

22.04.25

**2 Senator S.Y. Mézec of the Chief Minister regarding the Common Strategic Policy and reducing levels of people living in relative low income (OQ.70/2022)**

Will the Chief Minister state whether it is his assessment that the current Government has achieved the aim set out in the Common Strategic Policy to “reduce levels of people living in relative low income”?

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

I am pleased of the progress that has been made towards this objective since 2018. We recognise that more work will always be needed to assist those on lowest incomes, particularly during the current wave of inflationary pressure, but we have taken some tangible steps towards assisting vulnerable Islanders over the last 4 years. I am going to give a few examples, if that is okay. I think starting at the very top. We are presently showing the lowest level of unemployment in the last decade and that is ... if you are not unemployed you are earning more money therefore you have improved the situation of that individual. Therefore we have to celebrate that. That is one of the best things that we have had in the last decade. That is after the pandemic. Bear in mind that during the pandemic we went up to something like 2,290 actively seeking work, now we are down to something like 720. That is a massive improvement. We have steadily increased the minimum wage rate by 23 per cent, that is 3 times faster than inflation, and we are now at the target of 45 per cent of mean wages. The first child component in income support has increased by £17.50 a week, that is up 26 per cent from June 2018. We have frozen rents across Andium properties, that is with the support of Housing Ministers - plural - but obviously with my support as well, as no doubt the questioner will remember. We have reduced the social security rent cap to 80 per cent. As I said, we have increased the first child component in income support and, most recently, the Minister for Social Security has agreed a special payment of £20 a month for all Islanders on a means-tested benefit to provide targeted support during the current inflationary pressures. We have made it very clear that that is a first step. It is something we get in place and, depending on the nature of the household, that can be up to £80 a month for that household. We have not sat down and twiddled our thumbs, we have not made the poor poorer, we have set and targeted all the efforts that we can do. I hope that is recognised. That is not saying we cannot do more but that is saying we have made some tangible benefits to those individuals ...

**The Bailiff:**

Can I just ask you to bring your answer to a close?

**3.2.1 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

With all of that contained in the Chief Minister’s answer, is it the case therefore that he is expecting the household survey results to come through and demonstrate that there are lower levels of relative low income in Jersey than at the previous survey? Or is it likely to be the case that in fact that survey will show the opposite?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I genuinely do not know what those numbers are going to look like. As we have all expressed our disappointment but understanding of the reason that the data that I committed to ... we funded the study and COVID came along and basically disrupted the whole collection of data, which is why we are now setting that study going again, or it is going again, and it will be in place at a high level for the next Council of Ministers to see what other changes they need to make. We have to remember

that will be over a period of time and so the data the Senator is referring to will be before the significant change in cost of living that has happened in the last few months, partially, for example, because of the war in Ukraine and things like that. I think the other point, which we do need to remember, are the issues around relative low income there are also the points that, for example, we have given better and far more reaching access to things like dental treatment, to G.P. (general practitioner) access.

[10:00]

That has improved the lives of I think it is 11,000 individuals. That will not show as an improvement in income because it is taking off their expenditure side. That we need to recognise as well. But I think we have made some very tangible changes. There is always more we can do but compared to when we first came in, there have been improvements.

### **3.2.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Is it not the case that we do have the preliminary numbers attached to the pre-pandemic condition of our workforce and our incomes and when is he going to produce that and will it be before the election?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I do not think I understand the question from the start point. If it has been produced by the Statistics Department and the chief statistician, that is under their control and he is obviously better informed than I am.

### **3.2.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Is it not the case that he has requested the census figures before taking priority over the income distribution survey?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Number one, that is basically inferring that I have interfered, and therefore broken the law, in the operation of the chief statistician and his department and I hope the Deputy will withdraw that suggestion because that would imply I have overridden my powers as a Chief Minister. We have absolutely respected the independence of the chief statistician and I think the Deputy should know that, and I think he is being somewhat mischievous. For the avoidance of doubt, no.

### **3.2.4 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:**

Would the Chief Minister give his statistics on the use of foodbanks during his tenure as to whether they have gone up; whether he has that information?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

No, I do not have that information. Obviously the information is not generated internally within the Government.

### **3.2.5 Deputy M. Tadier:**

The Chief Minister can reel off statistics that he thinks supports the claim that under his Government things have got better yet surely one of the key indicators of poverty and relative poverty in Jersey is

the use of foodbanks, which the media certainly has been telling us has been going up in recent years. Is that not something that the Chief Minister is interested in finding out about statistically and learning about the people who lie behind those statistics?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

My understanding is the statistics themselves are produced by the providers of the foodbanks and therefore that is all under their control. It is something that I think would be of interest, and I am sure that will be revealed when the full surveys are produced.

**3.2.6 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

This follows on from what Deputy Tadier has just asked. It is clearly a fact that the use of foodbanks has gone up in this term of office from the already too high level that it was at the start of this term of office. Does the Chief Minister not regard that as being a key indicator of relative low income in Jersey because if people cannot afford to feed themselves and the numbers of those people are growing then that does constitute clear evidence that levels of relative low income have gone up during his term office and not gone down?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

As with any figures, these type of figures we need to understand. We need to understand the rationale behind it, particularly bearing in mind that we have been through a pandemic. But I make the point we have taken a vast number of steps to significantly support individuals and improve their livelihoods, for want of a better expression, during those 4 years. As I have said, the fact, for example, minimum wage has gone up by 23 per cent, the fact that, for example, we have assisted about 11,000 individuals to have either free or much subsidised G.P. access is something to be applauded. I did not say we were in a perfect world but I said things have improved in the last 4 years, and that should be something we should be proud of as an Assembly, because various Members have contributed to that. As I have said, unemployment is at the lowest level for a decade.