

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 17 October 2023

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

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Sir Robert Neill made representations.

- Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a number of applications in front of us; we have built them up over the conference recess. We are beginning with Sir Bob Neill. Bob, your application is on World Stroke Day and the standard of stroke care in England.

Sir Robert Neill: Thank you very much. I hope the grounds have been set out in writing, so I will save time and not seek to rehearse that. It is an important issue we would say, because stroke is actually the largest single cause of adult disability in the UK. It does not always get the attention it should, which is why we would like a debate. We are asking for one and a half hours.

I have got eight names here; I have got the authority of Duncan Baker, Amy Callaghan and Liz Saville Roberts to add their names as well, so we would have enough to do the one and a half hours. We would like to get it as close as we could to World Stroke Day because of that importance—I know it is not absolutely bang on. It will particularly highlight thrombectomy, as I have set out in the application, which is potentially a real game changer.

As a country, we are not making the progress against the original stroke plan that we ought to be—we are slipping behind somewhat—and we are not doing as well as some other countries are in catching up on that. We want to raise that as a topic. I hope that largely speaks for itself, but I am happy to answer any questions.

- Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I have one question, Bob. Obviously, we would prefer to allocate your debate before Prorogation. It is likely that Prorogation will happen on 26 October. Will you be able to take a debate on Thursday 26 October?

Sir Robert Neill: Yes. We will take any time that is available.

Chair: That would be a Westminster Hall debate.

Sir Robert Neill: Understood.

Chair: Excellent. If there are no further questions, then thank you very much indeed.

Carolyn Harris made representations.

- Q3 **Chair:** Next up we have Carolyn Harris. Carolyn, your application is on the subject of menopause, so over to you.

Carolyn Harris: Tomorrow is World Menopause Day. October is World Menopause Month, and it has become somewhat of a tradition for us to have a Backbench Business debate around that time. I use it as an example to other countries that say, "How have you managed to get the menopause so high up on the political agenda?" I frequently say, "Because



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the Backbench Business Committee in Westminster gives us the opportunity to debate this very important subject on an annual basis." Every time we have one it is well subscribed. Every time we have one it is emotional and interesting, and fantastic news and information comes out of it. We are always grateful for the opportunity to discuss menopause at the very good graces of the Backbench Business Committee.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Carolyn. As with the application from Bob, if we do get some time on Thursday afternoon on 26 October, would you be available? It is the right month.

Carolyn Harris: That would be perfect. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you. I should note that, since the conference recess has taken place, we have lost Mark D'Arcy, political correspondent for the BBC, who was almost eve-present at the Committee. It would be sad for us to not note that Mark is no longer attending the Committee because he has moved on to other ventures. Our best wishes go to him.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Next up, we have Lloyd Russell-Moyle. Lloyd, you are substituting for David Mundell, who has submitted an application on the subject of World AIDS Day.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Yes. World AIDS Day is 1 December, and we will be looking for a debate as close as possible to that date. It is a Friday, so there is a Thursday the day before, which might be an appealing day. As Carolyn has just said, it has become a tradition to have these debates, whether annually or biannually, and they have pushed the Government on these issues.

The last debate was well attended and pushed the Government on opt-out testing. The latest results have come through from the Government's own data. There has not been a statement or presentation to the House about these matters, so the update from the Government—and of course its new targets to get rid of new HIV transmission by 2030—needs to be kept on target, so we are looking for that.

There are particular problems regarding women and ethnic minorities getting testing, as we know, and diagnosis for gay men has reduced last year, although there is some positive news on diagnoses for people who are black, Asian and minority ethnic. It is a mixed picture, but we need to push forward because there is this target looming now that we are on the last stretch for. We think that that political necessity is needed.

There is also a real desire from MPs, not just in urban areas but in semi-urban areas, for their hospitals to be doing opt-out testing, and some of those issues are starting to come to the fore, whereas the response previously has been very urbanised. Actually, if we are to root out the last diagnoses, we have to focus in all parts of Britain. That is why we would be quite keen on a debate.



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Q6 **Chair:** Thank you very much. This would be one of the subjects, Lloyd, that we would write to our successor Committee about. We would recommend that they try to find time for it, if the Committee is re-established after the prorogation and the King's Speech.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is much appreciated. That letter will be public, won't it? I think there have been occasions on which the Government have picked up some of the debates even before the Committee has been re-established, so I am just making sure that they will be aware of it too.

Chair: We write two letters, and they are very similar; one is to the Leader of the House, and one is to the successor Committee.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: So I know who to knobble if the successor Committee is not yet reinstated.

Chair: Indeed. Thank you very much, Lloyd.

Nick Fletcher made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Nick, welcome. Your application is on the subject of International Men's Day.

Nick Fletcher: Yes, thank you, members of the Committee, for letting me come in front of you today. I have led this debate for the last two years; it was obviously led by others prior to that. International Men's Day is on 19 November, so we would be seeking a debate just before or after that date. It is an extremely important issue. Men are struggling in so many different areas of life, and the statistics are only getting worse. There is an awful lot of good work happening in this space, but the headline statistics are still quite distressing—the amount of young men who are dying by suicide and the amount of men who are dying through prostate cancer, heart disease and all of the other issues affecting men today.

I also raised this yesterday, regarding the prison population, but 96% of the prison population are men. We need to be doing something about that. It is not just a case of building more prisons; we need to be looking after men and making sure that they do not end up on a path that leads only to a life in and out of prison.

I therefore think that this debate is extremely important, and I will be looking for a debate in the Chamber if at all possible.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Nick. Questions, colleagues, please?

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Your application is obviously a good one, but there is a lack of Opposition Members on it. Could you kindly try to get some Opposition Members to consent to supporting the application, because obviously we would want to see a balanced debate across the Chamber.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you for that. The hon. Member for Rotherham has kindly sponsored this. The two Members from last year's debate—the hon. Members for Gower and for Newport West—unfortunately have both got positions in the shadow Cabinet and so are unfortunately unable to sign



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this. However, I have spoken with both of them and they have both said that they would have this year if they had been able to. I will obviously try to get some more, but we do have Members from the DUP as well, and we have an independent Member of Parliament on there too.

Q9 **Chair:** The point that Bob made is a pertinent one. Could you get a couple more Labour names? There's no shortage of blokes on the Labour Benches.

Nick Fletcher: It is an extremely important issue—it affects 50% of the population—so we really need to try to get some Opposition Members on there as well.

Chair: I am sure that, if we have a quiet word afterwards, Nick, I'll be able to point you in the right direction.

Nick Fletcher: That is very kind of you, Chair.

Marion Fellows made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Marion, your application this afternoon is on the introduction of an energy social tariff to support disabled people with the cost of living crisis.

Marion Fellows: Yes, and thank you, Chair. You will see from my application that I have a very wide selection of Members from almost all parties represented in the House. The main reason for the debate is because in the autumn statement last year the Chancellor mentioned a social energy tariff. In January this year, the Prime Minister said: "As the Chancellor has already announced, we are also consulting on the best thing...going forward, including options...such as a social tariff, as part of our wider reforms of the retail energy market."

Nothing has happened, and many disabled organisations and disabled people are really worried about the upcoming winter, because there will not be the same level of support. I have had lots of interactions with disabled people and organisations representing them, and they have said how hard they found last winter. Given that it has been mentioned by the Chancellor and the PM, we want a Minister to come and reply, to find out what is happening. I do not want to get into my speech, but I think everyone in the room knows how passionate I am about representing disabled people. I think many people represented by these organisations need to have some clarity on this. That is the reason I have called for the debate.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Briefly, would you be able to take a debate in Westminster Hall next Thursday, the 26th? That might be Prorogation—we do not know yet.

Marion Fellows: We are really desperate to have this debate. I will be happy to do it any time, any place.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Marion.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q12 Chair: For those of you who are new to this system, Jim has a season ticket with the Backbench Business Committee.

Jim Shannon: You are most kind, Mr Chairman. My request is for a debate on protection in schools for pupils with allergies. You have the background information in front of you, Mr Chairman. As I understand, it is a debate that has not taken place recently. The issue was raised with me by a lady called Helen Blythe. She is the mother of Benedict, a young boy, a five-year-old, who collapsed and died in a school in Peterborough in September 2021. It went viral: 900,000 likes among those who followed and understood the issue. Following this, she was inundated with messages from families of children with allergies, who shared distressing stories about children who had almost died, whether they had near misses or had been excluded and bullied at school. The petition has attracted 12,500 signatures.

I am conscious of your time, Mr Chairman, so I will not say any more on that. We have cross-party support from all the parties, including Caroline Lucas from the Greens, Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, DUP—obviously—Conservative, Labour and the SNP. They are all there. Helen Blythe's MP, by the way, is also one of the sponsors. They all recognise that it is a massive issue. I hope that we can raise awareness and give Helen what she wants: the recognition that what happened to her son will not happen to any other son.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Jim.

Bob Blackman: I think we are just going to have to add it to the wait list, aren't we?

Q13 Chair: Jim, I take it that this debate is not time sensitive and that, if it was to go on to the list for the successor Committee, you would be quite happy with that.

Jim Shannon: I would be quite happy. I think what Helen had asked for was some time in mid-November, so that is okay, Mr Chairman. To you and the Committee, thank you so much.

Chair: In that case, we might be dependent on the largesse of the Leader of the House, because it is unlikely that the successor Committee will be up and running before mid to late November anyway.

Jim Shannon: Thank you.

Marco Longhi made representations.

Q14 Chair: Good afternoon, Marco—lovely to see you. The application is on the subject of heritage pubs. Can I just say that I know that this is very sensitive, and we do not want anything said during the application that might prejudice criminal proceedings?



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Marco Longhi: Thank you for reminding me of that. It is something that is very much alive in my own mind. We all want to achieve a particular outcome. That is in everybody's mind. There are a huge number of people who are voluntarily acting as admins to a Facebook group that has been created as a result of an incident that happened to a pub very close to many people's hearts that has been in the news recently. On the moderation, we are at well over 35,000 members now, with 10,000 within the first five days. This is a matter that has made *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Sydney Herald*, major newspapers in Hong Kong and South Korea, and most broadsheets of the European nations. German TV came over to interview me twice. Al Jazeera wanted to interview me about it. Wherever we turn a corner, someone knows about the Crooked House pub. How we move forward in this place to protect our heritage pubs is very important. We are today debating Lords amendments to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Unfortunately, from a timeframe perspective we have missed the boat on that. The timing was very unfortunate. I would be looking to move forward with something in the future. By instigating a Westminster Hall debate—which, as you will see from the MPs signed up to this, has widespread support—we will look at every possible angle from which we can either tighten up current legislation or look at new legislation where we can do better. One thing is for sure: what we have right now isn't working.

Q15 **Chair:** It is one that we would be able to add to the list. Hopefully the successor Committee could give you some airtime as quickly as possible after the King's Speech. Is that okay?

Marco Longhi: This is my first time, so I am not entirely sure how this works. I will be guided by you, Chair.

Chair: Unusually for Select Committees, this Committee only lasts for each Session of Parliament and has to be re-established after every Queen's or King's Speech. We have to then bequeath a list to the successor Committee.

Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** Selaine, your application is on the subject of floating offshore wind.

Selaine Saxby: And getting it afloat! In AR5 we did not actually have any bids come in. There are only two projects ready to bid into the contracts for difference leasing round. Kevin will well know, as a Devon neighbour, that the Celtic sea is a particular passion. The delay in this project really is disastrous. It is potentially adding five to 10 years to the delivery of floating offshore wind. We are pushing for a debate to get the matter back in the frame of the new Secretary of State and her Department, because AR6 opens in the second week of November, probably just after the King's Speech. I think there is a growing view, even among people like the Crown Estate, that, given that there are only two projects in the country ready to bid and the budget was big enough for both of them to bid, if we could just get a strike price, we could bring AR6 for floating offshore wind forward. I do not have as many Opposition MPs on my list as I would like,



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but I do have confirmation that most of those around the Celtic sea were unable to sign but will be speaking. They include Stephen Kinnock, Nia Griffith, Tonia Antoniazzi and Luke Pollard, all of whom are Celtic sea MPs from the Labour Benches. There is very much cross-party support, right the way down to local councils and back up again. It is just that we all know that AR5 went badly.

Q17 **Chair:** If you had a choice, when would you like this debate aired?

Selaine Saxby: Tomorrow, but given that that is unlikely to materialise, then as soon as we can. We know that AR6 is coming.

Q18 **Chair:** So as soon as possible after the King's Speech?

Selaine Saxby: That would be marvellous, thank you.

Chair: Marvellous. Thank you very much indeed. That brings to a close our consideration of applications this afternoon. We now move into the private session.