

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 30 April 2024

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

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[I](#): Dean Russell

[II](#): Anthony Mangnall

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Dean Russell made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Dean Russell. Welcome and thank you for coming. Your application is on the subject of artificial intelligence and elections. Over to you.

Dean Russell: Thank you, Chair, for this opportunity. Artificial intelligence is dominating the headlines at the moment. As we know, the rise of artificial intelligence is starting to dominate the way that people will see our work lives, our daily lives and how we communicate with each other, but one of the most pressing areas is elections.

This year, 49% of the entire world's population is going to a national election, which is huge. When you then take into account the rise in artificial intelligence, especially this year's rise in deepfakes and things called robocalls, which is voice clones, and when we look at the use of data, the use of misinformation and deepfake news as it could be called, we are in a period where the entire way that we live—the way that we do democracy and the way that our elections are run—could be undermined or at least impacted by the use of artificial intelligence by bad actors, and also by people who just want to perhaps have a bit of fun and have a major impact on the way we rule our country.

There are examples of this. Just a few months ago, I had a debate on artificial intelligence and scams. During an evening debate—an Adjournment debate—I predicted that in the future there was a risk that perhaps on an election day somebody could get a call from somebody who sounds like their family member, using information from Facebook or elsewhere. They might call them and say, "Hey, it was great to see you a few days ago. You know what? I've always supported a particular party and always voted, but today, don't bother voting. I don't think we should vote. We should take a stand against this and put a marker in the ground."

I predicted that at around 10.30 pm on the Monday evening. The next morning, I woke up and heard that in the US New Hampshire primaries, 25,000 people had allegedly been called, supposedly by President Biden, saying, "Don't waste your vote in the New Hampshire primaries. Use it later in the year when it will make a difference."

That is one example of the speed at which we are going from thinking something could happen to it literally happening—hopefully I was not the person who caused it to. There are so many examples now of deepfakes, which is where somebody's image is manipulated, but increasingly there is the use of video. As part of the all-party parliamentary group on artificial intelligence, I have seen examples of live deepfakes—a live video call with someone they believe is a family member, but isn't. That sort of stuff could be used not just for Members of Parliament, but in local democracy.



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As we go to the election—perhaps in July, October or November, but definitely by December—we have just months before this will have a dramatic impact on us.

There is another area known as rumour bombs, where false information is shared. For example, a rumour bomb is sent to specific individuals saying, “Don’t go to the polling booth today”—in the US, for example—“because there is someone with a gun”, or, “There are six-hour queues, so don’t bother going.” That sort of false information could put people off voting. It is not just about this being used to manipulate people to change their voting decision. That is probably the least likely of all the things. It could use apathy to get people not to vote. It could use false information to damage candidates. Ultimately, it could damage our democracy. I see this debate as an opportunity to have positions from all parts of the House to debate the risks, raise concerns and talk about the many case studies that are already coming out. For example, in one country quite recently, deepfake videos of a former President or Prime Minister who was well loved were used to give an endorsement to the current candidate.

There are so many examples, popping up day after day. By the time we get to our election, whenever that may be, there will already be a day’s worth of debate to be had. We have not yet had a dedicated debate on this in the House of Commons. It is an important, timely debate on something that will have a massive impact on us moving forward. I would like to use it as an opportunity to ask the Government what plans are in place, and open up opportunities to explore that further.

Q2 Kevin Foster: Dean, I am interested to hear some of the thoughts you’ve had around elections, which I would normally expect to be of interest to a wide group of Members of Parliament, for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, your application has got only two signatures. Will you be adding more?

Dean Russell: Yes. I have a full list for you. I have got the full complement. I have not reached out to as many Opposition Members as I would have liked. We have got four Opposition Members at the moment. In the space of a few hours, we have been able to fill this up. Part of the delay was from reaching out over the past week. I can assure you that I have the full list, which I can give to you.

When you talk about technology and artificial intelligence, a lot of people go, “I don’t really do much about tech. It’s not really my area.” But when you talk about the risks from deepfakes, the risks to democracy or what they might have heard on the news in other parts of the world, all of a sudden it becomes very pressing.

When we have this debate, I think we will find not only that more people will want to speak in it, but that it will start a discussion that will probably lead to more Members of Parliament coming to this Committee to explore additional, related topics.

Q3 Kevin Foster: My next point: you have ticked the box for half a day in the Chamber, which would be a three-hour debate. We obviously have only a

relatively small number of applications or slots. That is less likely to be filled, if I can put it that way. Would Westminster Hall be acceptable for 90 minutes?

Dean Russell: Yes, but this is so important to our democracy that I really feel it needs to be on the Floor of the House. I am sure everybody who comes here would say the same, but this is about who runs the country. Even if it weren't about artificial intelligence but just about election interference, having it on the Floor of the House would in part be about having more colleagues debating it, but it would also show the weight of its importance to the general public. What I found, when I spoke in my Adjournment debate about artificial intelligence and scams, was that a number of people suddenly went, "Yes, I have had that happen to me," or were aware of the risks.

Part of our role in Parliament is to educate the public about risks. The truth is that we cannot necessarily stop the flow of the technology, but what we can do is explain to the public that, if they get a call on election day from someone they love, saying something very different from what they have said before, perhaps that is a red flag that this could be something from a bad actor who is trying to interfere with our democracy. Doing that from the Floor of the House is essential.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned that you have had an Adjournment debate, and that you want to create awareness. Is there anything that you want the Government to do? From our perspective, we look at this as being a general debate, as Kevin has suggested. Obviously, it would slot into Westminster Hall. If you want the Government to do something, you would have to have a divisible motion that would take action.

Dean Russell: Absolutely. My take is that we need to ensure a very clear position for the Government for how we are going to deal with this, in terms of both the investment needed and any awareness campaigns that are required.

This is not about asking for specific legislation, but I do think there needs to be Government action following this. What is it going to do, leading up to the election, to deliver for the security of democracy and this country? I think there is a clear need. In my Adjournment debate, with the half hour I had, I was only able to include one paragraph about the election side of things. Everything else was purely about scams. Many of the applications of those scams could apply to elections, but we have not yet had a dedicated debate, that I am aware of, on the Floor of the House about the impact of artificial intelligence on elections and democracy. I feel very strongly that the Government need to hear loud and clear—and hopefully from a lot of voices—that measures are needed to protect us.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** If it were to be allocated to Westminster Hall, which Government Department would be answering?

Dean Russell: I would say the Cabinet Office, because I think it is cross-departmental and goes to the core of everything we do as a country.



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Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Dean. That is much appreciated. Thank you for your application; please leave your list of signatures with the Clerk.

Dean Russell: If I may, Chair, I have two other people that would be happy to sign, so I left a blank space.

Chair: If you are confident that they will sign, write their names in.

Dean Russell: I will do that now. Thank you very much.

Anthony Mangnall made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Anthony, welcome. Your application is on the subject of potholes and highway maintenance.

Anthony Mangnall: Thank you, Mr Chairman, it is lovely to see you back here. I missed you last week—if that is any consolation—but Mr Blackman did an excellent job.

Bob Blackman: Be careful.

Anthony Mangnall: Flattery, I've been told, gets you everywhere.

Chair: I think that's philately, isn't it?

Anthony Mangnall: I have applied for a debate on potholes, because all too often potholes are one of those subjects that we politicians in Westminster try and avoid because, we say, it is the local responsibility of district councillors and county councillors. With the reallocation of HS2 money—a sum of about £36 billion being reallocated to transport networks across the country over a 10-year period—I think it is right that we have a debate on the Floor of the House with a votable motion for the Government to bring forward, perhaps, an annual report on the state of UK highways. Something along those lines would be positive and ensure that we could actually get Members of Parliament, in this place, to debate, discuss and hold the Department for Transport to account about the state of our roads.

I represent a constituency, alongside that of Mr Foster, in the county with the largest road network of anywhere in the United Kingdom, at 8,500 miles. I suspect nearly every single one of those roads has a pothole on it, or you would certainly believe it at the moment. Indeed, I am so well experienced in changing tyres of cars that I could give any Formula 1 pitstop team a run for its money.

The serious point is that we need to be able to see the allocation of that money brought forward, making sure it is front-loaded rather than just allocated over a 10-year period. That is how I would like to use the debate.

I have had, obviously, a number of signatures already, but since I sent out an email to all colleagues, I have probably had about 80 or 90 colleagues responding to say that they would like to take part in this. Having sat



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through Mr Russell's excellent suggestion for a debate on AI, I know that we all make the case for it being on the Floor of the House. I am happy to wait, for as long as the Committee would like me to wait, to try and have this on the Floor of the House and to ensure that we can raise it in a proper and timely manner.

Q7 Kevin Foster: I have the opposite comment to the last application: obviously, with 80-odd people, would a 90-minute debate be enough? The point is, though, on the form it said "applying for a general debate" but, from what I'm hearing, you feel that, because of the numbers, and because there have been generic debates—virtually every county has probably had some debate—you would rather go for a substantive motion.

Anthony Mangnall: I would. That is partly brought on by the extraordinary amount of support from colleagues to hold this debate. We are sometimes very pleased, in this place, to hand off things to our councillors. At this point, our councillors are coming back to us in desperation, asking us to please do something in this place to ensure that it is debated and discussed, since we are the mother of all Parliaments. Now is the time to do it and, I think, if we are going to get anything out of this, we should have a motion that actually attracts something for the Government to work on and something that, hopefully, future Parliaments will be able to benefit from as well.

Q8 Kevin Foster: To be clear, given some of the signatories, would the motion be UK-wide? Of course, some elements of roads are devolved, but would it be asking for a UK-wide report, for example?

Anthony Mangnall: I know you have expertise from the Wales Office. Obviously, this does have some issues, in terms of what is devolved and what is not. Obviously, I would like to ensure that you could have it as UK-wide, partly because the reallocation of HS2 has been taken into account in the Barnett formula. Therefore, I see no reason why we shouldn't include our Northern Irish, Welsh and Scottish friends in this debate and ensure that we have got good representation for it.

Q9 Bob Blackman: Anthony, obviously you wish to have a Chamber debate. The earliest date we could offer you is Thursday 23 May—the day before we break up for the Whitsun recess. If we offered you that—the Committee may or may not offer it—would you be in a position to accept?

Anthony Mangnall: Mr Blackman, I will bite your arm off for it.

Q10 Chair: We have got those two dates mixed up, Bob, so it could actually be Thursday 16 May, and that would then go there, I believe.

Anthony Mangnall: I am overseas on 16 May, I'm afraid. I'm sorry.

Chair: Okay.

I'm just wondering, Kevin, didn't a distant relative of yours have a problem with a pothole in Gloucester? *[Laughter.]*

Kevin Foster: That's a good one, yes! We missed the jokes.

Anthony Mangnall: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Last but by no means least, Mr Jim Shannon, please.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, likewise, we are very pleased to see you back. I have to say that your Deputy did exceptionally well, as he was expected to do.

Q12 **Chair:** Your application this afternoon is on Short money funding for abstentionist parties.

Jim Shannon: Yes, it is quite a specific issue and obviously, all our party members have signed it, along with four Conservatives, one independent and one Labour—I know that the right hon. Lady, the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, always reminds me that four Conservatives have to do it, and they have.

Very quickly, I would like to run through the reasons behind it—I know you probably have all this in front of you, Mr Chairman, but it is important for the record to have it said. The 1999 resolution on Short money does not specifically state that Short money funding is not available to parties whose Members have not sworn the oath, as it was introduced to offer assistance for parliamentary duties. It follows that it should not be available. Members who have not sworn the oath cannot participate in parliamentary proceedings. Paragraph 1 of the original 1975 Short money resolution provided that financial assistance was available to parties “to assist that party in carrying out its parliamentary business”. Paragraph 6 required parties to certify that the expenses they claim for had been incurred “exclusively in relation to that party’s parliamentary business”. These terms are repeated in the resolution of 26 May 1999.

Moving forward to February 2006, the House of Commons agreed to create a similar scheme solely for an Opposition party “represented by Members who have chosen not to take their seats”. The motion provided for “expenses wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred for the employment of staff and related support to Members designated as that party’s spokesman in relation to the party’s representative business.” There is no definition of “representative business” in the motion, and, hitherto, the term has not been used in parliamentary procedure. The terms of the motion would appear to allow Sinn Féin to use funds calculated on the same terms as Short money for different types of expenditure, such as for press and publicity and other representative functions. Other Opposition parties have access to Short money to support parliamentary business only, and no equivalent extension for representative work has been announced for them. Clearly, we have a disparity. There is an anomaly here.

The resolution was amended on 23 March 2016. In line with the amended Short money resolution, changes were made to the seats and votes



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elements used to calculate the amount of representative money a party was entitled to. The uprating formula was amended to use the consumer prices index instead of the retail prices index, and reporting requirements were changed. In July 2018, the Members Estimate Committee combined the representative money and Short money resolutions. Sinn Féin has an allocation under the scheme for 2023/24.

This should be debated in its entirety to highlight the disparity and to ensure that Ministers are cognisant of these concerns as we approach a new electoral mandate. This must, I believe, be addressed sooner rather than later. Mr Chairman, thank you very much indeed.

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

Q13 **Kevin Foster:** As always, it is well in order, Jim—it is almost as if you do this regularly. Which Department would you see responding? Obviously, the issue relates directly to Northern Ireland politics and the abstentionist position of Sinn Féin, but it is also spending more generally, and it might not necessarily be just that party in future. Which Department would you want to respond to this?

Jim Shannon: I was conscious that you were going to ask me that question. Right away, my first thought was the Northern Ireland Office; but this is about more than that. This is for every party who may find themselves in this position in the future. We are discussing setting a precedent for everyone. I would probably look to the Committee for direction.

Q14 **Kevin Foster:** If you saw it as a financial issue, then it might be the Treasury; if you saw it as a constitutional issue, then it would be the Cabinet Office.

Jim Shannon: My thinking is that it might a constitutional issue; I suspect it probably is. One thing is quite sure—

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** Who was the Minister at the time that these measures were put in place?

Jim Shannon: There are three different pieces of legislation in the background. I referred to the 1975 Short money, and the resolutions of 26 May 1989 and 8 February 2006. Fourthly, but not lastly, the resolution was amended on 23 March 2016. I apologise to the Chair, and to the Committee, for not knowing who did that. I should have known that.

Kevin Foster: To be fair, Mr Shannon, it would be the Government that decide who they put up anyway. They can take a view on that. It is interesting that you are pitching this as probably more of a constitutional issue, because, yes, initially I thought it would be about Sinn Féin and its abstentionism, but actually, if it is about the whole principle of it, it could apply to someone who, for whatever reason, decides not to take their seat in the House. It is not necessarily purely restricted to Northern Ireland, if we look back in the history.

Q16 **Nigel Mills:** Are you not tempted by a motion to suggest that Short



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money should not be paid to abstentionist parties? I am guessing that is the point of your debate.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, if I could say so respectfully, the point of this debate is that there is an anomaly. There is something wrong. Parties that do not attend qualify for Short money. There are special conditions for Sinn Féin. I think it has been a bugbear for probably many years. We have approached Government as well, so they are aware that we are requesting a Backbench Business debate. I suspect that Government will come back with a response. We want to see the rules changed. They are unfair; they create an anomaly. I think there is something not right. If people do not want to attend here, that is their choice; but if they qualify for something by not attending, that creates an anomaly or disparity, and I think that has to be debated and looked at.

Q17 **Chair:** From my perspective, your application does look a tad partisan, in terms of who has signed it. You have seven DUP Members, four Conservatives, and I think one independent. You have nobody from the other Opposition parties.

Jim Shannon: No, I have. My apologies, I have Kevan Jones, a late one coming in. I saw Kevan yesterday, and I asked him to sign. I have Kevan Jones from the Labour party, I have not neglected the Labour party—I never would, Mr Chairman; you would know that. If I have not done it correctly, I apologise, but my understanding was if we had four Conservatives sign, that is Government, and the others are Opposition.

Chair: I am sure Mr Jones will provide you with the cover that you require.

Jim Shannon: I am happy to leave this here. Would that be helpful?

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** Jim, previously you have declined to have debates on Thursdays. Is that still the case?

Jim Shannon: I apologise to the Committee for asking this. I presume sometime in early June, if it could be a Tuesday, would enable all our colleagues to be available, ever mindful that we are travelling a distance. I am not saying that that makes us any better than anyone else, but you understand the predicaments we all have.

Chair: So you are looking for a Tuesday morning with the Cabinet Office, or whichever Department the Government wish to put up. The trouble is, we have to look at the list and suggest a date, although I think it will be the Cabinet Office.

Bob Blackman: Going by the rota, it looks like 25 June.

Q19 **Chair:** So we are looking at mid to late June, potentially.

Jim Shannon: I told my colleagues that if we were going for a Tuesday, it would be mid to late June, so I was not far away in my predictions. I am happy with that; if that is okay and you can facilitate us, it is much appreciated.



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Chair: Right, okay. Thank you very much indeed, Jim. That concludes our public deliberations. We now go into private session.