

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 7 February 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 February 2023.

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

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Representations made

[I](#): Derek Thomas, Hilary Benn, Holly Mumby-Croft and Mrs Heather Wheeler

[II](#): Sarah Champion

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[V](#): Dr Liam Fox

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Derek Thomas, Hilary Benn, Holly Mumby-Croft and Mrs Heather Wheeler made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee, everyone. I thank you all for coming up so promptly after the Divisions. The first application this afternoon is from Mr Derek Thomas, and it is on the effectiveness of brain tumour research funding.

Derek Thomas: I am joined by some colleagues, if that is okay.

Chair: In that case, it is over to you.

Derek Thomas: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate this opportunity. Every MP will have constituents who have suffered a diagnosis or an impairment, or they may even have lost a family member. Treatments and therapies have improved, but nowhere near enough. Even the Government would say that.

We are asking for a debate in March, which is traditionally Brain Tumour Awareness Month. The reason it is important that we get it is that we all remember Dame Tessa Jowell's powerful speech in the Lords when she was diagnosed with her brain tumour. She spoke about the challenge of not having the data and the focused research on brain tumours. Many other cancers have seen enormous progress in treatment, but not so much brain tumours. Sadly, she died soon after that. That came at an important time in the work that colleagues and others were doing to understand the problem. A task and finish group was set up, and it recommended that the Government put significant amounts of money into brain tumour research. Soon after the passing of Dame Tessa Jowell, or around that time, £40 million was earmarked for that purpose, to be spent in five years. We are coming up to that five-year anniversary, and the tragedy is that only £10 million of that £40 million has been spent.

The all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, which I chair, has wrestled for a long time to understand why that is the case and what barriers there are to access that funding. We really need to move forward research funding and make a difference, to change both the life chances and the survivability of people with brain tumours.

We have done an inquiry, which has concluded and will be launched at the beginning of Brain Tumour Awareness Month. We believe that it is time in March to set out the challenge that faces the research community and the commitment there is in the research community to find a cure and to improve the treatment for people with brain tumours. It is still the biggest killer of children and young people under 40 in the cancer space. That is all we are asking for. There are MPs across the House who will have been touched by stories in their constituencies and will want to speak in the debate, in the main Chamber if possible.

Q2 Chair: And you are looking to hold it in March, as that is the appropriate month.

Derek Thomas: Yes.

Chair: Okay. Does anyone want to add anything?

Hilary Benn: I think Derek said it all.

Derek Thomas: Could you say a little bit about the frustration of researchers?

Hilary Benn: I came along to the all-party group because a constituent wrote to me. He has a brain tumour, and it is in remission at the moment. We have had this series of hearings, which is informing the report that we are about to publish. Funnily enough, in part, it is about finding effective ways to spend the money. Part of the reason that is given for the fact that the money committed after Tessa Jowell's death has not all been spent is that it involves getting approval in a very difficult area of research. I came to this knowing nothing, and that really came across.

Researchers are desperately keen to do more work. It is very troubling for the families that they have seen improvements in survival rates for breast cancer, leukaemia and others but basically almost no progress in brain tumour research to find effective treatments. The report we are going to publish has a number of very specific practical recommendations that we think would make a difference, and this would be a perfect opportunity for us to present that to the House and garner support from a lot of colleagues who will have an interest in this.

Holly Mumby-Croft: I came to this topic in a very similar way, through a constituent, and I have noticed the great degree of expertise that people who are affected by this hold, including my constituents. We have met lots of experts throughout this process, and they do have the answers—they know exactly what we need to do, and they are very specific about what needs to happen. It would be a fantastic opportunity to set that out in a productive way and have that conversation, and there is a great deal of cross-party interest in this.

Chair: Thank you. If we can find a slot, please accept the offer once it is made, because there is a Budget in March, and we are not sure exactly when it will be, but it might take up a Thursday, so time might be pressed. If we can get you a date as soon as possible in March, I hope you will accept it.

Sarah Champion made representations.

Q3 **Chair:** Hello Sarah. Your application this afternoon is on the subject of registered sex offenders changing their names.

Sarah Champion: I appreciate that this seems like a really odd and geeky topic, but actually, the questions I have been asking through written questions and letters to Ministers show that about 7,000 registered sex offenders drop off the list every year. They tend to be found again once they have changed their name, changed their passport, changed their driving licence and therefore got a clean DBS check, and they end up



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in schools or care homes and are found because they reoffend, then the police do a background check and discover that they have changed their name.

In legislation, there is currently provision to tag all these sex offenders, so that if they try to change their passport or driving licence, the police can do an investigation into them and make a decision on whether or not that is reasonable, but the Home Secretary wrote to say that she did not think it was proportionate to do this on everybody because of the costs involved.

I have been working with an amazing charity called the Safeguarding Alliance, which I was introduced to by Robert Halfon, because it is his constituents. It works across the country and has over 100 survivors who this has directly happened to. MPs keep on contacting me because their constituents who are survivors have got in touch.

We have got the Government to do two internal reviews, and we are trying to get them to act on the reviews and implement the safeguarding procedures. We have 36 MPs who want to speak, because it is a very real issue for an awful lot of people. To be quite blunt, it is something that, if we made some noise, we could get a win on. We would all be a lot safer because of it.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You have ticked the box to potentially have a Tuesday debate. What would be the answering Department? Would it be the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice?

Sarah Champion: This is the interesting question, because they bat us between both the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office. The Home Office is the one, because police and passports come under that Department, so we think that it is the one to go for. The Ministry of Justice technically has a small part to play, but it is only a small part.

Bob Blackman: There is an early opportunity for the Ministry of Justice to answer on a Tuesday, whereas there will be a queue for the Home Office.

Q5 **Chair:** A Tuesday debate would be 90 minutes, and you have 36 people who are interested in speaking. Whereas there might be an opportunity for a Thursday debate, where we could possibly give you the whole three hours in Westminster Hall.

Sarah Champion: That would be fabulous if that was possible.

Wera Hobhouse made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Hello Wera, nice to see you back. Your application is on the subject of Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you for having me, to ask for this very important debate for Eating Disorders Awareness Week, which is coming up on 27 February. I am chair of the APPG on eating disorders. We know that eating

disorders are the mental health disorder with the highest mortality rate. Eating disorders reached epidemic proportions during covid when the number of sufferers went up.

Obviously, we have achieved something in the last few years to raise awareness, but more needs to be done. As with many health conditions, prevention is better than cure, but, for that, people need to know what the early warning signs of an eating disorder are. They need to know how it affects young people particularly and how interactions on social media can make the condition worse. But they also need to know about research into the condition. We need to take away the stigma from eating disorders; that is one of the big reasons we need to talk about it more. A debate would be very useful.

Q7 Bob Blackman: I assume the Department of Health and Social Care would be the answering Department?

Wera Hobhouse: Yes.

Q8 Bob Blackman: On your application you have said you could do it basically any day. If we offered you Tuesday 28 February in Westminster Hall, would that be acceptable?

Wera Hobhouse: That would be great, thank you.

Chair: Anyone else? In that case, Wera, thank you very much.

Wera Hobhouse: Very quickly, would that be the 90-minute debate?

Bob Blackman: It would be, but that is for the Committee to decide.

Caroline Lucas and Sir Gary Streeter made representations.

Q9 Chair: Good afternoon, Caroline. Your application is on the subject of improving public access to nature.

Caroline Lucas: I am delighted to be here, and to also have Gary Streeter with me, who is co-proposing this initiative. We are asking for a three-hour debate in the Chamber, if possible. The timeliness of this debate is partly that ever since the covid pandemic there has been a renewed interest in public access to nature and a greater awareness of the physical and mental health wellbeing aspects of access to nature. More recently, DEFRA published its environmental improvement plan, with the commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space. This debate would be an opportunity to engage with the Minister in more detail about what that exactly means: what quality of green or blue space; how to guarantee it in perpetuity; how to apply it retrospectively; and how to ensure fair access.

Another aspect of timeliness is that a few weeks before that, on 13 January, a High Court judge ruled that the right to wild camp in England, specifically on Dartmoor, requires the consent of the landowner. That constitutes a significant blow to the public's access to nature. The decision



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is being appealed by the Dartmoor National Park Authority—but there is a lack of clarity over that. However, it is a decision that, ironically, has mobilised a much wider constituency of people now seeking to defend and extend the right to roam, which currently only applies to 8% of land, or 3% of rivers, in England.

I would not pretend that all my 42 co-signatories on this proposal are in favour of extending the right to roam, but I think they would agree that it is an important debate to have. Clarity should be achieved, and some of the debate will be around where responsibility sits alongside rights, and how we can ensure that the Government do more to publicise their new countryside code, for example. They spent a lot of time consulting on and producing a new countryside code, but hardly anybody knows anything about it. There are also issues around inequality, when it comes to people from ethnic minorities or with low incomes, who are far less likely to have access to green space.

The last thing I would say, before handing to Gary, would just be that 24 April marks the 91st anniversary of the famous Kinder Scout mass trespass in Derbyshire. That gave rise to the introduction of the first national parks, so a debate, if possible, before the end of March, let's say—because, obviously, recess then falls into the first half or two thirds of April—would be really helpful.

Q10 **Chair:** And you wouldn't want it closer to that anniversary?

Caroline Lucas: Well, if you were able to give me 20 April—it feels like there is only one date to get it in beforehand, because we are on recess until 17 April, but Kinder trespass is 24 April. If Thursday 20 April was a possibility, that would be very nice, but, if not, I would try to get it in before we break up.

Chair: Well, just remember, if you have a debate on Thursday 20 April, that Friday 21 April is my birthday, so you can—[*Laughter.*]

Caroline Lucas: I shall bear that in mind.

Bob Blackman: We can all turn up and protest, I suppose.

Chair: Okay, Gary?

Sir Gary Streeter: Just to briefly add to that, clarity is crucial right now on what we can and cannot do in national parks, and nature generally. I also chair the all-party parliamentary group on national parks, and, following the Glover report of two or three years ago, there is a very live conversation now about the future of national parks, the future of access, and so on. I am also a Dartmoor MP, and I think that, with the confusion and anger, in many ways caused by the High Court decision in January, which was unexpected, the great need now is for clarity.

It would be a debate where people can put forward their different points of view. Caroline and I wouldn't agree on every aspect of right to roam and access to nature—of course not—but we both agree on the need for



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clarity, and for the Government to come to the Chamber, in response to the debate, to give us an update on their thinking, to clarify as far as is humanly possible what this court decision means, and to reassure people that there will be access going forwards. That would be an extremely timely and helpful thing to do.

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

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** I have just one quick question. Obviously, you mentioned getting a debate on this for, say, 20 April. You wouldn't want it in March before we break up for the Easter recess?

Caroline Lucas: No, that would be good as well. I was not sure, to be quite honest, how big the waiting list was, so I thought that we would get in early and see what happens—but, yes, March is also good. I'd just prefer it not to be later than 20 April, if possible.

Chair: The issue of Dartmoor has certainly caused a lot of exercised debate on Radio 4, and, of course, the anniversary of the Kinder Scout trespass is something that is almost folklore now. Thank you very much for the application. It is much appreciated. Next up, please, is Dr Liam Fox.

Dr Liam Fox made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Your application, Dr Fox, is on World Down Syndrome Day.

Dr Fox: Yes, thank you, Chair. World Down Syndrome Day is on Tuesday 21 March. As you may or may not know, between one in 1,000 and one in 1,100 live births result in a Down syndrome child. We in the UK are the first country to legislate on this, and it is hugely important that we carry on the momentum that we had. It is also important politically that we show what, as a Parliament, we can do when we have genuine cross-party support. That private Member's Bill was supported by all the parties in the House, and I think it is widely recognised as a major step forward.

There are a couple of reasons why I am particularly keen for it to be in the Chamber, which both relate to the House of Commons itself. The first is that the legislation, when it was produced, said that guidelines would be laid before Parliament. Now, to me that means that all the relevant Select Committees should be able to question, in their own domains, what that legislation means. That means the Education Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee—and local government through the relevant Committee. We should be able to get from the Minister in the debate greater clarity on the Government's thinking about how that will operate, so that we as a House of Commons can have proper scrutiny.

The second reason is that the legislation itself begins the deanonymisation of civil service provision, in that it gives an instruction to the Secretary of State to name an individual on every integrated health board who will be responsible for the provision of the Act. We also need to tease out



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Government thinking on that; it was a major precedent set in the provision of public services. I think that is something that Members would want to get the opportunity to do, which we perhaps did not have when we did the first debate.

The Government—along with the charitable sector and professional bodies—are still developing the regulations, and it would be nice to hear from the Minister in this debate, given the level of interest in that week, exactly where the Government's thoughts are and progress is on the development of the regulations.

Finally, I think the legislation is a feather in the cap of the UK. I have had a lot of interest, particularly from individual states in the United States, to see whether they could replicate this type of legislation. I think it is good for the House to realise where we have set international precedents by working together. Perhaps we could say we don't get all that many opportunities to do so, but I think to celebrate it and take it forward when we can is a big plus for us and for the country. There is an opportunity that I may have, the day before, to speak at the UN in the international Down syndrome debate. I think that showing that the UK has given a lead is positive in every way.

Q13 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Given the number of speakers, this would obviously lend itself to a Chamber debate for three hours.

Dr Fox: It is, as always, hard to gauge from the number of supporters of these ideas how many will be willing to come and speak on a Thursday, but this has been such a big issue and has such a lot of momentum and so many colleagues spoke during the passage of the Bill itself that I think we would have no trouble getting a full three hours of speakers.

Chair: I believe the closest Thursday, if we are given the time, will be 23 March. Any questions, colleagues? No. Dr Fox, thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q14 Chair: Jim Shannon, the application that you have submitted for this afternoon is on human rights and religious minorities in Sudan.

Jim Shannon: Yes, Mr Chairman and the Committee; thanks very much. We have managed to gauge the support from the major parties, and a couple of other names have been added to the list I sent round earlier. I want to have this debate—this is through the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief—because Sudan is a country that perhaps we have not had the opportunity to focus on here in Westminster for some time. February/March is the 20th anniversary of the start of the genocide, and things that are happening in Darfur and Sudan are happening in many other places as well. There are human rights abuses. Women and girls are vulnerable to rape, kidnapping, forced marriage and domestic violence.



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Another issue we want to bring up in the debate—we will be looking towards the Government for this one—is UK aid. In 2022, the UK provided some £10.8 million in humanitarian assistance for food, nutritional supplements and safe drinking water, and the reason we want to speak about human rights and religious minorities is that the people are not getting this aid. Therefore, we think it is time that this issue was brought to the Government's attention. Last month, Open Doors had the launch of their "World Watch List" report here in Westminster. Sudan has now moved into the top 10 of the world's worst perpetrators—places where it's difficult to be a Christian.

A debate will do two things. It will serve as an opportunity to review the UK's humanitarian support to Sudan, ensuring that it is fairly distributed, and to highlight the issues of human rights abuses, especially against girls and women, but also across all ethnic groups in Sudan.

Chair: Thank you, Jim. Questions, colleagues, please.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** Is there any particular time pressure on this?

Jim Shannon: No, I am happy to go with whatever time you indicate.

Q16 **Chair:** If a slot were to come up on the first Thursday back, following the February recess, would you accept that?

Jim Shannon: I am afraid we have a Strangford association anniversary dinner, so I'm going home early that day and won't be available on that Thursday afternoon at all. That is not normal, by the way, but on that day I'm afraid I will not be here. Sorry about that—apologies.

Wendy Morton: How will we manage? *[Laughter.]*

Patricia Gibson: You will need to put in a lot of applications, Jim.

Chair: I can actually feel the revocation of a season ticket coming up here.

Patricia Gibson: There is the EU revocation Bill. This is the revocation of—*[Laughter.]*

Q17 **Chair:** Jim, thank you very much indeed. Obviously, that Thursday is a no-go. Will you be here that week at all?

Jim Shannon: I will be, yes. It's just that I have to go home early that Thursday because I have two guests coming: one from the Conservative party, and a guest speaker. I need to be there to welcome them.

Chair: Okay, Jim. Much appreciated. Thank you very much indeed.