



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 2 February 2016

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 2 February 2016

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

James Berry; Scott Mann and Mr Charles Walker; Siobhain McDonagh; Kevin Foster made representations.

Questions 1-42

James Berry made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. The first application is headed up by James Berry. Welcome, James. Could you tell us what your application is about?

James Berry: Thank you, Mr Mearns, for hearing me this afternoon. I wish to debate the motion—I would slightly reword what I put in the application—“That this House has considered the south western route franchise and stations in south-west London.” I would strike the words “renewal of”.

I am asking for this debate because it is very timely. The south western route franchise consultation closes on Tuesday 9 February. The consultation is on the invitation to tender for that franchise. This is important to Members of Parliament in south-west London and the surrounding area—10 Conservative MPs, five of whom are Ministers, and four Labour MPs—because of the fundamental importance of South West Trains to commuters in those constituencies.

I submit that this issue has broader importance, for two reasons. First, the south-west route goes all the way down to the south coast and the south-west and affects a large number of MPs. Secondly, the Department for Transport and the Mayor of London have announced that Transport for London may take over suburban lines in London, and this route is likely to be the first on which a suburban line is taken over by TfL.

This debate is important to the 14 Members of Parliament in south-west London. It is important to Members of Parliament across London, and it is also important to Members of Parliament across the south and the south-west who are affected by South West Trains. So it is a debate that will have broad cross-party interest and is timely because the consultation closes next Tuesday. I suggest that it is a strong candidate for a Backbench Business debate.

Q2 Mr Hollobone: In an ideal world, what do you want to happen to the south western rail franchise in south-west London?

James Berry: I and several other Members of Parliament have made submissions to the Rail Executive at the Department for Transport about what should go in the “invitation to tender” document, which will go to potential bidders who want to operate the service and will say, “If you win this contract, this is what you must deliver.” I want this debate to be an opportunity for Members to put on the record what they want to change about the rail service on behalf of their constituents and effectively to summarise what will be put to the Rail Executive in written submissions.

Q3 Mr Hollobone: Okay. You asked for a general debate. Even though you have a substantive motion, it is actually just a general debate motion. I just have to warn you—it’s not my decision—that the Committee has a habit of tending to put general debates into Westminster Hall if there are applications for real substantive motions on the Floor of the House. The other thing that members will be concerned about is that, while she is an extremely distinguished Member of the House, you only have one Labour party name on your application. The Committee tends to look favourably on cross-party applications.

James Berry: Mr Hollobone, I note that. This only concerns south-west London, where there are four Labour Members of Parliament. I put this application together very quickly because I was told that there would be a window of opportunity to have this debate before the consultation closes on Tuesday. The office of the hon. Member you mentioned is next to mine, so I was able to get the support of a Labour Member quickly. However, I am sure that the other Labour Members in south-west London would be very much interested in participating in this debate.

Q4 Bob Blackman: You have made a very unusual application for time. Normally, we have applications for 90 minutes in Westminster Hall or three hours or six hours in the Chamber, but you have asked for two hours. At the moment, you have a paucity of speakers. It looks like you have the sponsors and then one other speaker, which would not normally fill up the time for a three-hour debate, so I just wondered whether there was a particular reason for the request for a two-hour debate.

James Berry: That is why. I wasn’t convinced that I would be able to find enough speakers for three hours but, depending on the date, there are at least 14 MPs with a direct interest in the matter. Four or five of them cannot speak because they are Ministers, but based on the written submissions that they’ve given me to forward to the Rail Executive—I am co-ordinating this on behalf of the Conservative MPs in south-west London— all of them have very significant points to make.

Q5 Bob Blackman: You say that the consultation ends next Tuesday. Are you looking for the debate to be held before the consultation ends or subsequently?

James Berry: I understood that there may be a slot on Monday. If it could be accommodated on Monday, that would be fantastic. If not, the first available date after 9 February will be fine. If it is

proximate to this important demarcation line, which is the consultation closing, that would be beneficial to our constituents in south-west London.

Q6 Mr Bone: I think the slot on Monday is in the Chamber and would perhaps be longer than two hours. I am still not quite clear—if we ask to hold a general debate on Monday in the Chamber, is that what you really want? Is there a list of demands that you want as a group that would mean that you could say, “This House requires the Government to do X, Y or Z.”

James Berry: There is, in the sense that I am currently drafting, along with a number of colleagues, the demands that the Department for Transport should include in the “invitation to tender” document, such as that the Department ensures that the next franchise operator has a strategy to deal with significant overcrowding and to increase disabled access at train stations. So, yes, there is a list of demands. If I should have set that out fully in my application, the error is mine.

Q7 Mr Bone: I would not say it was an error. If we grant you the debate, the only place you could put it on is in the Chamber. I was not quite clear whether you wanted to go down that route or were happy with a general debate.

James Berry: There is a list of demands that I could adumbrate. If the Committee would like me to do that this afternoon after my session at the Home Affairs Committee, I will be happy to do so.

Q8 Mr Nuttall: Can I clarify the lead Members? You appear on your own today, but there are four other lead Members listed beside yourself on the application. Are all those lead Members certain, as far as one can reasonably be, to appear and take part in the debate?

James Berry: I know that the Conservative lead Members certainly wish to take part in the debate, subject to the date it takes place. I know that three of the Members have other commitments in the House, including delegated legislation Committees at this time, and would have been here to support me otherwise. I could have asked them to come and support me.

Q9 Mr Nuttall: That’s today, not on Monday.

James Berry: But on Monday, I think it very much depends if the application is successful for Monday. I don’t have their diaries for Monday, but I know that they are all very keen on this debate. This is probably the No 1, or one of the top three issues, in all our constituencies, since most of our constituents commute by train.

Q10 Mr Hollobone: Given the importance of this issue to your constituents and those of the other MPs involved, I think what the Committee might be driving at is that this is a golden opportunity for you to ask the House of Commons to endorse your list, on the lines of “This House urges Her Majesty’s Government to do A, B and C by this date.”

From what you said, it would appear that you do have support from the Opposition. I think the Committee is probably beginning to think that if you were to table such a motion, and if among the lead Members there were some Labour party names, you would then probably fulfil all the requirements of this Committee to have a Chamber debate.

James Berry: Yes.

Q11 Bob Blackman: The other issue, which you rightly raised, is that this could be the first franchise that is taken over by TfL. In that case, with respect to Mr Hollobone's comments, you will be asking the Mayor of London to do things rather than the Government. Then we get into the devolved areas of responsibility. I think you ought to be a bit cautious about what you are asking for and whom you are asking.

James Berry: With respect, Mr Blackman, my understanding is that the requirements of any operator, be it South West Trains, TfL or whichever, will be included in the Government's "invitation to tender" document. That is the responsibility of the Department for Transport, and that is the Department that I hope would answer this debate.

Q12 Chair: Since the franchise has not yet been awarded, we would consider the application with that hypothetical. Thank you very much, James. If you could keep in touch with Mike in terms of trying to beef up the application, we will certainly try to accommodate you.

James Berry: Thank you Mr Mearns and Members of the Committee.

Chair: Next on our list is Kevin Foster, but since he is a Member of the Committee, can I suggest that we take him last? So next up is Scott Mann, Simon Hart and Charles Walker with an application on conservation of sea bass and the effect of recent European Union measures on the UK fishing industry.

Scott Mann and Charles Walker made representations.

Scott Mann: Good afternoon, everyone. I wish to put a motion to the full Chamber for a three-hour debate on sea bass conservation and the recent impact of the EU measures on the UK fishing industry.

We had a very successful debate in the previous Parliament in Westminster Hall, which was arranged by George Hollingbery. A lot has changed since then with the latest EU renegotiations. We are now in the ridiculous situation that anglers cannot catch and keep fish between January and June. Gill netters, at the same time, can catch the very fish that are returned to the estuary in their nets and land that fish and keep it.

I do not feel that recreational anglers should be penalised in that way. Ireland currently has rod and line fishery only and receives a huge boost to tourism in that regard. Bass are a target species; people will travel right across the country to catch sea bass. We currently have 900,000 sea anglers in the UK, supporting 10,000 full-time jobs that are dependent on the sea angling industry, which is worth about £200 million to the UK economy. There are hundreds of coastal communities and coastal MPs, and this issue is causing consternation on many of the sea angling websites. The rod and line sector and the inshore fleet seem to be at loggerheads over this, and there is an issue regarding the EU policies on the six-mile limit and the catching of bass that are going out to spawn after they have been in the estuaries during the summer.

I am pitching because I think this would be a great debate that would engage a huge number of MPs from across the country. I have cross-party support. I have support from three former Fisheries Ministers and the Chairman of the all-party angling group.

Mr Walker: The deal done in Brussels is outrageous, and I say that as a conservationist and a fisherman. The idea that I go fishing and have to release a bass and that someone 200 yards off me can net it to put on a plate in the dining room of some City restaurant or, dare I say, the House of Commons or the House of Lords is simply nonsense. It is ridiculous. Once again, recreational fishermen are being penalised for the excesses of commercial fishermen. This is an appalling deal, and I support Scott. In the last Parliament, we had a debate in Westminster Hall that was extremely well attended, and many people spoke. Perhaps, given our success in the last Parliament, we could persuade you to grant a main Chamber debate on this occasion.

Q13 Mr Hollobone: Forgive my ignorance of matters to do with fishing, but I am very interested in your application. Are you saying that this is specifically between the months of January and March?

Scott Mann: The situation at the current moment is that the first six months of the year are catch and release for rod anglers only, and in the same period fish can be netted with gill nets and kept. We have a ridiculous situation in which anglers are not able to keep fish that they have caught. To be frank, anglers merely put a dent in bass stocks. It is a very sustainable way of fishing, whereas gill nets tend to net fish of all different sizes.

Q14 Mr Hollobone: And it is specifically sea bass?

Mr Walker: It is specifically sea bass. They are a very high value sport fish, and they are a particularly high value plate fish.

Q15 Mr Hollobone: So would a motion, for example, that this House believes that all anglers should be able to catch and keep sea bass between January and June, achieve what you want?

Mr Walker: I really think that a one or two fish limit for recreational anglers, given that netsmen can keep almost as many as they like, would not be an unreasonable proposition. If I deviate from your questioning, bring me into line, Mr Mearns, but I go to Ireland every year and we go bass fishing. If this ban is extended from July to the end of the year, it would be the first time in my life that I have ever, ever thought about deliberately breaking the law, because it is so incredibly unjust. I say that, and I see a Scottish Nationalist Member of Parliament here.

Q16 Mr Hollobone: I think this Committee feels your pain and might be keen to encourage you to get the House behind you. If it is as unjust as you say, why don't you table a motion seeking the House's support? Each year we have general debate after general debate about fishing.

Mr Walker: We will do that. We will seek the House's support because, as you can see, we feel strongly about it and there are others who feel strongly about it. If you go back and look at the debate that you very kindly granted in the last Parliament, there was a lot of emotion and a lot of passion. Far from getting better, things have actually got worse.

Scott Mann: Broadening it out to the EU, we have this ridiculous situation that we control the fishery inside the six-mile limit but big beam trawlers working out of Belgium and France effectively net the fish that have been in our estuaries during the summer, and they are spawning fish—fish that are pregnant and ready to give birth to new fish.

Q17 Bob Blackman: Is there any time dependency for this particular debate? Are you looking for a particular time slot?

Scott Mann: Yes, any time in the next couple of weeks. We want an airing.

Q18 Bob Blackman: Any time in the next couple of weeks?

Mr Walker: Mr Blackman, seriously, if we could do it in the next four weeks, that would be ideal. We recognise that there is a recess. We would love to do it in the main Chamber to demonstrate progress from Westminster Hall. If you require us to be patient to get a main Chamber slot, I think I can speak for Scott and the others in saying that we would be patient on that basis.

Scott Mann: Fifteen Members have already said that they would speak and, as I said, three of those are former Fisheries Ministers, so they obviously know their stuff and have been around the industry for quite some time, but I have had expressions of interest from other Members since the closing date for the application.

Q19 Bob Blackman: The other issue is that before this Committee granted a debate on a motion, we would want to see the motion for debate, because obviously we don't know what you are going to be seeking. A general debate is a general debate, but a motion on a specific topic would need to be seen by this Committee, I would suggest, before a debate was granted.

Scott Mann: Okay. After you meet in the closed session, are you happy to defer that decision until we come back to you with a definitive motion?

Q20 Chair: Absolutely. Pardon my ignorance, but are sea bass a regional presence around our coasts or are they everywhere?

Scott Mann: They are. I think there are a couple of constituencies in Scotland that they reach at a certain time during the year, but they cover pretty much—

Q21 Chair: Are they mainly in the west, though?

Mr Walker: Yes, in the west. I have caught them—

Q22 Chair: I don't think they are very common in the North sea.

Mr Walker: I have caught them up on Islay; I have caught a lot on Islay.

Q23 Chair: But not in the North sea, I wouldn't have thought.

Mr Walker: You catch them in the channel, going up. As the seas warm—and they are warming—their range is expanding, so they are moving up the north coast. You catch them off Norfolk. So they are moving up there.

Q24 Chair: I am not a sea angler myself, but I am down the coast enough to see sea anglers all the time on piers at places such as Amble and Tynemouth. For us, it's mackerel, codling and the odd herring; we don't see much sea bass.

Mr Walker: The range is expanding, Mr Mearns, but as Mr Mann said, one of the problems we have is beam trawlers coming into the spawning areas and wiping them out. Bass only reach sexual maturity at between 42 and 44 cm. The perfect plate size, as deemed by chefs across Europe, is about 32 cm. That creates a major problem with recruitment.

Scott Mann: It also takes about six years for a fish to reach sexual maturity. It is a very slow growing fish and it needs some protection.

Q25 Kevin Foster: We have certainly learned something about fish today. My comment is similar to Mr Blackman's. We would want to see the actual motion for debate. Also, speaking as someone who represents a coastal community—I have the water of Torbay actually in the constituency—I would be interested in your thoughts on the impact from rod and line fishermen who do it commercially, as opposed to those who net commercially, because there is a presence in Torbay of commercial fishermen who use rod and line techniques.

Mr Walker: There are, as you know, a number of charter boats that have diversified because commercial fishing did not offer a significant return on their time or investment. It has to be said that when people go recreational fishing out of a charter boat, they do not want to kill everything, but keeping a few fish is not unreasonable. People like to do that. They don't necessarily want to buy everything from Sainsbury's or Tesco. And there will be a consequential impact in people willing to pay £40 or £50 to go and fish off wrecks. If, for one of the species that excites them most, they are not even allowed to keep a single specimen—not one—

Scott Mann: And you know, we are all hunter-gatherers. We like to think that we can go out and catch species and take them back and cook them. I think it impinges on our rights a little bit to take that obligation away from us.

Kevin Foster: This one is more for the debate; it's one for you to perhaps think about in relation to what motion you have for debate. You are talking about recreational fishing provided commercially. There is also a fishery that is a commercial rod and line fishery—that is, they go out and fish and catch to then sell on into the market. That is present in my constituency. It would obviously, depending on what motion you put down, impinge on this debate, but I think that is more for the debate. That is why I would be particularly interested to see what motion you are proposing.

Q26 Mr Bone: Am I to assume that this is an EU directive—an EU law, as it were?

Scott Mann: Our Fisheries Minister went over to do the deal on the quota, so—

Mr Walker: This is an EU-negotiated settlement and it is not quite the deal we thought we were going to get, to be perfectly honest. We accepted, as recreational anglers and speaking on behalf of some recreational fishermen, that there would be the imposition of a bag limit on recreational fishermen—somewhere between two and three fish—and people were willing to live with that. When we had “peace in our time” and we were told, “By the way, guys, it's nothing, but the netsmen can keep on catching 200 yards offshore,” there was just incredulity at that decision. It was just an extraordinary decision.

Q27 Mr Bone: What I was trying to get at was that from the Committee's point of view, I cannot recall our ever granting a debate that was directly related to an EU directive. I am not sure whether there is any reason why we shouldn't, but I wanted to know whether this was a British Government one or an EU directive. I just cannot remember our doing one like that before. It probably doesn't matter.

Mr Walker: I am not an expert like you, Mr Bone. I think it was a Council of European Fisheries Ministers decision. There has been recognition for a number of years that bass stocks are being slaughtered. The prime areas for bass stocks are ourselves and Ireland.

Q28 Mr Bone: So a good date would probably be 18 or 19 February.

Scott Mann: We are in your hands, Mr Bone.

Mr Walker: Can I ask one question before we go, Mr Mearns? Would you like us to come back with a motion, or could we do that through your Clerk?

Q29 Chair: Via the Clerk. If we are unhappy with anything, obviously we will ask you back, but I think that is unlikely.

Mr Walker: Thanks very much.

Scott Mann: Thanks very much.

Siobhain McDonagh made representations.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome, Siobhain.

Siobhain McDonagh: I am applying for a three-hour Back-Bench debate in the Chamber on the persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims and other religious minorities in Pakistan. It is now almost 32 years since Ahmadiyya Muslims were affected by Ordinance XX of the Pakistan constitution, which criminalised their practising Islam as their chosen faith. They are prevented from calling themselves Muslims—they cannot put “Muslim” in their passports. They have an electoral register specifically for people of their faith. Similarly, the blasphemy laws that were introduced at the same time are continually abused to target other religious groups, including Christians, Hindus and Shi'as.

The past year has seen a significant rise in hate speech in the Pakistani media, with more than 2,000 instances of hate speech against Ahmadiyya Muslims alone, often labelling them as licensed to be killed. More than 250 Ahmadi have been killed since 1984, purely on grounds of faith. The most recent was Bilal Ahmad, who was gunned down in January in the Ahmadi headquarters in Rabwah Punjab. Previously, Mr Ikramullah, a pharmacy owner, was murdered at work in August 2015 by gunmen who shot him several times. There has been a spate of violence in which a large Ahmadi-owned factory in Jhelum was burned down in November after false allegations of blasphemy, and an Ahmadi mosque was also set on fire. Just last month, in January, a 70-year-old Ahmadi bookseller was arrested on blasphemy and anti-terrorism charges for selling the holy Koran. He has been jailed for seven years. There has been extensive violence.

What with a visit to Britain by the Chief Minister of Punjab approaching, and the upcoming 32nd anniversary of the changes to the Pakistani constitution, we believe it is a very good time to

debate this matter. The Ahmadis are a growing community in the UK. They have recently opened their first mosque in Glasgow. They are peaceful people—you will have seen their slogan in many minicabs across London: “Peace to all; hatred to none.” They are a great community from which we can all learn a great deal. We in the British Parliament should stand in solidarity with them.

Q30 Mr Hollobone: I agree, so why don’t you table a motion saying, “This House calls on the Pakistan Government to protect Ahmadiyya Muslims and other religious minorities from persecution”?

Siobhain McDonagh: I got the point from listening to the other presentations to the Committee. This is the first time that we have tried to do something like this. I thought that, given the fact that the Chief Minister of Punjab is soon to come to Britain, we could ask the British Government to make representations to him. That is something really practical that we need to do.

Q31 Mr Hollobone: Why don’t you call on the Pakistan Government directly to protect these person from persecution?

Siobhain McDonagh: I take your advice on that.

Q32 Gavin Newlands: Mr Hollobone made the same point that I was going to make. It really needs to be a substantive motion and I agree that you would have to condemn the persecution and call on the Pakistani Government to ensure the safety of religious minorities in Pakistan. Otherwise, you are just airing the issue without doing anything. It really needs to be a substantive motion.

Chair: Thank you very much. That’s fine. If you can communicate that via—

Siobhain McDonagh: Oh yes. Just finally, Members of all parties apart from the Greens are included on my list of sponsors.

Chair: Thank you.

Kevin Foster made representations.

Q33 Chair: Mr Foster, how can we help you?

Kevin Foster: I would like to apply for a Backbench Business debate, ideally in the Chamber, on the future of the Great Western railway. To be clear, given the earlier suggested debate, I mean the railway that serves Penzance, Swansea, Cheltenham, and the various areas in between. It is different from the South West Trains franchise, which covers the south of England, south-west London and parts of Dorset.

There are particular issues that affect the Great Western that would make it an excellent subject for a Backbench Business debate. I have tried to word the motion in a way that allows for a wide-ranging debate while still being relatively specific about the areas we are focusing on. For colleagues in Devon and Cornwall, for example, the focus would be on resilience and ensuring that we don’t get cut off again. Colleagues from Wiltshire and Somerset could focus on resilience, flooding, the plans for electrification and how services might be affected by stops being removed closer to London as a result of resilience work at the other end of the line. Colleagues in south Wales will also

be interested, which helps to bring a cross-party flavour to the submission. I am conscious that the entire Opposition in the peninsula west of Bristol is covered by Ben Bradshaw, the right hon. Member for Exeter, indicating that he would like to take part.

We could have a meaty debate. We could have had a whole tome of requests given about what people would like on this railway, from branch line services to new stations and everything else, but I am trying to focus in on the resilience of the overall line and electrification in terms of putting pressure on the Government. It is particularly timely given that we had discussions last week at both Prime Minister's questions and Transport Question Time about the resilience of the line and the Peninsula Rail Task Force, which covers Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, and the recent discussions around the electrification project heading towards south Wales, where there have been concerns about escalating costs and ensuring that commitment remains strong. I think it is a similar discussion to what colleagues in Northamptonshire will be having about the proposed electrification of their route.

The motion is specific in terms of what is asked for, without getting into the nitty-gritty of how the railway operates, so that all Members can take part. If we got very specific around, for example, the Peninsula Rail Task Force, that would effectively restrict the debate to those Members from Devon, Somerset and Cornwall with a particularly strong interest. At the moment, I have the Members listed plus an additional six Members on the Government side, which reflects the balance in the area, and another two Labour Members, both of whom are from south Wales. I have also left off any Parliamentary Private Secretaries. I suspect that there are one or two PPSs, not least the Member who represents Dawlish, who would be interested in speaking in this debate, but I have left them off the application as this is a Backbench debate. I suspect that they would want to take part, but I felt that it was appropriate that only Back-Bench Members were listed as interested in speaking.

As for the timing, we would like to have it as soon as possible given that a report is due to come out on the Peninsula Rail Task Force in the not too distant future. Funding and having a clear commitment to start to implement some of the things that will come out of the report are important. The actual work on electrification has already started on the route heading out towards south Wales, so it is timely to be discussing the commitment to extend that further.

Q34 Gavin Newlands: I take your point about the motion being a little woolly in trying to get everyone involved. To make it a bit less woolly, instead of “urgently” at the end—I am sure that the Government's definition of “urgently” can be somewhat different from our definition—you could perhaps put a deadline. It doesn't have to be next week, but you could maybe have a deadline. Also, I take your point about keeping PPSs off and so on, but ordinarily, for a three-hour debate, we would have about 15 speakers on the list, and I think there are 10; let me take a quick look. Can additional names be added to the list?

Kevin Foster: I would already add to the list that is in front of you eight who have indicated their interest since the form came in. From experience of being on the Committee, it is better to get the form in and then get the remaining names rather than submit a last-minute form, so Members can consider the motion and whether it is one they would be interested in.

In terms of “urgently”, the problem is that if we got very specific—for example, delivering the report is in the next couple of months in terms of the resilience of Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, and delivering electrification is a project that will clearly take a number of years. So I accept the point being made about how we could define “urgently” in the report. That is when we start going down the path of getting into some very specific areas. For example, I would want to see a report about resilience delivered in the next couple of months; actually electrifying the line to Swansea and further

down towards the south-west peninsula, even if we committed to it tomorrow, will take a number of years.

Q35 Mr Bone: It is a very well-constructed motion. It is almost as though you were on the Committee.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, Peter.

Q36 Mr Bone: But it is woolly. It is almost a way to get into the Chamber without having a very substantive debate. It is not as good a substantive motion as some of the others we have heard, just to make that point. The other issue is that we have two applications for train debates in roughly the same area, overlapping a bit, I would guess.

Kevin Foster: Not particularly.

Q37 Mr Bone: Well, they are not in the midlands.

Kevin Foster: No, they are in that part, and there are inter-links.

Q38 Mr Bone: So, given the limited amount of time that we have in the Chamber, is there any possibility they could be somehow put together? You would have more speakers talking about trains and things.

Kevin Foster: It depends what subjects we get into. To be fair to the first application, they are going to talk about the franchise, who is going to control railways and the Mayor of London issue, which, to be quite candid, is absolutely irrelevant to a Member for Torbay.

Q39 Mr Bone: I understand that, but if they were both in and, for instance, there were only a few speakers in that and more wanted to talk, it would not matter. I am just thinking about planning. If the Committee decided afterwards to say, “Look, these are great debates, but we only have one slot left in the Chamber for two train debates”—

Kevin Foster: If your suggestion is to put them on the same track of an afternoon—

Mr Bone: Thank you for that.

Kevin Foster —it would probably make some sense if, let us say, the Committee were looking to fill an afternoon or a period that might stretch in the Chamber. It would perhaps make sense to have those two train debates, like buses, follow each other.

Mr Bone: I give up. I can see what you are doing.

Kevin Foster: But I can see what you are driving at.

Chair: Careful; you’re going to hit the buffers.

Kevin Foster: The issue is that by trying to work out how we can couple these up and give the discussion a head of steam—I can understand the point, depending on the timing of the others. The only issue I have with this one is that this debate would be very much about the track, the structure and the infrastructure going into the regions, and I suspect that London Members would wish to have more a debate about the future of suburban rail and whether it is devolved, and Members for the south about who will run the trains.

There is a separate debate in the Great Western region about whether the current franchise is always the right one or not, and I would not say that that is the prime focus of Members for the south-west region. To be honest, if you have had the experience of not having a railway, you are perhaps less worried about exactly who is running the thing and more concerned about having a railway whose franchise you can debate. I would certainly accept the point that they could perhaps be sensibly put together in an afternoon.

Q40 Chair: Kevin, is the main franchise on the main lines that lead down to the south-west called Great Western Railway?

Kevin Foster: It is difficult. It used to be called First Great Western. I have used “Great Western Railway” to define it as where the old Great Western company was. If you look at a map, it is virtually the entire section of south Wales up to Oxford and Cheltenham and then right the way down through the south-west, excluding Dorset. I have used it to get around having to talk about the exact difference in the franchise used for local trains, such as Arriva Trains Wales and CrossCountry.

Q41 Chair: Just for clarity, could you retitle it “Future of the routes of the Great Western Railway”?

Kevin Foster: I am happy to do that, Chair. I was just trying to find a way of describing it without missing out a bit of track.

Q42 Chair: I am aware, for instance, that there are trains that serve our part of the country that travel up from the very far south-west on CrossCountry routes.

Kevin Foster: They do.

Chair: So it is more than one franchise which works on this piece of infrastructure.

That is the formal business of the Committee concluded. I thank you very much for your attendance.