

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 15 November 2022

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

Questions 1-34

Representations made

[I](#): Virginia Crosbie

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[III](#): Selaine Saxby

[IV](#): Harriett Baldwin and Anthony Browne

[V](#): Marsha De Cordova, Caroline Nokes and Jim Shannon

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Virginia Crosbie made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome everyone to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a number of applications in front of us this afternoon, but my first duty as Chair is to welcome back to the Committee Mr Kevin Foster. Welcome back, Kevin.

Our first application this afternoon is from Virginia Crosbie. Virginia, would you like to come forward please and take a seat? Your application this afternoon is on rail transport services to the communities served by the west coast main line—or should that be “should be served by the west coast main line”?

Virginia Crosbie: Exactly; I think I’ve won you over already.

Chair: Virginia, over to you.

Virginia Crosbie: Thank you so much for seeing me at this time—I am about to go into a debate about the west coast main line at 4.30 pm. Why this debate? Why a three-hour Backbench Business debate on the Floor of the House about the west coast main line? This is the first time you have seen me in here. I have a reputation for being a force to be reckoned with for my Ynys Môn constituents—generally about nuclear. Why has it taken me three years to come and see you? Well, essentially it is one word, and that word is “demand”. It took me less than an hour to get my form signed to have this debate—cross-party, with MPs from every single party, right the way up to Scotland and right the way down south.

We have had urgent questions on this issue. We have had debates. We have actually got this Westminster Hall debate this afternoon. We need three hours on the Floor of the House where we can feed back the views of our constituents, hold the Government to account and share how absolutely disgraceful this has been. The Government have extended the contract to 1 April. That is an absolute joke—April fool’s day. We have all got emails flooding in. This is an absolute misery in people’s lives, and it is about time that the Government were held to account.

Chair: Thank you very much, Virginia. I should declare an interest, as I chair the all-party parliamentary group on rail in the north, but when it comes to the west coast main line, we should call it “derailing the North”. Questions, colleagues, please.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously this is a general debate. You will appreciate the fact that Chamber time is very precious, and if there is a divisible motion—hint, hint—that gets you a guaranteed debate in the Chamber, otherwise we would be looking to say, “Would you accept a Westminster Hall debate?”, because that gets you more chance of actually getting the debate and a guaranteed length of time in the Chamber if you choose.

Virginia Crosbie: I take that on board. As I said, there is a Westminster Hall debate for an hour this afternoon. The contract with Avanti was due to be renewed on 16 October, and the Government renewed it on 7 October.



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People across the House were outraged by that, and the Government need to be held to account for it, and this is the opportunity to do that formally.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** So why not a motion accordingly?

Virginia Crosbie: I think this is a better opportunity for people to share the views of their constituents so that Ministers hear them and take them on board. Ministers have six months in which to see what Avanti is doing and to judge it before they make a decision on 1 April. That is what we want to do. We want to see the Government ensuring that.

The main issue seems to be with the train drivers doing overtime. Avanti has promised to be back to 90% of pre-covid service by 11 December. Ideally we would all like that to happen, so we want to see the Government holding it to account. We want evidence that they are meeting the train drivers and finding out why they do not want to do overtime, and finding out how Avanti is investing in training and getting more train drivers. Holyhead in my constituency is the second busiest port in the UK; there is one direct train a day to London. It is absolutely appalling, and that story is repeated across the UK.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. You should be aware that time in the Chamber is limited. It might be either side of Christmas before you can get into the Chamber.

Q4 **Kevin Foster:** I declare a slight interest in that, having been a Transport Minister until very recently, I responded to the most recent urgent question. I will explore a bit further the excellent points made by Mr Blackman about what you are looking to get out of the Government.

Having spoken to your sponsors, if, for the sake of argument, there was the opportunity for a divisible motion, would that be something you would look to do to generate the relevant interest in the debate? The other thing we are looking at is whether you are confident there will be enough demand for the debate. I think you have probably answered that point, but is it something you and the other sponsors might want to briefly consider before finalising the motion that you want to present?

Virginia Crosbie: There is an urgency. Avanti has promised to deliver the timetable back to 90% of its pre-covid level. This is a golden opportunity for us to make sure that the Government are meeting the train drivers and finding out from them directly what it is like working for Avanti. There is an urgency to this, and there is an incumbency and responsibility on the Government to be doing that.

Q5 **Patricia Gibson:** On that very point, if there is a responsibility for the Government to do X, Y or Z, would it not then be best to have a divisible motion—for the House to request, demand or persuade the Government to do this?

Virginia Crosbie: I will be really candid with you: I am three years into this job, and this is the first time you have heard me ask for a debate. I would defer to you; between you all, you have years of experience. Time is of the essence. I totally understand that three hours on the Floor of the



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Chamber is a lot of time, and you have lots of other petitions for that time. As I said, I filled that form within an hour. This issue is in all our inboxes—it is really acute.

- Q6 **Chair:** Well, Virginia, the application is with us. There is not any time in the immediate future—in the next couple of weeks—so if you wanted to add a divisible motion, my counsel would be that the Committee in the past has given priority to debates with divisible motions.

Virginia Crosbie: Okay. Would that mean that I would be more likely to get time?

Chair: It means that you are more likely to get time in the Chamber earlier than other debate applications that do not have divisible motions—that is all I will say.

Virginia Crosbie: Okay. I will be guided by you. I would be very happy with January.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Anne McLaughlin made representations.

- Q7 **Chair:** Welcome. Anne, your application is on outlawing self-disconnection of prepayment meters. Is this remote disconnection of prepayment meters by energy companies?

Anne McLaughlin: Yes. If I stop paying my gas and electricity bills, they can disconnect me, but it takes a long time. The energy companies have to work with me and give me lots of opportunities to contact debt counselling agencies. You can run up a substantial amount of debt before they will take the drastic step of cutting you off. I pay my energy in arrears, but if you are on a prepayment meter you pay it in advance, and if you go a penny over the £10 of emergency credit, it automatically cuts you off, and you are left without any gas or electricity. They call it self-disconnection.

There is more to this. For example, if you pay by prepayment meter you pay more in standing charges than the rest of us and you pay more per unit of energy than the rest of us, but you are far more likely to be on a low income. Something like 60,000 more people were put on to prepayment meters in the six months leading up to March this year—that is up to 5.5 million people. I am really worried, because we all have constituents who will not be able to pay their bills—that is worrying, but they are not immediately going to be cut off, thank goodness. But if they are on a prepayment meter, they are.

I know of people who have come out of homeless accommodation and been given their first tenancy, and the prepayment meter is there. I spoke to the Simon Community, which does an awful lot of work with homeless people in Scotland. It said that it has people who are walking the streets because their prepayment meter has cut off. When they have managed to



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get some money together and put maybe £10 or £20 in, that is all immediately eaten up in the standing charges for the days that they were disconnected. I cannot imagine how powerless that makes somebody feel. More importantly, it is going to put their lives in danger. I am not being dramatic in saying that: it is going to put their lives in danger.

There is an urgency because prices have gone up, and it is happening right now. The *Daily Record* in Scotland, which is the main daily tabloid newspaper, identified that an awful lot of people on prepayment meters are older people—pensioners. Not that it matters; nobody should have to go without gas and electricity. That's it. I just want them to have the same opportunities as the rest of us to catch up with ourselves, because it is not their fault that prices are going up.

- Q8 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Obviously, given the time of year there is some urgency for this debate. Would you take a Westminster Hall debate if time became available?

Anne McLaughlin: I thought I had marked that it was to go to a vote, did I not?

Chair: Absolutely, but in terms of the urgency and getting some time allocated, that's all. It was just a thought.

Anne McLaughlin: I would rather wait until I can get a debate in the Chamber, if you don't mind.

Chair: Okay, that's fine.

- Q9 **Bob Blackman:** I was just thinking about the urgency of this, because bad weather is setting in and so on. Presumably, you would want a debate well before Christmas—before we break for recess?

Anne McLaughlin: Yes.

- Q10 **Jerome Mayhew:** Is it your understanding that if you were to ban self-disconnection, then people would be funnelled through the same legal process as standard contract holders—an application to court and a court hearing?

Anne McLaughlin: Yes. To be honest, initially when I started talking about this to people, they were saying, "You can't let people run up limitless amounts of debt." But effectively that is what you and I do. MPs can run up limitless amounts of debt until we are able to catch up with ourselves, but that is because we pay in arrears. Those people who are paying more, and paying in advance, are not given that opportunity. I just want them to be treated exactly the same, particularly this year.

- Q11 **Jerome Mayhew:** I have one final question. Is there a very substantial difference in the percentage of people who are on prepaid meters who self-disconnect, as opposed to people on standard contracts who go through the process because they fall into arrears?

Anne McLaughlin: That is an interesting question, to which I do not know the answer. I am going to assume that there will be a significant

difference, because there is just no other option if you are on a prepayment meter. I can find that information for you, and I certainly will find it before the debate.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Anne.

Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Make yourself comfortable, Selaine. Your application is on the sustainability of burning trees for energy generation in the United Kingdom.

Selaine Saxby: Thank you very much. This application came about very much on the back of the “Panorama” programme that suggested that primary forest was being used to generate electricity. Although historically wood pellets have been considered carbon neutral under the conventional carbon accounting rules, the reality is that we don’t know where the forest is coming from and we don’t know how long it will take to replenish. Particularly against the urgency of getting to net zero, if it takes 100 years for the forest to regrow, is it really renewable and sustainable?

It is a decade since we have had a debate like this in the House. We somewhat inadvertently passed legislation only 10 days ago that has committed us to re-subsidising biomass in the country without fully understanding or investigating the changing depth of scientific evidence behind it.

We are now importing 27 million tonnes of trees each year to burn in power stations at a time when we actually need to be building houses, which has also sent the price of wood skyrocketing. There are many other subsidiary angles to this. It is important that 84 MPs have raised this matter in the House already. Obviously, the application is supported broadly across the House. I think the time has come for us to have a say on this matter and to really make sure that the science and evidence are correct. We didn’t scrutinise the Energy Prices Act 2022 when it went through 10 days ago, and I think it is quite important that, if we want to get to net zero, we are supporting the energy sources that are truly renewable in the timescale that we are actually looking to get to net zero.

Q13 **Jerome Mayhew:** Are you aware of the recent evidence session of the Environmental Audit Committee on this point, where they got Drax, which is the biggest importer—

Selaine Saxby: Yes, I know.

Jerome Mayhew—with about 14 million tonnes of emissions each year, and tackled the issue of the “Panorama” programme and some of the statements made in it? Are you looking to explore that side of it?

Selaine Saxby: I think it is important that the facts come to light, but beyond the actual “Panorama” programme, a number of us were already raising concerns, irrespective of it being Drax, over the fact that we were



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about to subsidise something that takes too long to grow back to truly be a renewable. Beyond that, I know there are Members who have put in to speak in this debate and who are sponsoring this application who are deeply concerned about how we as a Government are financing and supporting the finance of biomass all together—way beyond Drax.

The original application, which came from the other side of the House, had Drax named in it; I have therefore taken that out to make it a much broader debate and to look at the whole biomass issue, rather than one specific company.

- Q14 Jerome Mayhew:** Given that Drax is a centrepiece of the carbon capture, usage and storage project for the Hull hydrogen hub, are you anticipating your debate expanding into the wider consequences of the policy concerns you are raising about biomass usage?

Selaine Saxby: That is the whole point: there are so many different concerns and bits that people haven't actually looked at and understood. While it is great that the Environmental Audit Committee has had that opportunity, other MPs to date haven't. People just hear little bits of the argument and it sounds great that this is renewable and we can invest in it and it's easy. However, having been to the Conservative Environment Network international conference on biomass and listened to the professor there, I did not take any more convincing that we all need to know more about what we are actually investing in and proposing, and about the implications of going with it or not going with it.

Chair: Thank you very much. If there are no further questions from colleagues, in terms of timeliness, Selaine, you have obviously heard the earlier exchanges—we will try to fit this in as soon as we possibly can.

Selaine Saxby: We are happy to take a Westminster Hall slot so that we get there quicker.

Chair: That's very useful to know. Thank you very much indeed.

Harriett Baldwin and Anthony Browne made representations.

Chair: Welcome, Harriett, and congratulations on becoming Chair of the Treasury Committee.

Harriett Baldwin: Thank you very much, Chair.

- Q15 Chair:** You've put an application in this afternoon for a general debate on the autumn statement. Over to you, please, Harriett.

Harriett Baldwin: Clearly the economy has been at the forefront of what the country has been debating since September. The Government haven't allocated much time since 23 September to talk about these issues. We have another autumn statement on Thursday and my understanding is that the Government have not yet allocated time for the House to debate it. However, I do hear a rumour from the Leader of the House that we may



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get up to four days of debate on the autumn statement in Government time, in which case we would not need to make this application and we would be able to withdraw it.

Chair: Alright, so this is an application which—

Harriett Baldwin: It is a conditional application.

Q16 **Chair:** It is a conditional application. Should a debate on the autumn statement be forthcoming, it would automatically be withdrawn.

Harriett Baldwin: Yes.

Chair: Okay. That is understandable. Colleagues, any questions?

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Given the statement, there is obviously a bit of uncertainty. Would you accept a Westminster Hall debate—say, on a Tuesday morning—if that was forthcoming? That would be a 90-minute debate, but at least it would get you an early slot.

Harriett Baldwin: I think these big Budget matters with billions of pounds deserve to be debated on the Floor of the House.

Bob Blackman: That is why we want the Government to—

Harriett Baldwin: If the Government allocate the time, we would rest our case and be content.

Q18 **Chris Green:** Is this choice of debate in any way connected with a recent election—the Select Committee chairmanship?

Harriett Baldwin: All of us who stood for election wanted to see the matter debated, absolutely. Anthony is one of my colleagues on the Committee.

Chris Green: Absolutely. I would have anticipated that you would have mentioned it as part of your justification.

Chair: Well, I did congratulate Harriett at the beginning.

Chris Green: Sorry; I was not paying attention.

Chair: Harriett, thank you very much indeed. Next, please; the conveyor belt is moving swiftly today.

Marsha De Cordova, Caroline Nokes and Jim Shannon made representations.

Q19 **Chair:** I welcome Marsha De Cordova, speaking about the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Marsha De Cordova: Good afternoon, everybody. It is my first time here, so I hope I get this all done right. I welcome my two co-sponsors, who are here with me. Stephen Timms MP unfortunately cannot make it



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this afternoon, but I am pleased that I have these two with me today. As you can see from the application, the issue has huge cross-party support.

The United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities is on 3 October, but I am very flexible about when the debate would happen, provided that it is on this side of Christmas, as December is also Disability History Month. The UN international day is themed, and this year's theme is about looking at transformative solutions and innovative ideas to continue to create a more inclusive, accessible and equitable society for disabled people. There are approximately 14 million disabled people and, if you include carers, the number rises to 20 million. We already know, given the impact of the pandemic, that many challenges, such as the cost of living crisis, have fallen heavily on disabled people.

Having a three-hour debate on the Floor of the House would give an opportunity for all Members from every constituency to speak, because all of us here represent disabled people and carers, and know of the many challenges that many of them face. I declare an interest. Being a disabled woman myself, I take a personal interest in this issue, but I strongly believe that we all need the opportunity, since it was in 2018 when any such debate last took place. We can all attest that over the past four years disabled people have been hit hard by all the life circumstances that have happened. We need an opportunity not only to celebrate the many achievements of disabled people, but to discuss and debate some of those creative and innovative solutions to improve the lives of disabled people. I will hand over to my colleagues.

Caroline Nokes: I want to briefly focus on the work that the Women and Equalities Committee has done over the past couple of years. We have had two very active inquiries into access to services for disabled people as part of the pandemic, and we currently have an inquiry open that is looking at the national disability strategy, with a particular section around the cost of living and how that is impacting disabled people. As Marsha has brilliantly highlighted, there are some great solutions out there that can help disabled people with their everyday living and their challenges in the workplace, but assistive technologies often come at a cost. It is not just a cost to Government and local authorities; it is a cost to the individual because many of them run heavily on power or need charging up.

But I don't want this to be a negative debate. All of us will work closely with the charities, organisations and individuals in our constituencies that celebrate and champion the fantastic role that disabled people play in our communities. As Marsha said, 22% of our constituents will be registered disabled, and it is important that we give them a chance to celebrate their achievements and highlight the challenges they face. That is why I absolutely support the view that this should be on the Floor of the House, according to the respect it deserves.

Jim Shannon: I support Marsha and Caroline on this request. Obviously, as my party's health spokesperson, I am keen to be involved in the debate and was pleased that the ladies asked me to participate by speaking to the Backbench Business Committee today.



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I will quickly outline four things; when it comes to disabled people, it is about employment, their health, housing and transport. All those things affect us all, but they affect those who are disabled even more. The debate gives us an opportunity to discuss that.

Lastly, all three of us, and indeed all of us in this room, will be inspired by some of the disabled people we have met—people of incredible courage, tenacity and ability, even though they are disabled. I think it is an opportunity to say some of the good things that we can do as well. That is where we are coming from.

Chair: Thank you, Jim. Of course, Marsha, you bring with you a trump card in Jim because he is a regular with the Committee.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** In terms of timing, the day itself is a Saturday, I think.

Marsha De Cordova: Yes, that's right—3 December.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** Would you prefer to debate the issue after or before then?

Marsha De Cordova: The following Thursday would be great, if I could be so bold.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** Would you accept a debate in Westminster Hall?

Marsha De Cordova: A debate like this really should be given the opportunity to be on the Floor of the House. I say that because of all the reasons that myself and my colleagues—

Bob Blackman: I understand that, but the choice might be either Westminster Hall or not at all, because the Chamber is not available that day.

Marsha De Cordova: Right. Okay—what about another date, when the Chamber is available?

Bob Blackman: Then you are waiting.

Q23 **Chair:** I think you are then waiting until just before or just after Christmas.

Marsha De Cordova: Right. We do not want it after Christmas, I think.

Chair: If we can get you in before Christmas, we will certainly try.

Marsha De Cordova: Wonderful—thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Karin Smyth made representations.

Chair: Karin, welcome.



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Karin Smyth: Thank you, Chair. It is my first time, but I have now heard some of the patter.

Q24 **Chair:** What is your application for this afternoon?

Karin Smyth: It is for marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls on 25 November, which I appreciate is very soon. My colleague Jackie Doyle-Price cannot be here with me this afternoon, but it is very much a day that is recognised internationally, particularly by parliamentarians, as a key part of the work around the world on violence against women and girls. As I think colleagues can see, it is very much supported cross-party.

Debates about this subject are well attended and are highlighted. Of course, we sadly always have renewed conflicts across the world, as well as domestic violence on the rise, and violence generally against women and girls. I think we all know from our inboxes that this continues to be a really serious and difficult subject that remains on the rise.

The UN day is an important day. It would be remiss of our Parliament not to mark it in some way. I have heard what you said about time in the Chamber, and if there are days to be granted on a so-called Budget I appreciate that Westminster Hall may be a more sensible place, particularly given the pressure on time. I have asked for a 90-minute debate. Obviously, we would like the Floor of the House, and other Parliaments will be doing similar.

On 18 November, it will be a year since the Government published their most recent strategy on violence against women and girls, so using the debate to highlight the Government's report will garner a lot of interest from across the House. That is 18 November—just a week before 25 November. We have had Opposition days as well, but it is a very popular subject and, sadly, a debate that is on the rise. I hope that the Committee can find some time.

Q25 **Chair:** Am I right in saying that you would accept a Westminster Hall debate?

Karin Smyth: It is my first time doing this. Getting in a bit earlier would have been a bit more sensible, given that it is a day marked in the next couple of weeks.

Q26 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just ask what the answering Department would be?

Karin Smyth: I think it would have to be the Minister for Women and Equalities.

Patricia Gibson: White Ribbon Day is an international day, though, isn't it?

Karin Smyth: Yes.

Q27 **Kevin Foster:** It could also be the Home Office, given its VAWG strategy sits there.



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Karin Smyth: Yes. Sorry—again, this is a learning experience. Is it for me to pick that, or would the Government decide who would address the debate?

Chair: We can table the debate. You can stipulate who you would prefer to be the answering Department, but it would be in the Government's gift to decide.

Kevin Foster: Perhaps I can ask a question. It is right that we mark this. I think a lot of it would be about the focus and what we are looking to get out of the debate. Is the focus around UK policy in the context of the international day—for example, whether street-based harassment should be a specific offence—or is it around marking conflicts and others, which would be within scope but require a different Minister? It depends on what the real driver of this is and what core response you want. Is it about pushing the Government to take particular action within the domestic space to tackle violence against women and girls, or is it about the FCDO outlining what it is trying to do to protect against it in conflict? You could take this debate in various directions that are perfectly legitimate, but depending on what your goal is, you could have a Home Office Minister talking on that front or a Foreign Office Minister talking more widely.

Patricia Gibson: I think the complicating factor is that, in the past, debates along these lines have straddled all these areas. Some people like to talk about the domestic situation, and some people like to talk about the situation around the world. It is hard to tie down speakers in that way.

Q28 **Kevin Foster:** You may not tie speakers down, but what are you looking for at the end of the debate? Is it a renewed international commitment, or is it, for example, pushing the Government on whether it will bring forward certain legislation, and on what co-operation there is with the devolved Administrations around particular issues? That would determine who replies. It does not necessarily inhibit anyone who is speaking, but it is perhaps worth thinking about who you want to reply. We have previously established that it is quite useful to get a particular Department.

Karin Smyth: I think the point was to really flag that we are part of an international community, and to highlight our work internationally and co-operatively as parliamentarians. I have highlighted that there is a UK Government response, and thank you for picking that up. As Patricia Gibson said, I do not want to curtail our colleagues' talking about the overall banner, but I appreciate that point. But on the basis that it is a UN day that we as a Parliament should be marking, that would be the most appropriate way to do it.

Q29 **Bob Blackman:** The reason for asking is that, potentially, it could be a Tuesday morning debate in Westminster Hall, as opposed to on a Thursday, which might be closer to the day.

Karin Smyth: It would be nice to do it as close to the day as possible. I think that would garner more interest and publicity, and show that we are doing our part along with international colleagues.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Sir Mike Penning made representations.

Q30 **Chair:** Last but not least is Sir Mike Penning. Mike, your application this afternoon is on the future of BBC local radio, which I know has already caused some stirring, shall we say, among Members of Parliament across the country.

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you very much, Chair. When we had the UQ on this issue the other week, I felt for the Minister, because it was literally only that weekend that they had been told anything about what was going on with the BBC, even though—I said it in my response during the UQ—I was hearing from my local radio stations that, frankly, they were going to get the chop.

The title of the debate is “the future of local radio” or “is there a future for local radio?” When I submitted the application, I think I submitted it with 52 colleagues from across the House. I can let the Committee know that we are near 100 now. As I walked up the corridor here today, I was asked, “When are we having this debate, Mike. When is it happening?”

What is important—probably more than the 100 colleagues—is that pre-redundancy notices have now been sent out to people working in local radio, and the indication is that they will have to apply for their own jobs or that their jobs are not going to be there. These people are not the rich journalists and the rich people at the BBC who I alluded to in the Chamber the other day; these people are the stalwarts of our local communities. Particularly when we have situations such as covid, when schools were closed, or when there are weather events—what do local people in our communities trust? They trust their local BBC radio station to tell them what is going on, and that will be decimated by the proposals of the BBC.

When I submitted the application, I think I said to you, Chair, that I did not know how many colleagues I would get. I do not think you can have 100 colleagues in Westminster Hall; that is just not feasible. We have to be on the Floor of the House. I actually think it should also be a votable motion, so that the Minister goes away with the will of the House to tell the BBC what it cannot do, which is destroy local radio.

Q31 **Chair:** Okay. The thing is, if you would like a votable motion, Mike, it is your application, so you would have to submit that and let us have it in due course.

Sir Mike Penning: It was only because of the response that I have had from colleagues, saying, “This is imminent. We want it on the Floor of the House. These redundancy notices are going out.” You guys get some bids from all over the shop and certainly there have been some very good bids this afternoon. I cannot think of a better time to do it, as these pre-redundancy notices have been done. The Minister should have the view of the House—the will of the House—to go back to the BBC with.



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Chair: Okay, thank you very much. Questions or comments, colleagues, please?

Sir Mike Penning: Of course, none of the members of the Committee have been able to sign my form, so I probably have slightly more than 100 now. I have not spoken to all of my sponsors, because there are so many, but I have spoken to the vast majority, and we will submit a motion this afternoon.

Q32 **Chair:** I am honestly not trying to be funny, Mike, but the problem is that if we sign applications, we then cannot take part in the discussion or the vote on whether we allow the debate or not.

Sir Mike Penning: I know. I don't want anybody saying anything—I just want the debate on the Floor of the House. Obviously, afterwards, I will speak to your Clerks and make sure which form I need to fill out when I leave here. But, with that number, we cannot do it in Westminster Hall. I have only once asked this Committee to do something, and that was on children with terrible diseases. I think this is really very important.

Q33 **Bob Blackman:** In terms of timing, obviously you say the protected redundancy notice has been issued; what is the decision time?

Sir Mike Penning: I understand from my sources, this morning, that the BBC was supposed to have a series of Zoom meetings with people in local radio employment. Those were cancelled this week. I think they realised—they are not stupid; they know what is going on. The BBC is sitting behind me as we are doing this now. They know what is going on and we need to get that message out as soon as possible.

We need to do it before Christmas, if we possibly can, and give them a decent message going into Christmas. It will not be resolved before Christmas—that is plainly obvious—but the message from us before Christmas may be a decent Christmas present to the people who are going to lose their jobs.

Q34 **Kevin Foster:** Just to be clear, the application form says "General debate", but I think the intention now, after the feedback from colleagues, is that you want to give the House, via a votable slot, an ability to express an actual opinion, if I can put it that way.

Sir Mike Penning: I think when we first looked at this, the numbers were a little lower, but now we have got into the territory of the House expressing an opinion. That is what I think we should be doing. Thank you very much indeed for your time.

Chair: Thank you. To be fair to Mark, he might be employed by the BBC, but he is not the BBC.

Sir Mike Penning: We will have a conversation outside the room.

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