

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 28 March 2023

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

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Representations made

[I](#): Sir Stephen Timms

[II](#): Selaine Saxby

Sir Stephen Timms made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have two applications before us this afternoon, the first of which is presented by Sir Stephen Timms. Welcome, Stephen; nice to see you again. Your application this afternoon is on the issue of no recourse to public funds.

Sir Stephen Timms: Thank you very much indeed for the opportunity to make this application. No recourse to public funds is a long established feature of our system. The rules were tightened up in 2012, but it particularly came to prominence during covid for a substantial number of hard-working, law-abiding families when their jobs came to an end because of the lockdown, they weren't allowed to apply for benefit because of no recourse to public funds, and they were completely destitute, in a way that I don't think was ever envisaged.

I raised this with the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, at the Liaison Committee, and his sort of off-the-cuff response was that people in that situation—hard-working, law-abiding families—ought to be entitled to help of one sort or another. I very much agreed with him, but actually there wasn't any. There was an arrangement whereby people who were destitute could apply for a change of circumstances, which would enable them to be exempted from no recourse to public funds. That arrangement is in place; it works. The great majority of those who apply for exemption are successful, but the opportunity is not well known, and to apply successfully, you do need specialist help—it is a complicated, difficult exercise—and a lot of people don't have access to that.

I think there is a cross-party view that we ought to be able to prevent destitution. There will no doubt always be people who are poor, but we shouldn't have people in the UK who are completely destitute. I was speaking to the Trussell Trust's chief executive this morning, who said to me that, in about one in six of its food banks, the main reason people are there is no recourse to public funds. It is quite a localised thing: it is not the case across the country, but in some food banks it is the most prominent reason for needing it.

There has been a welcome move on the part of the Government now to make permanent the accessibility of free school meals for children from families with no recourse to public funds, and the Work and Pensions Committee, which I chair, recommended that families with children should not be in a "no recourse public fund" situation for longer than five years. That is a recommendation that the Government unfortunately have rejected, but I would welcome the opportunity, as I think all the applicants for this debate would, to air these issues and to ask Ministers to comment on what we might do to improve the position.

There is a final point on data. It is estimated that about 1.4 million people in the UK, including 175,000 children, are in families with no recourse to



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public funds. That is an estimate from the Migration Observatory at Oxford University; there is no official data on this at all. We don't even know—the Home Office can't tell us—how many people are given leave to remain with no recourse to public funds every year, which you would think would be really straightforward to establish, but it doesn't know. The Home Office has for a period now been promising better data on this, as a result of implementing a new casework IT system, but there is no sign as yet of that improved data, so another thing I would hope to do in this debate is press Ministers for an update on progress on that front.

Q2 Kevin Foster: Stephen, knowing regularly you pursue these issues, do you think 90 minutes will be long enough for a debate, given the issues you have already outlined?

Sir Stephen Timms: This is not an issue in every part of the country. I have no doubt that we could occupy a longer slot; my thinking was to make a relatively modest request that I am confident would be full, with contributions from all sides of the House. I am sure we could manage longer, but I was modest in my supplication.

Q3 Bob Blackman: Just to compliment you, Stephen, the Department for Levelling Up did not keep data during Everyone In on the number of people with no recourse to public funds that were taken literally off the streets, and they still do not have the data, so it is not just limited to the Home Office overall. There is a possibility of having the debate on Thursday 20 April, which is obviously the week we come back after the Easter recess, in Westminster Hall. Would that suit your diary?

Sir Stephen Timms: It would suit me very well.

Q4 Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed. I must admit, I have a number of constituency cases that fall into this category, and for a lot of different reasons, such as failed asylum seekers who will not be deported back to their home country, because it is just too dangerous for them to go there, but who cannot be granted asylum for whatever reason.

I must admit, I don't understand how that pans out, but it is the case for a number of my constituents. Again, they have no recourse to public funds, and I think one of them in particular lives on a weekly grant of about £30 from the local authority—it is God and good neighbours after that. I have a great deal of sympathy with this, Stephen.

There is an opportunity, potentially, for a Westminster Hall debate on the first Thursday back after the Easter recess. If that offer comes your way—

Sir Stephen Timms: Can I ask, Ian, what time that would be on that Thursday?

Q5 Chair: We have two slots currently, but the 1.30 pm slot is available.

Sir Stephen Timms: For me that would be a difficult one.

Q6 Chair: Or 3 o'clock.

Sir Stephen Timms: Three o'clock I could do, yes.



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Q7 **Chair:** Okay. From our perspective, the 1 o'clock to 1.30 pm slot is more sellable to most people than the 3 o'clock slot.

Sir Stephen Timms: Actually, looking at the diary, I could do 1.30 pm. I will have to swap something else around, but yes.

Q8 **Chair:** Okay, right. And that's your final say on it?

Sir Stephen Timms *indicated assent.*

Chair: That is much appreciated, Stephen. Thank you very much indeed.

Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Next up this afternoon is our second applicant, Selaine Saxby. Good afternoon, Selaine; it is lovely to see you. Your application is on the subject of reducing plastic pollution in our oceans. Over to you.

Selaine Saxby: I recognise that this is something we have perhaps talked about a lot up here. Those of us with coastal constituencies obviously spend quite a lot of time clearing plastic off oceans and beaches.

What has triggered this particular debate is that the UN Treaty on Plastic Pollution is at the end of May, where they are negotiating new terms, but there is also a Dutch project called Ocean Cleanup where they are actually trying to clean the Pacific garbage patch. Whereas we might be trying to stop putting plastic into the ocean here in our own little way, what they have done is identify the 1,000 most polluting rivers in the world and take steps—when you watch video footage of what they do—to actually stop the plastic getting out.

The garbage patch is now over 1 million km². It is just utterly terrifying how big this thing is in the middle of the Pacific. They have two boats with a large net in between, and they are literally clearing it up. It is a group I am working with going forward. We hope to actually live feed from the garbage patch in September when their team goes out.

We called for the debate on this topic so that everyone could participate from their own local experiences and the great things we do on our beaches to stop our own plastics, but on beaches like mine in Croyde we see the microplastics come back in, because there is also the legacy plastic to deal with. So this was an opportunity to bring what we have done before together with what the world is actually facing in clearing up what we have already done—not to mention what we are still doing and what we can do ourselves here, as well how we can contribute on an international scale. In the way that we lead the world in climate change, could we be doing more? There is a Dutch company doing this at the moment, but could we be more involved in that and influence what is happening in the UN?

I think most of us feel that what is happening in the Pacific is a long way away, but that plastic breaks down and starts to come ashore, and a huge amount of it is linked to fishing. There are many questions around for those of us with coastal communities and fishing fleets about how we do



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good for everyone to protect our fishermen and keep their businesses literally afloat, as well as making sure, at the same time, that the planet and oceans are there to be a harvest bed and that they do not deliver more pollution on to our beaches from things that have already happened.

I kept this as a broad topic so that people could contribute in whichever way they wanted. But what drove the application at this time is the much bigger international movement to try to clear up the oceans, as well as just our local beaches.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions please, colleagues.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** You were here for the previous application. I have the same question for you: would Thursday 20 April be acceptable?

Selaine Saxby: That's a problematic Thursday for me, unfortunately, with the long journey—I have to get back that night—unless it is the morning. I could do the morning and then get back, but the afternoon is difficult. Sorry.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Is that just on that particular Thursday?

Selaine Saxby: I checked when Stephen was talking to you—on that particular Thursday evening, I need to be back in North Devon and it is at least a five-hour run.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** What about 27 April?

Selaine Saxby: That one is much better. It would be absolutely fine.

Q13 **Chair:** That is a possibility, okay. Thank you.

Selaine Saxby: I would prefer the 1.30 pm slot.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** There's a possibility of a Chamber slot.

Chair: But it wouldn't be the 1.30 pm slot. There is no 1.30 pm slot in the Chamber.

Selaine Saxby: The Chamber would be fantastic. Obviously, quite a lot of people did sign up to this and there was quite a lot of interest. I am working with a SNP MP on the global clean-up.

Q15 **Chair:** This is something that we have been talking about for a lot of years. There was a ban on microbeads in our scrubs, shower gels and things a number of years ago, so we have been talking about this for a long time. I might be wrong, but am I right in thinking that there is also a rubbish patch in the Atlantic?

Selaine Saxby: It is not as big as the Pacific one. The mission of the global group is to start tackling the legacy. It is lovely that we can do something around our island, but obviously, our oceans are interconnected. When you look at the scale of it, it is absolutely horrifying. For those of you who are interested, we are hoping to put on the video on that they have shown to me before we get to the debate, or have it linked into the debate for people to see the wider issue.



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Kevin Foster: Chair, to add support to potentially looking at the Chamber, Torbay is a geopark, and the advice is that we are entering a new geological age because of the amount of plastic starting to lay down on the bottom of the ocean that will then be compacted into rock. So there is a massive legacy to this.

Chair: We already had a geological Pleistocene age, didn't we?

Q16 **Patricia Gibson:** Is World Ocean Day not on the horizon, so to speak?

Selaine Saxby: I think World Ocean Day is on the horizon.

Q17 **Patricia Gibson:** I think it is in May—I remember that we had a Westminster Hall debate about it last year.

Selaine Saxby: I led a World Ocean Day debate one year, so I ought to know what day it is.

Q18 **Patricia Gibson:** I am pretty sure it is in May—on 8 May or something like that. I don't know why I have that date in my head.

Selaine Saxby: I will have another debate for World Ocean Day, Patricia, I promise. It is on 8 June.

Chair: Bear in mind that, because of the coronation, there is no Thursday for us in early May. Who knows? We might be allocated another day in the week by Her Majesty's Government in or around that particular time, but there is no guarantee of that.

Wendy Morton: Just to add something in support of the debate, if it does come to the Chamber, I have noticed of late that several schools are running a lot of projects on oceans and plastic pollution. So there is a relevance not just to colleagues who have sea or ocean-facing seats, but even to those of us who are landlocked. I know from experience that it is not just about the big garbage piles in the middle of the oceans; a lot of coastal Africa is blighted with this sort of pollution as well—not to the same extent, but this could lend itself to a really wide-ranging debate.

Patricia Gibson: And it has wide-ranging implications because what goes into the sea enters our food chain.

Wendy Morton: Yes.

Chair: And apologies to His Majesty for referring to the Government as "Her Majesty's Government".

Selaine Saxby: It is a hard habit to break.

Chair: It is. Thank you very much, Selaine; that is much appreciated. We will now go into private session.