipate in recruiting a new Comptroller and Auditor General?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I have also said publicly, these type of independent offices are, in any circumstances, quite difficult to recruit to. However, I do believe we will be able to find a new Comptroller and Auditor-General. Again, the Chairman of P.A.C. and myself have that responsibility and, as an initial course of action, we are making contact with the National Audit Office in the United Kingdom to see if there cannot be an interim or temporary position until we are able to recruit to the substantive position.

4.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Chief Minister content that announcements were made to the Chamber of Commerce on the future of pensions in the Island which was, I believe, singularly unhelpful in this sensitive area and will the Chief Minister enforce his promise of some weeks ago to ensure that wherever possible, statements of policy or opinion are brought to this House rather than read in the press?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure there was anything new that the Minister for Treasury and Resources said in his speech to the Chamber of Commerce. Unfortunately, I was not able to enjoy his speech that day; I had another engagement. But I know certainly that I, during the election period, said that we must ensure that the Public Employees Contributory Retirement Scheme is affordable, is sustainable and is fair and I do not believe that the Minister for Treasury and Resources said anything other than that. He perhaps said a little more about how we might deliver those 3 tenets that are required in a public sector pension scheme.

4.8 The Connétable of Grouville:

Could the Chief Minister confirm whether he has received a communication from the former Director of Property Holdings in relation to his compromise agreement and, in particular, did he ask to be released from the gagging clause?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I have received private correspondence from the former director. I am not sure that I read it quite in the terms that the Connétable is suggesting. However, it was private correspondence so I am not sure I can say much more at this point.

4.9 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I am pleased to hear the Chief Minister has written to the Interim Treasurer and the now ex-Comptroller and Auditor General to, I think he said, find out some facts. Does this mean the

Chief Minister is going to hold a full investigation again into the terms and conditions, really, of the vote of censure? Is the Chief Minister not concerned that the independent Auditor General for Jersey had resigned under a cloud that his report - which I think it said that it had taken hundreds of hours to investigate - was basically rubbished by the Council of Ministers, and his integrity has completely been undermined?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

There were quite a number of questions there. I do not believe for one moment that the integrity of the former Comptroller and Auditor General has been rubbished at all by the Council of Ministers or any Minister. There can be no doubt that we must ensure that offices like the Comptroller and Auditor General remain independent and free from political interference. That does not mean, however, that any office should be above question and I cannot sanction that should be any other way. With regard to the investigation, as I have said, the Chairman of P.S.A. (Public Service Association) and myself are in the process of writing. However, I do not feel that there should be another investigation. This matter has been investigated twice previously because we have to be mindful of the independence and the non-political interference with the office. But should the next incumbent of the office wish to review the file and to review these cases, then that is right that that office would do such a review.

4.10 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Does the Chief Minister share my disappointment, the disappointment of the Hospitality Association and the tourist industry, and the disappointment of tourists themselves that the Condor fast ferry has been withdrawn at this crucial time of the tourist season?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am very aware that I do not know everything; far from it, in fact. I am not sure whether to admit to that or to phone my wife and double check whether my summer holiday is still taking place. I understand from the Minister for Economic Development that it is only one ferry which has been withdrawn. I cannot confirm that it is temporary but I do not know what that time period is. I shall ascertain to find out and revert to the Member accordingly.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Thank you, Chief Minister. That brings Questions without notice to an end. There is nothing under J. We now come on to Statements on Matters of Official Responsibility. I am going to take first the statement to be made by the Minister for Treasury and Resources.