

2015.11.17

3.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding Dame Heather Steel's report concerning the Dean's handling of an abuse complaint:

Will the Chief Minister advise why he, His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor and the Bailiff met the Archbishop of Canterbury to seek the release of Dame Heather Steel's report concerning the Dean's handling of an abuse complaint and whether he considers that the publication of the report, for which the victim was never interviewed, will draw a line under this matter?

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

His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor, the Bailiff and I met with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Dover in order to make strong representations for the release of the Steel report in compliance with the terms of reference. Without the publication of the report it will not be possible for Bishop Gladwin's review of safeguarding policies to be completed or for the Archbishop of Canterbury's commission into the relationship between the Church of England and England and in Jersey to take place. It is therefore vital that the report is released so that it can be determined what further steps, if any, are necessary or appropriate.

3.3.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I see the Chief Minister did not answer the second part of the question, which was whether it would draw a line under the affair. However, my question to him is: the Dame Heather Steel report is flawed, certainly in my eyes and the eyes of many others, because of the fact that she did not interview the victim of the abuse and also because Dame Heather Steel gave undertakings that she would give a transcript of her interview with former Deputy Bob Hill to him before the thing was produced. I have mentioned it in the States before because I have asked the Chief Minister to raise that matter with the authorities.

[10:00]

As a result of that, plus the fact that Dame Heather as a judge in the Jersey Court of Appeal, and was known certainly to Deputy Bailhache, something that she acknowledged in her interview with former Deputy Bob Hill, could be considered to be conflicted in this case and therefore could not do a thing. First of all, did the Chief Minister raise the transcript that Dame Heather said that she would give to former Deputy Bob Hill, yes or no? Secondly, I am making the points here, does he also think it is flawed with the information that I have just mentioned?

The Bailiff:

I think there were 2 questions there, Deputy. The first was: does the Chief Minister agree that Dame Heather promised to give a transcript of the interview to the former Deputy Hill?

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

It was asking whether he raised the issue because I have raised it in the States before and I asked him to do so.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I think the Deputy is getting rather confused. The Dame Heather Steel report was instructed by the Bishop of Winchester, it would therefore be for him to raise any issues with Dame Heather in regard of what is suggested. That review was undertaken to see if it was necessary to take any disciplinary measures against clergy in Jersey. That is why it is important that it is released in compliance with the terms of reference. Secondly, I do not think it is fair for the Deputy to cast aspersions upon Dame Heather Steel because she herself is a highly respected former High Court judge in England and Wales and I cannot, for a minute, I think it is inconceivable therefore that she would produce anything other than a fully robust and independent report. He also suggested that I had not answered his question. I did answer his question. Unless this report is released in compliance with the terms of reference then the other piece of work which needs to be completed and undertaken will not be able to do so.

3.3.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

It all comes down to credibility in a sense. How can any report where the person who is writing the report gives undertakings that she will give a transcript and then goes back on it mainly because of comments she made during that interview, including describing the victim as a criminal. Now unfortunately former Deputy Bob Hill is not in the States and able to question you more intently but the point is we have a flawed report ... in fact the whole exercise from start to finish has been botched and brings no credit on the church. Would the Chief Minister agree with that?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I will try and answer the first part of his question. It is hearsay and it is not right for me to comment on hearsay of what was or was not said or what undertakings were given in a private meeting, and I am not going to do that. I stand by my belief that Dame Heather Steel, as I have said, a respected former High Court judge in England and Wales as well of course here, it is incomprehensible, inconceivable that she would write a report that was anything other than independent. I think we have to acknowledge that the sequence of events have not shown the church in the best light that we should all wish to see. In Jersey that is difficult because the connection between the church and the Parishes at the core of our parochial system, it is at the core of our community and that is another reason why it is important that the terms of reference are complied with, so that the other reviews can be undertaken so that everyone involved can move on and we can feel confidence again in the institutions, which are at the heart of our community.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Chief Minister did not answer the question, which at the end was: does he believe that it has been botched from start to finish?

The Bailiff:

I think the Chief Minister did say that the Church had not ... what was exact language?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I said not been shown in the light that we would all wish or not in the best possible light.

Deputy M. Tadier:

I think perhaps the more fundamental question that is on many people's lips outside of this Assembly, outside of those who do not live in the church/States/Royal Court bubble is why on earth is the Chief Minister getting involved in this matter? He is not a clergyman, he is the Chief Minister for Jersey. Would the Chief Minister perhaps comment on that wider issue, that it seems that he is inadvertently being dragged into a squabble between a fairly niche ... I am not saying it is not an important issue for the victim who has suffered, I believe, abuse in this instance, but it is not for the Chief Minister to get dragged into what is essentially a squabble between some very old-school entrenched competing interests.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

It might surprise the Deputy to know I get dragged into squabbles every day that I am in office. I do not think that in this case that is what is happening. This Assembly approves the canons of the Church of England and of course they are agreed elsewhere, but they are part of the law of this land and also, as the Connétables will say only too clearly, the connection between Parish and church is extremely close. The connection between ratepayers and church is extremely close. Whether they attend those churches or not. Therefore a situation as we find ourselves in, which has implications for the institutions in our community, I think is rightly something that when I am requested to I should bring to bear my good officers to try and find solutions and move issues forward when undertakings have been given.

3.3.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

So by that extension presumably we know that social clubs throughout the Island in different Parishes, which also provide a very vital role, the various voluntary secular organisations also provide a vital role, some of which may be older in their philosophies than the established church in Jersey. Does the Chief Minister intend to get involved and drawn into all those squabbles when there are competing interests in those organisations as well?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I said rather flippantly, some of those do come across my desk. They would fall into the remit of social policy and I have a very able right-hand man who deals with those quite frequently.

3.3.4 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Perhaps the Chief Minister can tell us what the result has been of his meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury; has he solved the issue? Or when will we hear the issue is going to be solved?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Of course the ultimate solving is not within my hands. I do not need to tell you, Sir, perhaps I, through you, can tell the Assembly that we made the strongest possible case for compliance with the terms of reference, which were agreed by the Bishop of Winchester. Members will know that we have a temporary episcopal oversight from the Diocese of Canterbury by the Bishop of Dover and we thank him for the care and concern that he is addressing to these

issues, and he himself is on record as saying that he would like to find resolution to these matters as quickly as he possibly can. We reinforced that wish and that desire in our conversation and we hope that those undertakings can be agreed to, can be complied with, so that, as I say, we can then move on and deal with the wider and broader issues.