

STATES OF JERSEY



STATES MEMBERS' REMUNERATION: EXPENSES ALLOWANCE

Lodged au Greffe on 24th August 2011
by Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

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

- (a) to agree that the recommendation of the States Members' Remuneration Review Body that there should be an increase for the year 2012 of £350 in the expenses allowance for States members (taking this to £4,000) should not be implemented and that the expenses allowance should remain at the current sum of £3,650 for 2012; and
- (b) to agree that proposed terms of reference for the future Electoral Commission as agreed by the States on 15th March 2011 should be extended to enable the Commission to investigate the equity of the current expenses system and whether greater savings could be achieved for taxpayers by improved co-operation between the States and the parishes in utilising existing office space for use by Senators, Connétables and Deputies.

DEPUTY S. PITMAN OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

As members will know, I believe strongly that the decision to increase or decrease the remuneration levels of States Members should be left entirely in the hands of the independent body set up at the wise instigation of former Senator Ted Vibert. Our continued commitment to such a process removes the opportunity for Members from more privileged, wealthy backgrounds to try and freeze out those who have as much – if not more – to offer, but who do not have inherited wealth behind them to also seek election to serve their community.

Nothing has altered my opinion on this matter. Hence, though I wholly support the freezing of the current sum for 2012, I would have made no comment on this aspect even had I thought it was incorrect. However, I feel consideration of the issue of whether or not the expenses aspect of the recommendations should be increased in 2012 is wholly different.

Here with the salary aspect to be frozen, I genuinely feel that we have no justification for increasing the expenses aspect at variance with this. I feel this for 2 specific reasons.

Firstly, given what I feel to be the mishandling of the recent economic problems by this Council of Ministers in the development of policy – hitting those who can afford it least while simultaneously granting huge, wholly unmerited top salaries and ‘golden handshakes’ for senior Civil Servants – I believe that we have a responsibility to show some solidarity on the issue.

In October we shall have a new Council of Ministers; hopefully with a better grasp of the economic realities of life in Jersey in the current climate. As a consequence, I am optimistic that moving away from the failed policies of the past may subsequently lead to an improvement in our situation. Thus I believe that any consideration of whether the expenses aspect of States Member’s remuneration package should be left for a new government to vote on. Not one in the last days of its political life.

My second reason for holding this view is not only directly related, it also reveals what is actually the much bigger picture underlying this question. This being that: the expenses aspect is in dire need of a complete review.

Being a States Member who has always rented an office in the heart of my district throughout my 6 years in the States, I am fully aware of the significant costs involved. Costs which I acknowledge – as the Review Body rightly points out – have grown dramatically throughout this period while the expenses limit has actually not been increased at all since 2004.

Indeed, any Member who has also talked to Senator Alan Breckon will be only too aware of the very significant costs (that he has highlighted for the States only this year) which are involved in renting out an office of the size he requires. But to stress this point further, the Senator has been in the States since 1993. He is highly respected by the public and members alike for his work. Yet he has to rent an office, while many who likely do far less, have an office space provided, either due to their States Departments having made room to accommodate them; or by the nature of their role as a Constable, for example.

It is quite clear upon analysis that the need for a complete review on whether 'expenses' is the best and most cost-effective way forward is long overdue. In the 21st Century it should surely be clear that, certainly in the case of female, disabled or older States members, simply suggesting that a member should work from home is not adequate in terms of safety. This is equally true from the perspective of both the politician and those members of the public who may need to visit them there.

The fact is I would suggest that it may well be far more cost-effective for the taxpayer if the independent Electoral Commission can explore whether adaptation of existing office space in co-operation between the States themselves and the 12 parishes may be possible. Shared facilities may save both significant monies and encourage more effective working practices. Yet thus far, such a review has not been undertaken.

I feel that it must also be pointed out here that there has also been the very negative, creeping undermining of the wider equity issue of expenses and salary generally under Ministerial government. A glaring example of this being the provision of BlackBerries for Ministers and Assistant Ministers at the taxpayers' expense; whilst those who work just as hard, on Scrutiny for example, have been excluded and continue to meet these costs from 'official' expenses allocation.

This not only goes against the core intent of agreed policy, it also highlights how this whole issue really should be examined by the fully independent Electoral Commission. With the Electoral Commission already having been agreed, and due to complete its work during the next year, I consequently feel that this is the ideal opportunity to investigate whether or not savings to the taxpayer can be made.

Thus I believe that increasing the expenses limit now, without being in possession of all the relevant information, really makes no sense at all. Consequently I would ask all members to give the proposition their support.

Financial and manpower implications

There are no additional cost implications arising from this proposition should it be successful. Not only may investigation by the Electoral Commission ultimately result in significant financial savings; there will obviously be a core saving of £17, 850. This being the sum arrived at by saving 51 members' increased expenses at £350 over the 2012 period.