

2.7 Senator J.L. Perchard of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding his attendance at the Parents for Choice group meeting at the Town Hall on 4th November 2010:

Will the Minister attend the meeting being organised by the Parents for Choice group at the Town Hall on Thursday, 4th November 2010 and if not, why not?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

On 2 separate occasions, I have invited the spokesperson for Parents for Choice to meet with me and senior officers to discuss their proposal and other concerns that they may have. However, each time they have chosen to decline. I would like to confirm that this invitation is still open. Discussions are taking place with all fee-paying schools to gain a greater understanding of how this proposal will impact on the school, and what the school is able to do to minimise any increase in fees that may result from implementing this proposal. Furthermore, plans are already in place to discuss the proposal with all stakeholders once the initial consultation process is concluded. It is my intention, with the support of the schools' governing bodies, to meet with parents at each school to discuss the proposal in more detail once those discussions with the schools have concluded.

[10:30]

2.7.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister please meet with Parents for Choice? They have invited him on 8 separate occasions to meet. He has declined. One can only imagine why he is so shy. Does he refuse to attend Thursday's meeting because he now recognises that this issue has been grossly mishandled and has grown out of his control and, in reality, his policies would be in fact laid bare- threadbare - in front of fellow States Members and the educational establishments?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not believe it has been grossly mishandled. I just think it is absolutely and totally premature. I keep saying to States Members and others we have only just started the conversation with the schools. I am still awaiting the specific information that I requested from some of those schools to enable me to better understand the impact of this proposal. Once I have had that information and once those discussions have been completed, then obviously I would love to be able to inform parents and others about what the likely impact may be. I need to be allowed to work with the governing bodies. I also need to be allowed sufficient time to be able to do that. That is something that the governing bodies are requesting, and I too am requesting this Assembly and parents just to allow sufficient time for us to explore this proposal. There are no firm decisions being made and I have already given a commitment that I will be coming back to this Assembly before I do make them.

2.7.2 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

We are very aware that the Minister is in negotiations with boards and head teachers but, as has been pointed out, feelings are running high with parents of these children and it would be a great courtesy if the Minister would turn up at the meetings just to hear the fears and anxiety of the parents. Would the Minister do so?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have been listening to all parents' concerns. I have been able to speak to some personally. I have had email correspondence and I am acutely aware that many of the parents' concerns reflect particular issues to do with a particular school. One cannot generalise these issues with them in that manner. I need to, and I will... and I have given a commitment that I will meet the parents in each school, so we can properly discuss how this proposal may or may not be furthered.

2.7.3 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Does the Minister agree that with the approach being taken by some Members there is a danger that the real issue here, which is of course ensuring the education of our Island's young people, gets lost beneath some of the re-election campaigns of some Members?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I think the Deputy makes a good point, not only regarding the election campaign issue, but that States Members are losing sight of the fact that I, and my department, are responsible for the education of all children on this Island and the provision, not just those within the fee-paying sector. I am required and want to seek to provide the best education opportunities for all the Island's children regardless of their circumstances.

2.7.4 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

I am quite alarmed, and I think many parents are quite alarmed, when the Minister says that he wants to understand the impact of the proposals. These are his proposals. So, could he indicate what research and advice he received from his officers beforehand?

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am sorry. I am going to disallow that question, Deputy. The question must relate to the subject matter which is the meeting on 4th December.

The Deputy of Grouville:

But, Sir, the meeting is about this issue.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That would give rise to questions about the whole subject.

2.7.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

It was a very good question. My final supplementary, the Minister says, quite rightly, that he needs to work with the governing bodies and that a meeting of Parents with Choice would be premature. Why then has the Minister admittedly invited Parents with Choice to meet him privately?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I invited Parents with Choice to come and meet with me because they have brought forward, not general concerns raised by the parents that have been in contact with me, but a particular proposal that is of a more strategic nature. That particular proposal is quite rightly to be considered and understood and will be no doubt included in our Green Paper as we consider the future education provision on this Island in the new year.