

Dear All

Please see below the text of my Budget Speech. At various point I deviated from the below and responded to matters that the Minister for Health and the Minister for Social Services during their contributions, which are not reflected below as the remarks were *extempore*.

Therefore, please check the below against delivery.

With kind regards

Neil

Mr Speaker, as always in preparing my Budget Speech, I paused to consider the contributions made by the Honourable Members opposite in last year's Budget Debate and the various Government Press Statements, television interviews and occasional press conferences. In preparing my third Budget contribution, I recalled my opening remarks last year when I said that it was obvious to any reasonable and objective political observer that the GSD are consummate experts in the political art of announcement and re-announcement. This House will recall that I provided various instances on the last occasion and on the back of this unfortunate reality something further emerges with eminent clarity: and that is, Mr Speaker, that some individual Ministers appear to drown in ankle deep water in respect of their areas of responsibility and this inability to get to grips with their own departments does have a direct and negative effect on Gibraltarians. And as always Mr Speaker I will furnish this House with illustrations.

As the House will have by now become accustomed, (notwithstanding my fifteen minutes in politics, magnanimously raised to thirty minutes last year), I begin my address by focusing on the reply of the Hon the Chief Minister, which can be best

politely described as Castroesque in length and manner. The Hon the Chief Minister Mr Speaker seems intent every year to lecture us on this side of the House, it would appear, in the hope, that a lengthy political discourse will finally convert us to his political cause – or indeed make us succumb to his torture, as he accused one of my Hon friends during the last Question and Answer session of the House. However, I can assure Hon Members opposite that nothing could be less likely, Mr Speaker. As usual I relish the opportunity to rebut the various points the Hon CM made in relation to my contribution in respect of the provision of health and social services.

As I pause to consider the length of the replies of the Hon the Chief Minister on behalf of all of his Ministerial colleagues over the last two years, it also occurs to me that there is an unmistakable yet serious political psychosis deeply rooted in the collective psychological makeup of the GSD parliamentary party in general and its leader in particular. A leader, by the way Mr Speaker, who views himself as infallible in his arguments – one only has to observe his outbursts on behalf of his own Ministers when he does not even let them reply to our supplementary questions or at times even questions of their own areas of responsibility. And this uninterrupted pathology is further evidenced in the seeming inability of the GSD to refrain from replying to any statement whatsoever the Opposition makes whether they accept the facts or otherwise. And the pathology Mr Speaker lies in an inexorable political reflex to wish at all costs and at whatever cost to control public opinion. (Whereas I could demonstrate the nervousness exhibited by the Ministers opposite when a weakness is exposed in any area of government, I will only relate my examples to the areas in respect of which I have been entrusted by the Hon the Leader of the Opposition.) This obsessive compulsive disorder to reply to every pronouncement of the Opposition Mr Speaker throws into sharp focus that the

GSD is losing its grip not just on its erstwhile political stranglehold of Gibraltar's public opinion but on reality itself. Surely Mr Speaker it is a cardinal political rule, not to keep a political issue alive that does not favour you and which you cannot but accept as true; but so clinically anxious have the GSD become Mr Speaker that their fear of losing government overcomes them and gets the better of them spouting out diatribe from all angles in the hope that their legendary and notorious mud-slinging will obscure and bury the truth. But the truth will always out Mr Speaker and we here on these Benches will continue to remind the electorate.

What is worse Mr Speaker and as I have always maintained, the GSD does our democratic traditions, our public debate and our Parliamentary dignity no good at all to continue their personal attacks on the Opposition. (It is small wonder Mr Speaker that there are not more people willing to throw their hat into the ring.) It is one thing to attack our policy statements and quite another to go for the jugular against an Opposition member personally. The pattern is clear Mr Speaker and for everyone to see – the Opposition issues a Press Release on any given policy issues and the expected GSD reply comes in like a toxic bomb in its usual heavy handed manner, trying to personally eviscerate the spokesperson even if, and this is the killer, when the GSD have to accept what the Opposition has said. The litany of insults, the disrespectful and poisonous tone and tenor of all of the press releases as it relates to Opposition members is a method of conducting politics that Gibraltar wants to be shot of and is not something that we will perpetuate once we sit where they sit Mr Speaker, which thankfully will be very soon. But I have said so before Mr Speaker and I will continue to say it for as long as the personal attacks keep flying from their side that if a rebuttal concentrates on the critic rather than on the criticism it is because the substantive points raised cannot be properly countered.

I further warned the members opposite on the last occasion that their repeated mantras and politically expedient statements to try to counteract our public pronouncements would cease to be of any effect on Gibraltarians and that they would wake up one day to find that their political gimmicks are no longer of any effect. And as I anticipated last year Mr Speaker it was in the damp smell of newsprint Mr Speaker and in the crackle of the radio this Government woke up not on one, but on two ordinary mornings to read in two separate opinion polls what we on these benches knew well before, that people have had enough of their pernicious political manner. I have little doubt that the Hon the CM now wishes that he had not been quite so flippant in some of his remarks in this House when it came to the concerns of our citizens or quite so very sarcastic as to the number of people who complain to us about them – armies of people, he once said. Maybe not full armies, Mr Speaker, but certainly, it would appear, a majority of those armies.

In his reply last year, the Hon the CM took exceptional umbrage that I should have advised the GSD to stop replying to criticisms of their current policies and the way they govern Gibraltar by saying that it was better than it was in 1996. Well of course that all successive administrations build on past ones Mr Speaker; it would be a remarkable state of affairs if the GSD were to demolish the good work done by a previous administration. But that, as I have said before and as I say again and will continue to say in spite of the refutations of the Hon the CM, does not answer the criticisms of the Government of the day. When I question the Hon Minister for Health or for Social Services about any particular decision I am asking for an explanation as to the current state of affairs – casting their mind back to 1996 when the Minister was obviously not even in Government simply does not cut any ice. I,

as well as the rest of my colleagues hold the government into account as to present decisions; we want to know about what happens today, how the management of Gibraltar affects Gibraltarians today, how the wasteful expenditure of our public finances in particular in the wholly unnecessary construction of an airport impacts on our economy today, how political mismanagement in our public affairs from the decrepit state of the cemetery, the snail like pace of governmental decisions, the cancellation of speech therapy classes for our children, to the inexcusable delay in an elderly residential home prejudices Gibraltarians today, today, Mr Speaker - not in 1996, 1988 or any other year.

So no Mr Speaker, I do not accept any of the reasons given by the Hon the CM as to why it is important to hark back to 1996 in order to explain their shortcomings today – it is, simply put, sheer nonsense. And much more importantly Mr Speaker neither do the people of Gibraltar think that 1996 is relevant any longer. In an age of i-pods, i-pads, instant news coverage the electorate is concerned, rightly concerned, with how their government is performing on the day, Therefore, I do not accept the Hon the CM's charge against me that it is a problem to possess a memory that just goes back thirty minutes because I need not know what happened in 1996 to know that young Gibraltarians are still waiting for affordable homes under his successive administrations, that he has wasted millions of our money on a theatre project that has never materialised, that our cemetery has fallen into an utter state of disrepair clearly not caring that ordinarily the cemetery is visited by elderly widows and widowers who require its upkeep at the very minimum for their own safety, I do not need a memory that spans beyond thirty minutes to know that under the Hon the CM's stewardship our roads are daily in insufferable and endlessly frustrating gridlock, that there is clearly very little forward planning in traffic and other areas, that operations continue to be cancelled as a result of

something as straightforward as lack of beds, that women still wait months for appointment for breast screening and then months for their results, that a new residential home for the elderly has yet not been built leading to a bottle neck of beds at the hospital for our elderly who require care but not hospitalisation leading, by their very own admission to operation being cancellations, that there are homeless people waiting for homes notwithstanding empty government flats that could be used if the necessary works were carried out, the lack of a half-way home for men and for women who are left with no place to go. You see how 30 minutes is sufficient Mr Speaker.

And when one considers the way that this Government has conducts our affairs, it is clear that they have lost all real concern for how their policies affect Gibraltarians. If people really mattered to them, then, instead of spending money on say a VIP lounge at Gatwick or Heathrow or unnecessary trips and conferences, that money could be allocated for the speedy refurbishment of government housing so that not one single Gibraltarian is out of a home, so that not one elderly person feels a burden to society, so that young people can feel proud in being able to buy a home or live independently in government housing. How did we in Gibraltar slip so far Mr Speaker that even one person has to live in a car? How in a population of almost only thirty-thousand people with ten ministers can we not resolve homelessness.

And do not let the Hon Members opposite think that for a second that I begrudge them their trips and VIP lounges, but before they go out to spend our money let's invest it in getting our house in order first. Once that is sorted, then they can all fly around the world to their heart's content.

Fourteen years is certainly a long time to have got on with things and got them done Mr Speaker!

There are other matters that the Hon the CM raised, which I address at this point. This next issue, which is inextricably linked to the way that Government explains itself, that is to say with obfuscation and distortion is his accusation that I had said in my last speech that I was accusing the panellists of the complaints process as lacking independence. The Hon the CM knows full well that I absolutely said nothing of the sort but because it suited his political purposes he nonetheless went ahead and said so.

Last year I simply noted my suggestion to the Hon Lady opposite that if the Honourable Members want to eliminate the public criticism levelled at the current complaints system by various sections of the community, the review panel should be appointed by the Ombudsman rather than merely being selected by the Ombudsman from an existing list already compiled by the Hon Lady. I further explained that the moment that a politician decides who to place on such a list, the system exposes itself, whether unfairly or otherwise, to the criticism of political interference or political bias, whether there is any such interference or not, whether there is or is not any bias and whether a panellist is independent or not. As the Hon the CM knows, in the same way that justice must be seen to be done, it is equally as important that independence be seen to exist – no one has ever suggested that any particular panellist is not independent. Given the creation of the office of an independent Ombudsman let us show trust in that institution and let his office deal with all complaints that go beyond the initial investigation by the GHA. It makes sense.

Then Mr Speaker, completely ignoring what I had said the Hon the CM tells me that only unusual doctors could complain to me about the complaints procedures because doctors “...*hate the complaints procedure because it takes a huge amount of their time.*” And that Mr Speaker was exactly what I had said – that doctors had complained to me that if the department was properly resourced their workload in that respect would be minimal; did the Hon the CM think I would not review my speech and his reply. I explained to the Hon the CM precisely that one of the problems expressed by patients and some doctors is that there is only 1 Patient Complaints Co-ordinator employed and that resources are therefore limited in this area that this leads to junior doctors having to deal with complaints in addition to their already extensive duties. If the department were properly resourced the doctors input into the process would be just the necessary and not as it is today as a result of the GSD continuing to employ simply 1 complaints co-ordinator. Something which I see from the Estimates will continue into the next financial year.

Be that as it may Mr Speaker and having said all of the above, at least the Hon the CM agrees with me that it is “right and helpful” that I should highlight any shortcomings that emerge and I note that he does not resent me pointing out such instances and that this is constructive politics. And in that constructive spirit I turn to of my specific areas of responsibility Health and Social Services.

As always, I preface my contribution on our health services by saying that it is only right that our health system should be funded by the state. But in the same way that the Hon Lady and the Hon the CM concede that the system is not prefect, it is my obligation, as the Hon the CM agrees, to highlight those aspects of the system that require reviewing and improvement. It is my continued view that we

on these benches best serve Gibraltar's interest by considering Government's policies and their implementation and identifying their shortcomings so that the system is always self-renewing and improving. It is the Opposition's very function, as I have always said, which, in my view ensures that any government of whatever persuasion gives thorough consideration to the implementation of any government program and which all Honourable Members must agree contributes directly to the quality of the services provided in the public sector.

The Hon Lady opposite presides over the biggest state budget, which reflects the importance once again that Gibraltar, as a community, attaches to the free provision of health care to its citizens. We on these benches therefore need to be watchful on how tax payers' money is spent, we need to ensure that there is sound investment that does not result in government waste, that the amounts of money spent correspond directly with the quality of services provided and we need to ask whether the services provided are cost-effective.

During this financial year 2010/2011, the Government estimates a total forecast outturn of £74,127,000. In respect of the financial year ending March 2010, that is to say, the last financial year, the Government's forecast outturn is £73,473,000. The estimate in respect of 2009/2010 was £68,076,000. Approximately an additional five million pounds therefore has been spent in the last financial year than the estimate provided.

Given the millions spent Mr Speaker it is undoubtedly our duty to once again raise the question as to why some of the same old problems recur annually. It is a fact that the Hon the CM dislikes that I should remind them of the perennial issues and in his wish to turn the tables accuses us of regurgitating the same speeches; to turn

on the tapes, he says. In the first place Mr Speaker I write my Budget contributions afresh every year but it is certainly not my fault that the same issues should continue to arise if they fail to remedy these. As I told the Hon Members on the last occasion I will have no difficulty whatsoever in not raising the same issues so long as they are no longer a problem; but for so long as the same problems exist and for so long as I represent the interests of Gibraltarians, I will continue to monitor and highlight these matters to the Hon members opposite.

Mr Speaker, I now move to some of the issues, that I mentioned a few moments ago.

*Pensioners, Bed Shortages, Cancelled Operations & Other Problems*

In reply to my criticism of the Government for the high level of cancelled operations the Hon the CM tried partly to explain away his government's failure by telling me that there is a difference between bed shortages and bed blockages. The Hon the CM went to great lengths to lecture me on the fact that I should label things correctly. The Hon the CM seemed to have forgotten however that it was his own government by way of the Hon Lady opposite who had acknowledged the problem on 29 April 2009 by saying that the interim residential care facilities for the elderly will alleviate the acute bed shortage that was been experienced at the Hospital. You see Mr Speaker it is not just I that calls it a bed shortage, it is also the Hon the CM's colleague who calls it a bed shortage. The Hon Lady went even further accepting that the bed shortage resulted in the need to postpone some scheduled surgical operations. It would seem that just a three minute memory span is enough Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker the Hon the CM may therefore call it bed absences, bed unavailability, bed disappearances or whatever else he chooses to call it; but by whatever name he chooses to describe the problem, the problem is still a problem and one that needs to be resolved certainly after fourteen years of this uncaring administration or by my thirty minute memory span in politics.

The press have already extensively catalogued the various instances of inconvenience of those who have decided to go public when their operation is cancelled. What truly irks me as a servant of the public and what disgruntles the people who listen to this debate or read the papers, is the very cavalier disregard exhibited not just by the Hon the CM but also by the Hon Lady opposite. When during the last Question and Answer session of this House, I put it to the Hon Lady opposite that to have a scheduled operation cancelled can be more than merely a trifling inconvenience to the affected patient, the Hon Lady opposite in effect shrugged her shoulders to say that it was not as bad as I was making it out to be and said, like the Hon CM said in his last Budget address that operations are cancelled even in the Houston Medical Centre.

Mr Speaker what a remarkably cavalier and flippant statement! How does the Hon Lady know what preparations a person has had to make for the operation – the time off work, family arrangements, the psychological preparation before an operation, the pain that a person may be suffering as a result of the illness that requires the surgical operation? She cannot know Mr Speaker and if the Hon Lady cared about people she would rise in this House to apologise and explain how the government is trying to remedy the situation. Let me remind her that Gibraltar is still waiting for a second home for senior citizens in the old St Bernard's Hospital.

I really need say little else on this matter Mr Speaker as the facts do truly speak for themselves.

### Elderly

As I and belatedly the Hon Lady Opposite have already said Mr Speaker related to the question of bed blockages, are the health-related questions in connection with the elderly. In the last Question and Answer session the Hon Mr Netto told us that there were 514 persons waiting for a place in Mount Alvernia and that of those 29 were occupying a bed at John Cochrane Ward and 41 at St Bernard's Hospital. In answer to Question 369 of 2009 the total number of elderly citizens occupying a bed at St Bernard's Hospital as at 2 June 2009 was 41. The figures I have just quoted and as I anticipated in the last Budget represent a reflection of a growing trend. I therefore repeat that this government grasp the nettle on an issue that truly is important to the residents of Gibraltar. Let us see the Government acting expeditiously on a vital community matter – the way we treat those who have contributed to our society so much says a lot about who we are as a people and our values.

### Mammography Service

Mr Speaker, the public will be aware of the ongoing debate in and out of this Parliament in respect of the Mammography Service. As this House knows, the Opposition continue to receive complaints of women who have to wait months before being screened for breast cancer and then have to wait months for a result. The Hon Lady Opposite in the last Question and Answer session of this House in an answer to a supplementary question agreed that the current screening program

was not working as well as it should and that is why they were in throes of starting the routine mammography breast screening service. Whereas I sincerely hope that this program starts soonest and functions efficiently and effectively, as always, we on this side of the House will have to reserve our position and monitor the situation.

In respect of the current system, the Honourable Members opposite know of the dissatisfaction expressed by some women, some of which have written directly to daily organs to record in public the amount of time it has taken them to be screened and waited for their result.

All medical professionals agree that prevention is better than cure and for some patients, having to wait any number of months may be too long in that a non-noticed symptoms may become very much worse in that period of time.

And then Mr Speaker, as the House knows, there is the question of the routine mammography service, which we on this side of the House have continually pressed the Government to implement soonest.

The House and indeed the public will recall that that the commencement of this service has been subject to considerable delay. The delays had been of an equipment and of a staffing nature. It was a central plank of the Government's that a third radiologist had to be recruited before the service could start. In fact, in answer to questions in September 2008, December 2008, June 2009, October 2009 and February 2010 it was made clear that having a third radiologist in post was part and parcel of the service, as advised by the Hon Lady opposite herself.

Given the answers in Parliament by the Hon Lady, the Opposition recently raised its concern publicly about the commencement of the routine, structured mammography services given the dismissal of one radiologist and the suspension of another. Among the usual barrage of insults, the Hon Minister suddenly shifted the government's position and announced that it is possible to continue as planned with the structured service without the need for a radiologist by using Teleradiology.

Whereas I was happy to hear this for the women of Gibraltar, the question that immediately arose in my mind as well as in the minds of the people who had followed the debate was the obvious one: why did the Government not go down this route earlier given the difficulties that had been experienced with the recruitment of the third radiologist. Teleradiology would have saved a considerable amount of time and trouble and the service could have started as soon as it was announced as a commitment. In addition, it was very telling that when I questioned the Hon Lady in February of this year she said nothing about the Government's intention to explore Teleradiology and simply informed the public that the last piece of the puzzle was finally in place as a third radiologist had been employed on an initial locum basis for two months.

Mr Speaker, the fact is that it is the Hon Lady that has not done her homework in this area as she so frequently but unjustifiably accuses me. She has done herself no favours by indicating three years down the line that there was indeed another option open to them other than appointing a third radiologist. In the meantime the women of Gibraltar have been made to wait for years and years and now in 2010 the service is still not operational.

And if the above were not serious enough Mr Speaker in their usual desire to politically tarnish all the valid points that we raise, the Hon Lady accused me of lending covert support to the dismissed and suspended radiologist. As absurd as that statement was and as much as I expect political distortion and an attempt to manipulate public opinion, I could not believe that accusation – that was a low blow, even by their standards. I had never and have never commented on the employment situation of any of the relevant radiologists and the public are fully aware of this.

### Hospital Car Park

Then Mr Speaker I turn to another example of how the Government really does not prioritise the concerns of resident Gibraltarians. In this particular case I refer to the decision of the Government to finally open the car park at Europlaza for hospital users. The delay is yet another reflection of the poor planning that has surrounded the multi-million pound conversion of an office block into a hospital that the provision of car parking spaces for members of the public was not adequately catered for when the hospital opened, notwithstanding the fact that adequate parking was given as one of the reasons for the move from the old St Bernard's site.

Let's quickly recap:

The Government told Parliament in 2004 that they had agreed to purchase a floor from the developers of Europlaza to use as car parking space for the hospital at a cost of £650,000. When the hospital opened this did not materialise. For a considerable period of time, therefore, there had been no hospital parking spaces available for visitors. Once again this has caused considerable inconvenience to

many people – see Mr Speaker how the concerns of people are not prioritised; see how thirty minutes is enough; see how individual Minister cannot get their act together.

The problem became so acute that in June of 2005 the Government announced that they had reached agreement with Morrison's supermarket for the allocation of 25 car parking spaces to hospital users free of charge for one hour. The arrangement entailed the allocation of temporary passes from the car park attendant on first come first served basis. Even though the Government described the arrangements as "an open agreement with no time constraints", it came to an end without warning and there were hospital users whose vehicles were clamped in Morrison's car park as a consequence of this facility coming unexpectedly to an end. You see Mr Speaker rushed solution; no forward planning.

On the other hand, we on these benches have constantly pressed the Government in Parliament over many years to provide adequate car parking spaces for hospital users. The delays in providing this facility, once Europlaza had been constructed, were inexcusable. When I asked in Parliament in April 2008, I was told that the Government was implementing a policy to operate Government owned car parks through a Government-owned company and this was in the process of being housed, staffed and activated. The House was told that "this is not something that is technically under review, which means nothing is happening. Let me explain that, when the words are used 'under review' or 'pigeon-holed meaning nothing is happening.'" The Government added that this was not one of those cases and that it should happen soon.

At six meetings of Parliament that spanned 2008, 2009 and 2010 since that answer was given, we continued to push the Government on the issue. The indications

were that nothing was happening, despite the answer to the contrary given in April 2008, since it has taken a further two years for the car park to open its doors. In September 2008 the Government said that the new arrangements would become operational by Christmas of that year. This did not happen. In March of 2009 the Government said that the car park would open “quite soon” but it did not happen either. Parliament was told that the Government were now considering their own policy on transport and car parks generally and that the one for hospital users in Europlaza was being considered in that wider context. The Government also confirmed in June 2009 not only that there were no staffing problems as such, but that the car park was in a fit state to be operational at that time. This was then expected to happen “very, very shortly”. It then transpired since that “very, very shortly” actually meant eight months more to wait!

The Government could have saved motorists and hospital visitors a considerable degree of inconvenience had they made provision for public car parking spaces when they decided to convert the office-block at Europort into a hospital. Having failed to do that, it was totally unacceptable that people were made to wait while the Government made up its minds on how to operate and staff the car park, even though the building was ready and the spaces were available for use.

But Mr Speaker the delays affecting the opening of the car park is a perfect illustration of my opening statement that individual Ministers cannot get their act together. What could have been simpler Mr Speaker than the Minister for Transport to arrange for parking facilities?

Heartless

In a separate matter, the House will know that we brought to the public's attention a case where the GHA had refused medical attention to the children of a Gibraltarian family on the technicality that they did not have identity cards. This, Mr Speaker, even though the most cursory examination would have shown that it was a case of genuine hardship and of people were genuinely in need of the support of the state.

At the time we on these benches were dealing with the case of a couple with four children two of whom, as well as the mother, are Gibraltarian. The father and the other two children are also British. The family had lived for a time in the United Kingdom until about a year ago. The six of them lived in Gibraltar in one room, the monthly rent of which was £550. The father, who is the breadwinner, earned about £930 a month. This meant that the family, with four children, had financial difficulty in making ends meet. The family had to live in Gibraltar accommodation in order to be able to register with the GHA.

Initially, the GHA had refused to register the family for medical treatment on the basis that they did not have a local address and were therefore unable to obtain the necessary ID documentation in order to be able to register. After the family obtained a local address, they were told that they needed to pay £5 per ID card. This was an amount that a family in such circumstances simply could not afford.

In addition, and this is the reason why I mention it in my budget address, one of the children suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and requires constant medication, which is expensive and which the family simply did not have the money to pay.

Given the real financial hardship I immediately contacted the Hon Lady opposite so that the GHA could facilitate the registration of the children so that the child suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder received immediate medical attention. The question was not, as the GSD tried to make out, that the Minister was being asked to waive the requirements imposed in the law but that she should exercise some common sense in relation to these bureaucratic issues in exceptional cases of real and genuine hardship. Given that the Gibraltar identity card is simply there to provide proof of identity, if there is a requirement for the GHA to establish this in order to ensure the entitlement to register for healthcare, then it should be possible to do so by reference to other official documents like passports and birth certificates. The response from the Minister's office to the family directly was that the GHA is not the Government and there was nothing that they could do.

Again Mr Speaker I would ask that we pause here to consider that statement – because it is very easy in the cut and thrust of politics not to properly consider an issue. It is remarkable, to put it mildly for the Government to have said that the GHA is not the Government. Everyone knows that the Minister for Health is also the Chairperson of the GHA and that it is the Government that funds and lays down the policies for the GHA. The case I have described was a real and genuine case of serious financial hardship where the Government could have simply waived any administrative impediments to the registration of these children so that they could have received medical treatment, whilst they regularised their position.

And of course Mr Speaker, as I referred at the outset, the Government's Press Release detonated like a bomb of personal invectives, save that like with all anticipated attacks, we were well prepared. Moreover, the reaction was nothing if not hysterical and betrayed once again that they see themselves as being infallible

and above criticism. I will be somewhat sympathetic though Mr Speaker as the evident hypersensitivity must be due to the dawning realisation that their time is up.

Their Press Statement also made clear that the Government are simply averse to people approaching the Opposition with their problems, still less when at the request of the affected party the issues are made public. The Government must understand that in a democratic society members of the public are free to approach their Members of Parliament with their concerns and the Opposition are perfectly entitled to raise the issue in public if it is of public interest on behalf of their constituents. In this particular case, the Opposition had even written to the Minister for Health Yvette del Agua before taking this step. After all Mr Speaker we are not issuing a personal attack on a Minister or commenting on their personal lives but simply highlighting a real concern and it is childish and immature for the Hon Ministers to take such umbrage that the only response they have left is to insult.

And the plain fact remained Mr Speaker that while the Government imputed my motives and questioned my personal integrity and even my professional ability, there was 9 year old Gibraltar with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder who required immediate medical attention. I still maintain the view that the Minister and the GSD should have shown more compassion and humanity in this case because we were concerned with children who required our help and we failed them.

### Speech Therapy

Unfortunately Mr Speaker, the above is not the only instance of the Government not prioritizing people or unfortunately children.

As this House will be aware, the Opposition received representations from members of the public who complained that the frequency of sessions offered to children with speech therapists had been reduced. At the time we highlighted that in one of these cases, a mother of two young children enrolled them about two years ago to take speech therapy lessons as a result of developmental delay. These children made use of the speech therapy service provided by the GHA once a week after school for one hour. The children also attended during the summer months, albeit with a different and reduced timetable.

However in December of last year, the mother was advised that due to an increase in the number of children requiring speech therapy, her children would only be able to avail themselves of speech therapy sessions on alternate terms, instead of during the full year. In practice this meant that a child having contact with a speech therapist in December would not see the therapist again until April. This was confirmed by the Hon Lady opposite in the last Question and Answer session, but not without the usual attempt first at obfuscation. Understandably, the parents who saw me were extremely upset by the reduction and could not understand why the GHA could not devote more resources to tackle the increased demand instead of responding to the problem by reducing the service available to the children.

Once again Mr Speaker, the toxic reply arrived.

In their statement the Government confirmed that there had been increased referrals to the department. This was the point we made. The Government also confirmed that as a result of the increased referrals there had been cuts in the services offered (which they choose to describe as a “rearrangement”). This was also the point we made. Given that the reduction in service was and is a reality, the

GSD should have had the good grace to keep quiet instead of automatically switching to knee-jerk mode and publicly attacking us while at the same time confirming the very criticism that has been made against them. You see Mr Speaker how the present Government are incapable of replying to criticism without insulting their critics, imputing their motives and distorting the basis of the original complaint.

Mr Speaker as shadow spokesperson for Health I am perfectly entitled to air the Opposition's disapproval of the manner in which the Government decided to spend, or in this case, not spend the monies voted in Parliament for health care as it relates to the Speech and Language Therapy Department.

Regardless of their insults, I will continue to monitor how taxpayer's money is spent and to hold the GSD to account. It was therefore simply a false premise for the Government to say in their Press Release that it is contradictory for the Opposition to criticise the Government for a reduction in service and also for how it spends taxpayer's money. It is indeed possible for the GSD to reduce a valid and valuable service and at the same time squander our money, as is patently obvious by the way it spends our money. Could not the Minister have prioritised this matter? Can she not swim in ankle deep water?

More importantly Mr Speaker the GSD Government really needs to prioritise how it spends our money and must put people first – that services for our children should be reduced is just unacceptable and is further unequivocal proof that this Government could not care less how their spending plans affect the most vulnerable and in need.

## Mental Health

I will give Mr Speaker yet another example.

The GSD has accepted that mental health services needs to be further resourced and yet they have not made sufficient investment in the new purpose built facility that is a core plank of their policy. Mr Speaker it is symptomatic of the GSD that whilst projects of dubious benefit at present, like the air terminal and related schemes, should forge ahead, the real needs of the community are put to one side

In their last political manifesto the GSD promised a purpose-built mental health facility, which we, on this side of the House support and have done so since 2003. Indeed, in January of this year, the Hon Lady said that *“By far, the greatest improvement to our mental health services will be the new, purpose built facility at the Aerial Farm Site...”*. We have since discovered that the Government is still considering different sites and that no decision has been made on where to establish the new purpose-built facility.

In addition Mr Speaker, I also make once again this year particular reference to one of the most vulnerable group of persons, which we continue to believe are not being properly cared for by this administration: and this relates to sufferers of dementia and Alzheimers. In particular I refer the Hon Lady once again to two letters written in the Chronicle. In one of the letters it is said that a family gave up trying to receive assistance of Social Services for their relative suffering from Alzheimers and in another there is a grave problem of an elderly lady who is not in receipt of physiotherapy attention. We therefore once again urge the Government to urgently consider the needs of this group of persons and to immediately allocate

funds to either provide a respite home for those in need or to implement the full range of measure for those hospitalised, in addition to introducing mechanisms for early diagnosis so that the provision of resources can be anticipated.

### *The Care Agency*

Mr Speaker, I am afraid that when it comes to Social Services I have to reiterate what I said previously in spite of the fact that the Hon the CM does not like this. As a first step there needs to be urgent allocation of more funds to Social Services, in particular, to employ more qualified social workers and counsellors to assist and expedite the works of the family courts especially in the preparation of welfare reports – we also need to employ more probation officers and community service officers to expedite the business of the criminal courts. Whilst I note that there has been a small increase in the complement of qualified social workers as a result of the implementation of the Children Act, there still need to be far more resourcing of the Care Agency in particular in the recruitment of more qualified staff. Mr Speaker it is not at all an adequate explanation for the Hon the CM to reiterate to me that he has increased spending since 1996 when professionals or service-users can detect the deficiencies of the system today.

And as I said last year Mr Speaker, it is not for those who fall through the cracks of the system to have to seek out assistance, it should be the people entrusted with their care who should do whatever is in their power to provide them with the basic needs of any human being and ensure their dignity.

For instance, in answer to Question 391 of 2009 in respect of the construction of a half-way house for men, the Government had still not even identified a site, this although there is homelessness and an urgent need.

In conclusion Mr Speaker, what we have seen is a Government on its last legs and desperately clutching at straws. Gibraltar needs a Government who prioritises people as well as projects; we need a Government that is run by strong independent members that work together but who can boldly tackle their own areas of responsibility. we need a Government to get on with things properly and expeditiously – what Gibraltar needs is a change in the way that politics is conducted, a coherent forward plan and to take Gibraltar out of stagnation and into a new dynamism.

[Neil Costa MP](#)