



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 23 January 2024

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-25

Witnesses

I: Marion Fellows

II: Jim Shannon

III: Stewart Malcolm McDonald

IV: Damian Collins

V: Andrew Bridgen and Neale Hanvey

VI: Dean Russell

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



In the absence of Ian Mearns, Bob Blackman took the Chair.

Marion Fellows made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. The Chair is away on a Select Committee visit in France at the moment, so he has asked me to take the Chair for this afternoon's meeting. Welcome, one and all. We have six applications to hear this afternoon. We start with Marion Fellows, who is requesting a debate on the management culture of the Post Office.

Marion Fellows: Thank you, Chair. I really want this debate. Obviously, we are riding the wave at the moment. As many people will be aware, I chair the all-party parliamentary group. It is really important that we keep this issue front and centre. A Backbench Business debate would help, especially if it was in the Chamber.

Looking at the people who have signed the application, there is no Liberal Democrat Member, but we have had agreement from at least one Lib Dem Member to support the debate. My parliamentary assistant put this list together the same day we put out the email—that is how important people think it is. That is the nub of why I am here.

We need to keep the pressure up, especially after the Select Committee session last week, when more questions about the culture and management of the Post Office were brought forward. For me, it is about the sub-postmasters, not about Parliament, but we have a role to play in making sure that they get complete financial redress and justice, and that we move things forward. I know that everyone here will be aware that Sir Wyn Williams's Horizon statutory inquiry is ongoing, but we have managed to hold debates while it has been ongoing before.

Q2 **Chair:** May I ask what you seek to achieve by the debate?

Marion Fellows: As I said, I want to keep the issue in the public eye and to make sure that many other Members can bring into the public domain what they have experienced. I am sure many people around the table here have had visits from very concerned constituents. I had a meeting with sub-postmasters in my own area who came in to tell me horror stories that I did not know anything about, and they knew of my interest in post offices. "Mr Bates vs the Post Office" seems to have released something so that people feel able to come forward. I think it is really important that Members get to speak about their constituents' experiences.

Chair: Fine, thank you. Kevin.

Q3 **Kevin Foster:** I see the demand for this debate and the obvious wish for people to talk about their constituents' cases. You are going for a general debate rather than a substantive motion. Are there any specific requests that you are planning to bring up? Why are you going for a general debate rather than substantive? Normally, a substantive motion would be



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something to consider for the Chamber.

Marion Fellows: I did consider substantive, but I think there may be issues because of the Horizon inquiry, and I wanted to keep it so that we were not doing anything that would influence or prejudice anything that was happening in the inquiry. As I said, I really do not want this issue to disappear. There are all sorts of things going on at the moment. Naturally, things recede into the memories of people and the media. This has to be kept front and centre and I thought all I could do to keep it going was to ask for the debate.

Q4 **Chair:** If we were minded to offer it to you—the Committee will decide after this meeting—would you be available on Thursday 8 February?

Marion Fellows: Yes.

Chair: Thank you.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** We move swiftly on to our season ticket holder—Jim Shannon. No Backbench Business Committee meeting would be complete without an application from you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: Mr Blackman, may I thank you, as acting Chair, and your fellow Committee members? The issue, which happened over Christmas and the new year, is the Christmas killings of Christians in Nigeria. Almost 200 were murdered by Fulani tribesmen and also by Boko Haram. The ferocity of the violence that was carried out among men, women and children, the destruction of churches, the destruction and burning of homes and the brutalisation of women is something that is very hard to take. The Open Doors event last week probably gave most of us an indication; I think, looking around the room, nearly everybody here attended that event. Nigeria features highly, in the top two or top three, on its list at this moment in time.

We have had debates in the past. You will know from the background information that we had one in April 2023. There was another in April 2023, when we looked specifically at religious minorities in Nigeria. But it is quite clear that the action that we sought has not given the desired results. The violence continues. Plateau state in Nigeria seems to be where most of that takes place. Nigerian responses to these attacks may require further assistance in aid and development of plans to prevent future attacks. The governor of Plateau state described the attacks as genocide. That is the man in charge on the ground saying that it is genocide. It is very hard, when you hear of the numbers that have been murdered, not to feel that way.

Despite the debates that we held about a year ago, the violence against religious minorities—Christians in particular but also, in some cases, Muslims—continues to occur, as shown by the recent Christmas attack. I am asking for a debate to address what better policies and actions should be implemented by our Government with Nigeria to assist it. It is not about telling Nigeria what to do, because that is the wrong attitude to



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take. It is about considering how we can help them and encourage them to make sure that their army and police force respond better to the attacks—undoubtedly, there will be more attacks in the future—but also to provide aid for the people displaced because of such attacks. I was there with the APPG just over a year ago, and that gave me an understanding of some of the problems in Nigeria, but it is clear to me that the response from the Nigerian Government has not been sufficient, and maybe what needs to be done here, by the United Kingdom Government, is to see how we can help them to do it better.

Q6 **Chair:** What would be the answering Department?

Jim Shannon: The FCDO. Probably Anne-Marie Trevelyan—

Chair: I don't think you can pick your Minister—

Jim Shannon: No, but she seems to attend all the debates.

Q7 **Kevin Foster:** Jim, I am sure that it is in your diary already that there is a debate of potentially up to three hours on Thursday about freedom of religion in Westminster Hall. Could you briefly explain to me why this issue couldn't be covered as part of that?

Jim Shannon: First, I was approached by some of the church groups in Nigeria. I understand that point; indeed, I am down to speak in that debate, although I intend to speak on two other religious minority groups. The reason why I applied for the debate in this case is specific. This is, unfortunately, a continuing catalogue of violence. The 90-minute debate would be specifically about Nigeria. I think we probably want to focus on that and nothing else, because of the ferocity of the attacks against the Christians in those villages across Plateau and north-east Nigeria. Could it have been done within the other debate? Maybe some people might do that on Thursday. I am not saying they won't, but what I am saying is that this Nigerian incident is of such vital importance that I feel it deserves a 90-minute debate on its own. I hope that that helps.

Q8 **Chair:** Jim, you have ticked all three boxes. Do you have a particular preference for when your debate would be held?

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, I am always happy to go with whatever the Committee decides. I understand that time is at a premium for the debates that people ask the Committee for.

Q9 **Chair:** If we were minded to offer Tuesday 6 February, could you do that date?

Jim Shannon: Yes, I certainly could.

Chair: Thank you.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** We move on to Stewart Malcolm McDonald with an application on living standards.



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Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Yes, Mr Chairman. Thank you for seeing me this afternoon. The application has been submitted with support from many Members from different Opposition parties. I will hold my hands up straightaway and say that I struggled, despite my many friends on the Conservative Benches, to get more than my good friend Royston Smith to sign the application.

I think all Members around the Committee table, and all Members of the House, agree that living standards will be the defining issue of the upcoming election contest, and rightly so. It is only right that Parliament has a debate on that, and it shouldn't have to wait until we get into election time proper. I am happy to expand on that in response to any questions, but I think the whole issue of living standards will be fairly self-explanatory to most Members.

Q11 **Chair:** The obvious question is: can you get some more Government names to add to your application?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I would be confident of that. I confess that I rushed the application to meet your deadline, which slipped my mind. I was rather panickingly texting some Conservatives and Royston was the only one to come back to me on time, but Conservatives will undoubtedly want to have a debate on living standards. They believe that they have a record and ideas to put forward, as do other political parties, so I would hope so.

Q12 **Nigel Mills:** Which Department do you think will answer? It could be Energy or Work and Pensions; it could be the Treasury.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The two that I thought were the most obvious were the Treasury or Levelling Up. To my mind, the whole issue of living standards covers a wide array of subjects, including wage growth—or the lack of it—productivity, the public realm and disposable incomes. It can cover so many different issues that I thought either the Treasury or Levelling Up would be the most obvious to be at the Dispatch Box on the day.

Chair: Thank you. We will consider the application, as we will consider all of them, and the Clerks will contact you.

Damian Collins made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Next up is Damian Collins on the civil nuclear road map.

Damian Collins: The Government published the civil nuclear road map two weeks ago. It was probably the biggest development in the UK nuclear energy strategy for 50 years, since the big building programme in the '80s. There is substantial interest across the House in this subject because of the number of constituencies, such as mine, where there are existing nuclear facilities and people are looking for new investment. We have not just the building of big reactors such as Sizewell and Hinkley, but new technologies that haven't been available before, which open up more sites around the country.



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There are two live Government consultations running side by side—one of eight weeks and one of 12 weeks. The purpose of the debate is to give the House a chance to respond to the consultations through the form of a debate in the main Chamber. I have put the application together very quickly, so the people I have contacted are largely the people who asked questions in the statement. I have had another four responses since we put the application in. There are Conservative, Labour, DUP and Plaid Members. I do not have Liberal or SNP Members; they have principally spoken against the strategy and I imagine would do in the debate as well, so I think there would be additional interest from those parties too.

Q14 **Chair:** Well, remember that applications can be made even when people disagree with the debate.

Damian Collins: Sure.

Q15 **Chair:** You have ticked “Chamber only”. Have you considered having a motion to go with the application?

Damian Collins: I had considered whether the motion could be to support the Government’s civil nuclear road map, but it is also a consultation. It is unusual in a consultation to have a binary question. There may be some Members who would say, “Well, I support it in principle, but subject to these views.” I think it might be neater if it is seen as informing the consultation and the House is not asked to resolve one way or the other.

Q16 **Kevin Foster:** Given the ongoing consultation and the fact that there have recently been chances to pick some of this up in the Chamber, would it be possible to consider this in Westminster Hall? That would mean that you could have the debate slightly more quickly, rather than waiting for a Chamber slot. There has very recently been an announcement, and the Government will almost certainly want to schedule debates on their own response in due course. Would you consider a Westminster Hall debate?

Damian Collins: I think the Chamber would be more suitable. We have not had a major Chamber debate on nuclear energy in its own right for a long time. Given that I have a nuclear power station in my constituency, it is the sort of thing I look out for. The Government need to complete the consultation and respond to it, so the ultimate results of the consultation may not come until after the general election. I am looking for a set piece for the House to have the chance to express a view on it while the consultation is live; I think that would be more appropriate. I think it deserves a main Chamber slot due to the weight of interest. I think there will be a lot of Members wanting to speak. There have been a number of smaller Westminster Hall debates, often focused on single sites or single technologies, but the House has not had the chance to express its view on such a wide range of issues.

Q17 **Chair:** There are two consultations. When does the eight-week consultation close?

Damian Collins: That will probably be in about six weeks’ time, and the one after that will be in about 10 weeks’ time.



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Q18 **Chair:** Obviously, Chamber time is precious and we have a series of applications, so Westminster Hall debates are quicker to get than Chamber time.

Damian Collins: I would rather wait. I wanted to put the application in as soon as possible to give the Committee as much flexibility as possible. I think this could easily be after the after the February recess, if there is a slot then.

Chair: It is likely to be after the February recess.

Damian Collins: That is fine. I would be happy with that.

Chair: If there are no questions, then thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch.

Andrew Bridgen and **Neale Hanvey** made representations.

Q19 **Chair:** Next up is Andrew Bridgen on the covid-19 pandemic response and trends in excess deaths.

Andrew Bridgen: It feels like it hasn't been long since I've been in this Committee Room. It isn't really. A week ago, on 16 January, we had the 90-minute Westminster Hall debate. It was so well attended that Back-Bench contributions were limited to three minutes, which is completely unacceptable for colleagues, so I have applied again. In line with our discussion at my last attendance, I feel that this issue is of huge public concern. It is of increasing concern to colleagues across the House. That is reflected by the fact that I had 17 supporters for last week's Westminster Hall debate. Twenty-two have signed this application for a full debate in the Chamber. Could I ask you to add the names of Dame Andrea Jenkyns and Andrew Selous, who have indicated this morning that they would support that debate? That will take us, I think, to 24 colleagues. I also raised it in Business of the House questions on Thursday, and the Leader of the House urged me to go for a full debate in the Chamber. You are smiling, Mr Blackman.

Chair: A get-out clause from the Leader of the House!

Andrew Bridgen: I have heard that one a few times before, but the normal Chairman of this Committee was sitting slightly to my right and gave me every encouragement, although he did point out that he would not be here this week because he was out of the country. I hope that the Committee will bear in mind the level of interest from colleagues, which is growing. Clips of that Westminster Hall debate have been seen on social media over 10 million times, and that is in a week. I am absolutely convinced that if you give us the full three-hour debate that we deserve, it will be well attended and well appreciated by our electorate. Neale Hanvey from Alba is also supporting this application.

Neale Hanvey: As somebody who cared deeply about making a contribution to the debate in a very balanced manner, it was very frustrating—it was not the Chair's fault—to have only three minutes. That



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meant that I was only really able to advance one central argument about the pillars of good clinical practice, and had to leave all the clinical evidence that supports some of my concerns to one side.

When you reflect on the role of MPs, we are often the last line of defence for constituents. I have very troubled constituents coming to me about this situation. They expect Parliament to respond to that in an effective way, so I think it is incumbent on all of us to begin to discuss some of the concerns that the public hold. At the very least, it is essential that we have a three-hour debate on the Floor of the House. I think that the interest in it will be significant.

It is also important: we really must tackle this. We were chatting in the corridor before we came in about the fact that there were people involved in the Horizon scandal who looked at the prosecutions that were going on, and knew that there was a miscarriage of justice. We know that there are people who are suffering as a consequence of some of the things that happened during the covid pandemic, and it is incumbent on all of us—not a single party, not the Government, but all parliamentarians—to reflect on that and begin a discussion about this. That is why it is even more important now that the inquiry's investigation into the vaccine has been pushed back, which is very unfortunate.

Q20 Patricia Gibson: We have all been at 90-minute Westminster Hall debates that are popular, and you get two or three minutes and cannot develop an argument. But if you have a half-day debate in the Chamber, you are not going to get three hours. Because of statements and urgent questions on a Thursday, the debates are always squeezed. The most you will probably get, based on past experience, is about two hours, so it will not be much more than you have already had.

Andrew Bridgen: But it is more than we have already had, and what we had was not sufficient, so we have to go for more. As my colleague has mentioned, this is about protecting public health. That is why the symbol of Parliament is a portcullis: we are the only defender of the public.

Q21 Patricia Gibson: No, I am making a point about the opportunity to develop an argument and the limitation on your time. A half day is not going to answer your concerns about your time being truncated.

Neale Hanvey: I take the point that you make with good grace. However, the important thing is that the conversation needs to continue, and not having a further debate is not furthering the conversation. I will not see the need to repeat myself, even if I have a shorter allocation in a debate on the Floor of the House. I will be advancing a different argument, and that is just the nature of Parliament. But by not having it, the debate is finished, and that is clearly an unacceptable position. Whether we get a six-hour or a two-hour debate, at least it is two more hours than we have already had.

Andrew Bridgen: Also, the issue of vaccine safety and efficacy is something that is developing every week, if not every day. New evidence that asks questions is appearing. We will be having this debate at some



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time in the future, and I have no doubt that more information will be in the public realm and the arguments will have moved forward. Or perhaps someone will come out with some evidence that they were actually safe and effective after all.

Q22 **Patricia Gibson:** Just to be clear, I am not commenting on the substance of your debate; I am commenting on the timing.

Neale Hanvey: I appreciate that. That is why it is important to put that in the context that we have had some time but need more time. I would anticipate that ultimately the Government will need to concede some debate in their time, because this issue is going to increase in importance, not decrease.

Andrew Bridgen: It is of huge importance and concern to the public. If they perceive that the Government have curtailed debate on the issue by creating business that impinges on a three-hour debate, then woe betide the Government.

Neale Hanvey: I agree.

Patricia Gibson: To be fair, any debate in the Chamber on Thursday is always squeezed—every single one. It is not targeted at any one topic. If you look back, you will see that business on Thursdays is always very tightly squeezed.

Neale Hanvey: That's a very fair point.

Chair: The only time we have been able to change that is when there is no Government business and we get protected time for the Backbench Business debates, which extends the day. But doing that is not very popular.

Q23 **Nigel Mills:** Would you be tempted to have a motion calling on someone to do something specific?

Andrew Bridgen: I was just discussing this. It is extremely disappointing that the independent covid inquiry have put back module 4—investigations into the safety and efficacy of the vaccines—until further notice. I think the level of support and concern in the House will be such that we perhaps should have a motion calling on the inquiry to expedite the investigations and evidence as to the safety and efficacy of these experimental vaccines.

Neale Hanvey: In terms of public perception, that is really important. At the moment, with module 4 being delayed, it just fuels a lot of the conspiracy theories, when what we need to do is move the discussion away from conspiracy theories and into facts and science, and have a proper discussion about the impact this is having on our constituents, rather than having to backpedal on conspiracy theories.

Chair: Well, it is obviously your application, so whether you have a motion is your decision. The only thing we would want is to have sight of the motion before it goes on the Order Paper, just to make sure it is in order, but the Clerks will obviously do that for you. The application is



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there. We will consider it, and then the Clerks will be in touch about when we can allocate time in the Chamber. Obviously, there is a queue for the Chamber.

Andrew Bridgen: I understand; thank you. Please add those extra names to the list, because they were very keen to be seen to be supportive.

Chair: Okay.

Dean Russell made representations.

Dean Russell: To begin with, thank you so much for providing me with this opportunity to pitch to you the reason why I think this debate is so important. The debate that I am suggesting is on considering premature deaths from heart and circulatory diseases, and I have already had 30 cross-party Members support this. Just while I have been sitting here, I have had an extra one, so I am sure the number will grow. There will probably be so many speakers that we will be squeezed on time.

There are several reasons for pushing forward on topicality and timing. Some of you may be aware that during Prime Minister's questions last week I shared that I unexpectedly had a heart attack five months ago. I shared that experience, and I have been working with the British Heart Foundation to share with the media and elsewhere the early warning signs that I believe helped to save my life and reduce the long-term effects. This debate is not just about me—it is not about me at all, actually—but, following that, I have found incredible engagement with colleagues, who have been asking not just about the topic, but about the impact on them personally. They have been asking for the warning signs and all those things. But there is also interest from the public and the media.

This is aligned with a bigger picture, which is about World Heart Month. The British Heart Foundation do a big campaign every year. I am in a rather peculiar situation, because I did lots of work with the British Heart Foundation about 15 years ago. I believe I was one of the people who pushed them to do a British Heart Month, so my experience is circular. What they have found—they have produced a press release and research, which has been announced this week—is that the current state of heart and circulatory disease in the UK is, sadly, in decline for the first time in six decades. While there have been huge strides in improving outcomes, we are finding now that those outcomes are reducing.

In 2022, over 39,000 people in England alone died prematurely of cardiovascular conditions, including heart attacks, coronary heart disease and strokes. That is an average of 750 people per week. This affects everyone—whether directly, through family, through friends, economically, through business, through the impact on concerns or through the impact for those who fortunately have not died through this. Nearly two thirds—around 64%—of adults in the UK are overweight or living with obesity. I admit that last year I was within that category, but I am doing my best to reduce the risk.



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One of the key aspects of this is that it is a multifaceted debate. Obviously, ideally, it would be with the Department of Health and Social Care, because that would be the nature of where this would fall, but the truth is that this allows Members of Parliament to discuss social impacts, health impacts, individual choice, economic impacts, diversity and those who are at greater risk. It allows a wide-ranging debate, and that is why I have suggested a general debate on the Floor of the House to look at the topics of this. I believe that it is an opportunity to explore prevention and, through the debate, to raise awareness to the public of the signs to watch out for and things to think about. I think that there is a public-awareness and education piece here.

There is also an element about the impact of personal stories. Even just in the past week or so, from being open about this, a number of people have come up to me and said, "Actually, my family member had this," or Members of Parliament, from all parties, have come up to me and shared their own stories, which I will not share now, of the impact of heart disease and of recovery, from a range of different causes.

Therefore, I think that this is a perfect debate for Parliament. It is one that can push the debate forward. It can raise awareness during World Heart Month of something that the world will be talking about during the next month. It will be based on very current data and research, which we have seen through the British Heart Foundation. It also allows Parliament to do its best thing, which is to take real stories of real constituents, to provide education and to put forward ideas and policies, which I am sure will come forth through this, about how we can tackle the challenges that we face.

In summary, I think the key part here is that, as a debate on the Floor of the House, it is a perfect fit for Parliament; it is a perfect fit for all of us, as MPs, potentially to talk about stories personal to ourselves and our constituents. Ultimately, I genuinely believe that this debate, even if it affects just one person, could save people's lives. And if there is anything that we should be doing in Parliament, I think that is an important thing that we should be trying to do.

Thank you for your time. I can give you more stats, but I won't—but if you would like me to, I can. As I say, there is lots of support, and hopefully you will support this submission as well. Thank you.

Q24 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that, Dean. You have mentioned that it is World Heart Month; what is the period of time? Is that January or February?

Dean Russell: It is February, so, thankfully, there is time. It starts at the start of February. The background to it is that, many years ago, I did work for the British Heart Foundation, and they used to do their campaigns on Valentine's Day. I identified that the ad-word cost for "heart" was going through the roof on Valentine's Day, so I recommended, "Perhaps you should do a heart month?" It turns out that, a few years later, they did, so I feel that there is a personal, professional link here as well.



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Q25 **Chair:** The other consideration is that, with 31 speakers now, I think, and allowing for Front-Bench speeches, if you had a 90-minute debate, they would all get two minutes each.

Dean Russell: Yes.

Chair: So I would suggest that 90 minutes is not a very good plan if you have this number of speakers who are genuinely going to turn up and speak. That probably leads you to either taking the full time in Westminster Hall or a debate in the main Chamber. But it is your application, so—

Dean Russell: Absolutely; I have considered that. I was quite shocked at the number of colleagues who were very quick to support this. I think that the reality—although you will absolutely know best, as you do this week in and week out—is that, often, colleagues cannot always turn up on the particular day. They are not always here, and a lot of colleagues are in constituencies far from Parliament, so my assumption is that not all of them would necessarily turn up. However, I think that, even if half did, that would still provide a strong and robust debate, even if there was short time for speaking.

Chair: If there are no questions from colleagues, then thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch with you.

That concludes the public business of the Committee. The Committee will now go into a private session to consider the applications. Thank you very much for your attendance.