

STATEMENTS ON A MATTER OF OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITY

5. The Chairman of the Income Support Sub-Panel regarding income support review

5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern (Chairman, Income Support Sub-Panel):

I am making this statement today in an attempt to avoid what appears to be the normal defensive reaction of Ministers to Scrutiny Reports. I note with some sadness that in my absence from the Island last week the current Minister for Social Security was suggesting an element of politicking had already taken place in the preparation of our report on income support, S.R.5 of 2009. In an initial attempt to pre-empt such a reaction I draw the attention of Members to the presence on the panel of our 2 lay advisers, the Reverend Geoff Houghton and Mr. Ed Le Quesne who brought their own independent perspectives and who were fully involved in drafting the report and its recommendations. I believe our report offers a balanced approach and deserves to be heeded. It is a genuine effort to co-operate with the Executive in delivery of an effective and efficient benefit system. It should be viewed as advice from a critical friend. While the report contains many recommendations which could be implemented at relatively low cost and in a fairly short timescale, I wish to draw the Minister's attention to what I believe to be central issues which require his attention and action on a political front. The report notes the dedication of the Social Security staff, and particularly those dealing with income support, and praises their willingness to go the extra mile in their attempts to make the system work. In examining the activities of the department with regard to the introduction of income support, the sub-panel became acutely aware that departmental resources have been increasingly stretched over the past few years. The department has taken on additional responsibilities in areas such as Employment Law, redundancies and the massive overhaul of benefits. It has done so without demanding additional resource in an effort to drive down costs. The sub-panel believes these additional workloads have increased the stresses on staff and reduced efficiency. I believe that the Minister should admit that if he wishes to deliver essential additional services he must now accept that a bid for additional resource, especially staffing, must be made. The sub-panel urges him to do so. The sub-panel does not believe that the issues raised in this report can be put on the back-burner to await a departmental review in 2010. Some of the minor changes could be put in force at little cost today, others may require greater planning and indeed costs, but all require action to start. I urge the Minister for Social Security to demonstrate an open mind and include some of the changes required in the 2010 Business Plan for immediate implementation. Thank you.

5.2 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Would the Chairman not agree with me that he is the one being political by taking one comment reported in a newspaper which was the result of a 2-minute conversation? Would he not agree that it would have been better for him, on behalf of his panel, to have awaited my official response before accusing me of being defensive?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I do not accept that I am being political at all. I came back to the Island to see a front page headline in the *J.E.P.* which included a statement that there was an element of politicking about the issues. I am determined that in this case we can work together because we share the joint aim of producing a benefit system that works to support people in and out of work. I look forward to co-operating with the Minister in such aims and I point out these 2 essential elements that I believe are vital: (1) that we get on now with some reform; and (2) that we accept that if we are to deliver an effective, proper support system it may need additional resource. Despite the fact that we are in a recession we need to be able to support people properly, not just short-term with emergency measures but longer term to get people back into work and support them properly.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am sure that the Chairman is aware, contrary to some popular belief, Ministers and I certainly do not have editorial say over what is printed in the local newspapers. I am surprised he takes that as a basis for making a statement. I hope, however, that he, as he has indicated and I would like to do, can put this behind us and work together for the benefit of Islanders as he has just outlined. I hope that he will be giving me and my proposition, which we may get to either today or tomorrow, his full support to that end. I wonder if he could confirm that.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Having not had time to study the detail, nonetheless I will be giving him support for his annual review. It looks like in the right direction. We wait to see how the Minister builds on that great initiative now into the coming year. It must be next year that we build on, not some time in the future. Delay is worse than no action at all.

5.3 Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

Can I ask the Chairman about the issue he has just raised about resources? I confess I have not read the report but he raised the issue of additional resources. How much is he saying that, in his view, income support, based upon his panel's report, needs to be increased by in terms of millions of pounds and where is he suggesting that we find it from?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is not the job of Scrutiny to provide alternative policy nor is it their duty to go into the fine detail of how much money is to be spent where. That is a Ministerial responsibility and one of the things that Scrutiny should not do is do the Minister's work for him. There are no sums allocated or indicated in this report and nor would anybody expect them to be in there; actual figures to suggest £X million here and £X million there, X number of staff there. However, one of the essential elements that is contained in there (and is highlighted by my report and, I believe, agreed in principle by the Minister) is incentives to work. We have described income support as an in-work benefit and time and time again and certainly in this report we come back to the issue that incentives to work are probably insufficient. That is a cost. How much that cost is and how much can be done now and how much can be spread into the coming years is not for this report to say. It is for the Minister to decide and to bid for in debate with the Minister for Treasury and Resources. Where we get the resources from, again, is not the job of this report to suggest. It is to suggest that there is a need. It is point out the need which is an extremely critical one now but one which will not go away when the recession goes away. It is an ongoing need and we must build on infrastructure of benefit to make sure that it delivers what we have set out to deliver, which is an in-work benefit.

5.4 Senator P.F. Routier:

The Chairman mentioned that he did not think it was Scrutiny's role to bring forward different policy proposals. From reading the income support report, the Scrutiny Panel's report, it does talk about reducing the 5-year rule down to 3 years and to me that is one of the major policy decisions that founded the income support proposals initially. Does the Chairman accept that that is a major policy change?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I think the Senator has misread the report. I do not believe it says 5 years to 3 years. I think it says the recommendation is that the Minister reviews the 5-year policy. In particular under the circumstances where in previous years, under the old system, the family allowance was claimable on your first year's income tax return; so claimable by some families on behalf of some children after 2 years and now the blanket 5 years applies. So in going to this new system we have reduced accessibility to benefit for some (few probably but some) families and that needs review. All we are saying in our report is: "Please review it". It does not suggest a way forward and it does not suggest alternative policy.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I am a little bit surprised at the finding of the reviews because there is a benefit which is available to people who have children within Jersey after 6 months. That benefit has been in existence since income support came in. Outside of income support, admittedly, but it was recognised that the change that was being made from the previous family allowance system did require for a support system to be there for ... Does the Chairman recognise that the findings of his report are wrong?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

No. It apologises for having overlooked the fact that this benefit is in existence but it was completely unaware; as were the 49 individuals we got submissions from and as were the 10 groups that we contacted about the workings of the benefit. All were ignorant that there was a benefit available to replace family allowance after a mere 6 months. I apologise that we did not upturn that fact but it points once more to what is a central criticism contained in the report, that communication and publicity about what benefits are available and how they work have been lamentable; not necessarily in the time of the current Minister but certainly in the time of the previous Minister. We told him at the time and we are telling the Minister now that communication is vital to get the message over to applicants what benefits are applicable and how and what their rights are. Now, we have failed to do that and, worldwide, everyone knows, who deals in this area, that the major failing of any benefit system is under-claiming; people not claiming because they are not aware of what is there. This must be put right as part of the process.

5.5 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

It is on the substance of the report. Notwithstanding some excellent ideas like showing how benefits are calculated and incrementally built up and so forth, would the Chairman not acknowledge that there is an underlying assumption that we should have brought together the old Parish system, particularly the home visits system, and the more bureaucratic income support? In that sense he was really asking too much of the department who never really, at any point, had the resources to do that.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Indeed, that is an issue which is raised in the report and one which is essential, I think, to looking at how we go forward. It is not a plea to go back to the old Parish system but to modernise and replace something that is now missing. Time and time again organisations came to us (like Shelter Trust, like Citizens Advice, like Family Nursing, like Adult Social Workers) saying: "Time and time again we have to take our clients through this horrible form and take them through the whole process". It is hours and hours of fully trained professional social worker time or family nursing time dedicated to getting people to their proper benefit through the system; that system of advocacy, of helping somebody who may not understand the system very well, who may have learning difficulties or may be frail or vulnerable, to get through the system. That has been missing and it is sorely missed and we need a replacement for that certainly. Admittedly the department never thought it was taking on that role and neither did this House when it set up this new system. It seemed to ignore the fact that there was a lot of additional input going in through the Parishes that is now missing and sadly missing because people are missing out.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

I am afraid that completes the time for questions.

5.6 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Sorry, I do not know if I could make a brief comment. All sorts of comments are made against Ministers in this House for having long rambling questions or answers which are not relevant to

the questions. I wonder if you could just confirm how many questions it was possible to take in that 10 minutes and perhaps we could even do some analysis to see how many questions the average Minister manages to take in the 10 minutes? It seems to me there were a lot more questions which could have been asked but did not have time.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

There were 4 Members who asked questions and I think some Members asked more than one. But only 4 Members were able to ask a question.