



Backbench Business

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 10 January 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 10 January 2017.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-12

Witnesses

[I]: Ronnie Cowan and Stuart C. McDonald.

[II]: Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Danny Kinahan, Sir Julian Brazier and Victoria Prentis.



Ronnie Cowan and **Stuart C. McDonald** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the first Backbench Business Committee of 2017. The Chair of the Committee is unfortunately away on an Education Committee visit, so he has asked me to substitute for him. Welcome one and all. We will hear the applications, first of all from Ronnie Cowan and Stuart McDonald on immigration rules for spouses and partners.

Stuart C. McDonald: Thank you very much for having us along. I suspect there is probably not an MP who does not have a bit of constituency casework that resembles this; it is either a UK citizen who is not earning enough money, or it could be that a foreign spouse does earn enough money but those earnings cannot be taken into account. Those seem to be the two most common types of case that happen.

The changes were introduced in July 2012. To clarify the timeline, there was—as I understand it—an all-party parliamentary group report on the issue in June 2013. On the 19th of that month there was a Westminster Hall debate, but that was the last time this was debated, despite my millions of efforts in the ballot for a Westminster Hall debate. To clarify, since I submitted the application, I have had support from Caroline Lucas, Margaret Ritchie and Richard Fuller as well; they are also backing this.

Most of the substance is in the further information box, but the key issue is why is it that people cannot bring their spouses in if they do not earn £18,700, which is a significant increase in what was there before, and why is that they cannot take into account the potential earnings of the foreign spouse? They could be a Nobel prize-winning engineer or something, and we cannot take that fact into account.

Ronnie Cowan: As Stuart said, this is a UK-wide thing; it is a cross-party thing. We all have constituency cases in which people could come to this country and make a true and valued contribution to it, but there are these very hard and fast rules that we do not seem to be able to negotiate a way around or show any sort of common sense when it comes to applying them, and it is time to go back and redress them.

Q2 **Chair:** There is a potential slot in Westminster Hall on the morning of Tuesday 31 January. If that was offered to you, would you be able to accept it for your debate?

Stuart C. McDonald: That sounds good, yes; absolutely perfect.

Q3 **Kevin Foster:** Normally we look for applications to be from not only different parties but across both Government and Opposition Benches; we could perhaps mischievously suggest that Mr Carmichael spent a bit of time sat with my party. Have you got any Government Members who would be interested in taking part in the debate? I recognise the nature

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:31:06"
ServerTimeZone="14:31:06"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:31:42"
ServerTimeZone="14:31:42"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:32:34"
ServerTimeZone="14:32:34"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:33:05"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:05"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:33:15"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:15"
LocalTime="GMT" />



Body
UserTrail
Info3

Info1
Info2

DocName
Page 3 of 5
PhoneNumber

of it.

Stuart C. McDonald: As I say, since I submitted the application, Richard Fuller has agreed to support it as well. I got his email in support after I had submitted the application.

Kevin Foster: It would probably be helpful to have two or three more names from the Government side. To be clear, they do not necessarily have to absolutely agree with what you are going to say—it can be that they just want to take part in the debate generally.

Chair: Thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch with you later this afternoon.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Danny Kinahan, Sir Julian Brazier and Victoria Prentis made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Anne-Marie Trevelyan et al are requesting a debate on the armed forces covenant.

Mrs Trevelyan: Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity. You were kind enough to give us a debate last year. The armed forces covenant report is published in December every year, and we had a debate in Westminster Hall last year that gave us the chance to actually put this whole topic into the public arena for the first time; it had never been debated here since it was put into law in 2011. The year has been a very busy one since then, and the issue has grown in terms of public engagement and, perhaps most importantly, MP engagement. The House of Lords held a debate on it last night for the first time, which was very encouraging.

So we are keen to ask whether it would be possible to hold a debate in the Chamber, because there is now a strong cohort of MPs who are either directly linked to military bases in their constituencies or are realising that the military, both serving military families and veterans, are scattered across the UK and that it is really important to raise these issues in a way they have not been raised before. Colleagues all have particular aspects that they are now very keen to raise.

Sir Julian Brazier: The historical background to this is that in the days before we had a Backbench Business Committee four full days a year were allocated in the Chamber to defence. Typically you would have one full day discussing just equipment, one full day on the armed forces and then other days that might be on general defence or something specific, whether Trident, veterans or whatever. That whole arrangement has disappeared completely and whenever anyone asks for a defence debate we are told to approach the Backbench Business Committee. An opportunity to discuss the covenant in the terms of this application would

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:33:33"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:33"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [BJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:33:44"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:44"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:35:35"
ServerTimeZone="14:35:35"
LocalTime="GMT" />



Body
UserTrail
Info3

Info1
Info2

DocName
Page 4 of 5
PhoneNumber

principally cover serving personnel, but it would also enable scope for looking at veterans. I really think we should ask for a full day in the Chamber. It is a very long time since there was a proper debate on the armed forces more generally, let alone on the covenant specifically.

Chair: Congratulations on your well-deserved award.

Sir Julian Brazier: Thank you.

Jess Phillips: What did he get? [Laughter.]

Victoria Prentis: I want to add that the debate on the covenant would be very broad. My particular interests relate to service housing and the schooling of service personnel's children, which are probably not the same interests as those of other Members here. I just wanted to come along and add my support for a lengthy debate, because there will be Members who need to raise very specific issues.

Danny Kinahan: As I am an Ulster Unionist there is obviously a Northern Ireland angle, but as an ex-soldier it is also about looking at Northern Ireland to see how we can learn from there as to what happens in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have huge problems with mental health in the armed forces and huge problems with housing. It gets bigger and bigger to look at, but it is the same situation as everyone else's and the wonderful thing is that the Chair has pulled the regions of the United Kingdom together so that we all learn from each other and that is what I would like to see happening in the Chamber.

Q5 **Chair:** Before we proceed can I just ask whether there are any time constraints or anniversaries, anything that means you will be wanting to hold the debate around a particular week or date?

Mrs Trevelyan: No, but the opportunity to discuss the matter comes off the back of the annual report that was published just before Christmas. That obviously gives us the chance to set the markers that we want the Department, and the Government more widely, to look at in the year ahead, so a date in the next few weeks would be great, if possible.

Q6 **Chair:** You are asking for a general debate. Chamber time is challenging. If you were offered a debate in Westminster Hall earlier than you would get a debate in the Chamber would that be acceptable?

Mrs Trevelyan: Thank you, but we would rather wait, I think, and have the opportunity of the Chamber, Mr Blackman.

Q7 **Jess Phillips:** I very much support your having it in the Chamber. You had it in Westminster Hall last year so I suppose it is the natural progression, growing bigger and better. We always see applications with hundreds of people's names on them, but if a whole day was allocated,

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:36:36"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:36:49"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:37:20"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:37:49"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:38:00"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:38:18"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:38:31"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"



are you confident that the debate would fill a whole day? I am confident that it would.

Sir Julian Brazier: Although we have three Conservatives and an Ulster Unionist here there is plenty of interest on the Labour Benches. We would very easily fill a day. In fact, the reverse point applies. The danger, if we had a half-day, is that the Front Benches—all three of them—would want to say a lot and only a relatively small number of Back Benchers who wanted to get in would get in.

Q8 **Mr Nuttall:** Are the applicants formally changing the application before us? The one before me says "three hours". Are you saying that you want to formally change that into six hours?

Mrs Trevelyan: Yes, if we could. I think that was probably a natural step from where we were last time, but if there was an opportunity and you really felt that we could put a full day in, that would be our preference, definitely.

Q9 **Chair:** The only other constraint I would raise, because it is easier to do it now, is that we have some time available that the Government are allowing us for debate and one of the potential dates is 26 January. If you were offered that day, bearing in mind that it is Holocaust Memorial Day and might take a lot of people away, would you take it? What I do not want is to have you offered a debate and you accept it and then find that all the people who were going to contribute suddenly say, "Oh, sorry, we can't make it".

Sir Julian Brazier: We do not want Memorial Day. I think we all think that would be tricky. The very people who would most want to speak will all have constituency engagements then: that is the problem.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. We will let you know.

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:39:02"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:02"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:39:17"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:17"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:39:32"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:32"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:39:42"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:42"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:39:56"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:56"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:56"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:31"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:31"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:44"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:44"

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="10 January 2017"
ServerTime="14:40:55"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:55"