

Debate in Westminster Hall 20. January 2010
Excerpt from Hansard

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is a joy to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr. Evans. Many kind things have rightly been said about my hon.

20 Jan 2010 : Column 121WH

Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). All I would add is that what he has done is an absolute model of how one can use an all-party group to shift public policy forward an inch or two. I speak as someone who is sceptical of the proliferation of all-party groups in the past few years. One's faith in the system is almost restored by what my hon. Friend and others from all parties have done.

I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone), who said that when, sadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes leaves the House, he will be able to devote more time and energy to the issue. I do not think that it is possible for him to devote more time and energy to it than he has done over the past few years.

Mr. Steen: You wait.

Damian Green: I hear that with some trepidation.

We all agree that human trafficking is a despicable modern slave trade; that is clearly not an issue. There might be an issue between some of us about recognising its wide nature. I appreciate the passion with which the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) and the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) spoke about the prostitution-related element of slavery in particular. That is clearly a significant part of the problem, but it is not the whole problem. We need to take a view that encompasses child trafficking, domestic servitude, slave labour and debt bondage.

What is significant about the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is that he pointed out many of the worst failings of the current system; I am sure that the Minister will address them all directly. It was striking that he painted such a bleak picture. I have participated in other debates such as this, having worked in the field for many years now. There was a feeling among all parties that we had moved forward significantly, having signed and ratified the convention, and that Britain was in a

reasonable place on the issue. However, the picture painted by my hon. Friend is much darker and more pessimistic. If he is right—we all acknowledge that he is an expert in the field—we clearly need to give serious thought to the next steps.

My hon. Friend discussed statistics. For obvious reasons, they are difficult, but we need to start from what we know. The International Organisation for Migration reports that between 700,000 and 2 million women and children are trafficked across international borders every year. We know that 60 per cent. of illegal immigrants here in the UK arrive illegally, most carried in the backs of lorries. A Government assessment published in October 2008 estimated that 360 children are trafficked into and within the UK each year. Despite those figures, we know that only 57 under-18s, out of a total of 527 referrals, were referred last year to the national referral mechanism as suspected victims of trafficking.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.54 pm

On resuming—

20 Jan 2010 : Column 122WH

Damian Green: As I said, only 57 of the 527 under-18s have been referred under the national referral mechanism. In the five years to 2009, 452 people were arrested for human trafficking offences, of which only 110—less than a quarter—were convicted. I am sure that the Minister shares my concern over those figures.

I visited the UK Human Trafficking Centre in Sheffield last November and it was interesting to see its work. My conclusion is that having a central point for information on trafficking has been of great value to police forces, the Crown Prosecution Service and other agencies. UKHTC demonstrates the importance of specialisation when tackling new types of crime. An important aspect of its work was international co-operation, for example, through chairing the Interpol human trafficking group.

The team at UKHTC informed me that they were having more success in prosecutions than the figures appeared to show because traffickers were being prosecuted for offences other than trafficking—the so-called Al Capone approach. The Minister is nodding enthusiastically about that. However, that gives rise to the worrying thought, identified in the Select Committee report a couple of years ago, that the CPS has problems with the drafting of current trafficking legislation. I wonder if he has anything to say about that.

As we have learned from other countries, in the run-up to the Olympics, we must pay attention to the danger that more people might be trafficked here for that period, when hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of new people will be here. Perhaps the Minister would also address that point. Although I have kinder words to say about UKHTC than my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, the work that it does must be linked to prevention work. The Conservative party has urged the Government to focus on countries of origin. We were pleased to see mention of that in the millennium goals. However, many who work in this area, in particular the very good charity, Stop the Traffik, are concerned that campaigns are being targeted in the wrong way. Instead of specific resources being allocated for anti-trafficking campaigns, Stop the Traffik argues that Department for International Development aid campaigns should incorporate messages about trafficking. At a time of restricted public spending, that would seem to be a valid method of warning those in poorer countries of the dangers. Will the Minister consider a more inclusive approach? Is he in contact with colleagues in DFID about such matters?

The Conservative party policy document on this matter concentrated on better co-ordination between state agencies, in particular on ensuring that each police force and local authority has a strategy to deal with suspected victims of trafficking. Looking back on that, we are concerned that there appear to be problems with the national referral mechanism at a local level. Better information still needs to be provided to local authorities and police forces so that they are aware of the problem, are better able to identify victims and are more confident in using the mechanism. It is having a fairly patchy effect across the country.

Mr. Steen: The problem with the national referral mechanism and the Solicitor-General's office through the Director of Public Prosecutions is

evident: someone is declared to be trafficked, and then they are prosecuted and sent to prison.

20 Jan 2010 : Column 123WH

Damian Green: That is a fair point. I would like to elaborate, but I will not, given the time that is available.

An area that is often ignored is trafficking for the purpose of forced labour. In 2008, the last year for which we have full figures, there were only four convictions for trafficking for the purpose of forced labour, despite the problems of organised immigration crime that we all know about. We believe that one failure in this field has been not cracking down on rogue employers. A lot more work ought to be done on that. We have heard warm words from a succession of Ministers, holding various portfolios, but so far there has not been much effective action.

I will move on to new measures that I would like to see. I am conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes produced a full, extensive and—in some areas—expensive list of desires, outlining how he would like us to move in this area. I suspect that he produced the fullest shopping list he could in the hope that some of his requests would be picked up. He and I have had discussions in private about having a watchdog—indeed, the last time we did so, he was still agonising about how he could replace the word "rapporteur" with something else. That was clearly a matter of some controversy. I am entirely relaxed about the name, because the substance is more important.

I am not entirely convinced that setting up another unit in the Home Office is the best way forward, not least because of practical considerations. For example, we all agree that we should be most concerned about the trafficking of children, but we already have children's commissioners not just for England, but for the other nations within the United Kingdom. So in that area alone, there is clearly the capacity for serious, potentially annoying and damaging overlap between those two bodies. I am not sure that a proliferation of watchdogs is necessarily the right way forward, but I accept his point that we need better information and statistics, so that policy can be more evidence based. Most of all, we need ministerial will to drive the matter forward. In the end, the organisational problems are secondary to the priority given to the subject in the Home Office.

I agree not just with my hon. Friend, but with the point made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that part of the problem is the difficulty of multi-agency working. We agree that we need a more joined-up approach and we have published a policy proposal that details a more coherent approach, not just for policing our borders, but for protecting victims and prosecuting the offenders that includes instructing immigration officials to check the date on the return ticket of the adult accompanying minors to look for discrepancies; working with the countries of origin to help reintegrate victims; preventing re-trafficking; and educating potential victims. There should also be better law enforcement to bring more traffickers and employers of forced labour to justice, and better co-operation of national authorities within Europol and Eurojust.

Mr. Steen: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Will border controls also be enforced in relation to people being trafficked from the European Union, because that is where there is a gap at the moment?

20 Jan 2010 : Column 124WH

Damian Green: That is where Europol is particularly important and where better use of Europol would be hugely beneficial. *[Interruption.]* I sense the discomfort of the Chair, so I will make just one more point. The most important defence we have is our borders. We want to replace ad hoc police operations with a national border police force, which would be much more effective at combating trafficking at the border. The Government's failure to tackle Britain's poorest borders has resulted in a disastrous rise not just in organised immigration crime, but in trafficking. My hon. Friend has raised a huge range of subjects, and I promise him that I will think seriously about the future arrangements that he would like to see. He has made some points about the serious problems with the current arrangements, so I will sit down and let the Minister deal with those.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): This has been a thoughtful debate, which has included contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), my right hon. Friends the Members for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz)-the distinguished Chair of the Select

Committee on Home Affairs-and for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), and the hon. Members for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone), for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and for Ashford (Damian Green).

However, no one's speech has been more authoritative and welcome than that of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), whom I congratulate on securing the debate and on his tireless work to keep this important issue on the political agenda, not least through his work as chair of the all-party group on the trafficking of women and children. I am pleased to hear that he will continue his efforts after this Government are returned following the general election and after I return to my post. I may regret having said that, but I look forward to working with him. It has been a pleasure to do so, and I am sure that my predecessors would concur with that.

Let me deal briefly with two important issues before I go on to deal with the substantive points made. The hon. Gentleman was right to raise his concerns regarding the terrible events in Haiti. I have already spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), who has given a commitment to raise the matter with the necessary governmental and non-governmental agencies to see what can be done. On the question of the Olympics, again, we are aware of the potential threat. However, the Metropolitan police service Olympic security team and the Home Office keep such work under review, which is supported by the UK Human Trafficking Centre.

We all agree that human trafficking is an appalling crime-people are treated as commodities and are exploited and traded for profit. I reiterate that the Government are committed to tackling the issue, to making the UK a hostile environment for trafficking and to identifying and protecting victims. I am genuinely sorry if the hon. Gentleman believes there has been a loss of momentum. I hope that is not the case. Outside the UK, I think there is a view that much of what we do can be held up as very good practice, but I take his point seriously.

20 Jan 2010 : Column 125WH

Throughout the debate, reference has been made to the importance of victims. Of course, the UK action plan on human trafficking, which was updated in October last year, is very much based on a victim-focused strategy and on prevention, investigation, enforcement and prosecution.

That action plan also focuses on providing protection for adult and child victims.

On the issue of prosecutions, which the hon. Gentleman raised, the Crown Prosecution Service makes it clear in its guidance that victims of trafficking who have been forced to commit criminal acts should not be prosecuted if those acts are a direct result of their having been trafficked. However, such issues must, of course, be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, because blanket immunity is not necessarily offered. Many of those decisions are extremely difficult to make in practice, as is dealing with the problems surrounding victim identification. The hon. Gentleman raised the issues associated with what appear to be very young people from Vietnam often being brought over here to cultivate cannabis farms. For the people involved with making such decisions, it is extremely difficult.

At the heart of the debate is the future of the UK Human Trafficking Centre, which has played a pivotal role in tackling trafficking under the leadership of DCS Nick Kinsella. The centre was set up in late 2006 and has established itself as a good example of multi-agency working, with, importantly, a range staff from Government agencies working alongside those from the non-governmental organisation sector, who play a crucial role in many of the issues raised. On the subject of numbers, it is extremely difficult to get an estimate of the number of trafficked victims. We have given a commitment to bring forward a better estimate, particularly of those who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, and I can give a reassurance that those figures, which are being worked on as we speak, will be published very soon. However, the issue of numbers is very difficult.

On the question of statistics, the hon. Gentleman quoted the number of referrals as being 347. I want to update hon. Members by giving them the most up-to-date figure, which is 527 referrals between April and December 2009. On the issue of what appear to be relatively few convictions, the hon. Member for Ashford to some extent answered that point by saying that people who look as if they are caught up in trafficking are sometimes not charged and convicted of those offences, but of other offences, depending, of course, on where the evidence lies. UKHTC does important work with the National Policing Improvement Agency to make sure that police training is up to date. It has also worked with partners from the private sector in developing the Blue Blindfold brand, which has won a

great deal of support-I believe that the hon. Member for Totnes was at the launch of that. Again, such an approach is recognised as good practice.

UKHTC also houses one of the competent authorities established as a key part of the national referral mechanism

20 Jan 2010 : Column 126WH

and is the central repository for all data on human trafficking. The hon. Gentleman raised his concerns during the debate on the Queen's Speech on 25 November and I wrote to him in December in, I hope, reassuring terms. However, I want to repeat the main point: we remain absolutely committed to the continued existence of UKHTC. The problem was that, when the centre was established, it had no legal status of its own and was hosted by South Yorkshire police, which is its current legal entity. When South Yorkshire police approached the Home Office, it was concerned that reliability issues were emerging as a result of having more to do and a higher profile.

We looked at where the best place for UKHTC would be in the future to guarantee its continuing to operate as it does now. We looked at a range of options and concluded that the Serious Organised Crime Agency is best placed for UKHTC, both for the centre and for our overall anti-trafficking efforts more generally. It is not a merger with SOCA and it will not lead to a dilution of the centre's focus on the victim-centred strategy on human trafficking.

A number of details on changing UKHTC's status are currently being discussed by SOCA and the centre, but I have made it absolutely clear that the Government expect that the identity of UKHTC will be preserved, along with its character and functions, which will include its strategic objectives, brand identity and multi-agency composition, and its close working with stakeholders. Dealing with organised immigration crime is an important part of SOCA's work, so there can be some benefit from changing UKHTC's status in that regard, but we expect that the unique role of the centre will continue, and we want to support and develop it. I hope that that will be stressed if and when the Home Affairs Committee visits SOCA.

On the national watchdog or rapporteur, we agree with the conclusions of the Home Affairs Committee, which stated in its recent report that a

national rapporteur would not benefit data collection and that such an introduction would merely

"add yet another organisation to the multitude involved in analysing and combating trafficking".

We of course keep those matters under review, but we are satisfied that the current arrangements-

Mr. Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Mr. Steen: On a point of order, Mr. Evans. I thought that the Minister would have at least 10 minutes to speak, but he has only had nine.

Mr. Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I am afraid that Mr. Green's time was such that the Minister was left with nine minutes.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is always the Tory's fault, Mr. Evans.