

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Business

Monday 20 June 2022

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

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### Representations

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**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. The first application is from Sir Iain Duncan Smith. Sir Iain, your application is on UK sanctions for human rights abuse and corruption. Over to you, please.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Thank you, Chair. The point is to try to get the Government to open up about what their plans are on sanctions. These are the Magnitsky sanctions—the ones we imposed on Russians and some Chinese. I state an interest because China has sanctioned me anyway, so I have a personal interest in the subject. I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions with Chris Bryant. We are very confused about what the Government's policy is, mostly because the sanctions are all targeted sanctions, such as freezing assets and banning people from travelling internationally. You know all the details about that.

There have been a number of changes to the overall sanctions framework in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some of these include legislative changes. It is important to note that the implication of these changes for the UK's sanctions regime has yet to be examined by the House of Commons, so they have gone past us and we have no idea quite what they mean or what they will be.

The questions we want answered are: why has there been a drop-off in the Government's use of Magnitsky sanctions? There has been a drop-off. Between July 2020 and September 2021, the Government imposed sanctions on 105 perpetrators of human rights abuses and corruption. Since September 2021, the Government have only sanctioned three perpetrators. I should caveat that in my next question, which is: how could the UK co-ordinate better with allies? So far, the UK has sanctioned less than 15% of the perpetrators sanctioned by the US alone—one of our greatest allies. I am afraid that no answer comes back from the Foreign Office as to why this is the case. Why do we think they are not worthy of sanctioning when our strongest ally thinks so?

Do we have enough resources on this? The US puts a huge amount of money—\$4.5 million—into its sanctioning regime. We cannot get to the bottom of exactly how much has got into this and why it is not functioning properly. Is there just a singular focus on Russia? It appears that the FCDO sanctions taskforce is currently entirely focused on Russia, yet there are cases of huge abuses in China, Iran and a number of African states—all of these we have already listed in a Back-Bench statement, but we did not have enough time to take that further.

We think that we need more parliamentary oversight, and the Government should be more open. After all, it should be a matter of pride that the Government have taken action against these people. If there is scrutiny, we want to know how effective the enforcement has been, and what is



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going to happen to those frozen assets. There has been a debate suggesting that they should be used for the good of those being brutalised by the Russians, the Chinese or anybody else, but the Government do not seem committed to what they want to do with them—whether they want to eventually seize them and redistribute them, or whether they want to hold them in abeyance, potentially for years and years with nothing happening.

The view of the APPG is that the only way to start this process is to try to get the Government to the Floor of the House and pin them for a significant amount of time. There is a huge number of potential sanctionees, and we want to get through all of them. We want to state on the Floor of the House who they are and ask why they have not been sanctioned. This is a perfect opportunity for a Back-Bench committee to really have some impact on Government, which we will not get otherwise, as Bob will know. We have tried, but without success.

**Q2 Chair:** Thank you. In terms of timing, would you like the debate before the summer recess—as soon as possible?

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** As soon as possible, because this is affecting us now. We haven't got any answers. The Government went through the process of supposedly sanctioning more people, but we have no idea why they are still short on all the others. All those questions are outstanding ones that the Government have not answered, so as soon as possible would be my key request.

**Q3 Chair:** You haven't got a votable motion, in terms of a request for the Government to actually do anything. You just want a general debate; is that right?

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Well, we think a general debate. We could put a votable motion. We have tossed this one around a bit, as to whether we should do, but it seems to me that we are likely to get more out of the Government if we do it as a debate in which we can ask a series of questions. I could, literally within two minutes, put a motion together, but we discussed it and thought, "We don't want to come too aggressively at the Government at this point." We would like to give the Government the opportunity to clear the air and come clean.

**Chair:** Any further questions, colleagues?

**Q4 Bob Blackman:** Obviously I understand the pressure on time, but the pressure we have is that Chamber time is extremely difficult to come by, and we have a queue. However, there is an opportunity to get a Westminster Hall debate much earlier. That would give you the chance for a general debate, posing the questions and getting Government answers. I think, from the perspective of this particular type of application, if you did not get the answers you wanted, and you wanted to come back with a votable motion, we would look at that sympathetically for the autumn.



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**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** I would obviously prefer a debate on the Floor of the House, because I think there is a very wide interest in this from all parties, as I said—Conservative Back Benchers, Labour MPs, Liberal Democrats, and Scot nats for that matter. If it is at all possible to get a debate on the Floor of the House, it will have more impact, I think.

We did a Westminster Hall debate on sanctions. We specifically focused on China—and also Iran—but we had no answer worth talking about from the Government. If we go back to Westminster Hall, I think the Government would consider that to be something they can brush off, whereas if it is on the Floor of the House, I think the media will take a significant interest in what is going on. I am not saying that they would not take an interest in Westminster Hall—obviously, I am in your hands in this—but as I say, there are 16 people down who would like that, and there are more—

- Q5 **Bob Blackman:** A consideration that this Committee is likely to take—obviously, colleagues will have a view—is that you will get one shot at the Chamber. If you came back and said, “We want a votable motion in the Chamber” on a subsequent date, then, because of the pressure of other debates, you are not likely to get it. If you want an early debate, Westminster Hall is available; otherwise, it is likely to be the autumn before Chamber time would be available.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** When would I have to let you know my views on that? I would have to consult the others and my co-chair on this. I could do it in the next 24 hours. I can get back to you within 24 hours, if that is helpful.

**Chair:** That would be helpful, because we would normally be meeting tomorrow afternoon anyway. We do conclude some of our business just by consensus via a telephone connection group.

From my perspective, that is all that I need from you, Sir Iain, so I think that is fine. But it is certainly an important subject. I am sure it would have wide public and cross-House interest, in terms of looking for answers from the Government on such an important issue. Thank you for the application.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Can I ask one more question? If it was to be on the Floor of the House—you say the autumn—roughly when do we think that would be? Would it be when we return in September, or would it not be till October or November?

**Chair:** The thing is, if you were to get a Westminster Hall debate between now and the summer recess, and then you were not satisfied or answers were not forthcoming, if you got another application in before recess—hopefully you would get your Westminster Hall debate in enough time to get another application in before recess—that would mean there would be an opportunity for you to get a debate, potentially, in the two weeks after the summer recess.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Okay. In that case—thank you for your help—I will consult my co-chair.



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**Chair:** We are not ruling out a Chamber debate, but it is just that we have quite a bit on the stocks at the moment.

**Bob Blackman:** We have debates going back to March applications for which we have not allocated time yet.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** All right; I understand the pressures. I will see what I can do to help you and help us.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. That is very kind of you. I would just add one thing: we were advised just before the weekend that, in the first week in July, we are likely to get two days for departmental estimates, so there is a likelihood that we will probably not get another Backbench day for general debates that week. That means the 7th would probably be ruled out, which would leave us with the 14th and the 21st.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Maybe the Government heard that we were applying for a debate and put the estimates in.

**Chair:** You never know.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Thank you very much.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Next up we have Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown. It is good to see you, and welcome. The application that you have in front of us this afternoon is on the restoration and renewal programme in the House of Commons.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Mr Chairman, thank you very much for even considering this application. As Sir Iain said, this is a subject of wide interest to all parts of the House. This is not a political subject; it is a subject that we all know a great deal about and care about: our place of work. It basically concerns the entire restoration and renewal of this Palace—both Houses—from end to end. We know that the critical services could fail at any moment, so we should not be delaying this project. We also know from the Deloitte report that every single year we delay this project, it is costing us another £100 million. It is a project that, in monetary terms, is between the size of the Olympics and Crossrail, so this is a very big project.

We thought we had reached a major milestone in 2019, when we all collectively passed the Act of Parliament that set up the Delivery Authority and the Sponsor Body. For reasons best known to themselves, the two House Commissions have decided to abolish the Sponsor Body and take the matter into their own hands as the client. The problem with that is that we all have to be re-elected every five years, and officials change. There could be a complete change of policy every five years, so whatever we do, we need to come up with a mechanism that will actually work and deliver the start of this programme.



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Why is it important that we have a debate? To my knowledge, we have not had a debate anywhere in the House since we debated the Act of Parliament in 2019. With the fairly momentous changes that we have just had, it is important that Members of Parliament have an opportunity to have a say on this matter, which affects each and every one of us—not least because of the amount of money and the length of time we will be out of this place. Then we can hopefully get some form of guidance to the people who have been making this policy—the Commission—on our behalf. They can have a bit of guidance as to what Members of Parliament think, because I think it was quite wrong of the commissioners to abolish the Sponsor Body, which had been set up by an Act of Parliament, without any reference to Parliament.

I think this debate is important, and I would be most grateful if you and your Committee would consider it. I should say that I have set out the application in some hurry; I sit on the Finance Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, which have dealt with this matter since 2016, so I have seen all the scars of this whole project as it has gone along. I would be very grateful if you would consider my request. I have no doubt that I will get considerably more sponsors if given a little bit more time.

- Q7 **Nigel Mills:** Are we expecting the Government to bring forward a debate on the changes to the Sponsor Body? I guess that will need Parliament to undo what Parliament did, so wouldn't your debate risk being a repeat or a voteless alternative to the real thing, which we might well have to have soon anyway?

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Thank you very much for that question, Mr Mills. Yes, the Government are committed to coming up with a debate before the summer, but I think that will be very near the end of this session. It would be useful for the Government to have a debate without any votable motions, because they will bring forward hard and fast votable motions in that debate. Before they frame those motions, it would be really useful for them to have had a chance to hear what Members of Parliament from all sides have to say in a relatively short debate preceding that.

- Q8 **Bob Blackman:** In which case, Sir Geoffrey, the only chance of getting that done is by having a Westminster Hall debate. Would you be okay with that?

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I heard very clearly what you said to Sir Iain, and I am perfectly happy with a Westminster Hall debate. It is very important that we should debate this—even briefly—before we get to the summer recess, in case for some reason the Government delay their own debate.

- Q9 **Bob Blackman:** It is likely to be a Thursday afternoon. Are there any dates that you would not be able to do between now and recess on a Thursday afternoon?

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I will make myself available.



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**Bob Blackman:** Lovely. Thank you.

**Chair:** That is very useful.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, colleagues.

**Bob Blackman** made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** I am glad to see that we are still quorate with Chris having joined us—welcome. Our next application is from a member of our Committee, Mr Bob Blackman, who is requesting a debate on the independent review of smokefree 2030 policies. I should declare an interest, because I am also a member of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. Bob, over to you.

**Bob Blackman:** Myself and Mary Kelly Foy are the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. Colleagues will recall that we have had a couple of debates in Westminster Hall on this subject already, prior to the publication of the Javed Khan review.

After much delay, the Khan review was published on 9 June. It makes very specific and quite radical proposals for how we get to a smokefree England by 2030. At the moment the Government is considering the proposals, and the all-party group officers will be having a meeting with the Public Health Minister shortly to discuss those, but I think it is important that we now have a debate on the Floor of the House with a votable motion, which, as I have set out, would congratulate Javed Khan on his review and call on the Government to implement the recommendations without delay.

An important point is that some of the recommendations require consultation, but we want the Government to get on with the consultation. If the consultation comes back and is negative, the Government may choose not to implement it. Other recommendations can be done without consultation and could be introduced straightaway. I do not propose to go through all of them, because that would be the substance of the debate.

We have a list of 15 speakers broadly representative of all the political parties in Parliament, and I think it will make for a very good debate and quite a challenging one for the Government. I rest my case.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Questions, please, colleagues. It is difficult for me to ask questions since I declared an interest. From my perspective, notwithstanding my interest, it looks a very comprehensive and straightforward application. It ticks the boxes, Bob, which I would fully expect from you.

Q11 **Nigel Mills:** Mr Blackman, when would you like this debate? You might not be aware, but there is a lot of pressure on time in the Chamber.

**Bob Blackman:** As soon as possible. Of course, this is a votable motion, so it takes priority.



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Q12 **Nigel Mills:** If we allocate it. Would September be okay?

**Bob Blackman:** Too late.

**Chair:** This has 21 July written all over it, Bob. *[Laughter.]*

**Bob Blackman:** Just prior to the recess.

**Chair:** Thank you, Bob. That concludes our public deliberations this afternoon.