

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 20 February 2024

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Watch the meeting

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

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Nick Fletcher made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have started a little early because we are aware that there may be Divisions in the Chamber quite soon.

We have six applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Nick Fletcher on the subject of the educational attainment of boys. Over to you, Nick: tell us why you are applying for this debate.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you very much, Chair and Committee, for letting me appear before you today.

I am the chair of the APPG on issues affecting men and boys. We have conducted research and have recently produced a report on the underachievement of boys. They are behind girls at every single level throughout education, and 40,000 fewer boys than girls go to university each year. Unfortunately, with boys not achieving the grades they should, an awful lot of them do not end up in any kind of education, employment or training. That is not good for them, not good for their family and not good for society as a whole.

Work has been done on the subject, but the last time it was raised was in 2016. We need to make sure that the Government know what is actually happening. I believe that there are solutions to the problem, so this debate is extremely important and is very close to my heart. I hope that an awful lot of the other Members who have signed my application will come along so that we can have a real debate and hopefully make a real difference.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, colleagues?

Q2 **Kevin Foster:** I have to bring up the point that we expect applications to be genuinely cross-party. Looking at the list, there are 14 Conservative Members, but only two Opposition Members. Do you think you might be able to get some more?

Nick Fletcher: I might be able to get some more, yes. The Chair of the Education Committee really wants to support the debate—

Chair: He is of your party, though, to be fair.

Nick Fletcher: He is of my party, but he is a jolly decent chap, too, and obviously he is the Chair of a cross-party Committee. I understand that if I can get a few more names, it would be helpful, but I genuinely believe that it is an issue that affects every MP's constituency and we really need to look at it.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** You have ticked Tuesday only on your application. We have to make sure that the answering Department is answering on the right day, so—assuming that the Committee grants your request—I suspect the debate will be on either Tuesday 5 March or Tuesday 19



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March, which is an Education day. Would you be able to lead the debate on either day if the Committee allocated it?

Nick Fletcher: If the Committee granted me the debate, I would make sure that I could do either of those days.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Would you consider having your debate on a Thursday?

Nick Fletcher: I would prefer not to, just because I believe it is so important. I understand the comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) that it would be mainly Conservative MPs, but we have had huge numbers come forward for it. We had 16 signatures pretty much straightaway.

Bob Blackman: If you do a Thursday or a Tuesday, you get 90 minutes anyway.

Nick Fletcher: Yes, but on a Thursday many Members seem not to be around.

Bob Blackman: But it is a very important subject, so people will want to stay to debate it.

Nick Fletcher: That is a very good retort—but I would prefer it on a Tuesday if at all possible. Thursdays are usually fine for me when I appear before this Committee, but I would prefer a Tuesday for this debate if at all possible.

Q5 **Chair:** To put Bob's question a different way, if you were offered Tuesday 5 March, would you accept it?

Nick Fletcher: Yes. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Nick Fletcher made representations.

Chair: It's you again, Nick.

Patricia Gibson: The new Jim Shannon!

Q6 **Chair:** Your second application is entitled "Easter, the Resurrection, and the Impact of Christianity". Can you tell us why you would like a debate on that subject?

Nick Fletcher: This would be the third in the series of debates that I have had. The Committee granted me a similar debate last Easter, and it also granted me a Christmas debate last year. Both debates were well attended, and the numbers on the application have increased. There is an awful lot of interest: the first debate went on YouTube and was seen over 200,000 times across the world.

This is a subject that is extremely important to me and to many people in this House and across the country. Christianity has played a huge part in our history and continues to do so. We should all reflect on it, especially at certain times of year that are very important to the Christian calendar.



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Q7 Chair: I am wondering about the title, to be honest, because it does not lend itself to an answering Department. We slightly altered the title of your Christmas application by involving community, so the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities answered the debate. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Nick Fletcher: I understand where you are coming from. We could probably work “community” into the title. Christianity is all about communities. More than anything else, it is about bringing communities together and looking after one another within our communities, so I am sure we can work that into the title.

Q8 Nigel Mills: Is this a different debate from your Christmas one?

Nick Fletcher: Yes. I am already working on how I am going to move forward with this. I am working with people within Parliament and external to Parliament on how best to get something out of this.

We have a huge number of churches in our communities, but unfortunately they will fall into disrepair unless attendance increases. Although Christianity is the main theme of this, I also think it has a huge effect on where we all live and what we take for granted. As a society, we enjoy the benefits of living under Christian values, but unfortunately we seem to be letting them slide. We enjoy living with fantastic architecture that has been built over the years because of Christianity. I think that the Department for Levelling Up and all of us as a whole really ought to appreciate what we’ve got. I am extremely concerned that we are just going to let it go as we become more secular.

Q9 Nigel Mills: That seems to be a debate on the role that churches play in communities and the threat to the viability of local churches, which is quite different.

Nick Fletcher: I think they are inextricably linked: you can’t have one without the other, but an awful lot of people believe that you can. Easter is a huge date in the diary. It is a time of year when many people do go to church. I think that explaining what Christianity is about, where people need to go to explore their faith and the opportunities and the life that Christianity can give individuals can only happen if we have churches, ministers, vicars and people who are prepared to give their lives to that. They are inextricably linked and I feel very passionate about it.

Q10 Bob Blackman: You have ticked various different boxes, including that for a Thursday, so if we offered you a debate in Westminster Hall on a Thursday, you would be happy to accept that.

Nick Fletcher: If I could ask for it to be the closest Thursday to Easter, that would be—

Bob Blackman: That would be the last day before recess.

Q11 Chair: No, it wouldn’t. The last day before recess is Tuesday 26 March.

Nick Fletcher: That Tuesday would be fine, as would the Thursday prior to that.



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Q12 Patricia Gibson: You will know from your previous application that you will need more cross-party names. You have said that you had a similar debate to this last Easter. Do you remember which Department answered it?

Nick Fletcher: Yes, it was DLUHC, and it was DLUHC at Christmas as well. It sits within their remit.

Chair: So not the Cabinet Office.

Q13 Kate Osborne: I want to make the same point as Trish about cross-party support, because you have just two non-Conservative names on this application. Could you take that away and look at it?

Nick Fletcher: Yes, I will try.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Before you go, Nick, I want to make the point—and this is for all Members in attendance this afternoon—that it is of significant frustration to us that we do not appear to have any time to allocate in the Chamber between now and the Easter recess. The reason for that is that we have already pre-allocated the next two Thursdays in the Chamber with stuff that we have had on the stocks for quite some time, and on the following Thursdays we are expecting a continuation of the Budget debate, a debate on estimates and the allocation of a day to the Liaison Committee. That will take us right up to the Easter recess in the Chamber, so we don't have any time to allocate there. I say that for everyone's reference.

Jo Gideon made representations.

Q14 Chair: Jo, welcome. Your application is on food waste and food redistribution. Over to you, please.

Jo Gideon: Thank you very much. That is right, and this is my first application for a Backbench Business debate, so please treat me kindly. I am also not feeling terribly well, but if you have any questions I hope I can communicate why I want this debate.

I was chairman of the APPG on the national food strategy for over two and a half years, until the food strategy was published. One of the big areas that we have not spent a lot of time looking at is waste and food redistribution. A lot of time has been spent on food poverty and looking at access to affordable food, but if you think about it more than a third of all food produce is being wasted and food waste contributes up to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. It has a massive environmental impact and a massive cost to the UK economy.

The Government is under a legal obligation to provide an assessment of our food security every three years, and food security—access to food and the cost of food—has obviously become a massive issue in the light of covid and Ukraine. Redistribution has become ever more important. We talk a lot about food banks, but we do not talk much about where the food for the food banks comes from, how efficient the systems are and how much waste there is in the chain. This is about unpacking those areas of



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the food piece, if you like, that have not really been looked at. The fact that I have 35 colleagues from across the board who have signed up shows that it is of interest to everybody. It affects every constituency, and everybody wants to shine a light on the very good practice in their constituency as well as channelling the issues around food waste.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** I assume that DEFRA would be the answering Department.

Jo Gideon: Yes.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** You heard the Chair's position on the Chamber: there is no chance of Chamber time at all for the foreseeable future. Do you have any preference for a Tuesday or a Thursday?

Jo Gideon: I would not mind waiting until after Easter for the Chamber, given the number of contributors.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** But we have a queue. It is pre-allocated already, but we have a queue of other debates.

Jo Gideon: Are we looking at October? How long?

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** For Westminster Hall, we are looking in the near vicinity, so if it is a Tuesday, it would potentially be 5 or 19 March, I suspect. If it is a Thursday, it is almost pick your Thursday before Easter.

Jo Gideon: If it was a Westminster Hall debate, there are only a couple of dates that I could not do. Could you tell me again? I would not mind Tuesday or Thursday.

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** The Tuesdays when DEFRA are answering are the 5th and 19th, I believe. We have to get the 19th confirmed, but we believe that it is the 5th and 19th. Obviously, with Thursdays it does not matter which Department is answering, and we can allocate those from the beginning of March onwards.

Jo Gideon: On the 19th, I am away with a Select Committee, so the 5th would be the possible date.

Chair: Thank you very much. Anyone else? No. That is great and very much appreciated.

Dame Angela Eagle made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** Welcome, Angela. The subject of your application is LGBT History Month, which is this month, isn't it?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is indeed. Listening to what you have just said about your allocations, it may be that we need to tweak the subject given that we will be well shy of the month by the time you have time to allocate. Clearly, we could do that by talking about the challenges of progress for LGBT people in the UK and across the world or some such thing. We have traditionally had an LGBT History Month debate in the Chamber. We have 16 cross-party colleagues who have supported the debate. There is plenty to be talking about in terms of the progress that



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has been made in our own country and some of the challenges that remain.

I and my colleague Elliot Colburn, who apologises that he is unable to be here today—he is in a Select Committee as we speak—are the co-sponsors of the debate in our role as joint chairs of the APPG on global LGBT+ rights. The intention is to give colleagues the chance to talk about the progress that has been made in our country and the cross-party nature of that. We are one of the Parliaments in the world with the most representation of LGBT people across the parties and we can talk about how that has come about but also about the challenges that remain. There are various things on the agenda in our country at the moment, up to and including the conversion therapy issues, and the rise in hate crimes, which have just plateaued out for LGB people but are still going up for trans people.

The all-party group also does a great deal of work to support those across the globe who are seeking to make similar progress in civil rights for LGBT people. There are good and bad things to report on that: Greece has just allowed same-sex marriages and 14 Commonwealth member states have legislative protections against LGBT discrimination, but there have also been signs of problems and progress going backwards in places such as Uganda and Ghana, which have passed some very restrictive anti-LGBT legislation, including reconfirming the death penalty. There are also issues with the way things are going in Europe, particularly eastern Europe. There is plenty to keep the debate going, and we tend to use these occasions to have both updates on our own country and a review across the world of the progress, or lack of it, for LGBT people.

- Q21 **Bob Blackman:** Angela, you have ticked the Chamber only, but the sharp reality is that, as the Chair has said, we have allocated everything we can, and we have a queue. You are talking probably about just this side of Whitsun before you get Chamber time, but we do have spaces in Westminster Hall. Would you consider a debate in Westminster Hall? Obviously the Committee has to decide on this, but we could even enable you to hold it next Thursday 29 February.

Dame Angela Eagle: I think part of the issue is that we have a lot of people who would want to speak, and 90 minutes is not very much time to do justice to the debate.

- Q22 **Chair:** But there is also the possibility of a whole afternoon in Westminster Hall the following week. I know it would be beyond the month, but—

Dame Angela Eagle: I think we have accepted that beyond the month was likely to be the case, given your queues and the pressure on business.

Patricia Gibson: In the Chamber, you would often be lucky to get 90 minutes, because of urgent questions and statements—you are always squeezed.

Chair: We have lost debates totally in recent weeks on Thursday

afternoons, but there is a possibility of a whole afternoon in Westminster Hall.

Dame Angela Eagle: Do you mean a three-hour debate?

Chair: A three-hour debate, yes—so that is a thought.

- Q23 **Kate Osborne:** Do you feel that the importance of the debate warrants the Chamber, Angela? Because that is my feeling. If it went into April, do you think that would be more acceptable than Westminster Hall in March, for example?

Dame Angela Eagle: I do. I know it is difficult for you as a Committee to try to fit everybody's favourite topics in, but there is broad cross-party support and likely to be a reasonable attendance if we have the time, and many things to talk about. My preference, given that we have had Chamber debates in the past, would be to try to do this in the Chamber. I think colleagues would acknowledge the issues that you have with trying to timetable debates, but my worry is that if we went to Westminster Hall, it would be seen as a downgrade from what we have had in the past.

Chair: Thank you very much for that clarification. That is lovely.

Rebecca Long Bailey and **Dame Karen Bradley** made representations.

- Q24 **Chair:** Rebecca and Karen, welcome. Your application is on the subject of St Patrick's Day. We might have a difficulty with this: what is it about St Patrick's Day that you want to celebrate and, therefore, what would be the answering Department? Try to weave that in, if you do not mind.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Thank you very much for inviting us to put forward our application. It is not so much about St Patrick's Day as the contribution of the Irish diaspora to Britain. At the last census in 2011, over 430,000 people living in Britain identified themselves as Irish-born. The real number is far greater than that, and Anglia Ruskin University research estimated that the number of people in Britain with at least one Irish parent or grandparent is roughly 5 million. We had a fantastic debate a few years ago, led by the late Member for Rochdale. It was well attended and we heard many different points of view and contributions from Members right across the House, which covered the experiences of the Irish diaspora in their communities. I am from a big Irish community in Salford—the Irish consulate was placed in the north of England in recognition of that community and of the impact the Irish diaspora has had.

We went all the way through to topics such as the impact of business and the experiences of Irish people in directorships across the country. It was found that there were over 55,000 Irish directors sitting on the boards of British companies, and that Irish people were present in nearly all of the listed occupations of the census in Britain. It is a very important debate; St Patrick's Week is just a good time for it to be held. It is important to celebrate the contribution that the Irish diaspora have made here in Britain and to foster and continue the strong collaboration with our



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representatives in Ireland and in Britain. I and Karen are both members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly—Karen is the chair—and we understand the importance of ensuring that a message is sent out from the UK Parliament about continuing collaboration and close working. I do not know if I have taken over a bit there, Karen.

Dame Karen Bradley: No—thank you, and thank you to the Committee for hearing us. I echo everything Rebecca said. As co-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, I know that the way Westminster views our Irish friendship is incredibly important to our friends in Ireland and I know the significance of holding a debate that will allow the many MPs who have Irish origins and those who have strong Irish communities or businesses in their constituencies to speak about that.

I have an Irish dairy products business in my constituency. It produces Kerrygold butter. All the Kerrygold butter you buy is packaged in Leek in Staffordshire, so it would be very nice to be able to recognise the fact that not only do we buy its products, but the business employs an awful lot of workers. I would really support having this. The hook of St Patrick's Day is important, and we have heard what has been said about Chamber time. For that reason, I would not be averse to having a Westminster Hall debate because I think the date is more important in this case than having the debate in the Chamber, though we want to put a marker down that we will want Chamber time in the future.

- Q25 **Patricia Gibson:** We all understand the difficulties with timetabling but, just as was said in the previous debate, there is a precedent of this being held in the Chamber and it would look like a downgrade if it was to go to Westminster Hall. That would be quite sad.

Dame Karen Bradley: We would be happy to make the point that it was to ensure that we could have the debate at the appropriate time. I would certainly make the point in opening that we were very grateful to you for allowing any time. We know how contested your time is and how many requests there are for Backbench Business debates, so we would just be very grateful to have it at the point of St Patrick's Day; 14 March is our ideal time. I guess we could do 19 March, but you have said DEFRA would be answering then and DLUHC or possibly the Cabinet Office would be the more appropriate answering Departments.

- Q26 **Chris Green:** Something I did not quite appreciate until I did a quick bit of research is that St Patrick is an Englishman, isn't he?

Dame Karen Bradley: Oh, yes.

- Q27 **Chris Green:** He got taken over to Ireland, so this is part of a wider debate on England-Ireland or United Kingdom-Ireland relations. I think you covered it wonderfully well in your presentation, but that is one of the things that I thought should be drawn out.

Dame Karen Bradley: And the tomb of St Patrick is in Downpatrick, which is in County Down in Northern Ireland, so the links are so strong and deep.



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Chair: I have to declare an interest: I am a member of the Tyneside Irish Centre in Newcastle city centre.

Kate Osborne: Me too!

Dame Karen Bradley: We are going to have lots of people wanting to speak in this debate.

Patricia Gibson: I recall that the last one was really well attended, and that was a Thursday afternoon.

Chair: I think the references to where St Patrick came from shows that immigration and emigration between the United Kingdom and Ireland has been happening for an awful long time.

Dame Karen Bradley: The common travel area.

Chair: Indeed. At the moment, Westminster Hall on the 14th would be a distinct possibility.

Q28 **Bob Blackman:** The only other possibility is a Tuesday, depending on the answering Department. We would need to be clear on who the answering Department should be from your perspective. Obviously the Government decides, but you need to be clear who they are. If it were the Cabinet Office, I suspect it would need to be on the 19th, which would work.

Dame Karen Bradley: That might work. We are looking to get it as close as we can to St Patrick's day.

Chair: It is just the way the calendar works. It is very inconvenient that St Patrick's day is on a Sunday this year. Right, anyone else? No. Thank you very much indeed. That is much appreciated.

Olivia Blake made representations.

Q29 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least, we have Olivia Blake. Good afternoon, Olivia. Your application is on the subject of Eating Disorder Awareness Week, which I believe is between 26 February and 3 March.

Olivia Blake: Yes, that's right. This is a joint application with Wera Hobhouse, who cannot be here today—she sends her apologies. This really important issue is close to many Members' hearts. Many people suffer from eating disorders around the UK. They are the mental health conditions with the highest mortality rate, which means that the impact is huge on families that have someone living with them with an eating disorder, and the individuals themselves who suffer.

This year, the focus is on a misunderstood and little-known condition called ARFID, which stand for avoidant restrictive food intake disorder. The reason it has come into the spotlight is that since the pandemic there has been a massive increase in eating disorders, and this particular disorder has seen people reaching out for help very much more. According to Beat, this is the most visited page on their website. It is an issue they get a lot of calls about on their helpline.



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The fundamental thing, and the reason we think a debate would be worth while, is that the treatments are just not there. It is clear that this is a misunderstood area. People often think of it as fussy eating, but it can have a real impact on people. It can make it very difficult for them to eat foods of certain types, and access to treatment is very limited in the UK. Only six out of 55 NHS providers of eating disorder services for children and young people around the UK provide services explicitly for the treatment of ARFID. There is only one provider out of the 49 NHS providers for adults.

That is problematic because the condition can lead to malnutrition and death, and can have a real impact on individuals' day-to-day living. It is strongly linked with autism and other neurodiversity conditions. There is strong evidence that there are treatments that can work, but they have not been commissioned up and down the country.

That has come through to me from concerned parents in my constituency, and I am sure it is the same for Members up and down the country. I am sure there would be a large interest in having this discussion, because at the moment there is a black hole of the services that people really need. We need a broader conversation about eating disorders, which are impacting many people. Eating disorders are a deadly issue that we should be taking very seriously as parliamentarians. For that reason, recognising the awareness week with a debate is really important.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q30 **Bob Blackman:** How important is it for you to hold the debate in Eating Disorder Awareness Week? Obviously, you understand our constraints in terms of time.

Olivia Blake: Obviously, that would be preferable. I am sure we would be flexible about where the debate takes place or the day, but this is such an important debate that we would like it in any case.

Q31 **Bob Blackman:** If we offered you next Thursday in Westminster Hall, would you be able to do it? It is during Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

Chair: That would be the 29th.

Olivia Blake: In the afternoon?

Q32 **Chair:** Yes.

Olivia Blake: I think that would be possible.

Chair: Okay, excellent. That is really useful. That would be the slot that we would have available—the second slot in Westminster Hall on that Thursday.

Olivia Blake: Thank you very much.

Chair: Anyone else please? No. In that case, thank you very much indeed. It is lovely to see you, Olivia. Thank you very much for coming.