

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 31 October 2017

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

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Robert Courts; Chris Davies; Patricia Gibson; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-33

### Witnesses

[I](#): Ruth Smeeth and Robert Courts

[II](#): Julian Sturdy and Jeremy Lefroy

[III](#): Kelly Tollhurst

[IV](#): Gavin Newlands

[V](#): Jeremy Lefroy, Philip Davies and Julian Sturdy

[VI](#): Clive Lewis and Norman Lamb

[VII](#): Frank Field and Heidi Allen

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Ruth Smeeth** and **Robert Courts** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have seven applications in front of us, the first of which is from Ruth Smeeth and our very own Robert Courts on the defence aerospace industrial strategy.

**Ruth Smeeth:** Thank you, Chair, and our thanks to the Committee for making the time to meet us both and—I hope—support our application. As you will have seen, in recent days significant numbers of job redundancies have been announced at BAE, primarily in its military aviation and aerospace business. There is a strategic gap in terms of how we move forward to get a steady drumbeat of domestic orders that ensure we retain a sovereign skill base in the UK. There has simply been no debate on this issue in recent years except in the Defence Committee. Following on from the Government's shipbuilding strategy, I would very much welcome a debate on this issue on the Floor of the House or in Westminster Hall. You will see that both the quality and the number of Members across the House who want to discuss the subject are significant, and we would very much welcome the opportunity to debate it on the Floor.

**Robert Courts:** I echo that. This is a truly cross-party application. We would like to draw attention to the fact that the Government now have a shipbuilding strategy. Given how much lead time procurement takes—20 to 25 years for recent projects—we would like to encourage debate from all parts of the House on where the next generation of aircraft capability is going to be. I know that that is somewhat counter-intuitive when we are bringing one generation into service now, but if we do not start thinking about it now and having a strategy for where we will be in the next generation, there could be a gap, which we all want to avoid.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Is there any time sensitivity to the debate? Obviously we have had the bad news about BAE and we have had the shipbuilding strategy, which you both mentioned. Is there a particular week when you want to hold the debate, or is there anything that makes it really urgent, such as a decision coming up?

**Ruth Smeeth:** There is no particular week. The only thing that the Committee should be aware of is that the Government are undertaking a review on current capability, so this debate may be timely as the media coverage around that goes forward.

Q3 **Alex Sobel:** Do you intend to have a divisible motion?

**Ruth Smeeth:** No.

**Chair:** The point we would normally make is that for Chamber time we look in the first instance for debates with divisible motions, although quite often a motion can be created and just taken on the nod, as it were. We normally give Chamber time to debates with divisible motions, but not exclusively. It does seem a timely application.

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**Ruth Smeeth:** Thank you.

**Julian Sturdy** and **Jeremy Lefroy** made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Next up we have an application on World Antibiotic Awareness Week.

**Julian Sturdy:** Thank you, Chair; I really appreciate your time today. World Antibiotic Awareness Week 2017 will run from 13 to 19 November. It will take place worldwide, to raise awareness of antibiotics and AMR—anti-microbial resistance—across the globe. The week's aims are to raise awareness of the importance of preserving antibiotics through better appropriate use, whether in medicine or agriculture, and to increase the recognition of the important role that professionals and Governments play around the world.

(The intention of the group and the people who have supported this debate is to have a robust debate within the week—it is time sensitive—on the awareness of antibiotics and promoting what World Antibiotic Awareness Week is trying to deliver, but also to show that Westminster and the British Government play a key role in this. We want to challenge the Government on what they are doing to promote better use of antibiotics and how we can improve new antibiotic discovery, which is at an all-time low. It is very much about challenging Government on the way forward. I can touch on a bit of context, in terms of where we are with antibiotics and the problems we face around the world, but I think many of you will be very much aware of the situation.)

**Jeremy Lefroy:** I very much support that. I will just add that only two weeks ago, the chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, reiterated what she said in her excellent book, "The Drugs Don't Work", which I recommend to everybody: we face a real crisis by 2030 or 2040, where even relatively simple operations like hip replacements and appendectomies will become life-threatening.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Given that World Antibiotic Awareness Week is between 13 and 19 November, are you arranging any other events? Is a report or anything being published?

**Julian Sturdy:** The all-party parliamentary group on antibiotics is bringing forward a report that is being launched next—

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Does the report have recommendations?

**Julian Sturdy:** I have not had full sight of it yet, if I am honest.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** I mention that because you are asking for Chamber time. I do not decry the value of the debate or the subject matter, but if you have a report with recommendations, why do you not have a divisible motion that calls on the Government to implement the recommendations of the report you are publishing, whatever they may be? At least that would give you something to formulate the debate around, rather than a debate on a very important cause without anything to focus what you are asking the Government to do.

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**Julian Sturdy:** I take your advice on that. That is a very fair point. We want to challenge—this is about challenging Government. The whole week is about challenging Governments across the world on what they are doing. This is a global issue, not just a UK issue. We want to see what the UK Government are doing and where the UK Government are going on this. But you are right; there is an opportunity to have a divisible motion on this.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** If there is not, frankly, I would say that this is a very important issue but one that is ideal for a Westminster Hall debate, not the Chamber, because there is competition for Chamber time.

**Julian Sturdy:** I will take your advice here. How do we do that?

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** It is your application. We are here to encourage and promote debate.

**Julian Sturdy:** Do we go away and come back with better wording?

Q10 **Chair:** The application has been made, but it is not unprecedented for applications to be augmented after submission. If you were to submit to us a divisible motion, we would take that on board before making a decision on allocation of time.

**Julian Sturdy:** But your advice is that a divisible motion would be—

**Chair:** For Chamber time, because of the competing tensions we have from other quarters. Thank you very much for your application.

**Kelly Tolhurst** made representations.

**Chair:** Next up we have an application on the role of the DWP in support of care leavers from Alex Burghart.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I am Alex Burghart.

**Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to stand in for Alex this afternoon.

The application is for a general debate in Westminster Hall around care leavers and the role with the DWP. This is predominantly because Government will shortly be publishing advice to local authorities around the care offer that was part of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It is quite important that we offer a challenge around some of the things that will be in that guidance, predominantly around accommodation costs for care leavers, also how universal credit will affect the youngsters. It is one of those debates that we had a little bit when we spoke about Act last year, but I believe there is far more to be done in this area and it would be a good opportunity to challenge the Minister on how meaningful this local offer will be for our looked-after children. It has cross-party support and there are many who have expressed an interest in wanting to take part.

Q11 **Chair:** Thank you. I must admit I have a personal interest in this because

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I have been a member of the Education Committee since 2010 and in the 2010-15 Parliament, we published a good report called "Into Independence, Not Out of Care", which looked at this particular issue. When it comes to becoming a corporate parent, it is not just the local authority; it is all of **us**.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** The whole point and the argument at the time was about whether the local offer will be a true local offer, rather than just a nice thing to say that local authorities are doing.

Q12 **Chair:** Are you happy with Westminster **Hall**?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Yes, that is what Alex applied for.

**Gavin Newlands** made representations.

**Chair:** Next up, a former member of this Committee—he should know his way around—Gavin Newlands on anti-bullying **week**.

**Gavin Newlands:** I start by apologising, given my previous experience on this Committee, that with the timeframes involved this application should probably have been made several weeks ago to try and secure the week I am looking for. I am looking for your mercy in that respect. Given that you have seven applications, I do not propose to take up too much of your **time**. I will go over the application and say a few things.

I find it hard to believe, but the Library says that anti-bullying week has never been marked in the Commons in a debate, which I find a bit strange. There are also points in the application to reiterate: the bullying survey, which does not even include children under 12, says that 1.5 million young people were bullied in the past year and half of them do not report that. We have still not made it easy enough for young people to report the **bullying**.

I am sure we have all had to deal with constituents whose children are having problems with bullying at school and the school or local authority has not been dealing with the problem appropriately. A debate in Westminster Hall would allow Members to discuss all these issues, including some instances of prejudice-based bullying. I am sure I am not the only Member who has got some groundbreaking initiatives in their constituency, be it from primary schools, high schools or third sector organisations, trying to end bullying. This would allow Members to share these efforts and best practice in an extremely important **area**.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Which Department do you envisage answering this **debate**?

**Gavin Newlands:** Given the focus of anti-bullying week, it would have to be Education. I am not sure if that is the answering Department for that week.

**Bob Blackman:** It isn't, but Women and Equalities is.

**Gavin Newlands:** **If** anyone at all is willing to answer the debate that week, I will take it. The Chancellor could come himself and answer—if I

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can debate that week, I wouldn't care. If it is not possible, the following week would perhaps have to do, because we should still mark it and discuss the issues, but if I can at all get it that week, I would take it, regardless of the answering Department.

**Chair:** You've submitted an additional list of names, so that puts it much more in order from that perspective. Thank you very much, Gavin.

**Jeremy Lefroy, Philip Davies and Julian Sturdy** made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** Next up, Jeremy Lefroy on International Men's Day. Now, I do not know why there are wry smiles passing between Philip Davies and Jess Phillips on this issue.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Mearns. We have a number of other colleagues who wanted to be here but couldn't—Pauline Latham, Fiona Bruce and Stephen Timms. There are several other names that I will submit to you afterwards that have been added to this debate.

We request a debate, and would be extremely happy if it could be granted in Westminster Hall around the occasion of International Men's Day—not on, because it is a Sunday. It would give the House an opportunity to debate really important issues around, for instance, men's and boys' health, particularly mental health, gender relations and equality, and men's contribution to the community, family and society more widely. It is a general debate without a specific motion, which is why I think Westminster Hall, if it is appropriate, would be the right place to discuss these issues.

**Philip Davies:** I accept what Jeremy says, but this would be the third year of the debate. If you recall, the first year it was held in Westminster Hall, and there was a great deal of feedback, not least from people like the Chairman of the Women and Equalities Committee, that they felt that the debate should have been held in the Chamber in the same way that the debate on International Women's Day is held in the main Chamber. We did therefore hold the debate in the main Chamber last year. It was very well subscribed. Time limits had to be imposed on speeches. I would personally request that we carried on with the convention of saying that it should be debated in the Chamber as we do with the International Women's Day debate, which is also a general debate. That is very much the feedback we received after we held it in Westminster Hall the first year, from people such as Maria Miller.

**Julian Sturdy:** I am happy to support the application.

Q15 **Chair:** Are you looking for time in the week after 19 November or the week before?

**Jeremy Lefroy:** Whichever is convenient. Clearly, before probably carries slightly greater weight, but I realise there is great pressure on the timetable.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** In terms of the additional names, how many have you got?

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**Jeremy Lefroy:** The ones we have so far, apart from those you see in front of you, are Pauline Latham, Gavin Robinson, Philip Hollobone, Fiona Bruce, Maria Miller, Stephen Timms and Jo Swinson.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** That still does not get us to the three-hour debate. We would normally look for a minimum of 15 speakers for a three-hour debate.

At the moment, your application is for a general debate, which is fine, in either Westminster Hall or in the Chamber, or Westminster Hall on a Tuesday. Now, if we were to grant this for Tuesday, at the moment, you would have enough speakers—but I take Philip Davies's point that the history is that this is a well-subscribed debate. I certainly would not want to downplay it and squeeze the number of speakers into 90 minutes. At the moment, you have an application that says three hours or 90 minutes. It is your application, so we really need clarity on whether it is three hours or 90 minutes. Do you want it in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or do you want to have it in Westminster Hall on a Thursday, or do you want the Chamber?

**Jeremy Lefroy:** The key is that we have the debate. We respect the Committee and appreciate that you have got an awful lot of debates programmed. Therefore we would rather have the debate at your convenience than have no debate at all. However, as Mr Davies has said, I think, clearly, if it was in the Chamber that would be ideal. It would be up to us to ensure that we have a sufficient number of speakers. I do not think that that would be a problem, with the work that Mr Davies has done in the past, together with my own work for this year. I do not think that would be a problem, but we were trying to be sensitive to the number of applications that you have at the moment, to give you the maximum flexibility.

**Chair:** Thank you very much for that application.

**Clive Lewis** and **Norman Lamb** made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Moving swiftly on, the next application is the treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises by Royal Bank of Scotland Global Restructuring Group and the banking sector.

**Clive Lewis:** Thank you, Chair. As you can see from the motion, the application is for three hours in the main Chamber. It is pretty self-explanatory. As a quick rundown, the FCA has said it may look at giving the Financial Ombudsman Service new powers to tackle banking and some of the excesses and problems that have been going on. Since we had the debate the last time, in the Chamber, there has been a criminal investigation, with HBOS in Reading, and also the section 166 FCA report, which has been reduced and redacted and put out. There has been a lot of controversy about whether that should have gone out in its entirety.

We are seeing in the banking sector at the moment what we think is a systemic abuse of their powers. We think that GRG and RBS is the tip of a very large iceberg. It could be that we are talking billions of pounds. We know that, at least with RBS, approximately 11,000 small and medium-

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sized businesses have been affected. Many of them have gone to the wall—they have been liquidated by this; but also if you look at it in terms of productivity we know that about 13% of small and medium-sized businesses have any trust in their bank. This is a problem. The social licence for banks is in jeopardy; it is in question.

What we want is—the key components are an independent inquiry, looking at the whole of the banking sector and their behaviour, and a new tribunal system, which is independent and impartial, that can effectively deal with this. We are tired of firefighting on this issue. It is undermining the economy and confidence in the economy, productivity and investment. We want to stop firefighting and get to the root cause of this. We think that this motion and this debate will help to do that. It is a really good opportunity to do that.

**Norman Lamb:** I have been pretty horrified by what I have seen and read about this scandal. I came into it because of a constituent who was a whistleblower at RBS, who is now out of work, with his mental health very badly damaged; but when you talk to business owners who went through the GRG process, I think there is a substantial scandal here. It has come out in part, but not in full yet. I think if one is thinking about how we overcome this for the future, establishing a credible, effective and trusted independent process for resolving disputes is incredibly important. I think in itself it would create an effective mechanism to prevent bad behaviour in banks. I suspect at the moment there is, among some people, a sense that there are no consequences to bad behaviour towards small businesses. I think an effective dispute resolution process—a tribunal—would act as a deterrent to bad behaviour and is very badly needed. I think this Parliament should be seen to be debating these issues.

Q19 **Chair:** Would it be right to say that there is belief out there that the bank has used its position as a lender and creditor to asset-strip companies when they have got into difficulties?

**Norman Lamb:** That is the fear. There appears to be plenty of evidence to support those concerns. It was as if GRG became a profit centre—a mechanism to boost the bottom line of the bank as they were seeking to recover from the crash. It was supposed to be an intensive care unit to nurse companies back to health; but what actually happened was that very few companies emerged from it, and too many of them were destroyed.

**Clive Lewis:** So West Register was the other component of RBS which worked with GRG.

Basically, members of West Register—which was the asset acquisition component, or one of the asset acquisition components—would then sit on the same board as people who were liquidating assets. They were given special information, privy information that no one else had. They were then able to bid for these companies, for their assets, for shares with inside information that GRG had picked up in the intensive care process of trying to get them back to health. They were able to use that to liquidate

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the companies, get them for a fraction of the price, and then sell them on later for a lot more.

The bank is saying is that this was sanctioned. They are saying that it was sanctioned by Government. I doubt that, but that is what they are saying because, obviously, Government wanted to get the asset to lending ratio back up, and this was also after the 2008 crash. Those documents have been tumbling out bit by bit.

We also know—we are hearing today—that RBS managers are threatening the FCA with litigation if they go down certain routes in terms of publishing the full section 166 FCA report, which the Treasury Committee has been keen to see published. The Chair has asked for it and been told "no".

It is not just RBS but, given that RBS seems to be at the centre of this storm and that RBS is taxpayer funded, it seems unacceptable that it can get away with this. It is really time for Parliament to discuss and debate this. It affects thousands of our constituents, hundreds of thousands potentially.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** Given that the report from the FCA is out—

**Clive Lewis:** Part of it.

**Norman Lamb:** It's a summary.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** A summary. Is it a priority to have the debate sooner rather than later, or do you want to delay slightly until the report is fully published? What is your timeframe?

**Norman Lamb:** The main purpose of the debate is to make the case for a resolution to the problem, to establish an independent mechanism, to have an inquiry of some sort into how the culture developed. The sooner we have that debate the better, but it is not critically time sensitive. The important thing is to have the debate in the main Chamber, to have a motion there.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** If we offered you time next week, because there is potentially time available, would you be able to have the debate next week?

**Norman Lamb:** I suspect we could, yes.

Q23 **Chair:** We have time next Tuesday at the moment.

**Norman Lamb:** I think that's a yes.

**Clive Lewis:** This isn't going away and the main effort, so to speak, of this debate is to get the independent tribunal system in place, to get those arguments out there, for the independent inquiry, and to put this to bed: to stop firefighting and stop this slow trickle of disaster that is coming out of the banking sector and undermining a critical part of the economy.

Q24 **Chair:** Importantly, are you aware of any potential court proceedings, anything of that nature to do with this, or is it far too early at the

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moment?

**Clive Lewis:** There are lots of things going on in court in terms of individual litigation and so on, but in terms of this, I don't think so.

**Norman Lamb:** I don't think there are any sub judice issues that could cause a problem.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** The other question is do you have any other Government side speakers?

**Clive Lewis:** There are about 20 other people we think will speak as well.

Q26 **Bob Blackman:** It's slightly top heavy on Labour Members.

**Norman Lamb:** We are happy to work on that.

**Chair:** In that case, thank you very much indeed.

**Frank Field** and **Heidi Allen** made representations.

Q27 **Chair:** Lastly but not least, we have Frank Field and the roll-out of universal credit, joined by Heidi Allen.

**Frank Field:** Thank you very much for our chance to appear before you.

**Chair:** Order. We have a Division.

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

*On resuming—*

**Chair:** Welcome to the second part of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Frank Field:** Thank you for giving us this opportunity to bid for time. We wish to call a very specific debate on the first report that the Select Committee on Work and Pensions has made on universal credit. The report has a single recommendation. We wish to try and influence the Budget. We have cross-party support.

**Heidi Allen:** I emphasise the cross-party support element. The Work and Pensions Committee has agreed unanimously on this single ask, which is to ask Government to consider looking at a four week payment rather than six weeks for the first universal credit payment. You will know that that has been all over the press in recent weeks and debated in the House, too. There are also at least a dozen Conservative Members who would be happy to speak in the debate, but time did not permit me to ask people and get them on the piece of paper. To name a few: Dr Sarah Wollaston, Johnny Mercer, Jeremy Lefroy, Peter Aldous, Steve Double, Chris Green and David Warburton. It would be a Thursday, of course, but we feel confident that we could get a real cross-party debate on this. It feels like it is an issue that all sides of the House want to talk about.

Q28 **Chair:** You've given us a list of names there. To set the record straight, if you could supply us with that list, it will go down as part of the application.

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## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Heidi Allen:** I will do.

**Frank Field:** We will have about 45 or 50 names for you by this evening—cross-party. We would very much like a debate on 16 November, if you could consider that. The earlier the better because with more time it might influence what the Treasury does.

Q29 **Bob Blackman:** Is the report from the Select Committee published?

**Frank Field:** Yes, last week. It will be appended to the debate.

Q30 **Bob Blackman:** Because we have often had requests for Backbench Business time for the Chair to give a statement on the report, which would normally take about 20 minutes or thereabouts—not having a debate, but a statement and questions from across the House. Have you considered that?

**Frank Field:** Not on this, because what we most want is for the House, for the first time, to be able to debate and come to a conclusion on an all-party motion, rather than a motion from a single party.

Q31 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue is that you have asked for six hours.

**Frank Field:** Or a three-hour debate, I have here.

Q32 **Bob Blackman:** Not on your application.

**Frank Field:** My apologies. Obviously we would be happy with six because there would be that number of Members, but as it is so crucial that we get an opinion of the House before the Budget, we can speak fast.

Q33 **Chair:** We've got a motion. They are asking for three or six hours. They have asked for 16 November specifically because it is before the Budget and that is what they are trying to influence.

**Frank Field:** And we are asking for the main Chamber, if we may.

**Chair:** Thank you.

**Heidi Allen:** I will get those names for you, just to clarify.

**Chair:** That's very kind. That concludes the public business of the Backbench Business Committee.

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