



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 26 January 2016

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 26 January 2016

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

Kirsten Oswald, Edward Argar and Steven Paterson; Stephen Doughty, Liz Saville Roberts, Carolyn Harris, Mr David Hanson, Mr Mark Williams and Gerald Jones; Jeremy Lefroy and Stephen Phillips; Mr John Baron, Richard Drax, Craig Mackinlay, Mr Andrew Turner and Kate Hoey; Gavin Newlands and Jess Phillips; Bob Blackman made representations.

Questions 1-25

Chair: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for coming along. A number of people are making submissions to the Backbench Business Committee this afternoon. May I make one or two little housekeeping points? When you are invited to come forward and make your application, could you please tell us the title of your bid, give us a precis of what the application is about, and say why you would like the issue to be debated?

I would also like to point out that as part of this afternoon's proceedings, members of the Committee will be applying for debates. They will be allowed to make their application and then, in the private session at the end when we make the determinations, they will not be allowed to take part in the determination of their own bids or the bids that they are supporting. That is why I am glad that the membership of the Committee is here in its entirety—so that we can be quorate throughout the process.

Kirsten Oswald, Edward Argar and Steven Paterson made representations.

Q1 Chair: The first applicants are Kirsten Oswald, Flick Drummond and Keith Vaz—or others.

Kirsten Oswald: Or some variation on the theme! Thank you, Chair. Neither Flick Drummond nor Keith Vaz is able to attend. Keith Vaz is in a Committee and asked specifically that I pass that on, but I have another person who is happy to be a lead Member, Edward Argar, who will be happy to contribute as well.

The title of the debate that we are looking to secure is “Conflict in Yemen”. I have secured the signatures of a number of Members from a number of parties across the House—a very broad spectrum of people are interested. I have not sought interest specifically; people have come to me and said that they have heard this is something that I am looking at, and there are other people who are interested, and that is without advising people, so I think it is undeniable that a good number of people would want to speak.

It is a very topical and pressing issue. It was obviously discussed at Prime Minister’s questions last week and it is the subject of a lot of news reports because of the conflict that is going on. Even today there were news reports about hospitals in Yemen being bombed and the concerns of the local population about seeking medical attention because they are afraid to go to hospital. There is also a significant issue in relation to child soldiers, which I think many people would be interested in discussing further.

The topic has not been discussed on the Floor of the House of Commons in a dedicated debate for more than four years. There is clearly interest if you look at questions that have been tabled, particularly recently, but in terms of the Floor of the House of Commons, I think that it is certainly time that we reviewed the situation in Yemen. Clearly, thousands of people have been killed in Yemen and there are issues or questions about the weaponry that is being used, particularly by Saudi Arabia, and about the arms export licences. There is a range of different angles in relation to the conflict in Yemen that hon. Members are keen to explore, and this debate would give them the opportunity to do so.

I suspect that my colleagues would also like to contribute.

Edward Argar: I will just add that I fully support the application for the debate. As you will be aware, the title is a very broad one, which allows all the different aspects and angles that have been mentioned to be brought into it. I speak not just in my own right but as the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen and someone who has visited Yemen on a number of occasions. It is clearly an issue of cross-party concern, regardless of the approach each party or Member may take.

Although I know that the Committee recognises the subject’s importance, I emphasise that Yemen is a particularly geopolitically important country in the region. It is the most populous country in that part of the world, with 27 million people, and it has the lowest income per head. It is a hotbed of civil strife and suffering. It also has a significant historical link to the United Kingdom through the former Aden protectorate.

There is a range of issues that Members would be interested in picking up in the debate—for example, the economic situation in Yemen, the long-term prospects for Yemen given the water situation, and the conflict, which is at the heart of the debate title. Of course, the debate would be topical: every day, we read reports of the humanitarian consequences. What is happening in Yemen is also effectively an element of a proxy war being played out by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given the recent news from both those countries and the sensitivities in the region, that would give an added dimension and importance to the House’s considering the subject in some depth.

Steven Paterson: My colleagues have summarised the situation fairly well. The House of Commons has not scrutinised this matter in the same depth as we have rightly considered Syria and Iraq and explored issues that are important there. The United Kingdom has an economic relationship with Yemen, and I think that that should be scrutinised further in terms of the supply of arms. I simply add my support to this. It is an important issue that we should consider.

Q2 Chair: You are asking for a general debate. Normally, for Chamber time, we look for something with a votable motion. Have you considered that?

Kirsten Oswald: Because of the breadth and the spectrum of issues that relate to Yemen and tie into the conflict there, it may be constructive on this occasion to allow Members to debate the subject in its entirety. It is very complex, and I have therefore gone for the more general motion so that we do not restrict Members. It is very important that it is brought to the Floor of the House because of the severity of what is going on in Yemen.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Your ordeal has ended.

Stephen Doughty, Liz Saville Roberts, Carolyn Harris, Mr David Hanson, Mr Mark Williams and Gerald Jones made representations.

Stephen Doughty: It is a pleasure to be here. It is the first time that I have appeared before the Backbench Business Committee. I am here instead of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, who is unfortunately in another Committee and has asked me to attend in his stead.

We are making a bid for a general debate on Welsh affairs to be held on or around St David's day—1 March. Obviously, we are willing to consider dates around that if time is not available on the day. As you know, Mr Chairman, there was a long-standing tradition of Government time being made available for a general debate on Welsh affairs around St David's day. Unfortunately, that has died off in recent years, and I understand that the Backbench Business Committee has made time available for such a debate. There has been only one Welsh Grand Committee since the general election, so there has not been a chance for a discussion on the wider issues that Wales faces.

This is a cross-party bid, supported by all parties in Wales. It has very strong support and as you can see, colleagues from Dwyfor Meirionnydd, from Ceredigion, from Delyn, from Merthyr and from Swansea East are here as well as me. The bid is also signed by the Member for Montgomeryshire, who could not be here today, but strongly supports it.

Several very important issues affect Wales as a whole at the moment. Currently, extensive discussions are going on about the draft Wales Bill. People want to express significant views on devolution, the implications of EVEL and other issues in the House, and how we consider Welsh affairs going forward. We would also like to discuss significant economic matters and other issues of which the Committee will be well aware, not least the current challenges facing the steel industry, as well as the challenges posed by the roll-out of broadband across Wales, particularly in rural areas. There are also many concerns about major infrastructure projects, such as the electrification of the south Wales main line and rail and road links in north Wales. We also need to discuss the challenges facing communications and broadcasting, and the Committee will be particularly aware of the cross-party concerns about the future of S4C. It would also be an opportunity to discuss the important role that the BBC continues to play in Wales. We could also discuss the ongoing impact of welfare

reforms and, importantly, given the devolution agenda as it applies not just to Wales but broadly across the UK, the concerns about the city region proposals and the Mersey-Dee alliance.

We would like to consider all those issues strategically as they apply to Wales, and we think that the debate would provide a very good chance to do so.

Q3 Chair: In three hours?

Stephen Doughty: Yes. We will have very brief speeches.

Q4 Chair: Would anyone like to add anything briefly, because there are six of you?

Mr Hanson: The Welsh Grand Committee will sit next week, but that discussion will be limited specifically to the draft Wales Bill. As Stephen has said, we have not had the opportunity for some time in the Chamber to discuss a huge range of other issues.

Liz Saville Roberts: An application before you today to discuss S4C has been crossed out, because we have decided for a number of reasons that this application is a more appropriate medium for that discussion. You get two for one, if you like.

Mr Hanson: On average, there are four Welsh Grand Committees per year, but because of the nature of the general election timing, we have only had the one listed for next week, and we are likely to have only one between now and the start of the new parliamentary Session in May.

Carolyn Harris: For those who are not aware of it, we are asking for the debate on 1 March because of the significance of that date, it being St. David's day.

Chair: I think we have got that message.

Q5 Bob Blackman: I have a couple of quick questions. You mentioned the timing, and from a quick look, 1 March falls on a Tuesday and we are unlikely to have a slot for a debate on a Tuesday—almost certainly not. Would you prefer, if given the option, of the Thursday before or the Thursday after, if we are minded to award it?

Carolyn Harris: The Thursday after.

Chair: That would be 3 March.

Q6 Bob Blackman: Judging from your very quick introduction to a wide range of issues, you clearly want the Government to do things. Why just apply for a general debate and not something with a motion that may mention a series of things and be subject to cross-party agreement in terms of Wales? Although many of the subjects could be aired in a general debate, no decision could be taken, so why have just a general debate?

Stephen Doughty: There is precedence for such a debate to be held on a general motion. Given the cross-party interest in obtaining a debate on a range of issues, on which there is consensus, although there are different perspectives, it would be better not to have a votable motion because that enables the House to come together on those wider strategic concerns.

Chair: Okay. May I thank the Members who have submitted the application for their comprehensive autograph list of Welsh Members, which is included in part of the deal?

Mr Hanson: And English Members as well.

Chair: Indeed.

Mr John Baron, Richard Drax, Craig Mackinlay, Mr Andrew Turner and Kate Hoey made representations.

Mr Baron: Chairman, and Committee, many thanks for seeing us. We will keep this short. As you can see, the topic is parliamentary sovereignty: EU renegotiations. The motion is before you on which we would intend to divide the House if we were lucky enough to secure a debate in the main Chamber.

The rationale for the debate is very simple. The Government are clearly negotiating our future relationship with the EU, a matter of fundamental importance to this place, and that negotiation will be put to the British people in a referendum. However, the Prime Minister's letter to the President of the European Council, as you all know, formally setting out the Government's demands, does not include proposals to restore parliamentary sovereignty. In fact, I would go further and say that it hardly mentions the issue of parliamentary sovereignty. As it stands, the Government are not negotiating for Parliament to be able to stop any unwanted EU legislation, taxes, directives or whatever. Many of us believe that this should be an essential part of the reforms, for parliamentary sovereignty goes to the heart of such issues as the primacy of our laws, the extent of our small business regulation and, indeed, control of our borders.

Some of us have made an attempt to speak with the Prime Minister about these issues. We have been rebuffed—certainly a number of colleagues and I have. The issue has been raised in PMQs and other questions. Partly because our requests for meetings have been rejected, we think the best way to deal with the matter now is to bring it to the Floor of the House for a general debate in which all Members, whether we believe in parliamentary sovereignty or not, whether we believe we should be in or out, can participate.

I think I have probably said enough, except that since we submitted the application, more Members have put forward their names and are willing to support the debate on a cross-party basis. They include Paul Flynn, Sir William Cash, Philip Davies, Andrew Rosindell and Adam Holloway.

Kate Hoey: May I add that it is a cross-party matter? It does not make any difference whether you are on the leave or the remain side in the referendum; it is about parliamentary sovereignty. I would also like to point out that the chair of the parliamentary Labour party has signed this—I know that should not influence you in any way, but I just wanted to point that out—and there are Labour Members on both sides, leave and remain. This is a really crucial issue and it is necessary to get the debate fairly soon, because things are moving on in terms of the Prime Minister's negotiations.

Craig Mackinlay: It is great to see that this has cross-party support. There could not be a more relevant debate at this time. Whether you are for or against, in or out—whatever side you take, I don't think there could be a more relevant debate had on the Floor of the House in the next few weeks than this one and I would very much like to take part. I don't think you have any doubt about where some of us stand in the debate, but it is a very relevant debate for this time for this House.

Richard Drax: I just want to add that, for me, this whole issue, to which parliamentary sovereignty is obviously key, is probably the biggest decision we will have to make in our lifetime. It is about the freedom of our country. That is why I became an MP and it is what we are fighting to get back. How you can believe in parliamentary sovereignty and want to stay in—I will be absolutely fascinated to hear in this debate from those who argue that line, which I disagree with. It is a chance to flush people's views out and for us to put ours, and I think it is a very important debate.

Mr Andrew Turner: I feel if there is one word which makes for Europe or not Europe, it is “sovereignty”.

Q7 Chair: One interesting perspective on this debate is that, although the application may be cross-party, is it cross the pro or anti-Euro divide?

Mr Baron: I think it is. I officially have not yet said which way I am going to vote in the EU referendum—

Chair: I have a funny feeling—[*Laughter.*]

Mr Baron: —because I am waiting to hear what the Prime Minister has to say about the success or not of his renegotiation.

Q8 Jess Phillips: What if he gets everything he asks for?

Mr Baron: If he gets everything he asks for, we may have to look at it again, but I have a sneaking feeling that he may not. I don't know—let's see. But the issue of parliamentary sovereignty is important regardless.

Kate Hoey: I know one person on the list, although I will not name them, is certainly in favour of remaining—from the Labour side. I think I have made my views pretty clear.

Chair: I must admit I hadn't spotted that, Kate, but not to worry. [*Laughter.*]

Kate Hoey: Had you not?

Q9 Jess Phillips: I have a slight concern about the vagueness of the motion: “renegotiations must encompass Parliament's ability to stop any unwanted legislation, taxes or regulation.” Unwanted according to whom? I don't know. If this was passed, would we then have a referendum on every single thing that comes from Europe to say what is unwanted and what is wanted?

My second question is about timing. When would you expect to have the debate? I think the Prime Minister is hoping to bring back quite soon the terms of his negotiation. Are you hoping for a timing that would pressure him to go for more or to change some of the negotiations? Or will it be post the Prime Minister's announcement, whenever that might be?

Mr Baron: The answer to the first question, for absolute clarity, is that it is “Parliament's ability to stop”. This is talking about parliamentary sovereignty. We are not suggesting that we have a referendum on every single issue. It is very straightforward. If Parliament does not agree to it, we should have the ability to say no to any unwanted taxes, regulation or directives.

On the second question, with the Committee's acquiescence, we want the debate asap, to try to influence the debate and the renegotiation as it is happening now. Don't forget there is a bit of a tale to this. Some of us having been trying to get a communication with No. 10 on this issue for a period of months. You might have seen that I raised it at PMQs last week. We have been told that the door is shut. We have very few other avenues to proceed, if we cannot have a meeting and progress on that basis.

Q10 Chair: In that case, that prompts the question, if it is asap, when would be the latest from your perspective?

Mr Baron: My request would be before the informal meeting of the EU on 18-19 February.

Q11 Chair: That is before the recess in February.

Mr Baron: Yes, please.

Q12 Mr Bone: I think, Chair, that you have almost pinched my question because it seems to me this would be a pointless debate after February's summit. Either we find time for you before or you don't get it, because there is no point having this after the negotiation has been concluded. I just wanted to check that that was the feeling.

Mr Baron: I think it is wise to proceed on that basis, assuming there are slots available.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Gavin Newlands and Jess Phillips made representations.

Gavin Newlands: We are looking to get a debate on the role of men in ending violence against women. Perhaps in the application I should have declared that Jess is the Chair of the all-party parliamentary group on domestic abuse. I am an ambassador for the White Ribbon campaign.

I will be brief because I have laid it out in detail on the application. We are looking to secure the debate because of the scale of the problem of domestic abuse. There has been a large fall in recorded crime but domestic abuse has largely bucked that trend. Without rehearsing the debate, to go over a couple of figures. There is a 40-year low in recorded crime but domestic abuse in Scotland increased by 2.5%. That is also the case with related crimes. Domestic rape, for instance, increased 81% between 2013-14 and 2014-15. Stalking has also increased. Twenty per cent. of all police time is spent dealing with domestic abuse, which is obviously far too high a proportion.

Recent research into other issues discovered through the Library that we have not had a debate on domestic abuse from the male perspective. I was rather surprised by that, given the prevalence of the White Ribbon campaign, especially down here, over the past 10 years. The White Ribbon campaign had its 10-year anniversary at the end of last year, but we have not had a debate.

In recent years, there have been some positive moves from Westminster and Holyrood in terms of domestic abuse legislation. That is one reason why I am seeking a general debate. This is one area where I can praise the Government down here for the movement that has been made, which is unusual for me.

One area we need to focus on is prevention of domestic abuse. Given that men carry out 80% of this abuse, it is males we need to target, whether that is through schools, getting to boys earlier, or sports clubs and so on. I know the White Ribbon campaign does that. We need a debate on how to move that forward. We can talk about prosecuting and jailing the perpetrators of these crimes, but we need to try and prevent it a lot more than we currently do. That is really the essence of the debate.

Furthermore, there is a consultation in the Scottish Government at the moment with regard to widening the scope of domestic abuse and perhaps bringing in a crime of domestic abuse that would allow more people to be prosecuted. That ends on 23 March, I think. So this isn't time-bound as such, but if we could have a debate before 23 March that could perhaps inform that consultation, that would be great.

In addition to that, I think last year the crime statistics were published around 10 or 11 February, so perhaps it would be good, if they are released at the same time again, if the debate was after that point, so we have got fresh statistics from England and Wales. If that is not possible then obviously we will go with it. I did put "either", given we are on the Committee, and if we put a general debate then even if I want the Chamber I might get Westminster Hall anyway. Given the numbers involved, it would be ideal to have it in the Chamber, but I fully understand, given that I am going to stick to my guns, and I want a general debate on the issue, that we could end up in Westminster hall.

Jess Phillips: I would just add that often when we talk about domestic violence it is still the victims' organisations and the victims who in the worst cases are blamed but in the best cases are heard, and I think that it is time now for some of the debate to be about prevention and young men—and showing good, strong male leadership in abhorring this crime, and saying that we stand with the victims.

In Scotland, there have been some absolutely amazing campaigns that I think here in the UK we could learn from, about how telling women not to go out late at night isn't the thing to do. You need to tell young men not to rape people in the street. It is some of that messaging around men saying "This isn't activity that we all do, this isn't acceptable, this is not the way that we behave and we won't tolerate it." It would be really powerful for this place and it would be great to see lots of men in Parliament getting involved in the domestic violence agenda.

Q13 Kevin Foster: Just a quick comment: I think it is always welcome that we actually talk about survivors of domestic and sexual abuse, rather than just victims, because people can move on to be survivors. I take it that it would still be in order, if someone did want to, to talk about male victims as well—I know there are stats on that; but I take on board the point that it is about challenging the attitudes and understanding. I always give the example that no one says to someone who has been mugged that it is their fault for taking a wallet with them. That links to some of the campaigns that have been quite ill-advised, bluntly, around, basically, "It was late at night and don't go out late."

Jess Phillips: "Don't tie your hair up," I was once told, because somebody could grab me.

Q14 Kevin Foster: Yes, it is just bizarre, some of the advice that there is. So it would still be in order to wish to talk about victims of either sex. Obviously you want the focus on attitude—that attitude that people have that this is acceptable, from both sexes.

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely. I think there is a colleague that would like to speak about it from the LGBTI perspective, as well; so while the focus of the debate is about ending male violence against women, it does have flexibility in that respect.

Q15 Bob Blackman: What do you want to see happen as a result of having this debate? A general debate can air all the issues, but actually you want something to be done, don't you, and I just wonder if there is a strategy or something that can be rolled out, as an awareness campaign.

Gavin Newlands: Obviously so far there has been cross-party consensus on some of the legislation that has been put down. I am looking for some cross-party consensus on how we move prevention forward. I don't have the answers. I don't have a motion to put to Government: "I want x to be carried out." I want us to get ideas from the debate. Obviously there are some ideas out there, but I think it would be good to hear from all sides and perhaps thereafter we can move forward and maybe in the next debate we can put a motion to the Government.

Jess Phillips: I know lots of people think we are awful in here, but there is the idea of Parliament standing up, and the men and women of Parliament—it might get press—speaking to young men out there saying, "We care about your future; we don't think you are all awful, horrible people, but we want to invest in our young people."

Q16 Bob Blackman: Taking that logic, that would potentially lead to having a debate in Westminster Hall to air the issues, concerns, ideas and so on. If you do not get what you want, that might lead to a debate in the Chamber.

Jess Phillips: There is a big push on the Government at the moment around the prevention agenda with PSHE and perpetrator programmes. Pretty much every single Select Committee has recently written to the Education Secretary. It would certainly be another forum where the agenda of prevention is pushed on the Government and puts them under pressure. It is getting a bit embarrassing that they are saying no.

Q17 Mr Hollobone: There are two problems with your application, if I may say so. One is that it does not have a substantive motion, and the second is that it is not gender neutral. You could have, for example, "This House calls on Her Majesty's Government, within the space of six months, to draw up an action plan to highlight how men can help end domestic violence against women, and how women can help end domestic violence against men." There are two big issues here. One is the scale of domestic violence of men on women, but there is also the hidden but growing problem of domestic violence of women on men. If you were to come to the House with a powerful motion like that, calling for the Government to do something and recognise both those issues, the application would be far more effective.

Gavin Newlands: I hear what you are saying. I toyed with the idea of having a motion. Obviously the motion we have put forward is a bit kind of wishy-washy—to bring forward an action plan in six months and what-have-you. I toyed about with things like that, but I did not see the value in having a motion if I am not asking for something definitive, to be perfectly honest. That is why I am doing it this way, but I am willing to listen to that.

We have had many domestic abuse debates in Westminster Hall and the Chamber over the past few years but none have specifically spoken about male violence against women and how we tackle that societal problem. You are absolutely right that female violence against men is on the increase as well but I was basically wanting to talk about violence on women so I would rather keep it to that perspective. Regarding the motion, I am open to doing that because it is an action plan that we are calling for, rather than a specific action point. If you could discuss that as a Committee and come back to us on that, we certainly might consider it.

Jess Phillips: My concern is that if somebody came in here and asked for a debate on blood cancer, which is a specific cancer, nobody would expect them to talk about all the other cancers. The debate that we have brought is about male violence against women. If someone were to come here today and ask for a debate about female violence against men, we would not ask them to consider the alternative. They are two separate issues with two different root causes. No one is dismissing female violence against men, but we are asking to talk about the other.

Gavin Newlands: Essentially, we are trying to get rid of the deep-rooted societal problem of male violence against women. It is a somewhat different issue.

Jess Phillips: It is sociologically different.

Q18 Mr Nuttall: May I just pursue the point that you touched on very briefly that there have been other debates in recent years about domestic violence? There have been other debates.

Gavin Newlands: There have been other debates, but not from this perspective.

Q19 Mr Nuttall: It seems to me that if there were other debates about domestic violence, they were not there to encourage domestic violence. Those debates must have been about ending domestic violence. That is exactly what this debate is about, is it not?

Gavin Newlands: To some degree, you have a point, but we are trying to focus on the male aspect. Although it gets touched on in various debates, it is a very small part of other debates. I have looked at *Hansard*, and it is barely even mentioned in some debates. What we can do as men—whether it is through education or whatever—is a very small part of these debates. I want to widen that. I want it to become the main focus of the debate.

Q20 Chair: Am I right in thinking that the main word is that it is about prevention?

Gavin Newlands: Yes, the legislative agenda has moved quite a bit in the past few years, and we are very much heading in the right direction. I am sure that that will come up in the debate to some degree, but, to my mind, this is about prevention.

Q21 Mr Nuttall: May I suggest, therefore, that the title of the debate refer to the role of men in preventing, rather than ending, domestic violence?

Jess Phillips: Yes, that's fine.

Gavin Newlands: That's fine.

Q22 Bob Blackman: I wanted to come back to you on one thing, Jess. You mentioned people coming here and asking for a debate on blood cancer, but the Committee did actually turn them away. We said, “Wouldn’t it be better if all the APPGs and other organisations campaigning on cancer brought their bids together into one and had a debate on the generality of cancer?” They did, and it was a very successful debate. I am not decrying what you are saying—I am just saying that the Committee has a history of combining issues where that is relevant.

Jess Phillips: I don’t know the history of the Committee. When I talk about domestic violence and violence perpetrated by men against women, whether that is domestic or sexual violence, I am always told—I have been told this for years—that I don’t care about men, and that is utter rubbish. It is like ringing the Cats Protection League and saying, “I’ve got a bird. Will you take it?” Well, I’m Women’s Aid, so, no, like the Cats Protection League, I won’t take your bird. That is part of the problem: we are talking about sociologically different issues, and they have completely different pathways in and out. I would happily bring a debate about violence, but that is not what this debate is about.

Gavin Newlands: I think 70,000 people are convicted of domestic abuse, and 93% of them were men. That highlights the disparity, despite some of the points that have been made.

Jess Phillips: Since domestic homicide reviews began, there has been one domestic homicide by a woman against a man, whereas two women every week are murdered.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That is the end of your ordeal. Our next witness is Mr Blackman. *[Interruption.]* In true DIY fashion, Bob has taken his name plate with him to his new seat.

Bob Blackman made representations.

Q23 Chair: Well, good afternoon, Mr Blackman. Thank you for coming to the Committee. Welcome. Could you please tell us the title of your application and why you would like a debate?

Bob Blackman: The title of the debate would be “Compensation for victims of the Equitable Life scandal”. New Members will obviously not be aware that we have had several debates in Parliament since 1992 about Equitable Life and the scandal of the victims who were robbed of their life savings. The Conservative party, in their manifesto in 2010, agreed to provide funding for victims of the Equitable Life scandal, and the coalition Government implemented that. However, it was not full compensation for all those affected. During the last Parliament, we managed to get movement from the Government on providing more compensation as time went on, but there is still a huge gap, of some £3 billion,, between what has been claimed and what the Government have provided in compensation.

What has changed in this Parliament? The reason for bringing this measure now is that the Government have closed applications, as of 31 December 2015, to the compensation fund, so we now know how many victims are entitled to compensation. There is also a £100 million contingency fund that is unspent by the Government. There are three categories of claimant, and the overwhelming majority have received only 22.5% of their relative loss.

In bringing this debate to the Chamber, what we seek to do, with a divisible motion if it is opposed, is call upon the Government to provide full compensation for the victims of the scandal and,

at the very least, to provide the contingency fund to compensate victims, and obviously other elements of that.

I declare that I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policy holders. My co-chair is Fabian Hamilton, who has been appointed to the Opposition Front Bench. Therefore, in order not to fall foul of any rules, he is not here with me to present this.

As you will see, more than 30 speakers have put their names down. There are 20 Conservatives, six Labour, two Liberal Democrats and one or two SNP, I think—I am not quite au fait with all the names of SNP Members yet. We have had a number of other Members come in over the past couple of days who wish to speak on this. It gives Members, and particularly new Members of Parliament, an opportunity to voice their views on behalf of their constituents. Of course, there is great feeling among the more than 1 million people who have lost their life savings and who want and demand compensation.

Q24 Mr Nuttall: May I ask whether there is a potential date by when you would like this debate to be held?

Bob Blackman: I clearly want to put pressure on the Chancellor before the Budget. As we know, the Budget is on 16 March, so in order to give the Chancellor time to consider this case, I would prefer it to be before the February recess, but if it were held after—I am in your hands, in terms of timing.

Q25 Gavin Newlands: When would the money that is sitting in the contingency fund be returned to the Treasury?

Bob Blackman: The contingency fund was set aside on the basis that the Government did not know how many people would claim compensation. We now know how many people have claimed compensation, and they are receiving their money.

I do not want to go into the full details of all this, because your eyes will glaze over and you will slowly fall asleep, but the reality is that the overwhelming majority of claimants are getting phased payments year by year in their compensation. Those who received 100% compensation—that was only 37,000 people—got their compensation up front. The poorest pensioners—the trapped pre-1992 annuitants—got a token £5,000 but are excluded from the legislation. They then got an additional pension credit, but as you can tell, they were on their pensions in 1992 so are extremely elderly and vulnerable. Those people, who are entitled to compensation, are sadly dying every day.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Blackman. That is the end of the formal business. The Committee will now go into a closed session. Thank you for your attendance.