

STATES OF JERSEY



PUBLIC AND POLITICAL ACCESS TO ECONOMIC MODELS

**Lodged au Greffe on 22nd June 2004
by Senator S. Syvret**

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

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

to require the Finance and Economics Committee –

- (a) to make available to any States member who so requests a copy of any electronic models, produced at public expense, designed to assist in developing economic or taxation policies; and
- (b) to make available for public access at the Public Library computers equipped with any electronic models, produced at public expense.

SENATOR S. SYVRET

REPORT

In recent years at least 2 electronic models designed to assist in planning the Island's economy have been developed. The first of these is known as the 'Strathclyde' economic model. This programme depicting the Island's economy was developed for Jersey by the Fraser of Allender Institute of Strathclyde University. More recently the consultants OXERA have apparently developed a computer programme which can be used to model the effects of different taxation options. A significant amount of taxpayers' money has been spent on producing these 2 economic policy development tools.

The community faces an extremely testing time at present. Economic challenges face the Island more acutely than has been the case for decades. We are also facing the most dramatic set of taxation changes since income tax was introduced in 1928. Against this background, individual States members are going to have to take a detailed interest in the policy options to a greater extent than might usually be the case. We can be absolutely certain the taxation debates will not be the '9 day wonders' that States debates often are. The people of the Island are going to pay close attention to these issues as the outcome will have a direct impact upon their livelihoods. The community will be expecting each and every one of us to do our best in making the right decisions.

We will not be able to claim to have done our best if we proceed in a state of ignorance. There can be no doubt that every States member should have access to the material they feel they need in order to make informed decisions. This must include access to any electronic models that may help us to assess the impact of different economic policies. I have asked the President of the Finance and Economics Committee to supply me with both of the models referred to above, but regrettably at time of writing he has given no undertaking to supply them, and, somewhat disturbingly, stated initially that he had *"no information at all regarding the Fraser of Allender model"*.

In his most recent communication to me, the President of the Finance and Economics Committee has asserted that copyright reasons prevent the model being widely distributed. All computer programmes, with the possible exception of open source based freeware, are covered by copyright. This does not prevent programmes from being widely available. Citing copyright as a reason to deny access to material produced at public expense simply won't wash. It has also been suggested that the programmes are too complex to use and that only an econometrician could use them. There are 2 obvious failings with this argument; firstly it pre-supposes that there will be no people with economic knowledge who may wish to make use of the programmes, and secondly it maintains the obsolete view that things are simply too complex for the public to understand and that we should simply defer to experts.

Not only is there no justification in withholding these important policy tools from other States members, there is no justification in denying public access to them. They have been paid for with taxpayers' money and should be available on computers in the public library. To deny such public access is to fly in the face of States policy on public access to official information. The Code of Practice on Public Access to Official Information does contain a number of exemptions – clauses under which information may be withheld – none of which apply in this case. There can be no other credible course of action other than to require the Finance and Economics Committee to make the models available.

Financial and manpower implications

There will be some minimal cost and staff time associated with producing copies of the relevant software, and with installing it for public access in the Library. The public access provision may, for example, involve the cost of a PC.