

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 27 February 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green, Nigel Mills.

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Representations made

[I](#): Alistair Carmichael.

[II](#): Munira Wilson.

[III](#): Sir Robert Buckland.

Mr Alistair Carmichael made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. The first is in the name of Anthony Mangnall, but it is actually Alistair Carmichael presenting, and it is on the subject of the bicentenary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the RNLI. Alistair, over to you.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman—living proof of the maxim that in politics you don't always have to be good, you just have to be available. Anthony is part of a very important delegation with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, so he has asked me to speak to the application in his stead. He has 18 names on it. Reviewing the list as I prepared to talk to you, I noticed that we have nobody from the Labour party. For what I would hope would be a pretty non-contentious debate, it would be good if we were able to tick that particular box, so I will undertake on his behalf to find another name or two that would cover that.

As I say, I don't anticipate that this would be a particularly contentious debate. We are seeking 90 minutes. If it were possible to have it in the Chamber, that would be delightful, but I am pretty sure it would sit well in Westminster Hall as well. I think, though, that there is a political purpose to this. First of all, the RNLI is a massive voluntary organisation that provides a very important public service for those of us who live in island and coastal communities. The support goes right across the board. I was for three years a member of the RNLI national council, and I remember the fundraising department telling me that the biggest contributing community per head in the country was Manchester. It is an organisation that is respected and has reach across the whole country.

However, there are those of us who represent seats where there have been moments of genuine catastrophe. The Longhope lifeboat disaster was back in the 1960s, but it is still spoken about very much in Orkney. I remember as a secondary school child hearing about the Penlee lifeboat disaster from Mousehole in Cornwall. This would be a good way for the House to remind these communities that the contribution that many people have made down the years—200 years, now—is still remembered and appreciated.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, colleagues?

Q2 Kevin Foster: Mr Carmichael, you have already covered the first question that I was going to ask. While there are probably enough Opposition names—there are a number of names from the Opposition Benches—it would obviously be helpful if there were a couple of Labour ones. I represent a coastal community, where the lifeboat very much operates.

Mr Carmichael: You will be very welcome.

Kevin Foster: What are your thoughts on what you are looking to get out of the debate? Apart from paying tribute, are there any particular asks you will be making? And do you have thoughts on what Department you would



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be looking to get a response from?

Mr Carmichael: I would think that the obvious Department would be the Department for Transport, because they are the managing Department for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, and the working between the RNLI and the MCA is pretty close and pretty obvious. If you were to take it beyond that, it would be into the volunteering aspects, perhaps, which would be fruitful. There is bound to be some taxation aspect. But I think it would sit most appropriately with the DfT.

Q3 **Chair:** I am just perusing the list, Alistair. I think it is safe to say that we could add your name to it.

Mr Carmichael: Well, that might be helpful! And probably Jim Shannon's too.

Kevin Foster: Yes, definitely.

Mr Carmichael: Some things are just too obvious to state.

Chair: Jim has the same motto as the Royal Engineers: "Ubique."

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Are there any special timing arrangements for this debate?

Mr Carmichael: I think the bicentenary is coming up pretty soon. You can tell from the fact that I am looking at a single WhatsApp message here that Mr Mangnall didn't see fit to put too much information my way before he settled himself down in business class, but I think that is the case.

Patricia Gibson: We have 4 March on the application.

Chair: Right, okay.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned that a Westminster Hall debate could be possible. We could put it on either a Tuesday or a Thursday, but if it is a Tuesday we will have to make sure it is the right answering Department.

Mr Carmichael: That is where I think there could be a bit of flex, because there are aspects, as I touched on, that could cover different Departments. If we were able to have it on a Tuesday, I think it would give a better chance of a healthier attendance. If you are going to have these hearts-and-flowers moments, it is helpful if there is a good audience there to participate.

Chair: Any further questions, colleagues? In that case, thank you very much indeed, Alistair.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you very much. We shall await the word.

Munira Wilson made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome, Munira. Your application is on the subject of tutoring provision.

Munira Wilson: That's right. Thank you very much for this opportunity. My application is strongly supported by the Conservative Chair of the Education Committee, Robin Walker. Unfortunately, he couldn't be here to join me in support today, but he would like me to stress how supportive he is. I also have the support of Dame Margaret Hodge, as well as other Back-Bench Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs.

I am sure you are aware that tutoring has been the centrepiece of the Government's response to the pandemic in terms of helping children to catch up with the effects of missed education. Since the pandemic, the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has really widened. Even last week, the Sutton Trust was reporting on how drastically that gap has widened once again.

Although it is fair to say the national tutoring programme was beset with problems in terms of its implementation and roll-out, and that is widely documented and there were debates about it in Parliament at the time, ultimately, once some of those issues were sorted, all of the evidence shows—the Education Endowment Foundation has done quite a lot of work in this space—that it has had a massive impact for those children and young people who benefited from tutoring, and that small-group and one-to-one tutoring, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, can really help close the gap. There is an average impact of four months' additional progress over the course of the year, and there will be 62,000 additional pass grades in GCSE maths and English achieved due to Government-funded tutoring in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years.

We have two tutoring funds. There is the national tutoring programme and the 16-to-19 tuition fund, both of which are due to end at the end of this academic year. At the moment, there is no sign of that being extended—unless the Chancellor decides to make it one of his rabbits out of a hat next week, but at the moment I am not overly optimistic about that.

I have done visits personally, and I know that other Members from across the House and across the country have done visits with tutoring charities such as Get Further and Action Tutoring to see tutoring in action. We know from talking to those staff that, given the pressures on school and college budgets, those interventions will not be able to continue next academic year, and schools and colleges will need reassurance soon if they are to be able to continue that provision.

I will make a couple of final points. Research and analysis shows that, as well as helping with academic attainment, the economic benefits of tutoring are significant. For every £1 spent on tuition, £6.58 is generated in economic returns. Other research has shown that tutoring helps improve the confidence of children and young people, and when pupil absence rates from school are at an all-time high, providing an additional person for a young person to engage with in their education can be really beneficial.



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I hope that the Committee will see the importance of this topic for the benefit of children in England—because that is where this applies—and will grant us perhaps a 90-minute debate to discuss it.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, colleagues?

- Q7 **Bob Blackman:** One thing I will mention gently is that we have estimates debates coming up. Given that in your plea, effectively, you are asking for more money to be spent on this area, it might lend itself to an estimates debate application. We are not considering those today, but it would go in the queue. You might think of that.

Chair: I know that Robin Walker is considering putting in an application from the Education Committee, but not on this subject.

Munira Wilson: Yes, I think he is putting in an application on SEND, because he asked me to sign that, and I did. But if you think that it is worth putting in an application on this, then I am happy to. I don't know what the deadline is.

Chair: I think the deadline is this Friday.

Bob Blackman: It is unlikely that the Committee is going to allow two debates on education, given that we are only likely to get one day of estimates debates.

- Q8 **Chair:** Anyone else? And it's nailed on for the Department for Education.

Munira Wilson: Yes.

Chair: Okay. That's great, Munira—much appreciated. Thank you very much for the application.

Sir Robert Buckland made representations.

- Q9 **Chair:** Next up we have Sir Robert Buckland. Welcome, Sir Robert.

Sir Robert Buckland: Thank you, Mr Mearns. It is good to see you.

Chair: Your application is on the independent review of autism employment.

Sir Robert Buckland: That's right. It is an independent review that I launched in April last year, working with the DWP, and will be published tomorrow. It has a list of 19 recommendations about how obstacles to employment for autistic people can be removed. The statistics are alarming: under three in 10 autistic adults have a job. That is way below the disability average, and it is something I think we need action on.

I had the privilege, I think, of being the first Back Bencher to have a debate in the Chamber on autism—it was a Backbench debate back in 2012, when I was chair of the all-party group. I am back as chair of the all-party group, and I know that there is considerable interest across the House in these issues, bearing in mind that they affect constituents across the country.



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I enjoy the support of 12 colleagues from various parties in Parliament who have signed the letter of application, which I know you have. The report is a weighty document, coming in at about 50 pages—plenty for us to debate and discuss. By the time I envisage a debate being held, colleagues will have had a chance to digest it, and I am sure that they would want to share a range of issues and experiences.

I am asking, ideally, for a debate on the Floor of the House. I think this could command enough support for that time to be merited. I would welcome the opportunity to promote work that I think is needed and proposals that will require further implementation but on which the Government need to be held to account.

Chair: Thank you very much.

- Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Sir Robert, you say that the report that is going to be issued is a weighty document, and it will presumably contain recommendations to Government. I wonder if you would want to frame those recommendations in a motion that the House could consider.

Sir Robert Buckland: That's interesting. I had thought, perhaps, that we would consider the review. The recommendations indeed relate to Government, but they also relate to wider business and industry. It is very much an outward-facing review. I have been working with Autistica, the leading research charity in the UK. They have produced an index that employers can use. I would be happy to consider the wording of any potential motion.

- Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Just off the top of my head, "That this House has considered" whatever the title of the report is "and urges the Government and other employers to adopt the recommendations."

Sir Robert Buckland: That seems to be a fair encapsulation of what the report is seeking to do. I would be happy to give it a little bit of edge, and then the Minister can be held fully to account.

- Q12 **Chair:** By convention, we give precedence to votable motions for Chamber time. The only thing I would say, Robert, is that normally for a Chamber debate, which on paper is meant to be three hours—they never end up being that long because of other Government business—we would be looking for a minimum of 15 signatures. If you could get a few more signatures, that would be really useful.

Sir Robert Buckland: Very good.

- Q13 **Chair:** I would also counsel that we don't have any Chamber time before the Easter recess that we that we currently know of. It may well be that the Leader of the House, in a meeting with me tomorrow, might pull a rabbit out of the hat and suggest that we might get some more time before Easter. That is a possibility, but it is certainly not on the cards at the moment.



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Sir Robert Buckland: I get that. While the launch is tomorrow, this isn't absolutely time-sensitive in terms of the next month. I would be content to wait until April for it. I will digest your words and act accordingly.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes our applications for this afternoon.