

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 10 July 2018

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-17

Representations made

[\[I\]](#): Andy Slaughter

[\[II\]](#): Stuart C. McDonald

[\[III\]](#): Tim Loughton

[\[IV\]](#): Steve McCabe

Andy Slaughter made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications in front of us, the first of which is from Mr Andy Slaughter on ensuring that UK assistance to Bahrain does not enable human rights abuses. Andy, over to you, please.

Andy Slaughter: Thank you very much for entertaining my application today. I will try to be succinct and clear. Just as a procedural matter, I listed a number of lead members and supporters, and that is being added to gradually. I think Chris Law and Sir Peter Bottomley are the latest on that. I think we are up to about 15 named people so far and seven political parties—that is not bad for a start, is it?

Bahrain has not been debated very much recently. There are two reasons why we feel it is urgent and pressing that it should have more attention. Yes, the issue of human rights in the Gulf has come up through what is happening in Yemen and domestically in relation to Saudi, but there have



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been growing concerns over a period of time in relation to what is happening in both UAE and Bahrain. Bahrain is a small country, which is unusual in the sense that it has a majority Shi'a population but a ruling Sunni Government. There have been human rights concerns over a large number of years, and these came to a head in the wake of the Arab spring when there was severe repression and a lot of deaths of protesters at the Pearl roundabout, the main site of protest, when it was finally cleared of protesters, followed by an invasion of the country by Saudi and other forces under the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Since that time, there have been well-documented cases of torture by a number of organisations, including two I mentioned: Reprieve and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. There was the unfortunate resumption of executions after a seven-year moratorium at the beginning of last year. And there is the belief that many of the very bad practices we are used to seeing in more traditionally repressive regimes around the world are on the increase in Bahrain among the security forces, partly as a result of the events of the Arab spring.

That, if you like, is the first dimension of it. My involvement in that was through the all-party parliamentary group for democracy in Bahrain, which I set up some years ago. That has since been subsumed into the all-party parliamentary group on democracy and human rights in the Gulf, which Karen Lee chairs but I am an active member of. That is a growing group, which has growing support from Members.

The specific element we wish to draw attention to is the subject of a long, well-researched report by the two organisations I just mentioned, published a couple of months ago, called "Training Torturers: the UK's role in Bahrain's brutal crackdown on dissent". It is a large, well-documented and authoritative report that has not had a lot of debate and scrutiny yet. It is on the particular aspect of whether the Foreign Office in particular, but also other organisations, some of which are relatively little-known, occluded organisations—shadowy is the wrong word—such as the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, which has a £1.13 billion budget partly from DFID funds, and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, have been funding a programme with about £5 million of taxpayers' money in the past six years which is going into things such as training prison guards in state facilities in which torture is widespread, training an ombudsman who appeared to cover up rather than investigate complaints and training police officers in tactics that led to the jailing and abuse of peaceful protesters. I think that is in the submission we have put forward.

Yes, there are human rights abuses all around the world. Yes, Britain does trade with and indeed supply arms to some of those countries. But we would say it is relatively rare for the UK Government to be actively co-



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operating, funding and facilitating those parts of the security, prison and other forces in those countries that are complicit or active in torture.

Again, I will mention briefly that when I was shadow Justice Minister, we made strong protests about the Saudi prison contract, in which similar issues were raised. I am pleased to say that in response to that, the then Lord Chancellor cancelled that contract and closed down the organisation within the MOJ, which was busy trying to sell our services to oppressive regimes around the world.

This is, if you like, an issue which has been bubbling under for some time. It has been dealt with, to a certain extent, on an ad-hoc basis. It is a big issue, as far as our relationship with Bahrain is concerned. Our relations with Bahrain are particularly close. That is everything from relationships with the royal family there to the fact that two months ago a £40 million naval base was opened there, which is the first naval base for 50 years in that region. There are incredibly close working relations. On one level, those may be defensible in defence terms, co-operation terms or economic terms, but when they bleed into what is seen as facilitating or complying with execution, torture and human rights abuses, we think these matters should have more parliamentary scrutiny.

Sorry if I have gone on, but that is the basis on which we would have what is probably the first debate on Bahrain for a long time here—one, therefore, that I would say is overdue.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I will start where you finished, about the last time anything around Bahrain was debated in the House. I cannot remember such a debate, so I suspect it has been a long time, indeed. Secondly, you mentioned extra speakers. At the moment, on the list we have in front of us, there are no Government Members.

Andy Slaughter: I mentioned Peter Bottomley.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Was there anyone else?

Andy Slaughter: I have not got any other names today. As you know, the process is that people are tapped and come forward bit by bit.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Yes, but I think it would be helpful to your cause if you could get some extra Government names on there. The other thing is that we have very limited time in the Chamber. Given that there has not been a debate for some time, there is a possibility, when we come back in the September sitting, for one of the Tuesday sittings. We do not know when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would answer, but that would give you a guaranteed 90-minute debate on the Tuesday morning to maybe get some answers out of the FCO. You could then apply for a Chamber debate in the future, because at the moment we are probably



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not going to get any Chamber time until after the conference recess. I suggest that as a route you might wish to follow.

Andy Slaughter: Thank you. Those comments are very helpful. We are pursuing other Members. The all-party group was founded two weeks ago and that has a relatively long list of supporters now, some of whom are Government Members. We have written to them, asking them to take part. As you know it is a chicken and egg problem. Sometimes it depends on when it is and how long it is. But I am confident that we will have more Government speakers.

We wanted to have it in the Chamber and we wanted enough time to explore what are quite complex issues, and to get, if I am honest about it, some attention to an issue that is often glossed over, because there are dramatic things happening in the region. But if you are asking me the straight question of whether I would rather a bird in the hand, yes, I think we would take a bird in the hand. In terms of topicality, there is an issue in Bahrain today, which I won't bore you with. Hardly a week goes by without something else happening. I am confident, whether we have it in September or October, that there will be issues of topicality.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** I have just been prompted that there is an opportunity for Tuesday 11 September, which would be 9.30 am to 11 am—a 90-minute debate.

Andy Slaughter: I think we are largely in your hands on that. We know that we have enough information and speakers to fill three hours. We would rather have it in the Chamber. But if that is what is on offer, we would take what is on offer. As you say, if that acts as a catalyst in terms of generating more interest, we can always come back.

Q6 **Chair:** I think the concern, Andy, is that we have no time left to allocate before the summer recess. We have one week and three days back between the recess for summer and the conferences. You would then be waiting until mid-October, possibly, for another slot.

Andy Slaughter: I take the point.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Stuart C. McDonald made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Our next application is from Stuart C. McDonald on fees for the registration of children as British citizens. Thank you very much for coming along.

Stuart C. McDonald: Thank you very much. Since the application was submitted I am pleased to have received support from another couple of Members: Tim Loughton, who is here, and Tim Farron. I think we are up to



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15 now, from across five political parties. I should say at the outset that I simply asked the 65 or so MPs who had signed an early-day motion on this issue; I haven't even put the feelers out to the whole House yet, so I think that there is considerable interest in this issue.

We are talking about the result of changes to British nationality law in 1981. Back then, the Government changed—as many Governments did—nationality law so that being born in the United Kingdom was no longer enough in itself to make someone a British citizen. They had to have a British parent. At the same time, safeguards were put in place so that, if it transpired that the United Kingdom really was the home of a kid in that situation, they should be entitled to register as citizens anyway as a matter of law.

The motion focuses on two circumstances: whether such kids spend the first 10 years of their life in the United Kingdom and whether one of their parents subsequently becomes a permanent resident or a British citizen. In its wisdom, the Houses of Parliament decided that, in both cases, these kids would have the right to register as British citizens.

At that time, they set the fee at something like £30, which would be about £110 these days. However, in the last few years, the issue seems to have become badly conflated with issues around the naturalisation of adults who have chosen to make their life here, or people who are migrants, in the proper sense of the word, rather than kids who were born here and this is their home country.

We are saying that that is unacceptable, and that this is now becoming an obstacle to these children exercising their right to register as British citizens. That can mean that they may not even be aware that they are not British. They might end up wanting to go on a school trip and not being able to go abroad, or they might find that their application to university runs into bother because they are not a British citizen, or they might not be able to find work.

It is very topical just now because of what happened with the Windrush generation, and comparisons have been made with that. Indeed, in the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry last week, recommendations were made that were along the lines of what is in the motion, and the House of Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement also made similar recommendations. Some 67 MPs signed my EDM on this. A campaign is under way by Amnesty International on a project for the registration of children as British citizens.

The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration has also launched an inquiry into Home Office fee charging generally, so I think it



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will be quite useful for MPs to have their say on this issue. It has been debated a couple of times in the House of Lords. There was actually a cross-party meeting with Lords—Tim and I were both there—so there is interest in this, but it has never been debated in the House of Commons. I think it would be useful to have that chance for the first time.

I am completely in your hands as to whether Chamber time is available for the debate. If it is not, I am more than happy to have it in Westminster Hall.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** You have ticked 90 minutes and three hours for the debate, and you just said you could have it in either Westminster Hall or the Chamber. However, you have a substantive motion, which you cannot vote on in Westminster Hall. There is an opportunity for a debate—I presume the Home Office would answer it—on Tuesday 4 September, which is the day we come back from the summer recess, from 9.30 am to 11 am.

If the Committee allocates that time, you would be guaranteed 90 minutes, although obviously you couldn't have a vote. You probably heard the previous discussion. We have very limited Chamber time. You will not get a debate on this until after the party conference recess—the middle to end of October—at the earliest. Alternatively, you potentially have a guaranteed slot on 4 September if you so desire.

Stuart C. McDonald: A guaranteed slot would be fine. The most important thing is having these issues aired.

Q9 **Chair:** The only thing to bear in mind, from your perspective—I would think about it from my perspective—is getting here for 9.30 am on a Tuesday when it is the first day back.

Stuart C. McDonald: I shall be here on Monday evening.

Q10 **Patricia Gibson:** The other thing is the number of people interested in speaking on this. Ninety minutes would be a squeeze. I suppose you will have to weigh that up against whether to wait for a longer debate.

Stuart C. McDonald: On balance, I think the most important thing is just to get the issue aired as soon as possible. If that means that it will be a struggle to fit everybody in, I am afraid I will make that sacrifice.

Chair: Thank you.

Tim Loughton made representations.

Chair: Next up, Mr Tim Loughton and children's social care in England.



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Over to you, Tim.

Tim Loughton: Not surprisingly, my issue is again children. Because there was a slight rush in getting the form in, I have another half-dozen Labour MPs and some more Conservatives. I usually have 15 or so people willing to take part—

Q11 **Chair:** Will you submit your additional list to the Clerk, please?

Tim Loughton: I will do that. It includes two former Secretaries of State for Education, so we have some quite heavyweight interest in this.

I am relaxed on the timing, in that if we cannot have a debate straightaway it can be in the near future. Tomorrow the all-party group for children, which I chair, is releasing a follow-up report on the state of children's social care. We produced quite a high-profile report last year, which was very well researched and came up with some quite alarming statistics along the lines of, if you are a child in Blackpool you are seven times more likely to be in care than if you are a child in Richmond upon Thames, for example, and a whole load of other quite big divergences in the experience of vulnerable children around different parts of England.

As a result, we did a follow-up study to drill down into why those divergences are there. Without pre-empting tomorrow's report, we have come up with some information about risk thresholds differing hugely between different authorities, which obviously raises serious question marks over how safe children are geographically. The whole narrative around vulnerable children, I am afraid, has turned from one of children in need to one of children at risk, just in order to get them over the threshold to access services.

The report tomorrow will create some interesting coverage, but the issue seriously needs some action now. We hear a lot about adult social care and the interaction with health. I fear that children's social care has become increasingly marginalised. The whole focus of the Department for Education has understandably been on schools funding, fair funding for schools and curriculum stuff, but children's social care is part of the Department for Education, primarily, as I know from my time there, and it is always difficult to get that part to feature on the radar.

We have not had a debate on children's social care for some time, and certainly not in the Chamber. It would encompass quite a lot of areas, not just safeguarding and child neglect, but some child health issues and local authority funding priorities as well. This is not just about children in care through the DFE. I know that there is lots of interest, hence I am slightly reluctant to go for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall, because I think we would be squeezed for time. Certainly when we have had debates



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in the dim and distant past on children's issues, there is always a lot of interest.

I am hoping that we will get a lot of publicity tomorrow, about our report, but there are also several other similar reports. Today, the Children's Commissioner and the IFS have produced a report on funding constraints in children's social care. The Children's Society produced a report last week in similar terms. We are not a lone voice in all this. Hence, it would be timely to have a platform from which to raise all these issues that are coming up from lots of different children's charities, academic institutions and the all-party group, but if it cannot be in the next few days, clearly we will wait until the autumn in order to get a good platform.

Q12 **Chair:** I do not want to pre-empt the publication of your report, but if you are producing a report, surely your report will recommend that the Government do something.

Tim Loughton: Yes.

Q13 **Chair:** On that basis, what would be better in terms of trying to secure Chamber time—that is the way that we work with prioritisation? If you ask the Government to do something via a substantive motion, you would have a better chance of securing Chamber time.

Tim Loughton: I am happy to do that as well. In terms of what we are doing and why the autumn might work quite well is that the Children's Minister, who came to give evidence as part of our inquiry, has offered to come back to the all-party group in the autumn after we have published to give his considered response. Obviously one would like to have that on a wider platform if he is then able to respond to the debate. If the Committee thinks that it would be more impactful to have a substantive motion, I am happy to adapt that to "The House is concerned about the differentiation in thresholds and the impact that the shortage of funding is having", or something along those lines. That would be absolutely fine.

Bob Blackman: We could actually suggest a motion for you.

Tim Loughton: We would be delighted to listen to it.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** "This House calls on the Government to implement the recommendations as published by the all-party parliamentary group for children on whatever date you have published." That then encompasses whatever your recommendations are going to be, and it would cover us for a divisible motion, which would mean that your debate would have to be in the Chamber.

Tim Loughton: I am not against that. My only concerns are, we might have beefed up our recommendations slightly more if we were going to



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get that, and I do not want to be constrained by just the recommendations that we make. If it were along the lines of taking "with regard to the report produced by the all-party group, the Government should now do this" on top of the recommendations.

Bob Blackman: It is your application, not ours. I am just making a suggestion.

Tim Loughton: We will incorporate that.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** You have a list of more than 15 speakers already, so that is very helpful, but I think you heard the discussion beforehand. To get Chamber time, you are going to be waiting until the middle to the end of October, to be realistic.

Tim Loughton: On the basis that I do not think that we are going to get the Minister in front of us before October, the timing could work quite well for us, and it gives us a little second wind after the coverage that we are going to get this week, I hope.

Chair: On the Education Committee, we had him there this morning, and he'll be back next week, but there we go. That's one of those things. Thank you very much, Tim. That's very good of you. Could you think about the text of your substantive motion and give it to the Clerk, please, along with your additional names? Thank you very much indeed.

Steve McCabe made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least, we have an application in a similar vein, but there will be some differences. Steve McCabe on supporting children in need into adulthood. Steve, over to you.

Steve McCabe: Thank you. As you say, Chair, there are obvious similarities between the proposition that Tim was just referring to and this. Let me be clear what the distinct difference is. Tim wants a debate on the provision of children's social services and social care to look at the general pattern of that service as it is emerging. I am asking for a debate to look specifically at the problems of transition into adulthood for children who are currently supported but not in care. Children who are supported by children's services, we normally refer to as children in need. That is the major distinction.

My own interest in this is fairly straightforward. I should confess that in my very dim and distant past I was once a social worker, so I have some familiarity with this issue. Also, I chair the all-party group for looked after children and care leavers. As I say, there are some similarities between the problems that children leaving care face, and those that children who are not in care but are supported by children's services face.



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The big distinction is that we have now recognised that if children are leaving care we cannot just have a cut-off point at 18. We have things such as extended fostering. We have a requirement to follow up to the age of 25 in some circumstances. We provide a great many additional services. If children are supported by children's services—children in need—when they hit 18 that is goodbye and case closed. Of course, these are often children with quite a lot of difficulties and things to contend with. Most of us will know as parents that it is hard enough for our own children to make that transition into adulthood. It certainly does not magically happen at 18 or follow a nice linear pattern. That is the object of this.

I have at least 14 Members across parties who are willing to participate in such a debate. I am looking for a 90-minute debate and I would actually prefer Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or Thursday. I would be more than happy to look at October or beyond.

As a bit of background to the argument, we know that as of 31 March last year, there were 389,430 children in England classified as children in need and receiving support from local authorities. Approximately 58,000 of those are youngsters aged 16 or 17. They share many of the features and characteristics of children in the care system, but the significant difference is this 18 cut-off point. Why are these children getting support and why are they in need? It can be a whole range of things: they can be victims of domestic violence; they may have mental health issues either on their own or with their parents; they may have suffered abuse or neglect; they may have been engaged in substance abuse; they may have caring responsibilities or they may have been subject to sexual or other forms of exploitation.

The value of the debate would be that it fits with quite a lot of other things that are happening in the Government agenda. In the autumn, the Government will respond to the child in need review; they are also currently considering the issue of school exclusions and their impact on later life. As you will know, the Government are looking at approaches to domestic violence and whether there needs to be any change to those. Of course, they recently set out some plans for children's mental health. It seems to me that these are all issues that have an impact on children in later life.

We know some things about these youngsters; we know from the DFE's own research that many of these children spend the early part of their adulthoods as NEETs. They are also far more likely to be homeless in early adulthood. Only 3% of children who are receiving support from children's services at the age of 16 or 17 are actually referred on to an adult social care system. There is no requirement or duty on local authorities to plan any kind of transition for supported children. There probably is not a



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Member in this House who will not have children or former children in need in their constituencies. Very likely, people will have come across them at their advice centres, because of the kind of problems they subsequently encounter.

What we need to do is to explore rationally the kind of transition opportunities. We all know that we are living in a hard-pressed system and that resources are tight, but we have to think realistically about how we plan to assist the transition into adulthood, as an effort to try to make that path as reasonable as possible for those young people who are already at a disadvantage. If they are left hung out to dry, as it were, at the age of 18, they will almost certainly resurface in some part of the system, and may well demand a lot more resource and attention at that stage.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** On your request for Westminster Hall, we have a 90-minute slot potentially available for Thursday 6 September. If that were offered to you, would you accept it?

Steve McCabe: Yes, is the short answer.

Chair: That is the sort of answer we like. Thank you very much, Steve.