

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 6 December 2022

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Wendy Morton.

Questions 1-16

Representations made

[I](#): James Sunderland

[II](#): Jim Shannon

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[IV](#): Bob Blackman

Written evidence from witnesses:

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James Sunderland made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications before us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr James Sunderland on the future of overseas territories. Over to you, James. Why would you like us to air this debate?

James Sunderland: Thank you, Mr Chair. Ladies and gentlemen, this is my first time before your Committee. In fact, it is my first time before any Select Committee, so I am completely terrified. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you. My name is James Sunderland. I have been a Back Bencher since 2019. My application is signed by 16 cross-party Members—Members of all parties, actually. It is about the future of the overseas territories. I have made the application because the future of the overseas territories, which are clearly under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, is currently quite uncertain—more uncertain, I would argue, than it has been for many years.

Back in 2019, the then FCO conducted a review of the overseas territories and wrote a White Paper. Three years on, that White Paper has gone nowhere at all. In my humble view and that of many others who have an interest in this particular area, there is a need for that White Paper to reach some fruition. In addition, a number of Ministers for the overseas territories have come and gone. The position is currently occupied by a Member of the House of Lords. There is a view, perhaps, that the House of Commons should be taking a bit more interest in the overseas territories.

Another point, which is very much current, is the fact—I am being candid—that Brexit was not kind to the overseas territories. Promises were made about the overseas territories being incorporated into the trade deals with the European Union, and that has not happened. For example, the Falklands, as of today, are £15 million a year worse off because of the tariffs they now pay to the European Union so that their fish can go into that particular market. There is a great deal of uncertainty and angst among the overseas territories. Of course, earlier this year the JMC—the annual meeting of the overseas territories, to be hosted here by the Foreign Office—was cancelled at short notice.

My view as a Back Bencher is that there is a need for the future of the overseas territories to be discussed in the House of Commons. There is broad support for the debate to take place. I want to bring an FCDO Minister to the Dispatch Box to give the Department's position on where it stands on the 2019 White Paper. I am a very supportive Member of Parliament, but this particular case is important to members of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the various APPGs that support the overseas territories. I am chair of the BVI APPG, the South Georgia APPG and the Tristan da Cunha APPG, and as long as I chair those APPGs I will feel that we need to have this particular conundrum elevated in the House.



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I am confident that were the request granted today, a lot of speakers would want to come forward with a very broad-natured debate, asking questions of the Foreign Office. I am therefore hopeful that the Foreign Office—now the FCDO—would be in a position to define what it thinks of the future of our overseas territories, and undertake to fix the policy errors that have occurred over the last three to four years.

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

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I understand that you are a PPS for the Home Office.

James Sunderland: Yes.

Bob Blackman: We would not normally expect lead applicants to be PPSs, because obviously this process is purely for Back Benchers. I do not know where that leaves the Committee in terms of considering your application.

Q3 **Chair:** We would accept an application from PPSs of the minority parties but, by and large, not of the Government. But the application has been put in and you have the requisite number of names. From our perspective, it would probably mean that you would need someone else to lead the debate itself.

James Sunderland: Okay. Thank you for the observation. For what it is worth, I have notified the Whips Office. They are fully aware of the application and I think their view was that because it is not about my Department and they know me to be relatively loyal, they would not have an issue. Ultimately, that is a decision that you have to take.

Bob Blackman: As this is your first time in front of the Committee, I should say that we are not beholden to the Whips on this particular Committee—despite the fact that we have a distinguished former Chief Whip with us.

Wendy Morton: Can I make a suggestion? My former Whip's hat is well in the past, although I agree on that point. I think it is a really good topic for a debate and there is a lot of support. Is it feasible, Chair, for us to ask James to go away and get somebody else to lead it, and for them to bring it back, knowing that we would be favourable, so that we can reconsider it?

Q4 **Chair:** The way I would regard this is that it is a live application that has been submitted and we can add it to the list, as it were, but to get that final seal of approval—the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's—it would require James to get another Member to volunteer.

James Sunderland: Okay. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Up second this afternoon—I think it is his first time—is Mr Jim



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Shannon. Your application is for a debate on a blueprint for eye health in England and the devolved nations. Please tell us why you want this debate.

Jim Shannon: First of all, Chair, thank you very much. I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to come and ask for this debate. Apologies for last week, Mr Chairman: the Northern Ireland business in the Chamber meant that unfortunately I was unable to come to the Committee. I did send an apology.

This is a very important debate. I am my party's Health spokesperson. I have spoken to Marsha De Cordova, the Labour Member, who is the chair of the APPG on eye health, and her name is the 15th name on the request. We have a cross-party selection of Members, with members of nearly all the parties apart from the Green party.

Why do we want the debate? Because there are more than 3 million people in the UK with conditions that cause sight loss. Ophthalmology is now the NHS's busiest secondary care speciality, accounting for almost 10% of the waiting list, so the issue before us is massive.

Parliament last debated eyecare in January 2022—I suspect it may have been me who asked for that debate. This is not a criticism, by the way—it is an observation—but in the time since that debate in January, Westminster Hall has had three debates on cancer, one of which was mine. The point I am making is that there is a strategy for cancer and also a strategy for dementia. Indeed, I asked the Health Minister today in the Chamber about the 10-year cancer strategy. There is nothing for eyecare—no sense of any co-ordinated plan for eyecare at all. That is why the request is so important.

A nationally-led blueprint for eyecare services can inform local decision making, both here in England and regionally in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The debate would help to determine a blueprint for services in England, but it would also apply for and in the devolved nations.

Given the challenges that face eyecare services, it is vital that we remain focused on this crucial issue. I have asked for the debate because it is of such importance. I am happy to take a Westminster Hall debate. I believe it is time to discuss these things in the House and to have a Minister from the Department there to respond. You can see the names on the list: there are Members from all sides and all parts of the United Kingdom. It would be good to have that consensus of opinion and then press the Minister for a strategy for England first, but also for the regions directly as well. That is my request.

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

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** If we offer you a Westminster Hall debate on, say, 15 December, which is next Thursday, would that be okay?

Jim Shannon: It would, yes.



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Q7 Chair: That is an interesting answer to a crucial question, Jim, so thank you very much. In terms of trying to put a spotlight on what is actually happening, are you trying to focus on stuff that is beyond ordinary opticians and eye tests and so on? Or is it all that as well?

Jim Shannon: I would say it is all that and more. What we do not have is a strategy to address eyecare. Glaucoma is an example—it is treatable. We need to have a strategy that goes out through opticians, which is how we do it back home in Northern Ireland—people have their regular eye tests and get checked for glaucoma early on—because if you get it early, you save the eyesight.

I am sad and very sorry to say that there are people walking around the United Kingdom who have lost their eyesight because of not being able to access eye examinations and appointments because of covid. How tragic is it that someone should lose their eyesight just because they missed getting an appointment? If this debate could have some positive effect, that is what we are trying to do.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed; that is very much appreciated.

Our next application is from Mr Kevin Foster. We are going to have some musical chairs while Kevin leaves the body of the Committee to present his application.

Kevin Foster made representations.

Q8 Chair: Good afternoon, Mr Foster. It is really nice to see you.

Kevin Foster: Good afternoon; it is nice to see you too.

Chair: Your application is on the contribution of lifeboat services to United Kingdom search and rescue. Take it away.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, Chair. As you will appreciate, I represent a coastal constituency that is heavily reliant on tourism. Each year, we welcome tens of thousands of visitors, but sadly some of them get into difficulties around the coastline, as do more permanent residents—for example, people in the fishing industry and those who engage in yachting and watersports activities for pleasure. Crucially, the lifeboat services will then be deployed to help and assist them.

I must say that this is about not just the RNLI but the independent lifeboat charities such as Hope Cove in the constituency of my colleague the Member for Totnes. That is a valuable lifeboat service, but my understanding is that it is not part of the RNLI, whereas the Torbay lifeboat, for example, is your classic RNLI large orange lifeboat that can head out to the sea. It is a vital part of our maritime infrastructure, not just in terms of rescues near the coast but because it can head out, particularly in rough seas, to assist those who have ended up in trouble.



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The RNLI is a very valuable organisation that many people across our constituencies, including those that are not coastal, wish to support. I thought this was an opportune time to have a debate and seek a Government response to a number of issues that both the RNLI and the National Independent Lifeboat Association are interested in and to allow Members to express any particular views they have relating to the services in their own constituencies. We would then have an opportunity to get a Government response to those points. That is the basis of the application.

Chair:: Thank you very much. Colleagues, do you have any questions?

Q9 **Chris Green:** I think this is in your application, but can you clarify that this is not just about coastal lifeboats and that inland lifeboats would be included in the debate? Is that correct? That would make the scope slightly broader.

Kevin Foster: You will appreciate that, given Torbay's location on the coast, I am not familiar with them personally, but I understand that there are similar operations—for example, the River Thames goes past us, and that obviously presents certain challenges for search-and-rescue operations. Somewhere like the Lake district has incidents of a type similar to what may happen on the coast—that is, someone needs help after a genuine accident or because of misadventure. We can all think of scenarios where people do not quite realise the risk that they are putting themselves in, either near the coastline or in deeper water. Across the wider UK that is clearly a particular issue—for example, in certain parts of Scotland and the Scottish lochs. People do not realise just how deep they get, how quickly they get deep and what that means for the temperature of the water, even on what feels like a relatively warm spring day.

Chair: It is something that happens on large rivers around the country, and in lochs and lakes in different parts of the UK. That is entirely appropriate. Any further questions?

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Can I ask what the answering Department would be?

Kevin Foster: As it is a mostly maritime focus—although I take on board the comments made by the Member for Bolton West—Transport would be the likely respondent. I am sure they would be able to adapt the response to cover inland waterways, which would presumably be the Department for Transport anyway.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** In which case, as a Westminster Hall debate, you have a potential option of either Tuesday 10 January, just after we come back from the recess, or 15 December, or 12 January.

Kevin Foster: I think 15 December would be slightly awkward, but 10 January or 12 January would be perfectly acceptable.

Chair: Okay. That is very useful. Thank you very much indeed.

Bob Blackman made representations.



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- Q12 **Chair:** We now have our last applicant this afternoon, who is also a member of the Committee. Mr Bob Blackman is applying for a debate on the current situation in Iran and the treatment of protestors there.

Bob Blackman: Colleagues may well know the situation in Iran, with thousands of people arrested, hundreds of people killed and a large number of protestors now on death row, threatened with going through kangaroo courts and suffering the death penalty, just for protesting. The situation has been exacerbated because of the murder that took place and then the reaction, particularly of women in Iran.

I have had two urgent questions on the Floor of the House on this particular issue, asking the Government to take action. The Government have taken some action, but one of the requests I have made is that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps be completely proscribed as an organisation and their assets sequestered and used for the benefit of the people of Iran. The reason for getting the debate is to get that on the record as the settled view of Parliament, because although the Government are taking action at the United Nations and have proscribed the so-called morality police, they have not actually done what is really necessary, especially given the Home Office and Foreign Office's view on proscribing Hamas and Hezbollah, which are both funded and run by the IRGS. It does seem bizarre that the children are being proscribed, but the parent is not, particularly when the parent is responsible for all the issues.

We slotted this debate in, probably for a Thursday, and quickly assembled a list of colleagues who are willing to support the debate. We have added names as we have gone along, and we will be adding further Opposition names in particular as the days go by. I am sure that this is going to be a well-attended debate, with a lot of people having particular views. Both urgent questions were very well attended and heavily subscribed.

- Q13 **Chair:** You have submitted a divisible motion, so you are asking for Chamber time.

Bob Blackman: Yes, please.

Chair: Any questions, colleagues?

- Q14 **Kevin Foster:** I was going to confirm that, as it is a divisible motion, presumably it will be one where you will be looking to the House to express an opinion on the subject.

Bob Blackman: Yes.

- Q15 **Chair:** I am just flying a kite here, Bob, but we have not yet allocated anything for Thursday 12 January. Would you be available for a slot then, if one was to become available?

Bob Blackman: Absolutely.

- Q16 **Chair:** That is very good of you—thanks for clarifying that. For a three-hour debate, we would normally be looking for 15 Members to have signed the application. I am afraid to say that, at the moment, you only



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have a dozen, but it is a live application and I am sure you can go out there and add some names.

Patricia Gibson: I am sure you will find several signatories in the SNP group.

Bob Blackman: I am sure we will.

Chair: The irony is not lost, is it? *[Laughter.]* Thank you very much indeed, Bob.