

4. Questions to Ministers without Notice - The Chief Minister

4.1 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all I would like to thank the Chief Minister for responding to a question that I raised regarding the amount of (j) category employees employed by the States as a whole. I would ask him whether now that we have these figures and we are aware of these figures, could they be included in the 6-monthly Public Sector Manpower Report with any changes for the future?

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

Yes, they can.

4.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Chief Minister state, given all the talk of the Civil Service and cutbacks and more efficiency, Sir, whether there are any studies underway or, more to the point, whether there exists a real understanding of what productivity means in the various areas of the Civil Service?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, and it is already measured and the Deputy, as every other Member of this House, I am sure will be aware of the Benchmarking Report. There have now been 2 and a third will be published in the not too distant future. There will also be a performance report, which has been notified to Members, previously published in the autumn, which I think will provide the Deputy with all the information he presumably wishes to have.

4.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Following my written question of 16th of May, can the Minister confirm that nothing in Jersey's tax proposals, so far, has been approved by the E.U. (European Union), but merely by the Paymaster General in the United Kingdom? Further, can he confirm that Malta's proposals have recently been turned down?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Firstly, there is a considerable difference between Malta and Jersey; Malta is now a member of the European Union, Jersey is not; and secondly, the Deputy is well aware because both the Treasury Resources Minister and I and others, on frequent occasions, have confirmed verbally and in writing that ECOFIN (European Council of Finance Ministers) has approved the basic structure of Jersey's fiscal proposals. He is well aware of that. I cannot change that position. That is the position; that is what has happened. As the Deputy is well aware, we are now engaged in active discussions with the Treasury and through the Treasury, with the E.U. on the detail of those proposals. That is the position that has been persistently and consistently confirmed in answer to a myriad of questions by the Deputy and others, by the Treasury and Resources Minister and myself.

4.4 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

In response to questions earlier this year, the Chief Minister provided the House with details of suspensions within the public sector. Will he please now advise the House whether he is satisfied that these have all now been resolved?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am not satisfied that they have all been resolved, no. I only wish they were. All I can say is that work is actively in hand to resolve them. The Deputy will have received, along with all other Members of the House, something like a week or 10 days ago, the report from the Human Resources Director on how he proposes to deal with suspension issues in the future. I have to say a number of Members have come back to me to express their satisfaction with the way it has now being approached and, if you like, attacked.

4.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

The Chief Minister mentioned recently of his plans for a new Jersey anthem. Will he advise the Assembly as to his plans on how we can proceed with this excellent idea and particularly whether all Islanders will be given the opportunity to participate in its production or in its choice?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I think the answer to the last part of the question would depend on their musical ability. **[Laughter]** The Council of Ministers has not yet had time to give any attention to this item. It has fallen off the bottom on a couple of agendas recently, but my thinking is that we should embark on a competition open to Jersey people to submit their ideas for the anthem and then of course that would have to be the subject of wide consultation, not only with States Members but with the public generally.

4.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister inform Members when was the last time that either he or any representative of Jersey had contact with ECOFIN?

Senator F.H. Walker:

We do not have contact with ECOFIN directly. The contact again, as the Deputy has been told on numerous occasions, is through the Code of Conduct Group which is chaired by the Paymaster General, Dawn Primarolo. He is well aware of that and I do not know how many times both the Treasury and Resources Minister and I have to answer the same question.

4.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Minister say when he last had contact with the Chair of the Code of Conduct Group?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, about 4 or 5 weeks ago.

4.8 Deputy A. Breckon:

I wonder if the Chief Minister would care to comment if he has confidence in the process that the Council of Ministers has had to follow, including the time-scale for the production of the Strategic Plan?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The program for the Strategic Plan was agreed by the House when it agreed the States of Jersey Law last year and the Council of Ministers has followed the requirements of that to the letter. In retrospect, I think that the time-scale allowed to produce a document of the scope and importance

of the Strategic Plan was too tight, but it was set with the best of intentions. The intentions were that the Council of Ministers would have to put its ideas on their vision - its program - before the House by an agreed date. I think that intention was right. I think we need to give some consideration to the time-scale in the future. I think also that some consideration that needs to be given to the time-scale in which other Members of this House and Scrutiny Panels have operated because I am quite sad that very nearly all the amendments that have come in to the Strategic Plan have come in in the last 10 days. Not all of them, but very nearly all of them have come in within the last 10 days. That is despite the fact that the original date for debating the plan was the 6th of June - today - and the Council of Ministers has voluntarily put that back 2 weeks to allow Scrutiny Panels and other Members to put their amendments in so I think there are some things about the process that we need to look at. But it was the first off. There are bound to be teething problems. We need to look at it to see how we can improve it and I think we can.

4.9 The Deputy of St. John:

Could the Chief Minister advise as to whether he has yet had the opportunity to review, with the Attorney General, the concerns that have been raised by the finance industry with regard to the current extradition laws?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I have referred the Deputy's letter - which he wrote to me, I think about 2 weeks ago - to the Attorney General. I have had a holding response. I am awaiting a further and more detailed response which I am sure I will get in due course.

4.10 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

Can the Chief Minister confirm that, following discussions at the Council of Ministers, law drafting time has been identified to address some of the concerns raised in recent months about the detention of people with outstanding arrest orders in the United Kingdom and the question of their lawful detention here in Jersey?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, I am delighted to be able to confirm that that is indeed the case

4.11 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Some months ago it was announced that a group would be set up at a senior level, as I understand it, Sir, to look into the whole issue of rent rebates, because of its enormous impact upon the budget and yet we hear of random suggestions and they have been discussed this morning. Would the Chief Minister tell me, Sir, whether this group is still working and at what stage its work is?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I think the Housing Minister has dealt with such questions this morning. The Housing Minister and his Department are working on a comprehensive policy document on social housing in Jersey generally. As he said himself, in answer to questions earlier, the plan is that will be up for debate in September or October. It is, I know, a comprehensive document covering - I believe - every aspect of social housing, including of course, rent rebates.

4.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Chief Minister inform Members whether a satisfactory resolution has occurred over the issue of legal advice to Scrutiny Panels, and in particular the sharing of legal advice, and can he say when he will come to the Scrutiny Panels and reveal this agreement?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Can I say, Sir, I am in fairly regular contact with the President of the Chairman's Committee and he is aware that this issue is for debate by the Council of Ministers together with the Attorney General, on Thursday.

4.13 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Notwithstanding the Chief Minister's understandable, but not necessarily acceptable, concerns about the speed of Scrutiny's involvement in the Strategic Plan, would he acknowledge that one of the founding principles of developing the Plan was that it should be jointly developed between Scrutiny and the Executive and that no invitation arrived, despite various informal entreaties to that effect?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Absolutely, Sir, 100 per cent agreed. The Council of Ministers passed on the first draft of the Strategic Plan to all Scrutiny Panels on 3rd March this year. Until about 2 weeks ago, with the exception of one Panel, we had had no response whatsoever. We were all expecting to be called in to be scrutinised. We were all expecting to meet to discuss any aspect of the Strategic Plan. We were all expecting written inquiries from Scrutiny Panels on the Strategic Plan until 2 weeks ago - or just over 2 weeks ago, maybe 3 weeks ago - and apart from one Scrutiny Panel that really skirted on the periphery, we received nothing. I express my deep disappointment at that because it means that Scrutiny has not done a full and proper job on the Strategic Plan. It has had 3 months in which to do it - 3 months in which me and all my Ministers were available for meetings, were available to answer written requests and we were astonished at the lack of such interest in the Strategic Plan by the Scrutiny Panels. I will just single out here the Social Affairs Scrutiny Panel who, even though it got into it late in the day, has scrutinised now a number of Ministers and done so I think fairly effectively.

4.14 Deputy A. Breckon:

Can I ask the Chief Minister if he recognises that work plans had been formed for Scrutiny Panels which did not include exclusive consideration of the Strategic Plan as the Panels did not know what it contained?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I find that an amazing question. Every Member of the States has known that the Strategic Plan was going to be published early in March. Every Member of the States knew it had to be lodged early in April. If Scrutiny could not foresee that and make its own plans to fit it in and to scrutinise what is the most important document before this House this year - so far, anyway - if it could not fit it in somehow or other, then I am astonished at what it has been doing. Rather than looking frankly for oil under St. Ouen's Bay, [Laughter] it would have been much, much better employed as it was charged to be, scrutinising the Strategic Plan, of which, as I have said, it had more than enough notice. I think it is a sad reflection on the process of Scrutiny that no allowance was made in its timetable for such an important document as the Strategic Plan.

4.15 Deputy R.C. Duhamel of St. Saviour:

Would the Chief Minister not agree that despite his previous statements to the effect that the Strategic Plan is not binding on Members of the House, that he has in fact placing too much importance on the forthcoming strategic debate?

Senator F.H. Walker:

No, Sir, I would not. I made a formal statement to this House saying it is not binding on the States and I am not going to change from that. It is not. That was a formal statement. But that still does not detract from the importance of it as a vision for the next 5 years for Jersey. An importance, I think, which is now reflected by the fact that we have received no fewer than 19 amendments. They may nearly all have been in the last 10 days, but nevertheless quite clearly, Members are now taking the Strategic Plan seriously and have posed quite a number of amendments. I welcome that. No one can suggest it is not an important document and the debate we are going to have is not one of the most important debates we are going to have this year.

4.16 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister not aware, or has he simply forgotten that Scrutiny is supposed to be based on evidence and there is very little evidence in the current wish list that is described as a Strategic Plan coming forward from his office?

Senator F.H. Walker:

That is a lopsided, one-sided political view which I do not think is worthy of a sensible answer [Laughter].