

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 13 June 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 13 June 2023.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Wendy Morton.

Questions 1-19

### Representations

I: Tommy Sheppard, Aaron Bell, Martin Docherty-Hughes and Lloyd Russell-Moyle.

II: Sir Mike Penning.

III: Mr Virendra Sharma.

IV: Mr Alistair Carmichael.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



**Tommy Sheppard, Aaron Bell, Martin Docherty-Hughes and Lloyd Russell-Moyle** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. On this lovely sunny day in London, we have four applications in front of us. The first, from Mr Tommy Sheppard, is on the subject of bishops in the House of Lords.

**Tommy Sheppard:** Thank you, Chair. First, I am advised that I should make a declaration of interest. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary humanist group. Sitting on my right is Aaron Bell, who is the secretary of that group. This application has been brought forward with the support of that group, which comprises more than 100 parliamentarians.

The subject of the debate is the role of bishops in the House of Lords. Colleagues will know that there are 26 Lords Spiritual, as they are called: bishops appointed by the Church of England who have an automatic right to sit in the upper Chamber. The UK is one of the only legislatures in the world where the situation of automatic representation of clerics pertains; the other one is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

We think that there is a case to be made for reform of that situation. We think the debate, which would be wide-ranging in nature, deserves time in the main Chamber, given its importance. It will necessarily involve looking at the context of some big issues. One is the general role of the House of Lords and its location within our constitution. The other is a general debate about the separation between church and state, and in particular whether the Anglican Church should remain the established church in this country, given that in the last survey of public attitudes, 52% of the population declared themselves to be non-religious and 88% declared that they did not share the faith of the Anglican Church. In a country where only 12% of the population practise the said faith, it seems overdue that we should review that relationship.

The purpose of the debate would be to have a discussion, and perhaps to set an agenda for future discussions in Parliament that may or may not lead to reform. We hope that it will. It seems that this is something that Parliament ought to be discussing, particularly given the attitudes of the population at large.

**Aaron Bell:** Thank you for having us. Tommy has already declared an interest on my behalf: I am the secretary of the all-party parliamentary humanist group. I second everything that Tommy has said. I know it can be tedious when we talk about ourselves, but I do not think that this is a debate specifically about ourselves and this House. It is about the practice of Parliament, but it also speaks to a wider debate about the increased secularisation of society, whether people feel that it is right that we have bishops sitting directly in the House of Lords, and what we should do about that.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

I think it is a timely debate. Bishops, notably the Archbishop of Canterbury, have been intervening quite pointedly in politics recently. I do not intend to issue direct criticism of the archbishop, but that has aroused interest, particularly on our side, because he has been intervening against Government policy. It would be worthwhile exploring that, given that he has that role as of right.

Q2 **Chair:** I understand that naming individual clerics would be questionable in terms of parliamentary protocol.

**Aaron Bell:** Perhaps we would not name individual clerics then. But the fact is that the bishops are intervening politically in the debates on a Bill that is currently going through the other place. This proposed debate speaks to what legitimacy that has in the current era. I think it is a chance to open the debate. We would not be moving a motion because it would be a general debate. I think this debate's time has come based on what we see in the census, as Tommy alluded to. I support Tommy's application.

**Chair:** Do you have anything to add, Martin?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I support Tommy's application. As a Scottish constituency MP, I find that there needs to be a discussion about how the established Church of England has more of a say in the legislative process pertaining to devolved issues than a Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish Member of the House of Commons, and in certain elements even than Members for English constituencies. I think that really needs to be teased out and discussed in a robust debate.

**Chair:** Lloyd?

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I agree with everything that we have heard. I think that there are many different ways of looking at this; that is why a general debate in the Chamber would be interesting. How is religion represented? How are civil society and other views represented in our revising Chamber, if we have one? I do not think that the conclusion has to be just one or the other. It is not about complete exclusion; other countries have social charter processes whereby NGOs, religions, businesses and organisations like the CBI or trade unions feed into the revision of laws. This is the opening gambit to say that there is something not quite right here, because one group has a privilege over all others. Could we do things in a better way that gives everyone access to the wider discussions on how our politics works?

**Chair:** I am almost tempted to say, Father Jack-style, that this is an ecumenical question.

**Tommy Sheppard:** May I make one final point? In this application, we are not suggesting that people of faith—or, indeed, bishops—should not be involved in politics or hold representative political positions. Of course they ought to have the same rights to do so as anyone else, but what we are talking about is the automatic right for one Church in this country to appoint members of the legislature.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Patricia Gibson:** May I make an observation on the very point that the panel has made? The King himself has said that he wants to be the defender of all faiths, so to give primacy to the Church of England would seem in that context—

**Chair:** I would rather that individuals, no matter their status, were not mentioned in the debate, if that is all right.

**Patricia Gibson:** No, but I am just saying that in the context.

**Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much.

Q3 **Wendy Morton:** This is really a techie question about support for the debate. We normally ask for a minimum of eight Back Benchers—you have more than that—and for half to be Government names. The current list has only two names from the Government Benches and eight from the Opposition Benches. Would you be able to provide some more Government Members?

**Aaron Bell:** I know that there are other people who are sympathetic, so we could look at that. I don't even know who the other name is at the moment.

**Tommy Sheppard:** It's Crispin.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You have asked for a 90-minute debate in the Chamber. We grant 90-minute debates in Westminster Hall; debates in the Chamber are three hours, although they very rarely get three hours. We have to give priority to anything with a votable motion, because that has to be taken in the Chamber. We do have gaps in Westminster Hall between now and the summer recess, but we have no gaps in the Chamber before the summer recess. If you wanted a debate to air the ideas, you could get one in Westminster Hall before the summer recess; otherwise it will go on the waiting list.

**Tommy Sheppard:** Given the import of the topic, the genuinely all-party nature of the interest in it, and the scale of the interest, Westminster Hall does not really do the job, in my view. Given the public interest in the issue, I think we would probably prefer to wait in line for a main Chamber debate. I take your point about 90 minutes, but we could easily fill three hours—don't worry about that.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** We could do three hours between us!

**Chair:** In order to get a three-hour debate, you would need more names. We normally require a minimum of 15 or 16 names for a three-hour debate.

Q5 **Patricia Gibson:** To secure a place in the Chamber, it might be worth considering constructing some kind of divisible motion. Tommy, I noticed that you said you wanted to use this debate as a basis for future discussion. When I heard you say that, I thought the Committee would be minded to say, as an opening salvo, that you should go to Westminster Hall. To avoid that, I think you need to construct a divisible



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

motion, but it would have to be one that does not scare off anybody who might be minded not to speak against the party line, as it were.

**Tommy Sheppard:** Can I ask something as a point of protocol? If we did have a debate in Westminster Hall before the summer recess, would that—

**Chair:** That would not preclude you from bringing back a further application at some later stage.

**Tommy Sheppard:** To go to the main Chamber in the autumn?

**Patricia Gibson:** Based on what the Minister responded to. You could use that as the basis for your future Chamber application.

**Chair:** It is something to consider.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue, while you are contemplating that, is that Westminster Hall debates are available on Thursdays and Tuesday mornings, so it depends on which answering Department—which Minister, effectively—would be answering your debate.

**Aaron Bell:** The Minister for the Constitution, I presume.

**Patricia Gibson:** You might want to apply for a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall—

**Bob Blackman:** No, it is 90 minutes.

**Chair:** I am conscious of time and of the looming Divisions, colleagues.

**Tommy Sheppard:** If we could have a Westminster Hall debate before the recess—preferably on a Tuesday rather than a Thursday—and use that as the first chapter in Parliament, we could debate this more fully later in the year.

**Chair:** The timing of the Tuesday debate would depend on the registered answering Departments being appropriate for that particular day. We will work on that, Tommy. Thank you very much indeed—much appreciated.

**Sir Mike Penning** made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome. It is good to see you again. Your application this afternoon is on the subject of the BBC's proposals for the future of local radio.

**Sir Mike Penning:** I have sat here and asked for a debate before on this subject, which was very well supported, and we have had a recent lobby of the journalists and the local radio stations that are involved. Can I stress that this is not just about journalists? This is about the junior people working in local radio who mostly look after the interests of people who do not have another input of information coming to them.

In my constituency, I know of people whose mortgages are due for renewal—that is a big stress at the moment, with interest rates—but who cannot get one because they do not know what the future holds at the



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

radio station they are working at. That is an abhorrent situation for people to be in. At the lobby, we took a feeling—Chair, I know you were there; I will not beat around the bush about that—from Members across the House. As you have seen, there is support completely across the House.

But we should have a further discussion on what the proposals coming out from the top brass at the BBC are. We had that a little bit today when the head of the BBC was before a Select Committee, but I think this House should express an opinion as to what the BBC is doing. That was the general feeling at the lobby and the general feeling of the MPs who are signatories to the application. As you can see, we have 54 or 55. We could double that if we really push it. On that basis, I thought we should come back on behalf of Three Counties Radio, which is my local radio station, to ask the Committee to give more time so that we can debate the future—or the proposed future, or lack of future—of BBC local radio.

**Q8 Chair:** Thank you very much, Mike. I should say I was at the lobby, listening to what was said by local BBC journalists and other staff. They are represented by the NUJ. One of the things that struck me was the stat that they came up with: there are something like 5.5 million listeners over the age of 55, many of whom rely on it as a simple source of local information. So it is something that struck home with me, from my perspective.

**Sir Mike Penning:** There was one other thing at that lobby. If we are talking about money—this will come up in the debate—the amount of money the BBC are thinking they are going to save on this is, frankly, loose change by comparison with the money they are spending on BBC One or any of the celebrities that they pay fortunes for. People's jobs and information for our constituents is much more important, but that will come out in the debate.

**Q9 Chris Green:** I met a group from BBC Radio Manchester on the picket line in Greater Manchester. It is not just one or two stations. This is affecting people around the country, so this really does need to be debated.

**Sir Mike Penning:** It is vital that it is debated. This is funded by—this is an emotive subject—tax. The licence fee pays for this. Our constituents pay for it. They do not have a choice whether they pay for it. When things happen—I had a terrible explosion at Buncefield in my constituency when we had covid—who do they trust? They trust local radio.

**Q10 Chris Green:** That touches on my second point about people's expectations of the licence fee. This is one of those essential services that people expect from the licence fee. Might that come up in the debate as well?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I would hope it comes up. The licence fee is an emotive subject. My daughter—she won't mind my saying this—pays the licence fee because she has to, but does not listen to anything to do with the BBC. On the other end of the spectrum, we have the people that we are talking about, some of the most vulnerable people in our society, that completely rely on local radio for information, not least to do with schools



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

and covid and things like that. I have a radio station, Three Counties Radio, that looks after Beds, Herts and Bucks at the moment. We could end up listening to something from King's Lynn. I like King's Lynn—it is a very nice place—but there is no synergy, no empathy. I am sure the Committee gets what I am saying, but Parliament needs to express a view, which we have not done.

- Q11 **Bob Blackman:** This is clearly a very well supported application. I think many on the Committee are sympathetic. Our problem is finding time for this debate. At the moment we are full till the summer. You have a debate next Thursday on the prevention of FOP. I wonder whether we might be able to move that debate to Westminster Hall and have that on a different date, and have your debate on BBC local radio funding in its place. FOP is a very sensitive subject. I know you are a great champion of it and you might have lined people up to come on that particular day. If that is the case, it is a non-starter.

**Sir Mike Penning:** The first thing to say is that we had a debate on FOP in Westminster Hall, so the last thing I want to do is say to people that we are back in Westminster Hall. Can I take that away and speak to the campaigners and the families? I will not hold my breath as to whether they will agree. I will take their advice. We have waited a long time to get a debate on the Floor of the House. On the other hand, sometimes unexpected things have happened in this place. We are here till the recess. If there is a cancellation or something—

**Bob Blackman:** If there is a late-notice cancellation—

**Sir Mike Penning:** If there is a late-notice cancellation I am sure we can fill the Chamber on this subject.

**Chair:** And who knows, Mike? Our known time that we know that we regularly get has already been allocated between now and the summer recess, but it might be that other time becomes available on other days.

**Sir Mike Penning:** We will step into that breach.

**Mr Virendra Sharma** made representations.

- Q12 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Nice to see you. The subject of your application is the 2023 United Nations high-level meetings.

**Mr Sharma:** Thank you for allowing me to come before you and the Committee. I will be brief, although I have notes that take more than 20 minutes. In September, the United Nations will convene three high-level meetings to discuss issues of significant importance to the international community. These are pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, which will be on Wednesday 20 September, TB will be on Friday 22nd, and universal health coverage will be on Thursday 21st September.

The United Nations General Assembly frequently organises high-level meetings to increase awareness and consensus among heads of state on important global issues for the good of people worldwide. These meetings



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

are held during the week of the United Nations General Assembly to try to maximise engagement with senior governmental officials and Heads of State on these important issues. These important subjects will be debated.

I come straight to the application. Members from all the major parties have supported my application. I have also held conversations with other Members who were not able to sign the debate application but who have indicated to me that, should the debate be granted, they would like to speak. The chairs of several APPGs have supported the application, including global tuberculosis, UHC, vaccinations for all, and malaria and neglected tropical diseases, as well as the Chair of the International Development Committee. We would like to secure a general debate so that Members can discuss the broad range of global health topics that the three upcoming HLMs encompass and how the UK can play a leading role in that.

**Q13 Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Would you like this debate prior to the summer recess? You have mentioned that the high-level meetings take place in September.

**Mr Sharma:** Yes, we would like to have it before the summer recess, but we would prefer if it could be on a Tuesday.

**Chair:** Super. Thank you very much. You got your retaliation in first—that is well done.

**Q14 Bob Blackman:** Can we clarify which Department will answer? Is it FCDO or Health and Social Care?

**Mr Sharma:** I think it will be FCDO.

**Wendy Morton:** Just in the interests of fairness and consistency, in terms of Back-Bench support for the debate, we would normally ask for half of the names to be Government. By my count, we have three Government and eight Opposition.

**Chair:** We would not normally ask for half, Wendy.

**Wendy Morton:** Would we not?

**Chair:** No—a proportion.

**Q15 Wendy Morton:** A proportion—okay. I just wondered whether there would be a few more Government ones to add. I am sure you have that.

**Mr Sharma:** I can assure you that I have spoken—and you will know that I do what I say—to many Members on the Government side. They will be supporting it. Unfortunately, because of the time limit, I could not get all the signatures, but I assure you that there will be more support on the application.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. That is all. Thank you very much indeed, Virendra.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** made representations.





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q16 **Chair:** Last before us this afternoon is Mr Alistair Carmichael, on the subject of volumetric concrete mobile plants.

**Mr Carmichael:** Indeed. I note, Chair, that you have saved the most contentious matter for the end. The Committee has in front of it a fairly extensive note explaining the background to this. I fear that perhaps the note may have raised expectations and that the debate itself may not be quite as exciting as the note suggests.

In an ideal world, this would not be coming to the Floor of the House. This is something that really ought to be resolved. But for those companies, especially, in the various parts of the construction sector in parts of the country like mine and others, this is a real problem. It runs against all the direction of travel you will see in relation increased axle weights for other classifications of use. We have simply been unable to get any sense out of the Department on this. We have set up an APPG and tried to engage through that route. We have got nowhere.

Essentially, my hope is that this might actually just concentrate a few minds in the Department so that the prospect of any Minister having to get up on his hind legs and be grilled on this topic for 90 minutes by a genuine cross-section of people—the list of those who support the application are all active participants in the APPG—might just act as a catalyst for the issue being taken seriously. We could either see some progress made or, at the very least, get a reason out of the Department for there being no progress, which is essentially where we are today.

**Chair:** So it is a vehicle for concrete change. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Carmichael:** I couldn't put it any better myself—but I might have a go, come the day, if you grant me the time.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** How quickly do you want to hold this debate?

**Mr Carmichael:** I now know more about volumetric concrete mixers than I ever would have believed possible or desirable—

**Bob Blackman:** I'm sure you do.

**Mr Carmichael:** If you want to give me time tomorrow, we will fill it tomorrow.

Q18 **Chair:** And Westminster Hall would be fine.

**Mr Carmichael:** Westminster Hall is more than adequate.

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** We could offer you next Thursday.

**Mr Carmichael:** I think we could probably do that, yes.

**Bob Blackman:** In fact it is quite suitable: volumetric concrete preceded by the Mariana dam.

**Chair:** That is a possibility.

**Patricia Gibson:** Attitudes are hardening.



# HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** Thank you, Alistair. We will now go into private session for a short while. Thank you very much indeed everyone. Order.