

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 9 May 2023

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Watch the meeting

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

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Representations

[I](#): Mr David Davis.

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Mr David Davis made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We are in a different room today, but it is all grist to the mill. We have eight applications this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr David Davis on delivering new housing supply. David, over to you.

Mr Davis: Thank you, Chair. I am overwhelmed by the grandeur of the surroundings. You are familiar with me coming to you with requests for somewhat esoteric debates, on subjects ranging from prisoner votes to Russian oligarchs suing people. This is much more mainstream: it would be on housing supply. The first thing that I will say is that I was astonished by the reaction from my colleagues. We only sent out 25 emails and got 15 signatures back. We could easily run up a lot more. The last time housing generally was debated as a Backbench Business debate



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in the main Chamber there were 37 speakers, so there is a lot of interest in this, from across the board.

Housing today is in incredibly short supply, and the effect, certainly on the younger population, has been enormous. Housing affordability has gone from three times income to more than nine times income, and from I think about £70,000 20 years ago to an average house price of £300,000. This is largely a function of the population increasing but housing not increasing in line with it. Bluntly, all parties are to blame for that—every party in the House, virtually.

My argument in this debate will be about new towns, rather than the standard building on the edge of villages, which maximises the nimby response and the price of the house, and minimises the size of the house, all of which are problems that we have today. We have half the size of house that we had in 1920. We now build the smallest residences in Europe. Clearly there is a big supply issue, which is astonishing, because if you helicoptered from here to my house in Yorkshire, most of the ground that you would go over would be green fields or golf courses, not houses or cities. You would pass Birmingham off to the left, but otherwise there are no major concentrations.

The argument here will be about the economics of a new town initiative. The last time we had a new town initiative was in the '20s. The houses built then are now occupied by 3 million people. We have to build hundreds of thousands of houses every year for a decade to get anywhere near catching up. This is an incredibly hot issue. As I said, if I did a general circulation, I would be guaranteed to get at least 50 would-be speakers for the debate. As I say, it is an issue that I think will gain from the traditional Back-Bench non-partisan approach, rather than the firefight that will occupy this place in the coming months as we run into a general election.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Colleagues, questions, please.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I have only one question. Well done on getting 15 names in support of the application, but there is a dearth of Opposition names. We as a Committee would want to see a balanced debate between the different political parties, so it would help us if you submitted some names from principally the Labour Opposition, but other Opposition parties as well.

Mr Davis: Of course. I apologise for that. I am afraid that I have been tied up with a breaking miscarriage of justice that is going to explode in about eight days. That has rather taken up my time, but I will make sure that we have a large number of those names. The only ones that I have circulated are the very few in my own batting order, so I will do that as a matter of speed.

Q3 **Chair:** It is a live application, David. In other words, all you need to do is submit half a dozen additional names.

Mr Davis: We will do that as a matter of speed.



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Q4 **Chair:** Is there any particular time sensitivity for this?

Mr Davis: Not really. As I say, I have a controversy that is about to explode on me in eight days' time, so ideally not in the next 10 days, but other than that, no. As soon as is convenient, frankly.

Q5 **Chair:** I think it is unlikely—in fact, almost impossible—that you will get it before the Whitsun recess. The middle of June—

Mr Davis: That's fine.

Chair: Okay. We will certainly try for that. Thank you very much.

Mr Davis: Thank you.

John Howell made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Welcome to the Committee, John. Your application is on the work and role of the Council of Europe, and of the UK members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Over to you.

John Howell: Thank you. The delegation to the Council of Europe consists of 36 Members, and I try to run it as a genuinely cross-party group of people. Not all 36 have signed this application; there are two missing, one of whom is a member of your Committee. The other is a Whip. The rest are fully behind this application.

This is important, because the Council of Europe is the last chance that we have in this country to work with parliamentarians from around Europe—from the 46 member countries of the Council of Europe. There are 46 member countries of the Council of Europe, and only 26 or 27, or whatever it is, in the EU. That shows the scale of the Council, and wider Europe. The work we have been doing has been very important. For example, we had Russia kicked out of the Council of Europe. We were the first of the major multilateral organisations to be able to do that.

On Turkey, we have been very successful at convincing the Turkish parliamentary delegation to act for us in speaking to Erdoğan, to try to get Sweden and Finland to join NATO, which I think is very important. Of course, I have been involved, too, in seeing the political prisoner Osman Kavala. He is a human rights prisoner, and I am the only westerner to have been allowed to see him.

I will refer to one other issue, which is Kosovo's membership of the Council of Europe. We in the UK are all in favour of Kosovo joining, but unfortunately seven members were not, and voted against that. We are taking the lead in championing Kosovo to join the Council of Europe. It is already a partial member, but it cannot vote in debates. All those things need much broader appreciation among parliamentarians, and indeed at a wider level. I am disappointed that my job of championing the Council of Europe and getting those points across is so arduous.

Lastly, there is an organisation within the Council of Europe that is the subject of much controversy here. That is the European Court of Human Rights. My view is one of unashamed support for the Court and the convention. The last time that we were president of the Council of Europe, we introduced the Brighton declaration. I assume that Mr Blackman is looking around to try to remember what that was; it was under the Cameron Government, and it reformed the use of the Court. It said that the Court should not interfere where decisions had been taken legitimately and properly in a member country. Unfortunately, it has taken around 10 years to implement that, which is far too long. However if the declaration had been known about in the UK—if people had actually read the documents on that—it would have saved an awful lot of trouble.

As you can see, there is a huge plethora of interests and matters to be discussed as part of the efforts to ensure that the work of the Council and its members is fully understood by this Parliament.

Chair: Thank you, John. Questions, colleagues?

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** You have asked for a debate because it is the annual review. Is there a period of time in which you would want the debate to be held?

John Howell: No, there is no fixed point. We did have a debate a year ago—I can't remember whether it was longer ago than that—but I have called it "annual" because it is necessary to have a debate to explain to people what we are doing on a cross-party basis, and its importance.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, we get allocated time for debates on Thursdays. Are there any weeks in which, for example, you will be away on Council of Europe business?

John Howell: In the second-to-last week of June, we have a full Council of Europe meeting. I think we can work round anything else that you might suggest.

Chair: Okay. John, much appreciated. Thank you very much.

John Howell: Thank you.

Mrs Pauline Latham made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** We are now joined by Pauline Latham. Good afternoon, Pauline, and welcome. Your application is on the recognition of the Ukrainian Holodomor.

Mrs Latham: The reason why I wish to apply for a debate on a substantive motion is to allow the House of Commons, rather than the Foreign Office, to decide whether to recognise the Ukrainian Holodomor as a genocide. There are three reasons why I think this is really important, which I will go through before turning to why we are requesting a Chamber debate on a substantive motion, rather than a Westminster Hall



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debate. But before I begin, could I pass on the apologies of my co-sponsor Stewart McDonald, who has an unavoidable commitment in Glasgow?

The first reason why we would like a debate now is that 2023 represents the 90th anniversary of the Holodomor, which took place in 1932-33. During those years, millions and millions of Ukrainians died in a forced starvation—an attempt by Stalin's USSR to destroy the Ukrainian culture and people.

Secondly, I recently led a Westminster Hall debate on this topic. This is clearly extremely topical, given the horrendous actions of the Russians in Ukraine today. As the Foreign Secretary noted in response to my question in the House, one of Putin's aims is to destroy the Ukrainian nation. Discussions of genocide and war crimes by Russia against Ukraine are therefore extremely relevant today. In my Westminster Hall debate, I set out how in one Ukrainian town taken by the Russians, the Holodomor memorial was taken down. Recognition of the Holodomor is not just about a historical event; it has real impacts today.

Thirdly and finally, this debate will be so important for the Ukrainian communities living in the United Kingdom, which have greatly increased in recent months. In Derbyshire, we have a large Ukrainian community, and they frequently ask me about official recognition of the genocide. There is a genocide memorial of the Holodomor in Derby city, which I was fortunate to go to when it was unveiled. Every November, I attend a Holodomor memorial service in Derby, where this event is commemorated and those who lost their lives are remembered. Next month, at a national camp, we will lay wreaths for the victims of the Holodomor at a local service led by a priest. For both Ukrainian MPs in Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora in this country, a debate on the Floor of the House that recognises this as a genocide would be incredibly important.

I turn to the reason why we have requested a Chamber debate on a substantive motion. I have held three Westminster Hall debates on this issue since 2013. On each occasion, our Government have stated that their policy is not to officially recognise the genocide until a relevant court has done so, but of course, everybody who was part of that is dead. Even if they survived the Holodomor, they are not still with us.

It is clear that the Government are not going to move on this, but for the reasons I set out, we think it is really important that the UK Parliament—not any Department—has the opportunity to recognise this. Other countries have recognised war crimes against Christians by Isis, and the genocide of the Uyghurs in China. The House debated both those issues on a substantive motion and was able to come to a resolution, irrespective of the Government's inability to officially declare a genocide. We are quickly becoming one of the last of Ukraine's allies to recognise the Holodomor as a genocide; Germany, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and recently the US, have all done so. As one of Ukraine's strongest and most steadfast allies, I believe that the House of Commons should at least have the chance to debate the issue and come to a formal conclusion.



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This debate on a substantive motion is sponsored by 22 Members from five separate political parties, including the Government and official Opposition. I am very happy to take any questions from the Committee about the proposal. I believe it is really important and obviously very topical, this being the 90th year and given the war in Ukraine.

Q10 Bob Blackman: You say there is an annual commemoration service. Is there a special date when you would want to hold the debate?

Mrs Latham: Not that I am aware of; I do not think that there is. Ukrainians would be so pleased if the debate was granted and we passed the motion—obviously, we would like to pass the motion. Other countries have decided that they can admit it was a genocide without the Government officially recognising it. We say that we cannot recognise it retrospectively without going through a court, but other countries have said that they can. It is really important that we do this, for people who survived so much in the past and are obviously surviving now. As one of their biggest allies, we should do something about this.

I am very fortunate that, because of my work on this, I have been given a medal by the Ukrainian Parliament. There are only two of us in Parliament who have one—John Whittingdale and myself—for the work we have done on the Holodomor and Ukrainian matters.

Q11 Chair: Out of personal interest, when was the last time that the Government said in a debate that they would not recognise the Holodomor?

Mrs Latham: A few weeks ago in Westminster Hall. They will not recognise it because it has not gone through a court. What they say is that they would then have to recognise the Armenian genocide and all sorts of others. Yes, we have recognised the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian one, but they have had court cases. These people cannot have a court case anymore. That is why it is important for Parliament to recognise the Holodomor, even if the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary never do.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Mrs Latham: In the week beginning 12 June, I am on an IDC visit, and in the week beginning 19 June, I am with the Council of Europe.

Q12 Chair: On the off-chance, would you be available the last week before the Whitsun recess?

Mrs Latham: Yes.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q13 Chair: Next up is Jim Shannon, who will be very glad to know that he is not last for something. Make yourself comfortable, Jim. You have two applications today. The first is on the extension of transitional visa arrangements for inshore industry fishing crews.



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Jim Shannon: This is quite frustrating, which is why I brought the application forward. I have spoken to some other MPs who have a particular interest in this issue and are affected by it, whether their seats are in Scotland, Wales or the south coast of England.

The Government have brought in very strict immigration rules. We had a meeting with Robert Jenrick back in January this year, along with the two fishing producers organisations, the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation and others as well, and we thought that we had made some headway. Also, I took the opportunity just last week to speak to Suella Braverman, the Secretary of State, on this very issue. We had asked her for an extension.

We are not against the immigration issues; it is not about that. We—I say “we”; it is the fishing organisations—have a proposed system whereby we think we can address the issue of the language barrier. What the fishing organisations across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are prepared to do is have a college in Sri Lanka where they can teach people the English language, but we need a 12-month extension to make it happen. That is the gist of where we are.

I do not want to be disrespectful—that is not my form—but I spoke to Robert Jenrick last week when we were voting, and he said, “Speak to Suella.” I spoke to Suella, and she said she would review it again, but to be truthful with you, I do not think it is going to go anywhere. That is the frustration, so we have this request for this debate. It is not about the immigration policy; it is just about an extension. We need 12 months.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. Questions, colleagues?

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** The note suggests that there is time-sensitivity here. Is there any particular issue other than the urgency?

Jim Shannon: The urgency, but I am ever mindful that I will not be here next week, because we have elections in Northern Ireland, so it has to be the week starting the 22nd. That is the first time that I would be here—my apologies.

Q15 **Chair:** So you would be available the following week.

Jim Shannon: Yes, the week starting the 22nd.

Bob Blackman: The week commencing the 23rd.

Q16 **Chair:** Okay, Jim. We come to your next application, which is on evolving appraisals for cancer medicine.

Jim Shannon: As my party’s health spokesperson, I have immense difficulties and frustration with this issue as well. In July 2022, cancer waiting lists stood at over 320,000. We all know that the pre-pandemic levels exacerbated that. I have to give some credit to the Government as well: in the UK, cancer survival rates have risen thanks to improvements in planning, diagnosis and treatment. The UK lags significantly behind other countries for some cancer types, especially in five-year survival



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rates. What we are trying to achieve with this debate is the benefit to patients, improved access to a wider range of treatment options and the potential for improved outcomes for cancer patients, especially those who may have rare cancers.

The benefit to the NHS is quite simple as well. We understand the money issues. There is a need to deliver more efficient care through access to the full range of licensed and proven treatment options, reducing demand for urgent—

Chair: Take a moment, Jim—get a drink.

Jim Shannon: Okay, thank you. My voice has not stopped for the last 10 days on the election trail—apologies for that.

Chair: I can't imagine that for a moment, Jim—you are normally such a quiet, shy, retiring sort of bloke.

Jim Shannon: The benefits for the patients are better treatment, better access to medicines and improved cancer outcomes. The Government want to have that, I want them to have that and the Opposition want that to happen. The benefit to the NHS is that it would enable the NHS to deliver more efficient care and reduce the demand for urgent and emergency services. I asked some of the lobbying bodies to ask for this debate as well, because they see the real, core problems with cancer waiting lists across the United Kingdom. That is what I am asking for. Thank you.

Q17 **Chair:** Questions, colleagues? From a time perspective, I take it that, although it is an important subject, it does not have the same urgency in terms of getting a debating slot.

Jim Shannon: No, we will take whatever time you can give.

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

Sir Mike Penning made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Mike. Your application this afternoon is—

Sir Mike Penning: I'm dyslexic, so you are going to pronounce it for me.

Chair: Am I? Right. The aim is to secure funding to complete an academic-led trial to prevent fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva and to extend the trial to include children. Is that okay?

Sir Mike Penning: Can we call it FOP?

Chair: FOP for short.

Sir Mike Penning: That's what everybody calls it. I am sure that very often this Committee listens to people requesting debates on things that affect all of our constituencies. This condition doesn't; it affects a small number of people, particularly children, and we think there are around



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about 700 cases in the whole world, but that is the reason the diagnosis is so difficult. Hopefully, you have some of the photographs in front of you, which are horrific, but all of them are presented with permission of the families and friends of people with FOP.

FOP is a horrible, horrible condition. As a father—as a parent—I desperately wanted my children to be inoculated, including against measles, mumps and rubella. If a child with FOP has an inoculation, almost certainly the muscle around that inoculation will turn to bone. This condition is so badly understood around the world and in this country, where we lead in a lot of things, that amputations have taken place, because it is thought the condition is a cancer. Literally a bruise will turn to bone. The pictures are genuine. One of them in particular is of a child who was alive when the picture was taken and the parents quite rightly—fantastically—allowed the skeleton to be used.

In my own case, I have a constituent with a lovely young girl, born beautifully, but they noticed that her toes looked a little bit crimped in. If they hadn't checked on that and been told that it was bunions on a newborn child, they would never have had the diagnosis that they have today of FOP.

The seriousness of this condition involves raising awareness, because it is incurable at the moment, which is why the trials are so important. Public awareness matters, because the condition is so rare. Secondly, without being inside Horizon, the only project that has been going on at the moment in trials with the AstraZeneca drug is with two European countries and us.

In theory, Horizon 2020 should address that, in that we have come across. However, in the Westminster Hall debate the Minister was saying, "You should apply—these scientists at Oxford should apply—for funding," but that has not materialised, because the trial is already in its second phase. What we are trying to do is to address the seriousness of the condition—to say that just because not everyone has it does not mean it is not as serious as any other condition, to create awareness. We want to get the Science Minister there to the debate—it is the Science Minister who is needed; it is not a Department of Health issue—to address where exactly the complication in the funding comes from. I say that because I have been to Oxford with the team who are doing this work and they do not know exactly where the funding should be coming from. It should be quite a simple thing.

We want to have a debate. We had a very good debate in Westminster Hall; we used up the full period of time. We are not time-sensitive in that this is about tomorrow, but I will say to the Committee that if you have got a slot in June, we'll take the June slot, because we are desperate to have a proper debate.

I had no problem getting colleagues from across the House to support the bid today. Some of them actually wanted to come along today and I said, "Well, the best thing to do is actually to come along on the day that we



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have the debate.” We will fill a three-hour debate; I do not think there will be any problem with that.

I am a Brexiteer, but actually there are issues around Horizon that we have to address. This trial was started under Horizon. They need 20 people to allow their children, or we need adults, to be within this trial. We don’t have those people in this country, so we have to work together. America is pushing on and I scan the States to see what they are doing, but we need to get it on the Floor of the House, with the publicity it gets and the Minister being held to account.

I apologise for the photographs; they are horrible.

Chair: No, no—it is understandable. Each picture is worth a thousand words, Mike.

Sir Mike Penning: Well, the Clerks have been brilliant, because I was desperate for them to be brought here.

I will just go through the photographs very quickly. That little girl there is eight years of age. The condition strangles the organs. For mums and dads, it’s just heartbreaking.

Q19 **Chair:** You are saying you are quite happy to wait. I don’t think we will have any time before the Whitsun recess, but if we can get you a Thursday after the Whitsun recess—

Sir Mike Penning: If the Committee is kind enough to give us a three-hour debate, we will wait for the debate.

Chair: Mike, much appreciated. Thank you very much.

Wendy Chamberlain made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Wendy. Thank you for coming along, and for waiting as well. Your application is on the subject of support for Afghan women and girls.

Wendy Chamberlain: Thank you, Chair, and I thank members of the Committee. I speak on behalf of my two co-sponsors, Caroline Nokes and Liz Saville Roberts, who have sent their apologies. The three of us are co-chairs of the APPG on Afghan women and girls, which was formed towards the end of last year. We all know about the situation in Afghanistan; we were all recalled during the summer recess in 2021 when Kabul fell. However, the developing and very concerning situation of women and girls in Afghanistan meant that a group of us came together to specifically focus on that group of people. As well as that, Alex Crawford from Sky News has done a documentary in relation to the plight of Afghan women. In fact, that will start in the Boothroyd Room after we have concluded; I will be going to join them.



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There is an increasing interest in this area because the Taliban are doing exactly what they said they would do in terms of restrictions on women. We are hoping to have the former Afghan Minister for women, Hasina Safi, attend tonight's event, because we want to utilise the APPG to make those voices heard. We are clear that we want the APPG to be quite timebound about getting specific responses from Government and ensuring that pathways are there for women who have previously had influence in Afghanistan to have those routes into Government.

The application explains itself. Now is the time, particularly given that at the start of this month we had the UN's meeting in Doha. There were real concerns shared with us, and I am sure with other MPs, about the potential UN approach to the Taliban and the continuing restriction of women and girls' freedoms in Afghanistan. Given that we have not had the opportunity to really discuss that group of people since Kabul fell, there is an opportunity through a Backbench Business debate to do that now. As you see, I have Members from across the House in support of that. I am happy to take any questions.

- Q21 **Chair:** You have 10 signatures, and you have asked for a 90-minute debate. Would you prefer a Thursday afternoon or a Tuesday morning when the FCDO is answering?

Wendy Chamberlain: The reality is that on a Tuesday I would get more people, but would having us in the Chamber—so that Afghan women can see that—potentially work for a 90-minute debate?

- Q22 **Chair:** We do not allocate 90-minute debates in the Chamber, by and large.

Wendy Chamberlain: Then my preference would probably be Westminster Hall on a Tuesday, so that women who are involved with the group and the secretariat that advises us can be in attendance, and we can get a response from the FCDO.

- Q23 **Chair:** According to the rota, there is a possibility that in the week beginning Monday 5 June—Tuesday 6—the answering Department is FCDO. So that would be a possibility.

Wendy Chamberlain: Yes, that would work.

Chair: Okay. There are no questions from colleagues. In that case, thank you, Wendy.

Wendy Chamberlain: You are all welcome in the Boothroyd Room when you have concluded. Thank you.