

4. Questions to Ministers without Notice - The Chief Minister

The Bailiff:

That concludes the first question period without notice. We come to the second question period and I invite questions of the Chief Minister.

4.1 Deputy A. Breckon:

I wonder if the Chief Minister would like to comment on the idea of a national gallery and whether - if it is a realistic proposition - any funding has been identified to either build it or to run it?

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

I have seen no details whatsoever for plans for a national gallery. I have seen no information on funding, on operations or any details or data at all. I think it remains a very desirable objective; whether or not it is achievable, I cannot say today. I have no information.

4.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

In the light of the enhanced role for the 3 cost-cutting Deputies, would the Chief Minister announce what reports he has received to date from the 3 Deputies and on what topics those reports were?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am sorry; I just did not get the question.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

In relation to the activities of the 3 Deputies who are being officially sanctioned to carry out more cost-cutting or value for money studies, would he announce to the House the reports received to date and on what topics?

Senator F.H. Walker:

We have received no reports to date. I announced in the Business Plan debate the structure that is being set up to enable expenditure to be critically and independently reviewed. I do not expect any information out of that process for some time yet.

4.2.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Sorry, Sir, a supplementary. The group has been in existence for several months. What reports have been received to the present?

Senator F.H. Walker:

None have been received at the present because the 3 Deputies concerned lack resources and - not least - time. That has now been addressed and amended and to the Deputies' satisfaction they now have the resources they require and they, like the Council of Ministers, are looking forward to making a very positive contribution to the 2009 Business Plan.

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

In answer to a question I asked the Chief Minister in May this year about the lack of a States' policy relating to the employment of individuals with learning disabilities, he informed the House that the Council of Ministers would be receiving a major presentation by the Director of Human Resources and this was one of the topics that the Director had been asked to address. Is the Chief Minister able to give me any further information regarding that question, please?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Not specifically. I think Deputy Gorst could provide more information than can I, but, of course, he is not being asked the question.

4.4 Deputy S. Power:

Would the Chief Minister agree with me that the organisation and management of the 2007 Standard Chartered Jersey Marathon was excellent and was as successful as the previous one and

would he not agree that this is exactly the kind of event-led tourism that the Island should encourage and build on?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Absolutely, Sir. Every report I have had back suggests that the marathon was a triumph of organisation and a wonderful advertisement for Jersey and I very much hope - and indeed believe - that it is now firmly entrenched in the events calendar in Jersey on an annual basis. I would like to express my warm thanks and congratulations to all those hundreds if not thousands of people who were involved in one way or another in the quite splendid organisation.

4.5 The Connétable of St. Helier:

The Chief Minister is reported to have said at a recent speech at the Chamber of Commerce that the G.S.T. (Goods and Services Tax) petition was collected in many cases under false pretences, that some of the signatures were not valid. I just wanted to ask whether the Chief Minister was willing to apologise for those remarks which clearly cast a slur not only upon the members of the public who signed the petition, but on the Members of the Greffe who verified it before it was presented to the States?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The remarks were made based on reliable information received at the time, but however - and I have already made this clear to Deputy Breckon who I have little doubt has shared the information with the Connétable of St. Helier - I have made it very clear that now that the signatures have been checked by the Greffier, which at the time I made my statement I was unaware of, I am satisfied that the signatures are valid and I apologise to those who have signed the petition for suggesting otherwise.

4.6 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Further to my question to the Minister earlier on regarding Guernsey sewerage, in the European perception Jersey and Guernsey are the Channel Islands and anything one Island does can negatively impact on the other. Does the Chief Minister not agree?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Guernsey do lots of things that negatively impact on Jersey. No, Sir, I do not agree that in this context there is any cause for concern as far as our international reputation is concerned whatsoever; rather the reverse. As I said in answer to an earlier question, I think it is generally well known how far advanced Jersey's sewage treatment procedures and processes are, and Jersey is held up as a good example of a small community in this respect. I do not believe we need have any concern about a negative impact from Guernsey at all.

4.7 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I do not believe I stand alone in wishing to register my frustration about the prison situation that has been dragging its heels over the last few years. I understand that there was a successful meeting yesterday with the Minister for Home Affairs and the Chief Minister at the prison and it is going to come to the Council of Ministers in short order. Would the Chief Minister give us his opinion as to the situation there and whether or not he would be supportive of the Home Affairs Minister in seeking the funding necessary to sort the matter out once and for all? If the funding is not available, would the Chief Minister approach or be willing to approach the Treasury Minister to come to the House to seek for approval for those funds?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The situation I found when I attended the meeting together with the Home Affairs Minister yesterday was one of intense frustration. This has been caused by the fact that the money allocated - and this House did approve significant allocation of funds to the prison improvement plan not just for one year but on an ongoing basis - has been eaten-up by other operational

requirements. At this moment I am not clear why that has happened or indeed how that has happened. Some time before the current problem erupted into the headlines, the Council of Ministers at the behest of the Home Affairs Minister had commissioned a full report into exactly what is happening with the funding. That report is due to come to the Council of Ministers on 7th November and we will be giving it our full consideration then. But I have no hesitation in saying that there is a problem at the prison and it is a problem that one way or another we have to resolve.

4.8 Deputy J.B. Fox:

The Council of Ministers each fortnight, or whenever it is they meet, always discuss the future propositions and then make subsequent comments. Today we have just heard of a land swap being conducted by Property Holdings in relation to a small patch of land at the Les Mielles area at the Five Mile Road, which is an extremely sensitive area at the best of times. Can I ask the Chief Minister if such land swaps or sales, et cetera, are discussed by the Council of Ministers prior to notifications being accepted or being brought to the notice of States Members in the usual way? In other words, is there a way that these decisions can be challenged before they are ratified; signed and sealed, in other words?

Senator F.H. Walker:

No, land swaps such as the plot in question are not the subject of Council of Ministers discussions before they are implemented. That is very much in the hands of the respective Minister.

4.9 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

Does the Chief Minister agree that nice-to-haves, such as a national gallery, should only be considered after we have the prison building and facilities up to scratch?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, I do. Also, my understanding is that it is likely, should a national gallery project proceed, that it will not need to be funded by the States, but that is very preliminary, superficial information. But clearly we have to put our needs before our wants, yes.

4.10 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

If I might pick upon that last subject, there is a suggestion being bandied about that the Council of Ministers is basically requesting W.E.B. (Waterfront Enterprise Board) to put £1 million or £2 million towards this national gallery. In light of the comments made earlier on in this question session by the Chief Minister, would he therefore deny that? I presume that is not true.

Senator F.H. Walker:

I think the Deputy is adept at picking up every rumour or half rumour that he wants to that suits his cause. I can emphatically deny that that is the case.

4.11 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

In response to the non-answer to my question the Chief Minister gave me about 5 minutes ago relating to the States' employment policy of people with learning difficulties, can he confirm to me that the Council of Ministers did indeed receive a presentation from the Director of Human Resources and, if so, when will he be in a position to report back to the States Assembly about those very important policy changes which will address the needs and rights of all Island residents with varying degrees of learning difficulties?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I can indeed confirm that the Council of Ministers did receive a presentation and now I have had time to think further and my memory has stirred a bit, we did agree that we would double the number of positions offered in the States to people with one handicap or another. I am quite happy to provide that information to the Deputy and to the House if Members so wish.

4.12 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Chief Minister confirm that he is enthusiastic about Double Summer Time and, if so, when does he propose to introduce it?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am personally very enthusiastic about Double Summer Time, but it is not my call. We are still working on a proposition or a request put to us by Senator Perchard. The work is still underway. It is taking, I would accept, quite some time, but I would equally accept it is not exactly top of our priority list at the moment, but it will be coming forward in due course. What the answer will be at this point I do not know. Personally, I am in favour, but there are very strong reasons, very strong problems, related to the proposition as well.

4.13 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Is the Chief Minister able to state categorically that no behind-the-scenes deal has been struck with a supplier of energy from waste or, in common parlance, incinerator technology; that no contract has been entered into and no commitments made?

Senator F.H. Walker:

That is a question better addressed to the Transport and Technical Services Minister, but I am certainly unaware, and I am sure I would be, of any such deal. Again, I suspect that this is more rumour than reality.

4.14 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Like many other people, I think I was surprised by the Council of Ministers decision to reduce the overseas aid budget, or attempt to reduce the overseas aid budget recently. I know the Chief Minister is not going to name those Ministers who voted for and against, but could he give us some indication of the support that it did receive on the Council? We know that 2 Ministers were absent. Senator Vibert, I believe, has said that he opposed it. Of the 7 remaining Members, could the Chief Minister tell us if any abstained or opposed it; if they registered their dissent or whether in fact there was a casting vote?

Senator F.H. Walker:

There was no casting vote, nor do I recall there being any voices of dissent, but there was no vote taken. It was a proposition, as very frequently happens, that emerged without a vote, but I think the question is totally pointless because the States have taken their decision and the issue is firmly closed.

4.15 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I wonder if the Chief Minister might like to comment: I was struck recently, while walking up Hill Street, to notice that one of the employment agencies has been identified as the preferred employment agency of the States of Jersey, along with a couple of other banks, et cetera. Is it not anti-competitive and strangely peculiar that the States of Jersey would have a preferred placement agency so prominently advertising the fact that it is? Is it not fundamentally...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, if you want a reply to this question, you had better stop pretty quickly. We have 15 seconds, Minister.

Senator F.H. Walker:

I do not have a clue. It is not something that has ever been brought to my attention before, but I will find out.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the question period.