



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 9 Jan 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 Jan 2018.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Robert Courts, Chris Davies; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-20

Witnesses

[I:](#) Dr Lisa Cameron

[II:](#) Sir Edward Leigh, Mr Shailesh Vara and Stephen Pound

[III:](#) Catherine West

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

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Dr Lisa Cameron made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. It is our first meeting of 2018, so I wish you all a happy new year. We have three applications before us this afternoon, commencing with Dr Lisa Cameron on the role of disabled people in growing our economy. Over to you, **Lisa**.

Dr Cameron: Thank you. Happy new year to the Committee. It is a privilege to appear here again to ask for a debate. This is an extremely important issue and an important debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, I can let you know that three important things have happened in the past three months. First, disability and disabled people were not mentioned in the Budget. That gave a very negative message to the population about their role in the economy. Secondly, disabled people were excluded from any mention in the Green Paper on the industrial strategy. Again, that gave disabled people the feeling of being excluded from the parliamentary process and that their contribution to the economy was not being championed or prioritised. Thirdly, we had the Chancellor's somewhat unfortunate comments before Christmas regarding the contribution of disabled people to the economy and their productivity levels.

All those things have come together at this time to give a very negative message to disabled people about their contribution to the economy, and about the importance of the UK harnessing their skills and abilities and championing their potential. This debate would seek not only to change that perception, but to challenge and look to active policies that can positively take forward the role of disabled people **in** the economy across the United Kingdom.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I have one quick question. You have representation broadly from across the political spectrum, but apart from the fact that you have Wes Streeting defecting, which we would welcome, you potentially have a paucity of Government speakers. Have you reached out to get more?

Dr Cameron: Yes. My office has been in contact with Heidi Allen and Johnny Mercer, and they have been very **positive**.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Because it helps the application if there is a balanced debate between the parties.

Dr Cameron: Yes, I accept that. We have support from those on the Government Benches. Many Government MPs want to champion the role of disabled people in the **economy**.

Bob Blackman: **I** understand that, but it is your application for a debate and we have to look at it on its **merits**.

Q4 **Chris Davies:** Briefly, **I** can see that you want a debate on a substantive motion. If we were not able to find time in the main Chamber, would you

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consider a Westminster Hall debate, or do you specifically want a debate in the main Chamber?

Dr Cameron: I would consider a Westminster Hall debate because I want the issue to be raised and I want us to take it forward positively across the parties. However, it is extremely important that we give out a positive message to people with disabilities right across the country—one in six people are disabled—that they should have their time in the main Chamber. We have an opportunity here at the Backbench Business Committee to ensure that we are seen to prioritise their skills and potential for the country and take that forward in the main Chamber.

Q5 **Chris Davies:** If I may, is there a time limit on it? I know you would like to have it as soon as possible, I am sure, but if we could not fit it in until February or March would you consider it then?

Dr Cameron: Yes. Certainly in order to raise the profile, to ensure that we are championing disabled people, I would rather wait for a longer period to have it in the main Chamber than to have it in Westminster Hall.

Q6 **Chair:** Is there no specific date around which you would want the debate to occur, such as a commemoration date or anything of that nature?

Dr Cameron: No. We had International Day of Persons with Disabilities just before Christmas.

Chair: Thank you.

Sir Edward Leigh, Mr Shailesh Vara and Stephen Pound made representations.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome, Sir Edward. This afternoon your application is about the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. Over to you.

Sir Edward Leigh: As you know, this is an extraordinarily important subject. Although the structure of the Palace is in relatively good repair, the electrics and sewage system have been dealt with in a haphazard way over the best part of a century so, by general consent, the building is in some danger, perhaps from fire, and it is urgently necessary that the House comes to a decision on how we should proceed to deal with it. A commission was set up to look at this issue and it reported many months ago, and we are still waiting for a debate. We were supposed to debate the issue this coming Thursday on a Government motion, but the Government have pulled the motion and there is no indication of when this debate will be held. We were told about this in the week before Christmas and we decided immediately to ask for a debate. Frankly, our decision was not gainsaid by the Government. They did not dissuade us from it. Indeed, if anything, there was some encouragement for us taking this action in front of you today.

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It is very important, we believe, that it should be not a general debate, but an amendable motion. We have a motion, which we have sent to you, and which those who disagree with our point of view can amend. This will be an ideal opportunity for the House to have a free vote. The Government have made it clear that it is an entirely free vote. Indeed, I think the Government are perfectly happy with it being an entirely Back-Bench operation, because it is really a House matter. It is probably better that the fingerprints of the Government are not on this, one way or another. We appreciate that your slots are busy during January, but at least we can apply for a February slot. You have seen that we have, in very short order, a large number of names who want this debate. I should say that today Ian Paisley also adds his name to that list. We are genuinely all-party. You can see that we have Steve here. We have other Labour Members who want this debate. This list that you have in front of you by no means covers all the people who may disagree with our point of view, so we think that there would be absolutely no difficulty in filling up the three hours. I hope that is good enough as an introduction.

Q7 **Chair:** Entirely adequate. Thank you very much. Mr Vara have you anything to add?

Mr Vara: I endorse everything that Sir Edward has said. I would emphasise the urgency of this debate. The commission tasked with looking into this matter reported in September 2016. The programme of the process operating at the back end of that commission report called for a debate to be scheduled by the Government at the back end of 2016. That debate did not take place. We were then told that a debate would take place sometime in 2017. That did not take place. We were told that a debate would take place this Thursday, and that has been pulled for reasons that have not been made clear. We all recognise that this work is urgent. It needs to be done. We are therefore doing something that we hope will benefit the whole of the Palace of Westminster, in that we would start the process of getting something done.

Stephen Pound: Some words are massively overused, and actually lose their strength and value by being constantly overused. Principal among them is the word "iconic", which is applied to almost everything nowadays, from Members of Parliament such as myself, to London taxis. I prefer the description you just used, Mr Mearns, of "entirely adequate". However, if the word iconic has any meaning in this day of age, it is for this building. What sort of a signal would be sent out if we in this building proved to be utterly incapable of putting our own House in order, and had to scuttle off to some distant spot from which we will most likely never return? Meanwhile, this process will go on for ever and ever—we all know what it will be like if we leave this place, the Palace of Westminster, the home of our democracy.

We all know that this building is not the mother of Parliaments—that is a great misquote from Bright. This country is the mother of Parliaments, but throughout the world people ring Westminster to see what mother says. This is the heartbeat and the home of democracy. The significance of this building spans far wider than this sea-begirt island of ours; it is much

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greater than that. Are we really saying that in this day and age that we are utterly incapable of rewiring, refitting the sewage systems, undertaking all the interior works or even getting rid of the rats? I say that in this country we can achieve that, we are capable, and we will do it. We will not leave the Palace of Westminster. The Palace of Westminster will grow in strength and will stand as a symbol of not just democracy, but British can-do. Let's do it! Thank you.

Chair: I'm terribly sorry, Stephen, but the BAFTA nominations were announced this morning.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Unfortunately, Gary Oldman does not need a substitute. There is a certain irony about this application. As you have already said, Sir Edward, the Government scheduled the debate for this Thursday. If we are to allocate any time, it will be a Thursday. The Government have said that they pulled the debate on the basis that there was a lot of concern that having the debate on a Thursday meant that fewer Members would be present, and that they are looking for a date or time to hold the debate on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, when more Members are present.

I am concerned about two things. The first is that this will potentially take up time that the Backbench Business Committee has to allocate, when this is quite clearly House business and should therefore fit into the time allocated for House business, not Back-Bench business. How do you respond to that issue? Secondly, given the Government's view about not holding the debate on a Thursday, when we would only have a Thursday potentially to allocate, how do you feel about having the debate on a Thursday when possibly fewer Members will be able to attend and listen to the great oratory that we will no doubt hear?

Mr Vara: Mr Blackman is saying, "Let's wait for the Government to do it."

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** No, I am asking specific questions about what the Government have said, so that we can have your responses.

Mr Vara: Given that the Government's report in 2016 said that there would be a debate by the end of 2016 and we are still waiting for that debate, and given that the Government tabled a debate for this Thursday and have now pulled it, I have to say that the certainty of a debate on this very important subject being tabled by the Government in due course has to be questioned. I therefore think that we need to force the issue because it is so important.

As far as the issue of Back-Bench business versus the House authorities is concerned, I would hope that, to the extent to which the Committee has any discretion, you will consider the importance of this subject and weigh up the arguments, notwithstanding that it should be House business in Government time, and conclude that, given that the Government have not so far in 15 months tabled a debate, perhaps the Committee should take the initiative and allow us to do so.

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Sir Edward Leigh: If you grant our request and give us a debate on, say, a Thursday in February, it would be perfectly in order for the Government to move it to a Wednesday if they wanted to. The Leader of the House could make a statement saying, "We are very pleased that the Backbench Business Committee has made this initiative. This is clearly a House matter and a free vote. We think it is important, and therefore we are going to provide time on a Wednesday or Tuesday," but that is entirely up to the Government.

Stephen Pound: Mr Blackman makes a very sound procedural point, and I pay credit to him for it. However, that would apply in normal business. This is not normal. This is absolutely exceptional. I cannot think of anything that is remotely comparable. Far be it from me to impugn the motives of the Government, who—I was going to say I have great confidence in them, but that would be stretching it a little bit. I respect their position, but this building is suffering. The situation is getting worse by the day. We have now been messing around for nearly 18 months; it will be two years this September. During that time, this place has not been standing still. Bits have been dropping off it. We have to bring this matter to a head.

In any other aspect of the Backbench Business Committee, quite clearly Blackman's law would apply—there is no question at all about that—but this particular case is truly exceptional. The situation is being ramped up. People like ourselves are being called sentimental conservatives. I am not sentimental, and I am most certainly not a Conservative. I am a person who cares for this place, and I want to bring this matter to the testing point. We need to bring it forward. We need to do something. This is a great opportunity for the Backbench Business Committee to strike forward and lead in this matter. You, Mr Mearns, will be remembered with affection throughout history. There will be undoubtedly a Committee Room named after you. That is not a promise; that is an aspiration.

Mr Vara: That would of course be in the reformed and refurbished House of Commons, and the sooner we get that Committee Room marked to you, the sooner we can start the process.

Chair: I was told once that it might be Committee Room 5, because I spent 15 months in there on the HS2 Bill.

Stephen Pound: How come you haven't got a knighthood?

Q10

Alex Sobel: We seem to make a lot of decisions at the moment in the Committee. Undoubtedly, although we have not had a debate, this is a matter of intense debate outside the Chamber. You have written that up to 50 colleagues have expressed interest, but we only have, with Ian Paisley, 22 names. Do you have over 50 names on a list, rather than just 50 people who have expressed interest? If you have, which I do not doubt—I would be quite interested in speaking on this matter—do you not really need six hours in the Chamber, rather than three?

Sir Edward Leigh: Well, that's up to you.

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Mr Vara: This is an important debate. We are applying for three hours, but if the Committee feels that this subject requires six hours, we certainly will not complain. I can certainly say that over the past year, many people across the parties have said that they are interested in the outcome of this subject, and the number is well over 50. It is important to remember that while the Government say this is urgent, they seek to push the programme even further back by commissioning more work, research and analysis to be done, and then to come back to the Committee in 12 to 18 months. The Government's current proposals are that if there should be a full decant, that should take place in 2025, in seven years' time. There is an irony in the Government saying that this is urgent work while also saying that we are going to commence proper works in seven years' time. We recognise how urgent it is. We want that work to commence as soon as possible, and our motion sets that out.

Q11 **Chair:** The fact that the building is shrouded in scaffolding shows the urgency of the work, which is already taking place around us. I understand the urgency of your application. I did hear, though, that there was potential for the Government allocating some time a fortnight Wednesday for this very debate. Have you heard anything about that?

Sir Edward Leigh: No, but you can take the initiative and set down a debate for a Thursday in February at the first opportunity. As I say, we will have a debate anyway. It will be on an amendable motion, and the House will express an opinion. The Government have not told us whether they want to move it to a Wednesday. Unless you take the initiative, it could drag on. I think this would be a feather in your cap, frankly, as my colleague said.

Mr Vara: And if I may just add, Mr Mearns, that in the past this Committee has complained that it would like to have debates on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, rather than a Thursday. In this instance, if the Government were to say, "No, we are going to give you a debate on one of the first three working days," that would count as a bonus for you as well—[Interruption.]

Stephen Pound: You've just been made a Minister.

Mr Vara: I will take that call later, whoever she or he may be.

Chair: Even if it is a call from the Prime Minister, I hope you don't change your mind on this subject.

Mr Vara: So do I.

Q12 **Chris Davies:** Can I just check which Department you wish to answer?

Sir Edward Leigh: The Leader of the House is responsible for this.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Catherine West made representations.

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Q13 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Catherine, and welcome. Your application this afternoon is on skills devolution. It is over to you, please.

Catherine West: This is my first time ever in this Committee, so it is a real pleasure. This is a cross-party application to talk about skills in city regions. There is obviously a particular focus on London because some London colleagues helped to put together the report, "Bridging the Skills Gap", which talks about a crucial issue for all the regions: how we manage the productivity puzzle, and how we manage the new apprenticeship levy, which has been described by Leo Quinn, the chief exec of Balfour Beatty, as "like something out of Yes, Minister". It is definitely something that needs a light shone on it, and it is something that all of us as Members will be interested in.

There are tricky questions about local enterprise partnerships, which try to help the private and public sectors to come up with jobs for young people and adults in the workplace. Certainly, against the backdrop of Brexit, that is something that all regions need to address, in terms of how we go from the expense of university degrees, the role of FE, and how we manage the whole area of skills—is it better done nationally or is it better done at a local level? There are so many opportunities in the city regions, and yet many of them are saying that skills devolution is not really working.

There are big questions over whether the apprenticeship levy is working, and that is adding up to quite a lot of money these days, so we need to shine a light on how effective it has been. The *Telegraph* has reported that 60% of apprenticeships have not succeeded. This is not necessarily a party political thing; it is more about how we go forward nationally to try to achieve the best from the levy. Company bosses are starting to complain about it now, because it feels like a tax yet what are they getting back for it? Indeed, what are we getting back, as communities, in terms not just of young people but of adults trying to get back into the workplace so we have a workforce that is fit for the modern era?

That is the main thrust of the application. It is cross-party. We have applied for a three-hour debate because we think it will attract a lot of Members to speak. Everybody wants to talk about the apprentices in their area. Obviously, we would like to have it in the Chamber if possible, because it attracts a really good attendance from Members. The application has a particular emphasis on city regions, but that accounts for quite a big picture—that is the expertise that this report is addressing—and it would have general application across other regions. I hope that Members here consider the fact that the private and public sectors and commentators are highlighting that the apprenticeship levy is still in its infancy—it comes up to a year this April. There is also a link with education, schools, FE and all of those areas. That is a really important question for us to debate and for Ministers to come up with answers to. We really do want Ministers to apply the best of their expertise to come up with some answers to questions that I think a lot of people nationally are asking.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** On the application, you committed to update the number

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of speakers. Have you got any additional names?

Catherine West: I am sure your good self would be up for speaking in it, if it is successful. As I said before, I am pretty confident. We have got a list here from my trusty assistant. There is Tom Brake, Sir Vince Cable, Ruth Cadbury, David Lammy, Siobhain McDonagh, Bob Neill, Lucy Powell, Steve Reed, Paul Scully and Stephen Timms. I know there are others who are interested in the way city regions are run. I am sure that colleagues from the midlands and from Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle would be interested in how—

Q15 **Chair:** Or even Gateshead.

Catherine West: Absolutely—not that we would want to resurrect the Gateshead versus Newcastle debate. The important thing is that we look at how modern economies work and how we can promote the skills agenda into that. It is so complex and it is not an easy one to get right, but equally we have an opportunity. The Government was quite gutsy in bringing in the apprenticeship levy, in my view, but now we need a system that matches the expectations of all.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** Which Department would answer this debate?

Catherine West: I would love there to be—I do not know if we can have this—a skills Minister plus a BEIS Minister, because it is an industrial question, but it is also definitely a question about the FE side of things. In a perfect world, you would have CLG there as well, because we all know that boroughs have a key role to play in employability. We know of some excellent schemes—

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** The reason I raise this is that, although it is obviously your application, organising who would respond is quite significant in terms of devolution, skills and so on—different issues are being raised. There is an opportunity for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on either 23 or 30 January—that would get you an early debate. BEIS is answering on 23 January and CLG is on 30 January. There is the potential to have a debate, which might give you—

Alex Sobel: It's BEIS and Education on 23 January.

Bob Blackman: Sorry, BEIS and Education on the 23rd. That might get someone who covers both Departments to answer, and that would get you an early debate, rather than having to wait in the queue. Is that something you would be interested in?

Catherine West: In a perfect world, it would be good to have it before February-March, and I say that because I think a lot of Members might be quite busy around March-April. Therefore, it would be helpful if possible to have it early. Equally, if I got to choose—which I don't—obviously I would love to have it in the Chamber, because everyone wants the Chamber, don't they?

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** I understand that, but if you were offered one of those dates, would you accept a 90-minute debate, with the proviso that if you

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do not get the answers you like, you could come back and put in an application for a debate that could be held in the Chamber a bit later?

Catherine West: I think going for the earlier date is a good one. Thank you for asking.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I have a technical question about the subject itself. When it has come to the regions outside London, who would you see as being the delivery partners? Would it be the local enterprise partnerships or would it be city mayors, where they exist, or what?

Catherine West: Certainly in areas where LEPs work, it would be wonderful to have some references to best practice. In some of the city regions, the experience is that because there is such a complex economy, sometimes LEPs do not match what is happening in the economy, so they tend to be talking shops. So it would be good to have a few best practice examples from LEPs, maybe in a smaller area. For example, I imagine in the midlands or in the Gateshead-Newcastle area there may be really good LEPs, whereas the experience referred to in this report is that, actually, because an individual borough can be up to 300,000 people, in a way you have got that crucial role of the actual borough.

So, I think this debate will be quite complex, because it will refer to best practice in the regions where they may be a bit smaller in terms of numbers, but I think we will also refer to local authorities as delivery partners. Also, traditionally, as you know, local authorities have very close links with FE colleges, and they also have experience of the new training providers. We want to get some examples of best practice. We also probably want to shine a light on training providers where they have had quite a lot of time and cash to get it right and they still are not really doing what we need them to do. I think that is the kind of area that we will end up debating when it comes to the debate.

Q20 **Chris Davies:** May I suggest a change to the title to skills devolution in England, because it is already devolved in Wales and Scotland?

Catherine West: That would certainly play to the shorter debate—there will be a limit to how much we can get out in 90-minutes—whereas, if we had the three hours in the Chamber, I think we would have more contributions and we would be able to do more across the regions. With the 90 minutes, it might be difficult to do them all. As we all know, the regions have different challenges and different strengths, but to get the contrast we might want the longer debate in the Chamber.

Chair: Okay. That ends your ordeal, Catherine. Thank you very much indeed.

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