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12 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Chief Minister regarding the development of a population and migration policy: (OQ.181/2019)

Following the recent report that net inward migration has now exceeded 1,000 people for the fourth year in a row, will the Chief Minister bring forward a policy on population and migration as a matter of urgency?

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

Yes, the Chairman of H.A.W.A.G. (Housing and Work Advisory Group), the Connétable of St. John, is answering this question.

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

Immediately after coming into post, the Chief Minister requested Statistics Jersey to undertake a body of work to help inform the population debate and to ensure that the future decisions on migration were based on evidence. The Migration Policy Board was then set up in March 2019 and is urgently working through the interrelated and complex issues required to produce a migration and population policy. This ensures that the Island can strike the right balance between having a sustainable economy, a balanced population and meeting their environmental needs. It is hoped an interim report will be published this autumn.

3.12.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I thank the Assistant Chief Minister for his answer. I am curious as to what happened to the previous Government's policy and as part of their work. Could he identify and allude why that was pulled, what was so wrong about it that has launched this period of work?

The Connétable of St. John:

I thank the Deputy for his question. When you look at the previous Proposition that was pulled in September last year, Part (a) basically says to agree that we need a migration policy. That is taken as read. Part (b) that a sustainable balance should be introduced. That is reasonable. Part (c) that the control of housing and work should prioritise requests from businesses, which invest in skills. That is what we do anyway on H.A.W.A.G. Part (d) says: 'To request the Chief Minister ...' That is what we are doing. Part (e) says: 'To request the Chief Minister ...' That is also what we are doing. Part (f) says: 'To request the Chief Minister ...' We are doing that. We have formed the policy board, we are working on it, we are gathering evidence in order to bring forward, basically, what that Proposition said.

3.12.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Will part of that evidence be an assessment of the Island's skills, if you like a skills audit, so that the skills needs of the Island, that we have to address if we are going to have any population policy, will be an integral part of the report that is produced by the Policy Board?

The Connétable of St. John:

The skills form a very important part of migration, because we have to balance the skills with the needs of the Island. I am just quickly going through the papers, which unfortunately are not here. We have been addressed by Skills Jersey and we have had a presentation from them and we are working very much with them, as we are with many other organisations.

3.12.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask you, Assistant Chief Minister, is the Board aware of the main areas of skills need across Jersey? Not just now, but with projections over the next 10, 20, 30 years, because that will be the essential key to having a successful and a sustainable population policy, rather than just looking at numbers.

The Connétable of St. John:

I absolutely agree. We are looking at skills. We cannot give definitive answers, because this is part of the research we are doing. But the skills are vital and it is important that the immigration matches the skills. But it is also important that we grow the skills here on the Island and not rely on importing them.

3.12.4 Senator K.L. Moore:

Given the Assistant Chief Minister's comments about the previous population policy, could the Assistant Chief Minister explain to the Assembly why the Council of Ministers withdrew the previous population policy, rather than bringing it in as an interim measure while they prepare themselves for a future population policy?

The Connétable of St. John:

I fail to see what measures would have been brought in, because it says (d) is to request the Chief Minister bring forward amendments to the 2019 Control of Housing and Work Law. This is what we are doing. But we can only bring it forward when we have the evidence as to what to bring forward.

[11:15]

3.12.5 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

When the new Council of Ministers came in, to ensure continuity, the Chief Minister adopted many of the policies of the previous Administration. I am saying he did not - I do not know if he did, or did not - why did he not follow the 350-household limit that was supposed to be in place, but which was never met by the previous Administration?

The Connétable of St. John:

The policy that has been introduced, unfortunately, is a policy that fails to meet the target. We inherited this policy; I am not going to comment on how wrong, or how right, that policy is. We cannot withdraw licences. If a licence has been granted to an individual business, then that business has the right to maintain that licence. We cannot withdraw it. This is an area that we are looking into, so that we have greater control.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Supplementary?

The Bailiff:

We have numbers of questions to come, Deputy; I will come back to you if there is time.

3.12.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Assistant Minister suggested that one of the factors to look at, before awarding licences, is the training policy of the company required. Does it not strike him as ironic in suggesting that the training policy is failing if they are coming to H.A.W.A.G. to request licences? The training programme that they have in place has failed, already failed. Surely that is the case.

The Connétable of St. John:

I do not think the Deputy is quite right in saying that the training process has failed. What H.A.W.A.G. says is that individuals should be trained for the future and as the businesses very often grow the training that they provide in the growth of the business is all inherent and that is not a feature that we have picked up on.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may, Sir. Has the Assistant ...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, the same point I put to Deputy Higgins a moment ago, we have got numbers of Members wanting to ask questions and I will come back to you.

3.12.7 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

So that we can hold the S.E.B. to account, does the *rappporteur* believe that what H.A.W.A.G. should be doing is also either by quarterly, or every 6 months, reducing by sector the number of applications that are rejected, so that we have an idea of how effectively H.A.W.A.G. is performing?

The Connétable of St. John:

The permissions that are granted and not granted are, in fact, online and those that come on appeal to H.A.W.A.G. are part of that, but not identified separately. I believe there may be an issue as to why they are not identified separately, but I will look into it.

3.12.8 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Only yesterday, I spoke to a retailer who told me they had closed 2 stores, because they were unable to get licences from H.A.W.A.G. for people to work in their stores. Partly that is because there is an issue, not just for skills in Jersey, but there is an issue of lower skills and a need for lower skills and, at some point, jobs which you would say are unskilled as well. Does the Assistant Chief Minister understand and have an overall view of that situation that it is not just software programmes that Jersey needs, but it is also people to undertake jobs that many Islanders, to be blunt, refuse to undertake themselves?

The Connétable of St. John:

Yes, I am very well aware of that and the current policy has licensed employees, which were the former J-cats and that tends to be people with higher skills. We then have registered employees and they tend to be more of a labouring nature than a skills nature. We are very well aware and there is this clear definition between the 2.

3.12.9 Deputy G.J. Truscott:

The words dithering and procrastination may be a bit harsh. I will not be using them quite at this stage, maybe in the autumn, but I do look forward to your report when it comes out. I think nobody is advocating to stop inward migration. Without question, this Island needs people. We need doctors, we need social workers, we need all the important skills, advocates, you name it. Nobody is saying that we just need to take control. At the moment, this open-borders policy is just ruining, in the long term, this Island's future. Control is the word I would like the Assistant Minister to perhaps adopt and does he agree?

The Connétable of St. John:

Yes, we need control, we need a vibrant economy and it is achieving that balance. We heard from a former speaker how 2 shops have closed, because he cannot get the staff, while at the same time the recent headlines are that inward migration is unacceptably high. It is a difficult balance and what is important is that a thoroughly researched piece of work is brought to this Assembly for the Assembly to agree all together.

3.12.10 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Assistant Chief Minister did not answer the question that I asked. I was asking why they have not continued with the 350 heads of household and try to control it that way, rather than having no controls, whatsoever; will he please explain?

The Connétable of St. John:

When a licence is issued, that licence is issued and we are unable, at the present time, without certain procedures, to retract that licence. This is one of the areas we are looking into.

3.12.11 Deputy G.P. Southern:

When I last studied the problem of population and work licences, 10 or 12 years ago, the pattern forward was that a company would come, request some licences, let us say 6 licences, be awarded 2 and say: "Go away, train up your staff, or recruit locally." Then they would come back 6 months later and 9 months later and say: "Another 2, we cannot do it." Then 6 months after that would come back and get the final 2. Is that a pattern that he recognises still, in the practice of H.A.W.A.G., that what happens is that you just slow down the flow and eventually companies get their requirements?

The Connétable of St. John:

That is a familiar scenario that he suggests that businesses apply for more licences than they need and that they then subsequently come back again and again. We have recognised that and I sincerely hope we have the integrity not to be fooled by that.

3.12.12 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I thank other Members for joining in what is a very important issue. My final question goes back to my original question; this is a matter of urgency, so bearing all of that in mind and everything that has just been said, will the Assistant Chief Minister confirm there will be no effort to bring this forward if they feel that the time is there and enough work has been done? Will he commit when we will be debating this, if that is not the case?

The Connétable of St. John:

This is being carried out with complete urgency and the seriousness of this is known. I do not want to compromise on time to spoil what needs to be something that will be long-lasting, for the next 15, 20, 25 years. As for the actual timescale, I cannot commit to it, because there are unknown variables, such as law-drafting time and other issues. But it will be brought as quickly as is ... I forget the word, I am not good at English, as quickly as possible.

The Bailiff:

Possible; always a very good word, 'possible'.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Sir, before we move on I note that the Minister for Children and Housing is due for questions without notice and also is due to make a statement regarding the Citizens' Panel. It might be more efficient if he makes that statement first, rather than having a question and then coming back to the statement and having a question time.

The Bailiff:

Minister, would you find that convenient?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I have no views either way, Sir.

The Bailiff:

It would certainly enable Members to ask you questions about other things, which would probably be a good thing.

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Possibly, Sir. I just note that the statement has not been handed out to Members yet, but if that can be done quickly, then I do not mind just doing it that way round.

The Bailiff:

Very well, we will do that first. It was clearly not a party decision. Very well, Minister. Do all Members have a copy of the statement? No, apparently not. The Connétable of St. Lawrence, has the statement arrived on the Connétables benches yet? Senator, I daresay Members have got ears, as well as eyes, why do you not start reading the statement?