

6. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Economic Development

6.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Some States Members attended a presentation given by the schools' board and the Advance to Work Scheme last week and it was an excellent presentation, and I commend them for the work they have done in the past. What I found a little bit depressing was in the booklet that we were handed there were 150 or so companies listed who had assisted in this scheme and I was very, very disappointed to see that only 5 States departments have helped place youngsters for work experience. Can the Minister tell Members what action he intends to take to encourage States departments to participate fully in this scheme, and could he possibly come back in about 3 months' time and inform Members exactly which departments have taken place with the scheme and how many people they have placed?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean (The Minister for Economic Development):

The Deputy asks an extremely good question. In fact the placements, just to put the record straight, in the private sector there are 270 companies registered to take placements and we are encouraging as many more as possible to join the scheme. It is an excellent scheme. The Deputy is right, of course, in the public sector we are not really stepping-up to the plate in the way we should. There have been discussions with departments and lists have gone out to departments to encourage them to participate in the scheme, and I certainly am more than happy to report back on progress. We will certainly keep the pressure up. It is absolutely essential that we have full take-up of these schemes within the public sector.

6.2 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Does the Minister agree with me that the continuation of the taxi marshal scheme is a vital part of a successful evening economy and essential in particular to the operation of the hotels in the Weighbridge area, and will he take part in meetings to seek to find sustainable funding for the continuation of the scheme? As a former Deputy of St. Helier, does he share my reluctance to see the ongoing cost of this Island-wide service met by the ratepayers of St. Helier?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I share the disappointment of the Constable in the recent announcement of the suspension of the scheme. I think it is an excellent scheme. I think funding should be sorted if one possibly can, but perhaps the Constable should direct his question to the Minister for Treasury and Resources, not the Minister for Economic Development. However, I am more than happy to throw my weight behind the support to the scheme if funding can be found.

6.3 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister confirm that he recently wrote to the Chairmen's Committee over what he claimed was a conflict of interest regarding the chairman of the Economic Affairs Scrutiny Panel's review? A conflict that I understand had something to do with Jersey Airport. Could he tell us exactly what this conflict of interest is about in his opinion?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Yes, I can confirm I wrote to the chairman of the Chairmen's Panel regarding that matter. It was my belief that the intention of the Economic Affairs Scrutiny Panel to appoint or set up a sub-panel to be chaired by Deputy Higgins was either a conflict or a perceived conflict due to the Deputy's involvement with the International Air Display, and it was for that reason that I wrote to the Chairmen's Committee to seek their guidance. I should stress that it was not an intention to be an issue between the Executive and Scrutiny. I am very keen that the airport and the harbours are scrutinised. It was just an issue I thought that should be brought to the attention of the Chairmen's Panel.

6.3.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

A supplementary if I may, the involvement with the air display - obviously we have learnt nothing from the reply of the Minister - can he tell us exactly what this conflict of interest is about?

The Deputy Bailiff:

What do you perceive the conflict of interest to be about, Minister?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Perceived, indeed. Quite simply that there is a relationship between Deputy Higgins who runs the International Air Display and the airport and the Deputy gets some remuneration from the International Air Display, and for those reasons I believe that it is inappropriate that he should chair a panel reviewing the activities of the airport.

6.4 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

In the past I have asked the Minister questions regarding people employed at Jersey Airport who are being paid considerable sums of money but who are not carrying out their contractual duties. Could the Minister tell Members whether the Air Traffic Controller employed from the United Kingdom with a salary of £68,000, who failed his local radar qualification, is still employed at the airport and the nature of the work that he is doing? Secondly, can he say whether the Baggage System Consultant who is employed at the airport at a salary of £65,000 per annum without any knowledge or experience of automated baggage handling systems, is still employed at the airport on this project and, if not, what he is doing to earn his money?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The Deputy is offering an opinion not supported by facts at all. I am surprisingly not going to discuss the affairs of individual employees at the airport on the floor of this Assembly. I will say though that I am more than satisfied with the way in which the airport operates from a human resources point of view and in every aspect. It is a highly regulated and successfully operated airport and I would hope that there is a full and thorough scrutiny review in due course.

6.4.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

A supplementary on this. First of all, the baggage consultant is not working on the baggage project ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

That is not a question. That is a statement.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Sir, I am making a statement first. I am just asking for confirmation. My understanding is the baggage consultant has nothing to do with the baggage system even though Capita Symonds has now been brought in to manage ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

That also is a statement and not a question, Deputy. Deputy of Grouville.

6.5 The Deputy of Grouville:

To take up from Deputy Hilton's question about the Advance to Work Scheme; I too attended the briefing last week and out of the 270 companies that were listed as participants I noticed as well as the Deputy noticing that there were not many States departments participating. Not many large companies, large banks, trust companies and the like, the mainstay of our economy, were participating. In fact, the only trust company I could see at a glance was one where one of the directors of the Advance to Work Scheme is a member of, so what is he doing about getting these larger firms to participate in such a scheme?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I am taking every opportunity possible to promote the scheme and to encourage businesses of all sizes and in all sectors to participate. It has been growing. It is now up to 270 but we must bear in mind there are thousands of companies in Jersey, and certainly I would be very hopeful we can get some more. Through Jersey Enterprise we are taking the opportunity to ensure that all companies that receive advice through Jersey Enterprise are being made aware of the placement scheme. It does not matter the size of business or the sector, it is still a valuable opportunity and we will continue to push the point and, indeed, the question the Deputy has asked has also helped. Hopefully, the media will pick up on the point.

6.6 Deputy J.B. Fox of St. Helier:

In parallel to Deputy Hilton's question, one of the things that I understand is coming to light more and more and is a problem that I have come across is that we spend a great deal of time and money educating our young people, many of which go outside the Island to get the skills and qualifications we demand and within 10 years 62 per cent of them return back, many of which with skilled partners we have not paid for, but increasingly I am told that local people returning are being told they cannot have the local jobs available because they have not got 5 years' experience. How can we get the experience if we do not give them the opportunities? They go off again and we do not see them back.

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Well, I agree with the Deputy. We need to create the culture where we have proper succession planning in place and opportunities for training people to ensure that they can take local jobs. I have to say that central to the new economic growth strategy, which will be going out in Green Paper form shortly, Members will see is skills and training. Skills and training is absolutely essential to the future success of our local economy.

6.7 Deputy S. Pitman:

What knowledge does the Minister have of Social Security working with local businesses in trying to get those on incapacity benefits and deemed effectively as having some capacity to work, as the Minister for Social Security said last year that the department was working with businesses?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I can tell the Deputy that both Economic Development and Social Security work very closely together - and Education, Sport and Culture for that matter - as part of the Skills Executive in addressing all issues relating to skills training and ensuring that all individuals whether those suffering from incapacity or otherwise have opportunities to get into the work place and generate a fulfilling life as possible.

6.7.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

The Minister has not answered the question. He has generalised. Can you be more specific? I am talking about those recipients on incapacity benefits.

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Perhaps the Deputy could tell me what indeed she wants me to be specific about.

Deputy S. Pitman:

About what knowledge do you have on Social Security working with local businesses in trying to get these people into work?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Well, there are various bodies that are involved in looking at people with incapacities to ensure that they can get training to find work and, frankly, it is an issue that is being looked at with regard to the Skills Executive and the Skills Board. It is one of a whole range of issues to ensure people get and find fulfilling job opportunities.

6.8 Deputy A.E. Jeune:

Just following on from something raised by Deputy Higgins, can the Minister confirm that he is satisfied that those staff employed in his areas of responsibility carry out the functions for which they were employed?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Yes, as far as I am aware I have no reason to believe staff do not carry out the functions that they were employed to undertake and very satisfactorily.

6.9 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Could the Minister advise Members whether one of the airport directors is on a remuneration package of £215,000 that may or may not include agency fees and associated costs?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I think the Deputy said one of the airport directors. There is one airport director and the salary, I am not prepared to discuss of an individual but it is certainly nothing like that sum.

6.10 Connétable K.P. Vibert of St. Ouen:

Does the Minister share my concern that the financial cuts that his department is suffering are likely to adversely affect the Island tourism industry insofar as lack of maintenance of the small fishing harbours along the north coast?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Possibly. Clearly, from the tourism industry's perspective there is never enough money in terms of either promoting or, indeed, maintaining assets from within the Island. We have a problem in the States of Jersey, as I was alluding to this morning, about maintaining essential infrastructure including the outlying harbours. There has not been appropriate provision made over the years but that, I am pleased to say, is now beginning to be addressed. It is important that it is.

6.11 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Could the Minister advise what progress his department is making to set up a new independent business advisory service as envisaged in his business plan for 2011?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I believe the Senator is alluding to a merger between Jersey Enterprise and, indeed, the funded Jersey Business Venture. Discussions are ongoing between those 2 organisations and I am hopeful certainly before the conclusion of this year, that we will have one single body delivering support to the business community.

6.12 Deputy M. Tadier:

A moment ago in an answer about the director of the airport's salary, the Minister explained that he was not prepared to discuss this but then went on to say that the sum was nothing like that, which clearly implies that the Minister knows the sum that the director is getting paid. It should be public information. Presumably it is available under the Freedom of Information code of practice which currently exists. Why will the Minister not give that information now in public so that the members of the public can hear?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I am more than prepared to circulate information that is in the public domain with regard to salaries and I am happy to circulate that to Members. I am not going to speculate on the differentials between salaries, bonuses and other items in relation to different individuals or named individuals.

[14:45]

6.13 Deputy S. Power:

I wonder could the Minister explain as quick and as easily as he can, how he would apply G.A.A.P. accounting principles to St. Catherine's Breakwater?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

As quickly as I can. [Laughter] Quite simply there needs to be provision for the replacement of assets so all assets within the portfolio at Jersey Harbours and Jersey Airport for that matter have had nominal valuations attached to them and, indeed, replacement costs and it is from those figures that the depreciation of the asset over an accepted accounting period is arrived at and that is the right way to approach it.

6.14 The Deputy of Grouville:

Referring to the evening economy, does the Minister not believe that establishments that are responsible for people standing in taxi queues at night should partake in the taxi marshal sponsorships?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

That sounds an eminently sensible solution. I am sure that the premises in question may have a different view but, as I have already said to the Constable, I am more than happy to throw my weight behind trying to find an acceptable solution; that I am not sure is going to go as far as financing it but that is a matter for the Minister for Treasury and Resources, but I will certainly assist and that is an interesting idea.

6.15 Deputy A.T. Dupré of St. Clement:

Should the taxi drivers themselves not pay a contribution towards these marshals?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

That is a matter for the Minister for Transport and Technical Services to liaise with the taxi drivers to see if, indeed, they have the willingness to do so. I will leave that over to him.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings to an end the time allocated for the second question period.