

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 14 March 2023

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Watch the meeting

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

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Representations

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Nick Fletcher made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have seven applications in front us, the first is from Mr Nick Fletcher on the subject of Christianity and society. Over to you, Nick, and thank you very much for coming.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you, Mr Mearns, and thank you all for seeing me today. A recent census showed that fewer people are identifying as Christian, and yet it is still the faith of the majority of people in this country. I want to have a debate on why Christianity is important to believers and non-believers, basically through the constitution and our culture, which has made the country what it is today. I think it is extremely important that we support Christian people throughout the country, and that we let people be aware of the Christian faith and what it actually means to this country. I also believe that it is important for Members of Parliament and Ministers to hear that message too, because we are a Christian country and we are set as such in legislation, and our first reference point as a Christian country should be the majority of Christian people who make up our great nation.

Chair: Thank you. Questions, colleagues.

Q2 **Chris Green:** Is this debate more for a historical understanding of how important Christianity has been, or how much is it about the current importance of Christianity and the institutions we have today?

Nick Fletcher: It is both, actually. I think there is a general apathy to Christianity and its faith, but I also do not believe that people realise how much our constitution is actually based on it. We need to look back on history to see where we are and also look at where we are going as a country moving forward. There are an awful lot of historical facts in this building and an awful lot of heritage that has made us what we are today. Simply take the way that this place works, with the bishops in the Lords, our King as head, with his Government underneath him, but Christ above the King. That all forms part of our unwritten constitution and I do not believe that many people understand how that affects this place.

Q3 **Patricia Gibson:** It is a really interesting topic for a debate, but there are no names from either Labour or the SNP. I was going to say that you have not approached those Members, but perhaps you have and it has not worked. Are those names missing because you did not have time, or there may be other reasons?

Nick Fletcher: There is a Labour MP listed.

Patricia Gibson: Is there?

Chair: On the second page.

Patricia Gibson: So there is. I apologise.



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Nick Fletcher: Ruth Jones is on there, and Tim Farron. I put the application out initially to the Christians in Parliament, and I basically got enough names back, so I thought straightaway to get the debate moving forward.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application, Nick. That is registered. That is excellent. Thank you very much.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Our next application is from Jim Shannon. On paper, the application is supported by Carla Lockhart, but she is not here. The application this afternoon is on the subject of support for women living in poverty in the UK.

Jim Shannon: Chairman, I actually hoped that Carla would be here, but unfortunately she is not over until tomorrow, so she has asked me to come. She and I have discussed the matter for some time, and you can see by those who have added their names to the application that we have a cross-party list of prominent Members from all the parties, and others who want to take, who have not signed the application just yet.

We have made this application having talked to Members across the House and the facts are quite clear. Poverty has affected many people in the United Kingdom, but women in particular have been affected in a very difficult way. We have just had a Westminster Hall debate, led by Amy Callaghan, on single parents. And by and large, single parents are mothers who are looking after children, so when it comes to poverty, the level of poverty for them is quite real. The figures indicate that one fifth of women—22%—have a persistent low income. I think any of us, as elected representatives, will know that right away; there is absolutely no doubt about it. That is compared with a figure of—this is still bad—14% for men. Many ladies are living in persistent poverty, which denies women the opportunity to build up savings and assets to fall back on in times of hardship. More often than not, the pressure of running a family home, whether we are talking about a single parent or just a lady looking after the household, can lead to extensive poverty. Also, the figures indicate that black and minority ethnic women have even higher rates again—if it's possible to have a higher rate of poverty, they have it.

This is subject matter that has not been touched on before—not that I am aware of, Mr Chairman. I stand to be corrected, but I'm not aware of it. From some of the research that we have done, it seems that Bangladeshi women and Pakistani women are especially affected. I have a particular interest in the people of Pakistan—that is not a secret—so I am aware that, in particular, BME women are vulnerable. That is because of lower pay, higher rates of unemployment and economic inactivity, the likelihood of being a single parent and the likelihood of having a large family. All those things put together a strong dynamic, unfortunately, which leads to female poverty and child poverty. The Fawcett Society gives some figures. That is in the background information. I am sure that everybody has it in front of them and I do not need to go over it, but it shows that 64% of the



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lowest-paid workers are women. It paints a picture of a very difficult and perhaps tragic scenario in the United Kingdom today.

For those reasons, I felt, and Carla feels, that this subject matter would be worthy of discussion here at Westminster.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Am I right in thinking that you would be happy for this to be a Westminster Hall debate, Jim?

Jim Shannon: You know me, Mr Chairman: if you give me Westminster Hall, I'll take it.

Chair: Are there any questions, colleagues?

Q6 **Kevin Foster:** Jim, I am just wondering which Department you would see as likely to be replying to this debate and on what particular aspect. Would it be the Treasury, DWP—

Jim Shannon: I thought it was probably more one for the DWP, Kevin, simply because of the nature of the subject matter. I am not sure how we address the poverty, but if you want to address poverty, it always has to be the DWP, doesn't it?

Q7 **Chair:** It could be Women and Equalities.

Jim Shannon: Well, whatever you say, Chair, I am happy with.

Chair: I think what we try to do is determine the subject matter and the Government try to determine which is the best Department to reply, but it is interesting to see what your perspective is, Jim.

Patricia Gibson: Is there an overlap between those Departments?

Chair: I think there quite possibly is, but one of them is going to have to do it; that's the trouble.

Patricia Gibson: I am sure I have seen DWP Ministers sitting on the Benches with Women and Equalities—

Chair: I have a funny feeling, though, that only one of them will turn up.

Kevin Foster: Yes, sometimes at Women and Equalities questions there will be different Departments for specific things.

Kate Osborne: The problem is that there are many reasons that impact why women are living in poverty. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: That is a Division in the Lords, so don't panic, everybody; it's all right. Thank you very much, Jim; that is much appreciated.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Chair: Our next application is from Mr Jim Shannon!

Jim Shannon: Yes, another one—thank you.

Q8 **Chair:** Jim, I understand that this application is on the subject of religious minorities in Nigeria.

Jim Shannon: Yes. I have added a few more names on to it. I will give you my copy, Mr Chairman, if that's helpful.

Chair: That will be very useful, Jim; thank you.

Jim Shannon: Through the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, we visited Nigeria back at the end of May and beginning of June last year. We had wanted to go to Nigeria for some time. It is a country that has 232 million people. It is a cosmopolitan part of Africa where 50% of the people are of a Christian belief and 50% of the people are of an Islamic belief. It very much, I think, reflects life across all of Africa.

As you know, the elections are just over, and there is some concern over how the results were arrived at. It could well be that some think that the opposition parties fragmented a bit and therefore reduced their capacity to actually be a credible Opposition against the Government.

We visited quite extensively across the north-east and middle belt of Nigeria. The UN special adviser on prevention of genocide has highlighted the increasing risk of violence in Nigeria against Christian and minority Muslim communities—high levels of violence, hate speech, incitement to violence, displacement. Some 5 million people have been displaced from the north-east, the middle belt, and further south. The last 12 months have seen a record number of attacks on places of worship and religious minority in the north and middle states. It has even gone on in the western states and down towards the delta as well. More Christians have been killed in Nigeria than any other Christian groups in the rest of the world. That gives you an idea of the magnitude.

Obviously, I have a burden in my heart for my Christian brothers and sisters, as do others, but we also have to stand up for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no beliefs. Therefore, this debate will go beyond one particular religious group.

Nigeria's official Government position is that they've almost denied the religious persecution, despite all the figures showing it at a level which is quite hard to take in. The APPG had occasion last week to meet the new high commissioner who will be going to Nigeria just after Easter. We've also got a cross-section of interested MPs. Some are Labour MPs—your own colleagues, Mr Chairman—and I think of Marsha de Cordova, Taiwo Owatemi, Florence Eshalomi, Navendu Mishra. From the Conservative side, we now have the names of Nick Fletcher, Fiona Bruce, Alexander Stafford, along with Sir Edward Leigh and Andrew Selous. We also have Brendan O'Hara, who's a good friend of mine and has a really deep interest in these issues as well. We've got a good cross-section.

It's time to revisit this issue and to revisit it very, very soon. We did a report on Nigeria way back—I think it was 2015 or 2016—and the trip last year gives us that chance to catch up. We think now, in the light of the escalation in violence and murders among religious groups across Nigeria,

that this thing is of so much importance that we need to come back again.

Q9 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Jim. I think that's a very full application and a very full explanation of the application, so thank you very much indeed. That's very useful.

Jim Shannon: I'm quite happy with whatever you give me, but if it is not spoken for, could I ask for the first Tuesday back, if you don't mind me doing so? If you do, just tell me.

Q10 **Chair:** So that would be the first Tuesday after Easter recess

Jim Shannon: Yes.

Q11 **Chair:** I am not sure if the right Department would be answering then, but it's a possibility.

Jim Shannon: Okay. I have put the request in and will go with whatever you tell me.

Chris Law and Tommy Sheppard made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Next up is Chris Law. Chris, your application this afternoon is for a debate on the motion "That this House has considered systematic discrimination and human rights violations against Palestinians." Over to you.

Chris Law: Thank you, Ian. It has been a number of years since I was last in front of the Backbench Business Committee, so I have written a few notes. Let me say a little about why I think this debate is important. The last debate on Palestine, in February 2022, was on recognition of the state of Palestine, but this last 12 months has, in the words of the UN, been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the Israel-occupied west bank in 16 years. It has been the most turbulent year for the Palestinian people.

I sit on the International Development Committee and had the opportunity to visit both the west bank and East Jerusalem towards the end of last year. I heard at first hand testimony from Palestinians, NGOs, and the commissioner there.

The main issue is that, as I say, this has been the deadliest year in the last 16 years. A number of events have happened over the last year. The one that most of us will be aware of is the killing of Shireen Abu Akleh, a 51-year-old Palestinian-American TV correspondent for al-Jazeera, while she was covering a military raid on the Jenin refugee camp. That is one clear, notable death. Just before her burial, Israeli forces attacked the mourners carrying her coffin. Multiple investigations have found Israel responsible for her killing, and Israel eventually admitted, in September of last year, that there was a "high possibility" that one of its soldiers had killed Abu Akleh. However, Israeli authorities refused to launch a criminal investigation.

Also, the fifth Israeli parliamentary elections in less than four years resulted in the creation of the most far-right-wing Government in the country's 74-year history. UN officials have said: "2022 is the sixth year of

consecutive annual increase in the number of Israeli settler attacks in the occupied West Bank". They have also said: "Disturbing evidence of Israeli forces frequently facilitating, supporting and participating in settler attacks...makes it difficult to discern between Israeli settler and State violence".

The February 2023 acts of state-backed settler violence against Palestinians in Huwara are just one feature of a system of institutionalised discrimination. Further escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine in February urgently underscores the need for international justice and accountability measures to be meaningfully implemented, so that the perpetrators can be held to account for their crimes. Ongoing systematic and discriminatory human rights violations, including those that are illegal under international law, contribute to insecurity, instability and conflict in the region, and are likely to be an obstacle to peace under any political system.

Amnesty International and the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory have concluded that there are systematic discrimination and human rights violations against Palestinians as a result of the "political system of entrenched rule in the occupied Palestinian territory". In October of last year, the United Nations independent international commission of inquiry on the occupied Palestinian territory announced future reports to cover these human rights abuses.

The key reason for the debate is that so far the UK Government has rejected such assessments and opposed the open-ended nature of the commission of inquiry on the situation in Israel, the west bank and Gaza. It states: "The cause of advancing human rights in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is not served by the disproportionate focus on Israel." Lastly—I am sure we all agree on this—the UK Government must ensure that Israel faces consequences for its continued illegal settlement expansion, and support international measures to ensure accountability for human rights violations.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you, Chris. Tommy, do you want to add something?

Tommy Sheppard: I am here, partly as vice-chair of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, to indicate to this Committee that there is wide support across the House for a debate on this topic. Several things have changed dramatically since the House last debated it. One is the increase in civilian violence in the occupied territories, but perhaps more important is the interplay between Government policy and action, and settler violence on the ground. That is a distinct phenomenon that creates a new situation. The other thing that is completely different from when we last discussed the topic—colleagues will have seen this if they have been watching television—is the degree of mobilisation in Israeli civil society against what is going on. I am referring to the very big demonstrations in Tel Aviv, Haifa and elsewhere against the violence in the occupied territories. This is an opportune moment for the House to consider this



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topic, and its weight is such that it really ought to be discussed in the main Chamber.

Chris Law: Agreed.

- Q14 **Chair:** For a main Chamber debate, we normally aim for three hours, although we very rarely get that; and for a three-hour debate, we would look for about 15 or 16 signatories, but you seem to have only about half that.

Chris Law: I could get the other half for you.

Chair: The application is submitted and is live, but we cannot action it until we have some more names, Chris, in essence. Are there any questions, colleagues?

- Q15 **Wendy Morton:** On those extra names, it might be helpful to have a bit more political balance.

Chris Law: Yes, of course.

Wendy Morton: I'm sure you won't have a problem with that. I note that there are only two on the Government side, and the others are on the other side.

Chair: Anyone else? No. In that case, Chris and Tommy, thank you very much; your coming is much appreciated.

Peter Aldous and **Judith Cummins** made representations.

- Q16 **Chair:** This is the last application before the Committee today, although we have two others that people are happy to have proceed as paper applications. Last, but definitely not least, we have Peter Aldous and Judith Cummins on the subject of NHS dentistry. We have a convention; we have already had a debate on NHS dentistry, which I think you had a big hand in sponsoring. We don't like to have two debates with the same title, so if you would like to call it "NHS Dentistry: Progress"—or lack of it—or "NHS Dentistry: Updates", or something of that nature, we would be very happy.

Peter Aldous: Actually, Mr Mearns, this is the third time that we have been in front of you about a debate on NHS dentistry. I very much agree with your observation. The last time you granted us a debate, it was in the main Chamber back in October. We had a motion that said that the Government should report back on progress in three months' time, at which point I asked a question about it at Health questions. I got a sort of progress report in two sentences, but this is such an important issue that we need a more substantive progress report, so your suggested title fits well.

Speaking for myself, and I am sure for Judith and a lot of other colleagues, the issue has remained—dare I say it?—at the top of the hit parade, if there is such a thing, in our inboxes for longer than "Bohemian



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Rhapsody” or something like that. It has been around for a very, very long time.

Chair: I wouldn’t know; I’m just a poor boy from a poor family.

Kevin Foster: Oh, deary me!

Peter Aldous: I sense that the Government recognise that there is a problem, but our constituents largely do not see that when they ring to get an appointment with an NHS dentist. We need to look in detail at the proposals that the Government are bringing forward, and to make our own suggestions on what they should be looking at.

There are three issues that I would highlight. Obviously, there is a funding issue. The problem at the moment is that NHS dentistry has an annual budget in the order of £3 billion, and 10% of that—£300 million—gets clawed back by the Treasury at the end of each year, because the system is so broken that it can’t spend it. At the very least, we need to make sure that the £300 million remains available to NHS dentistry.

The NHS contract reforms have been talked about for a long time, and I would like to get a feel for where we are with them. I hear from Government sources that in some respects, the situation is very positive—they are beginning to make significant proposals—but when I listen to the British Dental Association, they question that. It would be good to get a handle on that issue.

There is also a staffing issue in the short term. The Government have passed statutory instruments to make it easier to recruit from overseas, but the feedback that I am picking up is that getting those overseas dentists registered with the General Dental Council is proving very time-consuming. That is why we need the debate.

In a relatively short time, we got 20 supporters for the debate from both the main parties in England. I suspect we could get supporters from other parties as well, and there were several names that came in after the deadline we set people for coming back to us. I will hand over to Judith.

Judith Cummins: Thank you. It is a feeling of “Here we are again,” isn’t it? I have been campaigning in this place on access to NHS dentistry for the last eight years, and I have to say that instead of getting better, the situation is getting worse and worse. That is certainly reflected right across the House. Everybody feels very passionately about this issue. On both sides of the House, we all know how it is. Access has always been the issue for me, and it is the issue for our constituents: 90% of adults are not able to register with a dentist, because 90% of NHS dental surgeries are not accepting new adult patients. That calls into question the national health service’s ability to provide dentistry.

The situation has gone from urgent to crisis point. Something needs to be done. We keep getting promised that action will come in weeks or months, but year has followed year. I would welcome the opportunity to have another debate. I thank this Committee for its support for our previous



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debates, but I trust that you will understand the need for another debate. Although this is a complex issue—there are lots of complicated funding formulas—the main thing is progress in reforming NHS dentistry to ensure access for our constituents.

Chair: Thank you. I am sure that at some stage, your tenacity will set Ministers' teeth on edge.

- Q17 **Patricia Gibson:** Dentistry is devolved, so the debate will focus on England, or England and Wales. As I am sure you are aware, however, every single sector in the UK faces skills shortages and labour shortages, and that issue is not devolved. From what you say, dentistry is not immune from that problem. As I have discovered from my investigation of the issue, when you are trying to recruit from overseas, there is a real problem with reciprocal arrangements for the recognition of qualifications. I hate to say it, but that has been exacerbated by Brexit. The other field I have particularly seen that in is architecture. The Government have to pick up on that when they try to recruit from overseas, as I am sure you would both like.

Judith Cummins: Indeed. A dentist practice in my constituency raised that. There is a Brexit dimension, but what would be massively helpful are terms of reciprocity between us and Ukraine. I have dentists from Ukraine who are now acting as dental hygienists rather than fully qualified dentists. That is madness.

Patricia Gibson: You are right: the issue of reciprocal arrangements goes beyond the EU. You might be able to recruit dentists from beyond Europe—from America, Canada or wherever—but that reciprocity is very difficult. Those arrangements are partly the problem.

Judith Cummins: I agree.

- Q18 **Chair:** Do colleagues have any further questions?

Peter Aldous: Can I add a couple of points to what Patricia said? She highlighted why a further debate would be opportune. The Government are due to come out with their NHS workforce planning proposals fairly shortly, and we need to make sure that NHS dentistry features prominently in them. We need to scrutinise the issue of recruitment from overseas. I have been very much advised by dentistry professionals that our qualifications are compatible with qualifications and experience from overseas, whether that is in or outside the EU—I am thinking in particular of Commonwealth countries—but it has been raised with me today that that might not be the case, so that is something that I would like to explore further.

- Q19 **Wendy Morton:** We all recognise from our casework the challenges with dentistry. I notice that you ticked both 90 minutes and three hours. Given the number of names on the list, I am guessing that the debate should be three hours; if it was 90 minutes, it might be a bit of a squeeze to get everybody in. What is your thinking?



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Peter Aldous: That is true. We are very much beholden to you; it is up to you where and when the debate takes place, but we are slightly wary about Thursday 30 March, for obvious reasons.

Chair: It is already taken. I am afraid to say that we do not have any time in the main Chamber until after the Easter recess. It would more than likely be a Thursday, depending on what time the Government offer us. As you can see from the business of the House today, we occasionally get other days.

Judith Cummins: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am glad to say that that was not an easy come, easy go debate application.