

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 14 November 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 November 2017.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Chris Davies; Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-26

[I](#): Jim Fitzpatrick.

[II](#): Ian Murray.

[III](#): David Hanson and Robert Neill.

[IV](#): Mhairi Black, Hugh Gaffney, Grahame Morris, Laura Pidcock and Sammy Wilson.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Jim Fitzpatrick made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. Apologies for the slightly delayed start, but our bacon has been saved and Members are here. The first application this afternoon is from Mr Jim Fitzpatrick on deafness and hearing loss. It is an application for a three-hour general debate in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. Over to you, Jim.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, colleagues. This is pretty straightforward. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on deafness. We have 15 colleagues who have confirmed by email that they want to support the debate and will participate in it. We obviously will take whatever the Committee will give us, because we have not had a proper debate on deafness for some time. As we have outlined at the bottom of our application, it affects 11 million people. There is a whole number of issues from welfare to the recognition of British Sign Language, the provision of hearing aids in different NHS trusts, as well as other local issues.

Given the number of people affected across the country, it is something that I think we need to grant as a debate. When colleagues see there is an opportunity to make a contribution, with the lobbying of deaf groups across the country, even more of them might be interested to come and participate. We would be very grateful for anything you can give us with your wisdom and experience.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. You have passed on to me things that I am sure I do not possess in great abundance, but there we go. Any questions for Jim?

Q3 Bob Blackman: Is there any particular time sensitivity? Is there anything coming up—an anniversary, a report, or something that you are launching as an all-party group?

Jim Fitzpatrick: No, it is very much open, Bob. There is no pressure; there are no Government statements coming forward; no policy references. It is very much a matter that we have lobbying colleagues about for a while to get to the requisite 15 names, and now a number of colleagues have said "Yes, we will come and contribute." Having got that, this was the first opportunity to ask your good selves for some space.

Q4 Bob Blackman: At the moment the application is for a general debate in the Chamber. If we decided to allocate you time in Westminster Hall, would you that be acceptable?

Jim Fitzpatrick: It certainly would be. Obviously, given that over 10 million people are affected by this, as always, it would look so much better if we were in the Chamber, but we need a debate so if all you can afford us is Westminster Hall, we would certainly take that. But we would be very



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grateful if you were able to give us the opportunity for a debate in the Chamber and, given that there isn't time pressure on us, we would be happy to have something a little further ahead.

- Q5 **Chris Davies:** Mr Fitzpatrick, how confident are you that you will have others joining in, on top of this 15?

Jim Fitzpatrick: We have canvassed the members of the all-party group, and there has been some lobbying of deaf groups in the constituencies of the MPs. I am quite confident that, when we are able to post that there will be a debate on deafness and deaf groups across the country identify that there is an opportunity to contact their local MP to contribute, more people will come forward. As soon as we got the requisite 15 and the balance that was required to come forward, we wanted to put the bid in so that we could get a debate sooner rather than later.

- Q6 **Chair:** I think there have been well-supported debates in the past, haven't there Jim?

Jim Fitzpatrick: Yes, that is my understanding. We have had a couple of half-hour debates on one or two individual problems, but we have not had a general debate on deafness covering the variety of issues that are confronting people who suffer from being hard of hearing or from deafness for a variety of reasons. It is an opportunity to get the Minister to come and lay out Government policy on deafness.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Ian Murray made representations.

- Q7 **Chair:** We have an application from Mr Ian Murray on the centenary of the death of Dr Elsie Inglis and the contribution of women to world war one.

Ian Murray: Thank you very much, Chair, and for taking the time to hear this application. It is quite timely. Dr Elsie Inglis was a pioneer in terms of the success she had in world war one setting up field hospitals. She was born in Edinburgh and was the first person to graduate from Edinburgh University who was female, but she was not actually awarded her degree until just a few months ago. I thought it would be a good segue into talking about the contribution women made to world war one.

Elsie Inglis died on 26 November 1917. She received a state funeral at St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh on 29 November 1917, so the centenary is coming up at the end of the November. I thought that, with the success of the Passchendaele debate the Backbench Business Committee put together and the many centenaries coming up over the next 12 months, it was an opportune time to celebrate these individuals—very similar to Mabel Stobart—who may also be familiar to some on the Committee, and to broaden that debate out into the contribution that women made to the great war effort. I think we will have lots of debates in the next 12



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months, celebrating and commemorating many centenaries, but this one is particularly poignant.

To give you a little more information, we are also coming up the centenary of the creation of the British army's first all-female unit—the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps—so that is something else that could be woven into the debate.

It is a completely cross-party debate, and since I told people that I was coming here to make the application, I have had additional names added to that cross-party list. I think it would quite a popular debate and a good way to commemorate the centenary of what Elsie Inglis did. She did so much work in Serbia during the war, they have 12 monuments to her, and Belgrade's main hospital for children and women is also named after her. The Serbian government are currently speaking to the Scottish Hospitals Trust, which is based in my own constituency, about a permanent memorial in Edinburgh to celebrate and commemorate the work of Elsie Inglis and her colleagues. So a really good debate to have, a really opportune time, and if the Backbench Business Committee was able to eke out a few hours for this particular debate, I am sure that not just my colleagues and I who have signed this application would be delighted, but also women in the UK in terms of being able to celebrate and commemorate what they did during the great war.

Q8 Chair: Ian, which Department do you think would be appropriate to answer this debate?

Ian Murray: Well, there are a number, aren't there? It would really depend. Women and Equalities might be a place for it to go. There is Defence, of course, and the Foreign Office. There are a whole number. There is the Cabinet Office, and even DCMS, which is the Department leading the commemorations. A large number of Departments could answer this debate. I know that Maria Miller is doing a lot of work as an individual Back Bencher on some of these commemorations. Obviously, that role was given to her because she is both former Women and Equalities and former DCMS.

Q9 Alex Sobel: Are you looking particularly for the debate to be held in the week beginning 27 November?

Ian Murray: As close to the anniversary as possible. I know that time is difficult, and I know that allocation of time is very difficult, but because that is the time of that centenary and of the centenary of the start of the all-women auxiliary corps, it might be quite an opportune moment for it.

Q10 Alex Sobel: To come back to Ian's point, the only answering Department that would be appropriate that week is probably the Cabinet Office. The following week, Defence and Health are answering Departments, so either week might be suitable.

Ian Murray: Either week would be fine. I am not particularly fussy about which Department answers, because there is nothing controversial here and there is no policy, really, to press on.



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Q11 **Chair:** Actually, in the week with the 28th in it, the Cabinet Office is answering but so is Women and Equalities—and Scotland.

Ian Murray: I try not to talk about Scotland if I can, Chair.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just clarify one issue on your application? At the moment, you have ticked the Chamber and Westminster Hall on a Tuesday. The debates we are allocated on Tuesdays are 90 minutes, but you have asked for three hours. Just for clarity, can we confirm that you would accept a 90-minute debate if we could allocate time on a Tuesday? Obviously, you would then not have the full three hours that you originally requested.

Ian Murray: Forgive me, Mr Blackman; this is the first time I have been to the Backbench Business Committee so I am not entirely clear about the way that the application form should be filled out. Given the level of interest in this particular debate, 90 minutes in Westminster Hall may not be sufficient, so anything in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall on a Thursday might actually be more appropriate.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** If we can find time during the week that you would prefer and that meant going to Westminster Hall as opposed to getting time in the Chamber, would that be acceptable?

Ian Murray: Yes, that would be acceptable.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Ian.

Robert Neill and David Hanson made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** Next up, we have Mr Bob Neill and Mr David Hanson.

Robert Neill: Thank you very much, Chair. Mr Hanson and I are here jointly on behalf of the Justice Committee. It is an application, as you can see, for a substantive debate in the Chamber about prisons policy. We have endeavoured to set out as fully as we can in the application our reasons, but in essence there has not been a debate in the Chamber about prisons, which is after all a major and extremely concerning topic on any view—one that involves the interests of virtually all Members of the House in one way or another. There have been some Westminster Hall and Adjournment debates, but nothing of substance. It is nearly a year since a White Paper was published on the matter, and there are still some outstanding responses from the Government, which members of our Committee from across the parties agree need to be ventilated. Of course, the Prisons and Courts Bill, which was introduced in the last Parliament, is not now proceeding—particularly the prisons part of it—so there will not be the opportunity to debate these matters in the context of legislation in this Session either.

I hope that sets out as succinctly as we can why we think there is a strong case here. As you can see, we already have some 21 names, and I suspect, given the nature of the topic and the public interest, that we



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would have no difficulty filling three hours of debate and doing justice to it.

David Hanson: There are a number of topical relevant issues relating to prisons that are ongoing. We have discussions about prison officer numbers and prison officer training. There are discussions ongoing about the use of psychoactive substances in prisons and prison safety measures. The Government are embarking on a programme of further devolution to prison governors, and the Bill that was intended to come forward has not come forward. We have been trying to discuss those matters in the Justice Committee, but it is an important issue that demands the attention of the wider House. There are 140-plus prisons in the country, and I am sure plenty of people will want to contribute on the position of their own prison, as well as the strategic issues that the Justice Committee on a cross-party wants to raise.

- Q15 **Chair:** You talked about the fact that we have not had a debate about this particular aspect of Ministry of Justice operations. Is there any particular time sensitivity between now and Christmas?

Robert Neill: No. I think we have noted one particular date when we have a prearranged prison visit, which I do to see the coalface. Subject to that, we are happy to take what is available.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed.

- Q16 **Alex Sobel:** Are you happy to accept either Westminster Hall or the Chamber?

Robert Neill: We particularly seek to press you, if we might, for the Chamber, simply because we have had Westminster Hall debates in the past. I suggest that the nature and scope of the topic and the level of public interest warrant it. Normally I would be the first to be helpful as far as I can, but I hope you will understand, given the breadth of the issue, the level of concern and the scope of the issues, that we seek the Chamber.

- Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously this stems from a Select Committee report. Has that report been debated in either the Chamber or Westminster Hall?

David Hanson: No.

Robert Neill: No, we have not had the chance to do that. Indeed, we have not yet had all the responses.

- Q18 **Bob Blackman:** Okay. But the Government have obviously responded to the recommendations.

Robert Neill: We have had some responses, but there are still outstanding matters that we have raised with the Secretary of State since the election. In addition, the report relates specifically to prison safety, but it is a very broad issue, as you can imagine. The Secretary of State has indicated that he intends to pursue the reform programme but not through legislative means, so it is all the more important.

Q19 **Chair:** So you have had a partial response to a Select Committee report.

Robert Neill: We have had a response, partially, to the report we issued in the last Parliament, before the general election, but of course there have been delays—understandably—and a change of personnel. I perfectly accept the good faith of Ministers that we will get substantive responses. The Secretary of State has appeared before the Committee, as has the Prisons Minister. That has helped us on some issues, but it still does not deal with the broad issue that we have not had the opportunity in Committee or elsewhere to debate the overall strategic thrust of prisons policy or for Members across the House to contribute on matters that affect their own prisons.

David Hanson: The key point about the Chamber is that it would give an opportunity, I hope, for the Lord Chancellor to come to the House of Commons. We had a debate in September last year in Westminster Hall on prison population issues, which the Prisons Ministers came to, but I think this is of sufficient importance that we get the Lord Chancellor to focus on the response if possible.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** You want the debate before Christmas. I understand the rationale for that. Because of other activities in the Chamber, leaving out 21 December, which is the last sitting day, only 7 or 14 December are potentially available. If either of those were offered, would they be acceptable to you, given that you cannot do 30 November?

Robert Neill: Yes, certainly.

David Hanson: Yes.

Grahame Morris, Mhairi Black, Hugh Gaffney, Laura Pidcock and Sammy Wilson made representations.

Q21 **Chair:** We now have an application on Women Against State Pension Inequality. Grahame, over to you.

Grahame Morris: We would like to present a bid for a substantive debate in respect of the WASPI women—the women seeking justice on changes to state pensions. It comes about at this time because of a parliamentary petition that was launched, which now has well in excess of 100,000 signatures; I think it reached 100,000 last Saturday.

You may recall that members of the Backbench Business Committee have participated in some of the debates. We held a debate in July in Westminster Hall that was absolutely packed, and a time limit of two minutes was applied. The debate was oversubscribed and it attracted a huge amount of interest.

We have also tabled a parliamentary early-day motion—early-day motion 63—which has 194 signatures. I think it is the EDM that has attracted the most signatures in the Parliament, and again, it seeks justice for the women affected.



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In relation to the application for a debate that we are bringing here, we are seeking a debate in the main Chamber for six hours on a votable motion. We have wide-ranging support—I think you have a copy of the application—with 64 Members of Parliament indicating that they would be willing to speak in the debate. They are MPs from all nations, all parties and all regions. It would be extremely timely, because the Budget is coming up, and we would like to have the debate at the earliest opportunity.

I would also like to say that we want a substantive debate and we want to find a solution for the women affected. I think every Member of Parliament has been lobbied; there are 4,500 WASPI women in my constituency and I think there are similar numbers in most others. We seek justice and a resolution for the women affected. We would like to press the case to the Committee and ask for your sympathetic consideration for having an all-day debate in the main Chamber on a votable motion.

Mhairi Black: I support everything that Grahame said, but I think it is important to remember that, yes, this issue has been debated multiple times in Parliament, but at every chance that it has been debated, no resolution has been found at the end of it; there has been no answer. The genuine aim of this is to find some common ground, so that we can come up with an answer for this issue.

However, it is important to remember that this is a Government-created problem and these women are completely blameless. This is a time-sensitive issue and these women have been suffering since the very first time we debated it. I think it has now actually ended up upon these women to do a petition to get this in front of Parliament. I think it would be an affront to those women if we did not grant them something really binding and effective and that brings this to an end.

Hugh Gaffney: As a new MP, this issue has been burning on the doorstep. Some of the people we are talking about have been caught out by this; some people didn't even know that this would affect them. For this to happen to women the way it has happened to them, and for them to suddenly have to extend their working life, I feel that this is a proper debate that needs to be had for the whole United Kingdom.

Laura Pidcock: I agree with everything that has been said. There is significant interest across all of the parties to find some kind of resolution. It is very confusing to explain to constituents why this has been heard several times and then it just dies a death—there is no conclusion from those energies. I would like to see it in the main Chamber, and I would like there to be a vote.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** As you have all said, this has been debated several times. Notwithstanding the issue—I understand the issue—our problem is allocating time for multiple requests. I think you said that you have 64 potential speakers, so clearly that would potentially allow for quite a long debate, but we have to ration the time available. Given that your main thrust is to get a resolution of the House, if we were to come back and



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say, "Look. You can't have six hours because it will prevent other people getting a debate", and we offered you a three-hour debate on your votable motion, which would obviously mean you would have to limit the speakers, would that be an acceptable route forward for your application?

Grahame Morris: If we could have the debate in a reasonable time, we would consider that. So many people are involved that I would have to consult. It is a colossal effort—we are just the tip of the spear here. If we could get the debate in the main Chamber on a votable motion, I suspect we would, but I would need to consult. If that was the Committee's offer, I think we would be minded to agree that but I would need to consult.

Mhairi Black: I have been elected for three years now, and we had a general election earlier this year. Parliament has changed since the first time that we had this debate. As Hugh says, this is a big one on the doorsteps. Every single elected Member in this room and in this building has a WASPI woman living in their constituency. I do not think that the fact it has been debated before should take away from the prominence of how important it is just now.

Hugh Gaffney: I would like to add that we have had the debates. It is time to stop talking and start doing some action. That three hours would give us something, but we would need to reach a conclusion. I would certainly grasp it and take it.

Q23 **Chris Davies:** In answer to Mr Blackman's question, I am not quite clear on whether you agree to a three-hour debate. If you do not at the moment and you have to consult, do you want us to hold this in abeyance until you come back to us, if we offer you a three-hour debate? If we decide to offer you a three-hour debate, would you accept?

Grahame Morris: We would prefer six hours, but we understand collectively that you can only allocate the time you have been given, which is not to say that you might not have an unallocated day that is given to the Backbench Business Committee. I know that is unlikely with the Budget coming up. We would prefer six hours, but if all we can have is three, as long as it is in the main Chamber on a votable motion, I think we could take it.

Q24 **Chair:** Can I point out to you that because of decisions that the Committee has already taken, there would not be a six-hour slot until the middle of December. There would be three-hour slots before that.

Laura Pidcock: It is such a colossal issue and so many people have a duty to represent those thousands of women in every constituency that I think six hours is what the issue deserves.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** Another issue is that I have very quickly looked through the number of speakers here. How many are there from the Government side?

Grahame Morris: I have looked through as well. Tim Loughton is the only name I can spot, although a number of others have indicated that they would or they have not responded to the specific request. *[Interruption.]*



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Can I also point out the DUP? Sammy Wilson has joined us here, and Jim Shannon is one of the signatories as well.

Q26 **Chair:** Sammy is not part of the Government, but he is part of the parliamentary majority.

Grahame Morris: He is part of the solution—that is the important thing. He could be.

Chair: Okay. Thank you for your time.