

4.7 The Connétable of St. Helier of the Minister for Economic Development regarding ferry services between Jersey and St. Malo

Would the Minister explain what steps, if any, he is taking to ensure the continuity and reliability of fast-ferry services between St. Helier and St. Malo?

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

There is no doubt that the unplanned industrial action by a small minority of Condor Ferries French employees has caused unacceptable inconvenience and disruption to Jersey residents, a situation that is thoroughly unsatisfactory. I am in regular contact with senior management of Condor to receive progress updates. It will not be a surprise to Members that I have offered my full support and that of the States to assist in a rapid resolution, but Condor Ferries have indicated that they are seeking to resolve the issue through negotiation with their striking employees and their respective union representatives. I believe that that is the best course of action. These negotiations are now progressing constructively and I have made it clear to Condor that we expect a resolution as quickly as possible. I expect that to be the outcome.

4.7.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister think it might be worth asking Condor's directors and management to see if they would accept a reduction in their terms and conditions, perhaps switch to Eastern European contracts for the time being, so that they can get over this hump as an act of solidarity with the French striking workers?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The Deputy could equally ask the question of P&O, Brittany Ferries or any other ferry companies that he so chooses. That is not really a very realistic question or a constructive one.

4.7.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

I could and I would but, as I understand, P&O and Brittany Ferries are not the operator that serves Jersey. They are not the ones currently causing an issue with transport and they are not the ones with whom we have a service level agreement, so I will disregard those comments from the Minister. Will the Minister take the opportunity to send a message of solidarity to the workers on the French ship that is currently being held saying that, we, the workers in Jersey, some of whom are also in this Assembly, respect what they are doing and that in these times of austerity when we see large corporations stand up for their right to exploit workers on a daily basis without anybody batting an eyelid, it is good to see workers, who are seeing their quality of living being eroded by an austerity programme, doing the same for themselves and we should have more of that in this Island and Europe.

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The short answer is no. The Deputy ...

The Bailiff:

That probably is not different then. [Laughter]

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I think I should expand very briefly because the Deputy raises an important point and that is that staff, quite rightly, should have the right to be heard, should have a fair and reasonable deal and, as far as I am concerned, when you consider this is a minority of Condor Ferry staff ... this initially was 11 staff out of more than 130 in total across the group, the majority of

which are totally satisfied with their terms and conditions. However, it is quite appropriate that staff have the opportunity to raise concerns and have the opportunity to be heard in discussions and negotiations. What is not acceptable is unplanned, wild cat strikes that cause enormous disruption to Islanders.

4.7.3 Deputy S. Pinel of St. Clement:

Would the Minister advise what measures have been considered or taken to support business that relies totally on the Jersey to St. Malo route, for instance the export of Jersey shellfish to France?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The Deputy raises an important question. Yes, there have been discussions about finding suitable craft to get catch from the fisheries industry across to France. That is progressing. Of course, disruption has occurred in any event due to the weather conditions where fishermen have been unable to get out and fish very much at all. It has not been such a pressing problem as it might have been at another time of the year, but there is a possible resolution in place if necessary.

4.7.4 Deputy S. Pinel:

I am aware of one shellfish export business that is paying Harbours £1,600 a week at the moment for rent, electricity and insurance. Could not some sort of holiday or break in this be considered as they currently cannot operate at all?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

We have considered support for the fishing industry, but Members will appreciate there are many other industries also suffering at this time and it is very difficult to draw a conclusion as to the appropriate type of short-measure support that could be given. The fishing industry gets a lot of benefits anyway in terms of reduced or zero harbour dues and other benefits that are given by the department. Clearly we are very happy to talk, as we have done recently, to the Fishermen's Association. There have not been requests from them for any assistance at this stage, but we are always happy to consider any proposals that are put forward.

4.7.5 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister confirm that, notwithstanding the current difficulties, he is absolutely convinced that the financial model used by Condor is one that is sustainable in the long term?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Perhaps the Deputy could clarify whether he is talking about their overall model of operating ferry and freight services, car and passenger, to and from the U.K., Jersey and France or whether he is referring to their model specifically around pay and conditions of staff.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

No, I mean the model on the continental routes.

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I would say that it is not just the continental routes because it has been assessed by a number of reports. Oxera and such like have done economic modelling on car and passenger services and freight to and from the U.K. and to the Continent.

[10.45]

The overwhelming view is that it is a network of routes, which is the reason why we have been in discussion with and are operating in conjunction with Guernsey in that regard. We believe that the Condor model and what is on the table currently is both sustainable for the long term and provides the Island with the best possible service that they could hope to have at this time.

4.7.6 The Connétable of St. John:

Given P&O Ferries were the Island's preferred operator some years ago when this route went out to tender and that agreement was scotched by Guernsey given that they preferred their own company, i.e. Condor, to run the route, has the Minister been in talks with Guernsey about talking yet again to P&O and see whether they would take over this route, given they have shown in the past.

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The Connétable is continually looking to the past. 1997 was the occasion that he is referring to in this particular instance. In those days it may well have been the best outcome for the Island, but the fact was that, for reasons I will not go into now, it did not become the outcome. The fact of the matter is that although Condor was originally a Guernsey and still is a Guernsey company it is no longer owned in Guernsey. It is owned by Macquarie. Macquarie very much view Condor Ferry Services, which operate between the U.K., Jersey, Guernsey and France, as a Channel Islands company and that is the way in which we prefer to deal with Condor as well. It is a Channel Islands... and, as a Channel Islands network of services, it is the way in which we are going to have safe, reliable, year-round services delivered at fair prices for Islanders, which is what I believe they wish to see.

The Connétable of St. John:

The Minister did not answer my question. Has he been in contact with his Guernsey colleagues to put pressure on the company, whether it is held within the Bailiwick of Guernsey or not? If not, why not?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I can give a very clear answer to this for the Connétable. 1997 was an entirely different economic climate to what we have seen in recent years. There are many ferry companies that have gone out of business. Ferry companies are struggling. We have seen, in 2012, Brittany Ferries making losses for 3 or 4 years.

The Connétable of St. John:

Is it yes or no?

The Bailiff:

The question is whether you have been in touch with Guernsey about talking to P&O.

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

With our colleagues in Guernsey we have considered all options with regard to the future sustaining of services between the Islands and the U.K.

The Connétable of St. John:

Is it yes or no?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

We have considered all options.

The Connétable of St. John:

So it is no then.

4.7.7 The Connétable of St. Helier:

What message does the Minister have for Islanders whose travel plans have been disrupted and representatives of the hospitality industry in particular, both here and in St. Malo, who are seeing falling revenues as a result of the strike?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The simple message is that we are, as I have said, urging Condor, through negotiations with their staff and the unions, to seek a very early resolution to this most unsatisfactory situation. I noted only this morning that business leaders in St. Malo have also been urging for an earlier resolution. Businesses clearly will be impacted in St. Malo at that end as much as it is here. It is for businesses in Jersey but it is also consumers, with half-term coming up this week, that we wish to see an early resolution and I would certainly hope that is exactly what we will see.