

4. Questions without notice - The Minister for Transport and Technical Services

4.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisssier:

Last year as I understand it the Minister or his predecessor made a statement that an ongoing and irritant unequal treatment would be rectified, namely that males get bus passes at 65 and females at 60. As I recall, Sir, a promise was made that this would be immediately rectified. Why has nothing occurred in this regard?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I do not know, Sir.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérisssier:

Given that a promise was publicly made in this Assembly, can the Minister promise that he will now go away and ensure that this promise is implemented forthwith?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am not sure I will be able to undertake to do it forthwith, Sir, but I certainly undertake to look into the matter. I think it is probably something I may need to discuss with one or 2 other Ministers - Social Security springs to mind - and I would be very happy to have continuing discussions with the Deputy on this subject.

4.2 Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am not entitled to ask a question, but may I ask the Minister if what they are doing now is still contrary to human rights, the issuing of a bus pass for a person at 60 and refusing one for a gentleman the same age?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I wonder if the Minister would care to declare an interest in this matter or not? **[Laughter]**

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I wonder if the question could be answered?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I would like to congratulate the Minister, Sir. He is one of my regular customers, although it is hard to call him a customer when he does not pay. **[Laughter]** I have to say that I am not in a position as I would need to refer probably to the Attorney General on this matter to say one way or the other as to whether we are in breach of human rights legislation on this issue and I will certainly look into it. What would be helpful I think is whether Members would like to indicate to me whether I should be reducing the age at which a bus pass is required or raising the age. That would certainly help my deliberations.

4.3 Deputy J.B. Fox:

The current road works in and around the Ring Road has again caused disruption to the traders and the residents of the Cheapside area. I have been waiting for a long time - it seems like 5 years now - to try and get vibrant villages sorted out and have parking arrangements for Cheapside sorted out from a blanket ban of a mass of cones. I wonder if the Minister could give me some reassurance that he will resurrect the various proposals - not only just my proposals - into a higher degree up the priority list in order that we can solve some of the issues that have been pending for such a long period of time in this particular area?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am very sorry to hear that Deputy Fox's vibrant villages are oscillating at a very slow rate. However, I can assure him that in terms of the temporary restrictions around the Cheapside area this relates directly to the major resurfacing work going up Queen's Road all the way to the Union Inn which is an 11-week project in total. The first phase involving Queen's Road and its immediate environment is only 3 weeks or so. I anticipate and very much hope that the current pressures on Cheapside will be relieved in due course. I regret to say that in terms of road resurfacing works you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs. I am afraid that this is just something will have to be endured for a short while. Thereafter, and doubtless subject to the findings of the St. Helier Regeneration Strategy, I hope that the Deputy's villages will start vibrating a little more than they are at the moment.

4.4 Senator L. Norman:

By price-fixing taxi fares and artificially restricting the number of licensed taxis, is the Minister not encouraging anti-competitive practices which is not in the best interest of the travelling public?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

The short answer is no. If I might correct the Senator, regulating fares is not quite the same thing as price-fixing although it does indeed fix a fair price. I think the implication of price-fixing is somewhat different. Due to an abuse of licence plates by a limited number of taxi drivers who did not live in the Island any more, there has been a modest restriction in the number of licence plates in circulation. However, that is a matter that in fact may well benefit the industry because we do have a problem of a diminishing taxi market. Therefore, if there is a slightly smaller number of taxis, as it were, trying to share out the taxi cake then that is some benefit to hardworking taxi drivers. This is an ongoing issue. I should make it quite clear that the Minister only regulates the rank taxis. All the cab operators are free to choose, currently, what fares they charge and generally speaking they charge higher fares than rank taxis. In that respect, I think that the regulation of prices is in fact in the public interest and not against it as the Senator was implying.

4.5 Senator L. Norman:

If the taxis were able to compete on price, might that not generate more business rather than the less business that, according to the Minister, they are now getting because of the lack of competition in the marketplace and the price-fixing by the States?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

I do accede to the Senator's great wisdom in this area. His undeniable achievements in the area of ferries and competition, I think, is well known to many. However, I should point out quite clearly that the taxi cab industry may not respond, in the way that people might predict, to the unleashing of pure market forces. The Senator is quite right in implying that there could be a tendency to drive prices down. However, there would also be a tendency for the entire industry to, first, initially fragment, facing customers with numerous lists of telephone numbers of competing operations to try and phone-up, not knowing quite whether they were operating 24 hours or not. Then there would be a subsequent tendency for the entire business to move into a monopolistic situation. I do not think either of those are particularly what we want to see.

4.6 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister inform the Assembly when he intends to bring his Sustainable Travel and Transport Plan to the States for debate?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

I intend to bring it to States' debate as soon as I am satisfied with it. I anticipate that will be in the next few weeks and certainly, I imagine, by the next session.

4.7 Deputy C.J. Scott-Warren of St. Saviour:

Does the Minister believe that local residents living in the vicinity of major road resurfacing projects should be individually notified in writing beforehand?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

That is an exercise that my department specifically undertook. Whether there have been any individual failures of notification I am not aware. If the Deputy would care to point any out, I will look into the matter.

4.8 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

In answer to questions recently in the House, the Minister stated that one way perhaps of resolving the traffic issues concerning the Beaumont and Bel Royal areas would be to construct a new road across the beach into St. Helier. Following that comment, would the Minister confirm whether consideration is indeed being given by his department to such construction?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

I believe the Deputy is doing me something of a disservice. I believe I was much more fulsome in my explanations of possible engineering solutions to the Beaumont/Bel Royal problem which not only included building a substantial road along the seafront but also the possibility of constructing a tunnel and indeed a potential flyover, all of which would be hideously expensive and utterly unworkable, I would imagine, as far as States' Members are concerned. No, I can assure both the Deputy and all States Members that I have no immediate plans to construct or ever put in the planning application for consideration for either a new motorway, along the seafront at Bel Royal, or a flyover or a tunnel.

4.9 The Deputy of St. John:

The Minister may be aware that at the Prison we currently have a very successful horticultural department which acts as a rehabilitation for prisoners too. We provide a huge number of plants and shrubs and so on which are then sold to the commercial sector. At the moment though, however, Transport and Technical Services and States' departments generally do not purchase from the Prison any of these items. Would the Minister consider this might be a good practice to support that particular initiative by purchasing some of their required shrubbery from the Prison? Thank you, Sir.

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

I should be most interested to see the full range of plants that may be grown in the prison. I am sure there may be some very interesting specimens **[Laughter]**.

4.10 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister's new Travel and Transport Strategy differ significantly from the last one, which he had to withdraw from the States, of which he was also very proud?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

Indeed I was and I shall be even prouder of the next strategy which I can assure the Senator will be even thicker than the last one, possibly glossier and packed full of interesting information.

4.11 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Reverting to the flowers at the Prison, which perhaps the Minister has no artistic soul and does not appreciate horticulture. However, they do have a very good range of plants. Will the Minister give assurances that he will in fact look at using them as a supplier for parks and gardens and so forth where T.T.S. (Transport and Technical Services) is involved?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

I can give an assurance to the Deputy I will be asking my department to request a brochure from the Prison forthwith.

4.12 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Will the Minister advise whether in his glossy new strategy he comes up with a solution to the traffic problems that we experience between Beaumont, Bel Royal and St. Helier?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

There will be a number of solutions put forward. Whether they will work at solving the traffic congestion problem between Bel Royal and Beaumont remains to be seen. I can, for example, point to the recent introduction - and may I add, highly successful introduction - of the new peak

time airport express route which is already accounting for new passengers and, by implication, reducing the potential number of motorists using that particular section. That is something I intend to build on. But I have to say to Members that a lot of these solutions lie in the hands of the public. If everybody insists on wanting to own a car and use it at peak times and go down a particular route then I regret to say we are always going to have a certain level of difficulty.

4.13 Deputy G.P. Southern:

As a journalist in a previous life, the Minister must be aware of Lord Reith's maxim that the B.B.C. should inform, entertain, educate. Whilst I am very entertained by some of his replies, will the Minister in future concentrate on the other 2 of the triumvirate to inform and educate us about answers? Will he take answers seriously, please?

Deputy G.W.J de Faye:

I have always disagreed with Lord Reith on this matter [**Laughter**]. I have always felt it of vital importance to entertain first [**Laughter**] then to inform and, if you are really lucky, you might educate at the end of the day. I should inform the Deputy: (1) to lighten up; and (2) that if you do not entertain then you do not have people's attention and then you have very little chance of either informing or educating. I intend to continue in my own style if the Deputy does not mind.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

That concludes the 15 minute period to the Minister.