

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE - THE CHIEF MINISTER

2. The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

Very well. As agreed earlier the Assembly now comes to the deferred questions without notice to the Chief Minister and I invite questions. Any questions? Deputy Le Hérissier.

2.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

A serious matter. Recently the Minister talked of a Tax Justice Network as being an enemy of the State, yet serious allegations and counter-allegations have been made about the involvement of a Minister in the work of the Tax Justice Network. Does the Chief Minister feel that this should be the subject of a proper independent inquiry?

Senator F.H. Walker (The Chief Minister):

I do not. Senator Syvret has made it abundantly clear from as long as I can recall, what his tax policies are and it has been an open secret, if indeed it has even been a secret of any sort, that he has been in contact - he himself has said so - with the Tax Justice Network. On the evidence available to Members at this point, I see no reason for an inquiry at all.

2.2 Senator B.E. Shenton:

Given that this Assembly has deemed 16 year-olds as responsible enough to vote, would the Chief Minister support a move to lower the age at which a youth becomes criminally responsible for their actions?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I probably would. I was one of those who expressed some reservations about the specific proposal that the States approved to reduce the voting age to 16 and I think there are knock-on consequences which we are going to have to consider, so although I would not give an absolute commitment to the Senator on the back of this question, I think he has a point which needs to be thoroughly investigated.

2.3 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Would the Chief Minister agree that the recent inter-island cricket match and the reception at Government House was a step in the right direction for forging positive relations with our sister Island and is something that should be applauded and recommended for future years?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Wholeheartedly. It was an excellent day, which undoubtedly helped the relationship between the States Members who participated and/or who attended and our counterparts from Guernsey, and I very much hope that it will become an annual event. Sir, it would be remiss of me though to comment on the day without again warmly thanking and congratulating the Deputy of St. Martin for the huge effort he put into it - and it was a huge effort against heavy odds at times - to ensure that the day took place and that it turned out to be the success it undeniably was.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Perhaps the Chief Minister could tell us who won Man of the Match, and how many runs he scored? **[Laughter]**

2.4 The Deputy of St. John:

Is the Chief Minister aware of reports in the British media that the British Prime Minister, whom I understand he was with the other day, plans to review the one-sided extradition law between the U.K. and the U.S. (United States)? In light of this, will the Chief Minister take legal advice as to how the Extradition (Jersey) Law 2004 can be amended to meet Jersey's international

obligations, and provide maximum possible security to Jersey residents who can provide a reasonable case in their defence? Thank you, Sir.

Senator F.H. Walker:

The answer to both questions in effect is, yes and yes.

2.4.1 The Deputy of St. John:

Supplementary. You have taken the wind out of my sails there, Sir. Will the Minister commit to a formal process of lobbying the U.K. officials to put forward Jersey's interest in this matter?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Again yes, Sir.

2.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

The Chief Minister is well aware that the Assembly is about to embark on another round of debate on the make-up of the States' Assembly. Is he of the opinion that it is critically important that we conclude this debate? Is there some urgency to restructure the States' Assembly? What is the Chief Minister's personal opinion on the make-up of the Assembly and the debate we are about to have?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I think the Senator is going to have to wait until the debate we are about to have before I express my opinion. Can I make a serious point, though? The Council of Ministers has been criticised by some for not coming forward with a Ministerial view on the reform of the States, but that is absolutely deliberate because we have quite definitely distanced ourselves from parliamentary issues as opposed to executive policy issues, the law drafting or law formulation or whatever it may be. So, it is quite deliberate and each Minister will no doubt speak and vote exactly as they feel appropriate on the proposition, as will I. So, I am afraid, Sir, the Senator will need to wait until the debate.

2.6 Deputy P.J.D. Ryan of St. Helier:

Just going back to the extradition situation, just for a moment through you, Sir, to the Chief Minister, there would surely have been an opportunity when the Chief Minister had his meetings with the U.K. authorities in Ireland. I would ask the Chief Minister whether this was on his agenda at that time, and if it was not could he give us some idea of when it might be on his immediate agenda to deal with, with the U.K. authorities?

Senator F.H. Walker:

It was not on the agenda at the British Irish Council but Deputy Lewis highlighted in his question the fact that the United Kingdom government is looking at changes to its own extradition law, and our extradition law is in effect, inextricably linked with that of the U.K., so any changes to the U.K. law will be looked at very seriously indeed here in Jersey and - I would anticipate - are likely to result in a proposition coming to the House at an early date.

2.7 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

Now with most of the developers' eyes turned on the Waterfront, would the Chief Minister pledge his continuing commitment that the older parts of town - the Cinderella districts, such as La Motte Street, Cheapside and so on - are not left out in the cold, and will he further pledge that he wants to see the town park move forward with all possible speed?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir.

2.8 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Will the Chief Minister comment on recent media reports that the prison governor has decided to leave his post due to the surfeit of red tape and bureaucracy that he has encountered over here?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am sure, in common with other Members and I know in common with the Home Affairs Minister, I am extremely disappointed that the prison governor has chosen to leave his post early, because there is no doubt he has made a significant contribution to the necessary improvements in operation and structure of the prison. I was also extremely disappointed to read of his reasons for doing so, but I regret that due to other pressures I have not yet had time to discuss that with the Home Affairs Minister, so at this point I do not know precisely to whom he was referring, or to what he was referring. But it is an issue of some concern which I will be discussing with the Home Affairs Minister at the earliest possible moment.

2.9 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Further to recent media reports in the national press where the United Kingdom Government freely admits it has lost all control on the numbers of people that have come into the country, and in light of the fact that local people are now being laid off - especially in the building trade - does the Chief Minister share my concerns for the future?

Senator F.H. Walker:

It is not for me to express concern about whether or not the United Kingdom Government has control over the number of people entering the country, but the fact is that Jersey does. I do not know the exact circumstances of the well-publicised lay-off of staff by a local contractor. I do know that the Economic Development Minister has been in contact with that contractor and as yet, I do not know whether a meeting has taken place. It has taken place. I know that that has been discussed. Jersey is in a difficult position. We do control, as I have said, the number of people coming in. So far as building work is concerned, not so many years ago we had a requirement that any outside contractor had to be at least 5 per cent cheaper than a local contractor if they were going to be awarded a contract. Now that was found to be driving building prices up and it was found not to be sustainable long-term and so for some time now local companies have been, and continue to be, in direct competition with companies from outside the Island. Sometimes inevitably, it is found that companies from outside the Island are more competitive and cheaper, but I would refer the Deputy to the enormous amount of work being undertaken in Jersey currently by local contractors, both at main contractor level and at sub-contractor level. Some have lost out, but some are without doubt still doing very well indeed.

2.9.1 Deputy J.J. Huet:

Can I ask for a supplementary on that? Does the Chief Minister not believe this could be because the building firms that are coming in are bringing British labour with them that are earning half the price that our tradesmen can earn?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I have no specific evidence of that but I deeply regret any situation where local people are losing their jobs, as we all must. But sadly, we do live in a competitive world and Jersey is renowned for having high building costs, and if we engage in complete protectionism in Jersey then we can only drive those costs higher and to the detriment of people wishing to buy their homes - to the business sector as well - so it is a question of striking a balance. Whether the balance is correctly struck at this juncture, I really do not have enough information to comment, but that is something, perhaps, the Economic Development Minister may take up at a later date.

2.10 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

On the same theme, Sir, the removal of the 5 per cent differential may indeed have allowed for cheaper prices and more favourable tenders. Does the Chief Minister not believe that perhaps in fact the disadvantages outweigh that advantage of cheaper tenders and would he envisage bringing that 5 per cent differential back again?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I think I have said in answer to the previous question, I do not have enough information to say whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages at this juncture. This is the first time that a local company has brought to my attention - in recent times certainly - the fact that they are struggling against mainland competition and I am delighted that the Economic Development Minister has investigated it and met with them so quickly. But we need more information. I would have to say that it would be a big decision to re-introduce the 5 per cent clause again, and as I said earlier, it could and probably would have an upward effect on building costs with losses basically, ultimately to all Jersey residents engaged whatever the building projects may be.

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

Just a point of clarification for the Chief Minister, we are going to meet, we have not met yet. Sorry.

2.11 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Following on from Deputy Huet, it was brought to my attention by a constituent the other week about somebody who had lost their job because of the fact that certain of the construction companies are employing imported labour on minimum wage.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

What is the question, Deputy?

Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Oh, sorry. Have I not got to the question? Is he aware of this?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Not specifically so. What I will say though is that the vast majority of people employed in the construction industry are local and that remains to be the case. I see the Deputy of Grouville shake her head, but that is absolutely the case. Of course, the numbers of people allowed to be imported are controlled.

2.12 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I intended to ask a supplementary but it got swept away. Given the considerable concern about possible leakage from Scrutiny that carries on, would the Chief Minister assure us that there is absolutely no leaking from the Council of Ministers?

Senator F.H. Walker:

No, Sir. I cannot possibly give that absolute assurance. What I can say is that I, from day one - and I have been very pleased indeed with the way the Council of Ministers have worked together as a team - we are very diverse individuals in all sorts of ways, but we work very well together as a team. We continue to do so and I have no direct evidence of leaks from the Council of Ministers.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

If there are no further questions, the time is effectively almost expired so we will conclude the question time.