

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 28 June 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 28 Jun 2016.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster, Wendy Morton; Gavin Newlands; Mr David Nuttall; William Wragg.

Questions 1-9

James Berry

Gareth Thomas

Stephen Doughty



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James Berry made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon. While the world outside goes mad, welcome to the oasis of calm that is the Backbench Business Committee. We have a number of applications this afternoon. The first is on children's early-years development and comes from James Berry, Tristram Hunt and John Pugh. Make yourself comfortable. Can you please outline the reason for the application?

James Berry: Good afternoon. I start by saying that this is a cross-party application, involving Members from the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties. I record with profound sadness that one of the Members who signed up to take part in this debate, and who felt very passionately about the area of early years, was our late friend Jo Cox, whose name still appears on the application—it will obviously have to be removed now. I wanted to record that before starting.

Children's early years is a very important area for many Members of this House, if not all. It is topical because the Government have indicated that early years will be an important priority in delivering their strategy to improve life chances. The Government have already passed legislation for 30 hours of free childcare.

We want the debate to be about what should go into that childcare and, in particular, about ensuring that children arrive at primary school ready to learn. All the evidence shows that children who do not arrive at primary school ready to learn stay behind. The debate will give an opportunity to air different views and theories on how we can ensure that children arrive at school ready to learn. That is something that a lot of children, particularly those from deprived areas of the country, unfortunately do not get at home. The debate could look at how that could be dealt with in a nursery or childcare setting.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** If the Committee agrees and approves your application, we have a potential slot on Tuesday 12 July in Westminster Hall. Were that to be offered to you, would you be able to accept it?

James Berry: I would have to check whether the other Members would be able to debate then. I did not have advance notice of that. It was hoped that it could be in the main Chamber, given the level of cross-party interest in the subject, but if that was the only date available I would obviously be guided by the Committee.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Given that you are asking for a general debate and limited time is available for the Chamber—a debate with the potential for a Division on a substantive motion has to be allocated to the Chamber—the likelihood is that you will be offered Westminster Hall. Also, the answering Department fits with that particular date. You are competing against others, which is why I asked whether you are likely to accept Westminster Hall, because then we know what the position is before we do our allocation.

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James Berry: I personally would be very happy to accept Tuesday 12 July, and grateful. I will of course need to check whether all the individuals on the list would be able to do it as well, but I am sure that a good number of them would be. I am also sure that a good number of colleagues who are interested in the debate but are not formally part of the application would as well.

- Q4 **Chair:** If as part of your persuasion you remind them that the answering Department would be available on that day, that would be useful. I also point out that we have a waiting list for debates in the Chamber that is about three days' worth of debates long. We have some competing attentions for our time to allocate. Thank you very much for the application.

James Berry: Thank you, Mr Mearns, and thank you, members of the Committee.

Gareth Thomas made representations.

- Q5 **Chair:** This is an application on the subject of maternity discrimination.

Mr Thomas: Thank you for the opportunity to come before your Committee and make the case for a Back-Bench debate on maternity discrimination. Kevin Hollinrake, Ruth Cadbury and I have the support of 27 Members of Parliament for this debate, across six different parties. We want to debate the implications of a report that was commissioned by the Government in the previous Parliament, and carried out by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, on maternity discrimination. It showed that three in four women who were pregnant or had given birth had experienced some form of discrimination at work relating to their pregnancy, and that one in nine of them had been dismissed. The request for a debate is to try to explore what can be done to change the culture that affects so many women.

I am struck by the support that I have received not only from my own side, but from a number of colleagues in the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Scottish National party ranks. I have had a couple of cases in my constituency that reflect some of what the Government-commissioned report found. There appears to be no prospect of a debate in Government time on this report, although when I raised it at women and equalities questions, the Minister replying—Nick Boles—indicated that he was positive about the idea of such a debate.

Mr Mearns, I hope that you and your colleagues might be sympathetic to a debate in September, as opposed to now, and in the main Chamber, because that is what gets the most attention. The Women and Equalities Select Committee has just stopped receiving evidence on this matter. Hopefully, come September we will have its report to inform the debate. That is the reason for suggesting a slight delay.

- Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Gareth, I am very sympathetic to the debate. Would it

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not be good tactics to have a debate in Westminster Hall before the recess, hear what the Government have to say and then potentially come back—we are very sympathetic to that—if you don't get the answers you want, for a substantive motion calling on the Government to do something once we come back after the summer recess in the early autumn? For a general debate we can potentially offer Westminster Hall, which is available before the recess. Depending on the Committee, I suspect it is unlikely that you will get Chamber time before the recess. That would potentially give you two bites of the cherry, and you will at least have on the record what the Government's view is. I just want to gauge whether that fits with your thinking.

Mr Thomas: That is a generous offer but, as I said, the Women and Equalities Select Committee has not finalised its report. I think it would be helpful to wait until the report has been published in order to have a more informed debate. My sense is that it will be available in September.

I have had conversations with a range of groups outside Parliament that are interested in this topic and want to contribute to Members who want to make speeches in such a debate. They are aware of the timescale for the Select Committee report and are sympathetic to a slightly longer wait in order to get Chamber time.

Q7 **Gavin Newlands:** Like my colleague, I am very sympathetic to the issue. To have a stronger case for Chamber time, would it not be better to change to a substantive motion calling on the Government to implement the recommendations of their report or those of the Select Committee report? You would be much more likely to get into the Chamber. I'm not saying you wouldn't get into the Chamber with a general debate, but there is already a queue, as you have heard. That is just something to consider.

Mr Thomas: In the end, I am not going to die in a ditch over September. The crucial thing is to have the debate. I am conscious that the Committee has got a series of other debates, and having listened to the previous presentation I am sure they are all positive applications. My sense is that if there is scope to wait and to have a debate in Chamber time with the weight of the Select Committee report, it might be helpful to wait. If, following your discussions, you insist on a debate before the summer recess, I am sure that our colleagues will adjust to that. All I would say, Mr Mearns, is that I would prefer to wait until September, if possible, and have a debate in the Chamber.

Chair: Order. We now have to suspend so that we can go and vote.

Mr Thomas: Mr Mearns, may I ask whether you need me to come back?

Chair: Does anyone want to ask any further questions?

Mr Nuttall: I was just going to put on the record the fact that we do not yet know whether we will have any time in September. We are in the hands of the Government, and there may not be time. There probably will be, but there is no guarantee.

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Chair: Okay. In that case, we will call proceedings to a halt for the moment. Please return in 15 minutes.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Stephen Doughty made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** The next application is from Mr Stephen Doughty, on the topic of co-operatives' contribution to the economy. Stephen, over to you.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Chair, for having me here today. I apologise that some of the other Members who are sponsoring this application cannot be with me, but I know that it is supported by the Member who was just before you. The debate topic would be co-operatives' contribution to the economy, and it would ideally be one of the 90-minute debates in Westminster Hall on a Thursday or Tuesday, if that is okay.

Essentially, the timing of the debate is because it is co-operatives fortnight at the moment—it runs from 18 June to 2 July. Obviously, we appreciate that we are going to miss that slightly because of the nature of the referendum recess and others and not being able to get the application in before then, but we hope at least to be as close as possible to the time when a lot of people are taking an interest in this. The aim is for this to be quite a broad debate, but focusing on those who are contributing to the co-operative economy across the UK. This is going to touch a lot of Members' interests, because many of them will have co-operative businesses operating in their constituencies, and also many constituents who are members of co-operatives.

The number of people who own and control the UK's co-operatives has grown by more than 10% to nearly a quarter of the UK's population. There are 7,000 independent co-operative businesses across the UK. The sector employs 222,700 people across the country and in 2016 it contributed £34.1 billion to the economy. A debate like this would give us a chance to explore the strengths of the UK's co-operative economy. Particularly in the light of some of the very high-profile challenges in other areas of the economy—BHS and a number of other high-profile retail and commercial failures—it is good to look at alternative models and their strengths.

There has been really solid growth over the past 10 years, and obviously the co-operative economy encompasses a wide range of things. It is not just, as some people often focus on, the Co-operative Group itself; it is much wider than that. It includes credit unions, co-operative retail societies, insurance, energy, schools and agriculture. There is potential there to engage and interest Members with interests in all those different areas, and many will probably have more than one of those operating in their constituency.

The other issue that we could explore through this debate is whether there is further legislative support the sector could take in order to ensure the

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continued growth of co-operatives. In the previous Parliament there were a number of measures introduced. Indeed, I sat on a cross-party committee that helped to make some improvements, which was actually led by the Conservative former Member for Cardiff North. Although I am a Labour and Co-operative MP, there is and always has been a keen interest in co-operatives and mutuals across the party structures.

We have support for this from three of the Labour and Co-operative MPs, but also from Steve Baker and Mike Wood from the Conservatives and Mark Williams from the Lib Dems. I hope for, and encourage, support from the SNP, and I know that many of the Northern Ireland Members take a keen interest in this and have such businesses operating in their constituencies. I hope that is helpful. I am happy to take any questions.

Q9 **Wendy Morton:** It is a really interesting debate that you are putting forward. I note that under "Any further information to be considered by the Committee" you say, "Co-operatives fortnight is 18 June to 2 July." You know where I'm coming from. Does that have an impact on the application?

Stephen Doughty: No. We would have hoped to have had it during that period, obviously, but because of the referendum and the recess that simply wasn't possible. We would be keen to have it as soon as possible so that it is not lost, but there have been a lot of interesting events and a lot of different publications and so on around the country over the past fortnight that I think will provide quite a lot of interesting food for the debate.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application. That concludes the Committee's formal business for the afternoon. I thank everyone for their attendance.

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