



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting

Tuesday 8 March 2016

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday 8 March 2016

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

Jonathan Reynolds; Jim Shannon made representations.

Questions 1-13

Jonathan Reynolds made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. The first applicant this afternoon is Jonathan Reynolds with an application for a debate on cabin air safety and aerotoxic syndrome. Would you briefly outline the reason for your application?

Jonathan Reynolds: Thank you very much Chair and Committee. I had forgotten that one of the privileges of being a Back Bencher is being able to come before this Committee. It is particularly nice to be back here after a number of years.

I am sure that you have read the briefing that I supplied but let me say that I am someone who is always willing to be open-minded when presented with evidence or a request to look at any sort of health and safety in the workplace or industrial disease issue. The reason for that is the history and legacy of asbestosis and mesothelioma in my constituency and, I'm sure, in the constituencies of many hon. Members here. I would never want to have been on the wrong side of history when looking at a potential industrial or workplace issue like this. It is through that prism and through my own interest in transport issues in particular—you will be aware that, until fairly recently, I was one of Labour's shadow Transport Ministers—that I have come before the Committee today with the issue of cabin air safety and toxic air.

To be slightly technical for a second, as Committee members might be aware, the problem of toxic air is that when planes fly at altitude, air pressure means that people obviously cannot breathe independently, so the air that you breathe in the cabin is supplied from the engines once it is cooled.

Obviously the engines on modern airplanes are incredibly complicated and feature a lot of lubricants, oil and so forth. The air has to be filtered to ensure that there is no contamination in the cockpit, but we do know that there are incidents that the Civil Aviation Authority records of what are called fume incidents, where contaminants enter the cabin. That is the core of the issue.

Concern has been building for quite some time about this as a potential danger to health. There have been a number of incidents: it is mentioned in the coroner's report on the death of a British Airways pilot, plus an inquest has just begun into the death of a member of cabin crew. There is a number of similar incidents that the unions representing the workforce in the airline industry have on file that are progressing through their inquest stages. So concern is building that this could be a potential industrial health issue.

We know for certain that there are these incidents of contamination. The issue is whether they pose a threat to health. The Government's position at the minute is that they do not pose a risk, although the Civil Aviation Authority is more nuanced, saying that a risk to health "cannot be excluded." The purpose of requesting a debate is to have an opportunity to present case details that MPs have from constituents who have been affected and to look at the issue more thoroughly. I would request that the Government look at the issue and undertake an inquiry of some kind. Given that this is an interest that is being pursued in other countries, it would be appropriate to get a chance to raise these issues in our Parliament. I certainly think that it is something that has not been discussed before and is worthy of consideration.

A good cross-party set of colleagues is supporting this debate, particularly colleagues who have airport interests in their constituencies and significant number of cabin crew. I would be grateful if you would consider the request for a debate.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Any questions?

Q2 Mr Nuttall: What Department do you think would be best placed to answer your concerns? There would be interest from a Health point of view and from a Transport point of view. Who would you expect to see at the Dispatch Box?

Jonathan Reynolds: That is a good question. My expectation would be the Department for Transport, because it is about regulation of the aviation industry.

Q3 Mr Nuttall: So you are looking at it mainly in that way.

Jonathan Reynolds: Absolutely. I think Transport would be the best Department for it.

Q4 Kevin Foster: I just want to query what the overall focus would be. What sort of items are being called for? I am conscious that as it is Westminster Hall, you have asked for a general debate, but what sort of solutions might be suggested and what points would provide an element of debate? I am conscious that we could all stand there and say, "This might be a problem," but what is the drive for having a debate as such?

Jonathan Reynolds: I think the purpose of the debate we would be driving for is: to draw attention to this as an issue; to look at some of the evidence that is being compiled in this country and others; to look at international approaches and what is being said; and ultimately, from my perspective, to request the Government to look at this in more detail and approach it with an open

mind. I think there is enough casework and anecdotal evidence to suggest that there is something worthy of examination here. I would not put it any stronger than that, but in terms of the cases and the people who have presented themselves so far, I think there is definitely something here that is worthy of further examination.

Q5 Mr Nuttall: Looking at the potential timing of the debate, you have indicated that you feel it would be appropriate for three hours in either the Chamber or Westminster Hall. There is no time in the main Chamber before the Easter recess, but it may be possible for this to be allocated to Westminster Hall. If you were offered that, would you accept that? You ticked the “either” box and, as far as I am aware, this matter has not been debated before in Parliament—I think you said that in your submission. We tend to start things in Westminster Hall and, if there is a lot of interest, it could always go to the Chamber on a future occasion.

Jonathan Reynolds: I would be happy with Westminster Hall if that is what is available in terms of the calendar.

Q6 Chair: For the record, Jonathan, we have two potential slots: Thursday 17 and Thursday 24 March, both of which are three-hour slots beginning at 1.30 pm. Could you do either of those if we allocated that time to you?

Jonathan Reynolds: Yes, either of those.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I ask Mr Jim Shannon to come up, please.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q7 Chair: Good afternoon, Jim, and welcome. This afternoon you are presenting two applications. Taking them in the order in which they were received, the first one is on water aid for Africa.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Chairman and Members, for giving me the chance to come and make my requests.

I understand that water aid was debated in Westminster Hall in the last Parliament but has not been in this one. Six hundred and fifty million people—one in eight on the planet—live without safe water. If I am talking too fast, Chair, just slow me down—reel me back. I have a habit of going in full flight, so to speak.

My interest in this issue is that 2.3 billion people—a third of the world’s population—live without adequate sanitation, and 315,000 children under five die every year from diarrhoeal diseases caused by dirty water and poor sanitation. That is 900 children every day—a quite shocking figure. The only clean water source is often miles from villages, which means that young girls and women have to carry the containers above their head on a journey of maybe 10, 15 or 20 miles to get water and bring it back again. They are susceptible to attacks by men as well.

There are other things that spin off this. The social and economic effects are the highest priorities in the African communities. The World Health Organisation has shown in very clear economic terms that for every \$1 dollar invested in water—that is only a small amount—the economic return is between \$3 and \$34, so the economic advantages are marvellous.

More people in the world have a mobile phone than a toilet. That statistic gives you an idea of the importance of the issue. We can all get a mobile phone, but we can't all have a flush toilet. A third of all schools lack access to safe water and adequate sanitation and, in low and middle-income countries, a third of all healthcare facilities lack a safe water source. Every 90 seconds a child dies from a water-related disease. Sometimes, women in Africa and Asia spend six hours a day trying to find water.

That is the importance of the debate, I hope that with just those bullet-point facts I have illustrated that. I hope you have a copy of this. You have seen that the 19 Members who have signed it come from all political parties, and there is an Independent as well. We have managed to gain support from the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and ourselves, the DUP, as well as from an Independent Member. I think that that indicates the interest across parties.

I have spoken to you already, Mr Chairman. I am seeking an hour and a half in Westminster Hall, just to put it into perspective. Hopefully that is acceptable to you and the Committee.

Q8 Chair: Thank you very much, Jim. Can I check one thing? There is a charity called WaterAid.

Jim Shannon: Yes.

Chair: Is the application for a debate tied to that particular charity, or are you just talking about the general concept of water aid?

Jim Shannon: I am just talking about the general concept of it, although to be fair, I will probably mention their work. We have some churches back home that are involved with them, helping dig wells to create a water source for people in Africa, but it is not about the charity.

Q9 Chair: The reason why I am asking the question is that I am a regular subscriber to the charity WaterAid. Therefore, in terms of openness and transparency, if there is a decision made by this Committee, I want everyone to know that I support that charity.

Jim Shannon: That is great. Thanks very much.

Q10 Kevin Foster: It has been interesting to hear the figures given already. I have a couple of questions. First, what do you see as the objectives of this debate? Obviously, it will bring attention to the issue, but what specific things might be raised? You can talk about problems, but potential solutions might be suggested in the debate.

Secondly, although it is obviously a very wide area with lots of interest, you have asked for only 90 minutes. Considering the number of speeches and even the odd intervention, which we sometimes get in an Adjournment debate, do you think that is likely to be enough time, given the level

of interest? To put it bluntly, people need more than a minute or two to actually say anything in a debate.

Jim Shannon: I suppose I probably try to set the parameters, if I can, for what the interest would be. I am always very conscious that if you ask for a three-hour debate, you have to fill the Chamber. I am conscious of what day it will be. Sometimes, if you are in the graveyard shift, if I can use that terminology—I think it is a real thing on a Thursday—maybe not everybody will want to stay. When we look to a three-hour debate, I am conscious about making sure that we have participation and contact. I believe that the number of Members who have signed shows an interest across the Chamber among all parties to participate in the debate and do their bit.

You asked me about solutions as well, Kevin. I suppose, first of all, you raise awareness. I think we will look at solutions to providing more wells across Africa. The Conservative Government have been very proactive through DFID in doing that, but I think we need to look at being more proactive and giving additional help. If the debate raises awareness of the need in Government, and specifically in DFID, to look at things they can change very quickly that would make a difference to people's lives, that is what I want to try to do.

Q11 Kevin Foster: My final point partly links to the Chair's point. When I read the title, I wondered whether it related to the particular charity that shares that name, and I recognise that the work they do is probably very similar. Would a title like "Water and sanitation in Africa" or something like that make the subject clearer? Would you be amenable to that sort of title change? It would be exactly the same topic and exactly the same points, but it would perhaps decouple it from the name of a specific organisation working on those areas.

Jim Shannon: I am very happy to accede to the request. You are right. In the bullet points, I mention sanitation on a number of occasions, so that is what it should be about. I absolutely agree.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Shannon; that is very kind of you.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q12 Chair: We now move on to Mr Jim Shannon—[*Laughter.*] The application is for a debate on dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Jim Shannon: I suppose I make this request because as a Member of Parliament I have had more direct contact with people who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia and perhaps Parkinson's. It takes some 20 years and millions of pounds to develop a new drug from scratch, which is why we need to be looking proactively towards new drugs to tackle dementia.

What is happening in my constituency, and I suspect in yours, Mr Chairman, and those of other members of the Committee, is that the age range is dropping. It used to be those over 70 and maybe those over 80 more so, but now one in 50 people between the ages of 65 and 70 has a form of dementia—it is starting early. The existing drugs have made some difference, but we also need to look at the availability of those drugs. For research and development, perhaps we need the Government working in partnership with the pharmaceutical society.

As we heard in the other presentation by Jonathan earlier, money always comes into these equations. Dementia costs the UK some £26.3 billion a year, which is enough to pay the annual energy bill of every household in the country—that is the magnitude of dementia and Alzheimer's. I tabled an EDM last week that sets out six simple steps. It is not a medical thing but six simple steps that we can do. What can we do? We can stop smoking. We can drink less alcohol. We can exercise more. We can read more books. We can check our diet. These are simple things that we can do individually, outside the medical regime. At the same time, we can't ignore the fact that 850,000 people live with dementia in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—a figure that is predicted to rise to over 2 million by 2051.

I am a great believer in being proactive. If we want to be proactive in addressing dementia, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, we need to have a policy and a strategy in place. I understand that things are devolved, but I am always very keen in this place, as you will know, Mr Chairman, to ensure that we have a strategy that takes in the whole United Kingdom, all the regions all together, to address an issue.

We have some 60,000 deaths a year that are directly attributable to dementia. In five years, if we take good action, we could reduce that by 30,000 a year. Some 44% of people with dementia in England, Wales and Northern Ireland receive a diagnosis, so there is good news. The diagnosis is very important, so let's get it early—if you get it early, you can take steps to address it—but that still leaves a percentage who don't get diagnosed. Diagnosis rates in England, on average, are just 48%, which means that there are 416,000 people in England who are living with dementia but who are not yet diagnosed, which is a big figure.

Mr Chairman, you know how I do things. I am not out to annoy people, to be aggressive or to seek arguments; all I am about is solutions. A solution for addressing the dementia issue in the whole United Kingdom is what I am about. A debate would give time for the Government, and particularly the Minister, to come back with a response—I know that the Minister works very hard.

The diagnosis rate in Wales is just 43.4%, which again means that some 25,000 people in Wales are living with dementia but have not yet been diagnosed. In Northern Ireland, the diagnosis rate is 64.8%. We have a good diagnosis rate—again, I understand it is a devolved matter—but there are still some 7,000 people in Northern Ireland who are living with dementia but who have not been diagnosed.

I will conclude by saying that there are 670,000 carers of people with dementia in the UK. I always say this: never forget about the carers. The money that they save the NHS across the whole United Kingdom is £11 billion a year, which is a huge saving to the NHS, but I believe those family carers carry huge burdens, too. In the debate, if we get the chance, maybe we can ask what support is available to them.

In our submission of those who are interested and prepared to consider being part of the debate, we have 22 Members. Again, they encompass all the parties—Conservative, Labour, Lib Dem, Scots Nats, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, Ulster Unionist, ourselves in the DUP and an Independent.

Q13 Kevin Foster: Jim, you might be able to guess the question that is coming. This is a very large area, and I can think of one ward in my constituency where 9% of people are aged over 85, so of course dementia and Alzheimer's are a real challenge in that area. Lots of people would want to speak, and I am sure there would be a few interventions, too. Do you think that 90 minutes would be enough for a good examination of this issue?

Jim Shannon: Honestly, a three-hour debate would be more suitable. This is a massive issue, and I think it is even bigger than the water aid one—I say that with respect. It is applicable to all of us. I know that we have asked for an hour and a half, but I suppose that I am never terribly ambitious in looking for a timescale for a debate, but if three hours is possible, I am of the same opinion as you, so I will leave that as a request. I suppose that I ask for debates on what is achievable, so maybe look at it that way. I thought a one-and-a-half-hour debate would be achievable, which is why I asked for it, but I would be more than happy with three hours, if you are agreeable.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Jim. That is very good. I thank you for your attendance.