

# Backbench Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 19 February 2019

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Watch the meeting

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

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### Representations made

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[II:](#) Ruth George

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Meg Hillier, Robert Halfon and Layla Moran made representations.

**Q1 Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This afternoon we have a slightly different format in as much as we are considering applications for estimates day debates. First up, we have Meg Hillier, Robert Halfon and Layla Moran, who want an application to be considered regarding the Department for Education budget.

**Meg Hillier:** Thank you very much, Mr Mearns. It is a pleasure to come here. We are, as you can see, a cross-party group, and we have the support of a very large number of Members. I am just getting the final figures, but upwards of 20 from both the Education and Public Accounts Committees and across the House have backed this.

From the Public Accounts Committee point of view, we have been looking at education funding for some time. We were one of the drivers behind running estimates days through this Committee so that Ministers would come to the House and answer in detail questions about the budgets they are responsible for. One of the concerns we have had is that a lot of simple lines come out from a Minister during questions, and sometimes in debates, about money going into education, but there is never the chance in those circumstances to really get into the detail of the budget. Although you can argue that money has gone up, pupil numbers have gone up too, so the funding per pupil has gone down, and that is one of the issues we want to probe. That relates to schools, and there are other bits of education that Robert Halfon will talk about. We think it is really important that Ministers can come and explain things.

As Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I obviously reach across the House to Members every week, and a lot of them have been raising with me the fact that they want to discuss their education budget. That is across England, across party and in areas of different types—rural, urban and so on. It is a real opportunity for us to get into some depth on this.

We also hear concerns that the spending review may be delayed or there may be a roll-over settlement, so we think there is also an opportunity to explore that in this context. I think Robert Halfon wants to add something.

**Robert Halfon:** This is a crucial time for education funding. We have joined up with the Public Accounts Committee because the Education Committee is doing an inquiry into school and college funding and hope to report by the spring. We are working towards having a 10-year plan for education in the same way as the NHS now has a 10-year plan and has funding for the next few years. We think that education should have that priority as well, which is why this debate is incredibly important, in terms both of looking in Parliament at how much money should be spent on education and of supporting our Committee inquiry.

**Layla Moran:** Just to add to that, I sit on the Public Accounts Committee with Meg and one of the things we have been really focusing on is capital spend. Meg has been particularly dogged about working out how we are



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going to pay to deal with the asbestos that is in all our schools. There are lots and lots of different pots of money lying in different places and we are a Committee that looks at value for money. We are absolutely not trying to make party political points. What has been really interesting in our reports is that we absolutely align, across party, when it comes to our not being convinced that value for money is always at the heart of what the Department is able to deliver with the money it has. This is a really good opportunity for us all to speak up, from our different party political perspectives, but what you will find with the members of the Public Accounts Committee is that value for money comes first.

**Meg Hillier:** I should just add that I have had the final figures. It is 55 Members of the House who have supported this debate.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Any questions? No.

**Meg Hillier:** I will just add that if we get the debate we intend to ensure that all Members have access to a detailed briefing from the National Audit Office, so that we really focus the debate on the numbers, which is, we think, the real benefit of applying for an estimates day debate. It is for that reason that we really wanted an estimates day debate, so that we could discuss the budget in particular. We would hope to have it in the main Chamber because of the level of interest.

Q3 **Chair:** That is where estimates day debates take place. We understand that the day that has been identified is next Tuesday. Because other matters might arise next Tuesday, we are making an application to the Government to get protected time for the estimates day debates. For openness and transparency, William Wragg and I are members of the Education Committee, so we have a little interest in this.

**Nigel Mills:** And I am on the Public Accounts Committee.

**Meg Hillier:** It is stacked in our favour.

**Layla Moran:** So you know that what we say is true.

**Chair:** I notice that other Members with other applications in the back row are shaking their heads. Thank you very much indeed.

Ruth George made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Ruth, your application is for a debate is about the Department for Work and Pensions budget.

**Ruth George:** Yes. My colleague, Heidi Allen, who submitted it jointly, apologises that she is not in today. This is very much a cross-party application from lots of Members on the Work and Pensions Committee, some of whom, being on this Committee, did not want to prejudice and sign up to it.

The Department for Work and Pensions budget is the largest of any departmental budget. It has not seen an estimates day debate for as long



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back as I can see. So many debates about welfare are going on and spending is increasing on disability benefits and universal credit. We are seeing lots of changes. It is important that we have a considered debate on work and pensions issues, including universal credit, which is obviously incredibly important, disability benefits and the pensions side of things, given that the single-tier pension and auto-enrolment are starting to come on stream.

The Department affects people directly, as much as any does. We have got around 10 million claimants of current legacy benefits and universal credit to come on board—that is households—and about 20 million pensioners. It is of great importance to people out there. There is a lot of debate, and in the Chamber it can become a bit yah-boo. Hopefully, an estimates day debate will enable us to consider what is going on in a far more measured way.

**Q5 Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. It is quite heavily subscribed. Is it 35 Members in total now?

**Ruth George:** I think that, if you include the ones on the form, we are up to about 50 Members who have signed up to it.

**Nigel Mills:** I should declare an interest: I am a member of the Work and Pensions Committee.

**Chair:** Thank you.

Ian Murray made representations.

**Q6 Chair:** Our next application is estimates relating to the Scotland Office, and that is Ian Murray.

**Ian Murray:** Thank you very much, Chair, for hearing this application. Apologies from Martin Whitfield, MP for East Lothian, who put this in. We are on half term, and he has childcare commitments in East Lothian, so he is not able to present the application.

**Q7 Chair:** I thought the Scottish kids' holidays were last week.

**Ian Murray:** I can only pass on what he told me, Chair. Given that it is a pitch for an estimates debate, I made a rough estimation of what he might be doing this week.

**Q8 Chair:** I never thought Martin was the sort of bloke who would keep his kids off school.

**Ian Murray:** He will be watching this. You will probably get a text shortly.

We have made an application for an estimates debate on Scotland for a number of reasons. First, we have never had one before, which is always as good a reason as any to have an estimates debate. Secondly—Mr Clark is here, so he can perhaps pitch in with some of this—since devolution in 1999, the issue of the Scottish budget, in terms of money going into the



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Scottish block grant, has been difficult to understand for a number of reasons. One is that the block grant has invariably been getting smaller because of the devolution of powers, which obviously has devolved money at the same time. Secondly, additional spending in Departments where the Barnett formula kicks in has made it difficult to track what money is spent. That has created a political situation in Scotland whereby there is no real accountability in terms of the money that goes from the UK Treasury to the Scotland Office and then to the Scottish Parliament; what that means in terms of what the Scottish Parliament raises itself in the modern context of devolution; who is to blame or thank for additional bits of funding; and how that funding is passed on to local authorities in Scotland.

We have just seen the latest budget settlement for Scottish local authorities cut again by 8% in real terms, when the Scottish block grant has been cut by only 2% in real terms. There is no real clarity in the Scottish public's mind about who is responsible for that.

You can see that the application is signed by all the parties in Scotland. Indeed, Stewart McDonald has signed it on behalf of his SNP colleagues. It is a cross-party attempt to get some clarity and have a debate about how the block grant is funding Scottish public services, how that interacts with devolution, how the Scottish Parliament is able to raise its own money, and how that interacts with the devolution beyond the Scottish Parliament to local authorities.

An estimates debate is a really good way to raise the big issues about who is responsible for what funding in terms of Scottish public services and Scottish public life. We have never had an estimates debate before. It is the 20th anniversary of the formation of the Scottish Parliament—

**Q9 Chair:** May I just put you right? You had an estimates day debate on 3 July last year.

**Ian Murray:** Interesting. Is that true? Well, Martin Whitfield has a lot to answer for, because that is not the script he gave me. Maybe he should go back to school with his kids rather than keeping them off. All the more reason then, because the estimates debate on 3 July last year had so much of an impact—

**Chair:** It was a Treasury debate but it was on devolved institutions. The agenda was heavily towards Scottish devolution.

**Ian Murray:** I will bow to your superior knowledge, or the briefing that you have just been handed. All the more reason to have another one, because it is obvious that it made so much impact that all of us Scots did not realise it had happened.

That is the pitch for the estimates debate. It does not have to be the full debate time, because obviously you are restricted to the date that has been allocated by the Government. It would just be a good opportunity to raise some of those big issues around devolution. You would make an old man—Mr Whitfield—very happy.

**Chair:** That is very kind. Thank you, Ian.

Ellie Reeves made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** The last of the estimates day debate applications is from Ellie Reeves, on the cost of sentences under 12 months to the Ministry of Justice, their effectiveness and the consequences for the size of the prison population. Ellie, over to you.

**Ellie Reeves:** First, my apologies for the fact that it is only me before you today. The application is supported by Bob Neill, who is the Chair of the Justice Committee, and you will see a number of other members of the Committee, across parties, listed on the application. Unfortunately, they are not available to be here today, but that is not a reflection of how strongly the Committee feels about the issue.

The issue of short sentences is something that the Committee looked at in our report "Transforming Rehabilitation", which was published in June 2018, and we are looking at it as part of our inquiry into the prison population, which should be published shortly. From an estimates point of view, we are thinking about the costs of short sentences and the implications for the Ministry of Justice.

I am sure you will have seen, Mr Mearns, that yesterday the Secretary of State for Justice made a speech in which he said that sentences of less than six months are ineffectual and should not be routinely handed out. He recognised their cost in terms of not reducing reoffending rates, but in fact increasing them, which puts an additional financial strain on our prisons.

The prison population has doubled in the last 25 years and stands at 83,000, which is an enormous cost to the MoJ. You will know that our prisons are currently fraught with difficulties.

There have been a number of urgent notifications issued on prisons across the country. With short sentences, people go to prison for a short period of time. There is a huge cost, when someone presents themselves at a prison in the first place, to get them through the system and settled into prison. If they have got a short sentence, very little rehabilitation can take place. Often, as a result of going to prison, they lose their job, their family ties and their home. There is a cost to that, not only to the MoJ but to other Departments, which is why it is so important that we look at this in terms of costs.

Among the things that the Justice Secretary talked about yesterday were community sentences and the use of electronic monitoring. Again, there will be costs in relation to those things, and we feel they need to be explored. This is a really topical issue. There was a short Westminster Hall debate a couple of weeks ago on short sentences. It was a 30-minute debate, and there were people who wanted to speak but could not get in. This is something that is being talked about across parties. It is something that Ministers are currently talking about, so it is very topical, and it is something that the Select Committee feels very strongly about. We would



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like to have a full debate on it so that the issues can be explored, so that Members of the House can put forward their views on this very important issue and so that we can look at how effective these sentences really are.

- Q11 **Nigel Mills:** This is a slightly narrower application than the two previous ones, which were both about a whole Department's spending. Would you be willing to consider a three-hour debate in ordinary Back-Bench time if you were not one of what will probably be two lucky debates out of the four applications that we get?

**Ellie Reeves:** Yes.

- Q12 **Chair:** This has all the traits of a very nice votable motion debate in the Chamber at another time, should it not be successful for an estimates day debate.

**Ellie Reeves:** Thank you.

Layla Moran and Caroline Lucas made representations.

**Layla Moran:** Thank you very much for hearing from me again. This time, I thank Caroline for supporting me. Anna McMorris was hoping to be here and is not able to, but she wanted to be here to illustrate the cross-party support we have for this.

Why now? Climate change continues to be one of the biggest pressing issues, not just for the UK but globally. I was struck when I was first elected by how little time it seems to be given generally on the Floor of the House. I noticed that last year there were three debates, only one of which was in the main Chamber; the other two were in Westminster Hall. Given how important this issue is, I personally found that very disappointing.

The reason for doing it now is that I am sure you will have noticed the student climate strike that happened last week. Regardless of what you personally feel—I was very supportive of them but as a teacher I really do not want them to keep doing it, because it would really have annoyed me in my physics classes, especially approaching exams—I think it is incumbent on Parliament to try to take some of that on board and show them that we are taking these concerns seriously. I can think of no better way to do that than by having a three-hour debate on the Floor of the House.

Chair, you will notice that we have got 20 speakers from every single political party, and I think that is just the beginning of the number of people who want to talk about this, from all sorts of different perspectives. The reason why we have chosen a slightly broader issue, but one that is narrow enough for a three-hour debate—it is "Progress towards net zero carbon emissions"—is because that is not what the Government currently want to do in the medium term. However, the fact that 160 MPs signed a letter to the Prime Minister asking for that by 2050 shows that the number of people who want something like that is quite broad.



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The other reason to do it now is that we are in 2019, and the UK, we were told after the last COP conference, wants to bid for COP 2020. What better way to show our support for something like that than to have a debate on the Floor of the House?

**Caroline Lucas:** Just to emphasise what Layla has said, it is shocking that in 2018 there was literally one debate in the Chamber on climate change. The young people who took to the streets on Friday have put down a challenge to us, and we should demonstrate that we are very happy to pick that up and that we will show some real leadership when it comes to the climate crisis.

The whole debate would be in the context of the most recent IPCC report, which basically said that we have, now, just 11 years in which to halve global climate emissions if we are serious about this 1.5° threshold, so there is a real urgency in the global picture. Here at home, it is a really important moment to show real political leadership on this as well. As Layla said, in the Westminster Hall debate a couple of weeks ago a lot of people couldn't speak for very long because it was oversubscribed, so there is a real appetite for this debate.

Q13 **Chair:** I see, Layla, you have the golden ticket in terms of securing a debate, because you have Jim Shannon on board. With Jim being a season ticket holder for this Committee, a debate is virtually guaranteed.

We may have some time on the 28th. If that date were to become available would it be acceptable?

**Caroline Lucas:** Personally, I cannot do that. But it is more important that we get the debate, so don't worry.

Q14 **Chair:** Okay. So it is a possibility.

**Layla Moran:** If so, we will try to publicise it as widely as possible, not just in here but out there as well. It would be great for the students to know that we were doing it as quickly as possible.

**Caroline Lucas:** Are there options on other dates?

Q15 **Chair:** We are completely and utterly dependent on the Government for the allocation of time. We were hoping for some time this Thursday and we haven't got it. We are hoping to have some time on the 28th. We have already asked for a debate on Welsh affairs, because that is the day before St David's day, but there is a possibility that this could be the second debate on that day.

**Layla Moran:** Let us know and we will make it happen.

**Caroline Lucas:** I know everyone says the same thing, but on a Thursday it is harder to keep people here, particularly for the second of two debates.

**Chair:** That is the day we are normally allocated, Caroline. We are in the hands of the Government.