



Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting Tuesday 26 April 2016

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

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

James Heappey, Christian Matheson and Mark Williams; Julie Elliott, Michelle Thomson and Chris White; Paul Blomfield, David Mowat and Roger Mullin made representations.

Questions 1-21

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. This afternoon we have three applications, the first of which is from Chris Matheson on bank branch closures.

Christian Matheson: I am making the application jointly with Mr Heappey and Mr Williams. The application is for a three-hour debate in the Chamber to consider the effect of bank branch closures on local communities and how these can be addressed and mitigated. We believe that the issue affects rural and suburban constituencies, areas and communities up and down the country. I was very gratified and grateful to receive support from across the parties and believe that there is sufficient support for this. The aim is also to hold banks to account, because there is a feeling out there, particularly among constituents, that when bank closures take place, there is very little form of redress or explanation. The closure takes place; it affects the community, small businesses and people who perhaps have limited access to larger banks, and they can do very little about it. In that respect, the debate would be timely. If it is in order, Mr Mearns, I will now hand over to Mr Heappey.

James Heappey: Mr Mearns, I developed an interest in this issue after all three of the remaining banks in Glastonbury in my constituency closed within 13 weeks of one another. That has meant that I have been having a look at it, and since I asked about those closures at Prime Minister's Questions, I have been very interested to see the number of people from across the country who have written to me to express their frustration at bank closures in their community.

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Clearly, there is a change in the way people are doing their banking, but the issue that Parliament should concern itself with is that although the banks are almost certainly right that more and more of us are doing things online, we are leaving behind the most vulnerable and those who find it most difficult to do their banking online. I am not sure that we, as Parliament, should allow the banks simply to assume that everyone is now on their way to doing their financial business online.

A constituency that of course does not have a vote in any election but is hugely important to all our communities is small business, which very much relies on the ability to do cash transactions over the counter at a branch, so the loss of branches is hugely problematic for it.

There is one other thing that I will add, Mr Mearns, to give you a sense of why the debate would be relevant now. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills in the previous Government, Vince Cable, negotiated the access to banking protocols. That voluntary agreement that the banks signed up to was supposed to encourage the banks to be more reasonable in their dealings with communities over bank closures. Those protocols are due to be reviewed after one year, which is about now, so it might be timely for Parliament to conduct its own scrutiny of the protocols and their success or otherwise in their first year, concurrent with the review process that is being overseen by the Treasury. For what it's worth, I think that Parliament might conclude that they have been utterly without teeth and might be worthy of review, but that is just my view.

Mr Williams: Just to add to that, the rural dimension cannot be overstated. My constituency in west Wales has lost five banks over a period of time, so I think James's point about the need to reiterate what was put in place towards the end of the coalition Government is very valid. Also, I think the last time the House had a substantive debate on bank closures was in February 2012, when there was a Westminster Hall debate for an hour and a half, so we are long overdue for another look at this issue, which I am sure has affected most hon. Members one way or another, whether their constituencies are urban or rural.

Chair: Are there any comments or questions?

Q2 Mr Bone: Obviously, this is an urgent matter and we ought to crack on with this debate, so if we could offer you a date soon—5 May perhaps—would that be okay?

Christian Matheson: I wonder, Mr Mearns, whether Mr Bone's generous consideration might be a little inconvenient, on the basis that there will be local elections on that date in parts of the country.

Q3 Chair: Banks, elections—it's a balance.

Christian Matheson: Indeed, Mr Mearns, and I would leave that to the wisdom of the Committee.

Mr Williams: I should say that there are national elections in Scotland and Wales as well.

Chair: It is a valid question. There is a slot to be allocated on that day, but we understand the tensions involved.

Q4 Bob Blackman: My question is the same. In terms of importance and urgency, the number of slots between now and Prorogation is very limited, so the options really are next Thursday

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or waiting until after the Queen's Speech when the Committee will have time to allocate in the Chamber. Is it important that your application is heard immediately, or can it wait?

James Heappey: Mr Blackman, of course there is urgency because banks are closing and the pace does not seem to be relenting, but the timeframe of after the Queen's Speech is not unhelpful in that we expect that by then the terms of reference for the review of access to banking protocols might have been published and it is entirely reasonable to use this debate to scrutinise those terms of reference as much as we comment on the wider problem of bank closures.

Christian Matheson: Mr Blackman, in response to your question, the three of us have worked together on this application, but we were supported by a large number of Members, many of whom are keen to contribute. I am keen to find a date when as many Members as possible will be in the House and able to contribute because there is widespread support for the application, which we were grateful to receive.

Q5 Bob Blackman: On occasions, this Committee is allocated end-of-day slots when Government business has finished. They may not be three hours. Is it important to you to have a three-hour debate, or potentially to have a slot with a vote and decision of the House at the appropriate time without necessarily having a longer debate when many people can contribute about the effect on their areas?

Christian Matheson: We would probably prefer a longer debate when more Members can contribute.

Q6 Chair: Something has occurred to me from what has happened in my constituency. One bank that has recently closed branches is Lloyds, which is largely in public ownership. Its forward planning was so good that it closed a branch in a shopping street with about 40 active shops, so it obviously does not want cash deposits at the end of working days. On top of that, it then closed a local branch six weeks before a brand-new supermarket was due to open just across the road. I could not for the life of me understand that because it diverted all the business to the central Gateshead branch, which had just been reopened and suddenly found it did not have enough counters to conduct business in that branch. That was fantastic planning, but there we go.

James Heappey: Perhaps I may add to that. Concurrent with all these bank closures is the reorganisation of the Post Office network. For many banks in rural communities, their get-of-jail-free card for closing a branch is that they say the Post Office will pick up the slack. The reality is that the Post Office network is going through its own transformation programme, which in most cases means closing post offices that are uniquely post offices and moving them to a counter in a village shop. The idea that they should take on all the banking function while being a convenience store does not quite add up. We are leaving behind many constituents who are less comfortable doing things online or need the reassurance of doing things face to face over a counter.

Q7 Chair: I personally have no doubt that this debate will attract significant interest from Members. Thank you for your application. We will consider it at the end of today's formal business.

Julie Elliott, Chris White and Michelle Thomson made representations.

Q8 Chair: The next application is for a debate in support of the UK's creative industries and their contribution to the UK economy.

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Julie Elliott: We are here to present the case for this debate, which I am sure will also be relevant to what is happening in your constituency, Mr Mearns. We hope to have a three-hour debate in the Chamber and we want it to take place towards the end of June if possible on the motion that this House has considered the need to support the UK's creative industries and their contribution to the UK economy.

I will set out some of the figures. In 2014, the creative industries were growing by 8.9%, which is double the figure for the UK economy as a whole. It generates £9.6 million an hour and is worth a record £84.1 billion to the UK economy. It employs something approaching 3 million people, so it is a big industry but it is hidden. It does not jump out because it is not like a big manufacturing plant or something like that, and the figures related to the sector are slightly hidden.

It is topical because at the moment education in this country is going through great change. With that backdrop, we are concerned about some of the skills and things needed to work in these industries. It is also relevant because, for the first time in more than 50 years, the Government have published a cultural White Paper. I suggest it is a good time for the Government to listen to contributions from Members, who will express the views of constituents on this matter.

It is an important subject because the Government's own figures show there is a clear economic benefit from the sector and culture is one of our greatest assets. It is also very relevant to the university sector, because universities in particular support ensuring that the talent we have coming through those universities is available to work in the sector.

There has been a huge breadth of interest in the debate. There are almost 50 signatories from across the parties, so it is not an issue for one party or one part of the country; interest in it is very broad and widespread. Chairs of Select Committees are signatories, and industry bodies are in favour as well as organisations such as MillionPlus, which organises in the university sector.

According to the House of Commons Library, this subject has not been tackled for quite some time and it is not believed that it will be debated in Government time in the near future, so it is an issue that has not really had an airing in this place for a considerable period. I think it is quite pertinent. We need to hear about the issues involved, because they are quite wide-ranging. We need three hours for debate because it is not about one issue; it is quite a complex area. We request that this would be a Chamber debate and not elsewhere.

Mr Hollobone: On a point of order, Mr Mearns. As I understand it, this Committee has the task of allocating time for Back-Bench debates in this Session. I have no problem with the application at all, but if the applicants are only interested in a debate at some point at the start of the next Session, surely that would be a matter for our successor Committee to decide and it would be quite wrong for us to make a decision on their behalf. Should we only continue if the applicants are prepared to consider a debate this side of Prorogation?

Chair: From experience, with the exception of the general election, I think previously we carried over business from one Session to the next, but I understand the point you are making. I think the Committee will remain intact with one exception.

Jess Phillips: Everybody's looking round the table.

Q9 Chair: I think it is entirely in order for the application to be made and to be added to the list. I wonder from your perspective, Julie, Michelle and Chris, what is time-specific about the end of June?

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Chris White: Thank you, Mr Mearns. At the end of June, yet another report from the Creative Coalition Campaign will be released. Also, as members of the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee, we will be coming close to a report on the digital economy, which is part of the creative industries, so a lot of things sit together. We are also obviously quite keen not to get in the way of the referendum.

Q10 Chair: Michelle, anything to add?

Michelle Thomson: A lot of it has been covered. The only thing I would say is that in my view the breadth and depth of the creative industries is generally misunderstood. It is not just about what we export, our brand, funding cuts, progress, classical or popular music and their development or gaming or use of clusters. Intellectual property, which in an accounting cost centre we might apportion to our legal sector, has in many respects actually developed out of excellence in the development of the creatives. I also think that diversity, as well as the value of trade, is not as well understood as it could be. A debate in support of the sector, which has seen progressively difficult and challenging times, would also genuinely add value to it.

Q11 Chair: As long as you accept that you will be put on a list and it will be entirely up to the successor Committee in the next Session to adopt that list or not. From experience, they would probably do so.

Chris White: I am sure that we would be willing to come before the Committee again if that were required.

Q12 Bob Blackman: This is a general debate. Would you accept a Westminster Hall slot?

Chris White: The number of people who have signed up to express interest in the past couple of weeks is already 50. I am sure that when this debate is on an Order Paper, it will encourage more Members to take part. I suggest that the main Chamber would be more appropriate.

Q13 Chair: From my perspective, a votable motion calling on the Government to do something would be helpful in securing Chamber time.

Chris White: I am sure that Julie or Michelle would like to contribute, but I think that this is an area of such national interest that it affects the majority of our constituents. There is a great element about promoting these industries. I do not think, at this stage, that we would want a votable motion on it.

Q14 Mr Nuttall: May I explore a little further the amount of time that you would like to have for the debate? The application before us says three hours or six hours. Really, I just want to know what your preference would be. You have plenty of names here. If they all turn up and all contribute, there would probably be enough for a six-hour debate.

Julie Elliott: I think it is quite right to say that we could quite easily fill six hours. We are approaching 50 names with very little effort. There was not a big push to get the names on this. The names came flooding in on this issue. We could quite easily fill six hours, but you allot six-hour

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debates very infrequently. That is why a three-hour debate is more realistic. If you want to give us a six-hour debate, we would be more than happy to have it.

Chris White: I support what Julie said. With regard to the three-hour debate, I hope that that would not be compressed with any other debate that took place during that day.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for making your application. We will let you know as soon as we possibly can. Next we have Paul Blomfield on Government Departments outside London.

Paul Blomfield, David Mowat and Roger Mullin made representations.

Paul Blomfield: Thank you, Chair. This is a votable motion on Government Departments outside London. I hope you have had the revised sheet with the additional names. The issue has been discussed in the Public Accounts Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, on which David and I have raised it. We have the support of four Conservatives and three Labour colleagues from those Committees, together with other colleagues from around the country from the Scottish National party, Liberal Democrats, and Plaid.

The background is that the trajectory of Government policy—and something that we all support—is to move Government jobs out of London because it will save money, improve policy making, and widen the talent pool from which civil servants are recruited. That has been exemplified by the DfE, MoJ and other Departments. But, against that background, in January, BIS decided to close its Sheffield office, which is a national office located in a region, transferring—not losing—247 policy and related jobs to London. Now, our application is not so much about that decision, but about the wider issues that it raises, the way in which the decision was made and the failure to account to Parliament. When we heard about the decision on the Select Committees we, not unreasonably, wondered how it could possibly be less expensive for Government to locate 247 jobs in London.

We asked questions of the permanent secretary, including to share the numbers with us and to have a look at the business case, so that we could get engaged in the discussion about how the Government had reached that decision. Both in hearings—and the permanent secretary is back in front of the Public Accounts Committee tomorrow—and in the written requests for information we have faced a history of obfuscation and unwillingness to provide information, either on the business case or the financial assumptions behind the decision. That is the frustration.

We were told that the numbers did not exist, and that it was not possible to provide them, but then we found in our hands a leaked document that provided the numbers, not all of the numbers but many of the ones we had been asking for. The numbers within that raised questions both about the robustness of the decision as well as about the fact that we had not been able to get those numbers. Our motion is seeking a National Audit Office inquiry looking at the costs and benefits of that specific decision, but set in the context of support for Government policy in general about moving offices out of London.

We think there will be a lot of interest from Members because it opens up a debate about the London-centricity of decision making, the accountability of senior civil servants to Select Committees, which is topical at the moment, as well as about the specifics around the issue that I have described.

David Mowat: Paul has made the case. We see a decision that does not appear to be robust and, indeed, at one time it appeared that the people involved were some of those working on the northern powerhouse. It really is quite obtuse that we are moving 247 jobs.

The reason given was that policy has to be done in London in BIS. That is what they have decided. These people are policy people and they are adding them to the 2,000 people—that is 2,000

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doing policy, not 25 or 30—who are going to be doing it in London. I find that difficult to accept and would like to explore that more. A debate in order to do that would be very welcome.

The other more general point, though, is that if it is Government policy to try to move jobs outside of London, for reasons that I think most colleagues would support, to the north and the west and the midlands, it raises the question of how actively that policy is being pursued when a decision such as this appears to be going through on a nod.

I think it is right that Parliament examines it properly. It is particularly right because the other reason that the permanent secretary gave as to why he was doing this is that McKinsey had a model and that said that policy has to be done in the centre and then have spokes for all the other stuff. I am not sure whether at that time it was clear—it was not to me—that in that model there were 2,000 of them going to be doing policy and, therefore, they all had to be in the centre.

It just does not smell right and I think it is appropriate that Parliament examines this properly in a public way and shines some light on what has happened.

Q15 Chair: Roger, would you like to add some weight to this incredulity, please?

Roger Mullin: Yes, I am equally incredulous at this. I put that this has got a wider framework. The Government supposedly have a policy about encouraging diversity, recognising the diversity of the UK and encouraging the distribution of civil service jobs away from the centre. This runs completely counter to that. That raises fairly profound questions about the difference between public policy and Government action. Here you have Government action that runs entirely contrary, it would appear, to public policy. I think we have got to ask fairly straightforward questions about how important public policy is when it is published.

Secondly, both David and Paul raised the issue of decision making. Basically there are claims often made by Government that they make evidence-based decisions—that they are highly analytical in nature. But when you see some of the decisions—and I think this is a classic of its type—it looks as if it is based much more on either heuristics or intuitive responses rather than any firm foundations of analysis. So I think this raises fairly profound questions about the nature of government, the nature of policy and the nature of decision making that are of interest to everyone throughout the UK.

Q16 Bob Blackman: As to the importance, I can understand your concern, but in terms of urgency is your request for a debate before the BIS executive board meets on 10 May, because of the Sheffield decision, or is it something where you are willing to wait to see what happens and then have a debate in the future, to talk about Government offices outside London?

Paul Blomfield: I think there would be some value in having it before 10 May, but I do not think it is critical. I think that the granting of the debate, if you were so minded, would be an important statement in itself, and obviously a National Audit Office investigation could only take place well after the decision had been made, so in that sense, in terms of the timeline, although it would be helpful before 10 May, a later date would be very valuable indeed to look at the wider issues.

David Mowat: It is interesting because 10 May is quite close in reality. We have the permanent secretary in front of the Public Accounts Committee tomorrow. I would be minded, if you were minded to grant us a debate, to tell him that we were going to have a full debate on this in Parliament and that we thought it was appropriate that his committee or his board should not make

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their final decision until that had happened. I think we could do that, as it were, even if the debate were in the future.

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Q17 Bob Blackman: So you have the opportunity on 5 May for a debate in Parliament, and a decision of this Parliament: would you take it if it is offered?

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Paul Blomfield: It is a very generous offer—

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Jess Phillips: It might seem a bit London-centric.

Roger Mullin: I disagree with Paul. I don't think it's a generous offer at all. I think it's a ridiculous offer, given the argument that has just been made that this affects far more than just the London-centric and a little bit beyond that. It fundamentally affects the nations that make up the UK—England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—which have elections that day. It is a preposterous suggestion that it should be 5 May.

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Q18 Bob Blackman: So what is the Scottish Government doing about pushing out Scottish Government Departments to elsewhere beyond Edinburgh and Glasgow?

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Roger Mullin: Well, they are doing a lot of that.

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David Mowat: Shall we start the debate now?

Roger Mullin: I could give you an example—the controversial decision that was made to push out, for example, bodies like Scottish Natural Heritage to Inverness, or Scottish Enterprise, which is based in Glasgow. You could go to every city in Scotland and find some aspect of the Scottish public sector of importance.

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Paul Blomfield: Perhaps I can just finish the second part of my sentence. I think I would underline the point about the difficulties with 5 May; we clearly would not get the level of participation that the issue deserves, because we are talking primarily about people who represent different parts of the regions and nations of the UK.

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Chair: I am honour-bound, though, to say that 5 May is a sitting day. I am honour-bound to say that.

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Q19 Kevin Foster: I have to say I have the Met Office not a million miles from Torbay, which was quite a successful relocation. What is interesting, looking at the debate is whether you are likely to have expressions of interest from London Members wanting to take part but this time, shall we say, from a slightly different perspective—wanting to argue that actually all the jobs should be in London? It is not just about whether everyone will come along and agree with it and say it is great, but also whether some may come along and argue a contrary point—one that you can guess in my constituency I would not agree with—that everything should be in London?

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Q20 Mr Bone: I understand entirely your desire—because I asked Vince Cable, when he was at BIS, whether he would like to relocate to Wellingborough, and he declined the opportunity. I go back to your point, Chairman. Parliament does not stop because of elections. It is not for me to say,

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but if I had been sitting there for any of the two previous applications, I would think that to get Chamber time guaranteed is really difficult.

It is quite clear that your debate ticks absolutely all the boxes: it is cross-party and, as Kevin has said, there will be arguments on the other side from London-based MPs. I would have thought it would not have been difficult to get a number of MPs cross-party because, by the way, you would be cancelling yourselves out in relation to any election. I just make that point because if I was there, I would bite our hand off and take that debate.

David Mowat: Just for clarity, I would be available on that afternoon.

Mr Nuttall: I think Mr Blomfield could cancel himself out with Nick Clegg, who is another Sheffield MP.

Paul Blomfield: We often cancel each other out.

Q21 Chair: Just for a bit of a contrary argument to Kevin's point, I have actually heard London MPs talking about decongesting London by moving jobs—

David Mowat: Funnily enough I was going to answer the point by saying that myself. I do not think it is that clear that it is particularly in the interests of London for every function in the whole country to be in London either, but that is something we could debate and discuss and there will be different views on it.

Kevin Foster: It is a point that is picked up sometimes when relocations happen, but it has to be said that when people have relocated public sector jobs out of London from some buildings, a year or so later more people are working in them on a higher average salary because of the demand for space in the capital.

Chair: Thank you very much everyone for your applications. We will be making some decisions immediately after the formal session has closed. Thank you very much indeed. That concludes the formal session and we will now go in to private session.

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