

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD (POWER TO BORROW) BILL

First Sitting

Wednesday 30 September 2020

CONTENTS

CLAUSES 1 AND 2 agreed to.
Bill to be reported, without amendment.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Sunday 4 October 2020

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2020

This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON

† Afolami, Bim (*Hitchin and Harpenden*) (Con)

† Bhatti, Saqib (*Meriden*) (Con)

† Brabin, Tracy (*Batley and Spen*) (Lab/Co-op)

† Brennan, Kevin (*Cardiff West*) (Lab)

Bryant, Chris (*Rhondda*) (Lab)

† Colburn, Elliot (*Carshalton and Wallington*) (Con)

† Davies, Gareth (*Grantham and Stamford*) (Con)

† Dinenage, Caroline (*Minister for Digital and Culture*)

† Farris, Laura (*Newbury*) (Con)

† Hammond, Stephen (*Wimbledon*) (Con)

† Jones, Fay (*Brecon and Radnorshire*) (Con)

† Lamont, John (*Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk*) (Con)

† Paisley, Ian (*North Antrim*) (DUP)

† Richards, Nicola (*West Bromwich East*) (Con)

† Saville Roberts, Liz (*Dwyfor Meirionnydd*) (PC)

† Smith, Nick (*Blaenau Gwent*) (Lab)

† Spellar, John (*Warley*) (Lab)

Adam Mellows-Facer, *Committee Clerk*

† **attended the Committee**

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 30 September 2020

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

British Library Board (Power to Borrow) Bill

9.25 am

The Chair: Welcome to the Public Bill Committee on the British Library Board (Power to Borrow) Bill. I have a couple of preliminary announcements. You will all understand the need for social distancing. I will intervene to remind you of it if necessary; I hope it will not be. Note passing should be electronic only. The *Hansard* Reporters would be most grateful if hon. Members could email electronic copies of their speaking notes to hansardnotes@parliament.uk. The selection list for today's sitting is available in the room and online. No amendments have been tabled, and I intend there to be a single debate on both clauses of the Bill. We will now begin the line-by-line consideration of the Bill.

Clause 1

POWER OF THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD TO BORROW MONEY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss clause 2 stand part.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I look forward to serving under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, for the many hours that I expect to speak on this Bill. I thank hon. Members for being here; they did not have to be. I asked them and I really respect their time, so I thank them very much for attending.

I am speaking in support of my private Member's Bill because it is important, though it may not look that important—it is very short. It simply allows the British Library to borrow—not books, but money. The reason why that is important is that the British Library has a unique, important place in all parts of the United Kingdom, and here I am looking at the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, the leader of Plaid Cymru at Westminster. The British Library is important for all Members of the House, not just this Committee. It needs the ability to borrow money so that it can expand to reach all parts of the United Kingdom.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his Bill. In my 19 years in the House, I have never got anywhere near the top of the ballot, so I congratulate him, with some jealousy, on getting this far. I will also say that I am a Member from Wales as well. This is not entirely clear from the explanatory notes: does the Bill permit the library to borrow money privately, not just from the state?

Bim Afolami: The Bill allows the British Library to borrow from the Public Works Loan Board, and so from the Treasury, through its sponsor Department, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to clarify that if she believes it to be incorrect. That is my understanding.

The ability to borrow money is important because libraries in the 21st century are not just repositories of books; they are places where people can get online, start a business and get advice. We are in the midst of a global pandemic, the economic impact of which we all know has been huge. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the bedrock of every part of this country and every single community. The British Library has helped, in the past three years, some 12,000 small and medium-sized businesses across the country through its business and intellectual property centres. With the money that it will now be enabled to borrow, it can expand throughout the United Kingdom and help more businesses.

It is worth saying that the businesses that the British Library's business and IP centres have helped have a 90% success rate of lasting for more than three years, which is something like double the national average, so the centres are doing a good job.

The Bill enables the British Library to build on the money that the Chancellor announced in the Budget in March—£13 million extra to support libraries throughout the United Kingdom. It will allow the British Library to expand those business and IP centres, so that more people and more parts of this country—not just London—can benefit from their expertise. Indeed, these sensible arrangements to borrow money, which I say again the library will do through its sponsor Department, DCMS, will allow the library to do many other things in future, too.

The Bill is necessary—short but important. I thank all the Members of the Committee for being here, and for hopefully supporting the Bill.

9.30 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden on his private Member's Bill and on his very short speech. Mine will be slightly longer, so I would just like a little patience from the other Government Members.

I am a passionate supporter of the Bill. Labour supported it on Second Reading and we continue to support it in Committee. The British Library has been keen to obtain the power to borrow for some time; hopefully, that wait is almost over.

As a member of the British Library, I am a big fan of its work. When we debated the Bill back in March, which seems like a lifetime ago, Members from all parties were enthusiastic about the future of the library, especially after a Budget that brought good news for it: it promised £95 million for the Boston Spa Renewed project, and a further £25 million to support the library in opening a British Library North in Leeds city centre. Members will not be surprised to learn that, as a Yorkshire MP, I am very keen to see that come to fruition.

That is because a physical presence for our national institutions outside central London sends a powerful message, and opens the door to opportunity for all. Examples include the Victoria and Albert Museum in Dundee, the BBC in Salford and the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, and soon Channel Four will have a presence in Leeds, which I have also championed. The British Library already employs hundreds of people at its impressive Boston Spa site, but I am looking forward to millions more having ready access to the library's resources and exhibitions when it opens in Leeds.

I want to put on record that the power to borrow should not lead to an expectation of borrowing. The grant funding that the British Library receives must remain in place, and new powers to borrow must allow the library to innovate and pursue projects such as efficiency improvements to the estate, upgrading to more efficient digital systems, and developing commercial products and services that could supplement the library's grant in aid. Also, I am keen to see the library use any financial freedom to improve its digital platforms, as the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, and particularly its digital collections.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly identifies the role of the British Library, a great British institution doing a lot of work in this country, but is it not also part of our international outreach? It engages with similar institutions as part of Britain's cultural offer to the world, which is one of the great attractors to this country.

Tracy Brabin: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Certainly, when I sit in the reading rooms of the British Library, I see international students from all over the world. The library is part of the soft power that draws the cleverest people from across the world to London, and will hopefully draw them to Leeds.

I want the library to keep growing and expanding its outreach work. In many communities, libraries have been lost or cut, so it is important that exhibitions and galleries are not confined to King's Cross. The library should always be seeking opportunities to get out to new areas. Indeed, it recently produced pop-up displays in over 20 partner libraries across the UK, through its Living Knowledge Network. That is the sort of innovation that I encourage; let us hope that we see more of it.

It is easy to look excitedly at the possibilities for the future and ignore the elephant in the room. Covid has impacted all walks of life, and the British Library has not been exempt. It was closed for four months, and even now, after reopening, footfall is significantly suppressed due to social distancing requirements. Of course, this has a major financial impact, and with visitor numbers a fraction of what they were, the library is likely to continue to face financial hardship for a period to come. I know that the library has drawn down on DCMS support already, and that all of us present are keen to see the library thrive again in future. I applaud it for prioritising access to reading rooms for medical research, and for using some of its space for a testing centre.

Earlier I touched on digitisation. The library has worked hard during covid to expand its online offering. The current exhibition of Hebrew manuscripts is available online, and its next exhibition, "Unfinished Business:

The Fight for Women's Rights", has an exciting digital offer, too, including online discussions, a podcast series, and online resources for researchers.

The Bill brings the British Library in line with DCMS-sponsored museums and galleries, as well as the British Film Institute, the Churches Conservation Trust, Historic England and more, by allowing it to borrow money as its peers already do. However, we need to support the library, and many other organisations, not only in borrowing money in future, but in the here and now, during the covid crisis, and we need to reach out across our communities. The British Library has made great strides in that direction already, and we support it and its power to borrow money.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I want to speak in support of the Bill. It is absolutely essential that we support libraries, library services, and one of the finest libraries in the United Kingdom. It is a testament to what libraries should represent.

It was once said that

"A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies",

and that we should never trust a person who does not bring a book to a room. It is important that we recognise the importance of people's access to reading material. It gives them interaction, escapism, opportunity, and powerful learning. The British Library, of course, does so much more. It has an outreach programme, and I agree 100% with what the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Batley and Spen, said about libraries reaching people who are hard to reach.

The threat to library services has increased because of covid. If the British Library is able to borrow money, and extend its digital platform, so that people can access it through a new and increased digital awareness, that too will be a benefit, but that of course costs money, and we cannot have everyone coming to Government with their hand out, saying, "We need more money." The Bill creates an opportunity and flexibility that allows the library to use its skills to gain resources to expand its services. I hope that that will be possible, and that this House will support the Bill completely. I look forward to seeing it enacted.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden on introducing the Bill, and I thank him. As he says, it is small but perfectly formed, and that is why it has the strong support of the Government. As the hon. Member for Batley and Spen says, just before Second Reading—it seems a really long time ago—my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed a suite of Government funding: up to £95 million for the British Library's plans for Boston Spa, £13 million to expand the brilliant network of business and intellectual property centres, and £25 million to help find a site in Leeds for British Library North. After all that good news and positivity, the British Library went into lockdown, and, like so many other cultural institutions up and down our country, lost visitors and valuable commercial opportunities overnight.

The financial impact of covid-19 will of course last a very long time. The British Library, along with many other DCMS-sponsored bodies, will be working out

[*Caroline Dinéage*]

how to manage that in the weeks and months ahead. It will need to be more flexible than ever before, which is why we need to give the British Library the same option to borrow money as its peer museums and galleries. The Bill will remove the legislative barrier that prevents the British Library from having the freedom that its fellow national museums and galleries enjoy.

We are granting the British Library the power to borrow money, but of course that does not mean that it has to, or that it will. There is no guarantee that any application to borrow will be successful, but it is important that it has the option to apply.

Kevin Brennan: Will the Minister clarify the point that I raised with the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden about private borrowing? Does the Bill confer on the board the power to borrow money privately, or can it borrow only in the way that he suggested?

Caroline Dinéage: It is quite simple: the board has the right to borrow commercially, but it would have to prove that such borrowing was better value for money than borrowing via Government loans, so in reality, it would be Government borrowing in most cases, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden suggests. Of course, that does not mean that the board will borrow, but it is important that it has the option.

As we have heard, the British Library's response to lockdown enabled its amazing collection and services to be still available to the public, albeit accessed differently. Vitality, it has also continued to support entrepreneurs

during this incredibly difficult time, when we need them more than ever, through online services and webinars. The Government invested £13 million to expand the BIPC network in order to ensure that those vital services reach even more parts of the country and more budding entrepreneurs right across England. That is essential as the country recovers from the economic impact of covid.

As the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings said, the British Library's "Unfinished Business" series of events, which was due to open in March—I was really looking forward to it—has been postponed but will finally open next month. It will be brilliant, and footfall is beginning to increase again.

The operational freedoms introduced in 2013 helped all our national cultural institutions, including the British Library, to be more self-governing and more financially independent. Those freedoms have given it the autonomy to make decisions independently and greater flexibility over its income, helping it to innovate and continue its fabulous work. Museums and galleries have also benefited from the power to borrow to improve their sites, give much better access to visitors, and take better options and opportunities to display our incredibly valuable national collections. It is only fair that the British Library should have the same opportunity, and I therefore urge the Committee to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill to be reported, without amendment.

9.43 am

Committee rose.

