



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 23 February 2016

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 23 February 2016

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

Peter Aldous, Mary Glindon and Kirsty Blackman; Helen Hayes, Liz Saville Roberts and Albert Owen made representations.

Questions 1-13

Peter Aldous, Mary Glindon and Kirsty Blackman made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee sitting. We have two applications this afternoon, the first from Peter Aldous, Mary Glindon and Kirsty Blackman.

We understand that you have an additional list of names for us. Do you have it with you?

Peter Aldous: I do not have the precise names, but the number has gone up dramatically in the past two or three days in that as well as ourselves, we have a further 12 colleagues who wish to speak in the debate. We will get the full list to the Clerk straightaway after the sitting.

Q2 Chair: That would be appreciated. Would you outline the reasons for the application, please?

Peter Aldous: Yes. Basically, the low oil price has had a dramatic effect on the North sea industry. I am here today with Kirsty and Mary, representing the three areas of the country—East Anglia, the Aberdeen area and the north-east—that are the most affected by this, although the effects go right across the country. There has been another report today from Oil & Gas UK emphasising the significant impact this is having on the industry.

Not only does it affect our three areas particularly badly, but the North sea industry is an import part of the manufacturing sector in this country. It is also a significant exporting sector, which has arisen in the past 50 years as a result of activity on the UK continental shelf. A lot of the companies involved are listed on the stock exchange, and it has a significant effect in the City. Also, I think the industry has a significant role to play in the future energy security of this country. There are, we think, pressing reasons why a debate is needed.

Ideally, we want the debate to take place before the Budget on 16 March, because there are certain fiscal policies that we think need to be addressed. It is a difficult time for the industry, but there is an opportunity now for the industry to rebalance itself and to reconfigure how it does things. It can have an exciting future for the next 30 or 40 years, from which the whole UK would benefit. We think this is an appropriate time to raise those issues and highlight them in a debate in the main Chamber.

Kirsty Blackman: I do not think the importance of the fiscal issue and of the 16 March date can be overstated. The industry is notorious for not working together. Lots of the companies have not worked together in the past, but they are realising the significance of what is happening and the low oil prices mean that they are actually working together and all pushing for fiscal change. I think it would be a really good time for MPs to debate the fiscal changes that could happen in the oil and gas industry.

There have been 65,000 job losses—a significant number. Look at some of the issues with steel plants and factories that have been closed, and the job losses there. They have been debated on the Floor of the House, but the numbers here are incredibly significant—65,000 is a huge number. The Oil & Gas UK activity survey makes clear how bad things have been over the past year—worse than anyone was predicting. There is an increased risk of insolvency for some of these companies—greater than ever before. Parliament needs to discuss how we can support these industries and ensure that there are no more job losses. From the point of view of the Government and the Treasury, presumably the UK wants to maximise economic return, so these are really important matters to be debated in public—both for the public to hear and to enable MPs across the House to get a better grip on what is happening.

Mary Glendon: Following on from what Peter and particularly Kirsty have said, there have been debates and discussions about the terrible situation surrounding the steel industry in the north-east. In my constituency, we have lost 2,000 jobs from OGN on Tyneside since Christmas. Despite all the hard work that has gone on in the background, workers in the oil and gas industry in my constituency and the surrounding area feel they are not getting the same voice that the steelworkers had. They are not detracting from the seriousness of what has happened in the steel industry, but they feel that they need their representations made, too, about what has happened to them.

We also have to consider the loss of skills. You have heard about 65,000 jobs being lost. People may have to go away to find work. What does that mean for apprenticeships? There could be a very wide-ranging debate about the oil and gas industry and its significance, not just to the economy but to the social fabric of our country. While people have jobs in this country, we are holding together communities. If people in the oil and gas industry work abroad, they are not coming home every night to see their family. What effect does that have? It is profound, going beyond the economy right down to the social fabric of our communities, and it happening now. That is why the debate is urgent.

Q3 Gavin Newlands: You have made a strong case. I think the issue probably should be before the Chamber. The only note of caution I would sound is that you have asked for a general debate, and this Committee could put a general debate in Westminster Hall. You talk about the fiscal issues and a report that has just come out; is there anything you can call on the Government to do in

the run-up to the Budget, or call on the Chancellor to do in his Budget, so that there is a motion before the House?

Peter Aldous: There are a number of fiscal measures we could be looking at—the overall levels of taxation at the moment, for example. Although there have been additional funds for seismic research, one could look at that as well. From my perspective, in the southern North sea, a different rate for gas taxation, as opposed to oil, would be something we could look at.

There are other issues. We are trying to encourage what I would call a more collaborative approach in the industry, so that as we move into the final stage of oil and gas exploration on the UKCS, different types of companies are involved—much smaller companies, rather than the big guys. It is important to encourage everyone to work together collaboratively; that way, we can make the most of what is out there and create job opportunities. Most important is localising the supply chain and making sure that the fabrication yards—Mary mentioned OGN on Tyneside and I have a similar company in my yard—have every opportunity to pick jobs, rather than those jobs going abroad.

Q4 Chair: That is very wide ranging.

Peter Aldous: It is, yes.

Chair: I am wondering whether there is an opportunity to distil that down into a votable motion to put before the Chamber.

Q5 Bob Blackman: I do not doubt the importance of the issue. Who do you envisage replying to the debate on behalf of the Government—which Department?

Peter Aldous: That is a good question. On the fiscal measures, you would obviously be looking to the Treasury to respond. On the wider issues for the future and maximising recovering of oil from the UKCS, then you are looking at DECC. I think where we are now—I welcome Kirsty's and Mary's perspective—leading up to 16 March, it is probably appropriate to ask the Treasury to respond.

Kirsty Blackman: In terms of distilling it into a motion, I would be comfortable if we were calling on the Chancellor to look at measures to support the sector in the March Budget, but I have not discussed that with my colleagues here.

Q6 Bob Blackman: The other point is that time in the Chamber is very limited. You have asked for a general debate, and distilling the wide range of issues you have talked about into a motion might be challenging, but the Committee has a number of opportunities in Westminster Hall. You have asked for three hours. There is a definite opportunity for a 90-minute debate on Tuesday morning in Westminster Hall and there are opportunities for a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall. If that is what the Committee decided to allocate to you, would you accept it?

Peter Aldous: Ideally, because of the seriousness and importance of the subject, my personal preference would be for the main Chamber, but if that was what was on offer—the timing is obviously important, also—I think we would take that, yes.

Q7 Mr Nuttall: My question was along similar lines. To be clear, bearing in mind that the Budget is fixed, we will at best have only one or two opportunities to allocate time in the main Chamber before that date. If it came to it that there was a choice between not having a debate before then and saying, “We’ll wait for the Chamber till after then, but we can have a debate beforehand in Westminster Hall,” which would you go for?

Peter Aldous: Oh, we would definitely go for the one beforehand in Westminster Hall.

Q8 Mr Nuttall: So being heard before the Budget is more important to you than the venue?

Peter Aldous: Yes.

Q9 Mr Hollobone: How about this? “This House calls on Her Majesty’s Government to announce with the 2016 Budget a fiscal action plan to help protect the offshore oil and gas industry from the oil price collapse.”

Peter Aldous: I am perfectly happy with that. Thank you very much!

Chair: If you adopt that suggestion or something very close to it, feed that back to the Clerks, please. Thank you for your time. We will make our decision at the end of the meeting.

Helen Hayes, Liz Saville Roberts and Albert Owen made representations.

Q10 Chair: Good afternoon. You have an application for a debate on court closures.

Helen Hayes: That’s right. This is my first time in front of the Backbench Business Committee, so please bear with me.

I would like to apply to the Committee for a three-hour debate on the recent announcement that, following consultation, the Government are to close 86 courts and tribunals across England and Wales. This announcement was made by the Minister responsible in a written statement on the last sitting day before recess. The main reason for requesting this debate is my strong belief, and that of many other colleagues across the Chamber, that an announcement of this significance should be the subject of a debate on the Floor of the House of Commons. During the last Parliament, the then Justice Secretary made a similar announcement in an oral statement, setting a clear precedent for this issue to be discussed in the House.

The reasons why I and colleagues from constituencies as diverse as Reigate, Vale of Clwyd, Bassetlaw and Brent Central think that a debate on the closure of 86 courts and tribunals is important include, first, the implications of this closure programme for access to justice in towns, cities and rural communities across the country. Colleagues who represent rural constituencies have raised concerns about some of their constituents having to travel very long distances on routes not well served by rural bus services, and sometimes not possible to travel to and from in a single day. In urban areas, such as my constituency, some of the closures will result in people on lower incomes, for whom train and tubes are unaffordable, having four-hour round trip to their court hearing.

Secondly, it is acknowledged that some of the proposals have changed as a result of the consultation process, which took place in the autumn. For example, some of the functions performed by my local county court, which is on the closure list, will now not move to Putney, but will move to Camberwell instead. This news was cautiously welcomed by some legal professionals locally, but there are many unanswered questions about the detail. Last week I met staff at a local law centre, who told me that their reaction to the revised proposal was very dependent the detail of how exactly the change would be implemented. Members should have the opportunity to ask those questions and debate the detail with Ministers in the Chamber.

Thirdly, very serious concerns were expressed during the consultation by a wide range of magistrates, third sector organisations and other respondents about inaccuracies in the consultation document. The Government acknowledged a number of these but have now leapt to a decision. It is important that Members have the opportunity to scrutinise the extent to which those inaccuracies have been eliminated from the decision-making process.

Finally, there are considerable implications arising from the closure programme for court staff, ranging from the practical provision of duty solicitor services, which are vital in maintaining access to justice, the potential loss of particular specialisms and the scale and distribution of loss of posts. These impacts can only be properly understood and scrutinised now that the full closure programme has been announced, and they have not been the subject of parliamentary scrutiny to date.

This request has the support of 23 MPs from the Conservatives, the Green party, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Plaid Cymru whose constituencies will be affected directly by a court or tribunal closure. We know that many other colleagues take a direct interest in this matter and would also welcome this debate. I am grateful for the Committee's consideration.

Q11 Chair: The list of supporting Members you have provided is light on Conservative Members. Do you have additional names?

Helen Hayes: We have four Conservative Members now, and I can provide an updated list to the Clerks.

Q12 Chair: We would appreciate that. Thank you. Do you have anything to add, Liz?

Liz Saville Roberts: I have three points to make. The first and foremost is on the Welsh language and the right to use Welsh in courts. Initially, there was to be no Welsh language assessment in this part of the consultation. There has been one, but I think there is room to debate that.

Secondly, there is the wider consideration of alternative venues and the degree to which those have been considered thoroughly, particularly those in the public domain, and the concept of sharing public spaces, thus saving money and making best use of those spaces.

Thirdly, I think it is important to discuss more widely the assumption that technologies such as videoconferencing can be adapted to use in these situations, perhaps without a proper understanding of both the opportunities and the challenges that they offer.

Albert Owen: Helen gave a good presentation. I think the Government are trying to use a one-size-fits-all model across England and Wales, and it simply does not work. They talk about journeys to court of 20 miles as the crow flies, but buses don't fly in the same direction as crows in my area and they have to circumnavigate big areas. Multimodal transport has to be used. If they close in the

peripheral areas, getting to the proposed centre in Caernarfon will involve a bus and train journey for people. That could mean witnesses and defendants travelling together on the same day on the same mode of transport. It just has not been looked into in great detail.

I do not get emotional, but local courts are the cornerstone of the British system. The very fact that local people go before local magistrates in local areas has been there from the beginning of the courts system, and it should not be eroded to close the deficit, to be frank. The Ministry of Justice has been asked to make savings, and I understand that, but I do not think we should sacrifice local courts to help deficit reduction. I feel very strongly about that.

Regarding the alternatives, in their report on the closure programme, the Government have only exempted a few and downgraded some, but where they say there will be alternatives, no explanation is given. I think the British public and those affected by these proposals deserve to know. A debate would bring that out on the Floor of the House of Commons and get a Minister there to give answers about those alternatives and not just say, "We're closing and looking at alternatives." Full consultation should have been given a full response, and we have not had that full response.

Q13 Mr Hollobone: Would any of your Conservative supporters be prepared to be a lead Member, so that we had Labour, Welsh nationalist and Conservative Members' names on the motion?

Helen Hayes: Without asking them, I cannot make that commitment on their behalf, but my understanding from our interaction with those Members is that their strength of feeling is very great. I would certainly be happy to put that question to them and come back to the Committee.

Chair: No one else has any questions. Thanks very much indeed for your application. That ends the public session.