

2.6 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding confidence in the Board of the Jersey Opera House:

Before asking the question could I say for the record that I have recently joined the Jersey Arts Trust, although I do not believe this bars me from asking a question about the opera house? I am a friend of both the theatre director and the chair of the Jersey Opera House Board, both gentlemen are parishioners of mine. However, I have no financial interest in the opera house, unless of course they are planning to put on one of my plays and have not told me about it. **[Laughter]** Does the Minister have confidence in the Board of the Jersey Opera House and that it is discharging its responsibilities in a proper manner?

Senator M.E. Vibert (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

My Assistant Minister, with responsibility for culture, the Deputy of Grouville, will act as rapporteur in this matter.

Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville (Assistant Minister for Education, Sport and Culture - rapporteur):

In common with many Islanders, Education, Sport and Culture is saddened and concerned with the unfortunate events that have troubled the Opera House in recent years. For this reason we do monitor the situation and have been kept informed generally of the changing situation. For legal reasons, and to be fair to the individuals, it would not be appropriate to discuss the details in public. However, given the legal obligations and duties borne by the Members of the Board of the Jersey Opera House Limited, I can say that Education, Sport and Culture is satisfied that the Board has legitimate reasons to be concerned. In any event, the Jersey Arts Trust is the sole shareholder of Jersey Opera House Limited, and Education, Sport and Culture has been assured that the Arts Trust has, and I quote from the Chairman: "Total confidence in the Board." The Constable of St. Helier is, as he has already said, a member of the Jersey Arts Trust and would therefore have been aware of their total support, especially if he had attended their recent meeting at which this issue had been fully discussed.

2.6.1 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

In view of the allegations of financial regularities, will the assistant Minister explain why she does not feel that it has been necessary to insist on a police investigation, or even is it not time for a truly independent review?

The Deputy of Grouville:

I believe a police investigation was discussed at the Board level, however they felt it was more appropriate for the individuals concerned to go to the Jersey Employment Tribunal.

2.6.2 Senator B.E. Shenton:

The Opera House saga has been mishandled for years. Is it not the case that the Minister and the Board are more interested in finding a scapegoat than sorting out this debacle once and for all for the benefit of the Islanders?

The Deputy of Grouville:

We have been troubled, as I said initially, with what has been going on at the Opera House, both last year with the overspends, lack of budget or whatever; that situation seemed to be resolving itself. We now unfortunately have to see the staffing issues of that theatre carried out in the media, which I would say is unfortunate, but nobody is looking for a scapegoat and, quite contrary, the theatre director's contract was coming to an end in October anyway, and if the Board had not acted as they are doing, having been alerted by their auditors of these financial irregularities, given that they have been given a States grant, I think we would have more reason to be concerned.

2.6.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Assistant Minister confirm that the Education Sports and Culture Department has complete faith in the Jersey Arts Trust? Secondly, Sir, would she suggest any reforms that might be required in terms of the relationship between the Department and ultimately the Opera House?

The Deputy of Grouville:

Education, Sport and Culture has a partnership agreement with the Board of the Jersey Opera House. For the first time we have established a partnership agreement directly with them and not their sole shareholder, the Jersey Arts Trust. As far as we are concerned, because this is a situation of "damned if you do, damned if you don't", and I do remember Deputy La Hérissier during the cultural strategy debate criticising politicians for interfering and intervening with the Arts. We were accused of having... we were told that politicians have no place in the Arts world, which we take on Board. These structures have been set up in a certain way whereby we are at arm's length from the Arts world. We have set up a partnership agreement with each of the cultural organisations. We give the Opera House Limited a grant and for that grant they have to open the doors of the theatre with a variety of entertainment for the public. As far as we are concerned that is exactly what they are doing, and indeed this might be an appropriate time to acknowledge the hard work of the outgoing director in putting on the shows that are currently being performed now.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I wonder if I could get an answer, does the Education Department have complete faith in the Jersey Arts Trust, yes or no?

The Deputy of Grouville:

We have no reason not to have faith in them. **[Laughter]**

2.6.4 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Earlier on in her answer, the Assistant Minister mentioned the fact that there is a monitoring of the situation. Can the Assistant Minister inform the House how often does she meet with the Board, and what monitoring system or mechanism is in place.

The Deputy of Grouville:

I have met with the Board on several occasions this year. They inform me generally what is going on and if they have any concerns with the organisation - not the running of the theatre - with the organisation - the property itself - so on. We have, I have to admit, discussed with them different ways of operating, for example, the Jersey Arts Trust, we would far prefer to see concentration on grass roots artists and culture and the Opera House. What we would dearly love to see is the Opera House get on and run the theatre.

2.6.5 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Could I just get clarification from the answer because I want to know what monitoring mechanism is in place. You do not have, or there is no monthly meeting with the board as far as you are concerned, or bi-monthly meeting. That is the sort of question I was asking.

The Deputy of Grouville:

We are establishing partnership agreements with each of the cultural organisations and we will also have service level agreements, business plans and so on. I am not entirely sure what he expects us to do: wade in and tell the Board how to run their theatre?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

To make it nice and easy, what I was asking is do you have bi-monthly meetings? That is basically it and the answer must be no.

2.6.6 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Could the Assistant Minister confirm or deny that the current Board has already stated that they wish to disband by Christmas, and if this is the case, would not she agree that it is not that they have lost confidence in the Board, but the Board has lost confidence in the Education Minister and department itself.

The Deputy of Grouville:

I have not heard that rumour. **[Laughter]**

2.6.7 Senator L. Norman:

Does the Assistant Minister consider that the Board of the Opera House would be somewhat churlish and defective by sacking the Opera House Manager when he had already tendered his resignation?

The Deputy of Grouville:

As I have already said, when the auditors of the company pointed out financial irregularities, they had to take action and we believe the action that they have taken has been appropriate given the auditor's findings. If they did nothing - and they are receiving taxpayers' money - we would have been criticised and they certainly would have been criticised for taking no action. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to sit there and do nothing while he left.

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

Does the Assistant Minister have confidence in the process for selecting the new director of the Jersey Opera House and should an appointment be made in light of current events bringing disrepute to the Board?

The Deputy of Grouville:

The appointment panel, I believe, is made up from a U.K. independent person who has a great knowledge of running theatres in the cultural world, the Opera House Chairman and the Arts Trust Director. We have no business... or we are not informed of this process: they go through the proper procedure.

2.6.9 The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is not a surprise to this Ministry to reply to a question with a snide remark and could I say for the record that I have attended all of the meetings of the Arts Trust that I have been invited to. **[Aside]** Would the Assistant Minister, given that no investigation of an independent type has been carried out but merely an audit by the Board's own accountants - who have given the accounts a clean bill of health on every other occasion they have looked at the accounts - think that the Theatre Director has been treated very shabbily and was he not entitled to an independent investigation before his life, his family and his career were taken through the mire by the Opera House Board?

The Deputy of Grouville:

I am not sure who went to the media first, but quite clearly this whole staffing issue and the irregularities have been played out by the media and I would say the outgoing Theatre Director has played quite a large part in that. The correct procedure is to go to the Jersey Employment Tribunal which I believe is taking place and then it will be up to the individuals concerned if they want to take the matter further.