

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 28 February 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 28 February 2017.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-18

[I:](#) Chris Stephens and Heidi Alexander.

[II:](#) Kit Malthouse and Suella Fernandes.

[III:](#) Joan Ryan, David Lammy, Sir Peter Bottomley and Tommy Sheppard.



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Chris Stephens and Heidi Alexander made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee in public session. Sadly, our Chair, Ian Mearns, is still indisposed, so we repeat our best wishes for a speedy recovery. In the meantime, I am substituting as Chairman for him. Chris, would you like to make your application?

Chris Stephens: Thank you, Mr Blackman. First, may I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group?

We are asking for a Back-Bench debate on the Department for Work and Pensions estate. You may be aware, Mr Blackman, that in early January the DWP announced that half the Glasgow and south Lanarkshire jobcentres would be closing. That was followed up, at the end of January, with the proposed closed 78 offices across the UK. Some of those proposals are open to public consultation.

We are asking for the debate primarily because there is an impact in three areas. The first impact is on DWP employees themselves. According to a written answer that I have obtained, there is the potential for 750 jobs to disappear from the Department. If that went ahead, it would be one of the largest compulsory redundancies that any Government Department has carried out. There are issues of redeployment of staff, which could be difficult. To give one example, the Wembley office is being relocated to Watford, but the Watford office is due to close after that as well. There is also the very real concern about the loss of experienced staff.

Secondly, there is the impact on claimants and customers. We are very concerned that some of the offices are in areas of high unemployment and social deprivation. Claimants will have further to travel. That will mean increased travel costs and the risk of being late, which will increase the use of sanctions. There is also the lack of digital access in some of the areas where offices are earmarked for closure.

The last impact will be on the communities themselves. I am talking about the loss of permanent jobs and the knock-on effect that will have on some communities, because in some of them the largest employer is the DWP office. There will then be the obvious impact on the family members of staff. There is also the issue that other Government Departments are closing offices in many of these towns.

Of the 78 proposed office closures, only 18 have been publicly consulted on. There are very real concerns about a quality impact assessment as well as an economic assessment. We are asking that the will of the House be tested on this closure programme.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. I am acutely aware of the Wembley office closing. I actually used to work there, a very long time ago—[Interruption.] If that is an interest, it is from more than 40 years ago, but never mind.

May I ask you about the time sensitivity of your request? Just so that you

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are clear, I point out that we as a Committee have no time in the Chamber to allocate at the moment.

Chris Stephens: My understanding is that the Department is going to issue the results of the public consultation and make decisions in April. We obviously wish to have a debate in the Chamber, but if there is a possibility of this being debated in Westminster Hall, that would be our second preference, if I can put it that way.

Q3 **Chair:** Obviously, there are various options for Westminster Hall debates. Actually, this applies to all applicants this afternoon: we do not have any Chamber time that we know about, because obviously the Budget is next week and the Government are reserving Thursdays at the moment as other Government time, so Westminster Hall will be the only option available to us this side of Easter, I suspect. Colleagues, do you have any questions? No. Thank you very much, Chris. The Clerks will contact you about potential timings.

Chris Stephens: I think Heidi wants to say something in support of my application, if that is all right.

Heidi Alexander: I apologise for not being here at the start of the sitting—I had not realised that Chris would be first up. I just want to add my perspective, as a London MP. Twenty-two of the closures are in London, and the criteria that the Government have set with regard to alternative arrangements having to be within 20 minutes of the existing jobcentres of course mean that, in such a densely populated city as London, there will be very little consultation at all on alternative arrangements.

In my constituency, we are seeing a very busy jobcentre in a very central location in the borough of Lewisham being squeezed into alternative premises. I just fear that if we make it harder for people who struggle some of the time to get to the jobcentre to access support and services, this will be a false economy in the longer term and we will not do as well as we would all like to do in supporting people into work. There are particular equality implications in London when you look at the demographics of people who are unemployed. It would be helpful for Members to have the opportunity to press the Minister on what alternative arrangements can be made.

Chair: Just so that you are clear, we are all very sympathetic to your request for the debate, but it is not in our hands, in the sense that there is no time allocated by the Government for the Committee to allocate this side of Easter. It may be April before we get time in the Chamber for such a debate. What is likely to happen is that when we have heard all the applications, the Clerks will get back to you this afternoon and say, "There is an option for a Westminster Hall debate." That may be for a limited time, but at least that would get you a debate to hold the Government to account. I do not want to rehearse the debate. Thank you.

Chris Stephens: Thank you.

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Kit Malthouse and Suella Fernandes made **representations**.

Q4 **Chair:** We will now hear from Kit Malthouse and Suella Fernandes.

Kit Malthouse: Thank you for calling us for consideration. Suella is one of the co-sponsors of the application. Obviously there has been a huge amount of comment, to a certain extent inside but largely outside the House, about the policy that should be designed around UK trade post-Brexit. It has become increasingly apparent that, as the Government go into the negotiations on Brexit over the next 24 months, in parallel they will be developing a number of policies that the country will adopt as we leave the European Union. One of those that has been most prominent is UK trade **policy**.

The prospect of any legislation in this area is quite limited, so the opportunity for Back Benchers to have a say on what UK trade policy should be in future is similarly limited. For those of us who are too shy to appear in the media or who eschew that kind of attention, the option of commenting in any kind of substantive way is limited. Therefore, in discussing this, not least because a huge amount of work is going on in think-tanks and elsewhere, including around the world, on what the UK should do both within and outside the World Trade Organisation—there is also a lot of misunderstanding about what the rules can and should be around global trade—Suella and I felt a certain amount of frustration that we did not have a platform on which to make our views known. As it happens, when we scratched the surface, we found that so did quite a lot of Members of **Parliament**.

You will see that we currently have 33 names on the proposal, and there are plenty more who volunteered afterwards that they would be interested in taking part. So we felt, off the back of that support—cross-party support, obviously, including the SNP prominently—that it would be a good idea for Back Benchers to hold a debate. We think we could fill a full-day debate with names. At the moment there are 33, and in a three-hour debate that would be five minutes each—less with ministerial time. Putting something together would help inform the Government's thinking and the thinking in the country and allow us to thrash out some of these **issues**.

We specifically wanted to go for the Chamber because we think it is an issue that should be given that kind of prominence, and we drafted a motion, which was cleared by the Table Office and agreed cross-party as one that people wanted to debate. However, we are conscious of the time constraints you mentioned, Chairman. We would be happy to go for a three-hour debate—we would prefer six hours—and to a certain extent we would be happy to wait a bit, certainly until after Easter. It is not the most pressing of issues, but I think it is important that we get in this side of the summer recess if we can. On that basis, we want to put the submission forward.

Q5 **Chair:** The one comment that I will re-emphasise is that we do not have any time to allocate for the Chamber. With the motion as it is drafted, I cannot believe anyone would vote against it. I may be wrong, but I

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cannot believe that. There is the feeling that a Westminster Hall debate would be possible, because it is almost a general debate, and in any case that is the time we have to allocate in the near future. What we have said to other applicants in the past is that if you take a Westminster Hall debate, which would potentially be a more limited amount of time, it would not count against you if you then applied for Chamber time as and when it becomes available, which might be later in the summer.

Kit Malthouse: We anticipated that that might be the position, and the preference among us is that we would rather wait for the Chamber if we possibly can, not least because we would like to have the possibility of having the Secretary of State there. We think that it is important and prominent enough that we could encourage proper representation from the Government to take the debate seriously.

I should add that it was our intention, possibly after this debate, to start to look at the other pillars of Government policy post-Brexit over the next year or so, and perhaps to put in a submission for a similar debate on what immigration policy should look like. Obviously I am talking about the long-term future, but we felt that the Back Benchers needed these—

Chair: It might well be, frankly, that the Government will want to have a debate on international trade, immigration and other issues. We do not know what will be in the Queen's Speech, but I suspect that those will be major issues for it to focus on.

Q6 **Mr Nuttall:** May I just comment in passing that even where debates are scheduled by the Committee in the main Chamber, we have no control over who the Government puts up to respond? I think it is fair to say that it is unusual for Secretaries of State to respond. I just want to put that on the record. I do not want anybody to go away with false hopes that the Secretary of State will respond.

Suella Fernandes: Just to echo what Kit said, there is considerable cross-party support that reflects the divergence of views on what international trade policy should look like. There is a lot of need for clarity, for debate and for building on the expertise and policy work that is going on outside Parliament. All of those can be brought into a full and rich debate that would justify the length of time we are seeking. As Kit said, there has not been any real opportunity for Back Benchers to debate this issue, so I would ask for it to be in the Chamber to reflect the importance and significance of the issue going forward.

Chair: It is your application. We can only give guidance and assistance to facilitate debates.

Q7 **Kevin Foster:** Do you think that there might be people who would wish to argue against this, given that there are some sharply divergent views on whether us leaving the European Union is a great boost to trade outside the UK? Is this likely to be a genuine debate rather than everybody sitting around and saying, "Great. Marvellous. We would like to expand trade." Who is going to disagree with that?

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Suella Fernandes: I think there are Members of Parliament who would disagree with that proposition quite strongly, based on current voices that are being heard. Yes, I think there will be scope for a genuine debate and I am not sure that the motion would be passed unanimously.

Q8 **Kevin Foster:** Did anyone sign this and say, "I think there should be a debate, but I am not going to support this."

Suella Fernandes: Not among those whose signatures we have.

Kit Malthouse: The motion has not gone to everybody who signed the paper. It is interesting that there is a lot of keenness to debate this from SNP Members, who obviously have particularly strong views about what British trade should look like in relation to their part of the United Kingdom. It may well be that they are the most fierce proponents of their own view in this debate, and that would differ from some of ours.

Gavin Newlands: I suspect you might be right.

Joan Ryan, David Lammy, Sir Peter Bottomley and Tommy Sheppard made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** We will now hear from Joan Ryan, David Lammy, Peter Bottomley, Tommy Sheppard—the whole gang are here.

Joan Ryan: This is an application. We identified that we would request a three-hour general debate in the House of Commons Chamber, but I hear what you have said, so can I come back to that shortly? From a study of *Hansard* it is clear that the issues relating to Turkey have not been debated in the Commons Chamber for five years, although obviously we had a statement following the attempted coup on 15 July.

Huge issues arise from what is happening in Turkey. You will know that a referendum on 16 April will significantly change the constitution and the working of parliamentary democracy in Turkey. That is a very live debate and a lot of people have raised the issues with us. For the UK, Turkey is a key NATO member; the EU-Turkey deal to tackle the migrant crisis is live; Turkey is a guarantor power in Cyprus; and, of course, there are peace talks that we hope will reach a positive conclusion in Cyprus. Turkey has an important voice and role to play in those talks.

Turkey is an important regional ally in the fight against ISIL-Daesh. The UK Prime Minister and Alan Duncan visited Turkey in January; Theresa May said that she envisages a "new, deeper, trading relationship with Turkey" and she secured an agreement to strengthen co-operation on security through a new strategic security partnership. This includes the fight against ISIL-Daesh. She also agreed a £100 million defence deal to help develop fighter jets for the Turkish air force.

All these issues demand a debate that people across Parliament can take part in, and we have a very cross-party delegation here to ask for that. You may also be aware that four separate early-day motions have been tabled in recent months about the situation in Turkey with a total

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signature count of 140. There is a lot of concern and it is very much cross-party.

At the moment we have 25 Members wanting to speak in this debate and that is not the final count, as we only started to act on this on Thursday afternoon. For a variety of reasons, that was our timing.

You will also know that 70,000 people have been arrested in Turkey, and 10,000 people detained. There have been many complaints among Kurdish and Alevi communities about oppression. The peace talks with PKK have broken down and there seems little prospect of them re-emerging. We have had acts of terrorism in Turkey and very prominent Members of Parliament have been arrested and given extensive sentences, and the immunity of Members of Parliament lifted.

We have tried to make this a general debate that everybody could take part in. It would look at the important and positive aspects of our relationship with Turkey, but also concerns about what is happening there at the moment. We have focused on talking about human rights and the political situation, to enable all Members to make a contribution.

On where the debate should be held, we hear what you say, Chair, about the time available. Taking on board the proposal you made a little earlier, it is important that we have some ability to address these issues before 16 April when that referendum will take place. If that would mean a shorter debate in Westminster Hall, I think we would accept that, given that you have said that we can come back and that will not reflect on the request to have a longer debate in the Chamber. We are in your hands but, given the importance of Turkey and our relationship with Turkey, you may feel this would be appropriate.

After the referendum there will be other issues to add to this debate. Minority communities here are raising big concerns about demographic change in Turkey. The communities here are also raising their fears for their friends and family, so there is domestic side to this debate as well as the much bigger geopolitical picture.

Q10 **Chair:** Any other comments?

Mr Lammy: I just want to endorse everything that Joan has said and add that there is an important Turkish-speaking population in north and north-east London. In my own constituency, I have one of the largest Kurdish populations in the country. There is tremendous concern among that population about different forms of oppression in Turkey. Those issues should be looked at properly, but I would endorse what Joan has said: Turkey is a hugely important geopolitical partner of the UK. One almost cannot think of a country that is more significant in the region. It is surprising that this has not really been discussed in Parliament since 2012. I think Members across the House will want to raise a range of issues, both in support of Turkey, but in an effort to scrutinise some of what is going on and bring it to the attention of Ministers.

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Sir Peter Bottomley: For a bit of balance, it is worth remembering that Turkey hosts probably more refugees from Syria than almost any other part of the region.

Tommy Sheppard: As parliamentarians, we have a specific role to consider what is happening to parliamentarians in other countries, particularly those with whom we aspire to have a closer and deeper relationship. We have a situation where people who were elected to represent their constituents in the Turkish Parliament are in prison, not for anything they have done but for attitudes they have expressed. Imagine if that applied to us. We have a particular responsibility to speak out on that.

As David mentioned, inevitably, a debate of this nature will allow us to assess and discuss the situation with regard to the Kurdish population in Turkey, and the role of the Kurdish region in the wider geopolitical situation.

- Q11 **Mr Nuttall:** If you are happy to take a Westminster Hall slot, there is only one potential danger. I flag this up so you are aware of it and not taken by surprise. I hope this will not happen, but if you took a Westminster Hall slot and for any reason you had only six or seven speakers and maybe it did not even fill the allocated time, that would count against you if you came back and said, "Actually, it was enormously popular, can we have three hours?" Just be aware of the fact that even in Westminster Hall, you still need to fill the time; you still need to get the speakers. If you had all those, I accept that there would be some disappointed people, because a time limit would be imposed, which may be two or three minutes if everybody turned up. In those circumstances, and looking on the positive side now, if you felt it was appropriate after 16 April to come back, I think, as the Chairman has said, there would be a very good case for you to request a further debate in the Chamber on the situation in Turkey at some point, once time becomes available, and we would look favourably on that request.

Joan Ryan: What would be the prospect, assuming that the Westminster Hall debate is well attended, which is a fair point? What would be the prospect of a debate in the main Chamber before the summer recess, given the speed?

- Q12 **Chair:** I do not think any of us can commit to that because it depends on the Government allocating us time in the Chamber. We are due to have a number of days but when they are allocated is up to the Government. Normally, we get Thursdays but next Thursday will presumably be the continuation of the Budget debate.

We do not expect to be allocated the following Thursday because of potential ping-pong on article 50, so the Government have reserved that day. We doubt we are going to get any Chamber time before Easter. After April any allocation will depend on how long we go as a Parliament before we are prorogued and then, after the Queen's Speech, you are into a new Session.

I do not want you to be under any illusions. We have got some time, as

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we said, in Westminster Hall and we anticipate getting some further time on 30 March. The earlier dates are 90-minute slots. We anticipate 30 March being a full three-hour debate in Westminster Hall but we do not know what the situation will be with the Chamber.

Sir Peter Bottomley: If you have it in mind to grant a three-hour Westminster Hall debate towards the end of March but it turns out that the Government can release to you the second Thursday for the Chamber, can we please ask if you have flexibility?

Q13 **Chair:** So that you are quite clear, the position is that we do not have 30 March allocated to us yet. We cannot allocate a debate until we have got the time released. Until we get the time released, we cannot allocate the debate. Assuming that the Committee agrees that your application is in order, it would go on our waiting list and then we would allocate it accordingly, as time-sensitive but a preference for the Chamber.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We are in your hands.

Q14 **Chair:** It's your application. We can just give you some guidance.

Sir Peter Bottomley: There is a view that for us to wait for the main Chamber would be the most sensible thing. If you judge that that is not going to be practicable for quite some time, having something before 16 April might be of use to those in this country who are concerned about the referendum. Those are the two considerations.

Q15 **Chair:** I do not want to put words in your mouth but, if I were sitting the other side, I would want Parliament and parliamentarians to express a view on the situation in Turkey ahead of 16 April and then possibly have a more substantive debate in the Chamber in the summer on the results of that referendum, but it is your application.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The other thing that might be sensible to air in front of you is that, if we are looking for the Chamber in time, to ask for maybe a 90-minute in Westminster Hall rather than a three-hour one might again allow flexibility. If you find that you have a gap that is 90 minutes rather than three hours, we would take that. If it is clear that you have a three-hour one that you cannot fill with some other appropriate issue, we will do what we can.

Joan Ryan: I think that will be a good compromise for us. Ideally, we want the main Chamber because this is a very big issue; I can tell that the Committee agrees it is a major issue. Because of the referendum on 16 April, it would be as well if we could express a view before then.

Q16 **Chair:** There is potential for either 9 or 16 March in Westminster Hall for a debate when we have time that we know about. Could you do either of those?

Joan Ryan: The 16th?

Q17 **Chair:** We are obviously going to look at that. It can't be the 14th.

Joan Ryan: Do you know the timing on the 16th?

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Q18 **Chair:** The Clerks will come back to you on that, but I understand it is a 90-minute debate scheduled for 3pm to 4.30pm. The Liaison Committee has a debate on a Select Committee report to start with but there is a possibility—it certainly happened last week—that that will not go its full time. Last week, there was extra time available for the debate so it could have gone on for longer, so you might get more time but we cannot guarantee that. It is either the 9th or the 16th.

Tommy Sheppard: The 23rd or the 30th?

Chair: We do not know yet. We expect to get the 30th but we do not have it yet. Anyway, we are not conducting a negotiation here. The Clerks will be in touch with you later on this afternoon. Thank you. That concludes the public session.

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