

4. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Chief Minister

The Bailiff:

We come to the second tier of questioning which is to the Chief Minister.

4.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

As the Chief Minister is aware, the House agreed that at the end January we should have a review of the unelected officers or the Crown Officers and we should have had a report and proposition naming the chairman and the panel members. Will the Chief Minister appraise Members as to why we still have not had the names of the chairman or the panel to carry out this review?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur (The Chief Minister):

Yes, because I am anxious that we should have the best possible chairman for this important review and in order to achieve that person we have had to look high and low. We are still looking. I am more confident now than I was that we will find someone in the near future but at this time we do not have a name. Until that name is available we cannot proceed but I remain anxious that we can deliver these objectives and I appreciate the time delay which has occurred and which is regrettable.

4.1.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

I had this answer a month ago from the Chief Minister. Can I ask what steps he has taken to advertise the post rather than ask people if they would like to do it?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

The difficulty with advertising it is one tends to get a very mixed response and has a significant amount of weeding out to do. If we can find a way of doing it without having to go through that process I would prefer to do that. If we cannot find a way without doing that, then certainly we shall advertise.

4.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In his written answer to question 4670 given earlier in the day, the Chief Minister states that clearly Hay were not comparing salaries in the Island based on job match places and, in the documentation presented to the States over the debate, are to freeze States workers' pay. Will he accept that nonetheless although Hay did not present that information, it was presented by his department in their comments as if it were a local comparison between private and public sector and thus it managed to mislead the House as to what the statements were about? Will he accept that he has misled the House and will he apologise for doing so during the debate on pay freeze last time?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I do not believe I did mislead the House at all. When one makes comparisons, one tries to make comparisons on a like-for-like basis. When Hay did that survey in 2006 they did their best to carry it out on a like-for-like basis acknowledging that there were not the equivalent police officers in the private sector and therefore looked for equivalent job matches in order to get that very comparison which the Deputy and others want to have.

4.2.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I do not question the work of the Hay Group, I question the presentation by his department of the figures that were produced. Does he not accept, and I will give him a second chance before I put it in writing, that he may have been guilty of misleading the House and if so will he apologise for that?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I do not believe I am guilty of misleading the House. If Members of the House have misread into what was written something which is different, then I can understand and appreciate their concern. I believe that what was said was perfectly straight forward.

4.3 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The North of St. Helier Master Plan aside, is the Chief Minister still committed to delivering the town park on the Gas Place site as set out in the terms of reference agreed by the Council of Ministers in the autumn of 2007 when setting up the steering group, whereby the Council of Ministers confirmed a green park across the site not compromised by any development whatsoever?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I am very confident that the working group looking at the North of St. Helier Master Plan is well aware of the States decision taken in 2007 and is also well aware of the need to make the best possible opportunities for the whole area in the way ahead. I await the report of that group with interest and I believe that they are equally committed to delivering a town park as part of an overall project to enhance the North of St. Helier and, indeed, the whole town of St. Helier.

4.4 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

At present we have, I believe, over 900 people registered unemployed. Does the Chief Minister in consultation with his Minister for Economic Development believe that licences should be drastically reduced for companies employing low-skilled foreign labour to give locals a chance?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

Yes, I think those who attended the migration policy presentation last week at the museum will be well aware of the way in which the current Regulation of Undertakings Law is being applied in the current circumstances and is, indeed, tightening up on the way in which unskilled labour may need to be used. Those licences are reviewed as they come up for renewal in a constantly changing climate.

4.5 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I would like to ask the Chief Minister whether he agrees with blanket confidentiality agreements on papers that are given to Scrutiny Panels which prevent proper scrutiny and investigation of the issues being considered. I will give him an example. The Depositor Protection Scheme which questions have just been asked about is subject to confidentiality clauses; the 12-inches thick of paper I have been told cannot be spoken about elsewhere. Only the chairman has had access to that. We have asked the department to go through and sift out what is genuinely confidential or not. Does he believe that this is the best way of having scrutiny?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

Wherever possible the scrutiny process should have the fullest amount of information available to it. On the other hand, there will be matters of commercial confidentiality, not just with the Depositor Compensation Scheme but in many other cases as well. It is up to the Scrutiny Panel in conjunction with the Minister to see how the information can best be obtained by the Panel in a way which does not prejudice that commercial confidentiality and the way in which by having the confidentiality the Minister is best advised as to the way to proceed. The Scrutiny Panel equally needs to be well advised and well informed and it is how that can be achieved, without breaking that confidentiality, which needs to be discussed between the parties concerned.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Just following through on that, I might add that the Scrutiny Panel did ask the Minister at a hearing to go through it and sift through what was relevant or not. We have still not heard back from them; it is still confidential.

The Bailiff:

Was that a supplementary, Deputy, or not?

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Sorry, I will let it go.

4.6 Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier:

This follows on nicely from Deputy Higgins. As Chief Minister, could the Chief Minister not get a policy with all the Ministers who work with Scrutiny Panels that they are exactly the same? Because some Scrutiny Panels work very well with their Ministers. They get the information very timely and they work along. Would the Minister not agree because there is no set policy across all ministries with scrutiny we are in a fine mess because Economic Development would not release very important papers which we are now told are basically not reinventing the wheel, these schemes are all over Europe and the U.K. So, which is it, but can the Minister please use his title as Chief Minister and get his band together?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I certainly agree that there should be common and high standards of communication between Ministers and the relevant Scrutiny Panels. The questioner suggests that may at the current time be patchy. I would suggest that maybe the experience between different Panels is also uneven. What we need to do is to work together on both sides to ensure that Scrutiny works in an effective way, and that is one reason why I intend to continue to have regular meetings with the Chairmen's Committee to see how these sort of things can be developed.

4.7 The Deputy of St. John:

The Chief Minister was invited to partake in sea tucker trials for charity at Bonne Nuit this Saturday. I understand he is not going to attend. Could he share with us his views, whether it is because he does not like seafood or because he has some other more committing engagement?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I should love to have been attending the Bonne Nuit Festival this weekend and I hope that other Members will have the opportunity to attend even though I cannot. The only reason why I have had to decline is because I shall be out of the Island this weekend. I have to go to the U.K. to collect my grandchildren coming over from America who are still under 16 and so that means I am out of the Island for this event, which I am sad to miss. I do like seafood.

4.8 The Deputy of St. Mary:

As we come up to the Business Plan, will the Chief Minister assure the House that the many good aims and objectives in the Strategic Plan agreed by Members will be carried out, or does the ideological imperative of keeping Jersey bottom of the league with regard to government expenditure matter more than all these fine words?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I think expenditure was part of the Strategic Plan, but I hope that the Deputy of St. Mary and other Members will come to the presentation being given in a couple of weeks' time by the Minister for Treasury and Resources and myself about the Business Plan, which I believe does, indeed, follow on and should follow on from the Strategic Plan in trying to put those strategic objectives into practice. Clearly, there will be conflicting demands between different areas in this and one of the difficulties in doing this is trying to please everybody. Certainly, it should not be focussing simply on the financial aspects but certainly the Business Plan does have to come up with spending within certain constraints.

4.8.1 The Deputy of St. Mary:

A supplementary. Which will take priority? The Chief Minister has not answered the question. Which will take precedence: fulfilling the needs of our society or keeping taxes low?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I think part of the need to fulfil the needs of society would involve keeping taxes reasonably low but sufficient to meet the demands of society. But that is a matter for all States Members at the time of the Business Plan to decide just how much spending they wish to incur and the consequences of doing that.

4.9 Deputy T.A. Vallois of St. Saviour:

Does the Minister not agree that Scrutiny is not working, especially in light of the recent report on Income Support where the Minister has stated that Scrutiny have been misinformed, however he was invited to a hearing in order to inform?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

My experience of Scrutiny over the past 3 years and a bit has been very positive and I believe in many cases Scrutiny works very well indeed. As I said in answer to an earlier question, it is sometimes patchy and it can vary from Panel to Panel. Scrutiny works well provided there is good information and good understanding on both sides and that the Scrutiny is based on factual information and not on personal prejudices and hypotheses. I am not going to comment on any particular Scrutiny report. If some people believe that there is room for improvement then we should all work together to try to achieve that improvement.

4.10 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Given the answer to question 4668 by the Minister for Health and Social Services earlier today pointing to the reasons for nurses leaving the profession were: cost of living in Jersey too high; better remuneration elsewhere; and increased local workloads, what steps will the Chief Minister take to make this Island once again attractive to workers both local and foreign in order to man our essential services?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

This Island will not be attractive to nurses or any other employees if the rate of inflation were to rise unnecessarily or if the Island were to become uncompetitive. One has to balance the need for paying a realistic salary and competitive salary with the need to maintain equilibrium in our costs. It is up to the States to decide how it is done and I believe in the current time the balance we have is quite correct and that the number of nurses and the vacancies we have in the department is not untypical of what has been happening for some time.

4.10.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

A supplementary. Does he believe that a pay freeze across the public sector is the way forward and will he agree to put competitive salaries in the field particularly of nurses in comparison with Guernsey and the U.K.?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I entirely believe that a pay freeze for the current year is very much the right course of action to do and is mirroring what is happening in the private sector already. I think if we are to remain competitive and if the private sector is to remain competitive we need to maintain this pay freeze and that policy will be debated in the House in due course. I believe wholeheartedly that it is the right policy at the right time for all States employees to match that in the private sector.

4.11 Deputy S. Pitman:

Does the Chief Minister think it appropriate that the legal adviser to the Council of Ministers is also responsible for deciding whether or not to prosecute any former or current States employee?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

As a personal question, the answer is yes, I do, but that issue I am sure can be dealt with quite adequately by the Attorney General himself and will no doubt form part of the ongoing review. I am totally confident that there is no conflict whatsoever.

4.11.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Chief Minister explain why he thinks that there is no conflict?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

Yes, because the Attorney General in making his decisions does it on a purely objective basis.

4.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In the light of the additional funding being directed towards apprenticeships in the fiscal stimulus plan, will the Chief Minister organise figures and deliver them to the House over the number of apprenticeships in the public and private sectors over the last decade in order that we can see what the trend has been and what the new figures mean?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I would like to think I could deliver that, but I cannot commit immediately to the private sector being in a position to give me detailed information for the last 10 years in a comprehensive and meaningful way. I should hate to produce misleading statistics, but to the extent that we can produce information which is helpful to understanding the argument I will do so. I would point out the fact is that we are providing funding to improve the opportunities for apprenticeship both in the private sector and the public sector and I believe that that is the objective we should be looking at rather than trying to get historical information which is of perhaps relatively limited use but simply an additional cost burden we can well do without.

The Bailiff:

Very well, I am afraid that brings questions to the Chief Minister to an end.