

London Assembly (Mayor's Question Time) – 21 November 2012 Transcript: Agenda item 3 –Mayor's Report

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): Can I now ask the Mayor to provide an oral update on matters occurring since the publication of his report?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Thank you very much, Chair. In the interests of speed I am going to confine myself to the one subject the Assembly has actually asked me to talk about, which is the transfer of management of London's fire engines from AssetCo to Babcock. The crucial thing to understand here --

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): I know that there is one question that is on the paper but the purpose of this period is for you to update us since your report and certainly since the cut-off date [for requests to the Mayor's Office for oral updates to the Mayor's Report] of Monday at 9.30am. Are you saying that you have made no announcements since 9.30am that you wish to remark upon so that Members can put questions to you?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Since 9.30am this morning?

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): 9.30am Monday is the usual cut-off date.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well there have been some announcements about London's decision to go for the Paralympic World Championships, we are making progress with our campaign to combat fast food and the profusion of fast food takeaways with an initiative led by Rosie Boycott [Chair, London Food Board] and we have launched National HIV Testing Week. If Members of the Assembly wish to question me about any of those matters I am more than happy to take questions on those but if you do not mind I thought I would push on with the announcement about what we are doing with fire engines. I know that is of great interest because there are several questions about that on the order paper.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): I know that but I am also trying to actually make sure that the Assembly's function goes well in terms of scrutinising you and your office. Point of order, Assembly Member Duvall?

Len Duvall (AM): Sorry, Chair, it is not a point of order but it is a procedural matter. I would not like my time to be taken off the clock but in terms of the events of Monday after 9.30am, that is our deadline for requesting Mayoral updates this morning. It is also in the Mayor's remit to offer up other issues and he has generously said that there some other issues of importance. What he has neglected to say is that, after 9.30am on Monday morning there was a major announcement by the Metropolitan Police Service about major job losses over the coming years that will mean a dramatic change in the way that London is policed. I was surprised by that statement in the sense that, under the new arrangements in the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime, I thought that a statement as dramatic as that would have been made by the Mayor --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, you are quite correct.

Len Duvall (AM): -- and if the Mayor was not there doing the press briefing that was done by the Metropolitan Police Service then the Mayor should be making an announcement this morning. There are questions down on the paper, Chair, but in future, in certain situations, there may not have been any questions and we would not have been able to have an opportunity to ask questions of the Mayor on such an important issue - the important issue - facing Londoners at the moment. We are in crisis in our 999 services over these budgets and I am surprised the Mayor does not think that is worthy of mentioning in his Mayoral update. He should not have to be asked, he should be telling us and being honest with London about what the impact of the policing cuts will be on London.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): With great respect to Len and to you, Chair, obviously there are, as Len himself admits, several questions directly on this matter on the order paper which will give Members a good opportunity to put those questions. On his point about an announcement, as I am going to say to Caroline [Pidgeon] in answer to the first question - or rather pre-empting the whole procedure, I do not mind - the draft consultation budget is going to be set out in the New Year, and --

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): Mayor, no, just a moment --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- until such time as that process gets underway there is no announcement. So with great respect to Len I must reject his characterisation of what has happened this week.

Len Duvall (AM): Chair, may I say, if that is the case why did the Mayor go on TV and say he agreed with the proposals about what the Metropolitan Police Service were doing? I am confused, Londoners will be confused and maybe when he gives clarity later on, he can. He cannot have it both ways. This is an important announcement and if that is the case why did he not just say, "There are proposals, I haven't come to a view on it and we're going to consider it"? I don't see that. The issue I was addressing, Chair, is about the procedure issues. There is a gap in our procedure issues and the Mayor sometimes wants to escape certain questions. He says he does not this morning and no doubt we will be getting some answers and some clarity because there is no explanation behind these proposals about the implications of what they mean for Londoners. We need to have those answers, Londoners need to have those answers.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): OK, I think that is what I was trying to have a conversation with the Mayor about, and if you do not mind, Assembly Member Duvall, we will take this up outside this meeting.

It cannot be right for statements of importance to be made after the 9.30am cut-off and for this Assembly not to be able to hear from the Mayor when they meet the Mayor in that very same week, so it is something that we need to look at. The point has been made and I was not referring to the police, there is a question on the police so we can pick that up, but if there had not been then we have got to find a solution so that it is not a matter of whether the Mayor feels like it. It has got to be that we have the right, as Assembly Members, to raise those questions of importance following the 9.30am cut-off, when we look at the agenda, we see no questions about. We will take this up outside this meeting.

Have you got an extra point to make Assembly Member Cleverly?

James Cleverly (AM): Thank you, Chair. It is one of these things, I know when I was group Leader I discussed this with you although not in this much detail. I think one of the issues that we have is that we

have a written question format specifically to give the Mayor and his team time to prepare detailed answers to questions. That being the case, then having very topical questions goes against the flow of that. I have no problem with our question and answer sessions with the Mayor becoming more topical but I think if that is the direction we want to go in then we have a structural problem by virtue of the deadline. I will be very supportive if we want to review the fundamental nature of how we scrutinise the Mayor through questions, but at the moment I think it is rather unfair to be critical of a system which falls between two places. I would be very keen to engage in that.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): Thank you. I am not being critical. I think in my wording I gave the Mayor an opportunity and in fact under Standing Orders, if the Mayor had spoken about all the statements he has made I do have the authority to extend this period to 20 minutes. It is not that we do not have the facility, it is that we do not have adequate communication between the Assembly and the Mayor's Office and I will deal with that at another time.

Can I ask the Mayor then, is he going to give us any other statements that he has made or is he just going to answer the question that is listed?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well I am grateful to you, Chair. I would just point out to anybody listening that the question of the police does come up several times on the order paper as Len and others have pointed out and there is ample opportunity to us to discuss that. Secondly, Members of the Assembly will recall that the procedure of allowing Members of the Assembly to ask questions for oral report later on was introduced by me. It was not something that was done previously --

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): No, no you are wrong.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- in order to allow myself to be scrutinised more heavily by the Assembly and I am delighted to be able to do so.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): Mr Mayor, I am not going to argue with you but you are wrong. We have always had the opportunity within our standing orders to ask you to give an update.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well let us crack on, all right.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): Thank you.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I apologise then, Chair. It was my impression that I was being extra special, courteous and decent. You have told me I am not.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): No, you are not.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Never mind, I did my best. What we are doing with Babcock and with the fire engines is making sure that we continue to provide the unparalleled service that London offers its citizens in the form of ever-improving fire cover and an ever-diminishing number of deaths from fire. We will continue to make sure that the London Fire Brigade (LFB) does that.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Point of order, Chair, if I may.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): Yes, Assembly Member Dismore.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Standing order 5.4(a), the Mayor was asked to provide an update; I would not call that an update, Chair. He has not explained how we got into this mess in the first place under his watch. He has not explained how the fleet replacement will be done in the future. He has not explained about the re-procurement process. He has not explained about the indemnities given to Babcock. He has not explained about the position of staff either in the UK or in Ireland, both of whom have been in contact with me. He has not explained the position in relation to contractors who have also been in contact with me. This is not an update of what is going on. That was a simple two-line statement which does not give us any real information about this appalling scenario which the Fire Brigade now faces. Will you ask the Mayor, Chair, understanding order 5.4(a) to actually answer the question that has been posted to him and give us a proper update about what has been going on in relation to the transfer of assets from AssetCo/Premier Fire to Babcock so that we can be sure about what is going on rather than the complacent reply he gave us just now and the equally complacent reply he gave us on 19 September.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I have nothing to add.

Jennette Arnold OBE (Chair): You have nothing to add. I think then that the records will show that the Mayor has nothing to add on that.