

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 29 November 2022

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-11

Representations

[I](#): Dame Maria Miller

[II](#): Elliot Colburn

[III](#): Margaret Ferrier

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Dame Maria Miller made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone. A very warm welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us. The first is from Dame Maria Miller, on the subject of International Women's Day.

Dame Maria Miller: I am here really on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament. We have decided that it is now a tradition for us to make an application for an International Women's Day debate. You will see from the list of supporters that we are a very cross-party group. I work closely with all the parties in the House of Commons.

We feel that it is incredibly important that Parliament should mark International Women's Day, and that the House of Commons should have a significant debate on it. As you have heard me say over a number of years, we want the Government to hold the debate in Government time, but we achieved that only on the centenary of women first getting the vote. I continue to try for that, but if, this time, I yet again do not succeed, I hope that the Backbench Business Committee will consider this application.

Q2 **Chair:** It is nice to know that we are a fall-back position, Dame Maria.

Dame Maria Miller: You are my first choice! The debate is particularly important this year because the APPG is doing an important piece of work on retaining women in the House of Commons—something that many of us are concerned about for the next general election, not least because of the boundary changes. In 2028, which I know feels like a long way away to all of us, it will be the centenary of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, which gave all people access to the vote equally. That is a really important point in time. We are doing a piece of research with King's College London and the Gillard Institute, which we will bring out towards the beginning of next year. Fawcett has also done a piece of research on this, too. That will provide important information for colleagues to debate and communicate to the outside world.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Colleagues, any comments or questions? It is an application that we are familiar with; we knew to expect it. You have done exactly the right thing, from our perspective: you got the application in very early, so it can get on to the list, and we can give the Leader of the House notice well in advance that we expect time to be allocated at around that point in the year.

Dame Maria Miller: Let me just confirm why I ask for 2 March. That is the Thursday before International Women's Day, which is on the following Wednesday. The week of International Women's Day is the week of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, and some colleagues who have an interest in this subject may well be part of a delegation

attending that event, so it would make sense for the debate to be in the previous week, if that is acceptable to the Committee.

- Q4 **Wendy Morton:** I just wanted clarity on the date. You say you want the debate on 2 March, but should that be 9 March? It is 9 March in our notes.

Dame Maria Miller: Apologies; I think we may have submitted an amendment to the note. It would be 2 March. We were slightly unsighted as to when CSW was happening. I am conscious that a number of colleagues who have an interest in the debate also have an interest in being in New York for that important international event.

Chair: Thank you very much. Nice to see you.

Elliot Colburn made representations.

- Q5 **Chair:** Elliot, your application is on LGBT History Month.

Elliot Colburn: Yes, indeed. Thank you very much for having me, Chair, and for considering this. I am one of the co-chairs of the APPG on global LGBT+ rights, and we are looking to have a debate any time in the month of February to mark LGBT History Month; that would be a timely moment for it. We tend to have a debate every year on Pride Month in the summer, but in recent years, we have not had much time to discuss LGBT History Month. Given the increasing toxicity around the debate, and the polarisation that the issues cause, we are hoping that we can use the debate as an opportunity to highlight the real and very pressing issues that the LGBT community in the UK and around the world faces.

It is important for Parliament to continue raising the issue, and to note not only how far we have come, but how much work there is left to do. That is why we would very much like time for a debate in this place.

- Q6 **Chair:** Thank you. Any points or questions, colleagues? No? It is great that you made the application in a timely fashion; it is an example to Members from across the House, and I wish more of them would do the same. It is amazing how many applications we get from Members who are almost desperate to have a debate next week, which makes life rather difficult for us.

We can certainly put that application on the stocks. It is good that we can give the Leader of the House notice of an application for a debate that would be timely in February. Bear in mind that there is a half-term recess then, but I think there are still three Thursdays available. Can you indicate whether you would prefer the debate to be early or late in the month?

Elliot Colburn: I genuinely have no preference—any time in February.

Chair: That is lovely. Thank you.

Margaret Ferrier made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Lastly, but certainly not least, Margaret Ferrier. It certainly was not intentional to have you last on the list; we hear applications in the order in which we receive notice of them. The application is for a debate on international Human Rights Day 2022.

Margaret Ferrier: I apologise if the application is quite late. Don't shoot the messenger! The chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group could not be here, so I stepped in, as co-chair. We are looking for a debate on international Human Rights Day 2022. It has been a number of years since we had one. The reasoning behind the request for a date next week is that international Human Rights Day is 10 December, which is a week on Saturday. We would look to have the debate on Thursday 8 December. As you will see, the Members who have added their support for the debate are completely cross-party. We have the Father of the House, someone from the DUP, and someone from the Green party.

Chair: You've got someone from the DUP who just happens to be Jim Shannon.

Margaret Ferrier: Well, yes. Jim does add his name to a lot of applications to the Backbench Business Committee, I am sure. We applied for a 90-minute debate, preferably in the Chamber, given the importance of the subject matter, but it could be longer than that, because I think there will be interest from more Members than just those who have added their names to the application. If the debate could be longer, that would be appreciated. If it were possible to hold it in the Chamber, that would be appreciated, too.

The debate would highlight the continued importance of the international human rights framework not only in the UK, but more widely. We know how many human rights issues there are around the world. There are many countries that lots of Members in the House talk about. We had one debate recently on Iran and another on Saudi Arabia executions, so there are plenty of countries on whose human rights issues we need to shine a light. It would be nice to celebrate the work of human rights defenders across the world and the good work that Amnesty International and charities such as Reprieve do, as well as the work of the Council of Europe and the UN. There is plenty to talk about, and I think it would be quite a well-attended debate. I leave the matter in your hands, Chair, and the hands of Committee members, but I hope you can see the importance of the debate taking place this year.

Q8 **Chair:** I appreciate that, but I am afraid to say that we literally have no time to allocate between now and Christmas. We are already fully booked up in the Chamber, but there is potentially a slot on 8 December, which is a Thursday, in Westminster Hall for 90 minutes. That might turn into a three-hour slot, depending on another offer that we already have out there. If that offer is not accepted, you might get three hours. The beauty of a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall is that you get three hours, whereas if you get offered a three-hour debate in the Chamber, that might turn into two hours or 90 minutes, depending on other



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Government business. If offered that slot, would you accept it?

Margaret Ferrier: Yes.

- Q9 **Chris Green:** Thinking about the two previous petitions for a debate, this seems like one of those issues that ought to be debated annually—if you make the application in good time next year—because there are so many things of relevance going on right across the world. There will always be something of importance or something topical to discuss.

Margaret Ferrier: I could not agree more, and I will feed that back to the all-party parliamentary human rights group. You are right that it should be one of those yearly events, and we should make an application in good time. I apologise again for the fact that this was a late request, but I thank you for finding time in the parliamentary diary for the 8th.

- Q10 **Chair:** Maybe you could put in the APPG's diary for early next September a note to put in an application for December.

Margaret Ferrier: I will definitely feed that back, Chair. Thank you very much.

Bob Blackman: For a three-hour debate, we would normally be looking at 15 speakers. You have 11 all together on your list, so you are slightly short for three hours, but obviously you have enough for a 90-minute debate without question. In the event that you do end up with three hours, you might consider getting one or two more speakers, just to ensure that we use the time effectively.

- Q11 **Chair:** If applicants get time, we beseech them to fill it. As soon as we know that you have been awarded the time, it might be worth sending an email round and letting everybody know that you have the time allocated.

Margaret Ferrier: I would definitely do that, Chair. I think the secretariat for the group would put an email out to all Members, and hopefully we would achieve a longer speaking list. You know what it is like: you don't know what is happening on a day, but then you see a debate and say, "Oh, that's an interesting debate. I will take part in that."

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