

News on legislative changes we would like to see....

What satisfaction there was in October 2007 when Tynwald received the Government Strategic Plan 2007 – 2011. Three items from P A G's Charter were listed in the Legislative Programme. These were Bills for:

- Access to Information
- Ombudsman
- Auditor General

All for introduction by July 2008.

Great news we thought, but how naive we were as earlier on the same day a question had been asked of the Attorney General about his Chambers workload. He admitted:

'The legislative programme contained within the Government's Strategic Plan shows, according to my calculations, some 58 new Bills which should be introduced before July of next year. That is clearly an impossible task..... '

Seven months have gone by without comment from the government that the proposed legislation is clearly an impossible task. The Chief Minister was asked by Peter Karran (May Tynwald) about progress of a Freedom of Information Act. In a very short exchange, with no hint of an apology Mr Brown answered:

'As the Hon. Member knows, the Government's Strategic Plan, received by Tynwald Court in October 2007, includes a commitment to provide the public with a statutory right of access to Government information. In keeping with that commitment, an Access to Information Bill is currently in the drafting process and is scheduled for introduction into the branches in the legislative year 2008-09, sir.'

When pressed about timescale Mr Brown said:

'I am not able to give that undertaking at the moment, Mr Deputy President, as there is a considerable amount of work to be done on this, and also, of course, we will want to ensure, as far as we can, that the Bill, when it is presented to the House, is in fact in the format that we believe is appropriate for the Isle of Man.' and went on to say:

'As far as I am concerned, my administration has been as open as any, if not more open, in terms of some changes that we have made. I have nothing to hide from the public. I am quite happy that information is made available to the public. In fact, that continues to happen. We do not need legislation to make available to the public information that is right for them to see. The legislation is important: it has been given priority by the Council of Ministers. It is a substantial piece of legislation and a lot of work is going on.'

'There have been problems, as Hon Members know, in the changeover of staffing within HM Attorney General's Chambers. However, the work is ongoing and, as I say, it is the intention of the Council of Ministers to hopefully introduce this Bill into the branches in the legislative year 2008-09.'

What confusion and contradiction!

A promise from Government regarded as 'an impossible task' by the Attorney General.

The Chief Minister saying that the legislation is not actually needed and yet at the same time regarding it as important and a priority.

We may therefore see this piece legislation sometime in the next 14 months, but that's only "hopefully" according to Mr Brown. We surely know what that get out clause means!