

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 5 March 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 March 2019.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-9

Witnesses

[I](#): Bambos Charalambous

[II](#): Nic Dakin and Richard Graham

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Bambos Charalambous made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have two applications in front of us this afternoon. First up we have Bambos Charalambous on court closures and the effect on access to justice. Bambos, over to you, please.

Bambos Charalambous: Thank you, Chair. There have been a significant number of court closures over the last eight years, which have had a big impact on local communities. The Government have decided to embark on a digital court programme, which is still in its early stages, but the effect of the court closures is only just being felt. Now is a good time to find out from MPs what the impact in their constituencies has been. We were not able to do that prior to the courts' closing; some of the courts closed only relatively recently.

It has sparked a widespread interest among parliamentary colleagues. For those reasons—in order to inform the Government, and for MPs to put forward their views about how it has affected their communities—I am seeking this debate. More than 20 MPs have expressed an interest. I saw Iain Duncan Smith in the lift, and he said that he would be interested in this as well. I am not seeking to add him to this, but there is widespread interest in the debate. That is why I am seeking three hours in the Chamber—because of the level of interest.

I am not sure whether there is anything else I can add. The Government are also seeking to sell off some court buildings, which they have not done yet. That is why it is urgent to have the debate sooner rather than later. Once those court buildings are sold, it will be very hard to bring them back into use. There is also potential for looking at how other buildings may be used as court buildings: council buildings, for example, may have a dual purpose. For all those reasons, I think it is very apt that we have the debate, and I am seeking your support to secure it.

Q2 **Alex Sobel:** You have made a very eloquent case for this, Bambos. As you are aware, we are only getting the business a week in advance on Thursday. We have a lot of debates that we have effectively approved, but that are waiting for Chamber time. Also, Chamber time is squeezed because of the number of UQs and ministerial statements that are coming through. Obviously you have said that this is fairly urgent. Would you be willing to look at a Westminster Hall debate, where you get three hours guaranteed, or are you looking only for Chamber time?

Bambos Charalambous: I think I would prefer to wait and get Chamber time if possible. That would be my preference.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously the Justice Committee has an oversight of this particular issue. Are they doing a report or an inquiry into this at the moment, or have they done one?

Bambos Charalambous: They have not done one, and we have spent quite some time looking at the prison population. There are areas where



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this does seep into it a little bit, but there has not been a separate debate or report into this. For instance, we are doing an inquiry into the magistracy and magistrates. There might be a footnote in that report about court closures, but nothing in relation to court closures has come up.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You have set out the problems, but what action do you want the Government to take following the debate?

Bambos Charalambous: I want us to be informed about the level of difficulty that people are facing in accessing justice, particularly in rural areas. Rather than spending millions of pounds on a digital court service, they could consider whether other alternatives exist where problems have been shown, and raised in debates, in certain constituencies. For instance, if they found there were delays in people attending a court that was many miles away, they could consider whether it was better not to sell off that court, or whether it was better to use a separate building in that community and have a physical court presence, rather than going down the digital route, which might adversely affect different communities.

Chair: I would counsel you that we are very unlikely to get any time next week—I cannot imagine why, but we are unlikely to get any time next week—and the week after that we already have a long-established and pre-allocated debate on the 21st, if we get the time. It may be some time before you get Chamber time at all, Bambos; it may well be after Easter. Thank you very much indeed.

Nic Dakin and **Richard Graham** made representations.

- Q5 **Chair:** Next up, please, a veritable double act: Richard Graham and Nic Dakin.

Nic Dakin: I must speak first, because I might have to suddenly disappear. I am in the Bill Committee at the moment.

- Q6 **Chair:** I thought you were going to be Parliament's answer to Penn and Teller, or something.

Nic Dakin: Like pizzazz? Yes, if only, Mr Chairman. Apologies if I have to leave before the question is concluded, but we are expecting a vote shortly in the Bill Committee, so I need to be there. I am ably supported by Richard, who can deal with all the difficult questions.

We are asking for a debate on further education, preferably in the main Chamber. There was a very over-subscribed petitions debate in response to issues in further education; I think we were down to four minutes' speaking time in the Westminster Hall debate, which demonstrates the widespread concern across the House on this issue and the fact that it resonates with the people we serve. As a result, Richard and I have written to the Chancellor, urging him to look at addressing the issues to do with the funding of further education, and we continue to have meetings with appropriate Ministers to pursue that course of action. The Back-Bench business debate, if we were to be successful, would be another point in that process of encouragement to the Government to recognise the need



to do something through the budgetary processes that are about to take place. We feel it is a very meet and appropriate time to have a debate of this sort in the main Chamber.

Richard Graham: Nic is absolutely right. That is exactly the situation. We have asked all 165 of those who signed the letter that we sent to the Chancellor whether they would be happy to support this application. There has been quite a lot of silence, but about 45 have come back and said yes, and no one has come back and said no. Tacitly, I think there would be huge interest in such a debate. The key thing is that we all have issues on education funding—it is probably the sector that will be most bid for in terms of the departmental spending review—but further education is the one side of it where there have been genuine undisputed cuts of around 30% over the last eight years. We all want to see the skills levels rising; this is an opportunity to talk about how additional funding can use the 33% of space in further education colleges that is unused, and how we can fill the colleges up with more people getting more skills, improve our productivity and make a huge difference. I think there would be a lot of cross-party support for this, which could only help the skills Minister, Anne Milton, who is as keen as we are to see more funding.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** With the, by the look of it, 190 speakers that you will have in this debate, I am not sure how long we could allocate to you to make it worthwhile. On a serious note, the number of speakers you have would qualify you for a three-hour debate. You said that you have already had a Westminster Hall debate on the subject. Our problem is that we have no Chamber time at all allocated to us. The Chamber time we do have is pre-allocated for other purposes, and we have a queue of debates. The fact is that we do not have any Westminster Hall time to allocate either, other than, potentially, a 90-minute slot on 2 April, which is probably your only chance of getting a debate this side of Easter. Given that you want to feed into the comprehensive spending review, if that were offered, would you accept it?

Richard Graham: I think we would certainly accept it because it may be an opportunity to appreciate any departmental spending review decisions that have been taken and to talk about where that money is best allocated, in terms of apprenticeships, T-levels, 16 to 18-year-olds and so on. And if it has not been allocated, it is an opportunity to remind the Government that this is incredibly important and, if they haven't done it this year, an opportunity to say "Please when will you do it?" Almost whatever the result, it is a good opportunity, and if that is what is available we would be extremely grateful if the opportunity were granted.

Q8 **Chair:** I concur with that, in as much as I think Bob is right: there is very little hope of getting a Chamber debate before Easter—that is, if Easter happens, of course; we live in hope. There is that slot, with the answering Department being the appropriate one, on 2 April.

Nic Dakin: I concur with Richard. We have to look at the slots. We live in the real world, and if that slot were timely and therefore appropriate, we



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would accept it, although as Mr Blackman says, we would perhaps be short of time for speakers, but not short of speakers.

Q9 **Chair:** I do not want to pre-empt what will be said, but I do not think you can do this debate without mentioning the vagaries of the apprenticeship levy and how it is not working as well as it should. I have an interest in that from my work on the Education Committee.

Richard Graham: I think we would all agree. I am sure there will be lots of questions about that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.