

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 31 January 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 31 January 2017.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Kevin Foster (Chair); Robert Courts; Gavin Newlands; William Wragg.

Questions 1-3

Witnesses

[I](#): Chris Davies, Mrs Helen Grant, Drew Hendry and Owen Thompson.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Helen Grant, Chris Davies, Owen Thompson and Drew Hendry made representations.

Q1 Chair: We will be listening to applications from Back-Bench Members for debates in either Westminster Hall or the Chamber. The first application for a debate is from Mrs Helen Grant.

Mrs Grant: Thank you, Mr Foster. I am joined, to begin with, by Owen Thompson from Midlothian, who is a member of the Scottish National party, and by Chris Davies, from Brecon and Radnorshire, who is also from the SNP.

Chris Davies: May I correct my colleague? We are actually in the same party but don't know each other very well.

Mrs Grant: Forgive me. We are learning, aren't we? I will not forget that again.

Gavin Newlands: We are open to applications.

Mrs Grant: On 7 November, Michael Fallon announced in a statement to the House that 91 military bases would be closing. The announcement was part of the "Better Defence Estate" strategy, and the closure dates for the various bases range from this year to 2032. The Government argue that their aim is to improve military capability and to rationalise the estate. Those goals are, of course, very well understood.

However, on the other side of the argument, there is considerable concern among Members and constituents about the negative impact that that decision will have. We know that it will impact on service personnel and their families, many of whom do not know where they are going or when, and on local communities, both socially and economically. There will be a loss of military heritage and connection with various towns and counties, a loss of civil community support and a reduced ability, we say, for the military to recruit and retain the very best service soldiers.

Those negative outcomes are shared by colleagues across constituencies, but in addition, we each harbour unique vulnerabilities that also deserve serious consideration. For example, Invicta barracks in my constituency has been earmarked for closure. It is the home of the 36 Engineer Regiment and the Queen's Gurkha Engineers. There is particular concern for the serving Gurkhas, for whom Maidstone has become their established home. If they are forced to move under the Government's plans, it will completely break up a very close-knit, neighbourly community in Maidstone. Those soldiers and their families have worked very hard for many years to integrate and become a part of the fabric of the area. Indeed, they have succeeded and are widely respected and cherished.

Unlike the 36 Engineer Regiment, who expect to be posted and moved from time to time, the Gurkhas tend to have one base from which they make their permanent home. That is part of a long-standing and balanced



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understanding between the UK and the Gurkhas: they come from far and wide to fight for us and take risks, and while doing that, they are able to retain their family, veterans and other support around them. To wrench serving Gurkhas from their culture or base denies them the benefit of that equation, and I believe that if that happened, it could be a breach of the Military Covenant.

This application has been signed by 11 Members, including me. They represent a very broad range of political parties, with two SNP applicants, three Labour and six Conservatives, including my colleague sitting next to me. In terms of geography, a disparate range of constituencies are represented. They run from Inverness, Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey in the far north to my own constituency, Maidstone and The Weald, in the very south of the country. Other Members would also like to contribute to a debate, if you were minded to grant it. We are applying for this debate now because we know from discussions with Ministers and others that the Government will quickly begin to implement the strategy, after which decisions will be irrevocable.

Owen Thompson: Quite simply, we all have a unique scenario within the constituencies we represent. For me, the Glencorse barracks has been listed as scheduled for closure. It is the home of 2 Scots, who have been part of the community since the base was first brought into use by the Army in the Napoleonic wars. That is not to say it has not had improvements in that time; one of the unique scenarios facing us is that £60 million was spent upgrading that base only 10 years ago, so that it is currently fit for purpose.

Beyond that, the armed forces make a significant contribution to the local community from Glencorse—there is integration with the schools and they have great close working with the local authority. Although I have a particular case to make for my local base, it is clear that there is an appetite from all corners of the country for a debate so that the issues can be aired. The opportunity presented by a Backbench Business debate would be the best avenue for us to go down.

Chris Davies: It is a pleasure to be in front of you to add my weight to the request for a Backbench Business debate on this particular issue. It is a devolved issue, in that Members from Scotland, Wales and, indeed, England are sitting in front of you today. It may be devolved, so far as it is a subject on the other side of the border, but as you are well aware, defence is a matter held in this place—and rightly so.

My great concern is Brecon barracks, which has been at the heart of the town of Brecon for just over 200 years. In fact, last Friday, I was in the officer's mess celebrating and commemorating the 138th anniversary of the battle of Rorke's Drift, which was immortalised in the film "Zulu". The Welsh regiment, the South Wales Borderers, were based at the barracks before going off to fight in the Anglo-Zulu war.

The town of Brecon is built around the Army base, which is at the heart of Brecon and, indeed, my constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire. We have



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been told, in the statement, that the barracks will be closed in 2027. It employs not just a lot of Army personnel but well over 100 civil personnel, so it is of great concern that the barracks may close.

The barracks is the mid-Wales headquarters of the 160th (Wales) Brigade, and ties in both south and north Wales, not to mention the important bases in Hereford, such as Credenhill, where the SAS is based. Strategically, it is very important to us, and we would like the opportunity for a Backbench debate so that we can put our case to the Government for keeping the bases open.

Q2 **Gavin Newlands:** I think it is a good subject on which to have a debate. The first question is whether there are any time sensitivities. Is there a time by which you have to, or would like to, have the debate? We have a slot on 9 February in Westminster Hall that would suit the application and although it is not in my gift to give it, would that suit you?

Mrs Grant: May we take soundings on that date and come straight back to you, once we have all had a quick check? I know that it may be difficult for me to attend for personal and family health reasons, but I would not want that to stop others holding that debate. Obviously, if I could check things and get back to you, that would be wonderful. I do not know whether my colleagues have anything to say about 9 February?

Chris Davies: I have the enormous pleasure of being on the Pension Schemes Bill Committee, which happens to be sitting on that date. It is a date to which I have been looking forward immensely for that particular purpose. I would like to take part in the Westminster Hall debate, so if it could be held on another date, I would certainly appreciate that.

Q3 **Chair:** I do not wish to prejudge the Committee's decision on whether to grant a debate in principle, nor the subsequent discussion about specific dates, but if the matter is urgent, that is the one day we have left before the recess. We are into the next month, as of tomorrow, but as I emphasise to all applicants, we do not have an unlimited choice of dates. Clearly, the more flexibility an applicant can offer, the more likely we are able to get your debate held, particularly if there are time sensitivities in terms of decisions being made.

Mrs Grant: I spoke to Mr Mearns about this matter, and I asked if he could perhaps have a word with the Committee. We are pretty much agreed that we would prefer the debate to come on after the recess. If that is convenient to you and helps you, and if there are more slots, it would be suitable for us.

Chair: Okay. Any other questions from members of the Committee? No? Thank you very much for your time. We will let you know our decision. That concludes the public business of the Committee.