

Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 8 December 2015

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 8 November 2015.

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

Kevin Barron; Tim Loughton and Liz Saville Roberts made representations.

Questions 1-14

Kevin Barron made representations.

Q1 Chair: We are a couple of minutes early but we can begin. Thank you for attending this afternoon. We have an application from Mr Kevin Barron MP. Sorry, the right honourable—and it is Sir, isn't it?

Kevin Barron: Yes, it is. It is, Mr Mearns.

Chair: I am terribly sorry; my agenda is misinforming me.

Kevin Barron: I don't use it very often in here—it's normally just Kevin.

Chair: Anyway, Kevin, it's lovely to have you here, with an application about the new tobacco control strategy. Over to you.

Kevin Barron: Thank you, I will be quite brief. I think you read the application; I am not going to talk beyond that, quite frankly. The current tobacco control plan for England, "Healthy Lives, Healthy People", runs out at the end of this month. It is the Government's intention to bring in a new tobacco control strategy in the new year but we are not sure about that at this stage. I am sure that you all are aware, as elected Members, that tobacco control measures receive wide support in this House and have done for a considerable number of years. Indeed, the previous Government passed some of the last legislation that we are likely to pass, as legislators, which was around the issue of standardised packaging and about smoking with children in cars.

This bid is hopefully to get the Department of Health to say how it is going to shape the new tobacco policy and what we are likely to see in the new year. It is not just about having a three-hour debate; we all recognise that somewhere in the region of 100,000 of our fellow citizens in this country annually still die prematurely from using tobacco products. If that was in any other sphere of life we would never leave Parliament until we had sorted it out. I am not saying we are going to sort it out with any new legislation, that is not the proposal, but we

hope to see how the Government are going to approach things in relation to smoking cessation.

The October 2014 NHS England “Five Year Forward View” rightly pointed out that, “the future health of millions of children, the sustainability of the NHS, and the economic prosperity of Britain all now depend on a radical upgrade in prevention and public health.” It is my view that prevention should be very high on our agenda at the moment. In December 2014 the Chancellor stated: “Smoking imposes costs on society and it is fair to ask tobacco manufacturers and importers to make a greater contribution”. A tobacco levy was initially included in the July Budget, but in the emergency Budget on 4 June this year the Chancellor announced a reduction of £200 million from the 2015-16 grant for local authorities, which we all know now have the responsibility for public health measures. Of course, smoking cessation is one of the best investments we can make: if we can get people off tobacco it increases quality of life as well as increasing lifespans.

It is about these cuts that I and other Members are concerned. You will have seen the cross-party Members who have signed the letter. What we want to do, under the circumstances, is to have a debate in the main Chamber. I am sure the Department of Health will come to that debate and we want to talk about the further funding of tobacco control policy and measures in the UK now to try to stop this massive premature death from the use of tobacco. I am very happy to answer any questions.

Q2 Gavin Newlands: It strikes me that this debate might be better with a motion in the Chamber calling on the Government to reverse the cuts to the public health initiative, rather than a general debate. That might be a better debate.

Kevin Barron: Well, I have been involved in anti-tobacco for quite a long time now. From time to time I have done things against my own Government, tabling amendments to legislation. By and large, we have had a lot of consensus in the House—I mentioned standardised packaging and smoking in cars. We have been building consensus over a couple of decades about the threat to public health that smoking is. While my instinct is, yes, that is what we do, we put motions down and have a go at one another, I think that, on this policy, we have gone beyond that. All Governments and all parties have gone beyond that, in my view, and therefore the debate we seek would ask for a definition of policy, as opposed to being a criticism. But, quite clearly, there are issues around the cuts and how they may impact public health measures.

There may be other issues we want to bring up, which have come on the scene in recent months, about the use of vaping as opposed to using tobacco. We have hardly touched on that at the moment, but as a form of smoking cessation, more than 2.7 million people are voluntarily going on to vaping at the moment and there is legislation coming through from Europe. I don’t particularly touch on it, but we have legislation coming through next year that is worth mentioning. So this debate would have its full three hours and it would be really concentrated on increasing public health measures. Keep your instincts—and I will keep mine—but I have approached these issues from a different point of view over the years.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. Your ordeal is over.

Mr Bone: You can have a cigarette.

Kevin Barron: No, vaping, Peter.

Chair: I think, Sir Kevin, we have got the figure down to less than 90,000 a year, so the 100,000 figure is just a bit too high, but it is still a Wembley stadium full.

Kevin Barron: And if it was happening in a work situation or a war situation, we would be doing something about it.

Chair: Absolutely. Thank you very much. Next applicant?

Tim Loughton and Liz Saville Roberts made representations.

Tim Loughton: I am here with Liz Saville Roberts showing cross-party support. In fact, 15 people put their names to the application across virtually all the parties. I am here to ask for a three-hour debate on the 1001 critical days from conception to age 2. It is quite time-sensitive, because we are relaunching the “1001 Critical Days” manifesto—hot off the press today—next Monday. There will be 200-odd people, lots of high-ranking academics, psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians, and politicians at the relaunch, which is likely to attract quite a lot of press coverage as well.

The 1001 Critical Days manifesto was originally produced about two years ago, led by Andrea Leadsom who set up the all-party group for the first 1001 critical days, which I now chair. It found its way into various manifestos ahead of the election. The aim now is to relaunch it with a lot of additional new members and others supporting it and taking it to the next level. For that reason, it would be very helpful to have the platform of a debate in the main Chamber to be able to give that extra impetus.

It has huge support across the whole House. Eight different parties have now put their names to it. The main eight sponsors, apart from Liz and myself, are Mark Durkan from the SDLP; Frank Field from Labour; Norman Lamb from the Liberal Democrats; Caroline Lucas from the Greens; Jim Shannon from the DUP; and Philippa Whitford from the SNP. We haven’t quite strayed into UKIP territory yet, but you never know. This is a pretty broad spectrum of people.

The manifesto is all about promoting attachment—those crucial first couple of years from conception to age two. It says that we should have a change in the mindset—both of central Government policy and in local deliverers through health visitors, children centres and all sorts of early years care in the National Health Service—to have a much more joined-up approach.

The all-party group produced a report back in February entitled “Building Great Britons”, which was a very good report, having spent some six months with some pretty high-level witnesses giving us research. The bottom line from that report is that not doing this properly is costing the country just over £23 billion a year. The cost of getting perinatal mental health wrong is £8.1 billion and the cost of child neglect, which often results from that, is over £15 billion, according to various studies.

The manifesto and the whole ethos behind it is about a pre-troubled families programme. It is published on the back of the Troubled Families Programme, which I think most people would agree has been a success in trying to address the symptoms of dysfunctional families. The manifesto is about trying to intervene early, before those troubled families are born, effectively, as the problems often go from one generation to another.

The debate will be an opportunity for people from different Departments to contribute, although it will be led by Health, perhaps, and DFE, because we are trying to promote an inter-Departmental cross-cutting strategy. The manifesto is also backed by all the major children’s charities. When it comes out, you will see in the back of our manifesto the NSPCC, Barnardo’s, the NCT, Bliss and all the major Royal Colleges—from paediatrics, obstetricians and gynaecologists to the Royal College of Midwives and so on—so it is very widely supported and it is important that we have a good platform in the House. If it can be tied in as close as is possible to next Monday’s reception and the official relaunch, we will get an even bigger bang for our buck.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q3 Mr Hollobone: What do you want the Government to do?

Tim Loughton: Well, we want the Government effectively to adopt the 1,001 critical days as their policy strategy. That will mean that, through linking up the local CCGs, other NHS deliverers, local authorities, children's centres and others, every local area will need to have a policy to deliver 1,001 days strategies.

Q4 Mr Hollobone: Why don't you ask the Government to do that in a motion?

Tim Loughton: Rather than just acknowledging this debate?

Q5 Mr Hollobone: "That this House calls on Her Majesty's Government to adopt the proposals contained in the 1,001 days report."

Tim Loughton: Yes, good.

Liz Saville Roberts: I have a background in further education and also as the leader on education in a local authority. It is about the significance of attachment and the way that it cuts across all policies. If children don't have sufficient attachment experiences when they are very young, it affects their relationships from then on in—

Mr Hollobone: Sorry to interrupt—

Liz Saville Roberts: And it also affects their education from then on in. It is important to appreciate how wide-cutting this is.

Q6 Mr Hollobone: I understand that; we are not having the debate now. What I am trying to encourage you to do is to try to get the Government to do something.

Tim Loughton: To firm up the motion. I am perfectly happy to consider that. If you are saying that we should put a motion, rather than just a "considered" motion, I have no objection to that, and I don't think we would object to that.

Q7 Chair: Liz, is there anything you want to add to the application?

Liz Saville Roberts: The reason why I am here is that I believe this is very significant, and that there is not necessarily an appreciation of its effect in a cross-cutting approach.

Q8 Mr Bone: As Chamber time is very limited, most debates in Chamber time are on a substantive motion. General debates are normally held in Westminster Hall. That is my guidance. If there was a substantive motion, you would have to be in the Chamber or rejected.

Tim Loughton: In that case, can we convert it into a substantive motion for the Committee to consider, Chairman?

Q9 Chair: We have an interesting process whereby the applications process is very malleable. If you wish to alter your application post this meeting, the Committee is happy to look at that.

Tim Loughton: I would also like to amend the title. Where it says "Frist" 1,001 days, it should say "First" 1001 critical days. I am sure we would be perfectly happy to amend it to whatever the Committee says stands the better chance of getting the maximum coverage and airtime on the Floor of the House.

Q10 Bob Blackman: Is there any reason why you wouldn't want a substantive motion? Given what you are launching, what Mr Hollobone has suggested is perfectly reasonable.

Tim Loughton: My only concern is that we don't want to turn it into a vote where certain Members might be whipped to vote against a substantive motion. Hence we have been quite gentle in drawing to the House's attention the idea of the 1,001 critical days. Normal practice on a substantive motion would not be to have a vote, but for it to go through on the nod. If certain more radical supporters of this agenda were to want to put it to a vote, it could end up in tears.

Q11 Bob Blackman: The point is that if you had a motion that said, "That this House has considered", that would effectively be a general debate in Westminster Hall, or in the Chamber, as we see fit. You could have a substantive motion endorsing the report—obviously you know the details of the report and whether there is anything in there that political parties are going to object to, and we don't know that. That is for you to determine, which will then allow us to determine your application.

Tim Loughton: Could I perhaps suggest, as a compromise, Chairman, that we amend the motion along the lines of, "That this House urges the Government to look at adopting the recommendations put forward in '1,000 Critical Days'"? Something along those lines would be a substantive motion without being too much of a hostage to fortune. That might be a good way forward.

Q12 Chair: The other aspect is that we have had a number of Backbench debates where the Government haven't whipped anybody and the Opposition parties haven't been whipped, but a motion has been carried in the House and the Government have subsequently ignored it, because it wasn't in Government time. That does happen. It is one of a number of eventualities in this situation. Having said that, it shows the will of the House.

Tim Loughton: The Government are capable of ignoring things even if they do result from a vote, so it is not exclusively one way or the other.

Chair: You may say that, but I couldn't possibly comment.

Q13 Mr Bone: On that last point, it is very unusual for the Government to whip. There was that very important debate on the credentials for the European Council and the Government thought it right to bring 14 Secretaries of State back from everywhere to vote, but on something not quite as important as that, like your debate, they probably wouldn't bother to whip. Then, of course, you have powers afterwards to come back to this Committee. If your motion has been passed by the House and they ignore it, you can come back with a subsequent motion, such as deducting £1,000 from the appropriate Secretary of State's salary.

Bob Blackman: Or even a pound.

Mr Bone: There are ways.

Tim Loughton: So, Chair, can I ask about timing? I don't know what slots are available to try to get it compatible with our relaunch next week. That is my major concern, as is how I can quickly redraft a motion.

Q14 Chair: The redrafting of the motion can be done and the Committee can agree in principle a subject, but I would counsel that we have a list of previous applications that are still awaiting time. The amount of time that we have available is not enough to fulfil all the

applications, so we have to make a decision based on what we believe are the priorities. For the future, I would counsel that if you have something time-sensitive, we need more than about a week's notice. You should try to come to us as early as possible.

Tim Loughton: Yes.

Chair: Anyone else? Thank you very much indeed.