

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 21 March 2023

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

Questions 1-3

Representations made

[I](#): Patrick Grady

Patrick Grady made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We did have two applications before us this afternoon, the first of which was in the name of Mr Simon Hoare MP, for a debate on the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. However, we were informed earlier in the week—in the last couple of days, in fact—that, although we previously thought that we were going to get Thursday 30 March in the Chamber, we are now not going to get it. The Government are retaining that time, as we understand it, and are proposing that there will be a debate on the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, so that makes Simon Hoare’s application redundant.

We only have one other application, and it is an in-person application from Patrick Grady. Welcome, Patrick. Lovely to see you. Thank you for coming. Your application is on the hunger crisis in the east and horn of Africa.

Patrick Grady: Thank you, Chair. The hunger crisis in the east and horn of Africa is in some ways not a new thing; this is perhaps the fifth year in a row that there have been seriously acute shortages of food and food security challenges in the area. The causes are multiple and complex. There is considerable political instability in most of the countries affected, there are longer-term climate impacts, and in more recent months—over the course of the past year or so—the crisis in Ukraine has exacerbated the situation because of the difficulty of getting food aid into the country.

As I said on the application form, the WHO estimates that nearly 50 million people are facing crisis levels of food insecurity. Other agencies put the figure even higher—it depends on what measure you use—but there is no question but that this is a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic proportions. That is reflected by the decision of many of the UK aid agencies to launch emergency appeals.

There has already been an indication of interest, both from across the House and from our constituents. The subject featured quite heavily on the Order Paper last week at FCDO questions, and there were a number of other Members bobbing to come in. There was also a very well-attended lobby back in February, put together by a coalition of aid agencies. I think that suggests that if a debate is granted, many of those organisations would take an interest and probably try to encourage more Members to come along and speak than just the ones who have submitted their names.

I should say that I gave a couple of additional names to the Clerk just before I came up here. I hope that demonstrates that there is a wide range of support across the Back Benches. As I say, I think the debate will give Members the opportunity to explore these issues in more detail than Question Time or even an Adjournment debate would allow. It will allow people to bring different perspectives and experiences to the debate, looking at the whole range of things—climate change, displacement and migration, and political instability. Importantly, it will also allow people to discuss both what the UK Government can do to respond, in practical



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terms, with the resources that it has available just now, and the wider political context of the development of the aid budget and the outcome of the integrated review. I hope the Committee will look upon the application favourably.

Chair: Thank you. Questions, colleagues?

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Patrick, the application seems quite wide in terms of where and when you would like to hold the debate. There are opportunities in Westminster Hall, potentially on either 25 April—that is a Tuesday morning, when the FCDO is answering—or the previous Thursday, 20 April, but that would be the last debate before we rise on the 20th. It will be the second debate, if you see what I mean. It is either 9.30 am on a Tuesday or 3 pm on a Thursday.

Patrick Grady: Yes. I think most of the Members who have signed the application would probably prefer a Tuesday morning slot. I was aware that the next cycle of FCDO response would probably be after the break. The Tuesday would probably guarantee us a slightly fuller Chamber in Westminster Hall, and I think we would be content with that. I think we could fill 90 minutes quite usefully if that was the slot that was available. It is a crisis situation, but it is not going to be resolved the other side of the Easter recess, so there will still be plenty for people to say.

Q3 **Chair:** You have said, Patrick, that you have added some names. The application was submitted with seven. How many do you have in total now?

Patrick Grady: I was able to give the Clerk two more names confirmed from the Labour party, and the name of one Government Member, who was not 100% committed but was very interested.

Chair: Thank you very much. From my perspective, that is fine in terms of an application for a Westminster Hall debate. If colleagues have no further questions, that brings our public deliberations to an end.