

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 25 October 2022

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

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Nick Fletcher made representations.

- Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome, everyone, to the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications this afternoon. The first is Mr Nick Fletcher, supported by Philip Davies—although I don't think Philip is with us—on the subject of International Men's Day.

Nick Fletcher: I thank the Committee for letting me appear today. I led this debate last year and it was extremely well attended. It received an awful lot of publicity. I am the Chair of the APPG on issues affecting men and boys. Although the debate was well attended and received much publicity, we are still very much in the same place. Each day 13 men commit suicide and over 30 die of prostate cancer. Some 96% of the prison population is male, and over 80% of the homeless community are men. We are continually letting men down. The APPG has put forward two reports. The first one, from last year, was "A boy today". The report from this year was on the need for a men's health strategy. We have recently published a report on male suicide.

This is a subject I feel really passionate about. I desperately feel that we need this debate, and we need it in the Chamber too. I think it is so important that we raise awareness of this subject. Andy's Man Club has recently gone from strength to strength. Although that is wonderful, it just proves the need for this debate to be out in the open. I urge the Committee to allow us time for a debate in the main Chamber, if at all possible.

- Q2 **Chair:** Am I right in thinking that International Men's Day falls on 19 November?

Nick Fletcher: Yes, so either 17 November, a couple of days before, or 24 November would be ideal.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. Colleagues, any questions, please?

- Q3 **Bob Blackman:** The listing you have is very heavy on Conservative Members. I understand there are a couple of Labour Members in support.

Nick Fletcher: There are two more. Ruth Jones and Tonia Antoniazzi have come forward and are happy to support it. We obviously have Jim Shannon and Sammy Wilson from the Democratic Unionist Party and Margaret Ferrier, who is Independent. I think we have a good number.

- Q4 **Chair:** In terms of the date for the debate, we don't know as a Committee whether we will get 17 November yet or not. It depends on the Government. We could offer you a guaranteed debate in Westminster Hall for 17 November. That would make it certain you would get the debate. Would you rather hold out hope of getting the Chamber or take the certainty of getting a debate in Westminster Hall?

Nick Fletcher: I really would hold out hope for the Chamber if that is possible. I think it is so important that this issue gets Chamber time.

Chair: Any further questions? If not, thank you very much, Nick, for the application.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you very much.

Wera Hobhouse made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Next we have Wera Hobhouse. Good afternoon, Wera. Your application is on climate change and human security.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you, Chair. I have been here before. I assume you have read the details of my application. This debate would in many ways be a follow-on from one we had a couple of years ago. As the climate emergency continues to not go away, with warning after warning that it is getting worse and we might not get there, it is important to link the climate emergency with global security and human security directly, and see how it impacts all of our lives, across people's lives, across the world. We need to get into policy and public debate that this is a human-security issue as much as just a climate issue; we need to influence and direct policy towards a debate that protects people from the catastrophic effects of climate change. That is the way the debate would go.

I have secured a pleasing number of cross-party supporters for the debate. I hope that I can have the debate. If you ask me about what time would be my favourite, I would say a slot where I get as many people as possible. I am not particularly worried about the main Chamber or Westminster Hall—I am perfectly happy with a Westminster Hall debate—but I would like to have a slot where it makes it possible for as many Members as possible to attend.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Wera. Any questions, colleagues?

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** The first available slot we could offer you would be 3 November in Westminster Hall.

Wera Hobhouse: What day of the week?

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** That is a Thursday. All our debating time is Thursday, either in the Chamber or Westminster Hall, with the notable exception of Tuesday mornings, but that has got to be the right answering Department.

Wera Hobhouse: What time on Thursday?

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** That is a matter of negotiation. There are two slots—either 1.30 pm or 3 o'clock.

Wera Hobhouse: I would definitely want to go for the earlier one.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Okay.

Chair: If it is any consolation, I have not long since attended a meeting where I was informed that the intended rail industrial action for that day has been cancelled.

Wera Hobhouse: All right. The other thing I would say is that there is no urgent need for going for it—



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Q10 **Bob Blackman:** I thought it was a climate emergency.

Wera Hobhouse: Yes, but I also want to have as many people as possible in the room. If you want to offer me a later slot, that is fine too. Then I can alert people to come and prepare speeches and that sort of thing. It is not about the immediate slot—it is about getting as many people as possible into the room.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** If you weren't accepting the most immediate slot, which Government Department would you want to see answering the debate?

Wera Hobhouse: That is a good question. I was thinking of Business, but there is also Defence or the Foreign Office—any of those could be in the mix.

Q12 **Chair:** My only concern, Wera, is that there is a potential slot on 3 November. That is a bird in the hand. Sometimes it is better than two in the bush, as it were.

Wera Hobhouse: I trust you as the Chair to offer me the best slot possible.

Chair: Right, okay. Thank you very much, Wera. That is very kind of you. I hope that your trust is not misplaced.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you, Chair.

Dame Diana Johnson made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Next up we have Dame Diana Johnson. Good afternoon, Diana, and welcome. Your application is on the very important subject of the infected blood inquiry and the compensation framework.

Dame Diana Johnson: I think I was last here in 2016 and you very kindly granted a debate then. That was before the public inquiry was set up in 2018.

We are now several years on. We are coming to the end of the public inquiry. It is due to report next summer. Last year, the Government very wisely asked Sir Robert Francis to do a piece of work to look at what compensation would look like, if that was recommended by the public inquiry. That piece of work was carried out, setting out what a framework for compensation would be. It was sent to the Government earlier this year. It was published in July.

We haven't seen what the Government's response is to that and what their plans are for next year and what will happen at the end of the public inquiry. Unfortunately, we have only had a series of written ministerial statements. There has never been an opportunity to question Ministers with an oral statement. The APPG on haemophilia and contaminated blood has asked for this debate on the basis that we think the time is now right to debate the issue ahead of next year's final recommendations, and to hear from the Government what their plans are and how they intend to respond to the work from Sir Robert Francis.



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Of course, to put this in context, almost every MP has a constituent who was affected by the contaminated blood scandal. Very sadly, one person on average dies every 96 hours as a result, so the community feel very much that they would like Parliament to have the opportunity to debate the issue as soon as possible.

As those people have often had to fight very long and hard, I request that the debate take place in the main Chamber if possible, to recognise how seriously the House of Commons takes this particular issue and to demonstrate our understanding of those who have been affected and how their lives have been devastated.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** I might be confused on this, but I thought that the Government had announced that they had agreed to set out—I think—£100,000 of compensation, leading to £4 million overall. I cannot remember the figures, but I thought that the Government had announced that relatively recently.

Dame Diana Johnson: You are absolutely right. In his compensation framework, Sir Robert Francis said that, because people were continuing to die, an interim payment should be made before the inquiry gave its final recommendations. Over the summer, Sir Brian Langstaff, who chairs the public inquiry, asked Sir Robert Francis to appear before it, and he felt so strongly about what Sir Robert was suggesting the Government should implement that he made the interim payments the public inquiry's first recommendation.

To give the Government their due, they said, "Right, we are going to do that," and they will, I hope, make those payments by the end of this month. That means £100,000 will go to those who currently receive financial support, but to put it into context, not everybody does. For example, the family of a child who received a blood transfusion and went on to develop HIV and AIDS would never have received any financial support for the loss of that child. There is also a view that we need to debate that; we need to hear the Government's intentions for people who do not currently receive any financial support.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** You have this down as a general debate. Are there no actions that you want the Government to undertake?

Dame Diana Johnson: Of course there are, but we felt it most appropriate to get the Minister on the Floor of the House to explain the Government's proposals and plans looking forward to the middle of next year, when the final recommendations will come out. To be honest, it has been really difficult to get anything out of Government about their response. It was in March that Sir Robert provided his view of what the Government should do, and we are now nearly in November, so we think it is time for the Government to show their hand.

Q16 **Chair:** In terms of the timeliness of the debate, how soon would you like this issue to be aired? We are pretty much stocked up with debates for the main Chamber until about mid-November.



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Dame Diana Johnson: It is not time-sensitive in the same way as some of the other debates that you have been discussing today. We would like to do it before Christmas, so if we could have a slot before then, that would be good. We are looking to next summer for the final recommendations of the inquiry, but we would like the Government to say before Christmas what they are planning to do.

Chair: That might give Ministers a little time to get their feet under the table, or their desks.

Dame Diana Johnson: Indeed.

Chair: All right—lovely. Thank you very much indeed for the application.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q17 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least this afternoon, we have an application from our resident season-ticket holder, Mr Jim Shannon. The debate you are applying for is “Christian Persecution: Freedom of Religion or Belief”.

Jim Shannon: First, may I apologise for last week? I was at a reunion event, and before I knew it, time had beaten me. Flick Drummond was here and sent me a message, so I actually ran, but I would have needed to be an Olympic medallist to get here in time. I apologise to you, Chair, and to all members of the Committee. That was entirely my fault.

Chair: Okay, thank you.

Jim Shannon: My co-sponsor is Fiona Bruce. Her name is on the final page, but I should have her in as a lead Back-Bench Member. This issue is something that we are very much aware of. I have done a number of events over the years called Red Wednesday. I know it is not possible to have a debate in the Chamber on a Wednesday, but we would be very pleased—I did not mention this to you, Chair—if were possible to get a Thursday in the Chamber. It has been an absolute lifetime since we have had a debate in the Chamber on the issue of freedom of religion or belief.

Red Wednesday is something that happens across the country. In my own council area, they do a red colouring on the town hall. They do it in other ones as well, as they do for LGBT things and so on. It is one of those things that councils respond to. I know that we hope to do that in our own council area. Alongside that, we want to have a debate.

Chair, you know that I chair the APPGs for freedom of religion or belief and for Pakistani religious minorities, so I am aware of the pressures on Christian persecution around the world. Red Wednesday is an event that was originally in the gift of the Aid to the Church in Need. I have spoken at similar events here in London, not too far away from where the churches are. This year it will be commemorated on 23 November, but we would be very pleased if we could perhaps have a debate on the Thursday that is close to it.



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The topic of freedom of religion or belief is something in which I have a personal interest. To be fair, there are many Members who have the same interest, and we are very pleased that they are all able to associate themselves with the debate and give us help. A debate in the Chamber on that day would give us an opportunity to highlight where persecution is a real issue for Christians, which is probably the middle east and Africa. It is also in the far east. It is in North Korea, China, the Maldives, the Philippines, India and Pakistan. It is all across the world and right across the middle east, such as in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. For example, the Christian population in Iraq was 1.5 million; today, it is 100,000. That has happened within 10 years. The drop in the number of Christians across the middle east is very worrying, and there is not a country where persecution is not a real issue. It is in Nigeria, which we visited some time ago. It is in Pakistan, which we are hoping to go back to. It is in Nepal as well.

I am trying to emphasise that this is an important subject. The list of speakers reflects that, and they are keen to be involved. I am ever mindful, Chair, that I am always respectful to you and your Committee. If it is at all humanly possible, we would really appreciate having a debate in the Chamber on a Thursday.

Q18 Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Jim. For a Chamber debate, your application is a bit short of names.

Jim Shannon: I can make sure there are enough. We have 14 on the application. I have not gone around everybody to ask them, but I am very happy to do that. I will speak to Portia, and I can probably have the names within the next 24 hours, if that is okay.

Chair: I just thought I'd make that point. Any questions, colleagues?

Q19 Bob Blackman: The other thing, Jim, is that if we do not get the Chamber time for when you would ideally want it, which would presumably be 24 November—

Jim Shannon: Thursday 24th. That's right.

Q20 Bob Blackman: We don't have to get Chamber time, but we know that we would get Westminster Hall time. Would you accept a debate in Westminster Hall if we don't get the Chamber time?

Jim Shannon: I spoke to Fiona yesterday. I will always respect your decisions—that is the way I work. I have made the point that I would love to have the debate in the Chamber, because we have not had a debate on these issues in the Chamber for such a long time, which is the point I am trying to make. But ultimately, if the available location is somewhere else, that is where the location is.

Q21 Chair: It is just that you have the specific date of 23 November, which is Red Wednesday. If Chamber time was not to be available on the 24th, you could get Westminster Hall time on the 24th, which would be closest day possible. But obviously, if we can get some Chamber time, we will certainly try to facilitate that.



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Jim Shannon: I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue relates to another application that you have on our list for a debate on Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month. There is a potential for offering it on 8 November, which is a Tuesday.

Jim Shannon: Will I take it? The answer is yes.

Bob Blackman: I thought it might be, but I've got to ask.

Jim Shannon: Thank you.

Chair: The Y-word that you have just uttered, Jim, is the correct answer.

Jim Shannon: I always find it is better to say yes. Thank you very much.

Chair: That concludes our public deliberations. We will now go into a private session. Thank you very much.