

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 16 May 2023

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

Questions 1-15

Representations made

[I](#): Sir Mike Penning.

[II](#): Sally-Ann Hart.

[III](#): Dame Diana Johnson and Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Mike Penning made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We are a little early for our allotted time, but we are awaiting Divisions in the House, so we thought we would crack on with business. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Sir Mike Penning. The application is on the subject of VAT on audiobooks.

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I apologise for perhaps wasting the Committee's time two weeks running, but until Jim Shannon did two in a row last week, I did not know we could, so I wouldn't have been sitting here with you this week.

Chair: For your information, Mike, it is something that is open to all Members, but Jim Shannon has a season ticket. We would love to see you more regularly.

Sir Mike Penning: I would only come if I thought it was very important. When I was the Disabilities Minister, one thing I had discussions about with the Treasury was the VAT on audiobooks. I declare an interest: I am dyslexic. My form of dyslexia allows me to read, but for a lot of people with dyslexia, that is not possible. Also, for people with a visual impairment that is also impossible. We are an inclusive society, I hope, and we need to be more inclusive. However, if you cannot read, it is extremely difficult to be educated, to be able to have an inclusive society, and to do training and get on in life.

I was shocked years ago to find that there was 20% VAT on audiobooks and zero on books, whether they are fiction or non-fiction. I looked around Europe, where there are different methodologies. It is entirely up to each individual country. Some might set 4% and some might set zero, but I am only interested in this country and giving people an opportunity.

I have tried desperately to get Adjournment debates, but I have not been successful in the ballot. I spoke to the Clerks and they told me that this Committee has the ability to grant a debate. I am looking for a Westminster Hall debate at this stage, and I hope the Committee can grant me that, so that we can address and perhaps publicise the issues that affect so many people in our communities.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will now have questions from colleagues.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Which would be the answering Department?

Sir Mike Penning: The Treasury.

Q3 **Chair:** There is a potential slot in Westminster Hall next Thursday afternoon, which would be the 25th.

Sir Mike Penning: Sadly, I am not here. That is the day before the Whitsun recess, and I will be shot by the wife if I am not in a certain place next Thursday. The week after we come back would be okay.

Bob Blackman: That we can definitely do.

Sir Mike Penning: In which case I can definitely get in.

Q4 **Chair:** Similarly, there is the possibility of a Westminster Hall slot on Thursday of the week commencing 12 June, so that would be 15 June in Westminster Hall in the afternoon.

Sir Mike Penning: That would be perfect. Thank you.

Chair: Okay, Mike. That is very much appreciated.

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you. See you all in the Lobby soon.

Sally-Ann Hart made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Colleagues who have just joined us, we have started early because of the impending Divisions. I hope you don't mind. Up next we have Sally-Ann Hart, whose application is on the subject of World Ocean Day, which is on 8 June.

Sally-Ann Hart: I am applying for this Backbench Business debate, because we are an amazing country surrounded by sea, and one of the greatest threats facing this country and the world, particularly our coastal communities, is climate change. It is encouraging to witness productive conversations on policy developments from this Government around restoring and protecting land-based habitats, and the awareness of the importance of carbon stores across the planet, which deliver a tremendous benefit in capturing carbon.

Our oceans provide solutions to mitigate and combat climate change. They make up 70% of the world's surface and produce about 50% of the oxygen that we breathe, but only a small proportion of our ocean has been explored. Despite the fact that human beings rely on the ocean, it is not given the same attention or resources as land. There is huge potential lying beneath our waters, and ocean-based solutions can have a significant impact on coastal communities above land, too. Those solutions offer opportunities for employment, industry and the economy and can support the UK Government's ambitions in levelling up regions across the UK.

Ocean-based solutions can also prevent coastal erosion and floods, which we know have often devastated our coastal communities. Coastal wetlands, salt marshes and mudflats offer protection against sea-level rise and coastal erosion. With the effects of climate change becoming more pronounced, we need to more fully explore and implement potential adaptation measures quickly.

On 4 March this year, the high seas treaty was reached between a number of nations to protect the oceans of the world. This is an historic treaty, and it took 10 years of negotiation to reach agreement. The high seas treaty aims to safeguard and recuperate marine nature and provides the ability to more easily realise the target of establishing 30% of the global ocean as marine protected areas by 2030. The treaty also strengthens



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government of the world's ocean by providing the framework to manage the ocean and sustainably use its biological resources. Prior to the treaty, there were no means for states to declare marine protected areas beyond their national jurisdiction. The new treaty supports a holistic ocean governance framework as a means to implement the obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment as included in the United Nations convention on the law of the sea.

However, with the increasingly diverse uses and potential uses of the ocean and the growth in areas designated for marine conservation, there are clearly growing spatial pressures on our ocean, known as spatial squeeze, and this may have an effect on more traditional industries like our fishing fleets. We must ensure that offshore renewables, wind farm and tidal stream energy, blue carbon habitats, marine protected areas, fishing grounds, aquaculture, cables, oil and gas all coexist where possible, so that there is space for all without detriment to traditional industries like fishing or to the marine environment. There is an argument to be explored for a new approach to marine spatial planning that involves co-management of our national seas with greater accountability for regulators.

In summary, our ocean is the world's largest ecosystem. It needs to be recognised and celebrated on World Ocean Day on 8 June. There are untapped potential opportunities in offshore renewable energy, aquaculture, health and wellbeing, tackling climate change and so on. We all, as parliamentarians, need to develop a greater understanding of the ocean, and all of us cross-party can support and promote ocean awareness and research on 8 June.

Q6 **Chair:** It just so happens that we have a slot for a debate in Westminster Hall on 8 June. If you were to be offered that slot, would you accept it?

Sally-Ann Hart: Yes.

Q7 **Chair:** That is the right answer. We normally prefer to have cross-party support for applications. Your application is in and is live, but we would like to see some Opposition party names on the application.

Sally-Ann Hart: I have Douglas Chapman on there.

Chair: That is one.

Sally-Ann Hart: I did it so quickly.

Q8 **Chair:** The application is in, and it is live. I would like you to add some names and submit them to the Clerk.

Sally-Ann Hart: Okay, I will do that, but keep that slot free.

Chair: I have suggested to you that that is available. It seems to fit the bill for your application. We will certainly try to pencil it in, but please get us some names.

Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you so much.

Dame Diana Johnson and **Sir Peter Bottomley** made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Last but definitely not least, we have the last application of the afternoon from Dame Diana Johnson and Sir Peter Bottomley. Welcome to you both; it is good to see you. The application is on the subject of the Government's response to the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry.

Dame Diana Johnson: As you know, we have been here a number of times seeking a Backbench Business debate on the issue of infected blood. To recap, the infected blood inquiry finished its oral hearings earlier this year. The final report from Sir Brian Langstaff is expected in the autumn, but Sir Brian has taken the very unusual step of producing an interim report in which he sets out very clearly the direction of travel, which is around the issue of compensation.

I want to read to you the list in his interim report. He talks about the need for a compensation scheme to be set up now to begin work this year; compensation schemes to be established before the inquiry makes its final recommendations in the autumn; interim compensation payments of £100,000 to be extended to groups that were not included in the payments made at the end of last year; affected family members to be eligible to make their own individual claims; chronic hepatitis B infections to be eligible for compensation—that is for the first time—a cut-off date for hepatitis C infection to be removed; and regular ex gratia support payments to be guaranteed for life by legislation.

That report was published in the Easter recess. The Government are telling Members of Parliament that they are working at pace to deal with the recommendations from Sir Brian. However, we have not had an opportunity for Members of Parliament to debate what Sir Brian said and to hear directly from the Minister about what "work at pace" means. There is some concern that that work is not as quick as it should be. We know that 500 people have died since the inquiry was set up and that one person dies on average every 96 hours. So there is a real feeling among the all-party group, which Sir Peter and I chair, and among Members across the House that this should be debated before the summer recess and we should at least allow people who are waiting to know what the Government's response and direction of travel will be to have some comfort. We are just concerned that radio silence isn't enough.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree with Diana.

Chair: I didn't think you would disagree with Diana, but there you go!

Sir Peter Bottomley: A debate will do good to the people for whom we are all concerned—when I say "all", I mean that all Members of Parliament are concerned with this. I think Ministers welcome the chance to speak. Certainly the present Minister, in the Cabinet Office, has come to the House of Commons to answer questions, but that is not a debate. I think that people who have been affected by this and those who are affected,



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and infected, want Parliament to be saying to Government, “When, what, how, and how soon?” A debate will help that.

Chair: Thank you. Questions please, colleagues.

- Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Diana, you mentioned at the beginning of your remarks that the final report is coming out in the autumn. Are there any other time pressures on having the debate at the moment—before the summer recess?

Dame Diana Johnson: Well, the interim report came out in the Easter recess, so it has been out for over a month now. To be fair, it’s a very unusual step for a public inquiry chair to make a report on compensation before he has actually made the report on the findings of the public inquiry, so I think it’s clear what direction the final report will take in the autumn. People are just desperate to know. They waited a very long time to get the public inquiry. They are waiting till the autumn for the final recommendations, but action could be taken now to identify the people who are not included in the support payment schemes and to start setting up the compensation framework. Penny Mordaunt, when she was Paymaster General, got Sir Robert Francis to do a framework analysis of what compensation could look like, and Sir Brian has used that a lot in his interim report. The Government have had it for over a year. They really should be in a position to make clear what their proposals are before the end of the year. And as Sir Brian says, the compensation scheme should be up and running this year.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My view, Chairman and Bob, is that if we are granted a debate, that makes it far more likely that Government will make a substantive decision and announce it before the summer recess. I think that’s important for those we are serving.

- Q11 **Bob Blackman:** At the moment, this is a general debate application. Have you not considered having a motion that calls on the Government to implement the recommendations of the interim report?

Dame Diana Johnson: Are you suggesting that we should change the title to that?

- Q12 **Bob Blackman:** I am suggesting that you should have a motion, which is potentially divisible on.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very happy to take your advice on that, if that’s the way to do it. I was just thinking that we could get the opportunity for a Minister to come and explain to us what is going on.

Sir Peter Bottomley: If my understanding is roughly right, if we had a motion that called on Government to announce by the summer recess how they are going to implement what has been recommended by Sir Brian, with a timetable, that would meet everything.

Dame Diana Johnson: And we can do that through the Backbench Business—



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Q13 **Bob Blackman:** It's not binding on the Government, but—

Dame Diana Johnson: No—of course. But it's a motion—

Q14 **Chair:** I think that it has been quite a long time since we had a Division from a Backbench Business Committee debate with a motion. That said, if it's passed on the nod, that is the will of the House, from our perspective.

Dame Diana Johnson: That is very helpful; thank you.

Q15 **Chair:** The application is live, so please consider the wording of a potential motion and submit it to us. We haven't any debating slots in the Chamber until towards the end of June, but I take it that if we could facilitate a debate towards the end of June, you would accept that.

Dame Diana Johnson: That's fine. We will be very happy if we can do it before the summer recess.

Chair: Excellent. In that case, thank you very much. We will now go into a closed session.