

Backbench Committee

Oral evidence: Backbench Business Committee

Tuesday 29 Jan 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 29 Jan 2019.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Jess Phillips.

Questions 1-9

Witnesses

[I](#): Mrs Maria Miller and Janet Daby.

[II](#): Neil Coyle.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mrs Maria Miller and Janet Daby made representations.

- Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. The first is on International Women's Day 2019.

Mrs Miller: May I give the apologies of my colleagues who are not able to be with us? I think there might be something going on on the Floor of the House that has unduly detained them—apologies for that.

- Q2 **Chair:** Here we are, an oasis of calm in otherwise troubled waters.

Mrs Miller: It is a pleasure to be here, Mr Mearns, for that very reason, and it is a great pleasure to be able to ask you, again, for a debate on International Women's Day, in my name and those of Jess Phillips, Janet, Jo Swinson, Angela Crawley, Liz Saville Roberts and Caroline Lucas. Again, there is cross-party support from all the major parties in this House, and particularly for 2019: this year it is 100 years since Nancy Astor first took up a seat in the House of Commons, which is another important milestone in this place that we need to recognise. I hope that the Committee will be particularly positive towards the bid.

There will be other women-related issues in Government business, particularly the ILO convention on outlawing sexual harassment in the workplace, which will be debated and, I hope, passed as an international agreement shortly after International Women's Day. Such a debate would give Parliament a timely opportunity to focus on the importance of women in politics and in the workplace, and I hope that you are able to look on the bid positively.

- Q3 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Janet?

Janet Daby: Thank you, Mr Mearns, for the opportunity to come before the Committee. I am very happy to present this along with Maria and other cross-Bench women. I just want to concur with what Maria said. This is a significant time in history for women, and the debate would be significant in terms of International Women's Day, for us in this country but also for women in other countries. We need to continue to ensure that we promote women and encourage them to become more politically active, to have a voice and to be empowered, both nationally and internationally.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** May I clarify whether you are applying for the debate to be held on 7 March?

Mrs Miller: Yes.

- Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Does that clash with any other events that are going on? I am mindful of the fact that if the debate coincides with the day itself other things could be going on.

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Mrs Miller: You are right to bring that up, Mr Blackman, because it is always a crowded week, as I know Jess will understand. International Women's Day is on 8 March—the date is always embedded in my memory because I gave birth to my third child on 8 March; James is a great supporter of women's rights—and the debate is for the 7th, the day before. As Members, we have to be careful not to hold events that clash. For instance, working with CARE International I have sponsored an event on the Tuesday of that week to mark the issues around sexual harassment in the workplace and the ILO convention. You make a really important point; we must not have other events on that day that clash, because that would limit the number of people who could take part.

Q6

Bob Blackman: The other issue is that if the all the speakers you have put down here turn up to speak, the time limit will probably be two minutes in a three-hour debate. Given that this is regularly a very popular and well-subscribed debate, I wonder whether we might be in the position of needing to give it a whole day. I have no doubt you could fill that. The other problem is that in the Chamber, as you all know, statements and UQs, and possibly Select Committee statements, reduce the amount of time anyway, so that could frustrate the debate.

Mrs Miller: Another excellent question, Mr Blackman. I get regularly frustrated by the fact that unrealistic time limits are put on speeches, and there seem to be an enormous number of urgent issues, ranging from Venezuela to teacher recruitment that seem to take precedence over the matters that we have decided to discuss. I think there is a very strong argument to say that we should take the entire day.

I recall from last year's debate—which was, of course, in Government time—to mark the centenary of women being in this place, that we had significant time limits. To point out the obvious to members of the Committee, it is not just women. You will not keep my hon. Friend the Member for—

Jess Phillips: Walsall North.

Mrs Miller:—yes, Eddie Hughes—from speaking at length on these issues, because he is, of course, passionate about women's issues, as indeed are all of the men who are marked down here. Janet, did you have anything to add?

Janet Daby: My daughter, surprisingly, was also born on 8 March. We have something in common, Maria.

Mrs Miller: Mims Davies as well.

Janet Daby: And she is a girl as well—how appropriate. I concur with Maria. It is a significant debate, and there are obviously people who would very much like to speak in it. However best it can be accommodated, that is the way forward.

Chair: I am sure you both realise that the gift of time is not ours. We will allocate debates in the Chamber as and when the Government provide us

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with the time, but we will flag up to the Leader of the House the request for a debate to celebrate International Women's Day, and I will do that at business questions.

Janet Daby: Thank you very much.

Mrs Miller: Thank you for your time—we appreciate it.

Chair: Thank you for your application.

Neil Coyle made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Next up, Mr Neil Coyle. Good afternoon, Neil. Your application is about rough sleeping.

Neil Coyle: Apologies—I have not done this before. Will Quince, who was going to make this joint request, is in the Chamber, so he has sent apologies. We co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, and would like the opportunity for the House to consider rough sleeping.

One point is the topicality of the issue. We expect very shortly the latest statistics on the number of rough sleepers across the country, so a debate linked to that would be incredibly useful, and has significant support from all the agencies involved—charities and other organisations trying to support those experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping, the roughest end of homelessness, such as St Mungo's, Crisis, Shelter and other organisations like it, and local authorities, which are struggling to manage the numbers of rough sleepers that they face.

There is also a strong case to be made about the public interest in this issue. People are very concerned, particularly at this time of year—less so, sadly, in the summer. When it is colder, the public interest in wanting to tackle rough sleeping grows because the issue is much more visible—I was in Birmingham not long ago and it was desperate around New Street station in particular. In my own constituency around London Bridge—and all the main train stations in London—there is a very visible problem. This is a problem that is raised across the country.

One demonstration of the public interest in a debate and in having more focus on the issue is the number of referrals to StreetLink, which last year had the highest number of public referrals they have ever had, and I suspect they will likely exceed that number. They have not published this winter's numbers yet, but the public are referring in greater numbers than ever before, and seeking more action on this issue.

I know time is very tight in the Chamber, obviously, but there is strong support cross-party. I think members of four different parties have signed up to support the debate already; I think there are 20 MPs of different parties.

The issue has grown, sadly, every year for the last eight years, and this could be the first chance to debate it since the introduction of the

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Homelessness Reduction Act, which—I say in the interest of currying favour—I know one member of the Committee did some excellent work on. However, we have not had public scrutiny of how that is rolling out, where there is emerging good practice—I include Southwark Council, my own local authority, which is training others in implementation—and where there are still some needs, including around the definition of vulnerability. We are hearing a link to the subject of the previous representation, as those trying to escape domestic violence are sometimes not meeting the thresholds for vulnerability, which is a very worrying indication of how they might be being misapplied. This could be a timely opportunity to look the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act and to see whether more needs to be done.

There has not been a debate on the issue since April 2018, I am told—in Westminster Hall, not the main Chamber—and that was oversubscribed. *Hansard* records that some Members who had put in to speak were not able to, so I think that is a genuine demonstration of Members' interest in having a fuller and more thorough debate.

I do not expect the Government will give their own time for a debate of this nature, sadly, despite the rising figures. That said, there are Government initiatives under way—pilot schemes—and a commitment to halve rough sleeping, which this debate would help focus attention on and perhaps even support the delivery of, in terms of what issues are discussed.

This issue also touches on many other areas of public policy. The reasons behind rough sleeping are multiple: mental health prevalence among rough sleepers; higher prevalence of ex-forces and care leavers among rough sleepers; and issues around drug and alcohol cessation services and their efficacy. Lots of other areas of policy would be brought into such a debate, which is why we would fully expect the number of Members interested in participating to be very high. It also links to other issues such as criminal justice policy and policing. Sadly, the figures show a jump in the number of people entering our prisons—not necessarily Members of this place—who are recorded as of no fixed abode. I think that figure is 27%, which has gone up, so if we want to save money in the prison and criminal justice system, we need to do more to tackle rough sleeping.

I hope that is a strong enough case. I do not want to take too much of your time. Apologies again that Will is not here with me to make a joint application.

Q8 Chair: Thank you very much, Neil. Given that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is releasing statistics on 31 January and that you mentioned topicality and timeliness extensively through your application, there is a three-hour slot in Westminster Hall on Thursday 31 January.

Neil Coyle: Okay. The challenge there, I think, is that the last time it was in Westminster Hall it was oversubscribed, so is there a chance to have a longer debate?

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Q9 **Chair:** The thing is, Neil, International Women's Day for instance, which has a huge number of pre-ascertained speakers, would warrant a full day but, given that this is a general debate without a votable motion, the most that you are likely to get of Chamber time is three hours, and that could be curtailed by Government statements, urgent questions or even Select Committee statements. In Westminster Hall, you would get a guaranteed three hours.

Neil Coyle: I think the difference is—forgive me for being cynical—when Government statistics tend to come out, it can often take a little time to go through exactly how they have been configured. I suspect that on this occasion, the sector might have some serious questions about how the statistics have been drawn together. We know that around homelessness and rough sleeping in particular, there is insufficient data collection. It is not an area in which data are recorded in as thorough a way as possible, so I suspect that if there is a debate we will end up bandying statistics about left, right and centre—not politically speaking—rather than getting into the issues, which might lead to a more meaningful discussion and potential solutions.

Chair: The offer was there, given your presentation. The alternative is that you then go on to the list as a general debate for Chamber time. You will be on the list and, as an opportunity comes up, you will then be offered it, but we haven't had a huge amount of Chamber time until about the last fortnight—in terms of Government offer. Our offer is a genuine one, Neil, because it would get you out of the stocks. Any more questions?

Bob Blackman: Instant gratification is always something that we would like to give, so 31 January and 7 February are available in Westminster Hall.

Before you decide what to do, we can say that it is likely to be at least the end of March, I suspect, before you come up for potential Chamber time because, as the Chair rightly pointed out, divisible motions have to take precedence, because they have to be taken in the main Chamber. Therefore, you could be in the queue and if a divisible motion comes up, you will remain in the queue while that jumps you. Otherwise, you can get a guaranteed three hours in Westminster Hall. Our bitter experience of the main Chamber is that you are lucky if the three-hour session becomes two and a half hours—frequently, it goes down to two or even one and a half hours, to get things through.

It is your application, I am very sympathetic towards the cause and there are a number of points to be made during a debate about councils not abiding by the letter of the law, let alone the spirit of the law. There is also the fact that if we are hearing about vulnerable people who are specifically covered under the Act—from a cross-party amendment agreed to the Act—then that is a really serious problem.

T. too, compliment Southwark Council, which was one of the trailblazers in getting this implemented in that respect.

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Chair: Thank you. We did have a third application this afternoon, on the progress of services for people with autism and their families, and what more needs to be done. Unfortunately, Cheryl Gillan cannot be with us, so we will hold that in abeyance until next week. That brings to an end our public determinations. We will now go into private session.