

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 8 January 2019

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-10

[I](#): Ian Austin, Stephen Crabb, Theresa Villiers and Dr Lisa Cameron.

[II](#): Robert Courts, Ruth Smeeth and Anne-Marie Trevelyan.

[III](#): Robert Courts, Ruth Smeeth and Anne-Marie Trevelyan.

Ian Austin, Stephen Crabb, Theresa Villiers and Dr Lisa Cameron made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. I wish everyone a happy new year as we sit down to the first Committee sitting of 2019. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. The first is on Holocaust Memorial Day. We have with us Mr Ian Austin, Mr Stephen Crabb, Ms Theresa Villiers and Dr Lisa Cameron. Welcome everyone. Ian, are you leading off?

Ian Austin: Yes, I am. Thank you very much, Chair. Happy new year to you and the other members of the Committee. As you just said, we want to apply for a debate in the Chamber on Thursday 24 January in the week of Holocaust Memorial Day, which takes place this year on the 27th.

As you can see, there is cross-party support for the debate. In the past, these debates have been well attended and constructive, with lots of moving contributions from Members on both sides of the House. Last year, 24 MPs contributed to the debate.

We want to ask for the debate because we think the holocaust is an integral part of British history. As well as Britain's role in leading the war to defeat the Nazis, Britain welcomed about 10,000 unaccompanied children on the Kindertransport in 1938. Last year was the 80th anniversary of that, and the debate would give us the opportunity to remark upon it.

In addition, many survivors chose to rebuild their lives here in Britain after the war, and many of them continue, now in their late 80s and 90s, to speak about their experiences in schools up and down the country. The debate would give us an opportunity to pay tribute to them, some of whom were honoured in the new year's honours list this year.

Given that the holocaust occurred more than 70 years ago, there is now the danger that, with the passage of time, its message and meaning is becoming diluted. In addition, because it did not actually take place here in Britain, there is always the concern that in years to come it could be seen as removed from British history.

The theme of this year's memorial day is "torn from home", which will give Members the opportunity to discuss the impacts and effects of persecution, the loss of family or place of safety, and the challenges that survivors had in rebuilding their lives afterwards. With each passing year, there are fewer and fewer survivors, sadly, so a debate such as this ensures that the holocaust does not become just another chapter in the history books.

Finally, the holocaust obviously serves as a warning of the dangers of allowing racism and prejudice to take root. Over the last few years, sadly, we have seen the rise of extremism. Prejudice and racism both persist. Community cohesion and race relations still face many challenges. A



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debate such as this would, we think, be an invaluable and powerful tool to help to fight bigotry, and would give MPs an opportunity to dedicate themselves to fighting racial prejudice and hatred wherever they find it.

That is the background to the application. We hope that, as in previous years, it is something that the Committee will be able to agree to.

Q2 Chair: Does anybody want to add to that?

Theresa Villiers: I have a particular constituency interest, given that I have a substantial Jewish population in my constituency. I feel a strong sense, personally, that it is important for Parliament to mark this important event in the calendar. It also gives us the opportunity to remember those who have perished in other genocides over the years.

I believe that past debates on this matter have shown the House of Commons at its best, with some incredibly moving speeches. In many ways, although it is counterintuitive, the debate has been uplifting, because much of the focus in the past has been on the incredible bravery of survivors, and the bravery of those who spoke out and helped those at risk of persecution, not least in Albania, where people did a huge amount to save Jews from the holocaust. Similar stories are often told about Denmark and the work it did to save its Jewish population.

For all those reasons, I appeal to the Committee to allow some time for MPs to reflect on these horrific events of the past, as Ian says, as a lesson to prevent such things from ever occurring in the future.

Stephen Crabb: I underline the point that Ian made earlier, namely that this debate will be very well supported by colleagues from all parties across the House and right across the United Kingdom. Many colleagues continue to support the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, not least through accompanying groups of teachers and college students on visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau, to see the importance of the educational work that that trust promotes and funds. That is work that our Government continue to fund. There is an important context for this, which means that colleagues will be very interested in attending and supporting it.

Dr Cameron: Just to add finally, I think this is such an extremely important debate to have at this particular time of year, to mark the anniversary. It also sends a clear message to constituents right across the United Kingdom that we are doing things here that are extremely important, to bring communities together and discuss issues, which we can come together and work together on, to move forward in the future and ensure that we always learn those lessons from the past. I think that is particularly important at this time, because often people watching Parliament just now feel that all we are doing is talking about Brexit, which is extremely important, but these are also issues that are important to communities and it is important that they have their place in Parliament.

Q3 Bob Blackman: Thank you for your application. I think every member of the Committee will be sympathetic towards it. There are one or two things of importance. First, you have a list of 15 speakers—as you said,



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Ian, 24 speakers spoke last year—but your application is, at the moment, for 90 minutes. Allowing for Front Benchers and the introduction, speakers would get 2 minutes each. Under our general rules, 15 speakers would normally qualify for a three-hour debate. Can I invite you to amend your application on the fly to a three-hour debate, because I think the subject merits one?

The second issue is that we have no Chamber time allocated by the Government at all, but we do potentially have Westminster Hall for guaranteed time, both on 24 January and potentially the following week. We all want this debate to take place. If you are offered a Westminster Hall slot, and if there is no Chamber time available, would you accept it?

Ian Austin: Of course, yes. We want the debate to take place, ideally in the Chamber, but if the Chamber is not available, of course we will accept it. We have had this debate in Westminster Hall in the past. As for time, last year I think it was 90 minutes, but if the Committee wants to give us longer than that, that is fine by us. There are lots of MPs who will want to take part.

Chair: First and foremost, I should declare my own interest, in that I live in the middle of a very orthodox Haredi community in Gateshead—a very large community in Gateshead—which I am proud to represent. That is just for the record, to let people know my interest. My neighbours on literally every side are orthodox Jewish people and Jewish families.

I will on Thursday, at business questions, make a representation directly to the Leader of the House for Chamber time for Holocaust Memorial Day, to give the Government advance notice and to ask for time in the Chamber, but if that is not forthcoming we will try to hold the place in Westminster Hall on the 24th for the debate to take place. Thank you very much indeed.

Ian Austin: Thank you.

Robert Courts, Ruth Smeeth and Anne-Marie Trevelyan made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Next up this afternoon, we have two applications from the same team. Good afternoon and welcome. We have Robert Courts, Ruth Smeeth and Anne-Marie Trevelyan. The first application is for a general debate in the Chamber on carrier strike strategy and the contribution to UK plc. Robert, over to you please.

Robert Courts: Chairman, thank you, and thank you everybody for hearing our application. Can I declare my interest on both of the debates, as it is declared in the form?

The carrier strike debate would have a twin focus. We have had brilliant progress on the carrier programme, as we saw in the sea and air trials of HMS Queen Elizabeth at the end of last year. These are incredibly ambitious and expensive projects with incredibly vast, far-reaching potential. These are the only aircraft carriers in the world that are



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designed from the keel up to operate the F-35 Lightning joint strike fighters, so they are better than everything that the Americans are using, or anybody else who is going to be operating that aircraft in the years ahead.

That makes it appropriate that Parliament does two things. First, it should celebrate and recognise what the carrier programmes have brought to the UK in terms of UK plc—I am talking about things such as supply chains, local skills and defence industrial expertise—to highlight to the public that these are not just expensive projects that cost a lot of money, but that they bring very real benefits to the country in terms of its industrial base, to local communities and to the Exchequer. It is an example of how defence can bring money in, rather than simply costing money.

Secondly, we should look at the use to which the carriers will be put once they exist, and the relationship they will have with our foreign policy. Are they intended for power projection? Will they operate in the littoral environment? What about fleet defence? What will be required to protect and support them—fleet escorts, submarines, resupply aircraft, organic airborne early warning? Will this be done alone or with allies and, if it is the latter, who provides what and when? All of this requires a thought-through carrier strategy, and it is something that we would all suggest is appropriate to consider now.

Given the nature of this big national project, we would suggest that a Chamber debate is appropriate, although I anticipate the point that is about to be made. I anticipate that there would be about 19 or 20 speakers.

Q5 Bob Blackman: Two questions, Robert. First, is there any particular date sensitivity on either of the applications?

Robert Courts: No.

Q6 Bob Blackman: The second issue is that, as you are aware, we have no time allocated by the Government in the Chamber. We have a queue of debates that take us beyond the February recess, assuming it happens. Therefore you would go to the back of a long queue, and you would be lucky to get a debate before March. I think that is the reality. Alternatively, you would potentially get some guaranteed time in Westminster Hall before that, if that was an option that you would consider.

Robert Courts: Thank you very much for that point. We would happily accept three hours in Westminster Hall if that is an alternative.

Chair: Any more questions? In that case, we will move swiftly on to your second application.

Robert Courts, Ruth Smeeth and Anne-Marie Trevelyan made representations.

Q7 Chair: Your second application is for a debate on combat air strategy. Robert, over to you please.

Robert Courts: Thank you very much. Many of the same points will apply. I think perhaps it has been prefaced by making the previous application.

Chair: This is not a cut and paste.

Robert Courts: Not quite, although you will notice that there is some similarity between those who support the last debate and those who support this debate.

The initial debate, which was led by Ruth, took place in November 2017 and was entitled "Defence Aerospace Industrial Strategy". That had 19 speakers, and I would anticipate that we have much the same level of support this time round. We noted in that debate the long gestation period for modern combat aircraft. In July 2018, we saw the combat air strategy, and we have seen the creation of Team Tempest, involving the Ministry of Defence, BAE, Leonardo, MBDA and Rolls-Royce. That is very welcome, but the document is rather aspirational. We would like to start looking at some of the detail of what will be required and to push for more progress, as well as to take stock of where we are now.

There are a number of points that I will be looking at: the required capabilities of the system; whether we are talking about an air defence optimised aircraft; the strategic and foreign policy use to which it will be put; which national partners, if any, are intended to be used in this system; the progress that has been made thus far; the timescale; whether we are talking about something that flies alongside Typhoon or succeeds it; any formal engagement with industry that has taken place; supply chain flexibility; and the strategic outline case that was meant to be delivered by the end of last year, but which we have not yet seen.

It is very much a case of building on what we have already seen, taking stock of the progress that has been made, and then pushing for more progress in the future. We would again suggest that now is an appropriate time to see where the Department has got to, as it is almost a year since the publication of the combat air strategy and 18 months since we first raised the point.

Q8 **Chair:** Do you have anything to add, Ruth?

Ruth Smeeth: I want just to thank the Committee for the previous debate, because the Secretary of State has said to the Defence Committee and on the Floor of the House that the debate and the issues we raised led to the combat air strategy. BAE announced over Christmas 700 apprentices, 100 of which they expect to be working on Tempest. There is a huge amount of investment in British defence manufacturing, ensuring not just that the Tempest is being developed, but what the training aircraft will look like and the overall package. It is easy for us to focus on just one platform, but this was meant to be a broader combat air strategy. A broader conversation is available to us only in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall.



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Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Just to add to that, I think the critical point is that the Ministry of Defence has a lot on, and these debates have afforded the Secretary of State—we have a new one since the first debate—the opportunity to hear from those who have constituents who represent the defence industry and, indeed, from those who are looking at the broader strategic focus of where we want our military capability to go in the next 20 to 30 years, or, in the case of the Queen Elizabeth, the next 50 years, in order to push that into the system. The Department is not minded to create big strategies; it is the leadership of Members of Parliament that has helped the Department and the Secretary of State to build that case. Both those cases have helped the Government to build a long-term strategy that helps us to use what we have invested in.

Q9 **Nigel Mills:** You know that we are short of time, Robert. If we had to ask you to prioritise one of the two debates, which one would you prefer to allocate the time to?

Robert Courts: We are split. I don't know whether that means I have the casting vote.

Ruth Smeeth: I think it does.

Chair: So the judge from Oxfordshire says—

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: This is pressure—this is like “phone a friend”.

Ruth Smeeth: Apparently we are going for carrier.

Robert Courts: I will go for carrier, please, on the basis that combat air is a strategy that is out there, whereas the carriers are being built and are sailing around, and we need a strategy.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** My repeat question is, of course, whether you will accept Westminster Hall.

Robert Courts: The same answer—yes.

Bob Blackman: The other consideration I would just make is that, were you minded to ask the Government to do something in a divisible motion, you would have to be given Chamber time, but you would have to wait. That is something you might want to consider, particularly given what Ruth was saying earlier about how it changed the Government's view. You might want to get the Government to do something—I don't know what it would be, but that is for you to consider.

Chair: As you are probably aware, Robert, your application is now resting with the Committee; it is live and can be added to and augmented, so if you wish to do that, please let us know. Thank you very much.

Robert Courts: Thank you.

Chair: Does anyone else have any questions? Thank you very much for your contributions this afternoon. That concludes the public session of the Backbench Business Committee. We will now go into private session and make our considerations. Thank you very much indeed.