



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Procedure Committee

Journal Office, House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Charles Walker MP, Chair of the Committee

Pete Wishart MP

House of Commons

23 June 2014

Minority party membership of the Backbench Business Committee

Thank you very much for coming, alongside Natascha Engel, at the end of last Session to speak to us about the position of the minority parties on the Backbench Business Committee.

As a number of us stated quite explicitly during our questioning at that session, we have a great deal of sympathy with the position of the minority parties as concerns their membership both of select committees generally and of the Backbench Business Committee in particular. You will recall the recommendation in our report 2010 elections for positions in the House that the size of the Committee be increased by one place and that that place be allocated to the minority parties. Responding to that recommendation in evidence to our review of BBCom, in June 2012, the then Leader of the House argued that “the principle with Select Committees is that you look at the size of the Select Committee and then you allocate them according to the representation in the House”. Both you and Ms Engel made a strong case for treating the Backbench Business Committee differently, and that it is wrong that a section of the backbenches—albeit a section which by a strict mathematical calculation does not merit a place—is effectively excluded from full participation in the proceedings of a committee which is supposed to represent the interests of all backbenchers.

We were very pleased to hear of the positive contribution which you have made to the Committee participating under the provisions of SO No. 152J(7), notwithstanding the entirely understandable perception of “second-class status” to which those arrangements give rise in you and your minority party colleagues. Ms Engel was clear about the benefits which your participation had brought to the Committee and the continued contribution of a



member of the minority parties to the proceedings of the Committee can only strengthen further the arguments in favour of full membership.

Having given the matter very careful consideration in the light of the evidence from you and from Ms Engel, we continue to recognise the strength of the argument for granting full membership of the Backbench Business Committee to a representative of the minority parties. We acknowledge also the difficulties which the minority parties have experienced in ensuring appropriate representation across all select committees following the Wright reforms. We consider that the position of the minority parties vis-à-vis select committee membership needs to be considered in the round, rather than looking at BBCom in isolation. We are not persuaded that this is the right point in a Parliament to be addressing that issue. Much better would be to do so as close as possible to the start of the next Parliament, when the new composition of the House will be known and some principles could be established which could apply throughout the Parliament. We will write to the Leader of the House to ask him to ensure that he or his successor as Leader in the new Parliament address the need to ensure appropriate minority party membership representation on the Backbench Business Committee and across all select committees in the discussions which will take place at the start of the Parliament.

We hope that in this final session of the Parliament you and your colleagues in the minority parties will see the benefit both to you and to the House of continuing to participate in the work of the Committee under the current arrangements; and we look forward to the issue being addressed in a more long-term manner at the start of the new Parliament.

I am writing in similar terms to Natascha Engel. We will also be publishing our correspondence with you on our website for the wider information of the House.

Yours
Charles



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Natascha Engel MP

Chair, Backbench Business Committee

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As a number of us stated quite explicitly during our questioning at that session, we have a great deal of sympathy with the position of the minority parties as concerns their membership both of select committees generally and of the Backbench Business Committee in particular. You will recall the recommendation in our report 2010 elections for positions in the House that the size of the Committee be increased by one place and that that place be allocated to the minority parties. Responding to that recommendation in evidence to our review of BBCom, in June 2012, the then Leader of the House argued that “the principle with Select Committees is that you look at the size of the Select Committee and then you allocate them according to the representation in the House”. Both you and Mr Wishart made a strong case for treating the Backbench Business Committee differently, and that it is wrong that a section of the backbenches—albeit a section which by a strict mathematical calculation does not merit a place—is effectively excluded from full participation in the proceedings of a committee which is supposed to represent the interests of all backbenchers.

We were very pleased to hear of the positive contribution which Mr Wishart has made to the Committee participating under the provisions of SO No. 152J(7), notwithstanding the entirely understandable perception of “second-class status” to which those arrangements give rise in Mr Wishart and his minority party colleagues. You were clear about the benefits which his participation had brought to the Committee and the continued contribution of a member



of the minority parties to the proceedings of the Committee can only strengthen further the arguments in favour of their full membership.

Having given the matter very careful consideration in the light of the evidence from you and from Pete Wishart, we continue to recognise the strength of the argument for granting full membership of the Backbench Business Committee to a representative of the minority parties. We acknowledge also the difficulties which the minority parties have experienced in ensuring appropriate representation across all select committees following the Wright reforms. We consider that the position of the minority parties vis-à-vis select committee membership needs to be considered in the round, rather than looking at BBCom in isolation. We are not persuaded that this is the right point in a Parliament to be addressing that issue. Much better would be to do so as close as possible to the start of the next Parliament, when the new composition of the House will be known and some principles could be established which could apply throughout the Parliament. We will write to the Leader of the House to ask him to ensure that he or his successor as Leader in the new Parliament address the need to ensure appropriate minority party membership representation on the Backbench Business Committee and across all select committees in the discussions which will take place at the start of the Parliament.

We hope that in this final session of the Parliament Mr Wishart and his colleagues in the minority parties will see the benefit both to them and to the House of continuing to participate in the work of the Committee under the current arrangements; and we look forward to the issue being addressed in a more long-term manner at the start of the new Parliament.

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