

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 5 June 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Colin Clark; Patricia Gibson; Nigel Mills; Alex Sobel; Mr William Wragg.

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Representations made

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[II](#): Mr Bob Seely.

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Carol Monaghan, Alex Chalk, Ben Lake, Kerry McCarthy, Nicky Morgan and Stephen Pound made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. For the first one, we have a glittering array of talent. It is led by Carol Monaghan and is about treatment and research for myalgic encpha—

Carol Monaghan: Myalgic encephalomyelitis.

Q2 **Chair:** Fantastic. That is easy enough for you to say, but there we go. Carol, over to you.

Carol Monaghan: Thank you very much, and thanks for giving me this opportunity this afternoon. Myalgic encephalomyelitis—ME for short—affects about 250,000 people in the UK. Sufferers have flu-like symptoms that can go on for weeks and months, and in many cases years, leaving them bedbound.

The big issue for people living with ME is that there has been a dearth of funding into biomedical research. The major funding so far was for a very controversial piece of research called the PACE trial. It considered ME to be a psychological condition, not a pathological one. Answers to written questions I have asked the Department of Health about biomedical funding show that, on average, we are looking at about £1 per year per patient, so this is very poorly funded, and most of that funding actually comes from ME charities.

There is a real need for us to raise awareness among politicians, the medical community and the wider public, because this is a largely unknown condition, and to push for greater funding into biomedical research.

Stephen Pound: Carol talked of 250,000 people being affected. In fact, it is many more than that, because of the indirect effect. If someone is bedbound—physically incapable of leaving their bed for two to three years—that affects their children, their family and their entire support network. What is so crucial about this debate is that it is not just another debate asking for more money for a specific subject; it is actually ventilating and shining a light on the condition, because there are so many misconceptions.

I have no problems with the charitable sector, which is a crucial part of our society, but it cannot take the whole of the strain by itself. ME groups do an incredible amount of work—virtually all of us MPs will, at some stage, have worked with our local ME groups—but we have got to have a point at which we can say, “This is the condition. This is the pathology of it. This is where we are and where we move on to from here.” That time has come. We have been wandering around and flailing. We have never, ever in recent parliamentary history sat down and said, “This is what it is,

and this is where we should be going.” That is why we are just about as cross-party as you can get here.

Carol Monaghan: We have DUP support as well for this.

Stephen Pound: Well, you have just lost me then!

This is not just special pleading for a special circumstance. It really is time that this Parliament considered the issue of ME in the totality. It affects a huge amount of people, and more and more people are being diagnosed. I am not saying that the illness is increasing, but the diagnosis is increasing. There is so much misconception out there, which is causing such pain and distress. We have the chance to set the standard and go on from there. That would be immeasurably beneficial, not just for the sufferers but for their families and their friends, for whom I make a special plea.

Nicky Morgan: I want to back that up. Back in 2012, I applied, along with Charles Walker and others, for the first general debate on mental health to be held on the Floor of the House. Just having that debate, and the fact that this was discussed in the main Chamber, with a number of MPs staying behind—on a Thursday, I think—to debate it, gave enormous hope.

That is actually what this debate is also about. ME—chronic fatigue syndrome—is one of those things that people talk about. Stephen is absolutely right: I suspect all of us, as individual MPs, have had cases about this. Carol is very modest; she held a short Westminster Hall debate on this, which a significant number of Members attended, and which had a lot of interest from people outside. When I mentioned it in a local newsletter, quite a lot of constituents and others came to me to say, “Thank goodness, people are beginning to talk about this.” There is also a very powerful film called “Unrest”, which I think was shown in the Speaker’s House and probably in other places around the country.

This would be the House of Commons at its cross-party best, with MPs talking about this issue, and people will be very grateful that the legislature is showing a huge interest. I think, funnily enough, that Ministers will want to come and speak and answer questions—shadow Ministers, too—because this is genuinely something of interest, which we could all do something to highlight.

Chair: I will bring Ben in, because he was here first.

Ben Lake: Thank you, Chair. I just want to add to what has already been said. The fact of the matter is that many of my constituents have contacted me in a little bit of frustration, actually, because this is a debilitating condition but there is so much stigma and misperception involved in the general perception of the illness. If we were able to discuss this in Parliament, on the Floor of the House, it would give a lot of hope to those individuals who are suffering—and, as Stephen mentioned, to all those who support them—that this is being acknowledged as a real illness, with the impact that it has on families.



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Alex Chalk: Very briefly, as a disease, ME's PR is hopeless. What I mean by that is that other illnesses crowd it out. We hear an awful lot about cancer and HIV, but ME finds it very difficult to get that airtime, because it is hard to define, diagnose and treat. That is all the more reason why it needs to be debated before Parliament.

Kerry McCarthy: Action for ME was based in my constituency—it is now just outside—so I have been working with them for a while. I also have a very good friend who has had ME since she was 15; she is now in her early 40s. Some say it might be linked to vaccinations, but I think she had glandular fever.

The main difference between ME and most other illnesses is that a lot of people are not believed. I helped my friend to go through an ESA application. She had basically lived with her parents for 20 years and never even tried to claim benefits. In the end, we got her to the stage of saying that she is entitled to ESA, because she has an illness that has her bedridden half the time—she has never held a job or anything. In the end, she won on appeal, because the Royal Free Hospital decided she was a textbook case of ME.

She had basically spent most of her life assuming that people would not understand, despite the fact she was constantly affected by migraines, limb pains and flu. It is almost like lots of little things that add up and mean that someone is not capable of going out and holding down a job or living a normal life. That is why it is so important to people with ME that we have a debate and show that we do not think this is psychological or malingering but that we actually feel this is a condition that needs respect and research and that needs to be treated seriously.

Chair: Thank you. Although I can't pronounce it, this is something that I am entirely aware of. A relatively good friend of mine, who was fit and a semi-professional footballer, actually contracted ME in the mid to late 1980s. At the time, it was disparagingly dismissed in the media as yuppie flu, which is totally wrong. That is possibly part of the problem with the media image, because, particularly for people of my age, ME still has that sort of ring about it in their minds, which is entirely unjustified.

Does anyone want to ask any questions before the minibus comes to take all the witnesses away?

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just ask what you want to achieve by having the debate, apart, obviously, from creating awareness? You have asked for a general debate, and I just want to clarify what the purpose is.

Carol Monaghan: First of all, raising awareness is extremely important. A lot of people do not understand the condition—politicians and, unfortunately, medical professionals. Medical professionals often follow the NICE guidelines, which are currently being revised because they are not considered to be adequate anymore. The NICE guidelines say that people can exercise their way out of ME or that that is the best treatment, but that has now been shown to be extremely damaging for those who have



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ME, and it can end up causing them further harm. This is about raising awareness with politicians and medical professionals, and calling on the Government to take a more serious position in terms of funding biomedical research.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** I take that point. You will appreciate that Chamber time is in very short supply. We have a queue of applications on the waiting list. There is a chance of getting a three-hour Westminster Hall debate at an earlier time, which would be a guaranteed three hours, as opposed to a Chamber-time debate, where you might get two hours and 20 minutes, if you are lucky, on a Thursday. There is no guarantee that you would actually get a debate in the Chamber ahead of the summer recess, but you could get a Westminster Hall debate before the end of this month. Given that those are your circumstances, if we offered you a Westminster Hall debate, with the potential option, if you do not get the answers you like from the Government, of coming back for a Chamber debate in the autumn, would you take it?

Carol Monaghan: We have had a Westminster Hall debate, and that was a good starting position, so my preference would be for a main Chamber debate. The subject will get more publicity if it is in the main Chamber, but I suppose the main purpose is to get it discussed by as many Members as possible, so if there were to be a Westminster Hall debate, with the possibility of a later main Chamber debate, that would be acceptable, but I really would want that main Chamber debate.

Stephen Pound: One of the issues, Bob, is that the Department of Health is answering for this, but there are also huge implications for the DWP. It is almost like a two-departmental debate, because the issues for the DWP are so important, and becoming ever more so. We actually need the two, which is why the Chamber would be more appropriate, but it is Carol's bid.

- Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Our job is to help to facilitate debate. In terms of helping your application, one reason why I suggest having a Westminster Hall debate first and finding out the attitude of the Government, is that you could formulate a suitable motion calling on the Government to actually do something in terms of medical research, which you could then bring back to the Chamber.

Carol Monaghan: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application.

Bob Seely made representations.

- Q6 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Bob. Your application is on the Russian Federation's activity in the United Kingdom and globally.

Mr Seely: Yes, it is. Thank you for calling me. Do you want me to outline my application?

Chair: Please.



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Mr Seely: I would be very grateful if the Backbench Business Committee would consider a debate on Russia. Before I give my reasons, I should say that I talked to other colleagues about this because I am aware that we had a debate a few months ago, and I wondered whether we needed another one. The opinion of the couple of dozen colleagues I talked to was that they would welcome it. Those interested parties include Chris Bryant, Ian Austin, Ben Bradshaw, Wes Streeting, Chris Leslie, Stephen Gethins, Stewart McDonald, Tom Brake, Richard Benyon, Nicholas Soames, Jonathan Djanogly, Vicky Ford, Colin Clark, Giles Watling and Simon Clarke. They all said, "Yes, put my name down."

The reasons are multifaceted. The Russian Federation's policies towards the UK and other parts of the world have become a significant issue in our domestic and foreign policy. That is against the backdrop of worsening relationships with the Russian Federation over the last 10 years. Six Select Committees are or will be looking into Russian-related issues: National Security, Intelligence, Home, Culture, Foreign and Treasury. The Foreign Affairs Committee has just produced quite a punchy report, as you know.

The Government have taken a lot of action since Skripal in the open space and in the covert space. Specific issues to add to that are the ongoing investigation into the Skripal poisoning; the upcoming World cup in Russia and the potential dangers for English fans; significant alleged war crimes in Syria, including the bombing of hospitals, which I think is a significantly bad event; the recent speech by the director of MI5 that was highly critical of Russian behaviour, which is itself, I think, an odd thing to have happened and a very notable thing; alleged attempts by Moscow, according to the German secret services, to engage in the Catalanian referendum on the side of Catalanian separatists; and the continued, ongoing war in eastern Ukraine, which, although more static than in recent years, is still very much a live conflict, with daily shelling.

Therefore, I believe that a general debate would be useful for Members, not only to express opinions on what has been happening, but to seek information and updates from the Government in order to look at our relationship more broadly with the Russian Federation. That, in a nutshell, is why I am applying for a debate.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** What do you want to see happen as a result of the debate?

Mr Seely: That is a very good question. One can just air things, and everyone can feel they have got something off their chest, and not a lot happens. I would say this is slightly different. Because this is an ongoing situation, I would like to see in greater detail what the Government are doing. I want the Government and a foreign affairs team coming to the House to explain what they are doing. There may be something specific that I would like to put to them, and the Prime Minister has promised me some airtime on this. But I would also like to put these arguments on the Floor of the House or in a parliamentary debate.



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Yesterday, I launched "A Definition of Contemporary Russian Conflict". It had a bit of pick-up in this country—on the "Today" programme and elsewhere. Funnily enough, it was the main item in a studio broadcast on Channel One in Russia, so they take these sorts of things very seriously. The second part of my report is going to look at what we need to be doing in the United Kingdom to defend our democracy and electoral system—not in a combative and aggressive way or some way that makes a bad situation with the Russians worse. For example, in Congress, they have a counter-propaganda Bill going through. It requires a health warning on authoritarian TV stations that do not have an independent editorial line. I want to put that argument on the Floor of the House. Should we be doing something similar? Should we be having an investigation into the health of our democracy and electoral system?

The time to have this conversation is now, not during a campaign after the KGB have dumped the entire contents of the servers of the Conservative party or, indeed, the Labour party online or given them to Russia Today, and not after another Brexit referendum—God forbid there should be one; I voted Brexit, so one hopes we won't engage in these sorts of shenanigans. The time to be discussing this is now, not a year before the next general election or a year before the next Scottish referendum vote, should there be a second one. The debate is quite timely for that reason.

Q8 Nigel Mills: I suppose the question is the one that Bob alluded to at the start. We had a general debate on national security and Russia on 26 March, and we have had all manner of UQs and statements on Salisbury and other Russian issues. How do you justify more Chamber time for an issue that was pretty extensively debated only just over two months ago?

Mr Seely: March, April, May, June—well, by the time we get the debate, it will be nearer three, and potentially four, months, so it is slightly longer than that. I would say that a great deal has happened since then. There is ongoing work on the Skripal poisoning. We have the World cup coming up. We have had the alleged war crimes—there is a series of new allegations about war crimes in Syria. We have had the director of MI5's speech. Everything that I have quoted to you as an example—with the exception of the Skripal poisoning—has happened since March. So I would say, Nigel, that this is an ongoing situation, and it is worth returning to this because it is not something static, but a reasonably fast-moving relationship, and a deteriorating one as well.

I didn't add this, but a new round of sanctions have been put on by the United States. We have had Mr—who owns Chelsea football club? Mr Abramovich has been denied a visa, so have we had a change of regime for how we issue visas to Russian oligarchs? I'm not quite sure, because I have not heard anything from the Government on that, unless I've missed it. There seem to be things happening pretty much every week, or every other week, that could further justify getting the Government to listen to a debate and to answer that debate.

Q9 Nigel Mills: Is three hours enough, then?



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Mr Seely: I'm tempted to say beggars can't be choosers. I think that three hours could work. This is not a debate that everyone in the House will want to talk about; this is not Brexit. I think six hours would be too long, but in three hours we could get a lot done.

- Q10 **Alex Sobel:** In relation to that last comment, which you made as an aside, you cited the Catalonia referendum in Spain and alleged Russian influence there. There has also been alleged Russian influence in our own referendum, but you have not listed it here.

Mr Seely: I am very happy to list that as well, and I refer you to *Hansard* for statements that have been made about that. You are absolutely right. I am not picking out Catalonia. The Mueller investigation is very much an ongoing affair. I think more information will come out in the next month regarding our friend in the Ecuadorian embassy, Julian Assange, and his role in the leaking of information on the Democratic servers, how that information got to him, and who brought it to him. I think there is more to come in this space, before the summer certainly.

Can I ask you one question? Is this a conversation that you are having about whether we have this on the Floor of the Chamber, or is this a conversation about the Floor of the Chamber as opposed to Westminster Hall? I just note that in the light of the conversation you had with our colleagues prior to this.

- Q11 **Chair:** To be fair, you have not been asked the question. Your application crosses the box for the Chamber, but I suppose we would have to put the question back to you: if you were offered Westminster Hall, would you accept it?

Mr Seely: I think this is important enough that we need to be discussing it on a reasonably regular basis at the moment. I would maybe not say that in a year's time, dependent. I would prefer something on the Floor of the House, because I think this is an important topic that enough colleagues would wish to speak on, and I think that is the correct place for it. However, we need to call the debate either way, such is the level of activity. Thank you for the question.

- Q12 **Bob Blackman:** You heard my earlier question about this. Given the queue of debates for the Chamber, there is a chance of getting a Westminster Hall debate this month. If you do not take Westminster Hall, you are likely to have to wait until the autumn to get Chamber time.

Mr Seely: To be honest, I would like something in the Chamber this month, but if you are saying, "Westminster Hall this month or the Chamber in September," then I am wondering whether this month or early July would be preferable, especially because of the World cup. I am aware that there are some time considerations with this debate. There is also the NATO summit in two weeks' time—or is it a month's time? Russia will again be a dominant factor in the NATO summit. Apologies, Alex—that is something else that I did not mention. I think that is point 8 or 9 of the reasons why we should have a debate.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed.

Joan Ryan made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Last this afternoon, but certainly not least, Joan Ryan on the subject of immigration detention of victims of torture and other vulnerable people.

Joan Ryan: I will start by saying I have asked for 90 minutes in Westminster Hall. That is my opening gambit.

You may know, and I think I put it in my precis on the issue, that Stephen Shaw, the former prisons ombudsman, was very critical of the detention of torture victims and vulnerable people in 2016, at which point the Government brought forward what was called a “flagship policy” on adults at risk, the stated aim of which was to provide further protection and to safeguard torture victims and vulnerable adults in immigration detention. The outcome of that was that it did precisely the opposite.

The policy then went to the High Court in October 2017, where the presiding judge said that it lacked a rational or evidential base and that hundreds of victims of torture, at least, had been unlawfully imprisoned. So, it is pretty serious stuff.

At that point, the Government, before it changed its policy, asked Steven Shaw to re-review the situation. His re-review has been submitted to the Home Office, but they are not releasing it at present. They are bringing forward their change and amendment to the adults at risk policy.

All of the NGOs have objected very strongly, and some of them, such as Medical Justice and Freedom from Torture, took the Government to court. They employ many doctors to give, not political views, but evidence that people have been tortured—if you are fleeing torture, you cannot hang around to get your medical record to show that you have been. The NGOs have said that this change will again make the situation worse and that the Government should wait until they have made public the Shaw re-review. But the Government are not of a mind to do that.

We need to bear in mind that 2017 alone saw 11 people die in custody. In fact, detainees are dying at a faster rate in immigration detention now than has ever happened before. It was revealed in September 2017 that there was culture of abuse and neglect at Brook House immigration removal centre and that women in Yarl’s Wood IRC have been on hunger strike.

The Government are bringing forward their change, and there is significant concern about that. There is concern that this is part—another strand—of the hostile environment, which we hope we are seeing the end of. I think the debate would be useful at this time, in the wake of the Windrush scandal, to help avoid another, similar scandal. The numbers could be different, but we are talking about hundreds of people being detained who should not have been—people who suffered significant mental health



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problems before they were detained, and those were even worse afterwards.

What is really causing concern is that the Government are asking for a higher level of evidence of torture than the courts ask for. There is a significant mismatch. So, I think there should be a debate at this stage. There has not been a full debate in this parliamentary Session—2017-19. It is an issue of such significance that two Select Committees are looking at different aspects of detention policy. This would be a good time to enable all concerned MPs to engage.

You will see that 17 people said that they want to speak in the debate. I draw your attention to the fact that 131 MPs signed EDM 696 about the detention of victims of torture and other vulnerable people. That is the eighth most-supported EDM in the whole parliamentary Session. The two current EDMs, 1202 and 1200, have been signed by 115 and 111 MPs. I think that demonstrates a huge level of concern. It is cross-party support, with MPs from both sides of the House. Back Benchers have expressed significant concern. That is why I am asking for the debate at this time.

Chair: Thank you, Joan. Bob.

- Q14 **Bob Blackman:** The one glaring omission in your application seems to be the notable lack of Government-side speakers. What feelers have you put out for potential Government-side speakers, to balance the debate somewhat?

Joan Ryan: I have emailed everybody. If you look at the EDMs, there is a significant number of people from all sides. If you look at the ten-minute rule Bill earlier in the year, there were people from all sides, including Government-side Back Benchers.

- Q15 **Bob Blackman:** It's just that, from our perspective, we have to look at whether we will get some form of balanced debate across the House.

Joan Ryan: Is that a requirement, though? Members should be concerned, if they're not—that would be my contention.

- Q16 **Bob Blackman:** It is a requirement for our Committee to get a reasonable debate. One of the issues is that there may be people—I am not saying that there will be—who speak up on behalf of the Home Office.

Joan Ryan: I don't know how you could know that, though. I took part in a debate last week on humanitarian concerns about Gaza, which we must all have. There were 11 Labour Back Benchers plus myself, two Front Benchers, and one Conservative Back Bencher. All 11 Labour Back Benchers and the one Conservative Back Bencher took a very similar stance. Only I took a different stance, in terms of the balance of views. I am just saying, I don't know how you can—

- Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Sorry, can I just cut across? That debate, as I recollect, was at the behest of the Deputy Speaker. A request was made to the Deputy Speaker for the debate to be allocated, because we did not fill the debate in time. It was not a debate that we had chosen.

Joan Ryan: I am just saying it was not balanced.

Bob Blackman: We go through a different process to the Deputy Speaker.

Joan Ryan: But there are Government Back Benchers who are concerned, to be fair.

Chair: Joan, to be fair, the point is that we have to make a determination about whether to move forward to the next stage, based on the application before us. We have always made it a custom-and-practice prerequisite that we need at least a handful of people from another political perspective as part of the application. We have always done that.

Q18 **Mr Wragg:** It does not mean that they might have a different view—it might be a very one-sided debate—but just have some Government Members' names on there, such as those who signed the EDM.

Joan Ryan: I don't think it will be one-sided.

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** Just to return to my questions, you have asked for a Westminster Hall debate, and there are two possibilities: either a Tuesday morning, in the 9.30 am to 11 am slot, or a Thursday afternoon slot.

Joan Ryan: I didn't cross Tuesday, but it would have been fine.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** Well, you have said either. We would interpret that as being either Tuesday or Thursday, in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. The potential dates—I will take advice from our Clerks if needs be—are a 90-minute debate on 5 July, which would be a Thursday. Alternatively, I believe there is 10 July, when the Home Office will be answering, or 14 June. You have a range of potential dates. It would help us, in terms of allocation, to know which particular day you would prefer—a Tuesday or a Thursday—and whether you would be ready to go next week, or whether you would like to wait a little while.

Joan Ryan: I don't mind which day at all. I could be ready to go next week without any problem. Also, I didn't make any effort about the balance—I just took the names that came in, and I didn't chase anybody—but I am pretty sure that if you wanted some Conservative Back Benchers on the application, I could get some.

Bob Blackman: We would certainly want to see some.

Q21 **Chair:** The names on the EDM might be a good place to start, Joan.

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. It helps the case to have it balanced, obviously. I did not realise that was your requirement. I had not thought about that, so that is helpful. Thank you.

Q22 **Chair:** The Committee has now been working for eight years, and we have come to a consensus among the membership of the Committee in its various guises that applications will have a much better chance of success if there is, if not an absolute balance, at least representation of other political parties, other than one or two.



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Joan Ryan: Yes, it is a fair enough point. Had I realised that, I would have made sure there were some. I am very confident there will be some. There is significant concern.

Q23 **Bob Blackman:** I'm sure there will be, but we have to consider the application on its merits in terms of what is before us.

Joan Ryan: So what does that mean, today?

Chair: What it means is that, rather than giving your application a direct green light, we will make it an amber, but as soon as some names were submitted, it would automatically switch to green.

Joan Ryan: Okay. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes our public deliberations.