

Backbench Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 15 January 2019

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-9

Witnesses

[I](#): Stephen Doughty.

[II](#): John Cryer, Vernon Coaker, Stella Creasy and Mr Iain Duncan Smith.

[III](#): Bambos Charalambous.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Stephen Doughty made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee, which is an island oasis of calm in otherwise very troubled seas. We have three applications, the first of which is Mr Stephen Doughty on the Great Western Railway delays and performance across the network.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Mr Mearns, and the rest of the Committee for hearing this application today. Many Members who are involved in sponsoring this application and are supportive of it are obviously involved with other business today around Brexit. That does not mean that we are not interested in standing up for our constituents on many other issues, one of which is the Great Western services.

The Great Western route is unusual in that it is hugely geographically wide, stretching right along the South Wales main line, the M4 corridor and the commuter lines into the Thames Valley, but crucially down to the south-west as well. It is a life-line for many communities down there. Many people rely on it for local transport but also, of course, to travel up to London.

There have been substantial problems across the network over the last two years, a variety of which have hit the headlines. Surprisingly, a situation has arisen where the franchise was extended by the Department for Transport without any full consultation. Big decisions will have to be taken in the future.

There have been serious delays, poor service and issues around electrification, new trains, delays in processing compensation claims for customers, and a whole series of other concerns about performance. Despite many meetings that Members from all sides of the House have had with Great Western management, a blame culture seems to have developed between GWR, Network Rail, the Department for Transport and the developer of the new trains on the intercity South Wales routes, Hitachi.

Those sponsoring the debate would welcome the chance to question the Department for Transport in particular about its strategic oversight of the franchise and some of the decisions that have led to the problems that have emerged with rolling stock, with staffing and with changes and delays.

The debate touches on a number of Members' constituencies. A huge number are affected from all parties and there are different issues in different parts of the network. I have particular concerns about the electrification and the services to South Wales, but we have many concerns in the south-west. We saw the impact of storms and other issues there. Of course, there are issues along the commuter belt and the Thames Valley.



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It has been a long time since we had a debate on the whole franchise and the wider strategic issues. Lots of individual questions have been raised and the routes were last discussed in 2016. Luke Pollard had a debate in October 2017 about specific south-west issues and the autumn Budget allocation. But there has not been one that looks at everything and I think the range of issues being raised would draw the support of a huge number of Members on a cross-party basis.

We are looking for a 90-minute general debate in Westminster Hall or the Chamber on the motion that the House has considered the Great Western Railway franchise and the issues facing constituents. We would be grateful for your support and are happy to answer any questions.

- Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Thank you, Stephen, for your application. I note you have asked for a general debate in Westminster Hall or the Chamber. You will be aware that due to uncertainties at the moment, we have no Chamber time. But there is an opportunity for Tuesday 5 February when Transport is answering, when you could have the first 90 minutes from 9.30 to 11, if the Committee agrees. Would that be acceptable?

Stephen Doughty: Yes, absolutely, these issues have been going on for quite some time. Certainly, something sooner rather than later would be very welcome, so thank you.

- Q3 **Alex Sobel:** As you said, a great number of MPs would be interested. We would normally expect more than five names for a 90-minute debate. You have two Government-side MPs, which is sufficient, but do you think you will get more MPs from the other side on your application?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely, there is a simple practical reason why there are not more names here. We have verbally had conversations with a lot of people, but with everything that is going on, it has been very tricky to track down individuals and get them to sign. Obviously, there are a few who would have come with me today. I think past experience of these debates on GWR show that a huge range of people will come and speak because of the number of constituencies that it touches and the different communities that it serves. It is not like some of the much smaller franchises. This really does affect a huge number of colleagues' constituencies. We have cross-party support and have had a lot of informal conversations in the corridors about the problems that we are experiencing.

John Cryer, Vernon Coaker, Stella Creasy and Mr Iain Duncan Smith made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** The application is about Home Office spending on police tackling knife crime.

John Cryer: May I start with a question? In conversation with Sarah, the Clerk, I was told we could broaden this to an application for a general debate.

Chair: That's a given.

John Cryer: I see.

Obviously, this is a big subject. If it is possible to get it on to the Floor of the House, we would like to do that. If it is not, we would go for Westminster Hall—or anything. Having said that, the application was sparked, in particular, by the murder of Jaden Moodie in Stella's constituency in Leyton and about 100 yards from the boundary with my constituency. That is just the latest in a series of episodes that has happened over the spring, summer and now into the winter, of what appears to be escalating knife and gun crime and general acts of violence. If we look at the *Hansard* reports of business questions, week in, week out, there are constant requests for debate from people—from myself, from people who aren't here. Bob springs to mind: he has often raised the issue of aggravated burglary. All those things come into it.

At the moment we are dealing with an escalation of knife crime that has happened for various reasons. It particularly seems to affect London. In our three cases, we feel that it particularly affects east London. That is linked to what seems to be a rise in gang activity. I think the police would admit—they have admitted it to me—that they are dealing with increases in knife crime and gang activity, with related crimes such as aggravated burglary. It has a public resonance because we are all finding that it comes up all the time. As I say, that is reflected in business questions and other question times—it comes up in Home Office questions all the time and, to some extent, in Justice questions.

We are all finding that in surgeries, street surgeries and street stalls, and in emails, it is coming up again and again and again; on some days, even more than Brexit, amazingly enough. It is a bit of a diversion from Brexit, I suppose. Other MPs, particularly London MPs, are saying exactly the same thing. Last week we had a meeting of the Labour London Group—Stella and I were there, and it was chaired by Wes Streeting—with Cressida Dick. This was coming up again and again—in fact I am not sure that anything was really brought up at the meeting other than knife crime, gang activity, violent crime and gun crime. That is why we have the application.

Mr Duncan Smith: I completely support this. There are three of us here who happen to be in the same borough where all of this is going on.



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Waltham Forest as a borough is under real pressure at the moment, but a lot of the adjoining boroughs in north-east London are facing the same problem. There are a huge amount of issues around the increase in gang crime, all the county lines stuff—it all links back to this and it creates an atmosphere of violence. Kids who aren't part of the gangs also begin to get involved in carrying knives and weapons to defend themselves and you get into a spiral; and that's exactly what's happened. Backing up John on this, it is not just in our borough, though—it is absolutely kicking off in London. I think that any London MP, bar a few, will tell you that there is a growing problem.

But it is not just there; it is in other parts of the country as well. I am a member of the serious violence taskforce that the Home Secretary sits on, but the reality is that the reports are coming in thick and fast. The Centre of Social Justice, which I chair, did a report and has reinvigorated that report, about how to end all this, but very little is actually happening. There are real issues to be debated. A huge amount of this is not just policing: it is also local authorities, local community groups, all those areas, getting the young kids out of the gangs, getting them back into regional education, into the mainstream stuff. That can only be done if everyone is co-ordinated. It is very dysfunctional in London. Part of the reason—and there is a financial issue here. Some of that needs to be tackled. There needs to be money to support some of the local authorities and those local commissioning groups, et cetera, because that is the way to do it. Glasgow has shown exactly how you do it, as has Boston, Cincinnati and others. London is peculiarly dysfunctional at the moment. John is absolutely right that we need to have a serious, focused debate on what is causing this, what we will do about it, what we are doing about it, and where we are going overall. I urge the Committee to have this as a priority because, frankly, one more murder, as has happened in the last few days, is one too many. There are plenty more happening at the same time.

Stella Creasy: Jaden's horrific murder was one of five knife crime incidents in Walthamstow in that week, but this is a national concern—despite the frustration that we all have with Brexit, there should be a Cobra on knife crime, because it is such a national co-ordinating issue. The drug trade coming out of London is affecting areas across the country through county lines, and vulnerable children are being groomed and exploited into this. It creates a culture of fear where we have a lot of young people in our local community carrying weapons—not just knives, but guns—because they are frightened, so it has a ripple effect.

The honest truth is that we as parliamentarians need to continue challenging the Government to work on this issue. John is right to focus on police resources because at the moment they are at the very end of it—the enforcement. We have pushed hard to get policing in the borough to try to break that cycle in the last week, but we cannot keep doing that—we cannot keep going round and round. There has to be a better way to resource this and save the lives of young people.



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Vernon and I have been dealing with Jaden's family because he had connections in Nottingham. This is the sixth child that we have had to bury in Walthamstow in the last 18 months alone. For many of those children, you can see in the pattern the point at which, had intervention happened earlier—the police are being asked to intervene in ways that perhaps other agencies should—we would have got a better result. Obviously there is a particular focus on London because there have been so many deaths, but we risk misunderstanding how this affects crime across the whole country if we do not see the interconnections. I know there is a violent crime taskforce, but we are not getting regular updates, the parliamentary scrutiny that we need, or the local intel that we can bring as parliamentarians by having a serious debate.

Vernon Coaker: Just to support my three colleagues and to add to that point, it is so important for the Committee to consider having the debate on the Floor of the House, notwithstanding the pressure on time. This is a national emergency. It is in my constituency and area of Nottingham, and colleagues I speak to in Liverpool, Manchester and Cardiff—even in Scotland, where they have got on top of the problem, and we need to learn from their public health response—tell me that there are still pressures. Obviously there is the policing, but there are other issues on preventative youth work and on the work that Iain and the committee he is on will be discussing. I just think the public out there will wonder why Parliament is not discussing something as crucial as this. If there is a terrorist incident, quite rightly—don't misunderstand me—there will be a national response that involves Cobra, as Stella has just said. We have young people dying on our streets all the time—the spike is mostly in London, but it goes across the country. If it were a terrorist attack, the whole apparatus of state would quite rightly pile into it. From that perspective, I think the public would expect us in the Parliament of our country to find the time to be able to discuss, debate and reflect on what more we should be doing about it.

Mr Duncan Smith: May I make one small point? Just to follow up on what Vernon said, which is absolutely true, the other day I went out—I am sure all my colleagues have done exactly the same—on a police patrol in the Waltham Forest area at about 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Within two hours, I went to one shooting, two stabbings and a potential stabbing that was put off. We all know about terrorism, but on the streets right now the people who are not being killed are being maimed and hurt directly as a result. We tend to focus only on the murders, but there are a lot of kids who are now in deep trouble because they have been stabbed or shot. It does not make the headlines because they did not die. This is the nature and scale of what we are doing: in two hours, four incidents of that nature. It is shocking, frankly.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** As you can imagine, I am very sympathetic to this request for a debate. You have completed the form, which is an Estimates Day form as opposed to our normal Backbench Business form. That is not an issue, except for the fact that if you really want Chamber time, you are going to have to ask the Government to do something in



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the way of a motion, which would then have to be tabled in the Chamber. At the moment you do not have such a thing; you have asked for a general debate. If that is what you want, I can understand, but we have no Chamber time to allocate at all at the moment and we have a queue of debates that will take us through to the middle of March, if and when we get Thursdays allocated to us. We have some time in Westminster Hall that, potentially, is available to you.

There are two options to get this debated: one is that you revise the application with a motion. It is your application, your choice. Alternatively, you accept Westminster Hall time, which means you will get an earlier debate than you would otherwise. The final issue, which I will just caution you on, with respect to Iain, is that you will need to have some other Government speakers. I am sure you will get them, but you need to have them on the application because we would want to see a debate across the Chamber, not just limited to one set of politicians.

John Cryer: Bob, I had the impression—well, more than the impression—that I really had to get the application in fairly sharpish. It resulted from a conversation I had with Ian. I just wanted to bang it in so I approached the obvious MPs.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** We are not saying your application is out of order. We are just asking you to revise the application so you get the best chance of a debate.

John Cryer: I am just explaining why there were 11 names on it rather than 20 or 30.

Q7 **Chair:** To put it simply, we have a traffic light coding system: green, amber and red. Red means out of the window, amber means it is a live application but it needs some additions, or a green is green for go. This is a live application and what we are saying is that this will turn green on the addition of, say, four or five additional names.

John Cryer: Okay. I will easily be able to do that. On whether we submit a motion, what you are saying, Bob, is that even if we submit a motion, we are still looking at mid-March at best for the full Chamber.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously this Committee has not allocated—and I do not want to speak on behalf of everyone but we will look at the merits of each application and the seriousness of it. Personally, I would say that something such as this is more serious than some of the other issues we have on our agenda, but that is for the Committee to decide. However, what I can say is that there is very little chance at all of getting Chamber time before the middle to the end of March as a general debate in the Chamber.

Stella Creasy: Is there more chance of getting an earlier debate if it was an Estimates Day debate?

Bob Blackman: No—forget Estimates Day. Estimates Day applications are for an Estimates Day debate, which we expect to be in the middle of March, funnily enough. So, that is not the issue. It would depend on the



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allocation of time from the Government for us to allocate. What we do know is that we get allocations for Westminster Hall routinely, so you would get a guaranteed three-hour debate in Westminster Hall—subject to getting the extra names—much earlier, possibly by the end of this month.

- Q9 **Chair:** It is just that, as a Committee, we have taken a custom and practice decision that we will give precedence to voteable motions, because it is asking the Government to do something, as opposed to general debates. Okay? That is because general debates can be aired in Westminster Hall. There is no division; it is a general debate. We will give precedence to Chamber time for voteable motions, because that is something we do.

I will just add that we are in this situation of having this significant backlog because prior to Christmas we had eight weeks when we didn't have any time allocated to the Backbench Business Committee in the Chamber at all. So we have got a backlog of applications, which stems back to then. That is what we have got, I am afraid.

John Cryer: I would be minded to go for Westminster Hall, because really you are saying that we are looking at mid-March at least, even if there is a votable motion. As you know, this is happening right away. If we can get three hours in Westminster Hall, tentatively we would go for that. Then we can get a Government response to the issues we raise and get the speakers. I would need another four or five speakers, something like that. I need to get those names to you.

Chair: Yes—a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall. The point about Westminster Hall as opposed to the Chamber is that the Chamber time gets squeezed because of urgent questions, statements, etc. In Westminster Hall you get a guaranteed three hours. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

Bambos Charalambous made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Bambos Charalambous, it's over to you.

Bambos Charalambous: Before I start, I have two names to add to my application: Julian Sturdy and Ellie Reeves.

This is an application for a debate about missing persons guardianship. I had a constituent whose brother went missing on the Galapagos Islands, whose body was never recovered. She tried to manage his affairs while not being able to produce a body. She found it virtually impossible to do so, because the mortgage lender would not discuss matters with her, and she was not able to cancel direct debits and manage her brother's affairs. Eventually, after a long passage of time, she managed to go down the presumption of death route.

This issue affects many people. A charity called Missing People estimates that more than 1,000 people go missing for over a year every year, where they do not know what has happened to them and have not found a body. These are not just runaways but people who are long-term missing. Their families, as well as having the grief of dealing with their loved one being missing, cannot manage their affairs, so they have the financial problems of trying to deal with things going on in their loved one's life, but not being able to.

I am asking for a Westminster Hall debate to discuss this issue. An Act of Parliament was passed in April 2017, the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017. It got Royal Assent on 27 April 2017, but has never been implemented, more than two and a half years later. We want to ask the Government to get on with things, because people's lives are really affected.

One of the people I spoke to was Peter Lawrence, the father of Claudia Lawrence, who was the young chef from York who went missing. Her body was never found. He found it virtually impossible to deal with lenders and other companies. Other people have interests; they have constituents whose loved ones are missing and who face the same barriers dealing with their affairs.

I am asking for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall to air this issue and to see if the Government can take more action to get the Act implemented.

Q11 **Chair:** Which Department would answer?

Bambos Charalambous: The Ministry of Justice. I spoke to Lucy Frazer and made her aware.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** This is a very good application and you have added an extra couple of speakers. The only thing I would say is that if all those people speak, they will not get very long in a 90-minute debate. Under our qualifying criteria, you qualify for a three-hour debate. Obviously, it is



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your application.

You have applied for a Tuesday Westminster Hall debate; Tuesday 12 February may be available, but we are not sure about the answering Department yet. Would that be acceptable to you?

Bambos Charalambous: Yes, that would be perfectly acceptable. Thank you.

Chair: Bambos, thank you very much.