

Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 15 December 2015

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 15 December.

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

Wes Streeting, David Burrowes and Craig Mackinlay; Anne-Marie Trevelyan and Johnny Mercer; Mhairi Black, Mark Durkan, Marion Fellows, Carolyn Harris and Ian Blackford made representations.

Questions 1-13

Wes Streeting, David Burrowes and Craig Mackinlay made representations

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the last Backbench Business Committee of 2015. The first application this afternoon is on Holocaust memorial day. I understand, Wes Streeting, that you are leading on that. We have had apologies from Nadhim Zahawi. Wes, it's over to you.

Wes Streeting: Thank you, Chair, for giving us this opportunity. I am flanked by Conservative Members, demonstrating the cross-party support for this proposal. This is my first time presenting to the Committee, so I hope I do it correctly.

We are seeking a debate as close as possible to Holocaust memorial day 2016, on 27 January. That would provide another occasion for the House of Commons to reflect on and remember the tragedy of the Holocaust. This year has been particularly momentous. We have marked 70 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. There have been a number of national occasions where everyone—from the royal family, to Members of Parliament, to the wider community—has been able to reflect on and remember these events, but the further we move from the Holocaust, the more important it is that we continue to provide opportunities for the country to reflect on the documentary evidence and the testimony of survivors and, crucially, that we make sure that that reflects the fact that fewer and fewer survivors are still with us.

When you look across Europe and the wider world, it is clear that, although the tragedy of the Holocaust is, in many ways, unique, genocides, violence and discrimination persist. We have seen the rise of the far right across Europe and a rise in anti-Semitism. There is the



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ongoing problem of anti-Semitism in the UK, where 473 anti-Semitic incidents were recorded in the first six months of this year—a 53% increase on the first six months of the previous year. There is still much to do, and it would be very welcome if the Backbench Business Committee could provide an opportunity in the new year for the whole House to come together not only to debate and to reflect on these issues, but to make sure that the words “Never forget”, which are so often used around Holocaust memorial day, are truly lived up to.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. Is there anything you would like to add, gentlemen?

Mr Burrowes: Just that there is a precedent. Since 2008, there has always been a debate on the Floor of the House around the time of Holocaust memorial day—apart from one year, when there were exceptional circumstances. There is therefore a very good precedent. Now, we have the benefit of being able to go through an application process in this Committee, but I should have thought that there would be a real question mark if you did not have a debate, and we would have to have a good reason not to have one. A general debate is of immense importance and value.

Craig Mackinlay: If I may just add to my hon. Friend’s remarks. This year has been particularly significant. Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth and the Duke paid tribute to the memory of the Holocaust by making the first ever visit to a Nazi concentration camp—Bergen-Belsen—in June. While we are not in any danger of forgetting what Britain did to liberate Europe from the cloak of Nazism and to free people from many of the concentration camps, the worry is that, as the years go by, and the few survivors who are left pass away, we still need to keep that memory alive. Holocaust is not just something that happened in Europe up until 1945; it has happened in various parts of the world since then—one could say that something very similar is happening in Daesh-controlled territory today—so it is important that we keep alive the awareness of what evil men can do to one another.

Today’s application is very much supported by the Holocaust Educational Trust, and I support it in everything that it does. I would say that what Britain did regarding the Holocaust itself, particularly what we did with the Kindertransport in 1938 to get 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children to safety in Britain, is something that we have an enormous amount of pride in as a country. I think it is absolutely right that we have a debate this year, and perhaps every year, at the appropriate time around Holocaust memorial day. I would very much like it to be debated. It is always very well supported.

Chair: Thank you. I think the way in which you have handled this, giving us more than a month’s notice of a particular week in which you would like something so that we can get in potentially pencilled in, has been very useful. Of course, we are in the gift of Government in terms of actually getting any time during that week, but should time become available, you will be on the list for consideration.

I should also declare an interest, because the area that I live in and represent in central Gateshead has a large Haredi Jewish community, which is a very orthodox Jewish community, who have their own attitude towards Holocaust memorial day. They want to remember it, but they don’t want to advertise it. It’s very strange, but I have a good working relationship with that community. I just thought I should declare that as an interest in terms of my judgment in this matter. Any comments or questions?

Q3 Mr Nuttall: I have just one small point. You did say that you wanted it to be as close as possible to 27 January. Did you mean as close as possible before the day or possibly



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the day after? We are very often given a Thursday, and if I have looked correctly at the calendar, the 27th is a Wednesday, so we might be given the 28th.

Wes Streeting: I am sure that that would be fine.

Q4 Mr Nuttall: You would be happy to have it afterwards.

Wes Streeting: I think it would still be topical.

Mr Burrowes: My understanding is that before—

Wes Streeting: Would be preferable.

Mr Burrowes: Preferable, because the day is the day, rather than the day after. The lead-up would be the preference.

Craig Mackinlay: From the week commencing 18 January onwards would be super.

Chair: That's useful. Thank you very much indeed.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan and Johnny Mercer made representations.

Q5 Chair: Good afternoon.

Mrs Trevelyan: We are keen to hold a debate to discuss the armed forces covenant report. The latest one, the fourth since the armed forces covenant was put into law, was published on Friday, but the report has never been discussed on the Floor of the House. It covers all the areas covered by the covenant from the corporate covenant to the community covenants, which local public sector bodies are involved in, through to healthcare, education and housing. It is an enormous report and a lot of progress has been made in the implementation of a lot of the areas over the past four years, but it has never been discussed and there has never been the opportunity to challenge the Government on where more work needs to be done.

Danny Kinahan, who is an Ulster Unionist MP, could not be here to support us, but he is keen that we should raise some of the devolved nation issues, because the covenant is working in a more limited fashion in some parts of the UK. We feel very strongly that this would be an opportunity to bring that to the fore. Just half an hour ago, we set up an APPG on the armed forces covenant, which was very well attended. I think there is an enormous appetite to have this conversation because the covenant is working to a lesser or greater degree than people would hope in different communities around the country. A debate on the report is an opportunity to home in on where the Government are at and on how well or poorly progress is being made.

Chair: Anything to add, Johnny?

Johnny Mercer: We are at a bit of a critical moment for how we look after our service personnel as we draw down operations, and operations become not front-page news every day, so the armed forces covenant is really important. How we look after these people going forward, particularly over the next three to five years, will define how we do it for the next generation. I think there is some great work going on, such as the Armed Forces Covenant report that came out yesterday, but there is certainly a significant gap between what the Government's strapline often is—not through deliberate deception or anything like that—and what a lot of us, as constituency MPs, see on the ground. We have a duty to those people to get in there and make sure we are holding the Government's feet to the fire and delivering what was brought in three or four years ago. A lot of people are struggling to see this pervading society across the UK, and I think we owe that to those people.

Chair: Thank you very much. Philip, do you have any comments or questions?

Q6 Mr Hollobone: I get the Armed Forces Covenant. I understand it and I know it is important, so I welcome your application. You said that there is a gap between the aims of the covenant and what the Government are actually delivering. Have you thought about calling on the Government to fill that gap with a suitably worded motion that asks Her Majesty's Government to do this or that? Your application is for a general debate, which is fine and I am sure there will be lots of worthwhile contributions, but at the end of the three hours, or however long it is, the debate finishes. If you were, however, to have a motion that actually pushes the Government to do something that you would hope would get the support of the House, at the end of the three hours the Government would have a parliamentary motion that they have to do something about. I am inviting you to think—not necessarily now—whether you might want to try to think up a suitable wording for a motion that actually gets the Government to do something that they are not doing at the moment.

Johnny Mercer: Yes, absolutely. All of us across the country have, to a lesser or a greater degree, service personnel, veterans and their families in our constituencies. I think the debate is a really good opportunity to shine a light on all those places and get people to come forward. I think that is a great point; we should take it away.

Mrs Trevelyan: We are happy to look at that. The starting point was the fact that the House has never challenged the Government on the annual publication of where they have got to. We have not stood up and said, "This is where you say it is, in housing or in health. To be honest, on the ground it doesn't look like that." We are both new MPs. The challenge of how we phrase that to make sure we force a response is something we are very happy to go away and think about.

Q7 Mr Hollobone: The other advantage of having a motion is that the Committee would then be in a stronger position to allocate time in the Chamber itself. At the moment, all you have asked for is a general debate, and general debates are held in the Chamber but also in Westminster Hall. There is nothing wrong with Westminster Hall. It is perfectly fine, but if you have a motion, we would be more inclined to see whether we can give you time in the Chamber.

Mrs Trevelyan: Thank you for that, Philip.

Chair: Any more questions from colleagues? Yet again on this one, I am afraid to say that I must declare an interest. I am a member of the Royal Engineers Association and the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers Association.

Mrs Trevelyan: Very worthy.

Mhairi Black, Mark Durkan, Marion Fellows, Carolyn Harris and Ian Blackford and made representations.

Q8 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. I suppose my only declarable interest on this one is that I've got lots of friends who are women of this age.

Mark Durkan: We were waiting for it. We were taking bets on what it would be.

Chair: Mhairi, over to you.

Mhairi Black: I know that, as MPs, this is an issue that you will be aware of, whether through constituents or organisations, but I thought I would just reiterate what the main problem is. The changes to the state pension age have affected just over 2.6 million women born between April 1953 and April 1960. The worst affected are the 500,000 women born between October 1953 and April 1955 who will have their state pension age delayed by more than a year. On top of that, another 300,000 women born between December 1953 and October 1954 will have theirs delayed by exactly 18 months. While we can all recognise that the acceleration is to equalise the differences between men and women, the pace of the changes that are happening will place an unfair burden on women, many of whom will have to wait between a year and 18 months to claim their pension. I am sure we are already aware of the inequalities existent beforehand that make it more difficult for women to form stable and substantial pensions through low-waged, part-time work and such like.

On top of that, we have a group of women who were not given fair notice of the changes that were going to be made to their pensions, which would have allowed them to plan to make life a bit more comfortable. This is a good time to have the debate because I am sure you are aware of the campaign WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality. It is asking the Government to put all women born in the 1950s who are affected by the changes in exactly the same financial position. Its petition has just under 55,000 signatures.

Given that we are about to see further changes to the state pension in April, this is a timely point to address the issues that this group of women faces. The Government have agreed to carry out a review on how to handle such changes in future. I think that that tacitly implies that the Government recognise that somebody has messed up somewhere at some point in time.

While that is welcome, it still does not address or provide an answer to the situation that these women find themselves in. This issue is cross-party, as you can see. We have 17 names from six different parties. It is an issue that is going to affect constituents throughout the UK regardless of the party they are represented by. It would be a good topic for the House to take into account.

Q9 Chair: Thank you very much. Anything to add, Mark?

Mark Durkan: Just to make the point that Members might say that this has been debated before. It has been debated in Westminster Hall both in this and the previous Parliament, but in many ways that has added to people's frustration, as they think that Parliament has spent a lot of time acknowledging and describing the problem but not tackling it. More recently, we had the comments from the former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, who essentially seems to be saying that Ministers were not best informed and advised when these original decisions were cast. There is a case for looking at this again. The proposal is that there would be a motion clearly asking the Government to do that.

Carolyn Harris: I want to add that I need to declare an interest because I am of that age that would be affected. I associate myself with everything that my colleagues have said. It is unfair, unjust and needs to have an airing on the Floor of the House as soon as possible.

Marion Fellows: Could I just add that I can't declare an interest because I was okay, but that doesn't mean that I do not fully and wholeheartedly support this motion? I have many friends and ex-colleagues who, because their birthday fell a little later than mine, were unfairly penalised in my opinion.

Chair: That has come as a shock to me, Marion.

Marion Fellows: I was a bit scared about making that very public but, you know!

Q10 Mr Hollobone: I understand this is an important issue. I asked a question about it on the Floor of the House of the appropriate DWP Minister and, like everyone, I get letters about this. I recognise it is an important issue. The question I ask myself is whether now is the right time to do this. I understand that there is an inquiry under way and that WASPI is giving evidence to that inquiry. I am not sure who is doing that inquiry, but I ask myself whether there is going to be a report from that inquiry any time soon with some recommendations. Might that be the time to have a debate on the Floor of the House, with a motion supporting any recommendations that inquiry might come up with? I am asking that in a genuinely neutral way to find out your reaction.

Mhairi Black: WASPI is giving evidence—I can't remember the exact date. As for addressing the specific problem, I don't think any overarching pension report is going to do that. This is a very clear succinct group of women who have been uniquely penalised. As Mark touched on, it has been recognised by all parties and Government Ministers that something went wrong, but nobody is coming up with concrete answers as to what we can do. Addressing this specific issue affects enough constituents throughout the UK for it to be taken on the Floor of the House and debated properly.

Marion Fellows: May I give a point of information? This report is not due until 2017.

Q11 Mr Hollobone: Who is doing the inquiry?

Marion Fellows: I am not sure.

Ian Blackford: The Government have announced a review and will announce the names of members of the commission in 2015, but the commission is not due to report until 2017, so it is some time off.

Q12 Kevin Foster: Putting my cards on the table, I think this is an issue that it is reasonable to have a debate on. Looking at the text of the motion, it needs some work to make it clear what you are talking about and perhaps tentatively even some shortening. A thought for your own minds is the fact that 6 April 1953 is a critical date for women because the new pension is coming in in April, so again that might be in your mind when putting down motions and whether you wish to reflect that thought or not. If someone got their pension today, they would not get the new pension that they would have been eligible for in a few months.

You could also be clear about which age change the motion relates to if you want to put pressure on a bit, as is being talked about, and whether this is re-arguing the 1995 changes—I remember back then discussing them with my mother who was affected because she would have been 64.5—or the 2011 changes. Again, it could be a little clearer because I am conscious from some of the feedback on social media in other debates, that some people think this is a demand for going back to 60, which my understanding of the WASPI campaign is that it is not.

If it is all about those born on or after 1951, I presume you are talking about the 1950s and the notice. In theory, born on or after 1951 would affect anyone of my age of 36 who has been given a pension date of 68, but I get the impression from what you are saying that it is very much focused on those who are within 10 or 11 years of retirement rather than those who are 30 years away from retirement. I am conscious that we can have a separate debate about 68 retirement at another time. The motion would then home in on the nub of the issue or the debate could be a very wide one. To have something that is very clear about what it is about, you might want to think about the 1953 issue in terms of the argument you are putting forward.



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Mhairi Black: *indicated assent.*

Marion Fellows: *indicated assent.*

Q13 Gavin Newlands: On the point that Mr Hollobone made about the inquiry, it is vital that the debate should be had, but perhaps the motion could be tweaked slightly so that it acknowledges the fact that there is an inquiry going on and that it will not report until 2017 but women are suffering now. You should perhaps acknowledge the fact that the inquiry is going on.

Mhairi Black: *indicated assent.*

Marion Fellows: *indicated assent.*

Chair: There is a lot to think about, but it seems to me that, on the face of it, the subject matter and the support gives it a green light. It is just a matter of whether you want to consider taking it away and tweaking it. Let us know by email or get in touch with Mike. Thank you very much for your application and your attendance.

I finish the formal part of our meeting by wishing everyone a very happy Christmas and a very healthy and happy 2016.