

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 10 March 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Fiona Bruce; Patricia Gibson; Nigel Mills; Claudia Webbe.

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Grahame Morris made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have five applications for debates in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Grahame Morris, and it is about the economic and social conditions in the former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales. Grahame, over to you, please.

Grahame Morris: Thank you, Mr Chairman, and thanks very much to the Committee for giving me the opportunity to pitch for this debate. This is an issue that I was trying to highlight towards the end of the last Parliament, but we were overtaken by events.

I do think this is an important issue. Essentially, it is about the economic and social conditions in the former coalfields of not just England, but Scotland and Wales. Often overlooked, the coalfields are not one distinctive region; they are obviously spread out. They cover a population of about 5.7 million. If it were a distinctive region, it would be the poorest region in the United Kingdom, and there are particular problems in relation to health inequalities, employment opportunities, the condition of the housing stock, and the educational achievement, attainment and legacy in coalfield areas.

There was an excellent report by Sheffield Hallam University called “The state of the coalfields”. We have had a general election since that report was produced, and a number of the former coalfield areas previously represented by Labour MPs are now represented by Conservative MPs, a number of whom indicated originally that they would support such a debate. I have had to kind of start again, but because of the nature of the geographical areas, I have support from Mark Fletcher from Bolsover, from Richard Holden, one of the new Conservative MPs from Ben Lake from Plaid Cymru, because this affects Wales, from Chris Stephens from the SNP, for Scotland, and from a whole number of Labour MPs—Dan Jarvis, Chris Bryant, Sarah Champion, Stephen Kinnock, Mike Hill, Mary Foy, Kate Osborne and Bridget Phillipson, all of whom represent coalfield areas.

I would like to have the debate to highlight the weaknesses of the local economies in coalfield areas, and the extent of economic and social disadvantage and the incidence of ill health that affects coalfield communities. It is not widely publicised, and the outcome I would like is to highlight the need for a sustained focus from central Government on the weaker coalfield economies and the need for larger-scale investment in transport, health, education and housing to redress the historic imbalance that has created those economic inequalities. That is not just over the past five or 10 years; it is a trend that has been developing for a number of decades.

If possible, I would like to have a minimum of a three-hour debate. I am not insisting on a votable motion, so it could be in Westminster Hall if the Committee had the time to allocate. I will gladly answer any questions the Committee may have.



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Q2 **Fiona Bruce:** I was simply going to commend your application, and just ask for confirmation—which I think you have given us—that you have a spread of colleagues, not just from different parties but from the geographic regions. You have said that.

Grahame Morris: You very kindly offered to consider the application last week. I have been chasing round and trying to get more signatures, but I am confident that there would be considerably more. I think some of the newer MPs are not necessarily aware of the advantages of the Backbench Business Committee and the availability of time to discuss issues of direct concern to them, but I am working on that.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Thank you for supplying these extra names, and I think you supplied an extra name in addition to the names you have given us, which is very helpful. You have said that you would take a general debate as opposed to a votable motion. Would you accept a slot in Westminster Hall?

Grahame Morris: Yes.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** In that case, would 19 March be acceptable to you?

Grahame Morris: What day would that be?

Bob Blackman: Thursday.

Grahame Morris: Yes, that would be perfect.

Chair: Okay. Grahame, thank you very much indeed.

Grahame Morris: You are very kind. Thank you for your kind attention.

Martyn Day made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Before you begin, Martyn, you have said that the title of the debate is “Fuel poverty and energy price caps”, but the reason for the debate is Falkirk’s forgotten villages.

Martyn Day: It stems from that and highlights a much wider issue that would be of interest to Members throughout the wider UK, and not just the Falkirk villages. They are what brought it to my attention and prompted my direct interest in the matter.

Chair: Okay.

Martyn Day: As you know, this stems from a petition and work I have done for a local community group, which has seen people who are off the gas grid, and therefore have electricity only, paying extortionate amounts. There is a much more complex set of factors in the equation than just the energy price caps and tariffs they are charged, although those are major factors in the equation. There is a whole range of issues in the melting pot—such as house insulation and the type of heating system installed—all of which work against the people and contribute significantly to fuel poverty.



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As an example, what I see in my area is people paying between £100 and £150 a week—I have seen the bills, so know these figures are accurate—not even to heat their homes, because their homes are still cold. It is absolutely unbelievable. As I know from inquiries since I came into my office and raised the petition, it is not confined purely to my area. There are people elsewhere in the country in similar situations, so it is something we could get a fair amount of interest in. I had a look on *Hansard* and do not think fuel poverty has been debated since late 2018. It certainly had widespread support and interest at that time, and it is time again to look at that.

I mentioned energy price caps as part of the title for the debate because when I look at Scottish Power—the main but not sole provider in the area—its energy prices have gone up in line with Ofgem’s price caps since the price caps came in, but that means a 20% increase over four years for somebody on a direct debit and a 30% increase for someone with a prepayment meter. That is way in excess of wage inflation, certainly in my area. Combining all those factors together would make a very interesting debate.

Q6 Chair: What we have not got is a list of Members supporting you in terms of having a debate.

Martyn Day: Yes, I must apologise for having omitted that. I filled this in last week in the office in the constituency, so I have not gone round touting for names, but I do not think I will have any problem finding names. If you want me to come back in another week—

Chair: I would not require you to come back. Just submit a list of names and, as soon as we have got that, it would have green for go.

Martyn Day: Right. That’s smashing.

Q7 Claudia Webbe: Fuel poverty is a good topic, so in a sense you should not have difficulties in gathering names. Will you widen the debate beyond Falkirk to bring in the full range of issues? Of course, this also relates to the climate change agenda and so on, getting a sustainable and just transition in a way that people can afford the fuel, rather than, as you have pointed out, paying extortionate prices.

Martyn Day: That is a good point, especially as we are in effect phasing out gas for new homes and for old homes in the future, and there is a huge debate about how we do that sustainably and affordably for everyone.

Q8 Bob Blackman: We would want to see another five or six names to ensure a proper debate. As the Chair said, if you supply that to the Clerks, there is no problem in us agreeing a topic for the debate. You have ticked for a 90-minute debate, which is helpful, and either Westminster Hall or the Chamber. We have the opportunity of a Tuesday morning debate. I am assuming that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be answering.

Martyn Day: I think it would be, yes.



Q9 **Bob Blackman:** That would fit with 31 March, which is the last day before the Easter recess. If you were able to get the names, would you accept that?

Martyn Day: I would be very happy with that, so I will work on getting the names over the next few days and get them to the Clerks.

Q10 **Chair:** A handy stat for you, Martyn: I saw a stat somewhere that about 40% of our emissions are from hard-to-heat homes, and from poor fuel efficiency in people's homes. That might be a handy stat for you to throw into the debate.

Martyn Day: I appreciate that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Debbie Abrahams and **Yasmin Qureshi** made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Up next we have Debbie Abrahams and Yasmin Qureshi. Good afternoon. Your application, Debbie and Yasmin, is on human rights in Kashmir.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you so much, Chair. As the application states, we are trying to have a debate on human rights in Kashmir. You will be aware that since India's partition there has been an Indian-occupied, or Indian-administered, Pakistan-administered and Chinese-administered Kashmir. We would like to focus on the debate between Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Two human rights reports came out from the UN in 2018 and 2019 that really raise concerns. The APPG that I chair also produced a report, again highlighting issues following an inquiry that we undertook on that. Since then, there have been various developments in Kashmir that have not really got either Parliament's attention or the national, or even the international, media's attention.

The developments are of significant concern given the fact that these are two nuclear powers. We would therefore like to request your support for a debate, at your earliest convenience, but given the real urgency around human rights issues, and in terms of the current situation in the region, we think it is a very important debate to have.

Yasmin Qureshi: I obviously want to support what Debbie has said. You may have been following the news recently. Quite a lot of stuff has been happening. We have not had a chance to discuss it properly in the main Chamber. You will have noticed from the application that 33 other MPs have indicated that they will want to speak. It is a big issue for many Members of Parliament in their constituencies, so we think that this is a right and proper application for the main Chamber.

Claudia Webbe: This is not so much a question as a comment. Clearly the application is well supported. As indicated, 33 Members would want to speak. I therefore think that the debate possibly could not happen unless we allocated six hours for it. The case is well made for it to be in the



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Chamber. Those would be my comments.

Chair: Anybody else? In that case, thank you very much indeed. The only other comment that I would make is that the Committee has just got back up and running. We may get some Chamber time on 26 March. We might even get someone the day before, or the day of, the beginning of the Easter recess. We do not know. We will keep in touch with applicants and let them know what time becomes available. Thank you very much indeed.

David Linden and **David Mundell** made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** We have an application from Jim Shannon, who has a season ticket but isn't with us at the moment, and an application from David Linden on the role of nutrition and vaccines and ending preventing deaths.

Bob Blackman: He has arrived just at the right moment.

Chair: I will hand over to the breathless David Linden. Over to you.

David Linden: Thank you very much, Ian, and apologies for the delay. I was stuck in an SI Committee, which bizarrely lasted for 15 minutes, which appears to be a record in this House.

Chair: Before you kick off, I just happened to notice that the Minister has been on his feet now in the main Chamber for just over 15 minutes. If we do get a Division, we would go off to the Division and come straight back.

David Linden: Thank you. I hope we won't delay you for too long.

I am grateful to colleagues from the Conservatives, Labour, the SNP and the Democratic Unionist party for supporting this cross-party application. I thought it would be helpful to give the Committee a brief overview of why we have brought the application forward and to explain the rationale of the ask for scheduling in late March.

The British Government are currently developing an action plan to end preventable deaths by 2030, and I think Members from all parties would certainly support that. I refer Members to my registered interests.

We know that good nutrition as well as vaccinations can play a part in reducing preventable deaths. This year, there are a number of key summits, whether that is the Gavi summit or Nutrition for Growth in Tokyo. The timing around the application is for when the UK Government make their pledge for Nutrition for Growth, and is around the same time as the Gavi pledge as well. That is a really good opportunity for us to focus in on that and hold Ministers to account. I very much hope that the Committee will approve the application for debate later this month.

David Mundell: I am very supportive. Along with David, I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on nutrition for growth. I think the timing is important, to allow a debate to take place before the UK Government have set out their Nutrition for Growth pledges. As well as the Gavi event and Nutrition for Growth itself, there is a major event taking place in late March at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine on global



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health and vaccination. In that context, the debate would be very timely and topical.

Q13 Fiona Bruce: Thank you for this interesting application. You propose a date of Tuesday 31 March. Are you flexible on date? Is there a reason why that specific date is so important?

David Linden: The timing behind the application is to follow on from the Gavi pledge, so there is a flexibility of a few days. I am mindful of the fact that other colleagues come to the Committee probably more regularly than I do looking for debates, so there is a degree of flexibility. We are slightly mindful of political deadlines, but we would always be keen to try to work with the Committee.

Q14 Bob Blackman: You have applied for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday. The other issue is who the answering Department is for that. For the date you have asked for, International Development is not answering. It is an answering Department for the Tuesday beforehand—24 March. If we offered you 24 March, would you be able to take that day?

David Linden: I dare say that is probably something we would be willing to look at. We are keen that the debate takes place.

Q15 Bob Blackman: The problem that the Committee will have is that unless we allocate that debate today, we will lose that debate.

Chair: We will lose that slot.

Bob Blackman: If you are able to take it, that is fine—we will debate whether you should have it afterwards—but we want to make sure that we know that you can take it before we debate that issue.

Chair: That is a Tuesday with the appropriate answering Department.

David Linden: On that basis, we would probably go ahead and take that date and we would do everything we can.

Q16 Patricia Gibson: I notice that you have only asked for 90 minutes. Is that enough?

David Linden: That is a fair point, Patricia. You guys on the Committee are much better versed on this than me.

I have come to the Backbench Business Committee as a supporter and as the primary sponsor of a few debates before, and what I see is a lot of colleagues signing up to debates and then very few of them actually turn up in the end. As part of my role in the Procedure Committee in the last Parliament, and as a Whip, I know that can lead to difficulty in terms of managing the business of the House. I have always tended to be of the view that we should take a shorter amount of time and colleagues just need to sub down their speeches a little bit. I know that that view is probably not shared across the House, but I think it is one that shows a degree of courtesy to other debates.

Q17 Chair: Anything to add, David?



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David Mundell: I think David is right. A shorter debate, but filled with on-the-point contributions, would be the best outcome.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We will discuss your application in the closed session.

We have one more application this afternoon, from Jim Shannon, but unfortunately Jim is not with us, so I now propose that we end our public session. Thank you very much everyone.