

7.8 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of the Chief Minister regarding biometric identity cards:

Will the Minister explain whether he has decided to proceed with biometric identity cards? What consultation has taken or will take place and what opt-out facilities will be available?

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

Following the decision of the States on 22nd June 2005 to adopt a registration scheme as an integral part of the new migration strategy, no decision has yet been taken on what form registration will take other than that it will be combined with Social Security registration. The Migration Advisory Group has concluded that on balance it is sensible that the single registration document incorporates a method of establishing identity for the purposes of assessing the employment and housing and potentially a range of other public services. Given the purpose of registration - including access to Housing, Social Security and other public services - an opt-out facility does not seem to be appropriate, but all avenues will be explored. This is an important policy area in securing migration and population objectives and the fullest possible public understanding and debate is vital. Clearly, therefore, all proposals on this subject will be subject to consultation as and when they are considered for development.

7.8.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I have tried a few crafty ones in my day but this might take the biscuit. I would like to ask the Chief Minister in what way he sees biometric identity cards playing a part in airport security in the future, as it does currently with Channel Islanders returning home being photographed and then re-photographed, there is a certain biometric element there I believe? What aspect does the Chief Minister see that playing in regard to Jersey's airport security; and on the issue of Jersey's airport security, can the Chief Minister update us about the issues in relation to airport security which have us looking at the least supportable time at security: an issue where there might be a strike on our hands?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I think that is a question that is a bit far off the subject of the principal question. Nevertheless, so far as the use of biometric identity cards is concerned for airport security, it is far too early to give an answer to that question. The whole issue, as I think I said in my main answer, is effectively work in progress and no decisions at this juncture have been made. So, I have had no updates since very early this morning on the airport security position but at the time that I received my last update sadly the news is that some sort of strike beginning tomorrow morning is most likely to occur. But I would emphasise that this is a dispute between the employers - who are G4S, the security firm - and the employees. It is not a dispute between the airport and/or, if you like, the States and their employees in this instance.

7.8.2 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Before the Chief Minister finally chooses the technology that will incorporate the information on to an identity card, will he take into account developing concerns on biometric passports and other such devices which have now been proven to be easily hacked into? Apparently the equipment to hack into a passport costs £105, and the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee has asked the government to reconsider the technology because it is not secure.

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am grateful to the Deputy for making that point. This will be the subject of detailed consideration by the Migration Advisory Group who will in turn, at the appropriate time, be advising me and the Council of Ministers on what they believe to be the appropriate way forward. Then of course it is a question of coming back to this House, no doubt going through a full, rigorous scrutiny process and consulting widely with the public.

7.8.3 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I did see a biometric passport only yesterday, Sir, and I believe they will be an important tool in combating illegal immigration and terrorism. However, I understand that this biometric equipment is horrendously expensive. Does the Chief Minister believe that if politically and legally possible this equipment could be shared with Guernsey?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The answer to that is, at this point, unknown. What I can say to the Deputy is that the Council of Ministers is meeting with our counterparts, the Policy Council in Guernsey on Friday and it is now added - and I am grateful to the Deputy - to the list of possible areas of co-operation that we will be discussing with them during that meeting. So, I am grateful to the Deputy for raising the possibility.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I request that you grant me a little leniency if I may, Sir, because I would like to stray back into the issue about airport security in relation to the answer that the Chief Minister gave me before, Sir.

The Bailiff:

You have got away with it once, Deputy, but not a second time I am afraid.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

May I ask, Sir, that the Standing Orders be lifted in order that we may question the Chief Minister on this issue? Given the issue that airport transportation involving perhaps delays and security issues and the ability for the finance industry to operate effectively is at hand here, we have no statements today from any of the Ministers in regards to this. We have a statement from the Economic Development Minister on sea routes; I believe that is forthcoming. But, I do believe that we need to at least have an understanding of what the issue is so that we can push the Chief Minister on some of these issues and question him and put some points to the Chief Minister, Sir, that we may have in this regards. Therefore, Sir, I would like to ask for the Standing Orders to be lifted in this instance so that I can ask the Chief Minister some questions on this issue.

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

If I may be helpful to the Assembly, I have already been in communication with the Greffier. The Assistant Minister will be making a statement on the issue concerning the airport, with your leave, later on after the luncheon adjournment.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I thank the Minister for Economic Development for that intervention.

7.8.4 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Given the wider implications, as I mentioned earlier, Sir with the biometric passports as used by Britain being now easily cloned and offering virtually no assistance with increasing security - what are the Chief Minister's thoughts on our own passports, which I believe are now going that way? Is there any intention of looking at the issue afresh given this new information on the lack of security of the information on these cards?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Clearly the Deputy raises an important issue. I am assured that security implications have been fully taken into account, but I will see that the Deputy's question is pursued with the relevant officers and gets a full, comprehensive answer to him, which I think would be of interest possibly to all Members of this House.