



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 29 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 29 March 2022.

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Nigel Mills; Kate Osborne.

Questions 1-14

Representations made

[I](#): Alun Cairns

[II](#): Anthony Mangnall

[III](#): Bob Blackman

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Alun Cairns made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a number of applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Alun Cairns. Alun, your application is on the Government's alcohol taxation considerations and alcohol duty review. Over to you, please.

Alun Cairns: Thank you very much, Chair. It is a privilege to give evidence in front of you and your Committee colleagues. I have not done this before, so forgive me if I seem a bit of an amateur. I am keen to ensure that Parliament has its role in scrutinising the Government's proposed changes for the alcohol duty system. This has come about partly out of demand from consumers and lobby groups but also as an opportunity from—and one of the benefits of—leaving the European Union.

A consultation was launched by the Government in October 2021, and the Government have responded to the consultation, but Parliament has not yet had its say. My request is for a debate in the main Chamber—I deem that a 90-minute debate would be appropriate—which would be a chance to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, merits, benefits and drawbacks of something that is extremely important to consumers. There is a great opportunity to grow the economy in some of these areas for lots of small businesses, but clearly there are certain serious health risks that need to be debated and discussed, particularly with such a major change in taxation approach, and how that can serve constituents best.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. You are asking for 90 minutes in the Chamber. Technically, we are meant to get three-hour slots, but they never materialise like that; by and large, we get time on Thursdays, and with urgent questions and statements the time gets concertinaed. A 90-minute slot in the Chamber would be unusual. Are you asking the Government to do anything?

Alun Cairns: First, thank you for clarifying that. I did not appreciate that it was three hours in the main Chamber. I would certainly like the debate to be in the Chamber. I do have sufficient names to take it to the three hours, according to the application requirements. Since I have spoken to you, additional names have been added, and I can easily communicate that to you directly or to the Clerk as you see fit. I can even share them now.

Q3 Chair: If you wouldn't mind sharing them now, that would be fine.

Alun Cairns: Certainly: Mike Wood, a Conservative colleague; Gavin Williamson, a Conservative colleague; Andrew Percy, similarly; and Lee Anderson, a Conservative colleague. They have agreed to add their names. I could easily have drawn lots of additional names. I did not chase colleagues particularly hard, because I think that the issue is of particular interest to so many colleagues.

I would add that it is a major shift in Government policy in terms of how duty is to be applied, particularly between the various groups. There will



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be a change from the current structure, which considers wines, beers, spirits and so on, with the broad thrust that the higher taxation level goes on the stronger drinks. However, some technical areas and the regulatory approach taken need to be considered as well. For example, the beer industry is keen to have different taxation within pubs for keg beer compared with retail. There is also the issue of loss-leaders and minimum pricing in different parts of the country. I think there needs to be consistent consideration. We are calling on the Government to adjust some of the elements from their consultation, some of which are technical but some of which are in principle. We are going with the general approach that they have laid out, but there are certain basic omissions that they have yet to address.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Alun, as you say, the consultation has ended. When are decisions due to be announced, as far as you know?

Alun Cairns: In the Budget.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** So we are talking about November time. So, in terms of time sensitivity, there is not a massive rush for this.

Alun Cairns: Not immediately. My original thinking was ideally before the spring statement, but it was quite obvious that this sort of change would not be made in the spring statement but was highly likely to be confirmed in the Budget. However, because a lot of these areas are technical, being too close to the Budget in the autumn would not be helpful, because a lot of consultation and discussions with the industry would need to take place about the changes that need to be made. It is not immediately time-sensitive, but as soon as practicable would certainly be helpful.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Would you accept a Westminster Hall debate if we offered it? Chamber time is very tight, as you will appreciate.

Alun Cairns: I appreciate that Chamber time is tight, but I think the Chamber is the right place to do it.

Chair: In that case, Alun, I think that is all we need from you. Thank you very much indeed.

Alun Cairns: Thank you very much. I am hugely grateful to the Committee for its time.

Chair: Thanks a lot—much appreciated.

Anthony Mangnall made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Next up is Anthony Mangnall. Your application this afternoon is on issues affecting the inshore fishing fleet. Over to you.

Anthony Mangnall: Thank you, Chair; thank you, Committee. I can keep this very brief, because I know you have a lot on your plate.



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I am applying for a Westminster Hall debate—90 minutes, please. The inshore fishing fleet is not a topic that is often debated in the Houses of Parliament. There are a number of changes coming through because of the Environment Act and the Fisheries Act, most notably the introduction of I-VMS monitoring, as well as some of the rules and regulations around boat sizes, the rules and regulations around the catch app, and the rules and regulations around quota.

This is quite well supported. I note that the submission I gave you does not actually contain any Labour Members of Parliament. There have been others who have indicated that they would be willing to support the debate and attend it, but who cannot sign because they are in shadow Cabinet and ministerial roles. I do think we can go to the full length of 90 minutes, and would be grateful for the Committee's consideration on this topic.

Chair: You have got other Opposition parties—Plaid, SNP, Liberal Democrats. The problem that we've got from the other side of the equation is that there is only one Government party, but if you've got Opposition Members from other parties—

Anthony Mangnall: I am happy to tell you who they are. Again, it is just that they would not sign it because they are not allowed—

Q8 **Chair:** No, that's not necessary. The answering Department would be DEFRA, I take it?

Anthony Mangnall: Yes.

Q9 **Chair:** There is a slot, which is the first day back following the Easter recess, with an 11.30 am start in Westminster Hall. Would you be available for that?

Anthony Mangnall: Chair, whatever you are willing to offer and whatever makes your life easier, I will take.

Chair: The thing is, if you did not take that, it would then probably go beyond Prorogation, if Prorogation happens.

Anthony Mangnall: In all honesty, I am very grateful to be offered anything, so thank you very much.

Chair: That slot is available, so we will have a chat about it and let you know definitely later on this afternoon, okay?

Anthony Mangnall: That is incredibly kind. Thank you very much for your time.

Chair: Much appreciated. Thanks very much indeed.

Bob Blackman made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Next up, we have Mr Bob Blackman.

Bob Blackman: I am in two places at once.

Chair: That was Bob Blackman, and over here we have evil robot Bob Blackman. Bob, your application is on the independent review of Smokefree 2030 policies.

Bob Blackman: Yes. Colleagues, the current position is that the tobacco control plan is still not published. Instead of publishing the tobacco control plan by the Department, there was a review of tobacco control that Sajid Javid ordered as Secretary of State, and Javed Khan is doing that review. He is due to release his review; he has had many discussions, including—I declare my interest as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health—with us and other interested parties. He is due to report his findings on 22 April, as we understand it, so we would obviously like the opportunity to debate his findings and recommendations to the Government at the earliest possible opportunity.

The earliest possible opportunity would be Tuesday 26 April, which fits with Health answering the debate and would obviously make sure that we get a good debate on the subject. Further to my original application, we have added extra names—I think there are now 10 names on the application—from a broad range of political parties. Clearly, we aim to debate not only the Smokefree 2030 policies but whatever recommendations Javed makes, and to get the Government to give us a response to that particular debate.

We have a number of dates. There is a debate in Westminster Hall at the moment about a smoke-free England, and tomorrow there will be debates in the House on the same subject in the Health and Care Bill. The Government are resisting many of the proposals that have been put forward, but we hope that the independent review will actually recommend them and make the Government make decisions in line with what we would like to see happen.

Q11 **Chris Green:** I went to the Cancer Research UK event before—this document contains the amendments from the Lords. If those amendments were agreed to by this House, that still wouldn't be sufficient for what you need.

Bob Blackman: Correct. There is a series of different things. The first thing is a levy on the profits of the tobacco companies—I asked about that at Prime Minister's Question Time last week—which would raise £700 million for the NHS were it to be implemented and, very importantly, could not be passed on to the consumer.

There is the aspect of raising the age of legal sale. We want a consultation to be conducted; the Government are resisting that for some reason, which we cannot understand. There are various other technical aspects to this. The Government are, as I understand it, resisting all the Lords amendments, so from that perspective, this is to get the Government out of a hole more than anything else. Having resisted the proposals in the Health and Care Bill, they will be forced to implement them in another piece of legislation later on.



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Q12 **Chris Green:** So whether or not the amendments pass, the debate is still required.

Bob Blackman: The debate is still required.

Q13 **Patricia Gibson:** Sorry; this is not to query your debate, but I am curious. If the Government are resisting the Lords amendments but will have to present this in a different way, why not just let the Lords amendments pass?

Bob Blackman: You would have to ask the Minister. I put that question to him about an hour ago.

Patricia Gibson: Still waiting for an answer?

Chair: Well, like the Lord, Ministers work in mysterious ways their wonders to perform.

Patricia Gibson: I think it is comforting that Bob is on the Government Benches and he cannot get an answer—I thought it was just the other side that could not get answers.

Q14 **Chair:** Mr Blackman, as you have alluded to, the Department of Health and Social Care is an answering Department on 26 April, so if we were able to offer you 26 April, would you accept it?

Bob Blackman: I would, and I would be celebrating my birthday at the same time.

Chair: Well, many happy returns for 26 April, Mr Blackman.

Patricia Gibson: That is the Committee's present to you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, everyone.