



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 24 May 2022

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

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Robert Goodwill made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** We resume the Backbench Business Committee after a rude interruption caused by Prorogation and the Queen's Speech. This is the Committee's first meeting after being re-established, so welcome everyone. We have six applications in front of us this afternoon. The first of which comes from Sir Robert Goodwill on "Zero emission buses in the UK". Robert, over to you please.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Chairman. The Government are committed to delivering 4,000 zero emission buses, and those of us on the all-party parliamentary group for the bus and coach industry, which I chair, are concerned that the progress has not been fast enough.

We have three major bus manufacturers in the UK. Alexander Dennis Group is in my constituency and in Falkirk. In Leeds, we have what's known as Switch—it used to be Optare. Of course, in Ballymena, we have Wrightbus, which is now owned by the Bamford family, and they've gone big time on hydrogen; the other two are mainly electric.

We are concerned that the system is not working fast enough. It is quite a complex system. Local authorities have to put in bus priority schemes as part of the bid, so we really want the Government to come and explain why it is that we're falling a little behind in the programme.

We would also like to talk a little bit about sourcing more UK batteries. A lot of the buses have Chinese batteries. Indeed, the bus that the Department for Transport put on its website when it announced the most recent tranche of money was an entirely Chinese-built bus, with Chinese batteries. When I drew that to their attention, the picture was very quickly changed.

We would like to have the opportunity to ginger the Government up a bit to get more zero emission buses out on our streets. Electric and hydrogen are great for buses. For bigger, heavier vehicles we are not quite yet there with the technology, but a bus can do a day on a charge. It doesn't carry a lot of weight, and we'd dearly love to see lots more of these buses on our streets to enable us to deliver net zero a lot sooner than 2050, if we can.

Chair: Thank you very much, Robert. Undoubtedly the Chinese bus would have been laden with Huawei surveillance technology as well.

Sir Robert Goodwill: I might add that I think 90 minutes will be sufficient. I don't know how long we could have, but I think 90 minutes would be ideal.

Q2 **Chair:** Our normal slots either are 90 minutes in Westminster Hall or three hours in the Chamber. We do tend to give precedence to Chamber debates which have votable motion—that's the sort of custom and practice that we've developed—but if you would like to take a 90-minute slot in Westminster Hall, we will try and facilitate that as soon as we possibly can.



Sir Robert Goodwill: That would be perfect, thank you.

Q3 **Patricia Gibson:** The application does seem very light on Conservative names, doesn't it?

Sir Robert Goodwill: I think the application has come from people who have bus factories, such as John Mc Nally in Falkirk and Mr Paisley in Ballymena. We do have a smaller bus factory in Rochdale, with some people using smaller minibuses, and we have a Labour Member there. It's pure coincidence where the bus factories happen to be, including, of course, in Falkirk in Bonnie Scotland.

Q4 **Patricia Gibson:** I am just thinking it looks a little bit like DUP debate.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Well, I think that that can be put down to Mr Paisley's enthusiasm in getting his colleagues to sign the paper.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** The answering Department would be Transport, so for a Tuesday morning slot—obviously we have to allocate debates according to which answering Department is available—it is likely to be 28 June. Would that be convenient?

Sir Robert Goodwill: I am a patient man. I am happy to wait until then.

Chair: In that case, thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Next up we have Jim Shannon. Your new season ticket will be sent out to you soon. You'll get it anytime now.

Jim Shannon: Thank you. First of all, can I welcome you back as Chair, Mr Chairman? I am pleased to see you there again. Nobody opposed you, so that probably says you're doing a grand job.

My request is for a debate on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on people with heart and circulatory diseases. We have 13 names from Labour, the Conservatives, the SNP and my own party.

The reason why we are asking for this debate is because I've been contacted by the British Heart Foundation. I have a very close working relationship with them back home in Northern Ireland, but over here as well. Some of the facts they sent me were incredibly worrying. The impact that covid-19 has had upon heart diseases shows a risk of reversing—indeed it has reversed—decades of progress in preventing and treating these diseases.

The stats show there were 470,000 fewer prescriptions for preventive cardiovascular drugs between March and October 2020 and an extra 12,000 heart attacks over that period of time. The NHS's 10-year plan has been sort of put on the back burner. We also had 300,000 heart patients waiting for vital emergency, urgent, elective and routine care in England.



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I think we truly have a crisis in heart and circulatory disease, and there is an event tonight that I unfortunately cannot be at. We need this matter to be addressed. We need to be able to explain to a Minister what is going wrong. Hopefully as a result of that—I always look for positivity in anything I ask for—we can make things better. I think probably that is what I am really about.

Those are some of the stats. I can get into more detail, but you said earlier on that less is best.

Chair: Thank you. Questions, colleagues? No. Jim, that looks fine to me. We will let you know as soon as we possibly can.

Jim Shannon: Thank you. I'm now going back to the Chamber.

Esther McVey made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Your application is on the national food strategy and food security.

Esther McVey: Yes, thank you. I think this is a growing issue, and there is lots to unpick here—whether that's about the cost of living, whether that is about security, whether that is where it's coming from. We are seeing supply chains altered and changed weather. It's even about farmers and their security, which could relate to fertilisers. This is about unpicking this whole issue, because it is playing a significant part in the minds of the general public as well as MPs wanting to reflect the public and their concerns. This is about asking: what is our ongoing strategy? Where is our food coming from? Do we understand where it is? Do we understand the complications within the farming system ourselves, and what are the alternatives?

The UK has a great vision on alternative proteins and alternative foods. We are one of the world leaders, and yet we're not developing that. At a time when people are looking for food they can afford, possibly looking at other forms of food as we move over to veganism and a more flexible diet, I think there is a massive set of issues here to unpick. Lots of MPs would like to discuss this ongoing issue.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you. Is there any time sensitivity in terms of trying to get this debated?

Esther McVey: No. I think it is a growing issue, and it does not need to be debated immediately.

Q9 **Nigel Mills:** You're after a three-hour debate, I think. You are a little short of Opposition names. You have three. Can you get another half a dozen?

Esther McVey: You're spot on. I thought the application had to be in for a certain time. It didn't, but I already have some people from the Lib Dems and I have more Labour MPs, so I can get more.



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Q10 **Patricia Gibson:** I am sure that if you approached the SNP, you would have a lot of support.

Esther McVey: Absolutely. Yes, I will.

Q11 **Chair:** If you can furnish the Committee Clerks with the names, that would be fine. You've got a substantive motion, so you would want Chamber time.

Esther McVey: Yes.

Chair: Okay. That's lovely, Esther. Much appreciated.

Carolyn Harris made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Next up is Carolyn Harris with an application on the menopause.

Carolyn Harris: I would like a debate—I really don't care if it's in Westminster Hall or on the Floor of the House—to discuss, once again, the menopause. It is a condition that affects 51% of the population, with 13 million women in the UK currently experiencing the menopause. There is a complete lack of knowledge within the medical profession as to what the menopause is and a complete lack of access to resources.

We're currently going through HRT crisis. There was a promise in October last year that women in England—the only place in the UK where you actually pay for prescriptions—would be able to have pay for HRT once a year. That hasn't materialised, and we now learn it won't appear until April '23.

The campaign to raise awareness of the menopause is growing beyond belief, and yet reactions from the Government are not keeping pace with what is necessary to give women choice, the ability to stay in work and to access a complete package of support and resource to help them to regain normality.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Could I just check something? You would obviously prefer Chamber time, but would you accept Westminster Hall?

Carolyn Harris: I don't mind. This is about having an opportunity for colleagues to speak. There is no area of social policy in which the menopause has not had a role to play.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** I understand that. It is just that your application just ticked the Chamber and, as you're probably aware, there is a huge queue for the Chamber.

Carolyn Harris: We will take Westminster Hall if that is what is available.

Bob Blackman: Okay. That's great.

Q15 **Chair:** Which would be the answering Department? Would it be Health?

Carolyn Harris: It could be Health, or it could be Women and Equalities.



Chair: That is useful. Thank you.

Robert Jenrick made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** Next up is Mr Robert Jenrick. Your application is on the subject of Iran's nuclear programme.

Robert Jenrick: You will be aware that talks have been ongoing for some time now between the parties to the original JCPOA—the agreement that was reached under the Obama Administration for Iran's nuclear programme. The talks have been taking place in Vienna, including the UK's delegation. They came close to reaching an outcome early this year, and then were disrupted by the war in Ukraine. We believe that they have started up again in earnest, and there is a good chance of an outcome in the months ahead.

I felt it was important that the House of Commons debated this issue. Opinions will differ across the Chamber, and within individual political parties, but it seems strange to me that our Parliament hasn't had the opportunity to discuss such an important issue to the region and internationally prior to the Government choosing to reach an agreement.

The Foreign Secretary has said to me that the Government will offer a statement to Parliament if and when an agreement is actually reached, but of course that will be after the event. I felt it was important for Members to have the opportunity to make their views known prior to the Government ultimately signing up to an agreement.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Two quick questions. Obviously you've mentioned the potential that these talks are going on and, therefore, there might be a time sensitivity about this particular application. Do you have any extra intelligence about when we're likely to see anything concrete, as it were, in terms of an agreement?

Robert Jenrick: It is difficult to judge. I think an agreement was very close to being reached immediately prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For various reasons that delayed the outcome, but talks have now started again in earnest.

I think in the past few days a number of different delegations from the EU and the US have been meeting with different parties. A number of the Gulf states have been meeting with Iranian representatives this week. It feels that there is a good chance that an agreement will be reached in the next month or so. It is difficult to be more precise than that, but I think if Members of the House want to make their views known—for or against or somewhere in between—there is a time-sensitive nature to this. The sooner, the better to enable a proper debate to be held in the Commons, so that Ministers and officials in Vienna are then able to take note of those comments, if they wish to, prior to reaching an agreement.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** The second issue relates to the motion. You talk about



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retaining terrorist proscriptions, As you will know, Hamas and Hezbollah are proscribed, but the IRGC is not. I wonder if you would consider expanding the scope of your motion to include the proscription of the IRGC, which might be controversial for some people.

Robert Jenrick: I think the motion references retained terrorist proscriptions, which I think was designed to encompass both those things. While the UK, as you say, proscribes Hamas and Hezbollah, the US, who effectively proscribes the IRGC on its foreign terrorist organisations list, are reportedly at least contemplating removing it. Certainly if the UK were to sign up to the agreement as billed today, it would be supporting the US removing it from their equivalent of a terrorist proscription list. But one could amend the motion in order to make clear that not only do we have concerns about that, but we would like the UK to take further action and proscribe the organisation itself. If that would help persuade you to support the motion, I will do whatever is necessary.

Bob Blackman: It would certainly help to persuade me!

Robert Jenrick: I should say that I have I have circulated this to a wide group of colleagues among whom there is of spectrum of opinion on this issue, so it might be better to stick to the current motion, rather than to revert to 26 different Members and asking them to reaffirm their support.

Chair: Absolutely. It could affect the level of support that you currently have.

Robert Jenrick: We tried to construct a motion that brings together a degree of cross-party support. You could have a more extreme stance on this if one wanted to, but that would exclude some colleagues.

Q19 **Chair:** I think you'll be aware that obviously we haven't any time in the Chamber this week because of jubilee debate on Thursday, which is in Government time. The first week back, the first debate on that afternoon is in Government time, so effectively we will not get any time until the second week back after the Whitsun recess, so that would be the soonest that you could possibly be considered.

Robert Jenrick: I completely understand that. If you are amenable to having a debate, the sooner, the better, because that gives the longest period of time for the Government to take our views as Back Benchers into consideration with the mandate to the officials negotiating in Vienna.

Chair: Thank you, Robert.

Richard Burgon made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** Last, but certainly not least, we have Mr Richard Burgon. Your application is on the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, and I believe that falls in July so—

Richard Burgon: June.

Chair: June; I beg your pardon.

Richard Burgon: The fifth anniversary of the Grenfell fire is on 14 June, so this is an application for a debate in the Chamber that week. Obviously every anniversary of the fire is important, but the fifth anniversary feels particularly significant. It remains a big national issue, so it is important that the public can have confidence that Parliament is still considering this matter specifically.

The application is supported by a wide range of Back Benchers: seven from the Conservative party, one from the DUP, four from Labour, one from the SNP and two from the Liberal Democrats. The debate that we're seeking would be wide ranging because the issues that the fifth anniversary raises are manyfold: the inquiry, cladding at Grenfell and around the country, inequality, justice and access to justice. People remember the difficulties that the bereaved families had in getting access to justice. Those are just some of the issues that would be raised.

I think it would be a great shame if the fifth anniversary, especially when many matters arising from the fire are still unresolved, was not marked by a particular examination of the issues arising from the Grenfell Tower fire in the week of that anniversary.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** I assume, therefore, if it's possible to do it, you'd want Thursday 16 June, which is probably the day of that week that we get allocated.

Richard Burgon: Yes.

Chair: Any other questions? There is nothing from me. I apologise for getting the date wrong at the at the outset. Thank you, Richard.

That concludes our public deliberations. I thank everyone for their attendance.