

My first year in Government - what I have learnt

By Deputy Shona Pitman - States Of Jersey- December 2006

It has been a first year as the youngest States Member, which has been marked by huge contrasts. Exhilaration at being given the opportunity to help improve the lives of people in the community and of course, play a part in trying to begin to improve Jersey as a whole within Government. On the other side of the coin, frustration and disappointment, at the way the huge opportunity for a more democratic form of Government with the change to the Ministerial system (December 2005) is being diminished.

I refer to: the regular obstruction of information to Scrutiny; the growing obsession of Ministerial 'spin'; the lack of public participation in government decisions; the 'tax the poor to save the rich' policies and too many 'privileged' politicians who are arrogant and appear morally bankrupt.

To illustrate my point...

Let's start with what symbolises a democratic Government – the ability of an electorate to vote for its 'leader'. Despite the proclamations of many politicians of the previous Assembly, that Ministerial Government would be more democratic than the Committee system, the people of Jersey can not vote for their Chief Minister. Moreover, this choice was only given to the 53 States Members, who voted by secret ballot. As the final vote demonstrated so glaringly, representatives could tell the electorate they would vote one way during their election campaigns, and then secretly vote for the total opposite. And who was voted in? Senator Frank Walker - a politician that was (by far) *not* favoured by the public and scraped in at bottom of the six Senators elected at the previous election.

With regard to Scrutiny's role, I am pleased to say that some Ministers have worked well with us and have taken on board our recommendations – just as the Clothier Report envisaged. Despite this, for all the talk on 'open and transparent' Government, why is it that Scrutiny is refused the same legal advice that is given to Ministers? Why is it also, that we are not automatically given B Agenda minutes of Minister's meetings and instead have to work hard to get them, if indeed we do? How can Scrutiny play its intended part in Government, if a Panel, following a review, takes its recommendations in the form of a proposition to the House. The proposition is then voted out, regardless of its merit but seemingly due to nothing more than being viewed as a desired direction of the Executive or, that certain Members do not like the individual who is bringing the proposition to the House.

Our relationship with the Executive is, as Ministers so often quote, apparently to act as a 'critical friend'. However, I have to ask: how can we be this when, in my experience, there are Ministers who clearly do their utmost to ensure that we either don't get the information or actually receive misinformation. As has been pointed out by others more than once, Scrutiny was meant to be not only the counter-balance to power but the 'champion' of the people in ensuring democracy. Because of the lack of co-operation with Ministers, as yet, I feel, it cannot be claimed to have become either.

The curse of modern western politics – 'spin'.

One of the biggest hindrances to our democracy is undoubtedly 'ministerial' spin. With the implementation of Ministerial Government came the Communications Unit, members of which are actually paid nearly fifteen thousand pounds more than politicians. Why? I wonder... We now hear a lot from 'Government' communications of the regular, much hailed public consultations undertaken on e.g. GST (Goods and Services Tax) and '20 means 20' (income tax at 20%, without any allowances for every earner); the construction on the Waterfront; the

minimum wage; the new income support system; and a decent public transport system. I ask; what real say have the people of Jersey had on important Government decision-making? After all, doesn't 'real' consultation and listening engender change?

We finally have a human rights law in place, yet what does this truly mean to people whose quality of life will be reduced because of the ominous tax policies which will hit middle and lower income earners hardest. Tax on education, basic food stuffs, children's clothes – are these not the most basic materials of a modern democratic way of living? (How long will GST stay at 3%, once implemented next year? As the demand on Government budgets increases, so to will the pressures to raise GST?). The ever increasing cost of living in Jersey e.g. expensive accommodation (comparable to the richest parts of London); a low minimum wage (currently below the UK); electricity rises of 20%; students paying university fees and their parents paying significantly more; and a lack of affordable leisure facilities to take children. With all these new expenses, Jersey faces a future of much more financial hardship for its people. Moreover, such hardships are more likely to compel people to take on second jobs or work longer hours, leaving them less time to spend at home with their families. This is all detrimental to the maintenance of traditional family values. And to top it all, the Chamber of Commerce are now recommending that Government set an income tax cap at a ridiculous level of between one and two hundred thousand pounds. Yet we all must sacrifice for a rosy future – according to Ministerial communications. And of course the new Income Support System will, we are assured, compensate for the new financial burdens that the low income earners will find themselves. However, regardless of Ministerial 'spin' the truth is, without any figures or regulations, as yet, we just don't know.

The erosion of diversity of industry and the need for understanding of our own impact within the global picture...

My final point: how many of our new policies, immigration, housing, education, fiscal are crushing other industries and with them, the people of Jersey, with the exception of the very rich, to suit our Finance Industry. And to what expense is our tax haven really having on third world countries? Yes, we most certainly need this industry and must continue to nurture it, this is a fact, but in what way and to what expense? We do not exist within a vacuum. When it comes to the matter of finance it is without doubt, that all too often in recent years any criticism of this industry is immediately jumped upon and portrayed as somehow being bizarrely 'anti-Finance' or even 'anti-Jersey'. What we actually need to move on to here, is an intellectual response to ensure we do continue to fully support Finance – but in a manner that compliments and respects 'the bigger picture' both at island level and within the sphere of globalisation. As I pointed out before, so much else has been allowed to wither on the vine – a vibrant tourism industry and agriculture to name but two. Without focussed investment, regulation and innovation *now*, where will we turn if and when the Finance industry wanes as many predict?

What about democracy?

And the only question that remains is: do we really live in a democracy? The answer in my view is, no, we do not and this Government is not even moving in that direction. For anything to change, people must get out and vote for *more* political candidates who have a social conscience and possess a real understanding of economics both locally and globally.