

Backbench Business Committee

Oral evidence: Backbench Business

Tuesday 16 January 2024

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Patricia Gibson; Nigel Mills; Wendy Morton.

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Representations made

[I](#): Fiona Bruce

[II](#): Sir Stephen Timms and Siobhan Baillie

Fiona Bruce made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications this afternoon—although only two are here in person—the first of which is from Fiona Bruce. Welcome, Fiona. Your application is on the subject of religious persecution and the World Watch List 2024.

Fiona Bruce: I am applying for a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate on the Open Doors World Watch List 2024, which will be published tomorrow. There is a launch event here in the House, which is always well attended by MPs—I understand that over 100 have already booked to attend. The World Watch List, which Open Doors has published for over 30 years, provides an analysis of persecution across the world. I regret to say that I fully anticipate that it will report that the situation has worsened over the last year, in no small part due to the increase in authoritarian regimes, including those that might not always spring to mind, as well as those that colleagues will be familiar with. Right across the world, from Nicaragua and Cuba to Algeria, and then across to some Asian countries, the position is deteriorating.

I work a lot with Open Doors in my capacity as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the World Watch List 2024 is a very authoritative report. The material in the report—I have last year's with me—would give colleagues an opportunity to contribute to the debate in a very up-to-date, authoritative way on any country that they might choose. Last year, there were 79 countries in the report. To give you an idea of how things have deteriorated, around 30 years ago, when the report started, there were around half that number in the report with high or very high levels of persecution. So you can see how things have worsened.

Finally, a number of MPs have expressed support for a debate, but since I submitted my application on Friday, three more colleagues have indicated their support: Alexander Stafford and Steve Double from the Government side and—sitting behind me here—Stephen Timms from the main Opposition party.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** You are asking for a Westminster Hall debate. Could you do Thursday 25 January?

Fiona Bruce: Yes.

Chair: If no one else has any questions, I thank you very much indeed, Fiona.

Sir Stephen Timms and **Siobhan Baillie** made representations.

Q3 **Chair:** Next up we have Sir Stephen Timms. Your application is on the subject of the Child Maintenance Service.

Sir Stephen Timms: Thank you very much, Chair, for giving us the opportunity to put our application. I am joined by Siobhan Baillie, who has also signed the application.

As you know, Chair, the issue of child maintenance continues to generate a huge amount of work for MPs. The Work and Pensions Committee, which Siobhan and I are members of, published a report in April last year and the Government responded to it in July. I think it would be fair to say that the tone of the response was sympathetic, but it did not contain many detailed commitments to change things. We asked in our report for various things to be done within six months. Now that six months have passed, we thought that a debate would give us an opportunity to take stock of what has happened over the last six months and allow MPs to press the Minister on the causes of the continuing unhappiness—which there undoubtedly is—with the performance of the Child Maintenance Service.

We think there will be a lot of interest in this debate, certainly from our Committee. There is an all-party parliamentary group focused on this, there are other concerned MPs, and there were two private Members' Bills on this last year—Siobhan's was one of them, Sally-Ann Hart's was the other. There is a great deal of parliamentary interest, which we think this debate will be able to harness; but perhaps I can ask if Siobhan would like to add anything.

Siobhan Baillie: I will be very brief—I am leaving soon to go to a DL on child maintenance. There is quite a lot of activity, possibly in response to our Committee's report, which was very thorough, and also the National Audit Office, so Members would have quite a lot of detailed information to rely on in a debate. More widely, since I did my private Members' Bill, I have had colleague after colleague coming up to me about their postbag issues, which are getting more complex. Quite a lot of the issues are mechanical and about the service that people are receiving. As you all know, this is not just about parents receiving money; it can have a huge impact on whether the child actually gets to see the parent. Gingerbread says that if the payments that are due were paid to single-parent families, we would lift significant numbers of families out of poverty, so this is quite multifaceted. I am really grateful for your time today.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You have applied for a Westminster Hall debate on a Tuesday. As you know, we need the right the answering Department to allocate a Tuesday debate. At the moment, it would appear that if you held out for a Tuesday, you will not get your debate until after the February recess. We do not even have the rota for then, so we do not know if the answering Department would be Work and Pensions—which I presume is who you would want to answer your debate. We certainly couldn't allocate it for a Tuesday before then, but we can allocate it for



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next Thursday in Westminster Hall, for example, if that suits you.

Sir Stephen Timms: The reason why we were keen to go for a Tuesday was twofold. Our Committee meets on a Wednesday morning, so we can't do then, but we are also concerned that a number of interested Members wouldn't come to a debate on a Thursday, and we are keen to maximise participation and we think we are more likely to achieve that on a Tuesday. Do you have anything to add, Siobhan?

Siobhan Baillie: No—I'm in every Thursday, but I think that's fair.

Q5 **Chair:** Bob is right: I think it is unlikely that you would get this in until probably the last week in February. We literally do not know what the rota would be immediately following the February recess, but bear in mind that we come back on Monday the 19th, so it might be the first or second Tuesday after that. We can pencil it in as a priority for a Tuesday morning, if you want to wait that long—that would tick all the boxes in terms of the application being sound—but that is a decision for you to make. If you want to hold out, we can put it on the list and then give you the first available Tuesday with the DWP answering.

Sir Stephen Timms: I think we would be grateful for that. We accept that it will take a bit longer, but we think it is worth waiting.

Chair: In that case, thank you very much.