

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 6 February 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 6 February 2018.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-15

[I](#): Kirstene Hair.

[II](#): Hugh Gaffney.

[III](#): Norman Lamb.

[IV](#): Siobhain McDonagh.



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Kirstene Hair made representations.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications before us. First and foremost is Kirstene Hair, on seasonal migrant workers.

Kirstene Hair: I am calling for a general debate on the requirement for consistency of access to the seasonal migrant workforce UK-wide. This issue has gone on for a number of years and it has now reached breaking point. Some 80,000 seasonal migrant workers are required each year to support the United Kingdom's agricultural industry, but we have seen a 15% to 20% decline in recent years and that trend is due to continue unless a framework is put in place, such as the seasonal agricultural workers scheme that was in place until 2013.

I have cross-party support from more than 40 MPs from various parties: Liberal Democrat, Labour, SNP, Conservative and DUP. That support has ranged from right up in the north of Scotland—Banff and Buchan, and Moray—down to Kent and many of the constituencies in between.

(The) industry is worth £1.2 billion to the UK economy and has grown by 131% in the past two decades. What the farmers in my constituency, and indeed across the United Kingdom, are asking for is simply a framework that allows them ease of access to the seasonal migrant workforce, from both EU and non-EU countries. I have lobbied DEFRA and the Home Office on the issue and I am now getting feedback from farmers across the country that the matter is absolutely urgent; that if they do not have vital changes in the coming months there will be an extremely detrimental impact on an iconic UK industry.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Are there any **questions?**

- Q1 **Bob Blackman:** I understand the issue involved, but could you just be clear about what you want the Government to do as a result of the debate? I understand that an immigration Bill is due. Is there something you want done immediately or could it wait until the **Bill?**

Kirstene Hair: In order for the industry to have the security to continue to invest, which they have done successfully over the past decade, they need to know that they will have access to workers. We therefore need an urgent Government announcement that we will have a scheme to allow them access to the workforce. It is hard to quantify this, but last year there was a significant acreage of soft fruit that was not picked—it was left to rot in the fields because there were not enough workers to finish the season. That could have a considerable impact again this year and in the coming years, so they need to have stability and security and there therefore needs to be an urgent statement from the **Government.**

- Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I note from the application that there have been a number of debates on the **subject** in Westminster Hall.

Kirstene Hair: Yes, the last one was in **July.**

- Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Presumably they have not produced the relevant result.

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The motion as you have it framed would allow us to offer a debate either in Westminster Hall or time in the Chamber. But it is not really a divisible motion; it is a motion for noting, more than anything else. Given that you have already had those debates in Westminster Hall and you do not seem satisfied with the Government response, it is not clear what action you expect the Government to take. If you want some action, you need to frame it in the motion, which then means it needs to go in the Chamber. I am trying to guide you on how this might **work**.

Kirstene Hair: That is really helpful and I am happy to amend the motion, to ensure that it seeks the urgent statement that it **requires**.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** I do not want to make one up, but something like, "This House calls on the Government to bring forward proposals, blah, blah, blah," would be the sort of motion that you might want to put. We are doing it a bit on the fly.

Q5 **Chair:** You have said **that** it is urgent. Obviously, an awful lot of the seasonal work begins in May and June. How time-sensitive is this? We have very little time. There is a recess beginning this Thursday and we will be back on 20 February. How soon do you think you would need the debate to take place?

Kirstene Hair: I obviously do not know the exact intricacies of the schedules, but **I** would hope for a debate when we return from recess or even up to the end of March.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Hugh Gaffney made **representations**.

Q6 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Hugh. Your application this afternoon is on family reunion for refugee children with family in the UK. Over to you.

Hugh Gaffney: The debate I am looking for is to highlight this before it happens. It has already started in the other House, where this was discussed on 15 December. Baroness Williams of Trafford, Minister of State at the Home Office, announced that the Home Office is currently considering a new resettlement asylum strategy, which among other areas will make improvements and changes in UK policies for refugee family reunification.

You might remember a small child, whose name was Aylan Kurdi, who was washed up on the beach. We know the horror stories of thousands of children walking miles just to get here. I think we can kick this Bill off from here, have the Westminster Hall debate to start it off and bring it back to people's attention. Don't wait until another picture appears in the papers showing another dead child. Let's try to prevent it. This is something we can do in the Houses of Parliament to make a change to society, help these children and reunite them with families in the UK. If this could be the starting point in Westminster Hall, then I would like that to be considered by the Panel.

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Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Does anyone have questions?

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** Could I just ask which Government Department you would see answering the debate?

Hugh Gaffney: I am actually thinking about both the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, because they will need to work together on this.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Only one Department will answer.

Hugh Gaffney: Oh, sorry; only one. Then I think it has to go to the Home Office.

Q9 **Chair:** Is there any time sensitivity here? You would obviously like it as soon as possible, I guess.

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. Obviously we have a recess, but ASAP. I don't want to wait until the summer when I pick up a paper. We just had a tragedy last week when another boat overturned. We are losing children just now. All they are asking for is to come and meet their mum and dad in Britain.

Norman Lamb made representations.

Chair: Norman, this afternoon your application is on access and waiting time standards for early intervention in psychosis.

Norman Lamb: Yes, and thank you very much indeed. I must also mention that we have two additional names to add to the list.

Q10 **Chair:** I believe that is 13 in total?

Norman Lamb: I think so. Jeremy Lefroy and Johnny Mercer can be added to the list. Briefly, by way of background, when I was Minister I introduced the first waiting time standards in mental health, so that you start to get equality of access to evidence-based treatment between physical health and mental health. That standard has been in place now for nearly two years. It was supposed to be met by April 2016. We have done a major FOI across the whole country, so we have a pretty comprehensive understanding of what is going on around the country. Basically, 29% of trusts said that they could meet the full NICE evidence-based treatment package, so for most of the country people are not getting access to the full evidence-based treatment.

I suppose in a way it is a perfect case study of the lack of parity of esteem, as we call it, between mental health and physical health. If you could imagine a cancer service that says, "We'll offer you chemotherapy up to the Xth week but not beyond that," there would be a national outcry. It is to highlight that it is unacceptable that we are not meeting the full evidence-based treatment package in a national programme that sets that standard very clearly.

The debate would be a means of highlighting the issue and putting pressure on NHS England to implement parity of esteem, which we

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legislated for in 2012. I have put down that I would like Westminster Hall. The subject was debated a couple of years ago, and there was a lot of interest from colleagues across the House at that time, but I think it needs to be debated again in Parliament.

Chair: Thank you. Are there any questions?

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** You put down for a 90-minute debate but you say you have 13 speakers, which does not allow them much time to develop any arguments. We have got a number of slots coming up in Westminster Hall. If we allocated you the time, would you be able to take a three-hour debate on this subject, as opposed to a 90-minute one?

Norman Lamb: Yes, I am pretty sure that we could; I'm just trying not to be greedy.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Siobhain McDonagh made representations.

Chair: Lastly, but certainly not leastly, Siobhain McDonagh. This afternoon's application from Siobhain is on child poverty in London.

Siobhain McDonagh: I appreciate that the mention of the word "London" raises hackles among some MPs from other parts of the country, across all parties. In trying to state my case, I would say that there are now constituencies within the UK where more than half the children are growing up in poverty, compared with one in 10 in areas with the lowest poverty rates. Some 700,000 children in London are living below the poverty line; that is 37% of all children in the capital.

Although poverty rates are higher for everyone in London than nationally, that gap is larger for children than for any other group. London has the highest rate of child poverty in any English region. There are as many poor children in London as in all of Scotland and Wales. Among the 20 parliamentary constituencies with the highest levels of childhood poverty, seven are located in London. In two of those, Bethnal Green and Bow and Poplar and Limehouse in east London, children are, for the first time in recent years, more likely than not to grow up poor. Measured by local authority, Tower Hamlets in east London has the highest level of child poverty—53%.

When researching this debate, I was shocked to discover that, according to one of the food bank charities, one in 10 London families have relied on a food bank. It is hard to believe that London has one of the lowest rates of maternal employment in the UK. That is partly due to the cost of childcare and access to decent childcare.

Because London is a very dynamic place, 10 years ago the average family in poverty in London lived in inner London, on welfare benefits, in social housing. The average family in poverty in London today lives in outer

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London, is in work and lives in private rented accommodation. The fact that they are in private rented accommodation is the strongest factor in their poverty. The two London boroughs that have seen the biggest demographic change over the past 10 years are Enfield and Croydon, one in north London and one in south London. That is basically why I am requesting the debate.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. Any questions, please?

- Q12 **Bob Blackman:** I have two points. First, you put down to have the debate either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall, but your motion, although not necessarily divisible, could actually only be debated in the Chamber, because you could not put this motion in Westminster Hall. Secondly, it is not clear which Government Department would answer the debate.

Siobhain McDonagh: When I heard you ask somebody else that, I thought, "Oh gosh." I thought that many Departments were in competition with each other, but I suggest whatever we now call the DCLG.

- Q13 **Bob Blackman:** The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Siobhain McDonagh: Yes, that one, because housing is the biggest driver of poverty, and local government is a big factor in targeting communities and people.

- Q14 **Bob Blackman:** The third issue I would mention is that you have only one potential Government Member speaking, so it is a very unbalanced debate.

Siobhain McDonagh: It is a very unbalanced debate, and that is mainly because I cannot ask you, Mr Blackman. You would have been top of my list of London Conservative MPs, because I know that this issue will be a major concern for you, given the mix of people that you have in your constituency. Part of our problem is that there are only 21 Conservative MPs, as you know, and quite a number of those are Ministers or PPSs, so they are not allowed to participate in an application. We have 26 MPs so, to answer another of your earlier questions—could you deal with more than 90 minutes?—yes, I am sure that we could.

Chair: Bob, are you satisfied?

Bob Blackman: I am worried that you have a very unbalanced debate. I think you would definitely need to address that. The other issue, as you say, is that if that number of Members actually turned up and spoke in a 90-minute debate, they would get about two minutes each. I suppose the final point is that if you had a 90-minute debate on child poverty in London, whether we could allocate it on a Tuesday morning, for example, would depend on which Government Department would answer.

- Q15 **Chair:** I suppose the question for us is this: given that it is a London-specific debate, on child poverty in London, how many Conservative MPs would potentially be available to sign up?

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Bob Blackman: I do not know off the top of my head.

Jess Phillips: There is Justine Greening, now that she is a Back Bencher.

Bob Blackman: Yes, and David Evennett and Matthew Offord. There are several who could; they may not wish to, but they could.

Chair: If you could cajole two or three of them to sign up, that would be very helpful. Thank you very much.

Anyone else? In that case, that concludes this afternoon's public hearing. We will now go into private session to make our determinations regarding the time that we have available. Thank you very much.

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