

2016.06.28

7 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding population estimates and the limits set in the interim population policy were not achieved: [9535]

Following the publication of the latest population estimates, can the Chief Minister account for why the limits set in the interim population policy were not achieved?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

In the simplest terms, our economy performed exceptionally well in 2015 delivering more private sector jobs. The Housing and Work Advisory Group are vigilant in considering applications, refusing approximately half of all those received, but it remains important to support good businesses delivering jobs and services. That is in line with our policies of delivering the economic and social value and in the current uncertain global climate should be welcomed more than ever.

3.7.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

A supplementary: if it is the case that the large amounts of people coming to the Island is because of economic growth and it is the Government's intention to see more economic growth in the future, would he, therefore, like to reveal to this Assembly and the public that they can continue to see levels of immigration into the Island much higher than the interim population had set in future?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Housing and Work Advisory Group will continue to consider applications for good positions right across the economy and they have always been clear about that, that they would be considering not only economic, but social value. I think that is the right thing for them to do. We know that we are surrounded by more uncertainty today in the U.K., across Europe, and we see global markets being uncertain as well. We are in a strong position to weather that uncertainty but we also, during the course of this year, as the Minister said, need to have a debate and a conversation about the sort of Island we want. From that, we will know whether these population policies need to change.

The Bailiff:

Can I just say to Members that question 7 is about why the limits have not been achieved and it is not so much about what is happening in the future?

3.7.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Will the Chief Minister admit that the reason why it has not been achieved is not only the fact that perhaps they have had more applications, but equally, they did not believe in the interim population policy of 325 anyway and that what they are doing is stoking up, I would say, high levels of inflation in the near future in housing? The evidence for that is the period 2006, 2007 and 2008, which nobody wants to go back to, where house prices go up by something like 30-odd per cent. We have a major housing crisis at the moment. Does the Chief Minister not think that by agreeing to these rapid increases at the moment he is causing problems for the future?

The Bailiff:

The second part of the question is not a supplementary on this question. The first part of the question is: did you ever believe in the population limits that you set?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy is trying to recreate history. He knows that they were planning assumptions that the department uses, but the policy of the Housing and Work Advisory Group was, as I have outlined about giving licences to businesses, that were going to bring economic and social value. He accuses me of not believing in the population policy. He stood in this Assembly many, many times and said that the economy was going into freefall and that we would not see economic growth again in the future. I think that we have worked really hard right across departments to see the economy grow. We have a more diversified economy than we have ever had before. Financial and business services is more diversified. We should be pleased with that economic growth and the reason we should be pleased is because we know that we continue to face uncertainty. I would challenge any Member to say that we did not.

3.7.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If economic growth, as the Chief Minister says, is the cause of the number of net inward migrations, does the Minister believe that these numbers will appear again in the future? Is he confident that we will maintain this economic growth following the shock that occurred to the world economy from Brexit?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Nobody has ever, for a minute, mistaken me for a clairvoyant in the past, but the Deputy seems to be asking me to undertake that particular role. I will not do so. I deal with the facts. We make balanced decisions for the benefit of our economy, because that gives benefit to our community. These increased numbers, of course, have managed to and will mean that we do not see wages spiralling out of control, something that the F.P.P. (Fiscal Policy Panel) were very clear that we should act against. As to what the future holds, I can tell you the strength of our position today. I look around me and see that across Europe and world markets we see uncertainty, but I believe that we can build on the strong position that we have so that we will still see inward migration, we will still see economic growth. But we cannot take it for granted and we must continue to work. The reason we must work is because it allows us the money to invest in our social projects for the benefit of all Islanders.

The Bailiff:

Questions looking to the future can be tackled under questions 14 and 15, or in questions without notice. Final supplementary, Deputy Mézec.

3.7.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Given that these targets have been missed by such a wide margin, would the Chief Minister agree that it was unwise to set these targets in the first place given that they were so unfeasible? Would he like to take the opportunity to disassociate himself from a policy which never worked, or would he like to continue to make himself look ridiculous by pinning himself to something that simply does not exist in reality?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy is continuing to use words that he knows are nowhere in the population policy and, therefore, I am not sure what answer I can give. The policy is about giving licences to businesses that are going to bring economic and social value to our community. We should not underestimate the difficulty that those Members of the Assembly have in making those decisions week-in, week-out, having to say no to some businesses because of the very concerns that the Deputies over there are raising. Equally, where they think there is going to be ultimate long-term benefit for Jersey, they make the decision to issue the licence. I am grateful that they have done that because I believe I can

stand here today and be more confident of our future because of those difficult decisions they have made.