

2019.05.21

14 Deputy J.H. Perchard of the Chief Minister regarding the prospect of setting net migration to the Island to zero: (OQ.123/2019)

Given the conflict between protecting green space and addressing the need for more housing, will the Chief Minister consider setting net migration to zero until a new population policy has been presented to the Assembly?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

The Connétable of St. John is answering the question on the matter of population.

Connétable C.H. Taylor of St. John (Assistant Chief Minister - rapporteur):

The Chief Minister recognises the importance of population and housing to the Island and, as such, has set up Migration and Housing Policy Development Boards, to consider these 2 issues. The boards consist of Ministers, backbenchers and laypersons, who bring a mixture of views and experience to the boards. The boards run alongside the Island Plan, because the Minister for the Environment announced last week that he will be providing a balanced approach, by providing new homes, allowing the economy to grow and protecting the environment. The importance of these matters for the Island require that sufficient time is given, to allow the relevant research to be taken and policies to be proposed by the various boards, so as to give the implications on policies, taxes, services, and ensure a balanced economy and environment are given due consideration. As Chair of the Migration Development Board, I am confident that we will have a properly researched, relevant and evidence-based, debate in the spring of next year on migration. A knee-jerk reaction at this stage is likely to be unproductive and setting net migration to zero could have a significant negative impact on the economy, to key services, to health and education and also a danger of sending a message that Jersey is closed for business. This is a difficult message for us to recover from.

4.14.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

The population is currently about 105,000, increasing at a rate of plus 1,000 a year with 1,500 people leaving every year and 2,500 coming in each year. There is no sign of this trend stopping at present. For how long does the Minister think this is sustainable?

The Connétable of St. John:

I agree entirely, this is not sustainable and this is why the board has been set up to look into these matters. But any knee-jerk reaction is likely to be unproductive. We must ensure that the economy has the staffing levels they need to ensure the economy can grow. We must, at the same time, ensure that the infrastructure is available; that housing is available and, at the present time, there is a shortage of housing and so there are brakes being put on to migration at the moment. But we are limited as to what we can do, until a full policy and a full understanding comes forward.

4.14.2 Deputy S.M. Wickenden of St. Helier:

The previous administration brought forward a proposal for an immigration policy that was pulled at the beginning of this new administration and that was almost a year ago now. Could the Assistant Minister confirm if there is a soft target of migration that is currently being used in the Island?

The Connétable of St. John:

The proposition that the Deputy refers to was pulled in September last year and we do not, at the moment, have any target other than that which has been carried forward from the previous policy.

This is being looked into and I cannot report at this stage as to whether any figures are being discussed.

4.14.3 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Is my understanding correct in that the Migration Law can only work with the policy being adopted by the Assembly; so, therefore, for the Minister to lodge an interim proposal would take 6 weeks to be debated, to only come back with a fuller policy in November, so would not an interim, as proposed by the Deputy in her original question, not really be effective?

The Connétable of St. John:

The short answer is that the Deputy's thinking is correct. To bring forward an interim policy is not the way forward, until we have fully researched the topics and come forward with an evidence-based proposition for any changes that need to take place.

4.14.4 Deputy G.J. Truscott of St. Brelade:

Guernsey have, for at least 2 years, I think, 3 years, been under a work permit system. Is there any evidence that this has been detrimental, or has it been a success and can we draw any positives from perhaps looking at what they have achieved over the past 3 years and is work permits something high on the list of the Assistant Minister?

[11:00]

The Connétable of St. John:

We have not, as yet, been briefed on the Guernsey model; that is due to take place shortly. We are looking at the possibility of work permits. The big elephant in the room is Brexit and, therefore, how this is going to affect us going forward, as to how to obtain manual labour for agriculture and hospitality. There will be a need for a permit system and this is something we are actively looking at.

4.14.5 Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin:

The Constable said, at the start of this question, that he found the current situation is not sustainable. Could he outline which parts of it he does not find sustainable?

The Connétable of St. John:

The current parts that are not sustainable are the level of inward immigration and the level of housing that is being provided. That is not sustainable. This is why it is important that the Migration Policy Board feeds into the Island Plan, to ensure that we balance the housing needs with the Island Plan, with the level of migration.

4.14.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Having pulled the last attempt to get something to debate, the question must be on what sort of guidelines, what policies, is the population being controlled by? Because, at any time, it seems to me, anyone can pull a suggested policy and operate under no policy at all. It is surely impossible for us, as an Island of a certain size and a certain population, to operate under no policy whatsoever. What are his criteria?

The Connétable of St. John:

We are currently operating under the 2011 immigration policy, as agreed by this Assembly.

4.14.7 Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

If we have an increase of 1,000 per year, please explain what profession, or what work, these 1,000 people are doing? Somewhere we must be increasing, somewhere in our workforce, so please explain where those 1,000 people are working and where they are living?

The Connétable of St. John:

I regret that is not information that I have. I have enormous amounts of information, but not exactly where they are living; that I cannot say. Which areas they are working in, again, is uncertain, because under the regulations, where somebody has a registered licence to employ somebody, once they have worked for 5 years they can then very often change jobs and, indeed, change sectors, so it is difficult for us to trace.

4.14.8 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

In his response to my initial question, the Assistant Minister stated that there are brakes being put on migration. Can he confirm that the Government is actively reducing inward migration and clarify the Government's numerical target for net migration?

The Connétable of St. John:

We are looking at removing any unused licences that are possessed by employers and that is a process that is ongoing. As for any set target figure, I have said, at the present moment, there is not a set target figure, other than the 325, which is historic. Going forward, this is something that the board is looking at and we will come forward, in due course, once it has been fully researched.