

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 27 November 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 November 2018.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-12

Witnesses

[I](#): Gareth Thomas.

[II](#): Norman Lamb, Johnny Mercer and Luciana Berger.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



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Gareth Thomas made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. The first application in front of us this afternoon is Mr Gareth Thomas on the future of the water industry in England and Wales. Gareth, over to you.

Gareth Thomas: I have the support of a number of colleagues across the House for a debate on the future of the water industry in England and Wales. It has been a topic that has featured much in party political debate, but party political debate in general, outside the House of Commons. I happen to think that such a debate would be useful, not least to give airtime to a particular set of proposals for the future of the water industry that I and Co-operative party colleagues support, which promote the concept of public ownership but still in the private sector—fully owned and mutualised, as is the situation with the current Welsh Water company. We are keen to give that a bit of airtime. From speaking to those who support the concept of a debate, I know that not all the sponsors share my view on what the future of the water industry should look like, but all think that there are enough concerns about the way consumers of the industry are being treated that such a debate would be a good opportunity to hold the industry to account as well as to debate its future.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Is there any time criticality for this particular issue? Before you answer, I will just explain: we have not been allocated any time in the Chamber for six weeks or more, and we have filled up our Westminster Hall slots until, I think, 20 December, so we are now looking at either 20 December or, alternatively, the new year. I wonder whether you would like to take the slot on the last day before we rise, or would rather wait for the new year.

Gareth Thomas: I would love to wait for the new year, if possible. That would be preferable.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** If it were to be held on a Tuesday, because you have the option in Westminster Hall of a Tuesday debate, which would be the answering Department?

Gareth Thomas: I suspect it would be DEFRA. It has current responsibility for the water industry.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** So the potential for you is Tuesday 8 January.

Gareth Thomas: That would be lovely. If it were possible to put in a bid for a week or, failing that, two weeks later, that would be even better.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Norman Lamb, Johnny Mercer and Luciana Berger made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** We had another application, but the applicants are not here, so the

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last application we have on the list for today is you, Norman, and Mr Mercer.

Norman Lamb: This is about first aid and the legal responsibilities on companies to protect the health and safety of their workforce. The legislation is framed very much in terms of their physical health and safety, rather than anything about their mental health. Basically, there is a campaign to try to get the legislation changed to apply the principle of parity of esteem, which is there in the legislation for the NHS. It seems that there is a good case for saying that a workforce's mental health is as important as its physical health. The plea, I guess, is that we should have time to debate the case for that in Parliament. That is why we have come together—the three parties—to make the case.

Johnny Mercer: It speaks to the perpetual efforts to bring parity of esteem to mental and physical health. It should be a fairly obvious and quick win for Government. While we as politicians talk a good game about delivering parity of esteem, it is really important that people outside of this place see that there are people who genuinely care about it and are genuinely fighting to make it happen. A lot of these people are in silent communities, such as mine in Plymouth. It is absolutely right that we should be their voice and sing their song in a public debate to get this recognised.

First aid at work is clearly something people talk about a lot, but mental support, which across society now is equally seen as important, is not really spoken about. It is happening in places such as the military. You go on command courses now and they will give you a good two months talking about resilience in the workforce and things like that. It would be great if we could force the Government to have a look at doing this in the workplace as well.

Chair: Okay.

Norman Lamb: It is about good preventive health care. If you raise awareness and understanding in the workforce, you can stop the drift of ill health and people then having to rely on the NHS. If we intervene much earlier in supporting people, we relieve the burden on the NHS. It is good for all those reasons.

Q6 **Chair:** Do you have anything to add, Luciana?

Luciana Berger: I have been at an external event and I am pregnant and cannot move as quickly as I thought I could. I thought we were fourth on the agenda. That is what we were told. My sincere apologies if we got the wrong end of the stick.

Norman Lamb: We have made the case.

Johnny Mercer: You don't need to play the pregnancy card.

Luciana Berger: I am not playing it; I have only got 12 weeks to go. Forgive me if I repeat anything, but the application is off the back of a

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petition that has already been presented to Downing Street. It has secured more than 200,000 signatures from people right across the country who are rightly concerned that we should reflect on the current legislation and update it to incorporate mental health first aid. There are perhaps some moves to look at guidance, but on a cross-party basis on behalf of all our colleagues who have supported the application we are collectively very clear that we need to do something more concrete to make as much difference as we can in our workplaces, as we see efforts undertaken in our places of education and our health services. This is one area where we feel we can collectively make a real difference to ensure that people at work are supported with their mental health in the same way that we are very open and supported when it comes to physical health.

Norman Lamb: Luciana has perfectly complemented the strong case that Johnny and I have already made.

Q7 **Chair:** In fact, she has echoed as well as complemented it.

Luciana Berger: To complement the public voice, we saw in the Sunday papers—the Committee might have noticed—a letter that was signed on behalf of 40 businesses across the country, including big businesses like PricewaterhouseCoopers, WHSmith and the mobile phone network Three. They wrote to the Prime Minister calling for this very initiative. It is also supported by businesses that already take the lead in this area, but it is clear that they are in the minority at the moment. We want to make this commonplace across the country.

Johnny Mercer: It is interesting. When the Minister was responding, she wrote exactly the same letter as last year. It would be good to get people to the House of Commons to talk about it, rather than just push out letters.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** On time criticality, is there anything coming up—a Government decision or anything else around a day—that means that you need to have the debate at a particular time?

Luciana Berger: We are keen to reflect the strength of feeling across the country, in the light of the numbers. As far as I am aware, I have never been involved in any petition that secured many more than 100,000 signatures, and we already have—I did not have the chance to look at the most recent figure—well over 200,000. We are reflecting a public—

Norman Lamb: I do not think there is a particular event.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** I think that is the key. I do not doubt the subject matter or its importance, but assuming that this is approved—I think it quite clearly will be—it will be ninth in the queue for Chamber time. We have not been allocated any Chamber time whatsoever before Christmas, although we hope that we might get some. That means that you would probably not get a debate until February at the earliest.

Luciana Berger: I suppose the key other moment that would complement this area, because it is not in isolation, would be the NHS 10-

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year plan, which we anticipate before Christmas, although it might be delayed. These things do not happen in isolation.

Norman Lamb: I feel that, if we had a debate in the next two or three weeks, it will be completely swamped by other things that are on our minds. A delay until the new year—you look **mystified**—

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** That is fine. The other thing I mention is that, obviously, with a petition of that size, the Petitions Committee could allocate you a debate in Westminster Hall on a Monday afternoon. Have you considered that route? Obviously you have a substantive motion, which would need Chamber time, but have you considered that route, to get a debate earlier rather than **later**?

Luciana Berger: We have not been able to consider that route because it is not a petition on the Parliament website. It was done via the Change.org website, which prevents us from pursuing that avenue.

Q11 **Chair:** Thank you very much. As Bob was saying, we actually have not had any Chamber time for Backbench Business Committee debates for six weeks now. We are told that we are not likely to get any next week, for obvious reasons, and we are not sure at all if we will get any in the week after, on the 13th. I am very conscious that you have an application signed by almost 70 people. We will have to battle for more Backbench time.

The Government are basically saying that we have run out of time, inasmuch as they have allocated to us the time that would be allocated in a normal parliamentary Session. However, we are in a two-year session. It seems incongruous that, in a two-year parliamentary Session, the Backbench Business Committee would get the same amount of time as we would normally get in a one-year Session. With your permission, I might use you as an example of a very well supported application that will not get heard if we are not allocated more time by the **Government**.

Johnny Mercer: Everyone is wittering on about how boring Brexit is and how it takes up all the bandwidth. This is the sort of thing people expect us to be talking about so, if you could, push those views from us and towards the people who allocate the time. A lot of people in the country think Brexit is done and are looking for their representatives to come into work and actually change the dial on stuff like this. Throw me under the bus.

Chair: In a **hutshell**, it is a combination of the Leader of the House's office and the Government Whip's office.

Norman Lamb: Use us, by all means.

Q12 **Chair:** I appreciate that. Thank you very much indeed. If there was an outside possibility of time becoming available on the very last day—20 December—would you be interested in having a debate on that **day**?

Norman Lamb: I think **so**.

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Luciana Berger: Yes, very much so.

Johnny Mercer: Definitely, yes.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much indeed. We have no other applicants in front of us, so that concludes the public proceedings of the Backbench Business Committee for today. We will now go into private session.

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