

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 21 February 2017

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-17

Witnesses

[I](#): Bryon Davies.

[II](#): Rt hon Nicky Morgan and Lucy Powell.

[III](#): Mr Virendra Sharma.

[IV](#): Kate Green and Dr Tania Mathias.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Byron Davies made representations.

Q1 Chair: I welcome colleagues to the Backbench Business Committee. Unfortunately, the Chair, Ian Mearns, is still not well, so we send him a message of “Get well soon”. He is suffering from a prolapsed disc. The doctor present will know immediately how painful that is, so we wish him well and a speedy recovery.

Taking people in the order in which we have them on our paper, I ask Byron Davies to come forward and make his application.

Byron Davies: Thank you very much, Chair. I am grateful to have the opportunity to ask for this extremely important debate. Of course, the beer industry, the pub industry, affects every single constituency and every part of the United Kingdom. That is reflected by the fact that here in Parliament we have two all-party parliamentary groups—one on beer and the other on saving the pub—and they are among the biggest groups in Parliament. There is great interest across the parties here in Parliament.

The beer and pub industry has a huge impact on the UK economy. It is worth something in the region of £23 billion in gross value added and is, of course, of massive importance to the Treasury in terms of tax take, but in particular, and more importantly, in terms of jobs and the wider UK economy through the connected supply chain.

The industry is of course vital to many and varied aspects of British society. It is vital to our rural communities, as I know only too well, representing a very rural south-west Wales constituency. It is very much the case that it creates community cohesion. There is a very interesting Oxford University report on its importance in tackling loneliness as well. As an example of its diversity and importance, the Pub is The Hub organisation says that the pub now supports a huge range of community services, from adult education classes through to broadband and to local shops, post offices and so on in the community.

I therefore suggest to you, Chair, that pubs are the beating heart of many of our communities and deserve to be represented at the heart of British democracy here in our Parliament. The topic is, I believe, too broad for a Westminster Hall debate. It tackles numerous major issues and talks about the upcoming Budget. It is therefore extremely timely and exactly the sort of topic that can be raised prior to a Budget, to effect a Government response and change, which is part of the purpose of Back-Bench business.

Q2 William Wragg: In terms of the timing of the debate, given the proximity of the Budget and the backlog of applications that we have for debates in the main Chamber, would you be prepared to accept a Westminster Hall debate, on the basis that you might get it in before the Budget and therefore could have your representations on the record?



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Byron Davies: That is a very fair point. Naturally, I would, as I said in my comments, prefer to have the debate in the main Chamber, but in view of the Budget, yes, it would be acceptable to have it in Westminster Hall.

- Q3 **Mr Nuttall:** I was going to pursue a similar line, but I will just mention this. We have known about the Budget for quite a few months, and the problem of the escalator has been in place for years. Therefore, it is probably no surprise that as we have only one allocated slot—well, in fact, even that has been provisionally allocated. There is actually no time left, unless we were to change what has already been planned, which is extremely difficult—and I am sure you will be interested in the Welsh debate that we have provisionally put in for 2 March.

Byron Davies: They both go together, almost.

Mr Nuttall: Yes, you will be able to refer to it in the Welsh debate. So you see the conflict that exists, but we will leave it there.

- Q4 **Chair:** There are two potential opportunities, which you would fit, for a Westminster Hall debate: Thursday 2 March and Tuesday 7 March, which obviously is the day before the Budget. That is actually all the time we have to allocate before the Budget. If either of those was offered to you, would you be in a position to accept it?

Byron Davies: Yes.

Chair: Thank you.

Lucy Powell and Nicky Morgan made representations.

Lucy Powell: Nick Clegg sends his apologies. This is the first time I have come before this Committee, so hopefully you will be kind with me. Can I pass on my best wishes to Ian Mearns as well? I know he is high on morphine at the moment, which I think is helping a little.

We have come together—Nicky Morgan, Nick Clegg and I—to put in for a debate on social mobility, and particularly the findings of the Social Mobility Commission's recent "State of the Nation" report, which has not been debated in Parliament. There was not even a statement in Parliament about it. As you will be aware, social mobility is a key issue that is very much being promoted by the new Government and other political parties, but we have not had much time to debate it on the Floor of the House. There is wide support for this debate, both in the House and outside it, with many stakeholders, third parties and so on involved, so I think we could get quite a lot of interest, both in terms of the debate itself and in the Chamber, in the issues that we want to talk about.

You will be aware that a number of the issues that have been raised by the Social Mobility Commission—quality teachers, quality in the early years and making sure we have real high-quality education in the areas that need it most, as well as other issues, such as housing and access to jobs—have generated much interest when they have been debated in various

guises in the Chamber. We think there is a real opportunity to bring them all together in one big debate.

Nicky Morgan: I would like to support Lucy on this. I think it is very important that this is cross-party. This is the kind of debate that would probably show the House at its best, because these are issues of wide and general interest to our constituents. People can obviously talk about early years and education, but we know that housing and skills are also of critical importance. It is not just about specific policies—the report is very important—but about the broader issues that we often do not get a chance to debate.

The Social Mobility Commission report is important. It is annual and cross-party, and there are some very important messages in it. I just think this is the sort of thing that we could have a really high-quality debate about, which would flush out some very important issues. It is actually something that both Government Front Benchers and shadow Front Benchers would benefit from hearing views on as well.

Q5 **Gavin Newlands:** Social mobility is obviously an issue that cuts across all parties and all nations. I am curious; there appear to be no Scottish or Northern Irish MPs listed on your application. I am not entirely sure that there are any Welsh MPs, but I could be wrong on that front. It might be worth trying to approach MPs from the other constituent nations if you want this to be as broad a debate as possible.

The point has already been made about lack of time in the Chamber. Currently, we do not have any more time to allocate debates. You have tabled a substantive motion but it does essentially just call for a renewed approach; it does not ask for anything specific. I understand why you have done that in order to make it cross-party, and in essence, that could transfer to a general debate. The question is: if there was no time available to the Committee to allocate in the Chamber, would you accept a slot in Westminster Hall, though it would be a general debate at that point?

Nicky Morgan: First, there is no harm meant by not including you. It was really just a question of getting a date in. You know what it is like trying to pin MPs down in this place.

Q6 **Gavin Newlands:** No offence taken.

Nicky Morgan: Maybe this an opportunity for people to get to know each other better. We all want debates in the main Chamber and there is a thing about having a motion; it does just sharpen the debate and the speeches people make. You are right to say that it calls for a general renewed approach because I think that is the way to have a better higher quality, more informed debate, rather than making it incredibly partisan.

Although we would like to get on with it, I understand there is a big pressure on Chamber time before the Budget. If it were to be after that date it might be better actually, in the sense that the Budget might have some measures in it that relate to the social mobility debate, which can

then be picked up in the course of our debate. We would prefer the Chamber, if that is possible, at some point.

Chair: Thank you. We will be in touch.

Mr Virendra Sharma made representations.

Mr Sharma: Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to come before you and for giving your time. The topic for the debate is stimulating research and development to combat infectious diseases and ensuring equitable access to new diagnostic drugs and vaccines.

Late last year, the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Access to Medicines published a report with recommendations for stakeholders, Governments, policymakers, business leaders, international organisations and civil society, to improve health and wellbeing for all.

The UK Government have shown leadership in some areas of biomedical research and development, launching the Ross fund in 2015 to tackle malaria, TB, AMR and other neglected tropical diseases. Moreover, the Government have galvanised international support for tackling antimicrobial resistance by commissioning a seminal independent review of the issue, which published its recommendations in May 2016 and paved the way for a UN high-level meeting on AMR in September 2016. In addition, in 2016 the G20 tasked the OECD, FAO, OIE and WHO with reporting back in 2017 on options for global effort to address AMR.

Despite those initiatives, there remain big gaps in the UK Government's approach to improving access and innovation in healthcare, resulting in significant challenges for people both within the UK and around the world in accessing the medicines they need, either owing to cost or lack of investment in treatment options.

The Commons has not had significant opportunity to discuss the UK's leadership on tackling infectious diseases and AMR. Ahead of the G20 reporting back, this debate would give Members that opportunity because they would like to reflect on the UK's initiatives and the UN High-Level Panel meetings and recommendations, and to hear more of what the Government's priorities in this area will be.

The key topics for discussion will be: new incentives for research and development of health technologies; improving access to existing medicines; a global convention on R and D; and sustainability of the healthcare system. The debate is supported by Labour, Conservative, SNP, Green, DUP and SDLP Members as well as the membership of the all-party parliamentary groups on HIV AIDS, global tuberculosis, and malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

Q7 **Chair:** Thank you for that presentation. Just to be clear, you want a general debate. The form in front of us has Westminster Hall on Tuesday ticked, but you have asked for a three-hour debate.



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Mr Sharma: Yes, because if you look at the interest, all the APPG members and other Members have shown interest in the debate. It will be a long debate and we would prefer to have three hours.

Q8 **Chair:** I just want to press you on this. As things stand, we would expect to see 15 speakers on the application for a three-hour debate. If it is a 90-minute debate, you have sufficient speakers to support your application. If you are really pressing for a three-hour debate, you do not have sufficient speakers, so we would ask you to add some extra speakers to make the application live. But there are potential opportunities for 90-minute debates in Westminster Hall on 2 March, 7 March and 9 March.

Mr Sharma: I can delay it until late March if you—

Chair: It is your application, so it is for you to decide what you want to do. We are here to facilitate debate and give you an opportunity.

Mr Sharma: May I seek some guidance?

Chair: Of course.

Mr Sharma: If I get six more Members and reapply for it—

Q9 **Chair:** You do not have to reapply—that is the good news. You do not have to appear in front of us again, either.

Mr Sharma: Okay.

Chair: But you do have to supply the Clerks with additional names, which does mean that we will consider your request once those extra names are supplied. That is your choice.

Mr Sharma: I will bring the names of six more Members and give them to the Clerk. I still feel that because the interest is so high, we want to have three hours.

Q10 **Chair:** Can we just be clear that you would accept a debate in Westminster Hall?

Mr Sharma: Yes, I accept that.

Chair: Lovely. Thank you very much.

Dr Tania Mathias and Kate Green made representations

Dr Mathias: I hope that you have got the written submission. The debate was originally only going to be about treatment of asylum claims involving allegations of torture, but following more interest I seek a wider debate that also includes UK policy on torture. I hosted an event in Parliament on asylum claims and there was a lot of interest. That made me feel that we should be debating this as UK-wide policy on torture and how we treat asylum claims.



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I think it is timely because of the other debates we have about refugee concerns and because of statements that are coming from across the pond, as it were, which makes it very significant for us. We have some more names, but as you can see the people who showed more interest have legal backgrounds. I believe a lot of the medics who have come across victims of torture find in this 21st century it is getting harder to diagnose tortured people. It is a sad case that invisible torture is increasing, so you do need specialists.

The UK and Denmark are leaders in this field, but I would want that to be acknowledged in the House with all the problems that the Home Office have with that. It is not just lawyers and medics; in every single constituency, and probably every MP's surgery, we come across people who have come to this country and have a history of torture. It is important that all communities are aware of it. I hope—this is not my pitch to you, but what I am hoping in the debate—that we show we are leaders in this area, whether as politicians, local people in the community, or the police. We need that awareness, and I want to widen the debate.

Kate Green: Just to support what Tania said, I think it is a really important opportunity for this House and this Parliament to show our moral leadership in global terms on an issue that I know all colleagues feel very strongly about. We must also ensure that, in this country, our practice is best of breed. Again, I know all Members want that to be the case. I cannot recall in the time I have been in Parliament a debate that has specifically focused on the very important issue of torture. As Nicky Morgan said earlier, this is the House at its best. We often use that cliché, but this is a powerful opportunity for this Parliament to be opinion leaders in the world at a time when, as Tania said, we see some very alarming and frightening trends as a result of growing conflict and dissent.

Q11 **Chair:** You will be aware—you were listening to the earlier applications—that we don't have any time available in the Chamber any time soon. We have a position whereby we have pre-allocated some debates for next week. We have lost time this week thanks to the way the Government has operated. Then, of course, the Budget happens, and there will be a debate on that. I suspect that the earliest we will see any time in the Chamber will be 16 March, and possibly a bit later than that.

Dr Mathias: That would be okay.

Q12 **Chair:** I was going to suggest something to you. Clearly, this is a general debate. I am not suggesting that your application loses anything by it, because obviously it stands alone, in terms of the issue, but it might be—this is for you to consider—that we could potentially fit you into a 90-minute slot in Westminster Hall, which would give you the opportunity of getting the Government's views on the record. If you are unsatisfied with the Government's response, you can come back to us with a refreshed application, possibly with a motion that you want the House to adopt, which would then lead you to a Chamber debate probably before the Easter recess. I am thinking creatively about how you might want to approach it, but it is your application and I don't want to force you down



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a particular route.

Dr Mathias: Thank you for that. I had not thought of that. There is a concern; just this morning, I was at a 90-minute debate on something that was even more circumscribed, and we ran out of time. There were a lot of colleagues present, but not as many as might want to speak on this. I think that most people, including the Minister, felt short-changed. The Minister had to say, "I will be writing to people." I would not want to happen on a topic such as this. I am not saying absolutely no, but my preference would be to wait for the Chamber rather than try to squeeze this into 90 minutes.

- Q13 **Chair:** I suggest that, if you want to press that, we would need to see from colleagues a motion that would justify having Chamber time, because having a general debate in the Chamber clearly restricts the position. You would have a long wait, I suspect, for Chamber time, particularly without a divisible motion.

Dr Mathias: Right.

- Q14 **Chair:** If I can put it this way, your choice is to accept a 90-minute debate in the next two weeks—this week or next week—with a promise that you can come back with a refreshed application, which might, depending on the Government's position, lead you to a motion that you want the House to adopt. We as a Committee would look sympathetically at that. Alternatively, put your application on hold and provide us with a motion that you would want to put to the House for a future event.

Dr Mathias: Which might be?

Chair: You don't have to answer now, but the Clerks may well offer you that option.

- Q15 **Gavin Newlands:** At the moment, on our waiting list we have five debates ready for the Chamber, plus the applications we have heard today. That is just to support what the Chair is saying.

Dr Mathias: I appreciate that.

- Q16 **Chair:** For a Thursday, we will fit two debates in. You are then waiting potentially until the end of March, or even into April.

Dr Mathias: Yes. You are steering me towards that 90-minute debate. Do you want me to say now or email later?

- Q17 **Chair:** We will consider all the applications once we have concluded, and then offers of debates will be made to people. It helps us if we know whether you are likely to accept.

Dr Mathias: We are very likely to accept a 90-minute with a chance of a refresh.

Chair: Fine. Thank you very much. That concludes the public meeting of the Committee.