

4. Questions to Ministers without Notice - The Chief Minister

4.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Over the past few years various senior Jersey politicians have stated that the Island would only move to Zero/10 corporate taxation system if there was a level playing field with other O.E.C.D. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries. In the event that there may not be a level playing field in place, will the Island still proceed with a Zero/10 taxation system?

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

A level playing field and protecting Jersey's competitive position is, of course, right at the top of our agenda. It is abundantly clear, I think, that a level playing field will not be achieved with jurisdictions such as, for example, Singapore and other jurisdictions which are beyond the scope of Europe. However, it is generally felt, not just by Jersey, or certainly by myself and my department and advisors, but also Guernsey, the Isle of Man and other jurisdictions that the advantages of moving to a Zero/10 structure, as approved by this Assembly, far outweigh any alternative that is envisaged at this time. Of course, we continue to press to ensure the level playing field is delivered in all our major direct competitor jurisdictions - which it is - and continue to press for other economic advantages elsewhere where they may not necessarily be the case.

4.2 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I am sure the Chief Minister is aware of a new cannabis substitute being sold quite openly in Jersey. This product is known by the name of Spice and, according to research, can give the same effect as cannabis but if used in large amounts can cause respiratory failure. Will the Chief Minister undertake to consult with his Council of Ministers at Health, Home Affairs and Economic Development with a view to possibly banning the importation and sale of this produce?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I will definitely commit to consulting on this issue. As the Deputy is aware, it has only recently come to my attention, and I think to everyone's attention other than those presumably who have been using it for some time. Yes, I will be consulting with the Health Minister and Home Affairs Minister, in particular, to see what if anything can be done about it or what should be done about it because I am not aware of the technical or the health issues at this point.

4.3 Deputy P.J.D. Ryan of St. Helier:

My question to the Chief Minister is very much a long-term question, I believe, at this stage in the Island's economic general structure. At the moment, we have an inflation target of 2.5 per cent that has been in place for something like 8 to 9 years, I believe. Whereas we are in monetary union with the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom's inflationary target, as set politically by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee, is one of 2 per cent. Would the Chief Minister agree that having a difference in the 2 inflation targets, in a situation where we are in monetary union with the United Kingdom, continues in the long-term to make the Island's economy less and less competitive and does he foresee a position in the not too distant future when we should adjust our inflation target to be in union with the United Kingdom? In other words, to have a target of 2 per cent rather than 2.5 per cent.

Senator F.H. Walker:

I do not believe that the difference between the 2.5 per cent target set, as the Deputy rightly says, some time ago for Jersey and the current 2 per cent target for the U.K. is that significant. It was not that long ago, of course, that the U.K.'s own target was 2.5 per cent. What is significant to Jersey is the range of recent increases that we have seen in the interest rate in the U.K. because

that does have an effect, and a quite significant effect, on the overall rate of inflation in Jersey. But I would remind the House that the target for Jersey is 2.5 per cent R.P.I.X. (Retail Prices Index excluding mortgage interest payments) which effectively excludes the effect of these interest rates but, nevertheless, they will have - as we have had 3 with the possibility of more to come - an impact on the headline rate, of that there is no doubt. I see little purpose in Jersey adjusting its target from 2.5 per cent down to 2 per cent at this juncture. What we need to do is concentrate all our efforts on meeting that target of 2.5 per cent, in my view.

4.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

In view of the excellent initiative shown by Senator Shenton, is it the Chief Minister's intention to appoint him as attendance monitor for the States? **[Laughter]**

Senator F.H. Walker:

If it was within my powers, I most certainly would but, of course, it has nothing to do either with me or the Council of Ministers whatsoever.

4.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If the Chief Minister did appoint Senator Shenton, he would have to leave all of his 4 Scrutiny Panels that he is involved with at the moment, which would be a shame as with 2 of them I work with him. Has the Chief Minister put in place the recommendation made in the Scrutiny Report 8th November 2005 under the title Provision of Legal Advice to Scrutiny Panels, that the Law Officers' Department ensure that all issues in new draft legislative proposals which potentially impinge on the rights of individuals to privacy and protection of personal data, are automatically referred to the Data Protection Registrar as part of the normal human rights audit of legislation? If he has not, when will he do so?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I cannot give the Deputy an absolutely 100 per cent watertight answer but I believe the answer is, yes. Certainly it is my understanding that every relevant piece of legislation is referred to the Data Protection Registrar and, indeed, that other pieces of proposed, or possible proposed legislation - and, for example, we are talking here about migration policies, population database or whatever it may be - most certainly have been, are currently or will be, and we will not see any such legislation coming forward to the House for approval without the support and her own approval from the Data Protection Registrar.

4.5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Just a supplementary, if I may, Sir. Will he further assure the House that when such material is referred to Data Protection it comes with the appropriate questions and not limited to only parts of the proposed legislation?

Senator F.H. Walker:

That is a very vague and generalistic question. I am confident that the Data Protection Registrar is given every opportunity to comment in an informed way on all proposed legislation.

4.6 The Connétable of St. Helier:

If the Minister for Transport and Technical Services plans for a new incinerator at La Collette are successful, the Chief Minister will have, as part of his legacy as the first Chief Minister of the Island, the commissioning of a vast incinerator at the entrance and gateway from the sea to St. Helier. In view of mounting concerns globally about C.O.2 emissions and the effect on sea level rises, is the Chief Minister satisfied that enough has been done to explore alternative options to such a large incinerator and does he not think that his legacy will be better served, and our environmental credentials on Island better served, if more work was done on the alternatives?

Senator F.H. Walker:

With respect to the Connétable, this seems to me to be resurrecting a question which has been asked, put and debated by this House on I do not know how many occasions over the last 2 or 3 years. We have surely done the question to death and the House has reached the conclusion. It is not a question of my legacy, it is a question of what this House has agreed. Faced with an enormous amount of evidence, faced with Scrutiny reports, faced with a huge range of other reports, it is a question of what this House, having weighed up all the options, has agreed and I adhere to and support the decision taken by this House.

4.7 Deputy S. Pitman:

Having delivered the opening address at last autumn's N.S.P.C.C. (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) conference, I am aware that domestic violence is a keen interest of the Chief Minister. In light of the new U.K. initiative, would the Chief Minister advise the House whether funding will be made available within the Island to follow the much hailed programme of creating in-house safe rooms for women at risk within their homes?

Senator F.H. Walker:

That is principally a matter for the Home Affairs Minister and I am sure she will, if she has not already, be reviewing the matter very closely and I would expect to have discussions with her in the near future.

4.8 Deputy J.B. Fox:

Appreciating that the Planning Minister is restricted in what he can say sometimes, can I ask the Chief Minister, going back to the question of Plémont, whether the Council of Ministers has considered, or is considering, that an alternative site is Warwick Farm - which is on my particular area - part of that consideration as it seems to be an ideal consideration for a site that will shortly be transferred for other purposes?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I do not think I should, any more than the Planning Minister, comment on a matter where planning applications have been made. What I can say to the Deputy is that a report on the Plémont headland will be considered by the Council of Ministers on the 25th of this month, next Thursday.

4.8.1 Deputy J.B. Fox:

I just wanted to know if he would report the details of that result to the Members, please.

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, absolutely.

4.9 Senator J.L. Perchard:

In parliamentary terms, a Green Paper is a consultation document issued by Government that contains policy proposals for debate, dissection and discussion. A Green Paper, Sir, would often contain alternative policy proposals. Does the Chief Minister agree that it would be in the interests of our Island's good government to formalise and adopt a Green Paper system in Jersey?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, absolutely. We have gone some considerable distance towards it but I absolutely agree with the Senator that we should do more and we should formalise it so that everyone is aware of the exact procedure, and that is exactly what the Council of Ministers intends to do in the very near future.

4.10 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Chief Minister accept that the commitment to examine the impact on resources and infrastructure on the Island produced by the Island's growing population is too little too late in that it is a very short study and the model is being set up and reported on by February, and it should have been done a long time before we set up our current migration policy?

Senator F.H. Walker:

It is not too little or too late. It is an important piece of work and, in many respects, I do agree with the Deputy; it is a piece of work that ideally should have been done some time ago but the fact is - and I do not expect some Members of the House to agree with this - we have had neither the information nor the resources to undertake a report and investigation of this scale. I have repeatedly in the past said to the States that Jersey is a statistical desert and we were. We are no longer a statistical desert; we have meaningful information now which we can research and review in the sort of project that is underway now. So I think it is, in that respect, timely, I think it is valuable and it is certainly not too little.

4.10.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may, Sir. Does that mean that, in the light of the proper information, we may be rescinding or amending current policies?

Senator F.H. Walker:

We would not be undertaking the review if it was not to inform policy, but there is no need - or no point - at this stage to change the migration policy as approved by the House because I would remind the Deputy and Members that the structure, the principle of the migration policy, is, for the first time ever, to enable us to monitor and to control the make up of those people. There is absolutely no reason whatsoever to depart from that principle.

4.11 Deputy of St. John:

With regard to the question, Sir, of the future of the Plémont site, would the Chief Minister support such an asset swap that Deputy Fox was alluding to when, clearly, Warwick Farm and other such assets have a considerable amount of value which, if liquidated, can be put into the public purse and spent on much more laudable causes?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am grateful to the Deputy for the question. The whole question of the States' property portfolio and how we use it is one that is receiving, currently, a great deal of attention. As I think the Deputy is aware, and certainly the Public Accounts Committee are aware, land swaps are very much a possibility, very much one of those things that we are investigating. There is tremendous value in the States' property portfolio and, as the Comptroller and Auditor General has said, we need to go even further than the proposed Property Plan, which was approved by the States, in terms of unlocking the value of it and maximising the use of it to the benefit of the public generally.

4.11.1 Deputy of St. John:

Would the Chief Minister not agree that if an asset swap was considered for Plémont, we would effectively be giving away millions of pounds worth of public money?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I am not going to comment on that particular application. I think the Planning Minister quite rightly has said that is not appropriate for him, I do not think it is appropriate for me. Clearly, all such aspects of any proposed land swap, not just for Plémont but anywhere else, would be given a thorough investigation before any recommendations were put forward.

4.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Chief Minister have under consideration the introduction, as has recently happened in the U.K., of the personalised inflation rate to account for different groups in society's particular circumstances whereby the young person has a different inflation rate because his spending is completely different to someone, let us say, who is a pensioner? Will the Chief Minister consider, or explore with the Statistics Department, the possibility of introducing a personalised inflation rate especially for pensioners?

Senator F.H. Walker:

It is an interesting concept. I do not know as yet any of the detail. I am aware of the matter to which the Deputy refers; I do not yet know any detail and have no idea, therefore, whether it would be appropriate to Jersey or not. But, yes, I think it is interesting enough to merit an investigation and to have a look to see whether or not it is appropriate for Jersey.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am afraid that brings matters to an end, Deputy. There are no matters under J, so we come to K, Statements on a matter of official responsibility. The Chief Minister will make a statement regarding staff payment and negotiations.