

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 1 November 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 November 2016.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Gavin Newlands; Mr David Nuttall; Jess Phillips.

Questions 1-12

Witnesses

[I](#): Neil Gray.

[II](#): Stephen Doughty.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Neil Gray made representations.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have two applications to hear this afternoon. The first is from Mr Neil Gray. Your application this afternoon is about cuts to employment support allowance and universal credit. Over to you.

Mr Gray: Basically, over some time there has been discussion about the cuts that are due to come forward to employment support allowance and universal credit. There is a belief that the autumn statement coming up will be one of the last opportunities where a fair hearing can be given to this issue and where there is the possibility of the Government having to look at it again.

Over some time, I have managed to secure cross-party support for this debate from Members from nine parties in Parliament and I hope, if it is possible with the leave of the Committee, to have a debate before the autumn statement. I understand that time will be very pressing, but the time that it has taken to garner the support of Members from across the Chamber has obviously meant that it is only now that I am able to come forward with this motion.

Q1 **Kevin Foster:** Looking at the application, Neil, I am conscious that it seems to be focused very much on looking at the process that will be put in place to help people get back to work—is it? I am just looking through, because it is quite a lengthy motion, and I am just trying to get the feel of whether it is about the benefit system or—as it seems to be from the second part of it—about the support around, basically, disability employment.

Mr Gray: Essentially, and where I think I have managed to garner the support of colleagues, particularly from your own party, Mr Foster, it is around the timing of these particular cuts, when we also have this week the Green Paper on Work and Health coming out, and whether the cuts coming forward to ESA, WRAG and universal credit are the cart being put in front of the horse, and whether there needs to be some delay—at least a pause, a halt—to those cuts while the discussion that's to be had within the parameters of the Green Paper can be played out, so that at least the replacement system can be considered before the cuts take place for those disabled people who both have long-term health conditions and are seeking employment support. That is why it's a rather lengthy motion.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** On the time-sensitivity of this, from my reading of the motion, you want to get an admission before the autumn statement. Are you therefore looking for a debate before the autumn statement?

Mr Gray: Ideally, yes. Obviously, you have got the Budget, but that is far further down the line, where it will be far more difficult if the Government are minded or persuaded by the House potentially to overturn these cuts, or at least delay what's coming forward. The autumn statement will be the last major financial opportunity to do that.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** At the moment, regarding time in the Chamber, you will



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appreciate that it is very limited. So, if we were in the position of offering you—although you would not get your debateable motion—time in Westminster Hall, so that at least you got the debate on the stocks and got an answer from the Government, would that be acceptable if we don't have time in the Chamber to offer?

Mr Gray: The fact that this is a motion supported by a cross-party group of MPs means that it requires being heard on the Floor of the House, so that the Government—although it's obviously not a binding motion, but having the substance of the motion on the table for consideration and to be heard by the Government is very important. I appreciate that time is very pressing, but if there was any avenue by which this could be heard on the Floor of the House before the autumn statement, that would be preferable. Obviously, however, if it's not possible, having it in Westminster Hall before the autumn statement would be a second option.

Q4 **Mr Nuttall:** I would just observe that, given that the business for this week is already established, that the House is sitting for two days next week and that the autumn statement is on 23 November, that leaves one week and two days' business. Leaving aside the Friday of that week, which is private Members' business, there will be just six sitting days. With the best will in the world, the Government will probably take most of those for Government business and will probably give one of those six to the Opposition for an Opposition day debate, which, I would suspect, leaves very little time to allocate to this Committee for us to award debates. We have a list already on the stocks, as we say, of debates actually going back to July of people who have been before us and who have not been heard. These are just matters of fact that need to be borne in mind.

Neil Gray: I obviously appreciate that the timing of this is very difficult, but I hope the Committee will also appreciate that this is such a pressing matter, and the sensitivities around achieving a cross-party motion—as we have done—ensure that, as best as possible, this is not a party political matter but a matter for Parliament to consider. Unfortunately, the timing could not be avoided. I am coming before you pleading that, if there is any space before the autumn statement, we could have it then.

Chair: If I could make an observation: I think the Government are actually getting the financial cuts that they need because you have to apply for universal credit online. Quite often, applications that are put online by constituents just disappear into the ether. Because those weeks of potential benefit payments disappear into the ether, they are getting those savings anyway, from that perspective. I have certainly seen a number of cases where that has actually happened; it is very unfortunate. People are meant to live on fresh air, it seems. There are no questions. I thank you very much for your application, Neil. We will try to find an appropriate slot.

Neil Gray: Thank you.

Stephen Doughty made representations.



Q5 **Chair:** Stephen Doughty's application is to "Rethink Remembrance—raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel that need our support."

Stephen Doughty: I am here on behalf of what I think now exceeds 30 colleagues from across the House. We have about 12 Conservatives, 12 Labour Members and a number of SNP Members, Ulster Unionists and Lib Dems in support of the application. We would ideally be looking for a debate on the Floor of the House in the Tuesday 8 slot, which I know is a precious slot for the Committee to consider. Obviously, that is timed to coincide with Remembrance and with the Royal British Legion campaign. Essentially, the motion would be, "Rethink Remembrance—raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel that need our support."

You will all be aware, of course, of the annual poppy appeal held every November, when poppies are distributed and the legion focuses on the need for remembrance and to raise vital funds to help armed forces veterans. However, this year the legion is asking the nation to rethink Remembrance by recognising the sacrifices made not only by the armed forces of the past—particularly around the anniversaries we have been going through with regard to world war one and world war two—but also today's generation. For many people, and I say this from the experience of my own constituents as well, Remembrance is still very much associated with the fallen of the first and second world wars. While we will always remember them, and Parliament has obviously conducted a number of events to do so, the legion, and indeed my colleagues who support this motion, want to raise awareness of the new generation of veterans and service personnel who also need our support. We are looking at upwards of 12,000 British servicemen and women killed or injured since 1945, and the aim of the campaign, and of a number of the contributions that colleagues would like to make, is to challenge some of the common perceptions about veterans and the sort of issues they face and the support that they require. The Royal British Legion recently did a survey of 1,000 adults that showed that the vast majority associated the poppy, Remembrance and the charity's work only with world war one and world war two veterans. Only just over a third of those surveyed identified Remembrance with thinking about those who are currently serving or have recently served. I think that shows some of the perceptions we need to shift and some of the issues we need to raise.

I know this from my own work: I spent a year on a programme called "Inside the Legion" with the legion where I saw a lot of their work at grassroots level and indeed met a number of more recent veterans who were going through particular issues, whether that was housing or work and transition to civilian life, and also those suffering from mental health issues and other problems, not just from the recent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq but from the Falklands and many others from the '60s and '70s. I suppose some of you will have seen the very successful campaign the legion are running around the country where a number of older veterans—they are 88 and 97—tell stories of conflict or injury and, as they tell them, you realise that actually they are talking about people



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from the more recent generation of veterans, including: Anna Pollock, an RAF veteran who was paralysed in 2013 who is from Catterick in North Yorkshire; Ben Poku, a British Army nurse and Royal British Legion volunteer from London; Sam Jack, 29, a British Army veteran from Stansted in Essex who suffered brain damage in 2009; and Stewart Harris, who is 32, from Rhyl, a British Army veteran who was diagnosed with mental illness in 2009.

Obviously this is an issue that affects constituencies across the House. I know that many colleagues have indicated a wish to speak in the debate and highlight both individual cases and the fantastic work the legion and others are doing. It would be apt and a challenge to some of the more traditional debates we have had around veterans' affairs and Remembrance for the House to consider this motion. I am getting new emails every minute from colleagues who would like to speak and I hope the Committee might consider that slot on the Floor of the House, but if not, obviously we can take up one of the slots in Westminster Hall.

- Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Two things, really. The application talks about Tuesday in Westminster Hall for a 90-minute slot. You are now bidding for a Chamber slot on the Tuesday that you know is coming up.

Stephen Doughty: Yes, indeed. Initially we were not aware that there would be such a demand, but, as I said, literally in the last two hours I have had more and more colleagues contacting me saying they would like to take part in this. So I wanted to bid for the highest possibility but obviously I recognise the constraints facing the Committee.

Bob Blackman: Bid high.

Stephen Doughty: Bid high, yes.

- Q7 **Bob Blackman:** Which Department do you see answering this?

Stephen Doughty: I think primarily it would be Ministry of Defence, but I would hope to see Ministers from other Departments such as the Department for Communities and Local Government and others also there—

- Q8 **Bob Blackman:** The reason I ask that is that obviously, for a Tuesday Westminster Hall slot, we have to fit with which Department is answering. So if it was Defence, clearly that would fit with Tuesday 22 November, which is quite a long way away.

Stephen Doughty: Hence the suggestion of considering the Floor of the House.

- Q9 **Mr Nuttall:** To be clear, are you amending the bid in terms of both time and venue?

Stephen Doughty: Yes

- Q10 **Mr Nuttall:** So three hours in the Chamber, not 90 minutes in Westminster Hall.



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Stephen Doughty: Yes. I know that is extremely cheeky and ambitious, but—

Q11 **Mr Nuttall:** No, I just want to be clear that that is what you are saying.

Stephen Doughty: Yes. That is born out of the level of interest.

Q12 **Mr Nuttall:** I appreciate why, and I entirely accept that it would be greatly preferable if this was dealt with before the marking of Remembrance.

Chair: It appears to have expanded on the basis of Stephen's and the topic's popularity.

Stephen Doughty: I should add we that have got a number of former services personnel in the House on both sides who are keen to speak, as well as those who have worked with the legion, and indeed Front Benchers on both sides are keen to support this. I think it enjoys widespread support across the House.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application. That concludes the formal business of the Committee—a short but sweet afternoon so far.