Backbench Business Committee

Transcript of meeting
Monday 7 September 2015

Representations made before the Backbench Business Committee on Monday 7 September 2015

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

Matt Warman; Emily Thornberry, Clive Lewis, Grahame Morris and **Andy McDonald; Nic Dakin** made representations**.**

Questions 1-26

Matt Warman made representations.

Q1 Chair: Matt, you are applying for a debate about superfast broadband. Would you like to kick off?

Matt Warman: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I begin by passing on the apologies of Ian Liddell-Grainger, who is my co-lead on this and who, partly because of the debate on Syria, cannot be here.

I do not need to tell the Committee that the matter of broadband and its continued roll-out fills up all our postbags on a weekly basis. What I would like is something to follow up the extremely well-attended Westminster Hall debate that I led earlier in the parliamentary calendar. The reason I would like to do that now is that, as you can see, there is huge cross-party support from Labour, the Conservatives, the SNP and, indeed, the Green party. I have, informally, the names of far more Members than I wrote down here.

It is partly because of that pressure for a debate, but it is also because we are moving into a new phase of broadband roll-out, which means that now is the right time for the main Chamber to debate what the roll-out will look like in future and how we get far better value for money as a nation than we managed to extract, primarily from BT but also from local councils and other operators, in phase 1 of the roll-out. I hope the Committee will agree that this is hugely pertinent in terms of the post we get and the cross-party support and that the timing is right because we are entering a new phase that needs parliamentary debate and parliamentary pressure.

Q2 Mr Hollobone: Thank you, Matt, for your presentation. I am struggling to think of any Member of the House who would disagree that superfast broadband should be rolled out more quickly, and therefore there is a question mark about how much of a debate it would actually be.

The second thing is that you are asking for Chamber time. Chamber time is very precious. We do not have any to allocate at the moment, and if you want Chamber time, it might be an idea to use the opportunity to table a motion to ask the Government to do something. You have had a debate in Westminster Hall; we know it is a big issue. In the Chamber, you can table a motion that, if passed, would encourage the Government to do something, yet there is no substantive motion on your application. I also note on the list of supporters Dan Rogerson, who is no longer an MP. I think I can also see two Government PPSs, who should not be supporting Back-Bench applications. I agree that this is a very important issue that should be debated, but I would like to see a motion asking the Government to do something.

Matt Warman: I agree with you in principle, and I would like to be able to provide something like that. Some of that would obviously depend on the timing, but I would be quite happy to work with the Committee to get something where we could end up with a Division.

Q3 Bob Blackman: Can you be clear, Matt, about what you actually want to achieve by having the debate? As Philip outlined, having a motion and asking for something to be done is quite clear. We have had debates on rural broadband. You name it, we've had debates on it. What exactly is the aim of this particular subject area? As has quite rightly been said, we have a limited amount of time and other competition.

Matt Warman: Put simply, the aim is to make sure that the approach we have taken in the past is not replicated and that we learn from the mistakes of previous phases of the broadband roll-out, so that we do it better next time, for the next phase and for the most hard-to-reach part of the population.

Q4 Mr Nuttall: Thank you, Matt, for your presentation. You said this was a very topical matter that needed an urgent debate. Given that we have no Chamber time available at the moment and that there are already some subjects in the queue, is there a sell-by date where you say, "Well, quite frankly, if it's that far in the future, it won't be topical any more and there's no point having the debate."? Is there a sort of end date when you say, "If I can't have it by then, don't bother."?

Matt Warman: At this stage, it will be for local councils to continue to make their own decisions. Unless local councils keep going to the point where they have developed the whole programme for the whole country in a very short space of time, rather than in the several months that we actually have in the run-up to Christmas, there is not an immediate deadline that I would say we have to hit.

Q5 Chair: I spent a little time during the summer break in rural northern England and in southern Scotland. Is there any sort of congruity between the areas that do not have superfast broadband and the areas that have very poor 3G and 4G phone connections and poor digital radio connections?

Matt Warman: There's very often an overlap between bad superfast and bad 3G and 4G and, for that matter, mobile signal of any sort. That said, this is not just a rural issue by any means. There are areas of Shoreditch—the fabled Tech City—that have terrible broadband. This is genuinely a national issue; it is not just a rural one.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Right, I think that is all that we need to know at the moment. You have lots of supporters, which is useful.

Emily Thornberry, **Clive Lewis**, **Grahame Morris** and **Andy McDonald** made representations.

Q6 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. Emily, over to you.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Chair, for giving us an opportunity to come to speak to you. This arises from a number of discussions among Members of Parliament and things that have been happening, particularly over the summer. As you know, over the summer, the Chancellor announced the sell-off of RBS shares. In many ways, the debate, nationally and in the newspapers, was about whether he was getting value for money.

We had debates about RBS and whether it should be in the public hands at the time of the international financial crash; but apart from that, we have not really had very much debate about it. To those who wish to have the discussion, it seems that the debate can be much wider than, "Should RBS be in public hands or private hands? Are the Government getting value for money?" There is an argument about, "If the bank was to remain in public hands, what could be done with that money instead?"

We have just heard about one part of infrastructure and the challenges for the country. There are all kinds of difficulties in terms of infrastructure and the amount of investment that needs to be made. Although the Government might talk about a Northern Powerhouse, there is not a lot about how it might be funded. They talk about a British Business Bank, but they have also said that its approach "will not directly lend to or invest in businesses nor use taxpayers' funds to prop up businesses with little chance of success." So it is not really the sort of thing that we think it potentially could be.

Clearly, there are counter-arguments to this. It is a question and a matter of great debate as to how you go about funding infrastructure, what the job of banking is and whether there is a public role for banking. At a time like this, it seems a very important debate to have.

Now, I don't know—having just taken my lead from the questions that have been asked—what the sell-by date of this is, because I don't know how fast the Chancellor will sell off RBS shares. We would like to have a well-attended and sparky debate, including many points of view. We hope to influence Government policy, so that a sensible approach can be taken.

There has been a lot of interest in the idea and the application is supported by 16 Members, including five current and former members of the Treasury Select Committee. The group encompasses members of six political parties, representing England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We ask for a three-hour slot in the main Chamber.

Q7 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Does anyone want to add anything?

Grahame M. Morris: I think Emily has covered the ground more than adequately there, but unlike the previous bid, which has merits, there are two distinctive points of view, which would make for an interesting debate. I point out, with respect to the members of the Committee, that when the announcement was made of this sell-off by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it was made at the Mansion House, rather than to the House of Commons, and we have not properly scrutinised the implications of this decision.

There are arguments that can be made to look at alternative models of banking. Emily has mentioned the National Investment Bank—the idea to use banking as an asset to aid the real economy—jobs and growth—like in Germany with the Sparkassen. It is an issue that should be aired, and there are plenty on the other side of the argument, members of the Conservative party—some of whom are listed—who would no doubt have a counter-argument to that. I think it would be interesting, timely and important in terms of scrutiny for the future of the banking sector.

Q8 Chair: Just one thing I would say, for the avoidance of doubt: on the form where it says, "suggested time to allow for debate," it says 90 minutes, but for Westminster Hall, it should read three hours. That was corrected in advance.

Emily Thornberry: Three hours.

Q9 Mr Bone: On that point about Westminster Hall, are you happy for a Westminster Hall debate?

Grahame M. Morris: We would prefer the main Chamber, because it is such a big subject.

Q10 Mr Bone: Why would you prefer the main Chamber?

Grahame M. Morris: Because I think there is such interest, particularly in respect of the proposals for a National Investment Bank. Mr Bone, in the past I have made bids here and I have been persuaded by the force of argument of the Committee that I should accept Westminster Hall and it has been over-subscribed. So, perhaps with the benefit of experience, we would prefer to have it in the main Chamber, given that we think the debate will be well attended.

Q11 Mr Bone: The problem with the main Chamber is, as the Chairman said, we do not have any time—it is very limited. Given what you are saying—there is a debate and a difference of views—I would have thought you could put down a motion asking the Government to do something—maybe not sell the shares or whatever. Then you could have a debate and, if necessary, a Division. That, I would have thought, would have given you a better chance of Chamber time. Otherwise, if this is a general debate, this is ideal for Westminster Hall.

Emily Thornberry: You see, I don't think it is necessarily a party-political point; I think it is something that is debated in the Conservative party and in the Labour party as well. There are a variety of different views, and I think there are solutions to be found somewhere. I do not necessarily have the answers myself, and I would be really interested to hear what colleagues have to say. I think that the higher profile that might be given to a debate such as this, which is essentially about the nature of how we fund infrastructure in the future, what the future of our country is and how we ensure that we keep up with the rest of the world, is surely one of the most important things that could be debated.

Q12 Chair: I think what Peter was saying in particular, Emily, was that we have not got any time allocated in the Chamber. This week, we have two debates pre-allocated from before the summer recess for Chamber time on Thursday, and we do not have any time allocated next week, so then you would be going on to the week beginning 12 October and we do not have any pre-allocated time—yet—for that week.

Emily Thornberry: That is why in my application I suggested October, because of being aware of that.

Q13 Chair: So, as long as your application is not time-sensitive for the immediate future, that is a possibility. But the one caveat, I would say, is that we do tend to give precedence for Chamber time to debates with a votable motion.

Emily Thornberry: Okay.

Q14 Mr Hollobone: I would like to support what you said, Chairman. I do not think that anyone on this Committee would doubt the importance of the subject; it is just that the motion as tabled, frankly, is boring. Why don't you say something like, "This House calls on the Government to suspend the sale of Royal Bank of Scotland shares until alternative models are considered," or something like that? That would generate some interest.

Emily Thornberry: Yes, all right, we will do that. That's cool; we will do that.

Q15 Mr Hollobone: The other thing I would say is that, while all of you are very distinguished Members of Parliament, you are all from the Labour party. I would have thought it would strengthen your application if, among your lead Members, you had some Conservatives, a Liberal Democrat and the SNP.

Emily Thornberry: We have someone from the SNP, and we have the SDLP.

Q16 Mr Hollobone: But they are all in the second 11. Among the lead Members—

Emily Thornberry: I suspect they'll turn up, though. Let's face it, they're going to be there.

Q17 Chair: What we are saying, Emily, is that the application is noted but could do with some modification. If you modify the application, we can then move on it. Okay?

Emily Thornberry: Yes.

Clive Lewis: It seems we are moving to an agreement, but in terms of how deep this goes into the economy and the impact it will have—one of the areas that has been looked at by some of the think-tanks that are looking at this is the alternative proposals. We could actually be seeing a £30 billion to £40 billion increase in GDP if the bank is broken up and separated into 130 local and regional people-owned banks. If you look at the figures—

Q18 Chair: Yes, but we do not want to rehearse the debate here. Will there be the mileage for a lively debate, whether it be in Westminster Hall or the Chamber? I think, to a large extent, with the modifications we have talked about, that the case is well on the way to being made.

Emily Thornberry: Would it be all right if Andy comes in?

Chair: I'll bring Bob in first.

Q19 Bob Blackman: To reiterate what colleagues have said, there is a lack of Chamber time, but a three-hour slot is available in Westminster Hall a week on Thursday. If that were to be offered to you, would you accept it?

Emily Thornberry: I don't think so. We would rather wait until mid-October and have a votable motion.

Andy McDonald: I want to make the point, Chair, that if a debate were to be held in the main Chamber, the interest would be phenomenal. The contributions that would come forward from right across the House would be incredibly informative. I know that an awful lot of people are very focused on this issue, from across the political parties. It could present us with a proper opportunity to better investigate some of the models that my Friends referred to. We all have this in our constituencies. RBS in particular has been risk-averse and is strangling some of the developments we would want to see in our constituencies. In the main Chamber, that would be given much better mileage.

Chair: Your comments are very much noted, but you know what you need to do.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you very much.

Nic Dakin made representations.

Q20 Chair: We now have Nic Dakin disguised as Jim Shannon, or is it the other way round?

Nic Dakin: Thank you, Chair. I am responding to a request from Jim, whose flight has not come in yet from Northern Ireland. I thought Ian Paisley would be here to lead, so I am the substitute for the substitute.

I think Jim has been before the group before to put forward an application for a debate in Westminster Hall on the availability of cancer drugs. A significant number of Members—at least 15—are willing to participate in such a debate. It is a very sensitive issue. We had at the end of last week, for example, the decision by the Cancer Drugs Fund—NICE—on Abraxane, which was quite controversial. The whole issue is very sensitive and worthy of an airing in Westminster Hall. I am here to speak on behalf of my colleague, who is from another party.

Q21 Mr Hollobone: You have 15 people. If you were granted time in Westminster Hall, do you think you would be able to fill three hours or only 90 minutes?

Nic Dakin: I think, based on the discussions I have had with Jim, we are confident of filling 90 minutes. I think we would prefer to have a good 90-minute debate, rather than try to fill a three-hour debate and find it getting a bit woolly.

Q22 Mr Bone: First of all, I think it is a good application for a Westminster Hall debate. It is an important subject, and I think you would get additional Members coming along. I know from chairing in Westminster Hall that 90 minutes goes by very quickly, and you have got the Front Benchers speaking. You are talking about some really serious stuff here, across a wide range, so I would have thought that three hours on the subject would possibly be a better time limit.

Nic Dakin: I bow to your greater wisdom in these matters, Mr Bone.

Q23 Bob Blackman: Obviously, Jim is the lead sponsor.

Nic Dakin: Jim is the lead sponsor, yes.

Q24 Bob Blackman: Has he given any indication of when he would like the debate to take place? Which week? We have some time in Westminster Hall next week.

Nic Dakin: I think, if it were next week, Jim would be up for that. That is my impression.

Q25 Bob Blackman: That would be the Thursday.

Nic Dakin: Yes.

Q26 Bob Blackman: The point we are making is that 90 minutes is probably too short, but three hours in Westminster Hall on the last Thursday before we break up—will that be doable or not?

Nic Dakin: Yes. I think that is a perceptive observation. If it is on a Thursday, I am confident of 90 minutes being filled, but three hours might be a stretch. If it is when we come back in October, but in a more prominent time in the week, Peter is probably right on the level of interest.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Shannon.

Nic Dakin: Thank you.