

AN EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT FOR AN EFFECTIVE MICROSTATE

Synopsis of speech by Mark Boleat at Jersey Chamber of Commerce, 9 December 2015

Introduction

The paper covers –

- The challenges facing Jersey
- The adequacy of the policy-making framework in Jersey
- Suggested solutions
- Specific issues

The paper is based on my extensive experience of policy making in Jersey together with the experience I have in the UK of dealing with public policy over my whole career, most recently as the political leader of the City of London Corporation, in which capacity I am heavily involved in London and national policy issues.

The challenges

The starting point is that, by international standards, Jersey is a very prosperous community, and a great place in which to live and work. It has for many years punched well above its weight both as an island and through Jerseymen play a major role on the world stage.

The challenges facing Jersey are similar in nature to those facing many other communities and are inter-linked –

- A significant budget deficit of between £80 and £145 million, with no great confidence that measures have been taken that will address the issue.
- The average economic standard of living has fallen by 20% since 2001, although with signs that the position is now improving.
- Vulnerability because of dependence on one industry the fortunes of which are determined to a large extent by outside factors.
- Jersey's place in the world with the threat of Brexit, security concerns and international measures on taxation.
- Complacency and unreal expectations about what government can deliver.
- A political system that makes it very difficult for ministers to govern effectively.

The policy-making framework

The policy-making framework is unsatisfactory –

- The States is not representative because of the huge differences between the parishes in respect of the number of electors needed to elect a member.

- There are too many States members with not enough to do, and no mechanism, in the absence of parties, to provide the necessary discipline.
- Scrutiny has improved and may generally be working well, but in some cases it has simply become opposition.
- Much of the debate is in the media where evidence is generally not needed and much is unnecessarily unpleasant.
- Business people are not adequately engaged in civil society and in the policy-making process, and civil society itself is not adequately engaged in the policy making process.
- There is an extreme blame culture, often with the benefit of hindsight.

Government, like business, now needs to be nimble, able to take decisions quickly, often with imperfect information, and in the knowledge that with the benefit of hindsight not all decision will be proved to have been correct. The consequences of the deficiencies noted above are –

- Delay and prevarication in taking key decisions - the length of time that the old JCG site was allowed to lie derelict being an example.
- Excess consultation rather than leadership.
- A risk averse culture where doing nothing is often the safest option.
- An over-responsiveness to perceived public opinion as expressed in the media, rather than recognition that States members have been elected to govern.
- People who because of their experience would be good States members are deterred from standing for election.
- Generally, the Council of Ministers is seen as being over-reactive and not sufficiently in the driving seat.

What should be done

- In the referendum 19.48% of the population voted to retain the status quo and over 80% voted to reduce the number of members and to reduce the imbalance between constituencies. The preferred option for the smaller number of members was one that retained the Constables. That the States went with the 19.48% and maintained the status quo was an affront to democracy. The preferred option should now be implemented.
- The way the States works should be reformed, with less lengthy and unproductive debate and more addressing real problems in committees.
- The civil service is not sufficiently joined-up, and will not be until all the ministers and policy people are in the same building.
- There appears to be no strategic communications strategy, the communications unit instead providing a public information service. Social media is not used effectively.
- Mechanisms must be found to involve business and civil society in the policy-making framework. One such mechanism has just begun operation – the Jersey Policy Forum (www.jerseypolicyforum.org). It will produce publications and provide a forum for discussion covering all the policy issues of importance to Jersey, ranging

from Jersey's place in the world to poverty and education in Jersey. The Forum needs support from business.

Specific issues

There are a number of specific issues that Jersey needs to address in order to ensure its continued prosperity –

- Immigration. Jersey needs to get real and stop searching for a policy solution that does not exist. Jersey needs talented people from around the world – as does the UK, and it needs net immigration if it is not to have a population structure that results in an unviable dependency ratio. Guernsey, the Isle of Man and Bermuda are all shifting their policy from seeking to limit population growth to seeking to maintain the size of the working population, which implies population growth.
- Education. It was unacceptable that Jersey's state education system was so poor, and even more unacceptable that no one seemed to care about it or even know about it. It is very welcome that this is now a priority for the Council of Ministers and that the new Director of Education is taking the necessary steps.
- Jersey needs to protect its USP, its semi-detached relationship with the UK. It must continually demonstrate that it adds value to the UK and that it is fully compliant with all international standards on financial regulation and taxation.
- Jersey needs to give serious thought to its future – not in the nature of a wish list, but rather whether it wants to continue to be a dynamic economy, attracting and retaining talented people and punching well above its weight, or rather whether it wishes to become like the Isle of Wight, an island that has not adapted to changing circumstances and where living standards are little more than half those of the surrounding mainland.

Mark Boleat

mark.boleat@btinternet.com

www.boleat.com