

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench debates

Tuesday 4 September 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.

Questions 1-16

[I](#): Mr Simon Clarke and Frank Field.

[II](#): Martin Whitfield and Hugh Gaffney.

[III](#): Kerry McCarthy, Vernon Coaker, Alex Cunningham and Martin Whitfield.

Mr Simon Clarke and **Frank Field** made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. I hope that you have all had a pleasant break during the summer. This is the first meeting of the Backbench Business Committee in the autumn term, and we have three applications in front of us this afternoon. First, we have Mr Simon Clarke and Mr Frank Field with an application on free ports. Over to you, please.

Mr Clarke: Thank you very much, Chairman, and thank you very much indeed for the invitation to appear before you today. Free ports are something that a lot of MPs representing coastal and port communities are keen to see emerge as a potential post-Brexit dividend for our economy. The idea is not a brainwave that just the two of us sitting here today have come up; a number of studies have reflected the benefit that they could deliver to our economy, and indeed the benefit that they are currently delivering in a number of other places worldwide, ranging from Geneva to Shanghai.

In essence, the idea of a free port—hopefully you have the Policy North policy paper in front of you—is that you do not pay duty until such time as goods pass the land barrier of a port. Goods could arrive at Teesport, say, in my neck of the woods, and they could be assembled there as part of the manufacturing process and re-exported without paying duty. Obviously that provides a tremendous incentive to onshore jobs back into the UK, if they become more competitive relative to overseas producers.

There is considerable evidence that there would be appetite for this, and it could potentially deliver tens if not hundreds of thousands of jobs. That is not to say that a debate would necessarily lead to the Government changing their mind, but it is certainly very important that we air this idea, debate its potential and hear from all sides of the debate. I think the fact that, as you will see, there is a significant range of cross-party opinion on this—including people who take very different views of Brexit—goes to show that this idea merits serious and substantive consideration.

Q2 Chair: Frank, it is over to you to extoll the virtues of Birkenhead and New Brighton as a free port, I'm sure.

Frank Field: I have joined Simon because this ought to be a job-creating initiative, and we ought to be using as much power as we have as Back Benchers to think about what the post-Brexit landscape might look like. Certainly your constituency, my constituency and Simon's constituency would benefit if we could get more clarity and commitment from the Government, and our aim in this debate is to try to get that commitment so that people locally, the local authorities, businesses and trade unions can be thinking about how it would operate in their area.

Q3 Bob Blackman: Obviously you have asked for a general debate on the topic—I don't want to get into the subject area. What do you want to see happen as a result, given that you have not actually put a specific motion to the House for consideration?



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Mr Clarke: In many ways the situation with Brexit is evolving so quickly that any application risks being rendered quasi-redundant by the course of events if you narrow the specificity of the debate topic. I think probably it is best that we take it so that we can debate the merits of free ports in and of themselves, so that we try to secure a commitment that whatever deal is reached does not prejudice their deliverability, and ideally such that we can show the strength of feeling in the House in support of them.

There is no question that Ministers are intrigued by this idea—some of them, predictably, more so than others. I think that the strength of welcome that has been experienced is really important. It is not just from MPs in Parliament; for example, again in my neck of the woods, the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, is very engaged on the issue. There is a huge amount of interest in devolved government as well in how this might work.

There is a map in the pamphlet that shows the sheer range of ports around the UK. This engages dozens if not scores of Members of Parliament, so it is far from geographically restricted. I think it merits full consideration in the main Chamber.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** That is my other question. Obviously, it is a general debate, and you have asked for time in the Chamber. Time in the Chamber is very strictly limited, in terms of the queue of applications we already have, and obviously we have to give priority to divisible motions. If you were offered an opportunity to debate in Westminster Hall, would you take it?

Mr Clarke: I think we would take that all day long, to be honest. As always, there is a preference, but it is in no way a precondition.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Anyone else, please? In that case, Simon, thank you very much for the application. We will be making deliberations. We haven't got an awful lot of time to allocate, and we haven't even got confirmation of next week's business yet, and whether or not we have got time next week. As soon as that becomes clear, we will be able to let you have a better idea of when this has got a chance of being aired.

Mr Clarke: Thank you very much indeed.

Martin Whitfield and **Hugh Gaffney** made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Next up is Martin Whitfield with an application on World Menopause Day 2018. Martin, over to you.

Martin Whitfield: Thank you very much. I hope everyone had a pleasant recess. The purpose of this debate is to raise the question about the menopause. Ironically, if it afflicted men—as the applicants here before you are—it probably would have been solved many generations ago. It is something that, interestingly, of the things that needed to be debated before recess, was raised for one of the very first times in the main



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Chamber. It is important that it is raised, and it is important that it is explored. I think you will agree that a substantial number of Members wish to support this. Indeed, today I have had Members from other parties come up to me to say that they support the application.

The 18 October is the day assigned by the world for the recognition of menopause. I look with hope for the debate to occur on that Thursday afternoon in the main Chamber, to give voice to something that is hugely important. It affects 50% of the population at some stage, but it should be recognised and understood by 100% of the population. As the phrasing says, it falls on the Government, employers, health professionals and society to have regard to this matter.

Hugh Gaffney: I just want to support the application. This is something that affects everyone in life, and it also affects workers' daily work. Employers should understand it better and people should understand it better. That is why I want to support this day of action.

Q6 **Alex Sobel:** Obviously it is a very important issue, and I understand why you need main Chamber time for it, but you haven't got that many names; you have only got two names from the Government side. You said you have more people—

Martin Whitfield: There are some more names, which I can submit to you, that have come today. We were challenged with recess more than anything else, for which I apologise. We were anxious to get this in on Friday and, by the nature of things, those who sought to support it were those I could pester while they were on their recess.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned in your application and in your introduction that you would like, if possible, to hold the debate on 18 October.

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously we don't know what the business will be. Are there any other activities taking place that day that might take Members away from such a debate in the Chamber, or wherever it is held?

Martin Whitfield: I would add that the evening sees a reception at Speaker's House for JP Mackintosh—one of the great MPs who predated me in East Lothian—and I sincerely hope that many people will be staying for that. Indeed, rather than being drawn away, I feel that that Thursday may find a significant number of MPs and speakers both anxious to contribute to this and, more importantly, wishing to celebrate the life of a great parliamentarian.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Very good. The other issue is this. Although this is a potentially divisible motion—it is very difficult for anyone to vote against it, I suspect—were we able only to offer you time in Westminster Hall on 18 October, would that be acceptable, rather than moving it to another day completely?



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Martin Whitfield: The date is significant for many reasons. It is fair to say that the phrasing of the motion was done so as to occasion—I sincerely hope not—a Division if necessary. The reason for the main Chamber is that I would suggest there is a significant interest in the matter; it is enormously important. Of course, I would never say no to that Thursday in Westminster Hall.

Chair: Anyone else? No. In that case, thank you very much indeed. I hope you know what the score is, Martin. Thanks, Hugh.

Kerry McCarthy, Vernon Coaker, Alex Cunningham and Martin Whitfield made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Lastly this afternoon, but certainly not leastly, we have Kerry, Vernon, Alex and Martin, with an application on ending exploitation in supermarket supply chains. Kerry, over to you.

Kerry McCarthy: Thank you, Chair. Vernon and Julian Sturdy are the other official sponsors of the debate. Julian has done a lot of work on the food supply chain, in particular the work of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, but unfortunately he could not make it here today. We have got an updated list of cross-party support.

I will start by first saying why we think it is important to have a debate. There has been a lot of discussion in this place about modern slavery and other human rights abuses of workers over recent years, and the agri-food sector is the sector most affected but tends not to be talked about. We tend to talk about nail bars instead.

The International Labour Organisation estimates that in 2017 more than 1.1 million victims were working in the agriculture sector. You will remember back in the day the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers, and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority came out of that. But there are still many cases. There was a case in Cornwall recently where a woman was exploiting workers. Often it is people with unresolved immigration status, so they are below the radar and do not feel that they can go to the police. In this case they were forced to work in double shifts with no breaks. They were living on site in unsanitary, unsafe caravans.

I think there is real public interest in this. It is actually the food that all of us eat. These are things that appear on our supermarket shelves. There are about 50 huge food manufacturing and retail companies that dominate the world market. If we could put pressure on them to change their practices to weed this out of their supply chains, we could make a real difference. It is not just slavery; it is workers' abuse generally.

I will give a quick couple of other examples. The Environmental Justice Foundation has done brilliant work on seafood slavery. That are trafficking networks within the Thai fishing industry; companies such as Young's that supply prawns to the supermarkets here. It found that people were being kept on ships for several years at a time. There were cases of people

being tortured, murdered and bodies being thrown overboard into the sea. They basically get transferred from one ship to another and do not come back to land. The authorities haven't a clue what is going on on those ships.

There was a case recently of Italian tomato growers that supply UK supermarkets. There was an investigation when a Sudanese worker died of a heart attack and that uncovered low-paid migrant workers, working up to 12 hours a day in blistering heat, with no breaks or medical assistance.

The last case I will mention is an American chicken factory. It purposely went for underage or illegal migrant workers. It was blackmailing them into working for minimum pay in unsafe conditions. There was one case where the workers were actually wearing diapers at their work stations and processing chicken, because they were not allowed toilet breaks, so it is pretty grim stuff.

The reason we are looking for a debate ideally on Thursday 18 October is because that is Anti-Slavery Day, so there will obviously be a lot of discussion in the media that week. It is also, by happy coincidence, World Food Day on Tuesday 16 October, so it sits quite nicely in the middle of those two dates.

Oxfam has done a big report, "Behind the Barcodes", looking at some of these practices and has an event in Parliament. There is an event involving quite a lot of organisations on the Wednesday, so it is very timely. As I said, this is an ideal time to influence Government policy.

At the G20 leaders' summit in November, two of the priorities are the future of work and a sustainable food future. We also have Michael Gove bringing forward changes to food policies. He is bringing forward an outline document in December, hopefully. It is a really important time to influence where we get our food from, how we treat the workers and what we actually buy in the shops. Vernon is chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, and Alex and Martin support this as well.

Q11 Chair: Does anyone want to chip in? Vernon?

Vernon Coaker: Chair, thank you very much. The reasons for the debate have been well outlined and the significance of 18 October, notwithstanding what Martin said on another very important matter. If you remember, Chair, a few months ago the Committee gave us a whole afternoon in the main Chamber, and the debate was vastly oversubscribed. It made a huge contribution as part of what Parliament is doing to tackle trafficking and slavery. The Select Committee is examining this as well.

The all-party parliamentary group's contention has always been that, although the UK is at the forefront of that work—to be fair, the Prime Minister has been at the forefront with the Modern Slavery Act and so on—it is so important for us to maintain the momentum for all of this. It is



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clear that, despite our efforts and the work that has been done and the legislation that has been passed, in 2018 there is still a huge problem in our own country as well as in others. The emphasis has often been on trafficking for sexual purposes, when in actual fact there are significant numbers—the majority—of forced labour, particularly with respect to children. There are still issues with companies not properly publishing statements with respect to their practices, which is required under section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act. It is there but is not being implemented.

The Committee is pushed for time, as we all are, but 18 October is Anti-Slavery Day and it would be of huge significance for the Parliament of this country to be able to discuss the matter, which is of horrendous proportions and every single one of us finds horrific. Our constituents and the country and those who look to this country to be an example on this issue would want to know what we as Parliament are saying about it. The seriousness of what we have just heard demands that Parliament once again looks to make this a priority in the time available to us, notwithstanding the many other important issues that the Committee has to consider as well.

Alex Cunningham: That has been pretty comprehensive. The only thing I would add is that I am always mindful that we live in a buyers' world. We see the supermarket chains, and the continuing growth of organisations such as Walmart, which are cornering the market in purchasing. They put the screw on the people they are buying from, who then put the screw on the people who are producing the food, and they put the screw on the people who are actually doing the work. We need to be mindful of that. We talk about policy, but there is also the responsibility of the Walmarts of this world and other organisations responsible for producing the food. They have a responsibility to the people at the bottom of the pile as well.

- Q12 **Bob Blackman:** I have one brief question about your application. You have ticked both 90 minutes and three hours. Given the range of speakers that you have put forward in the revised list, that would not leave them much time. Can I invite you to clarify that your submission is for three hours?

Kerry McCarthy: Yes. We only really got on to this last week. These are the people who came forward just in the last few days. I think we would probably be looking at a three-hour debate. There has been a lot of interest.

- Q13 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue, as I mentioned to the previous applicants, is that we don't know what time we are going to get either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall. You have ticked both. Obviously you couldn't have your motion if the debate was in Westminster Hall. Is it preferable to you to have the debate in that week, if we don't get Chamber time, or would you rather wait for another opportunity if we don't get 18 October?

Kerry McCarthy: Vernon is more connected with what is happening around international Anti-Slavery Day. My feeling is that it does warrant a



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main Chamber debate and there would be a lot of interest and perhaps we would not do justice to it if it was in Westminster Hall. There will be so much discussion in the media that week. I don't know what you think, Vernon. The timing is crucial, but do you think Westminster Hall that week would be better than the following week?

- Q14 **Chair:** Before you come back, Vernon, there is a counter argument to that. If you took Westminster Hall, you would be guaranteed three hours. In the main Chamber, time gets squeezed all the time. You might end up with an hour and a half or an hour, depending on what other Government business comes forward, urgent questions and all the rest of it. You talked about giving the subject a proper airing. Some of the Westminster Hall debates that we have had in the recent past have had a full three hours and have been packed out with people and everyone has had the opportunity to talk about the importance of the subject and do it justice.

Kerry McCarthy: But we wouldn't be able to record the will of the House that the Government actually take leadership on this. I know it is not a particularly contentious motion, but in terms of getting it on the record that we want the UK to continue showing a lead, we would get that only in the main Chamber, wouldn't we?

- Q15 **Chair:** That is entirely right, but there is a risk: our time does regularly get squeezed in the main Chamber.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, I have been in that situation.

- Q16 **Nigel Mills:** Can I just ask Martin a question? If only one of the two debates that you are applying for today could be in the Chamber on 18 October, which one would you prioritise?

Martin Whitfield: That is a lovely question. I am going to go back to a piece of advice I was given many moons ago when I was confronted with a list of potential Committees. I was told, "What you have to remember is that when it comes down to it, it is the Committee's decision."

Vernon Coaker: Notwithstanding the very powerful point that you have made, the only thing I would say is that the symbolism of this being done in the main Chamber is enormous, in terms of how it is looked at globally.

Chair: Does anyone else wish to comment? No? In that case, I thank you very much indeed for the application. Obviously, we do not yet know whether we have time in October, but knowing that there are time-sensitive debates waiting gives us a strength in our application to the Leader of the House and the Government for time to be allocated. Thank you very much indeed. That concludes the public business of the Committee this afternoon. We will now go into private session.