



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Monday 5 June 2023

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

Questions 1-14

Witnesses

[I](#): Alistair Carmichael.

[II](#): Christine Jardine.

[III](#): Matt Warman.

[IV](#): Jason McCartney.

Alistair Carmichael *made representations.*

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications in front of us this afternoon. We will begin with Alistair Carmichael, whose application is on the subject of the UK fishing industry. Alistair, welcome and over to you.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you very much, Chair and members of the Committee. The application is set out in front of you. You will see that it is supported by another 23 Members of Parliament. We have interrogated them fairly strictly with regard to their intentions in taking part, because I have seen a few of these debates recently when the number on the application does not necessarily meet the number on a Thursday afternoon. Of course, we all know that debates occasionally get shifted and the rest of it. They assure me that there are—if I look at the first eight, at least seven of them would sustain a three-hour debate on their own.

This is an issue that matters a lot to a small number of communities, and it is also of significance to communities right across the whole country. The pitch is for a three-hour debate. It would be nice to get it back into the main Chamber, but I would happily take Westminster Hall time as well.

The question is not so much about whether there is something to debate here; it would be who you would be bringing in from the Government to answer it, because in years gone by this would have been a fairly well-worn path of complaining about total allowable catches, quotas and the rest of it, and that is still a big issue for the industry, as things like the discard ban.

We have now got the review of the deal for fisheries under the trade and co-operation agreement, which is due to happen in 2025, and we need to start talking about that now, in the same way that we would have been talking about a review of the common fisheries policy back in the day. Beyond that, we have the issue of visas for crew, which would relate to the Home Office. You have spatial squeeze, where you have the fishing industry being squeezed of their traditional grounds because of energy or communication cables or whatever, so that would take you into Energy Security and Net Zero, or Business.

Just this week, I have started getting emails in relation to requirements that are being set up by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to assess the fitness of fishermen before going to sea. Once you go down that path, you are into fairly choppy waters at a fairly early stage.

There is no shortage of things to be discussing, and there is no shortage of people who have expressed an interest in having the debate, and I would hope that you would look upon it favourably.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. It is a well-subscribed application. If



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we could offer you some time at the end of June, would you be able to accept that?

Mr Carmichael: I would be delighted to accept that. The point that engages my delight is the question of the MCA and the fitness to fish test, which I just mentioned. I think that that will become an acute issue very quickly. The Home Office and visas for crew issue is also only getting worse, and we are seeing more and more inshore boats tied up as a consequence.

Chair: Thank you very much. Every day between now and the end of June is filled, but the last Thursday in June is a possibility, albeit that we have to depend on the Government allocating us the time.

Christine Jardine *made representations.*

Q3 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Christine, and welcome. The subject of your application is support for bereaved children.

Christine Jardine: This is, I will admit, a subject that is very close to my own heart, but I have discovered since first raising this at business questions that it is a subject very close to a lot of people's hearts in this place, either through personal experience or experience with their own constituents. There are a number of charities that do a lot of work with bereaved children in this country, but they are hindered in their work by the fact that they have no way of knowing at any time how many children are bereaved and how many children need support. Unless you have already been in contact with social services or needed support when a parent, sibling, grandparent or carer dies, there is no way of contacting you. The school may be very helpful, but that is not always there all the time. People move. There are all sorts of problems with that. The charities have expressed an interest in having a way of knowing how to contact children or a way of children knowing how to contact them.

We have moved on in the debate slightly from when I first raised that. At that time, people automatically assumed that it could be some sort of register, partly because one of the organisations, Winston's Wish, suggested to me that there could be a way, when a death was registered, for the authorities to be notified that there was an affected family—a child or children. But it is not that easy. I think we need to investigate how it can be done.

Since I first raised it, it has also been pointed out to me that this is a problem that does not go away with childhood. If the child does not get the appropriate support, and sometimes even if they do, it can go on into adulthood and lead to more problems. So there is a benefit both to society and to public services in the long run from dealing with the issue properly in the very beginning.

The issue has also developed in the sense that I do not think a register is necessarily the best way, but we need to investigate what would be the best way. Over the past few months, I have felt a wee bit passed between pillar and post, between the Home Office and the Department for



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Education. A number of people on the Government Benches have expressed support, but they have not known which was the appropriate Department or the appropriate way to deal with it. So I feel that a debate would allow that to be investigated. It would clearly show how much concern and support there is in both the voluntary sector and in Parliament, and it would perhaps encourage the Government to look at it in a positive light and to see what they could do to help.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Am I right in saying that you still have only eight signatures at the moment, Christine?

Christine Jardine: We did have an awful lot more expressions of support than that, but we wanted to get the application in, so we got the right balance and put the application in. We have more support than that.

Q5 **Chair:** It is a live application. If you would be happy to settle for a Westminster Hall debate, the number of signatures that you have at the moment would be about appropriate.

Christine Jardine: We have already had a Westminster Hall debate, but the problem was that it was dealt with by the Children's Minister, who said that it was not her but the Home Office that would have to respond. We have had difficulty getting the Home Office to respond and to set something up. So although I am happy to do it again, I just felt that I should mention that we had done that.

Q6 **Chair:** When was that?

Christine Jardine: March.

Q7 **Chair:** I'm afraid to say that there are not enough signatures at the moment to secure a Chamber debate, but it is a live application, and if more signatures are forthcoming, we can consider it for Chamber time at some later stage.

Christine Jardine: Thank you very much.

Chair: I'd like to say, from a personal perspective, that this is very close to me. I was only 12 when my mum died, so I know it is something that you live with for an awfully long time.

Christine Jardine: It does, and the number of people affected is astonishing.

Matt Warman *made representations.*

Q8 **Chair:** The subject of your application is artificial intelligence, so are you the real Matt Warman or an avatar?

Matt Warman: It would be careless of me to give it away.

I do not need to tell the Committee that artificial intelligence is the issue of our age, and certainly the issue of the moment. It has come up in Westminster Hall, in Adjournment debates and in Prime Minister's questions, and it is increasingly all over the front pages. What we have not



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had is a main Chamber debate that gives parliamentarians the opportunity to use that bigger stage to the many and various aspects that AI affects.

I should say that I got to the 16th slot on the form and then stopped, but I have plenty of other people from all parts of the House who are keen to get involved. It is no coincidence that the first three names are those of Select Committee Chairs—Alicia Kearns, Darren Jones and Greg Clark. There is real interest in the topic, as I think you know.

There is obviously a real debate to be had in terms of how optimistic people are, or how scared they are of AI, and how they want Parliament to make different policy about it. We know that Front Benchers in all the main parties are interested in having their say on the subject in one format or another, and I think it would be good to provide the opportunity to see whether the Government think their White Paper is still where it should be. Finally, it would really help industry to hear more from parliamentarians across the board, so they know whether understanding of this really important issue in Parliament is as it should be, and to get a sense of what parliamentarians currently think.

There is plenty talk about. I hope the Committee will look favourably on my application.

Q9 **Chair:** How will we know on the day whether the speeches were written by the Members themselves, or by some other force?

Matt Warman: We have already had a couple of Members—not me, yet—stand up in the Chamber and say, “This speech was written by ChatGPT.” It does raise an interesting question, because one of the most important principles for regulation of AI is transparency. As far as we know, all MPs who have used it have said that they used it, but we do not actually know for sure.

Q10 **Chair:** I’m not going to disclose how my script today was written.

Thank you very much indeed, Matt. I take it you are seeking a main Chamber debate. Late June or early July are possible; it depends on a range of factors, but if time becomes available, we will let you know as soon as we possibly can.

Matt Warman: That would be fantastic. Thank you very much.

Jason McCartney *made representations.*

Q11 **Chair:** Last, we have Jason McCartney speaking on an application that was originally submitted by Alec Shelbrooke. The subject is the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and NATO summit in Vilnius 2023. Over to you, Jason.

Jason McCartney: Thank you, Chair and members of the Committee, for your time. I’ll start with apologies from Alec Shelbrooke, who is the lead Member on the application and the leader of the UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I am a member of the NATO Parliamentary



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Assembly, so I said I would come along today to represent this application.

Our application is for a 90-minute general debate, either in the main Chamber or in Westminster Hall, hopefully on a Tuesday, under the title, "The NATO Parliamentary Assembly and NATO Summit at Vilnius 2023." The NATO summit in Vilnius is on 11 and 12 July. The debate is supported by 10 other Members from across the House, including Conservative, Labour, and SNP Members. The UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly is bicameral, cross-party and is appointed by the Foreign Secretary of the advice of the Whips of each party. It is staffed by Clerks from the House of Commons and has a formal standing within Parliament. We are a very active UK delegation; we hold various chairpersonships and rapporteur roles, and we also have one of the vice-presidencies. The Assembly has 269 delegates from the 31 NATO member countries. We put forward various recommendations and motions. We really do scrutinise the work of NATO, which is very much in the news at the moment because of the war in Ukraine. We have just had Finland join NATO, and Sweden are in the process of going through. Then, obviously, there is the big issue around when and if Ukraine will also join.

We have just had our spring session in Luxemburg. The UK delegation, on top of our procedural meetings, had an early morning meeting with a delegation of Ukrainian MPs, and one of the Speakers from their Parliament gave us an update on the situation there, which has been very useful when coming back and talking with Government Ministers about Ukraine.

The Vilnius summit is on 11 and 12 July. The Heads of States and Governments from the NATO nations will be there. The best timing, if possible, for this debate would be the week commencing the 17 July. That would allow us, straight after the NATO summit, to give Members the opportunity to reflect on announcements at the Vilnius summit, rather than having the debate the week before it. Having sat in front of the Committee before, I know how precious time is. Having been on the delegation and given how important it is with everything going on in Ukraine and our key role, I think it would send a very positive message to Ukraine if we could have this debate following the Vilnius summit. Thank you for your time, and I am open to answer any questions.

Q12 **Chair:** It is my pleasure. That is the last week of the summer term, as it were. I believe that there is a potential that Defence might be answering that day. Certainly, I think they are answering on 4 July, therefore, a fortnight later, they might well be also answering on 17 July. There is no rota yet; we do not know.

Jason McCartney: As well as the wide range of experienced parliamentarians who have supported this application, there would also be considerable interest from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Defence Committee and others, because of the Ukraine elements.

Q13 **Chair:** It would be Defence that are answering, I take it?



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Jason McCartney: Yes.

Q14 **Chair:** In that case, what we will do is accept the application. It is in order, and it has enough signatures for such a debate. We will park it until we get to see the rota, and then we will try to give you the most appropriate date. Is that okay?

Jason McCartney: I would really appreciate that. Thank you Chair and thank you Committee.

Chair: You are very welcome. Good afternoon, everyone.