

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 3 July 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 3 July 2018.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1 - 24

Representations made

[I](#): Jim Shannon.

[II](#): Paul Williams and Andrew Selous.

[III](#): Luke Graham.

[IV](#): Douglas Ross.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Jim Shannon, our season ticket holder, on violence against farming communities in Nigeria.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, thank you and I thank the Committee members as well. At business questions last Thursday, I raised this matter with the Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom, who suggested that it would be an ideal topic to take to the Backbench Business Committee. I am here for that purpose.

This issue is becoming quite serious. You may have this in front of you, but I would none the less like to read out what I have submitted under "Topicality", because it is important to give the context. "Muslim Fulani cattle herders and Christian farmers have been engaged in armed conflict." It is not a simple issue; it is very complex. The Fulani herdsmen, for instance, do not own the land, but there are people from the wealthy towns who do. They look after the cattle as well. The Fulani are really only herdsmen and not cattle owners as such, but there has been conflict. The conflict has meant that in the areas in northern Nigeria where this is taking place, there have been attacks upon Christians. They see the churches—and sometimes the Muslim mosques—as things they should attack, and they attack people there.

The violence has been some of the worst we have seen. Since 2001, 60,000 have been killed. There have been 1,000 people killed in the four months from January through to May alone—mostly women and children, but some menfolk as well. Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide indicates that if we are not careful, we are probably looking at a full-scale civil war in northern Nigeria.

I spoke to one of the Nigerian MPs who came here the last week. He is a chair of the committee of the army in the Nigerian Government, so he had a position of some power. He gave me some idea of the complexity of the issue and where we are. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. Crops and livestock worth millions have been destroyed. We need to bring this issue to awareness.

We, as the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, will do an inquiry on Nigeria in October of this year, so we want to tie the debate in with the inquiry. We are not requesting a debate in the short term; we are requesting one in the first or second week of October on our return after the political party conferences. We have cross-party support, and we can add two other names to that: Paul Girvan and David Drew, who have also contacted us about this. To be specific, we are looking for a 90-minute debate if possible, if that is agreeable to the Committee and yourself, Mr Chair, on the Tuesday morning on our return in October, to tie in with our inquiry.

Q2 Bob Blackman: Just to clarify one thing, the application talks about a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

three-hour debate, but are you saying you are requesting 90 minutes?

Jim Shannon: I talked it over with my staff in the office and we think it might be better to get the large awareness we are seeking in our inquiry if we go for the 90-minute debate. I talked to them before I came up. We were of the opinion to go for a three-hour debate, but I think a 90-minute debate might be better on the Tuesday morning.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** So you want to go for a Tuesday, specifically?

Jim Shannon: Yes.

Bob Blackman: That's fine.

Q4 **Nigel Mills:** In terms of timing, Jim, you said you are doing an APPG inquiry starting in October. Would it make sense to have the debate discuss the findings of your inquiry, rather than having the debate before you have done that work? Wouldn't that make more use of your inquiry?

Jim Shannon: We also discussed that as well, because we wondered whether it would be better to have it at the end or at the beginning of the inquiry. The idea was to have it at the beginning, because it would raise the awareness. This is not an easy subject matter. It is immensely complex. It is not necessarily religious, as such, although there is the attacking of Muslims by Christians and vice versa. To be fair, it is coming from both. The Fulani herdsmen don't own the cattle, but people in the towns own the cattle. But indiscriminate killing is taking place. The Nigerian Government seem powerless to do anything: powerless because they do not have the resources or because they do not have the will. When I talked to the Nigerian committee chair last week about it—a Nigerian MP—he gave us a lot of reasons why the Nigerian Government have not done anything, but he encouraged us to have this debate. Off the back of that, if we get the application agreed, I will say that as well. There is immense interest in this, including from myself as chair of the all-party group on freedom of religion or belief. I would be concerned about any religious connotations whatever about what is happening, because this is a much more complex issue. We want to raise awareness. That is our initial thinking on the matter.

Chair: Thank you for your application.

Jim Shannon: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Paul Williams and Andrew Selous made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Next up we have Paul Williams and Andrew Selous. The application is on perinatal mental illness.

Dr Williams: Thank you for considering this. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I work as a GP one day a month.

We know that it is common for new mothers to suffer from post-natal mental illness. A recent survey by the National Childbirth Trust of 1,000 women who had recently had a baby found that almost half had a mental

health or emotional problem post-natally or during pregnancy. If it is left untreated, post-natal mental illness can lead to significant harm not only for the mother, but for her developing child.

Although many factors contribute to healthy development, post-natal depression has been identified as a significant risk factor to healthy child development. It has been shown to have an impact on cognitive development, including language development and intelligence. This is not a trivial thing. The consequences of post-natal depression can extend into toddlerhood, pre-school, adolescence and beyond.

Working as a GP, I have provided newborn babies and their mothers with support and care in the post-natal period. It is a crucial time. At around six weeks after they have given birth, most new mothers will see their GP when their baby gets a six-week check. Official guidance from NICE encourages doctors at the six-week check to enquire about the mother's emotional wellbeing, so there is an ideal opportunity at this time for GPs to spot any mental health problems that are developing.

While a pregnant woman has many healthcare appointments before the birth of her baby, the six-week check might be the last routine appointment she has when a health professional can perform checks on her as opposed to the baby. Given many new mothers' reluctance to actively seek help for mental health problems, if they are not picked up at six weeks, there is a significant chance of their remaining undiagnosed. Some women get an excellent six-week check, demonstrating the potential that it offers. If the doctor has time to talk to a woman about how she is managing, problems can be identified and treatment offered, but research shows that that time is not given.

In the NCT survey that I referred to, a fifth of the women questioned said that they were not even asked about their emotional or mental wellbeing. Half of the women who had an emotional or mental health problem said that they did not feel able to properly talk about what their problems were, probably because the appointment was all a bit rushed. This is not something that can be done within a couple of minutes. Open and supported questioning needs the time to listen, and it cannot be done if the appointment is just for the baby; it needs to be for the mother as well.

We think that GPs and their teams should give mothers appointments as well as babies at the six-week check. That is not currently the case across the board. We would like a debate to open up the evidence and make some specific recommendations for improving perinatal mental health. We want to talk about funding for the six-week post-natal check so that GPs get the time for a full appointment for the mother as well as the baby. We want to talk about improving guidance to GPs on best practice around maternal mental health. We think there should be a separate appointment, and we would like GPs to be trained in the best methods of helping women to disclose mental health problems. It is a timely debate because negotiations begin in September for a new GP contract. We think it is important that consideration be given to that separate six-week check for maternal health and wellbeing in the new contract.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I have supplied the names of 18 Labour, six Conservative, four Lib Dem and two DUP Members. In addition, two Conservative MPs and one Labour MP have added their support since my giving information to the Clerks, so 33 MPs are supporting this from across the House. We think it is an important and timely debate and I hope that the Committee will find time for it.

Q6 **Chair:** Andrew, do you have anything to add?

Andrew Selous: Just to add briefly to what Paul said, my concern is that England is falling behind the rest of the United Kingdom in this area. Paul chairs the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences. We know that Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are ahead in this area. We also know that there is a lot of research in this area in the United States of America, in California. We know that Wisconsin is ahead in this area.

There is an international perspective. We are falling behind and there is research that we should be using in this area. As Paul said, the impacts can be lifelong, in terms of the cost to the state, the cost to people's life chances, the impact on their prospects and so on. This is a very significant area.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** I have a couple of questions. At the moment your application asks for a 90-minute debate. Working on the principle of 15 minutes for an opening speech and 15 minutes for each of the party spokespeople to speak—that would take an hour—each of the speakers on the list in front of us would get one minute. Obviously it is your application, but given the number of speakers, and you have added some extra ones that are interested, it sounds to me as though this subject warrants a longer debate than 90 minutes.

Having said that, there are two potential options to get an early debate. One is a Tuesday morning, which would be a 90-minute debate, where Health would be answering, and the other is 19 July on a Thursday, when you would potentially get three hours of protected time in Westminster Hall. Given those circumstances, what would you like to do with your application?

Dr Williams: Given those circumstances, the preference would be for the longer debate on a Thursday in Westminster Hall.

Bob Blackman: Lovely.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application.

Luke Graham made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Next up is Luke Graham, on the remit of the Office for Budget Responsibility. Luke, over to you, please.

Luke Graham: Thank you very much, Chair, for considering my proposal. My proposal is reasonably simple: to have a debate about the extension of the OBR's powers. At the moment, the charter officially precludes the OBR from looking into the full range of pieces of legislation and costing them,

including the proposals of Opposition parties. I would like to have a debate to address that issue and see if we can increase the resourcing for, and the scope of, the OBR.

I was inspired to make this move by looking at the Congressional Budget Office in the United States, which scores every piece of legislation before the American Congress from both Government and Opposition. It also goes through amendments and offers additional technical advice to Members. It is useful not only for Government, but for Opposition parties. I believe that in the last year it scored some 740 pieces of legislation, amendments and technical proposals.

This has come before the House previously. The chair of the OBR raised this issue in 2014 before the Treasury Committee, and made a recommendation about extending the powers of the OBR so that it could consider Opposition proposals, and both sides of the debate could be properly scored, with objective analysis supplied. That would lead to better debate.

I am a relatively new Member of the House—I joined only last year. One of the things I sometimes find disappointing is that in our debates we start challenging each other's numbers and the credibility of the numbers, so we shift away from substantive debate. I think it would be better for everyone, and for every party, if we could have a set of figures that we can all more or less agree on. Of course, the interpretation of that will be the substantive part of the debate.

Q9 Bob Blackman: I assume that the Treasury would be the Department answering the debate.

Luke Graham: Yes, I believe so.

Q10 Bob Blackman: In which case, we have an opportunity on the last day—Tuesday 24 July—in Westminster Hall. It's Tuesday morning, from 9.30 to 11, it's a 90-minute slot, and you could have the allocation. Would you want to accept it for that particular day? I repeat that it is the last day before the start of the recess.

Luke Graham: Yes, if I can. Apologies: you have caught me on the hoof; I will just double-check that I am not in the constituency, but if I can, if that is possible, yes. Presumably the alternative date will be September, when we come back.

Bob Blackman: Well, it's when we get allocated time.

Q11 Jess Phillips: I'm somebody who wants to change the way the Office for Budget Responsibility reports on things myself. I have a specific interest in whether the decisions made by Government are good or bad for women. Would the debate be broad and about any sort of proposal for changing things and not just about the OBR also doing Opposition—

Luke Graham: That's right: I have kept this quite broad, but it is about the scoring of Opposition and Government policies. I can forward you some information on the CBO. That scores some of the amendments and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

other, technical advice as well. For example, I know that on previous legislation and in previous debates, you have proposed additional analysis; that in theory would be scored too, and certainly, I would hope, would be part of the debate.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Douglas Ross made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Last up is Mr Douglas Ross on labour shortages on inshore fishing vessels. Douglas, over to you.

Douglas Ross: Thanks to you, Chairman, and to the Committee for allowing my application to come forward today. There is an ongoing issue with staff shortages on fishing vessels, particularly in the inshore fishing industry. Previously, some exceptions were allowed, but changes in visa rules have meant that it is now extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get non-EEA workers to come to the UK, particularly Scotland, the west coast of Scotland, and Ireland, to work on these vessels.

This has been subject to a number of questions in Parliament from Members from all parties. The Scottish Conservative group of MPs has written to the Immigration Minister on it specifically, but it has also been raised by spokespeople from all the parties in Parliament that represent Scottish and Northern Irish constituencies. It is an issue that comes up at many different Question Times—it seems to get added into DEFRA questions, DTI questions and Home Office questions, so there is a wide range of interest in a number of areas—and it is an issue that is causing more and more concern. I have constituency cases involving fishermen in Lossie who now potentially face not being able to recruit staff. There are efforts to recruit local people, but it will take time to train local people up. But there are skilled people from the Philippines, for example, who are keen to come back to Scotland to work on these fishing boats and are unable to do so at the moment.

What I would like from the debate is to hear a response from the Home Office, because previously DEFRA Ministers have answered. We have not had a debate on this specific element of visas for fishermen in this Session of Parliament. There have been previous debates on it, but there has not been one in this Session, and my request is that this one be answered by a Home Office Minister, because debates in the past have been answered by others.

Just to say something about the representation, all parties represented in Scotland have supported this, which I am very grateful for, as have Members from the DUP, because this is a considerable issue in Northern Ireland as well.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Just to clarify, you want the debate to be answered by the Home Office.

Douglas Ross: Yes.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** There is an opportunity on Tuesday 17 July—once again,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in the morning, from 9.30 to 11. You could take that, because the Home Office is answering. If that were offered to you, would you find it acceptable?

Douglas Ross: Absolutely.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the other thing we would have to do would be make sure that the Home Office understood why it was answering such a debate.

Q15 **Jess Phillips:** You don't have many Labour names on the application.

Douglas Ross: There aren't that many Labour MPs for Scotland. They are the third largest party in Scotland. I went round my own group and then I went to one representative from each party to make sure that I had cross-party support, but I am confident that there would be more Members.

Q16 **Jess Phillips:** There are quite a lot of Labour fishing MPs.

Douglas Ross: Not in Scotland, sorry.

Q17 **Chair:** To be fair, this isn't just a Scottish matter.

Douglas Ross: I would say that it is more for Scotland, particularly in the west. It is inshore fishing, so it is predominantly in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which is why I went for our MPs. It is inshore rather than further afield. If they just go beyond the 12-mile limit, they can employ non-EEA workers without any hassle at all. That is why it is more a specific issue for Scotland and Northern Ireland. I am sure that that is an issue that your Labour colleagues could raise if they came along to the debate.

Jess Phillips: No doubt.

Q18 **Chair:** I was going to make the point that it looks like there are Labour shortages in the list of applicants.

Douglas Ross: I am sure they will take part in the debate.

Q19 **Patricia Gibson:** It's no more short of Labour than it is SNP. We have almost half of the fishing industry.

Douglas Ross: In fairness, on that point, I went to the SNP spokesperson on immigration, who has also dealt with the issue, and I thought having Stuart C. McDonald showed that there was support from all the parties. There is one from DUP, one from Labour, one from the Lib Dems and one from SNP.

Chair: There is a potential slot that Bob has highlighted on 17 July.

Bob Blackman: The other point is that, with 13 speakers in a 90-minute debate, they are going to get about two minutes each, so you are not going to have 13 speakers by the end.

Chair: Thank you. That concludes the public session of the Committee.