

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 12 June 2018

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-6

Representations made

[\[I\]](#): Alex Cunningham

II: Debbie Abrahams and Kate Green

III: Alison McGovern and Stephen Twigg

Alex Cunningham made representations.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This afternoon we have three applications, the first of which is from Mr Alex Cunningham. His application is on the tobacco control plan for England 2017.

Alex Cunningham: Thank you, Chair. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for this opportunity to present the case for a debate on the tobacco control plan, specifically the ambition of achieving a smoke-free generation by 2022, which is the end of this Parliament. The application is comprehensive, so I can be relatively brief in my comments. Hon. Members will be aware that the control plan was published less than a year ago. It was nearly a year late in being published. The Government have done much to build on the legacy of previous Governments to reduce smoking, but much more needs to be done. The group of Members behind this debate want to work with the Government in achieving that.

The debate will cover various aspects of the plan, but largely focus on the smoke-free generation and whether the actions of the Government to date have put us on course to deliver it. As hon. Members will have read in the application, there are some concerns that recent trends suggest it will not and Members wish to challenge the Government to come up with the actions to support success. We ask for a three-hour debate in the main Chamber, preferably on Thursday 19 July, which is one day after the anniversary of the plan being published.

Chair: Thank you, Alex. Any questions? It is a very full and comprehensive application.

Q1 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just say, it is a very comprehensive application and I would expect nothing less? However, according to this listing, we do not have what we would normally request for a three-hour debate, namely 15 speakers. There is certainly a shortage of Government names on the list. I wonder if it would be possible to add some further names, particularly given that you are applying for a debate on 19 July, so there is time to acquire the names.

Alex Cunningham: I am happy to do that. I was expecting to put the application in a week later than I was eventually asked to do, so I am confident that we can supply a few more names.

Chair: Anyone else? In that case, I think your very full application fulfils the requirements with the exception of the added names, but I am sure they will be coming to us quite soon. Thank you very much, Alex.

Debbie Abrahams and **Kate Green** made representations.

Chair: Next up we have Debbie Abrahams on the cumulative impact assessment of changes to disability support.

Debbie Abrahams: I am delighted to put this application to the Backbench Business Committee. You will be aware that in 2014, the

WOWcampaign tried to get a petition, which eventually had the support of over 105,000, calling on the Government to do a cumulative impact assessment on the changes to disability support. We had a debate back on 27 February, 2014. We have not had one since.

Since then there has been a lot of additional information, for example the Government's own Social Security Advisory Committee calling on them to do a cumulative impact assessment on the impact of welfare reform on vulnerable groups. We have had the House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and disability assessment in March 2016. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also concluded last year that the Government should carry out a cumulative impact assessment. Our own Equality and Human Rights Commission, back in March, published its cumulative impact assessment on what it thinks the impacts of the changes in social security cuts and other cuts have been to disabled people, which is approximately £2,500 a year for each disabled adult since 2010.

Given the fact that we have not had a debate in four years and that we have had the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, the roll-out of universal credit, changes around the criteria for personal independence payment and so on, we hope that the Backbench Business Committee is able to support this debate.

Q2 Bob Blackman: The obvious gap appears to be a lack of Government speakers. One of the sponsors is a Government Member. What extra Government speakers would you be able to secure?

Debbie Abrahams: I will make sure, as we made the proposal quite quickly, that we have Government speakers in the debate.

Chair: Any other questions? No—thank you very much for the application. It looks like it is entirely in order.

Alison McGovern and Stephen Twigg made representations.

Chair: Last but not least, we have Alison McGovern and Stephen Twigg, showing that work is possible across the Mersey, on the practice of forced adoption in the United Kingdom.

Alison McGovern: I will briefly introduce the issue on which Stephen and I would like to have a Back-Bench business debate. There have been incredible steps forward recently in the field of women's rights—incredible campaigns. This year is a very important year in the history of women's rights. An ages-old issue has been part of Britain's hidden history, and that has been the practice of women and their babies being forcibly separated by parts of the state—be it the national health service, or social workers and others. That happened predominantly in the 1950s and '60s, but with a small number of cases afterwards.

This is a case that you will all be aware of from the media, with coverage particularly of young mums who were told that it would be “for the best” if they gave up their child. That is not something that we would consider to be the right approach now, but it happened, and an estimated 500,000 British women are affected by this. That number includes some of my constituents, some of Stephen’s and those of many Members across the House. It also affects our former colleague, Ann Keen, a previous Member of this House.

That group of women run a great campaign calling for a public apology—that is what they would like to see. The offer has been made by other states in the face of this issue—for example, in 2013 in Australia and more recently in Ireland—and I would like to see the Government take that approach of being open and frank about what happened in the past, acknowledge that we would see things differently now and apologise for whatever role that they played. It is about giving a platform to people’s stories, which have been hidden away. That would go some way—we cannot undo what happened in the past, but we can acknowledge that it happened and say that, in the light of how we feel about these things now, it wasn’t right that it happened.

- Q3 **Bob Blackman:** May I just ask about one thing? In the motion you talk about “forced adoption” but, listening to what you said, it was more a practice of young women being persuaded that it was in their best interests or the best interests of the child, rather than literally the children being taken forcibly. I just wonder whether this is the right way of phrasing it, given the circumstances you described.

Alison McGovern: To be frank, cases vary. Different things happened to different people. There has been discussion and ministerial comment previously about the possibility of a public inquiry. Having experienced other historical injustices, I wonder whether opening it up in that way is the right approach, or whether what we need is transparency and an acknowledgement by the British Government that it was not the right thing. In understanding that, there will be a difficult line between what was seen to be common practice then and a good thing then, and what was in certain cases definitely against the will of the individual.

I completely accept the point that you make, but this debate is about finally giving voice to some of the people who experienced this—they are all of our constituents—and seeing if there is a way to move on in how the Government have treated them.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** I am just wondering whether there was a policy in force in the NHS, a Government policy or something that was making this happen. Or was it as you were saying, peaceful persuasion—“It’s in your best interests”, and so on—which is markedly different? I don’t think it was the right thing to do, but—

Alison McGovern: But that is the very reason to have the debate, because the answer is that we don’t know. There hasn’t been transparency to date, so it may be that the Government will consider what papers they

hold, which might contain evidence either way, which would be helpful to those affected.

- Q5 **Chair:** What we do know is that 500,000 women are affected by this. One can only imagine that with 500,000 women being affected by this that there will be a lot of different circumstances.

Alison McGovern: Exactly. In addition, we cannot forget about the children themselves—it is not just the women, but the children or their siblings and families. It is quite a widespread issue.

- Q6 **Bob Blackman:** The other thing is, is there any time-sensitivity to the debate?

Alison McGovern: There isn't a specific date that would fit in—there is no time-sensitivity in that sense—but it is an issue that has been hidden for a long time, hence the reason for making the request.

Stephen Twigg: We would be keen to have a debate on the Floor of the House on a votable motion, and that would be more important than having a debate soon. If a slot wasn't available for some time, better to have this dealt with fully and properly, enabling MPs in all parts of the House to reflect their constituents' concerns about it.

Chair: Thank you very much. No one else? In which case, thank you for your application.