



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 19 January 2016

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 19 January 2016

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

Norman Lamb; Guto Bebb, Ian Blackford and John Mann; Jeremy Lefroy and Stephen Phillips made representations.

Questions 1-17

Chair: Several people told us in advance that they were coming and are already scheduled. The first application is from Norman Lamb, Liz Kendall and Dan Poulter.

Norman Lamb made representations.

Norman Lamb: Forgive me, I have not done this before so I have no idea what I am doing.

Q1 Chair: You are very welcome Norman. What we ask you to do is give us a quick précis of the subject matter and why you want a debate.

Norman Lamb: My request has quite widespread support across the House. In essence, the call is for a debate on whether there should be a commission on the future of the NHS and social care. Wherever you come from politically, it is clear to everyone that the challenge facing the NHS and the care system is pretty existential because of growing demand, which has been there since the second world war, but continues apace.

Inevitably, the finances during a period of austerity create a massive challenge. This is the toughest settlement the NHS has had over the last five-year period. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that, up to 2020, we are projected to spend a declining proportion of our GDP on health, which is at best challenging, given the considerable rising demand of about 4% a year. The Health Foundation estimates that there will be a gap of about £6 billion in social care by 2020. The

spending review came up with some proposals to narrow the gap, but still leaves a very substantial gap.

In other words, there is a widespread view across the political spectrum that we need to think afresh about both the design of the health and care system—particularly this divide between health and social care, which was designed in 1948; is it still fit for purpose today?—and the adequacy of the resourcing and how that can be addressed.

I put forward a proposal the week before last in a ten-minute rule Bill, which is supported by two former Secretaries of State, Alan Milburn from Labour and Stephen Dorrell from the Conservatives. Now, I want to continue the argument and have the debate in this place on an issue that is probably of greater public concern than any other domestic matter that we deal with here. That is the case in a nutshell.

I should perhaps mention that after the ten-minute rule Bill presentation, the chief executives of 40 care organisations wrote to the Prime Minister in support of the case. The Royal College of Surgeons supported it as well. There does appear to be quite a widespread call for something of this sort to happen.

Chair: I see that you have a good spread of Members—more than 30 have signed the application.

Q2 Mr Hollobone: Congratulations on your application. The subject clearly attracts widespread public support. It seems to me that you could debate this for a whole afternoon—rather more than three hours—and I wonder why you have been so modest and limited yourself to three hours. Why not go the whole hog and ask for a full parliamentary day?

Norman Lamb: I suppose it is in my nature to be modest, Philip. I leave it in your hands. I don't know whether you have the flexibility to make your own judgment about timescale, or whether you are stuck with what I have applied for. I certainly think there would be the demand and the interest needed for a longer debate, if that is what you conclude.

Q3 Mr Hollobone: Do you think you could fill a parliamentary day?

Norman Lamb: I don't think there would be any difficulty at all, given the level of interest. Throughout, I have tried to do this on a cross-party basis. I think the NHS transcends narrow party politics. It is one of those national institutions that everyone is proud of but whose sustainability everyone is concerned about.

Q4 Chair: In terms of timeliness, if you were limited to three hours, there is the potential for three hours on Monday evening coming; or we have Thursday next week available. Could you do either or both of those?

Norman Lamb: Do you mind if I quickly look at my diary?

Chair: Please do. It's just to try to circumvent communication after the meeting. The Government have told us that they expect us to have three hours-ish on Monday and a full day on Thursday.

Norman Lamb: From what time on Monday?

Chair: It will be from 7 up to 10 o'clock.

Norman Lamb: Monday is okay with me. Let me check Thursday as well.

Chair: If you wouldn't mind—and bear in mind Philip's comments about the amount of time available.

Norman Lamb: Thursday is more difficult. I have a commitment it would be more difficult to get out of.

Q5 Chair: Okay. We understand that a similar Monday slot might exist on 1 February.

Norman Lamb: I will check that. That's fine as well.

Q6 Mr Hollobone: If you were to say to the commitment that you have on Thursday 28 January, "I've managed to secure a full day's debate in the House of Commons on the national health service," would your commitment regard that as a reasonable excuse?

Norman Lamb: I am supposed to be chairing a commission on personality disorder. I could find a replacement to do that for me. I leave it in your hands. I think I can probably escape. I have explained why I would prefer not to do so, but if it is an opportunity for a longer debate, there may be a case for it.

Chair: Thank you. You don't have to wait—go about your business and we'll let you know the outcome. We have Guto Bebb and John Mann next.

Guto Bebb, Ian Blackford and John Mann made representations.

Guto Bebb: We have Ian Blackford as well, from the SNP.

The topic of the debate is the future of the Financial Conduct Authority. The matter concerns a significant number of Members across the House. There are three specific reasons why we are requesting the debate, because in my view the FCA has done three controversial things recently. There is significant concern in the House about the way it dealt with the interest rate swap issue—an ongoing issue that has been the subject of three well attended parliamentary debates, but is still not resolved. Last Tuesday evening, there was a debate on the Connaught Income Funds attended by 48 Members—a significant attendance for any Adjournment debate, I think you would agree, Chair. In addition, there was the decision not to go ahead with a review of banking, which was announced on new year's eve—a controversial decision, to say the least. The organisation had the review of banking as part of its business plan for this financial year. The fact that that has been pulled, with very little explanation why, also needs to be addressed.

Rather than having debates on the individual strands that have been of concern to a number of Members, the feeling is that there is a case to be made to highlight Members' lack of satisfaction with the way in which the Financial Conduct Authority is performing and to allow Members to voice their

concerns about those three areas and others where they believe that the authority is not performing its duties as a regulatory body.

As you can see, there is significant cross-party support for the debate. I could have given you significantly more names, as well. As I said, previous debates I called for on the operation of the FCA have been extremely well attended. We are hoping for a main Chamber debate, and we would be happy to fill as much time as the Committee allocates. I am not sure whether John or Ian wish to add anything.

John Mann: Only that it is hugely timely. On interest rate swaps, Members will start to get lots of correspondence or detailed correspondence from a few people, depending on where they are, over the next month. Also, the future of regulation is a bit up in the air, and this debate would give us the chance to have a say before it is all determined internally by non-politicians. Again, the sooner the better.

Ian Blackford: To add to that, I am happy to support everything that Guto and John have said. The issue that has come up over the last few weeks is the removal of the need for a review of the culture of the banks, which has offended quite a lot of people. We all recognise that we need to make sure that the banks are fit for purpose, and we need to press the FCA to make sure of that. The debate provides the opportunity to tease out all the issues that have been mentioned this afternoon.

Q7 Chair: One question for me is that you have asked for an odd amount of time, two and a half hours—

Guto Bebb: Not according to the form I have. I apologise if it is different from the form that we have submitted.

Q8 Chair: I just wondered if that was based on experience. We try to allocate three-hour slots, but they tend to get cut to two and a half hours because of Government statements, urgent questions or whatever. It would be a three-hour slot.

Guto Bebb: Certainly, when previous debates have been granted by the Backbench Business Committee, we have always been time-limited as a result of the interest shown. We would definitely be looking for three hours and would be more than happy to take more.

Q9 Kevin Foster: I can see what you are driving for in having a motion that could be voted on. I see you have applied for either Chamber, but I presume the preference would be the main Chamber. As a quick observation, having sat in the PPS slot in last week's Connaught debate, it is obvious that there is more than enough interest to sustain this for at least three hours.

Guto Bebb: The number of issues that can be raised in relation to the FCA is wide-ranging, to say the least, so three hours would be a minimum, and the main Chamber does add to the seriousness of the proposed motion.

Chair: Thank you.

Stephen Phillips and Jeremy Lefroy made representations.

Q10 Chair: Stephen, this is a late application, but we are very happy to take it.

Stephen Phillips: Mr Mearns, thank you very much for hearing us. I actually have a completed application form, if it helps. It has the motion on it—because we are after a substantive motion—the reasons for the debate and a list of the Members who have indicated, in a very short period of 24 hours, that they are prepared to take part. I will hand that to you at the end, if I may.

The application, which relates to another bit of Africa, is for a debate on foreign policy and development aid in central and east Africa. The principal concerns, which I have set out on the form, are at the moment—I suspect—in relation to Burundi, where there is the possibility of a civil war kicking off. Many of you will remember the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s. It is fair to say that Jeremy led an Adjournment debate in the House, which was fairly well attended for an end-of-day Adjournment debate, on Burundi, and one effect of that was actually to hold the Government's feet to the fire and to persuade the Minister for Africa that it was about time he visited the region, which was done, and we are able to exert some influence.

It seems to us that there are security threats to the United Kingdom emanating from central and east Africa at the moment, that it is a subject that is worthy of debate in the House, and that the debate is timely, given everything that is going on, particularly in Burundi and the Central African Republic. It is for that reason that in a very short period, less than 24 hours, we decided to come before you to make the application.

Jeremy Lefroy: Just to add that the UK already spends in excess of £1 billion a year in ODA in that area, and secondly that the Ministry of Defence is very heavily engaged in troop training and stabilisation in the area. There is an awful lot of UK interest, but we do not tend to look at things across the whole region—we tend to look at it country by country, and I believe this is an opportunity to look across the region.

Q11 Bob Blackman: Obviously, you have got the application in somewhat late, so we have not got all the details in front of us that we would normally have.

Stephen Phillips: You will have before we leave.

Bob Blackman: Can I just ask you about not just the timeliness but the urgency of holding such a debate, because clearly we have got to allocate time in the next few weeks, and understanding how important it is to have a debate either this week, next week or the week after would be very helpful.

Stephen Phillips: To answer your question directly, I do not think there is any huge urgency. On the form I have indicated that the most convenient date is preferably 28 January, because we know you are likely to have a day that Thursday, when you may be looking to allocate a three-hour slot. That would be a week on Thursday. If it went back after that, it certainly would not be the end of the world. There is no real pressing urgency other than the situation in certain countries, of which Burundi is the most notable example. It is potentially inflammatory, and we have the presidential run-off at the end of January in the CAR.

Q12 Bob Blackman: But also, not only are there Thursdays, there are two Monday evenings coming up. Would you be able to fill either of those slots?

Stephen Phillips: I have difficulties with the two coming Mondays. First, this Monday if it is late is fine, but I get back from Rwanda on that day. The following Monday I regret to say that I am in Kuwait, so I would not be here at all. It is for that reason that we have indicated that we would prefer 28 January, but if it has to be a Monday I am sure that Mr Lefroy will do a fantastic job leading the debate.

Q13 Kevin Foster: I was just going to question whether it was one that you would be prepared to have either way—in Westminster Hall or the Chamber, or just the Chamber.

Stephen Phillips: I think just the Chamber—first because we want a formal motion that is capable of being divided on before the House, although I have to say that I do not think this motion, unless amended, would be divided on. There is the impetus, particularly in relation to foreign affairs, that a debate in the Chamber has far more traction—when you want to engage not only the British Government, but the Governments in the region—than a debate that takes place in Westminster Hall.

Q14 Mr Hollobone: I recognise the import of the motion, and I recognise your desire to have it in the Chamber. As you know, we are allocated time by the Government and we have to fill that time, and sometimes we have subjects that we would like to be debated in the Chamber, but we have to put them into Westminster Hall because we have got to fill the time. If that were to happen to you, would you be dreadfully upset? You would still have three hours of parliamentary time.

Stephen Phillips: I would be upset, but not dreadfully so. I think we have 19 speakers at the moment, but I think it would be more difficult to fill three hours in Westminster Hall than it would in the Chamber. I think you have got the text of the motion before you, because I put it in the email last night. I would like a motion before the House in these terms, and it is for that reason really that we are seeking Chamber time.

Q15 Mr Hollobone: Can I suggest to you that there is a way round this? First, you would be upset, but you would carry on, and if when the general debate motion was put in Westminster Hall you were to, by voices, say that you do not agree that the House has considered the issue, the motion would come back to the Floor of the House subsequently for a vote.

Stephen Phillips: It would come back for a vote, but without a debate, as I understand it.

Q16 Mr Hollobone: You would have the debate in Westminster Hall. I know it is not a perfect solution, but it is a solution.

Stephen Phillips: I appreciate that the calls on your time are sometimes significant: I do not know how significant they are at the moment. It is a solution, but as you rightly say, Mr Hollobone, it is not a perfect solution.

Q17 Chair: Just for the record, Stephen, you say you have 19 speakers. What is the political make-up?

Stephen Phillips: Obviously, I have to say that there was not a very large number of Opposition Members around last night—if I can put it in those terms—so you have got mostly Conservatives, but you have the Chairman of the International Development Committee, Mr Twigg; Yasmin Qureshi; the spokesman for the SNP, Patrick Grady; and I think one other Labour Member.

Chair: Thank you. Your ordeal has ended.