

Backbench Business Committee

Oral evidence: Backbench Business

Tuesday 18 April 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 18 April 2023.

Watch the meeting

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

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Representations

[I](#): Crispin Blunt and Ronnie Cowan.

[II](#): Naz Shah.

[III](#): Dame Angela Eagle and Elliot Colburn.

[IV](#): Tim Loughton.

[V](#): Mohammad Yasin and Antony Higginbotham.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a number of applications in front of us this afternoon. The first one is presented by Crispin Blunt and Ronnie Cowan.

Crispin Blunt and Ronnie Cowan made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to you both. I understand that this is about psilocybin access rights. Over to you, please.

Crispin Blunt: Thank you very much, Chair. I am going to read a statement that Charlotte Nichols has sent me, which includes her apologies. She is the third of our triumvirate who are presenting this case.

"I'm very sorry that an urgent matter to deal with has kept me away this afternoon at the last minute, as I desperately wanted to be here in person to convey why this issue is so important to me professionally and personally, and why it is something I've been working so hard to hard to raise the profile of as a policy issue over the last two years with Crispin and other colleagues cross-party; something that I hope this backbench debate if granted will help with getting us over the line with the Government.

As members of this committee may have heard me speak on previously, I live with post traumatic stress disorder—something I didn't have when I was elected, and which I've been sectioned for during my time as an MP, following being the victim of life-changing violent crime at an event in my capacity as a constituency MP that I won't detail the specifics of in this setting knowing that this is broadcast and while the criminal case against the assailant is ongoing because of sub judice rules.

Most people typically associate PTSD with our veteran community, but actually the highest incidence of this is from victims of crime, and the highest proportions are among survivors of sexual violence and child sexual exploitation.

I don't want anyone's sympathy, but what I **do** want is adequate treatment pathways for those living with a condition that I unfortunately know first hand just how debilitating it is. I am only alive because I was sectioned in the months following this attack and because of the follow up support I have had since through Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing, but even with the help I get far beyond what the vast majority of our constituents could expect through the NHS, I am only **managing** my PTSD and must live alongside it indefinitely.

Psilocybin offers a potentially curative treatment pathway for people like me living with conditions that are—let's not sugar coat this—far too often, fatal because our existing treatments are so inadequate. Conditions including PTSD, treatment resistant depression, anorexia, and addiction.

Our scheduling policies act as a barrier not only to treatment paradigms that no other medication or therapy can provide, but most cruelly even severely restrict research! This flies in the face of the evidence from the limited trials that have been able to take place in the UK, but also the far more substantial research from countries like the US and Australia who are both moving to make this treatment available in their jurisdictions off the back of that evidence that shows how it can benefit many people who have given up hope of ever being able to live with their illness because of its severity, and for whom the grave feels like the only respite.

We are **long overdue** this debate in the UK, and every day that we delay means veterans, rape survivors, victims of crime and all those with mental health conditions that could benefit from this treatment are subjected to a misery we could be released from if only there were the political will to even discuss what that might look like.

I beg the committee to grant us this application and the fullest possible time to discuss in detail a way forward that we might finally see some long overdue action.”

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Ronnie, do you have anything to add?

Ronnie Cowan: It is interesting. I am not coughing for comical effect; I currently have a chest infection, so I am taking medication for it. I dip into my pocket and take my antibiotics, but these antibiotics have been through all sorts of tests and different clinicians before they come to the marketplace, so we know that we can take this stuff safely. The issue we have with psilocybin, which you may know as magic mushrooms—because that is basically where it comes from—is that we cannot do the proper research to get it to the stage where it can be prescribed by doctors, because the classification of this drug is such that it is too expensive to do it.

If you are going to keep psilocybin in a laboratory, it has to be on a wall in a safe with a camera on it, and it costs a huge amount of money to do this research, so people are walking away from it and doing easier research. Recently, we have found that psychoactive drugs, which a lot of people think of as being party-type drugs—MDMA, ecstasy and stuff like that—have serious clinical benefits for people with very serious disorders, and we are not getting the research done so that people can safely say, “I can take that, and it will help me with my situation.”

We are talking about the whole thing widely, in general. Psilocybin as a particular product has been wrapped up in drugs legislation since the 1960s and 1970s. We made it worse when we cracked down on psychoactive drugs, and because of that something that has the potential to do an enormous amount of good for a number of people in terrible situations is not having the proper research done on it. I am not saying that it is a miracle drug for all of these people—there is no miracle drug—but what we are doing right now is trying to act partially in darkness, because the research is not allowed to be done because of the classification of the drug. I am now going to take my antibiotic.



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Q3 **Wendy Morton:** Can I clarify that you are looking for a debate with a substantive motion in the Chamber?

Ronnie Cowan: Yes.

Q4 **Chair:** In terms of time sensitivity, there are no anniversaries? You want this as soon as you can get it?

Crispin Blunt: We are about 60 years behind now. As Charlotte made the point in her text, every day we do not have this treatment available we are killing people, as 18 people a day commit suicide through what is currently untreatable depression. It is really appalling what is happening.

Chair: We could offer a Thursday in May after the Coronation recess. We will try and make you an offer for one of the Thursdays after that.

Crispin Blunt: Many thanks.

Naz Shah made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Naz, over to you. Your application is on combating Islamophobia.

Naz Shah: We put in an application because the United Nations has recognised the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. We had technical issues with our email, which is why our application was not submitted on time. Generally speaking, we have not had a debate on Islamophobia since 2019, I think, when the definition was agreed by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims. Many accepted the definition, but the Government did not. Since then we have had somebody who was recruited as an adviser by the Government. The Government said they would have a definition on Islamophobia, but that did not happen.

This is more of a general debate that is not just about the definition of Islamophobia. We know that hate crimes against Muslims have risen more than 42%. Those are just the recorded ones. We know that the United Nations has recognised it, and it is only right that in Parliament we have a discussion about the issue of Islamophobia. My constituency is one of the largest Muslim constituencies, but we have a sizeable population of Muslims in our country.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Questions from colleagues now.

Q6 **Wendy Morton:** I have two points to clarify. I appreciate that you had a few technical challenges, hence the paper copy. Can I check that you are the vice-chair of the APPG?

Naz Shah: I am.

Q7 **Wendy Morton:** And is Sara Britcliffe a vice-chair as well?

Naz Shah: No. Sarah Owen is the chair.

Q8 **Wendy Morton:** Was the other person sponsoring this debate Sara Britcliffe?

Naz Shah: No, I don't think it was Sara.

Chair: That is what's written on the application, Naz.

Naz Shah: Sorry. Sara is a Tory MP who added her name to it; that is my understanding.

Wendy Morton: I think she is a PPS, but I'm guessing that if the debate is in Naz's name, it is not a problem.

Q9 **Chair:** Right. You have four Conservative Members other than Sara. In terms of time sensitivity, I understand that the UN has declared 15 March, so I take it you do not want to wait until 15 March.

Naz Shah: No. We would rather have the conversation sooner. We had hoped to have it just after the Budget debate, but that did not happen.

Q10 **Chair:** So if we can get you a slot in the Chamber after the Coronation recess, will you take it?

Naz Shah: That would be super helpful.

Chair: We don't know when it will be. We often allocate debates, the Government tell us we have the time and then we do not get the time. We will do the best that we can to slot that in as soon as we possibly can.

Dame Angela Eagle and Elliot Colburn made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Your application this afternoon is on Pride Month, which is in June.

Elliot Colburn: It is. Thank you for having us here again so quickly. Angela and I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) rights. We are here to ask for what is our annual tradition now of having a debate during the month of June to mark Pride Month. This is an opportunity for LGBT people in the UK and around the world to recognise the progress that has been made to reach the significant steps that we have seen in this country and worldwide. There is a lot to celebrate that we would love to highlight, particularly the significant number of countries that decriminalised last year, which was particularly positive, but there are a number of issues still facing the community in the UK and overseas that we would like the opportunity to have a debate to highlight.

We think it is very topical this year, given the discussions that we have had around faith and relationships in the Church of England. We are still waiting on a conversion therapy Bill, which is several years in the making. Obviously there are issues around hate crime and the Government's review into relationship and sex education, and we are globally facing recent developments such as the anti-homosexuality Bill that has just passed in Uganda. Angela, I am sure I have missed lots of stuff, so I am going to ask you to help.

Dame Angela Eagle: There is lots of stuff. This has all-party support, because I think we are the second gayest Parliament in the world now. I think we have been overtaken by New Zealand as a percentage, but obviously not in the actual quantity—or perhaps even quality. But there



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are a range of things pending, as Elliot has said, both domestically and internationally. There are a lot of worrying elements internationally with anti-LGBT laws, which are being promulgated and would make LGBT existence—particularly in some African countries, such as Ghana and Uganda—very difficult indeed. There are also things happening in Europe too, if you think about Hungary and what has gone on in Russia. We obviously want it to be about pride, which means that it can be a very open, wide-ranging discussion and debate. I have always found that when we do these things, we get really interesting cross-party, very wide-ranging discussions of things, which is why we are asking for the Chamber—obviously to coincide, if we can, with the month of June, which is Pride Month.

- Q12 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. One observation is that we would normally require 15 names on an application for a Chamber debate, but it is a debate that has been applied for. It is active, so you can add names.

Dame Angela Eagle: We will get you three more, then, Chair.

Chair: The more, the merrier. If the application is submitted, it is just a question of making sure that we can allocate you some time in June. But in order to do that, we would need those extra names. That is the precedent. Thank you very much indeed.

Tim Loughton made representations.

Tim Loughton: I appear to be on my own. I don't know where my fellow compatriots have gone.

- Q13 **Chair:** We understood that you were to be accompanied by Dan Carden and Peter Bottomley.

Tim Loughton: , I just noticed Peter Bottomley heading the other way. I don't know where he has gone.

Chair: One can never legislate for these things. Your application this afternoon is on the Government's approach to migration. Thank you very much indeed for joining us.

Tim Loughton: Thank you, Chair. This is not a time-limited debate, so we are not asking for anything urgently. Obviously there is legislation at the moment that is taking up quite a lot of the Government's time—the Illegal Migration Bill—but it struck us that we have not had a proper debate on the broader subject of migration and long-term migration policy. We have had only occasional bits of legislation as to how we clamp down on it, so we thought about having a less heated, more broadly based debate on long-term migration policy that goes beyond the immediate challenges of people coming across the channel in small boats, and which is about safe and legal schemes in the long term. It is also about international migration patterns, which are going to become an increasing challenge not just for this country, but for many other countries, as people move for economic and climate change reasons. Our current migration system in this country is—how do I put it tactfully?—not operating at peak efficiency.



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A more broad-brush debate about what our migration system should actually look like and about the factors we need to take into account in the longer term might add something to the way we shape our legislation over the next few years, rather than just see us reacting to the latest crisis facing Border Force or whatever it may be. That is the thinking behind why a general debate would be beneficial to us all.

Chair: Okay. I note that it is a heavily supported application, with 30 names, which is very welcome. Any questions, colleagues?

- Q14 **Kevin Foster:** I'll put my cards on the table: it makes sense to have a wider debate, because we have spent a number of years having very bitty debates. Tim, how do you see this being steered towards being a general debate, rather than focusing on one particular issue, which is where we always used to go with immigration debates?

Tim Loughton: It is not about taking a view. It is about having a sensible, grown-up discussion about what a sensible, workable, practical, realistic and compassionate immigration policy would look like. That is why it has a lot of cross-party support, and why we are doing it outside of a particular crisis, to which particular legislation going through now is addressed. If people want to include that, then fine, but they have the opportunity to do that next Tuesday, when the Illegal Migration Bill comes back.

- Q15 **Wendy Morton:** I notice that Adam Holloway has an asterisk beside his name. Is there a reason for that, or was it a typo?

Tim Loughton: It is usually because has reported from some war zone somewhere. He has also lived in the jungle in Calais—I think that is probably what it refers to.

Wendy Morton: Okay. That's fine.

Tim Loughton: As a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee, he usually has something to declare.

- Q16 **Chair:** We might get a half-day on Tuesday 2 May—the Tuesday between May Day and the Coronation recess. If that was a possibility, and we threw it in your direction, would you be able to take it?

Tim Loughton: I don't see why not. I will check my diary. As I say, this is not time-limited, so if you needed something, I am sure enough people could come up with something. The only consideration is that if you make it so close to the Illegal Migration Bill—

Chair: Which is the previous week.

Tim Loughton: —which is next Tuesday, it might just be a continuation for those people who did not get time to air their full speeches. That is the only caution.

Chair: That is a consideration, Tim. Thank you for that.

- Q17 **Patricia Gibson:** As regards the fear of putting it too close to the



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legislation, I think the legislation will cast such a long shadow that, whenever you have this debate, there will be an element of that.

Tim Loughton: We frequently have legislation on migration matters, so if we waited till next term, more migration legislation might come through, which would also cast a long shadow. So I don't think there is any ideal time for this. I think it would be beneficial to try to separate it from what is happening today, which the Bill next week is supposedly there to address, so that we can have a more grown-up and wide-ranging discussion without the heat of those circumstances. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: Thank you very much. I do apologise, because we are now going to have to suspend and reconvene immediately after this set of Divisions.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: Welcome back, everyone. Thank you for coming back in such a timely fashion following the Divisions. We have one more application to hear this afternoon, and that is from Mohammad Yasin.

Mohammad Yasin and Antony Higginbotham made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Mohammad, your application is on supporting Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Mohammad Yasin: Absolutely. Thank you, Mr Chairman. As we all know, in 2017—more than five years ago—hundreds of thousands of people from Myanmar fled. The Myanmar military launched a campaign and killed thousands of people, forcing 700,000 to flee Rakhine state for Bangladesh. It was described by the UN human rights expert as a genocide.

Conditions in Bangladesh are deteriorating rapidly and on a grave scale. In January, I and my colleagues who are supporting this application attended refugee camps with the Bangladesh APPG. The plight of the people there was devastating. You cannot describe in words the conditions they are living in. It was a complete eye-opener, especially with respect to the vulnerable families who do not have any men in their family because they were killed by the Myanmar military. Especially at night time, there is no law and order; there is nobody to look after them. There are gangs operating. They are in a very difficult situation.

I saw the tears in those people's eyes, and when they realised that we were from the United Kingdom, they begged us to do something. I think the best thing we can do is have a debate here. These people are forgotten, and their aid is reducing every day; the help they are getting with food and other things, such as shelter, is reducing. It is a really worrying situation.

On 5 March this year, a huge fire tore through the camps, destroying around 2,000 shelters and leaving around 12,000 Rohingya refugees homeless. They were already living in very poor conditions, and then they lost those shelters too.



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Unfortunately, the plight of the Rohingya and those living in those camps no longer gets the news coverage, or the national and international attention it deserves. In the last few years, what little attention has been paid to Myanmar has focused on the military coup and attempts to crush civilian resistance.

The regional campaigner for south Asia at Amnesty International has called on the Government to work with the international community to urgently put in place measures to ensure that everyone has access to emergency shelters. Durable solutions for the settlement of Rohingya refugees have long been discussed, but a solution that meets international human rights standards is yet to be implemented.

It is vital that we have a debate in this Parliament so that Parliament gets renewed energy to address the causes and the possible solutions that will enable the Rohingya to return safely to Myanmar as soon as conditions allow. We need a debate in this Parliament so that the people living in those camps are not forgotten. We should use the debate to try our best to put pressure on Myanmar, and to encourage the Government to put more pressure on Myanmar to try to solve this issue so that these people can get back to their country. They are not allowed to build anything; they are just living in temporary shelters. They are not allowed to work in the camps, either. All the NGOs who have shops where they distribute food in exchange for vouchers get their workforce from outside; unfortunately, the people from the camps cannot work there.

The situation is very serious. Unless you visit the place, you just cannot imagine the conditions these people are living in. I ask you to grant the debate so that we can discuss the issue in Parliament.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Would you like to add anything, Antony?

Antony Higginbotham: Thank you, Chair. I endorse everything that has been said. I had the privilege of visiting Bangladesh and the Rohingya camp just a couple of weeks ago, and it is right that you just cannot imagine the scale of the camp. There are children who are educated to a very young age and then just cast out. This really does risk a lost generation. The previous petitioners to the Committee mentioned global migration. This has the potential to be one of the biggest global migratory challenges of our time. We are talking about 1 million people.

I endorse everything that has been said. I will just say, in conclusion, that we have a huge diaspora across the whole of the UK who really care about this issue. It is important for them to see us debate it in our Parliament, and for us to show that we take it seriously. It is clear that the Government take it seriously, so I do not think there is a discrepancy there. In fact, I think the Minister who covers Bangladesh was in the camp only a couple of weeks ago. If the Government take it that seriously, it is only right that we as Parliament should take it that seriously too.

Q20 **Chair:** Thank you very much. You have applied for a 90-minute debate, but 17 people have signed the application. That is enough to get a three-



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hour debate—not that we always get three-hour debates in the Chamber. In fact, we rarely do, given the way Government business and urgent questions eat into the time that we are allocated on Thursdays, but I would have thought that you would easily get a couple of hours on this in the Chamber if we could get some time from the Government. I take it that is what you would prefer—time in the Chamber.

Mohammad Yasin: Yes please.

Q21 **Chair:** Thank you. As there are no further questions, can I thank you very much for the application? It is a vital subject, and you are entirely right to bring it back to our attention; otherwise, there is a real danger that the plight of the Rohingya in Bangladesh could be forgotten. We are very grateful for the application. Thank you very much indeed.

Mohammad Yasin: Do you have any idea when we can have the debate?

Chair: I would like to think that we could get some time for you in late May or early June.

Mohammad Yasin: That is fine. I may not be here the week when we come back from the Coronation holiday. I am not here for those three or four days.

Chair: I think we have already just about got that time allocated. Thank you very much indeed.