



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 19 July 2022

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Watch the meeting

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

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Representations made

[I](#): Elliot Colburn and Mr Steve Baker

[II](#): Mr Alistair Carmichael

[III](#): Lloyd Russell-Moyle

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Elliot Colburn and **Mr Steve Baker** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to a sweltering Committee Room 16 for the Backbench Business Committee. This is our last session before the summer recess. We have a number of applications, the first of which is from Elliot Colburn and is on the UK response to the human rights violations and the economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

Elliot Colburn: Thank you very much for having me, Chair. I have applied for the debate as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils and I am joined by Steve Baker, one of my vice-chairs. I think it is fair to say that, since I submitted the application, the situation on the island has deteriorated somewhat. With the President fleeing the island, his current whereabouts are unknown. We know roughly where he is, but we have no idea of exactly where he is. He has left behind a country in great turmoil. More than 300,000 troops are currently deployed across the island, and the majority of them are in Tamil-inhabited areas. Just to put it into a bit of perspective, that is three times the size of the UK's ground force. In the absence of any political leadership, there is increased militarisation on the island. We are increasingly worried, because of the reports that we have had from human rights organisations, about the reality on the ground not only for Tamils but for many other marginalised groups, Muslims being another group that has suffered great persecution throughout the pandemic and beyond.

This really plays into a longer issue that Tamils have had since the end of the civil war on the island, and Tamils in the UK are calling for the UK to play a much more leading role than it has done. The UK is the penholder for the UN human rights convention and is a key stakeholder at the International Monetary Fund when deciding issues relating to Sri Lanka, but the UK has yet to exercise many of the weapons in the arsenal that it has to help to tackle human rights concerns—such as Magnitsky-style sanctions—which is why we have come forward to this Committee to ask you guys to consider our having a debate on this subject.

Mr Baker: Mr Mearns, I am very pleased to appear before you and the Committee for another application. It is a very important, timely and relevant debate. In relation to the motion, I particularly draw your attention to the increased militarisation on the island and human rights violations and the context of the economic crisis. As someone who represents a material number of Tamils and some Sinhalese families, I know that it will be a wide-ranging debate that engages all their interests and attention, and I hope that it will encourage the Government to do much more, as Elliot has said. I fully support what Elliot has put before you.

If I may, I will also draw your attention to the number of hon. Members who have said that they wish to support the debate and speak. We have 14 on the application, and I think we can say we are very confident that



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they will seek to attend such a debate, so I hope you will see fit to give us the Chamber for three hours on a substantive motion.

Chair: Well, you have submitted a substantive motion, asking the Government to do something, particularly with regard to the IMF. It is useful to have that. Are there any questions, colleagues?

Bob Blackman: May I just declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Council of Sri Lankan Muslim Organisations UK—COSMOS. That relates to the Muslim section of the population, which Elliot quite rightly alluded to. Of course, I am a key member of the APPG for Tamils as well.

Q2 **Chair:** In terms of timeliness, I take it that you would want the debate as soon as possible.

Elliot Colburn: Yes. The UK will be one of the key penholders at the IMF that considers any bail-out that they give. The Sri Lankan Government—what's left of it, anyway—is currently preparing its submission to the IMF for a bail-out. We are aware that IMF bail-outs cannot attribute human rights concerns to them, but there are things that the UK can do in terms of the debt that Sri Lanka would owe, and the substantive motion would call for the UK to exercise those powers, to try to get just that.

To have the debate as soon as possible would be fantastic, but I think it is fair to say that this issue will not be going away anytime soon, so whenever it is possible to fit it into the very busy calendar that you have, we will be very grateful for the time.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** The UN will be considering this issue on 15 and 16 September. Is that right?

Elliot Colburn: They will be. We believe that the UN sessions between 14 and 16 September will be considering the progress made on the resolution that was made last year. That is why we would like the debate sooner rather than later.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will have to adjourn now and then come back as soon as we can after the Divisions. I am terribly sorry, everyone.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Mr Alistair Carmichael made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Welcome back everyone. We now come to our second applicant this afternoon: Alistair Carmichael on post-Brexit fisheries management.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you very much, Chair. We touched on this in the application, but to explain the political pedigree of this application, in July of last year you very kindly allowed me 90 minutes for a debate in Westminster Hall, which was well subscribed. We had, from memory, nine Back Benchers and three Front-Bench contributions. Everybody was very well behaved. I took 10 or 11 minutes for the opening, and everybody else



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took four, five or six. The Front Benchers took 10 to 12 minutes each. It was very well received within the industry, as well as in all the regional places. We got no fewer than four pages in *Fishing News*—unprecedented.

From that, the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries undertook a piece of work that went out around the coast, talking to the different fishing industries that there are. Although we talk about “the fishing industry”, you have the sort of boats that I have in Orkney or in Shetland principally: big white fish boats, very big pelagic boats, and a small inshore fleet catching shellfish mostly. Then, around the coast, you have small inshore fleets, 10 metres and under. Of course, they all have very different needs and different requirements from the Government in terms of management. Then, on top of that, you have the various communities that would have been the fishing communities of yesteryear, which are now principally involved in fish processing. I am thinking of places like Grimsby and Hull, and Aberdeen and Arbroath in Scotland.

We have spoken to all these communities and produced “Brexit: Voices of the UK Fishing Industry”, a report from the APPG. Essentially, the purpose of today’s application is to get some of what we heard from the industry on the record in Parliament, to tease out some of the issues, and indeed to get a Government and an Opposition view on what we have heard. When I put in the application, I think we had nine supporters. I had a late flurry yesterday and today, so I will give the Clerk the list: Emma Hardy from the Labour party, Liz Saville Roberts from Plaid Cymru, Douglas Ross from the Conservatives, Steven Bonnar, Stephen Flynn and Dave Doogan from the SNP, and Rosie Duffield from the Labour party.

That takes us to 16 at present. There are a few notable absentees. I am pretty sure that David Duguid from Banff and Buchan will probably want to speak in the debate. He moaned like hell because he did not get in last year. Sheryll Murray, who is the chair of the APPG, I have also not heard back from yet, but given that she is the chair of the APPG and we are centring it around a report from the APPG, I would be surprised if she did not also want to partake. There is also Brendan O’Hara, who spoke last year, so we would land comfortably above 15 now. Although we asked for a 90-minute or three-hour debate, if you were able to accommodate us within a three-hour slot somewhere, that would be good.

In terms of timing, any time after we come back in September. I was listening to the application in respect of Sri Lanka. We are not time-sensitive in the way that that is. However, these days, the pinch points in the fishing industry calendar tend to come around about October or November, when the Government are negotiating the North sea catches with Norway and the EU, and the pelagic catches with the Faroese, the Icelanders and the Norwegians. Therefore, something that would put forward a parliamentary view in time for those negotiations would be helpful.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Questions from colleagues, please.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned that you had a Westminster Hall debate



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last year. Would you accept a Westminster Hall debate this year?

Mr Carmichael: Yes, I would, although it would be good to get it back on the Floor of the House. Fishing is one of those industries that actually matters a lot to a very small number of communities, and a little to a lot of communities. For the communities that it does matter to, having it in the Chamber is significant; it means that a lot of people comment on it. However, equally, Westminster Hall serves the same purpose if it has to be there. We would do it on a general motion.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** The reason I mentioned that is that the potential availability on our allocation list is either a 90-minute debate on Tuesday 13 September, or 8 September, or a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall, which is the only way you would get a three-hour debate anyway, on 15 September.

Mr Carmichael: You will make your own decisions, obviously, but my preference would be the three hours on the 15th in Westminster Hall.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Much appreciated.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Lastly, for today and before the summer recess, we have an application from Lloyd Russell-Moyle. Lloyd, your application is on World AIDS Day, which is in December, so I assume, before you kick off, that you are putting in an early application to try to get a slot for round about then.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Yes. I am speaking on the application from the APPG on HIV/AIDS; our co-chairs are listed there. I am the treasurer and the person who has been given the task to come in front of you today.

We are looking for a debate on this issue around 1 December. We would probably prefer the day before, just because there are a number of World AIDS Day events that usually happen in the afternoon and evening of the 1st. The MPs involved in the APPG usually like to make an appearance at those. We have a vigil in London, Brighton and Manchester, and there are a number of events that happen alongside that. We have had the debate on the 1st before, I think, and that has made it more difficult. Therefore, we are willing to give a bit more flexibility on the date. That hopefully helps you as well.

We think a debate is important. In the past year, the Government have made a number of commitments around HIV, including the abolition of new transmissions of HIV in this country by 2030. That is an ambitious target that requires Government action, so this is about not just looking backwards but looking forwards at how that is going to happen.

We have seen, in Manchester, London and Brighton, the now routine testing of bloods for HIV when people go into hospital. Many of you may assume that that happens already, but it does not always happen in the NHS. If those trials go well—we will have some initial outcomes by December—how that rolls out to the rest of the country will also be an



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important set of discussions for Ministers to have. So, there are some good policy questions and discussions here, as well as, of course, stigma and destigmatising it, and talking about people living with HIV, and people who we lost to HIV, including of course Terrence Higgins, who was a *Hansard* reporter in this place. Those are the kinds of things that we would want to touch on and address. We think that a 90-minute debate would probably suffice. We are always happy to have a longer one, but we will be honest here. Of course, I would always say that we would like a Chamber debate, but we are happy with a Westminster Hall debate, if the Committee thinks that that is the best option.

Q8 Chair: The problem that you would have, Lloyd, is that the 1st is a Thursday. We get time in the Chamber on a Thursday, and we get time in Westminster Hall on a Thursday. If you wanted to vary from that by, say, two days and have it on the Tuesday beforehand, whether it was appropriate would depend on who the answering Departments are in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday. We will not know until much closer to the time, in terms of the rota.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I understand, Chair. If it is a Thursday slot, most of the activities happen in the later afternoon and evening. If we can schedule it as the first debate rather than the last one, it gives people who want to go to the vigils in Manchester or whatever the time to get on the train and do that. I think that is what we are conscious of, rather than saying no to a Thursday at all. If you have the last slot on Thursday, which I think is what we had—I was going to say two years ago; I think it is more like four years ago now, because of covid—I remember that that slot was more difficult, because it was more difficult getting people to stay.

Q9 Chair: The first slot on a Thursday would be 1.30 pm, normally, for a 90-minute debate.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Exactly. I think that is much more appealing, if you feel that that is a schedulable time.

Q10 Bob Blackman: Can we just check that the answering Department would be Health and Social Care?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The Department is Health and Social Care. That's the Department that has made the commitment for 2030. That's the Department in charge.

Q11 Chair: I think, from your perspective and the Committee's perspective as well, if Health and Social Care was answering on the Tuesday just before, that would be the ideal slot, because that would then free everybody up to do the other activities, but if that was not the case, the Thursday slot at 1.30 pm would still give people time to get back to where they need to be—just about, anyway.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Yes, absolutely perfect. Is there anything else?

Chair: Not from my perspective.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Thank you very much. Enjoy the recess.



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Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That brings us to the end of our public deliberations. We will now go into a private session. Thank you very much, everyone.