

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 7 February 2017

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-18

Witnesses

[I](#): Nigel Adams.

[II](#): James Cleverly.

[III](#): Albert Owen, Mr Mark Williams and Craig Williams.

[IV](#): Nusrat Ghani, Dr Tania Mathias and Right hon. Keith Vaz.

[V](#): Alison McGovern

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Chair: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. Unfortunately the Chair, Ian Mearns, is still indisposed, so he has asked me to substitute for him. On behalf of the Committee, I send our best wishes to Ian for a speedy recovery. I have an application for a debate as well, so I will vacate the Chair after we have heard all the other applications—Mr Nuttall will take over while my application is heard—and I shall then not take any part in the allocation of time on my application. That is for form's purposes. May we have Nigel Adams first, please?

Nigel Adams made representations.

Nigel Adams: This is my first appearance before the Backbench Business Committee—I feel as if I have been summoned on some sort of speeding fine in front of the magistrates court, but it is a great pleasure to be here. I wonder whether the Committee will give consideration to my application that we have a 90-minute debate in the Chamber about the importance of intellectual property to the British economy. I think this is—or should be—an incredibly important part of our industrial strategy. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you for coming, Mr Adams. Clearly, you will be aware from the number of people here that there is a large number of applications for Chamber time. It seems that your request could be classified as a general debate, which then could be allocated to Westminster Hall. We have two potential slots in Westminster Hall but not much Chamber time. If you were offered either Thursday 23 February in Westminster Hall or Tuesday 28 February in the morning in Westminster Hall, would that be acceptable as a means of getting a debate sooner rather than later?

Nigel Adams: I am of the opinion that this is such an important issue that it could warrant some Chamber time. We are under no time pressure for a particular slot; we are quite happy to be bumped back as far as you like. Hopefully the debate will be held before we leave the European Union, because that is a key part of the debate—

Chair: Even our waiting list is not that long.

Nigel Adams: It is such an important issue, it touches so much of our industrial strategy and it has an awful lot of cross-party support. I would be more than happy to wait as long as it takes.

Q2 **Chair:** May I suggest one route you might wish to follow? This is a strong steer. If you accept a Westminster Hall debate in the short term and you do not get satisfactory answers from the Government, that would not preclude you from coming back to the Committee to request Chamber time for a debate with a divisible motion that might lead to a much more involved debate and force the Government to answer in the right way that you may wish.

Nigel Adams: Right. That does sound like a strong steer, Chair. Certainly that seems, in the short term, an acceptable solution.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Any questions? No. The Clerks will be in touch.

Nigel Adams: Thanks very much for your time.

James Cleverly made representations.

James Cleverly: Good afternoon, Chair. It is a pleasure to appear before you and the Committee.

I am requesting a 90-minute general debate in Westminster Hall on the topic of international trade, specifically with Commonwealth nations. I have put before you an application with a number of supporting signatures from a range of parties. I am more than happy to answer any questions from the Committee.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you for your application. We have two potential slots available for 90-minute debates in Westminster Hall, which is your request, either Thursday 23 February or Tuesday 28 February. Would either of those slots or both be acceptable to you?

James Cleverly: There is a high chance that as part of my membership of the International Trade Committee I will be overseas on Thursday 23 February, so I would therefore prefer, if possible—so that I may attend—the Tuesday 28 February slot.

Chair: Okay. Fine. Thank you. Any questions from anyone?

Q5 **Mr Nuttall:** Which Department do you see answering this debate, the FCO or International Trade?

James Cleverly: I would envisage the Department for International Trade—*[Interruption.]* Or a different Department.

Q6 **William Wragg:** The FCO might fit?

James Cleverly: Yes. Potentially, the debate could fit any of the foreign-facing Departments. There is a significant crossover with some of the work that DFID is doing in terms of aid and trade.

Chair: Okay. We will cogitate on that and let you know. Thank you.

James Cleverly: Thank you, Chair.

Albert Owen, Craig Williams and Mr Mark Williams made representations.

Albert Owen: Good afternoon, Chair. We are here as a team. We would have had Ms Liz Saville Roberts with us, but she is very busy doing a ten-minute rule Bill and a Westminster Hall debate; otherwise you would have got all the parties representing Wales here as one team—and we will be one team when we play England in the Millennium Stadium on Saturday as well. Hopefully we will be able to win the bid here and that game. I will put some of you off by saying that, but—

Chair: You stand more chance here.

Albert Owen: Which was the other reason I raised it.



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Seriously, this is an annual bid that we put in. We used to have a full day on Welsh affairs, which then became a half-day in Government time. When the Backbench Committee was formed, it was suggested by the Leader of the House that we make an annual application to yourselves.

It is a very important year, not just with Brexit, but the English votes for English laws issues, and the many issues that Welsh Members wish to debate on domestic and international affairs. We feel that the Chamber is the appropriate place for that. It is an historical event, as I say, and before and after devolution we had this debate in Government time. In recent years we have been successful in applying for Backbench Business time. I will hand over to my colleagues who are here to support me—they are two front row men.

Craig Williams: In fact I am Parliament's tighthead prop. Just to show the cross-party nature of this application, the vast majority of my Conservative colleagues who can sign are signed up to this. We see it very much as about not just the domestic and international, but the cultural exchanges that we can have. In fact, one of the Members who made representations to you earlier was saying outside that he thought the Cardiff Arms Park had been demolished, so there is clear need in the House to have this debate, to dispel myths of that nature. I just want to shut up there and say I am happy to answer any questions. This is an incredibly important debate that we have held annually for some time.

Mr Mark Williams: I cannot speak about the vast quantity of Welsh Liberal Democrat MPs, because I am the only one. To reiterate the message: there has been that long tradition of having that time in the Chamber and it is very much a cross-party bid. The debates we have had historically have always been very well attended. When we talk about time required, that time has been well utilised.

Q7 **Chair:** There is just one issue on your application. You mentioned the preferred time as 2 March, being the day after St David's day. Alternatively, you said 24 February. Can I clarify that because the House is not sitting? It would be 23 February.

Albert Owen: Is it not? There is an error there; it will be the 23rd. It is the Thursday before if we cannot get 2 March.

Mr Nuttall: The House is sitting on the 24th for private Members' Bills.

Q8 **Chair:** Right. The issue for us, however, would be that we do not know if we will get 2 March allocated but we do know that 23 February is allocated to us for debate. If you are offered that date, would you accept it?

Albert Owen: Reluctantly, yes.

Chair: Thank you. Any questions? Okay. Thank you for your attendance.

Nusrat Ghani, Keith Vaz and Dr Tania Mathias made representations.



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Nusrat Ghani: Thank you. This is my first pitch for a substantive motion and debate in the Chamber that urges the Government to publish a sight-loss strategy for England. I am supported by Keith Vaz, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes, a condition which has a huge impact on sight loss, and Dr Tania Mathias, who can give examples of the issues, not only at the coal face but also on the expertise that is coming forward.

There are almost 2 million people in the UK living with sight loss and it is expected to double to 4 million by 2050 because of our ageing population and more people living with conditions that lead to visual impairment. A survey in 2014 by the Royal National Institute of Blind People showed that more than 85% of people were more fearful of losing their sight than any other sense. Yet, despite that, eye health does not get the profile it deserves within NHS England. There is no overarching strategy and NHS England has not produced any strategy to govern it. There are, however, equivalent strategies for hearing loss and dementia, for example. There are also eye-health strategies in place for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but not for England.

In the Chamber, the only time allocated to eye health since 2010 has been one oral question and one ten-minute rule motion. That is 11 minutes over seven years. However, in Westminster Hall there have been three debates on sight tests in special schools, sight tests for drivers and looped blind cords.

We should allocate a significant amount of time and I am asking for a three-hour debate in the Chamber to discuss this very important issue, because it affects so many people in so many ways, and will affect even more people going forward. Should you ask why we need to look at the issue, it is because there are efficiencies that we can improve in eye-care services and because we can make better use of existing resources across primary and secondary care, as well as the voluntary sector.

Unlike any other disability, more than 50% of sight loss could be prevented by early testing. I do not think there is the same strategy for any other disability in this country. That is my pitch and I would now like to hand over to Mr Keith Vaz to talk about diabetes and then on to Dr Tania Mathias.

Keith Vaz: Thank you for listening to us. I am here to support the bid by Nusrat Ghani. In all the time I have been in Parliament, which is 30 years this year, I cannot remember a specific debate on sight loss. If you are a diabetic, as I am with type 2 diabetes, one of the consequences of not managing your diabetes is sight loss.

Although it is a debate on its own, there are lots of other all-party groups that have an interest in this debate. In your own constituency, Chairman, you have one of the highest rates of diabetes in the country and you have a number of people who might well lose their sight if that condition is not managed. That is why this debate is so appropriate. I think Nusrat Ghani is right that we need three hours, because what we will see is that a lot of



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the all-party parliamentary groups will want to piggyback on the back of Nusrat, if I can put it like that, and want to speak on how it affects their particular areas. I fully support the application, which I hope very much will be granted.

Dr Mathias: The only thing that I would add is that our country leads in research. With Brexit negotiations, this kind of thing will become even more important. I would think clinical trials and how we move forward in co-ordinating is going to be a big part of the debate.

Q9 **Chair:** Thank you. You have mentioned that there have been Westminster Hall debates on this subject. You will appreciate that there is a lot of pressure on Chamber time. This is a general debate, so two questions apply. The first is, if you were offered a Westminster Hall slot, would you accept it? If the answer to that is yes, that is ideal, because that starts the process. But if you didn't accept that, what do you actually want the Government to do?

Nusrat Ghani: There have been three Westminster Hall debates, but over the last seven years, sight loss has only been discussed for 11 minutes in the Chamber. I do not think 11 minutes is enough to talk about a disability that can be prevented for 50% of people who lose their sight. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have a sight loss strategy; we don't in England. I would urge the Government to put together a strategy to tackle sight loss for both young and old people. It affects every MP because it has an impact on every constituency. I am more than happy to take your direction, but I would like you to remember 11 minutes over seven years.

Q10 **Chair:** The issue is of course the competition for the time. If you want Chamber time, you are going to have to wait quite a long time, because we have a queue and no time allocated. What would strengthen your case would be a motion calling on the Government to do something. You could have, for example, "This House calls on the Government to introduce a strategy on combating avoidable sight loss," which would be relatively simple and could be done. But the application is yours, not mine.

Nusrat Ghani: As I said, it would be, "This House urges the Government to publish a sight-loss strategy for England." That would be the motion.

Q11 **Mr Nuttall:** That doesn't appear on our brief. Our application just says a general debate in the Chamber.

Nusrat Ghani: Forgive me, Mr Nuttall. It was my first time filling out the form.

Chair: We understand that. We are trying to help.

Q12 **Gavin Newlands:** I am glad we have got that sorted, because it was crying out for a motion, from what you were saying. That is fine if we have that resolved. Obviously this is an English and Welsh issue, so there are no SNP Members on there, and that is absolutely fine, but as far as I can see there is only one Labour Member and 17 Conservative Members on the list. We usually try to look for a bit of balance.

Keith Vaz: I am worth 17.

Q13 **Gavin Newlands:** That's as may be.

Nusrat Ghani: We have updated our list since then and I can present it to you by the end of the afternoon. We have about 40 people supporting and there is a healthy split across the House.

Q14 **Chair:** If you can update the Clerks with the suggested text of a motion and the names, that would be very helpful, because that would speed up your application. Thank you very much. We will be in touch.

Alison McGovern made representations.

Alison McGovern: It is a pleasure to address the Committee this afternoon. I am here on behalf of a list of Members with an interest in this issue, who you should have listed on the application, most specifically Heidi Allen, Anne McLaughlin and Tom Brake, all of whom were lead sponsors for this debate.

I just want to say two things about this issue and why it is important that we have a debate on the Floor of the House with a votable motion. This issue is both controversial and urgent.

It is controversial for two reasons. First, the unaccompanied child refugees in Greece and Italy are part of the huge movement of people seeking to escape conflict in the middle east and north African region. That movement of people into our continent of Europe has been a controversial and difficult issue for all Governments to manage, and our Government especially. Members of the House take very different views on this issue, and I think it is about time we gave people an opportunity to debate it properly.

Secondly, it is also controversial because it relates to our position in Europe. There was rightly a great deal of focus on the refugees—especially the child refugees—in Calais before the French took action to remove some of those refugee camps, but very little attention has been given to refugees who are currently in Greece and Italy. Those two countries historically have been great partners of the United Kingdom, and our place in Europe is currently the subject of very heated debate in our country. I think we should bring this debate to the Floor of the House.

This barely needs saying, but this is obviously a massively urgent issue. The children who are arriving on the shores of Italy and Greece without their families are in need of our attention today. Their situation is uncertain because it is not clear whether the United Kingdom is prepared to live up to its responsibilities under the Dublin agreement and the Dubs amendment, which Parliament passed, to reunite them with their families. The Home Office looks set to release criteria quite soon for bringing children here who have a right to be here, but it is important that Members are able to put pressure on, debate and discuss that process. The Home Office has, it is fair to say, been challenged by Members on



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several occasions, but not specifically about unaccompanied child refugees in Greece and Italy.

In conclusion, this issue is both controversial and urgent. You should note that we have a substantive, votable motion. I feel sure that there would be great call on whatever time could be found to bring this debate to the Floor of the House.

- Q15 **Chair:** Thank you for the presentation. I understand the urgency of the issue. The earliest time we have for a debate in the Chamber is 23 February. If you were offered a debate on 23 February, would you accept it?

Alison McGovern: Yes.

Chair: Are there any other questions from colleagues? Thank you.

[Mr David Nuttall in the Chair]

Bob Blackman made representations.

- Q16 **Chair:** We now come to the final application before us today. As Mr Blackman explained at the start of the meeting, he has stood down and will take no part in the Committee's deliberation on his application. We will now hear the application from Mr Bob Blackman on the subject of compensation for victims of the Equitable Life scandal.

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Mr Nuttall. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on justice for Equitable Life policyholders, jointly with Fabian Hamilton. As he is a Front-Bench spokesman, he is not able to play a part in the application, but he is fully supportive.

I will not run through the whole history of Equitable Life, but essentially, the thing that makes the scandal different from any other is that it was a Ponzi-type selling scheme, whereby people were encouraged to invest their life savings in Equitable Life on the promise of bonuses that were completely unachievable. What makes this different from anything else is that the regulator knew about it, the company knew about it and the Treasury knew about it, and they refused to take any action. Equitable Life policyholders had to go to court and then finally through the Parliamentary Ombudsman to seek justice.

I was very pleased when, in 2010, the Government did take some action. They rewarded some people with partial compensation; some people received 100% of their compensation; some people were excluded completely from the compensation scheme; and others have received the princely sum of 22.5% of the compensation that the Government accept is due to them.

We have continued to lobby for Equitable Life policyholders from before I became a Member of Parliament and consequently over the last six or seven years. The difference now is that the scheme is closed to new applicants, so no one is allowed to put in a bid for compensation if they have not already done so. The Government have said that they have



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provided only £1.5 billion in compensation, but the previous Chancellor, George Osborne, accepted at the Dispatch Box that the total owed was £4.3 billion. What we are seeking is that the Government look at the extent of compensation given and that, as the economy improves, the compensation should improve so that the people who invested their life savings should get the compensation they are due.

We have a comprehensive list of people who wish to speak. We recently had a meeting with the responsible Minister, which started off as quite a reasonable meeting but subsequently there was correspondence saying that the Government were not prepared to provide more money. We have previously had debates in the House reinforcing the view that full compensation should be paid. On the application before you, the preference is that a debate is held before the Budget, but it is intended to put pressure on the Government to provide more compensation for the people who have lost money.

Chair: Thank you. Any questions from any members of the Committee?

- Q17 **Jess Phillips:** If we cannot get it in before the Budget—that is getting quite tight now, because it is on 8 March—would it matter if it went afterwards?

Bob Blackman: We would obviously have to amend the motion. Given the meeting we had with the Minister, we are not expecting the Government to do anything in the spring Budget, so a resolution of the House would add some pressure to the Government.

- Q18 **William Wragg:** Have there been any indications from the Government as to their willingness to extend the compensation scheme?

Bob Blackman: I think it is fair to say that the correspondence we have received from the Minister suggests that they are not willing to provide—I could go into all the details, but time suggests that that would not be wise.

Chair: Thank you. That concludes the application and that is the final application for today. That concludes the public part of the meeting.