

6. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Chief Minister

The Bailiff:

Very well. That brings questions to the Minister for Home Affairs to a close. So we then move on to questions for the Chief Minister. The Deputy of St. John.

6.1 The Deputy of St. John:

I will put this in 2 parts if I may. Could the Minister give us his views on environmental savings across all States departments?

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

Was that 2 parts? [Laughter] Environmental savings are something which should be of concern to all of us and all departments have a part to play. I am not sure what the Deputy was getting at with his question so maybe I am a bit obtuse but maybe he would like to elaborate just what he means by the question.

6.1.1 The Deputy of St. John:

You will see in the written questions today, I put several questions to some of his Ministers and we have had a rather tardy response in 2 of those questions, one from Treasury and one from Education. Given that I am aware and having seen the document shown to me by the Minister for Treasury and Resources of a health spend of £18,000, he showed it to me a week or so ago, yet that is not shown in his response and I would like to know why it is not shown in his response to the question and that was just for one Ministry. Given there are a number of Ministries I suspect that the figure is considerably more than £18,000. Likewise, a tardy response from the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture re Victoria College and their lighting, given he refers to the ...

The Bailiff:

I think a concise question please, Deputy. There are a lot of people who want to ask questions.

The Deputy of St. John:

Yes, Sir. Okay, so he by now will have read those 2 replies so can he answer, will he be kicking his officers and whipping them into shape and make sure they come back with proper answers when asked?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

No, the answers were put to my fellow Ministers. If the Deputy is not satisfied with the content of the answers I am sure he has every right and will no doubt exercise his opportunity to review those questions, but in response to his general question about my opinion on these matters, my opinion is that all Ministers, and indeed all Members, should be striving to achieve realistic environmental savings wherever possible. I will say not just environmental savings but any savings whatsoever. I do not think there is anything in these answers which suggests that Ministers are failing in that duty.

6.2 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Further to the answer to the written question by the Deputy of St. Mary regarding Jersey College for Girls, will the Chief Minister undertake not to allow any location that might be a potential site for the office strategy to be used for any permanent purpose until Members have seen the office strategy?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

The office strategy is a matter for the Minister for Treasury and Resources through the Property Holdings Department, but I am certainly happy to confirm that any site that was earmarked for a

potential site for office development would not be used for other purposes. At this stage it would be premature to speculate on what an office strategy might or might not contain but certainly in relation to the narrower point of J.C.G. (Jersey College for Girls) it is, as the answer quite clearly says, not the best use for that site.

6.3 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

In the light of his comments following the publication of the independent report into public sector pay - i.e. that its conclusion is justified, the Council of Ministers pay freeze - does the Chief Minister genuinely believe there are nurses who, we all agree, do such a wonderful and difficult job, might, along with their other colleagues, lose their drive and ambition because they are currently so well-paid?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I think the Deputy's reading into that report matters which I did not say, which the report itself did not say. The report did not say that nurses are overpaid but what it does say is that, as people get into the higher echelons of pay grades, the differential narrows and that there comes a point where higher grade staff are paid less than in the private sector. That is an inevitable discouragement to those people seeking further promotion. It is not related to nurses or any particular group of employees. It was an observation across the States as an employment body as a whole.

6.3.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

With due respect, I think the Chief Minister is really splitting hairs, otherwise he should really take it up with the reporting but does he not subsequently agree that the across the board pay freeze, in light of instances like the nurses, is clearly a huge knee-jerk reaction and a really appalling mistake that should be rectified?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

No, I do not, but if the Deputy still feels that way there will be opportunities for him to express that view at a subsequent occasion. The States have already discussed that matter once, made their views perfectly clear. I believe that was correctly stated and that this report does not do anything to contradict that decision.

6.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What concerns does the Chief Minister have about the recent reported actions of Lloyds Bank Jersey over mechanisms to avoid E.U. (European Union) Savings Tax Directive using Hong Kong subsidiaries? What assurances can he give the Assembly that these actions are not widespread in the Jersey finance industry and what action will he take to ensure that Jersey's reputation on tax avoidance and evasion issues is maintained and further improved?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

Jersey has a very high reputation and very high standards of regulation as was evidenced last week with the publication of the I.M.F. (International Monetary Fund) report. If there are allegations which are justified of failures to reach those high standards then I am sure that I and all those concerned would wish to take action to condemn that. At this stage all I am hearing is allegations. When those allegations are investigated and if there are regulatory requirements which need to be addressed they will be I am sure.

6.4.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If such charges are proved what actions will the Chief Minister take to ensure that the reputation of Jersey on these issues is maintained and improved?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

The answer is, at this stage, a hypothetical question without knowing the full facts. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to say what action would be appropriate in the circumstances. Certainly what we would want to do is to maintain the reputation of the Island and to ensure that this does not tarnish it in any way.

6.5 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

Does the Chief Minister concur with the view of his Deputy that the Island will eventually need a Foreign Affairs Minister and, if so, what consideration has been given to the introduction and costings of a new States department?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I think one could end up having new Ministries for this, that and the other. What the Deputy Chief Minister was saying, quite rightly, is that international affairs play a significantly higher part of the Island's activities every year. I have been noticing this in my time as Chief Minister and that is why, at a departmental level, we have put more resources and more activity into dealing with international matters. There will come a stage possibly that when that reaches the point that it is appropriate to put all those activities into a separate Ministry, not at the current time I hasten to add, but we have to be prepared to evolve with changing circumstances and meet what is an increasingly significant challenge to our Island's activities.

6.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Chief Minister agree with the sentiments of our esteemed former Bailiff that Jersey should seriously consider independence if faced with a hostile U.K.?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I take the comments of the former Bailiff very seriously as I do with those of the present Bailiff, but I do not think that, at this stage; he was expressing a more general view and we would need to look at a lot more detail before giving the Deputy a categorical blanket assurance that he says one way or the other. I believe that the comments made by the former Bailiff were very appropriate in the context in which they were made.

6.6.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

Just a supplementary then; would the Chief Minister not concede that the comments were in fact unhelpful given that the relationship between Jersey and the U.K. is - for want of a better word - already perhaps slightly tense?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I am sure the Deputy would equally have wanted to ensure that the former Bailiff or anybody else has the opportunity for free speech.

6.7 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

In light of the recent meeting at Fort Regent for the staff and unions regarding the pay freeze, will the Minister look at reviewing, with S.E.B. (States Employment Board), the stance that they have on revoking the legal right of employees to bargain for their right to an annual pay review?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

The States Employment Board are always willing to look at their policies and keep them under review. The situation in respect of the current comments of the staff at Fort Regent reflect a variety of views, not simply about pay levels but also about conditions of service and so on and indeed the States Employment Board itself is anxious to talk, not just about pay levels but also about conditions of service.

6.7.1 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

But their legal right to bargain for an annual pay review has been taken away from them. Will the Chief Minister review his stance on this and S.E.B.'s?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

The rights to bargain is always constrained by certain practical limitations. I think it is appropriate that those limitations are set out clearly in advance so that both parties concerned are in no doubt about what is or is not available for discussion. That does not mean that there is no opportunity for review. It means the review is carried out within a known framework known to both sides.

6.8 The Deputy of St. Mary:

Changing tack somewhat, would the Chief Minister agree that, in terms of broad strategic issues, the way Islanders feel about their Island, whether they feel proud to be from Jersey and their sense of self-worth, that these are important matters? If so, if he does agree with that statement, does he regret that today we have heard that it is perfectly okay to make vast untaxed windfall profits simply by owning a piece of land that happens to get planning permission or be re-zoned? Does he further regret, what we have also heard, that the Island is looking seriously at entering the global online gambling business?

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy. You are raising too many points there for one question so the first 2 only.

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I certainly believe that it is important that we listen to the needs and views of Islanders and of course they can have a variety of views and one person's views in one direction may be totally different to somebody else's. In respect of windfall taxes I think the Minister for Treasury and Resources tried to explain to Members that this is not a simple matter to look at in isolation. What one is looking at in terms of land sales and land zoning is providing affordable housing and a windfall tax simply, in the first instance, is likely to increase the cost of the land. What has to be looked at is the overall situation of how affordable housing can best be delivered, be that by a windfall tax or be that more likely by suitable planning obligations. The objective remains either way. Windfall taxes are not necessarily the best way to achieve them.

6.8.1 The Deputy of St. Mary:

I just wanted to ask whether he regrets that the Island is looking more and more like a giant lottery because if you take the gambling, together with the windfall tax, that is what it looks like to some people?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

As I say, it may look like that to some people, other people may take a different view.

6.9 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I wonder if the Chief Minister could update us in relation to the I.M.F. report and circulate documents on a regular basis when these bodies have concluded their investigations, as States Members are always hearing about the pressures that these organisations bring but seldom get to see the results of their investigations?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

It is perhaps remiss of me not to have circulated the entire I.M.F. report to all Members, so good was it, but in fact it runs to hundreds of pages and I think some Members might feel a bit put off of the weight standing on their doorstep and the environmental cost of printing all that lot perhaps could be appropriate.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Maybe just the Jersey parts.

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

Was that in relation to the number of pages? It is a very long and comprehensive document, which I reiterate, puts Jersey in a very good light. Certainly, I would like to do all I can to ensure that it is known and appreciated just how well Jersey has done in that analysis. It was an objective analysis by independent outside experts who spent a considerable amount of time investigating our regulatory framework in relation to money laundering and drug trafficking and so on. They have made certain recommendations which we will be following up. In general terms, as I think Members should be aware by now, our performance in that review is among the highest in the world and for that I commend the regulators, the authorities, the financial institutions and all who have contributed to make sure that Jersey's position in this way is rightly recognised and appreciated by the outside world.

6.9.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

That said, that is traditional speak that we have heard from the Chief Minister. I was asking if we could not, perhaps, move to a position where the States Members are better informed because all we tend to hear from year to year is that these reviews are going to be conducted. We need to be on our toes, la, la, la, la, la, then they are conducted and then we hear that we have come out glowing. We never understand what was done. We never understood what the issues were about and we never really get to understand whether or not we have addressed them. Can the Chief Minister, please, introduce a system whereby the 170 pages of each report are distilled down to an acceptable form for Members and the public to understand what has been going on?

Senator T.A. Le Sueur:

I am anxious to ensure that Members are fully informed and indeed if a well-equipped communications unit can help to deliver that then I shall be more than willing to invite them to achieve just what the Deputy is looking for.

The Bailiff:

Maybe there are other Members who want to ask questions but I am afraid that brings question time to an end.