



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 3 November 2015

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 3 November 2015.

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair), Bob Blackman, Mr Peter Bone, Mr Philip Hollobone, Gavin Newlands, Mr David Nuttall and Jess Phillips.

Mr David Burrowes and Sir David Amess; Mr John Baron, David Tredinnick and Jo Churchill; Dr Phillip Lee, Stephen Phillips, Dr Lisa Cameron and Seema Kennedy made representations.

Questions 1-18

Mr David Burrowes and Sir David Amess made representations.

Q1 Chair: Order. We have a number of applications. The first comes from Mr David Burrowes, Dr Matthew Offord and Sir Alan Meale, regarding Famagusta. Over to you, David.

Mr Burrowes: Thank you for the opportunity to apply for a debate on the return of Famagusta to its lawful inhabitants. Although the Chair has an interest and understanding of Cyprus, this may be seen as a niche subject that should be in the backwaters of a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate. We have been there and done that.

You might be asking why this should come before the Backbench Business Committee when it is asking for a substantive motion. You might also be asking, why now? We could have made the case over the 41 years of this divided, occupied island. Why now is because in a response to me on 20 October by the Foreign Secretary, the case was made—*(Interruption.)* Thank you for joining me in supporting the application, Sir David.

The Foreign Secretary made the point that now is a particular time when a settlement to the Cyprus problem is possible. He said that many people think that now we have a chance “the like of which we have not seen for decades”. I believe that it is important for Parliament to seize the debate, not least for Back Benchers, given that Britain is a guarantor power.

Cyprus is not just any small island in the Mediterranean. We have a particular historic and legal responsibility, as well as being a member of the European Union. That is a relevant point to why

I want a substantive motion. Not only is this a crucial time, and it is not just me saying this—I have sounded off about Cyprus for many years—50,000 people signed a petition calling for this motion to be debated and it was presented to the Prime Minister. Fifty thousand people registered their public interest in the issue, saying that it should demand parliamentary attention.

There is cross-party support for the motion, but why should there be a substantive motion in the Chamber? We had a one-and-a-half-hour debate in Westminster Hall last year, which was similar to previous debates over the years, and it received wide cross-party support. The debate could be held in that manner, but the reason now is to move it forward to a substantive motion so that we not only debate the issue, but we recognise particularly that this Parliament in Britain, with its responsibilities to Cyprus, has a responsibility to put down a motion urging particular action.

I am focusing particularly on this motion because the European Parliament discussed one and passed a resolution similar to that before the Committee. If it can do that, why cannot our Parliament do it, particularly as we have a longer historical and indeed far greater legal responsibility to Cyprus? At this time of all times, when everyone is saying we have a greater chance than in previous decades to bring about a solution, particularly in relation to Famagusta, which is subject to a UN resolution and is an example of the divided island, it would create an opportunity for a sea change in the prospect for a settlement.

The motion is effectively a repetition of what the European Parliament discussed and we should not leave it to the European Parliament to put down these resolutions. We should not leave ourselves with general debates on the issue. We should discuss a substantive motion that will have a particular effect at this particular time.

Q2 Chair: Sir David, would you like to add anything?

Sir David Amess: It is a weird feeling sitting here, if I dare say so. I simply agree with everything my colleague has said.

Q3 Bob Blackman: Sir David does not even appear on the application. He must be a late entry. There seem to be only three names at the moment. How many speakers do you have lined up and can you supply us with those names because the application is for a 90-minute debate?

Mr Burrowes: I can supply a list of eight or 10 names of those who would be able to take part in a 90-minute debate.

Q4 Chair: Would they be cross-party?

Mr Burrowes: Yes, very much so. They would come from the all-party group, which is made up of 20 names. To be realistic about the expectation of people attending debates, I would say that we could get 10 names.

Q5 Chair: So, in essence and to dot the i's and cross the t's, perhaps you would submit the names.

Mr Burrowes: I will do that.

Q6 Mr Bone: I am wondering whether this is Government policy already.

Mr Burrowes: The Prime Minister responded to the petition saying that the Government noted the concern about the breach of UN resolutions, but they have not taken the steps that would be within the resolution, not the specifics of the resolution.

Q7 Mr Bone: You want the House to express a view.

Mr Burrowes: To take it a stage further. At present, they are saying we should wait for a settlement and let the Cypriots get on with it.

Q8 Mr Nuttall: You mentioned that you had had a debate in Westminster Hall in the previous Parliament.

Mr Burrowes: Yes.

Mr Nuttall: How long was that debate and how much interest was there? Do you recall whether everyone attended?

Mr Burrowes: It was a 90-minute debate and nine Members spoke.

Mr Nuttall: Were any Members there who sought to speak but could not get in because there was not enough time?

Mr Burrowes: Everyone managed to get in. Some spoke for longer than others. I think I spoke for longer.

Sir David Amess: We weren't struggling to make up the numbers. We fully occupied the time and did not run out of speakers.

Q9 Chair: Thank you. It is just that an application for 90 minutes in the Chamber is rather a hybrid. We normally tend to deal with three-hour debates or even six-hour debates in the Chamber. Ninety minutes is what we tend to preserve for Westminster Hall.

Mr Burrowes: It is an unusual application. I recognise that. I am not being greedy and saying that three hours would occupy 20 or so speakers. I know your Committee wants to look not just at general debates but at specific substantive motions and I think that should happen even if the issue may not occupy the whole House's attention. It is enough that it is a matter for this Parliament.

Q10 Chair: I think the difficulty for us is that we would need to make a sort of debate share/match with another subject to fill the time. If the only allocation that you could get was three hours, do you think you could fill a three-hour debate? That is the crucial question.

Mr Burrowes: Well, yes, that is a question that I have to be realistic about. There are some question marks about getting 20 people to speak—

Bob Blackman: Or 50.

Mr Burrowes: Or indeed 50, yes. I know there is a minimum of 20. So there would be a doubt about that.

Q11 Mr Bone: We are exploring the possibility that if Government business collapses on any particular day early, we would put on a debate. And this might be that sort of issue. We haven't quite reached that point, but it would seem that might work.

Mr Burrowes: Yes. Okay.

Q12 Chair: And from your perspective, David, is there any particular time sensitivity? Do you want it done by a particular date, or would you be happy for it to be added to a list to be considered?

Mr Burrowes: No, there's not time sensitivity. People who have been around for a while know that the Cyprus problem has gone on for a while. It would be lovely if it was going to be sorted in a month, but I think we've got a few months to deal with.

Chair: So it wouldn't be crucial for you if it had to be over by Christmas, as it were?

Mr Burrowes: It wouldn't be crucial. I think we are in a particular time where we want to try to encourage momentum in the process.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Sir David Amess: Chairman, just before we leave, forgive me for indulging myself but there is a point of information to check. Will I have to make separate representations about the Christmas Adjournment debate, or is it going to be an internal matter?

Chair: I think a suggestion coming from a Back-Bench Member might be opportune.

Mr Burrowes: There's an edited version of the substantive motion that I can just pass to the Clerk.

John Baron, David Tredinnick and Jo Churchill made representations.

Q13 Chair: I notice, by the way, that we have got Sharon Hodgson and Nic Dakin, who are both shadow Ministers, and so, to a large extent, they are disallowed.

Mr Baron: Would you repeat that?

Chair: As part of the list, there are Sharon Hodgson and Nic Dakin, who are now both shadow Ministers, and therefore not Back-Benchers, as it were, in terms of making applications to this Committee.

Mr Baron: Okay. Well, that is probably my fault, more than anybody else's.

Chair: Okay. Well, you know, they're keen.

Mr Baron: First of all, thank you for seeing us and I thank those who are with me—Jo and David—for joining us today. Very briefly, we know the scale of the cancer issue in front of us; 3 million people will be living with cancer by the end of this Parliament. Some estimates suggest that one in two people will be diagnosed with cancer during the course of their lifetime.

A cancer strategy was last published back in 2010, which set the priorities for the last Parliament, obviously. In July, the independent cancer taskforce established by NHS England published its recommendations for the next cancer strategy for England. It will obviously replace the last one.

The purpose of the debate would be to allow the wider cancer community—you will note, Chairman, that this application has been put in on behalf of all the various all-party groups on cancer and not just the one that I am chair of, which is the all-party group on cancer—to question the Government as to their intentions regarding this latest cancer strategy. That is because we have had a lot of warm words, which are fine, but we also want to see action with regard to implementing this cancer strategy. At the moment, we have not had anything detailed to us—when I say “we”, I am talking here as part of the wider cancer community—as to how, by what means and by what timetable the Government will actually implement the cancer strategy.

I will add—very briefly and then I will keep quiet—that our last cancer debate on the Floor of the House of Commons was very well attended, as you may remember; we ran out of time. There would be no shortage of speakers in this debate. I ask—I think we have asked already—for at least a half-day debate on the Floor of the House and we could very easily fill a full day, even on a Thursday one-line Whip; I have no doubt about that. All the cancer charities would be looking in on this debate as a means of trying to get answers from the Government on what is a very important subject to many people.

David Tredinnick: I would support everything that John is saying, not least as a member of the Health Committee for the whole of the last Parliament. Cancer permeated all our inquiries in one way or another. John mentioned the cancer strategy and the last debate, which was well attended. The critical point is that the last debate was before the new cancer strategy was published, and it is that strategy that we have to debate. In my view, there are very pertinent reasons for doing this now. We are lagging behind our European partners and other parts of the world. We do not really take notice of what is happening in other parts of the world. The all-party group for integrated healthcare, which I chair, has looked at some of those aspects, and I certainly think that now is the time for us to look at the issue again.

Jo Churchill: I would agree with what has gone before, but I will also try to add weight to it. We have 200 different cancers in this country. In this Parliament, we hear representations about many of them, which is why the debate is coming forward.

We lag behind other countries. When I spoke as a campaigner in 2010, we were only marginally ahead of Bulgaria, and Sweden was way out in front. Guess where we are now? We are in exactly the same place. It is pertinent and timely that we have the debate. Cancer should be looked at as an exemplar. I am sure all of us have had full postbags, particularly on issues around the cancer drug funds. We need some answers, particularly on timescales. We need to know what the Government will do. If we find an exemplar through the cancer strategy, it is highly likely that beneficial methods around multidisciplinary teams and other such things will be rolled out. As John said, it is one in two. I have had two goes at it. Many in this room have probably had a go at it. Cancer affects all of us, and that is why it is right that we debate it.

Mr Baron: May I add a further point? I thank David and Jo for their comments, and I see others in the room, so thank you very much. The beauty of this debate, I hope, would be that the other

chairs of the various cancer groups would be able to make their own contributions. Every specific cancer has a particular angle. One is not pretending to represent them all or to espouse all their causes in this brief moment, but there are common things that bind us, such as early detection. In Sweden, the one-year survival rates are 82%. That is survival one year on from diagnosis. In this country, those rates are below 70%. That does not sound a big difference, but that 10%, 11% or 12% represents tens of thousands of lives a year that are lost because we are not matching the best in Europe when it comes to early diagnosis.

Q14 Mr Hollobone: If you had something like, “This House calls upon Her Majesty’s Government on 31 March 2016 to publish a detailed action plan to implement the new cancer strategy”, the Chamber would be far fuller than if you just had a general debate on cancer for three hours. That would also enhance your chances of being awarded Chamber time. At the moment, you are asking for a general debate. We do not have a lot of Chamber time to grant applicants. If you keep it as a general debate, you are likely to end up in Westminster Hall.

Mr Baron: Okay. I think you have just written the motion, so well done.

Q15 Bob Blackman: Of course, this Committee in the last Parliament asked you to come together as a set of people, instead of what we did get, which was different applications from different cancer groups to have a debate. I echo what Philip said about having a debatable motion and having an ask of Government, because otherwise we will get lots of different people talking about the treatment and diagnosis of particular cancers when we want a comprehensive strategy.

Mr Baron: Thank you both for those points; they are absolutely valid. I would be happy to put that on the motion. Take it as read that that is what we will put if we are granted time on the Floor of the House.

Dr Phillip Lee, Stephen Phillips, Dr Lisa Cameron and Seema Kennedy made representations.

Dr Lee: Thank you for accepting my application to put to you the case for a debate on the Middle East. I have had a positive response in communications with parliamentarians, both formally in terms of those who have put their names to it—I think there are around 40—and also in the many informal communications on the strength of the case for the debate, and it is very much cross-party.

I think it should be a general debate because of the number of issues that will come under the umbrella of quite a broad title. It is a broad title because there are so many issues. Allow me to outline some of them: the spread of ISIL, Daesh, ISIS, or whatever you want to call it; the ongoing Israel-Palestine tensions; the recent nuclear deal with Iran; Britain’s relationship with the gulf states—this past weekend, they trailed the new UK gulf strategy at the IISS conference in Bahrain; regional stability in the context of an apparent rise in sectarianism; civil war in Syria and Yemen; and a migrant crisis affecting Europe, currently emanating primarily from the civil war in Syria. I could go on, because there are other issues.

Parliamentarians find it difficult to express their views on these issues, because we all know that there isn’t enough time to discuss them on the Floor of the House. In fact, I could put a case for a

debate of at least three hours on each of the issues I just listed. In today's newspapers alone, the front pages are all about whether there will be a vote on the Floor of the House on expanding British operations against ISIS into Syria. At the moment, the media are trying to second-guess Parliament's view and basing that on votes that took place historically and are not necessarily consistent with what would be asked of us if such a vote took place in future.

A large number of colleagues would want to speak. I wanted to speak in the debate when there was an emergency recall of Parliament in 2013. I flew all the way back, only not to get the chance to speak. I was bobbing up and down for six hours. There is always great demand to speak in debates on these issues. In view of current events, it would be significant, which is why I am requesting a six-hour debate.

Stephen Phillips: I do not have much to add. Phillip makes a fantastic case for not just what the Committee normally grants—a three-hour debate—but a six-hour debate. Strange as it may seem, I am old enough to remember that we used to have general debates on the Middle East that lasted an entire day; indeed, I made my maiden speech in such a debate. They were salutary. They were opportunities for Members to express their opinions, on behalf of their constituents, on an area of foreign policy that is critical for this country and that we no longer have the opportunity to debate properly, for the reasons Phillip outlined. In those circumstances, it seems to me that, although this is an unusual application, the Committee should give serious consideration to acceding to it. It is a very important application.

Dr Cameron: I agree with everything that colleagues have said. It is very much a cross-party application. I am here as testimony to that. It is a topical issue, not only for Parliament. It is not just something that we all want to discuss, but that the British public want to see discussed. They want to see constructiveness in our approach and cohesiveness across Middle East policy. That is why it is extremely important that it is afforded this time and that Back Benchers are given the opportunity to voice their views and concerns on the range of issues that have been mentioned.

Seema Kennedy: I echo my colleagues' sentiments. What happens on the streets of Cairo and Riyadh directly affects our constituents through their jobs, through investment, through defence of the realm and through terrorism. It is a gigantic region with a lot of issues. I think our constituents want to know the views of their representatives, not just those of the Government. I ask the Committee's indulgence for a six-hour debate.

Q16 Mr Bone: I think you make a very good case. This is clearly an important issue, but, to be fair, the Government do make regular statements, following which Members get to ask questions. Dr Lee, you mentioned the will of the House expressing a view. If you had a substantive motion, such as "That this House supports bombing in Syria", you would actually set the agenda, people would be listening to your debate and the will of the House would be expressed. It would not necessarily bind the Government—that is open to interpretation—but it would have far more effect than a general debate.

Dr Lee: I would totally agree, but you could also have a substantive motion on every single one of the subjects that I have listed. Indeed, there may be a case to come back and make a pitch for each of the subjects to have a substantive motion, but I am realistic about the amount of time available on the Floor of the House. Timing is an issue here. I have no inside knowledge as to whether this vote will be pushed or not—there are conflicting reports today—but a general debate allowing people to express views on such issues is a starting point. I think there should be a vote going forward, because there is a persuasive argument to be made that there should be a substantive motion for each of them.

Indeed, the Government should make the time for that. It is not just this Committee that should make the time for it.

Q17 Mr Hollobone: I would support Mr Bone in his comments. I appreciate that you are asking for a full day's debate for very commendable reasons, but if we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are not going to—I know that you are not setting out to—solve the problems of the Middle East in one six-hour sitting. However, were you to table a motion to test the opinion of the House on something topical, such as air strikes in Syria, you would capture the attention of the nation and of the Government, who might actually be interested in the outcome of such a vote. I just want to leave that for you to—

Dr Lee: I think Stephen would like to respond.

Stephen Phillips: I think that Mr Hollobone's point is a very valid one, but it is valid in relation to one area of the discussion that this debate seeks to embrace. Those who were at Prime Minister's questions last week know that I asked about Yemen. Yemen is a completely forgotten conflict, in which over half a million children are facing death from starvation, and yet the House knows nothing about it and it is not in the media. If a motion comes before the House that is solely related to air strikes on ISIS in Syria as well as in Iraq, there is no opportunity, really, to address that issue, just as there is no opportunity to address the issue of Iran's nuclear programme or the rapprochement between Iran and the west over the past year and a half. It is for that reason that I would respectfully say to the Committee that this is, as I said on the last occasion that I was successful, one of those times when a general debate is actually the right way forward.

Q18 Mr Hollobone: I know that's your opinion and that's the basis of your application; I am just suggesting that it actually might be—I don't know—that you had more chance of success were you to have a substantive motion, which could be "That this House urges Her Majesty's Government to implement an immediate emergency aid programme to relieve the suffering in Yemen." I am just putting it to you that there may be better ways of capturing the attention of Members and the nation than a general debate.

The other thing that I would say is that I know that you are stressing that this is a cross-party application, but looking at your list of supporters, which is extremely distinguished, I count 31 Conservatives and six from other parties. That doesn't suggest to me the sort of balance of opinion that we normally accept on the Committee.

Dr Lee: In answer to the final point, as I said, I have had informal discussions with people who haven't added their name and I maybe wish that they had been on the declaration of interest.

The one final thing that I would say about requesting a general debate is that my own personal frustration is that all of the things that I listed here are related to each other. The impact of the Sunni-Shi'a schism that is taking place affects each individual country throughout the region. The argument around Israel and Palestine, whichever side you sit on, has an impact on the region. This is an attempt for us to discuss all of these issues in the context of a regional approach. If you went down the path at the outset of just having substantive motions on individual issues, we would miss the opportunity, as a House, to discuss the merits of a more coherent strategy towards the region as a whole.

Seema Kennedy: I am not an expert on how to frame things on the Order Paper, but it has been expressed to me that Members and the wider public don't understand what our strategy is in the Middle East—if we have one—and of course there are so many interlocking issues. If we were to have

a general debate with a motion, we might elicit some further information about what the Government's strategy is.

Chair: Thank you. You have made a compelling case.

We have one other application that is in writing and there is nobody here to support it, so I will draw the public sitting to a close.