

23.09.12

1 Deputy L.V. Feltham of the Chair of the States Employment Board regarding social media posts and the teaching strikes (OQ.175/2023)

Will the chair advise who authorised and approved the social media post issued by the Government on Tuesday, 5th September, relating to the teaching strikes, and provide her assurance that the information contained within the communication was accurate?

Deputy K.L. Moore of St. Mary, St. Ouen and St. Peter (Chair, States Employment Board):

I would like to start by saying how disappointed I am this morning that schools are closed, children are missing out on their education and family life is disrupted, which of course has an impact on productivity and our economy. Having said that, I regret that the social media post, which the Deputy refers to, was not specifically authorised or approved by a Minister when it was published on Facebook. The information included in the post had been used earlier that day in a note to editors with a statement sent to the Island's media outlets, and was approved for those purposes alone. We therefore consider that the information was accurate but it should not have been used on social media at the time or in the way it was. On occasions we all get things wrong but, when we do, it is important to be clear, honest and open. I apologise for this, particularly at a time when the S.E.B. (States Employment Board) was involved in direct and constructive conversations with the union. I accept that this resulted in an unnecessary escalation of tensions. The Council of Ministers had been updated to say that there would be no comment and I have to say that myself and my vice-chair were deeply disappointed by this social media post.

Deputy L.V. Feltham:

I do not think that the Chief Minister answered my question. I asked the question who authorised and approved the social media post, and I did not get an answer to that question.

The Bailiff:

Are you able to be more specific? I had understood you to say, Chief Minister, that it was not authorised at Ministerial level. Is that correct?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

That is correct, that is what I said. I can imagine that the Deputy would not want a witch hunt, neither would I. But it was authorised internally but not at a Ministerial level.

Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Perhaps the Chief Minister could let the Assembly know which area or which department authorised the issuing of the social media post, and that would be a better answer, perhaps.

The Bailiff:

Is this your supplemental question, Deputy Feltham?

Deputy L.V. Feltham:

No, I do not believe that I have had an answer.

The Bailiff:

I have to say, how the Chief Minister chooses to answer is a matter for the Chief Minister. You may not wish it to be answered in that way, but if that is how the Chief Minister chooses to answer, we

cannot go iteratively and chivvy a little bit more of an answer along as we go. That is the answer to the question. If you would like to ask a supplementary, you are at liberty to do so.

[9:45]

5.1.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

I will perhaps phrase my question a bit differently. Who is in control of the Government social media posts and who ensures that the social media posts do, in fact, relay the thoughts and opinions and the policies of the Government?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

The Deputy will be aware that we have many responsibilities, particularly in communicating. All I can say on this matter is that the decision to post this on social media was made by a senior official.

5.1.2 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier Central:

I was just about to ask whether you could see in the chat, and I apologise for not being in the Assembly but I tested positive for COVID. May I ask the chair of S.E.B., she mentioned that she believed that the post was accurate, can I ask what average was used to work out the figures? Was it the mode, the median or the mean?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

While I admire the Deputy's scientific knowledge, I am simply given figures and I do not have an answer to his question.

5.1.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is interesting to be seeing this online and seeing Ministers around her smiling. It is a very important question because those 3 figures that were published as accurate have very different meanings. It is disappointing that the chair does not understand. Could I ask the chair to please find the answer to that question and get back to the Assembly during this sitting?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I do take this extremely seriously and of course I will get the relevant answer, and that is all I can say.

5.1.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier South:

If the social media posts did not receive political approval, why is it still online?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

We asked that it was taken down the day that it was put up. I have not got access to my social media at the moment but I had been informed that it had been.

5.1.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I can see it on my computer right in front of me that it is still online. Can I ask the Minister, therefore, given the divisive nature of this post and the role that it clearly plays in trying to foster public opinion against teachers at a time where that is extremely unhelpful, will she ensure that it is taken down as a matter of priority?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I would hope that officials who will be listening to this will duly do so.

5.1.6 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:

The social media post has, of course, been attributed as a direct quote from the Constable of St. John, who is the acting chair of the S.E.B or vice-chair, but we know has been acting as chair, in a sense. The Minister also talked about a witch hunt in the same paragraph as talking about accountability to the Assembly. Could we at least, if not have the name of the senior official who authorised this post but which was not authorized by Ministers, have that person's job title?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I do not think that would be appropriate. We are all aware of responsibility and the way responsibility can be elevated. Therefore, as chair of the panel, I have to take that responsibility despite my earlier explanation and disappointment.

5.1.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

There is a wider context here, which I would invite the Chief Minister to consider. We have a situation where the teachers, some of whom are here today, are being told that they have to exercise restraint in their request for not having a pay cut this year in real terms. We also have a situation where it seems the Comms Department at government seems to be growing and growing with new recruitment happening all the time. We do not necessarily know who those people are, what their job titles are, and they seem to be out of control because they are attributing words to Ministers that Ministers have not said. Is this not a double standard coming from Government, and a Government and its Comms Unit which is completely out of control and in crisis?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I can clarify by stating that the senior official who gave that notification was not a member of the Comms team, and I would contest that our Communications Unit are an extremely useful part of government. One of our key aims is to restore confidence in government, and that means being able to communicate clearly, and that requires the support of that unit who have many talented people within it. As I said earlier, we deeply regret that this social media post was put out, particularly at the sensitive time that it was.

5.1.8 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier Central:

Would the Minister agree with a constituent of mine who described this act and the words used as "propaganda" rather than information?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

No, I think these are useful facts that were earlier that day shared with as notes to editors attached to a press release, and they state the case. There is a lot of information available. I think it is important that we share that with the public.

5.1.9 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Given that the Chief Minister has acknowledged that the information on the social media post was damaging and could cause damage to the industrial relations, could she tell us why she then thinks it was appropriate to have exactly the same information in the notes to editors?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

This is background information. Often when press releases go out, the members of the media will come back with relevant questions and therefore these were put alongside that information as helpful additional pieces of information.