



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 14 May 2024

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

Questions 1-15

Representations made

[I](#): Judith Cummins and Tim Farron

[II](#): Tim Loughton

[III](#): Dame Andrea Jenkyns

[IV](#): Selaine Saxby

Judith Cummins and **Tim Farron** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. The Chairman of the Committee is away on an education visit, so the Committee has asked me to chair the meeting once again.

The first application is from Judith Cummins, Tim Farron and Peter Aldous on NHS dentistry. Over to you, Judith.

Judith Cummins: Thank you very much, Chair. It is very nice to see you in your place. Peter has sent his apologies. Unfortunately, he has another meeting, but he did want to be here.

This debate is supported by 40 Members from four different parties—25 Labour Members, seven Liberal Democrat Members, one Green party Member and seven Conservative Members—so it is really cross-party, as it always is. We all know that this is one of the biggest subjects that ends up in our inboxes; so many constituents contact us about access to NHS dentistry and the state of NHS dentistry. The Nuffield Trust, Healthwatch England, the BDA and the Health and Social Care Committee have all called for the Government to roll out a fundamental reform of the dental contract, and that is the key driver behind much of the exodus of dentists from the NHS.

The topic was last debated last April, and there was an Opposition day debate on NHS dentistry in January 2024. However, it is very topical at the moment, as the situation has got worse. I think we are all aware how bad it is. Last year, 12 million people were unable to access NHS dental care. That is one in four adults in England. According to data published in April this year, 64% of dental practice owners and 61% of associate dentists in England reported that they often think of leaving NHS dentistry. That represents a clear and immediate threat to our constituents' access to dentistry, and to the long-term sustainability of the service in general. Worryingly, only 1% of the 100 NHS practices contacted in England currently accept new patients.

There is real concern out there, which is reflected right across the House, and I think the debate would be hugely supported. I am grateful to you for allowing me the time to present.

Q2 **Chair:** Anything to add, Tim?

Tim Farron: Thank you, Chair. We really appreciate your time and that of the Committee. I think all of us who spend any time in the presence of the public would say that this is comfortably a top-five issue, if not higher.

In particular, we really hope that the Committee will give us the time because we think the House needs to scrutinise recent developments in this emerging issue—indeed, crisis—and especially the Government's recovery plan. We are glad that there is one, but we think that the details of it deserve serious scrutiny. For example, there was a claim about new money—£200 million—to support the recovery plan, but, on scrutiny, the Secretary of State had to return and correct the record of the House to indicate that new money was not existent; it was recycled. If Members of



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all parties and our constituents are to have confidence, we want to know whether the resource exists, how much it is and where it is coming from.

Likewise, there have been interesting statements—encouraging, to a degree—that the recovery plan involves 500 new practices, or practices taking on new NHS work as a result of the recovery plan. We would love the House as a whole to be able to scrutinise and interrogate that claim and to bring in the experiences of our constituents, whether they be patients or indeed dentists or dentists’ staff, to see whether the claim is true, or the extent to which it is. Much has been made of 15 mobile dental vans to encourage and improve access in rural communities. There are only 15 of these vans and their capacity is 30,000 courses of treatment, set against 12 million who are unable to get NHS treatment at the moment.

In short, roughly speaking—it will vary in different bits of the country—about 50% of children and over two thirds of adults have not had access to an NHS dentist in the last three years. The knock-on effect is people doing DIY dentistry, and people succumbing to sepsis as a result. I think we are now spending something like £80 million a year, according to the BDA, on surgery involving general anaesthetic for children because of dental problems. Of course, those children are waiting up to two years. They are on antibiotics during that time and becoming resistant to antibiotics later in life as a consequence.

The word crisis is used a lot, but we have one in dentistry. I think there is a particular moment that may justify us having this debate, in that there is an NHS dentistry recovery plan from the Government, and we would like the opportunity for all Members to scrutinise it.

Q3 Chair: It is a very strongly subscribed debate and you have a substantive motion that could divide the House, so you will obviously be looking at Chamber time. If we offered you Thursday 13 June, would that be acceptable to you?

Tim Farron: I am sure it would be.

Judith Cummins: Yes, I am sure it would be. Thank you very much, if you did.

Q4 Kevin Foster: I will put my cards on the table straightaway: I think this is a compelling issue. It is right that there is a high level of interest. It clearly needs to be debated on the Floor of the House, and you have a divisible motion, so the debate needs to be on the Floor of the House. I make that point in starting: you don’t need to sell me on the need for a debate.

The motion talks about “an update on progress in two months’ time”. How do you envisage that update on progress being given, and exactly who to?

Tim Farron: I guess we would expect the Secretary of State to make that update to the House. I imagine it might need to be a bit more than two months’ time, given that August would be the two-month period, but we would expect there to be clear measurements on the number of new cases



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treated and the number of new dentists contracted from the beginning of the recovery plan and, indeed, from the point that we had the debate.

Q5 Kevin Foster: So you would expect it to be a report placed before the House and then, potentially, followed up by a Select Committee.

Tim Farron: Well, indeed—potentially by a Select Committee and/or by a written statement and then an oral statement in the House.

Chair: If there are no more questions, thank you very much for your presentation. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly.

Tim Farron: We are really grateful. Thank you.

Judith Cummins: Thank you very much.

Tim Loughton made representations.

Q6 Chair: The next application is from Tim Loughton on recognition of the Republic of Somaliland.

Tim Loughton: Thank you, Mr Blackman. This is slightly more niche than dentistry in the UK, but it is a subject that has not really had an airing in this House. A number of colleagues have been to Somaliland recently. I was there with a colleague last month. The return from that visit rather hit the headlines in a way that I had not anticipated, given our relations with Djibouti next door. That may or may not feature in such a debate, but the application is for a debate primarily on the recognition of Somaliland.

Somaliland is the former British protectorate of British Somaliland—it is based on those borders. It broke away from what we know as Somalia back in 1991. It has not received international recognition, although a few places have given it recognition, but it is a haven of peace and democracy in an otherwise rather turbulent region.

The Somalilanders are very keen to be recognised in the international community and they have been taking many steps to try to encourage that, not least a recent memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopian Government about giving them access and development of the port of Berbera, which is potentially going to be a bigger port than Djibouti and will be very important in the whole gulf of Aden region.

That memorandum of understanding is being pursued at pace now, including by many Somaliland British residents who are legal experts, whom we met on our recent trip. The conditions of that MOU are that Ethiopia, if it is successful, will recognise Somaliland formally and will have access to the port and a naval base near it. That could be a very important turning point for the way the world looks at Somaliland.

The subject has become fairly topical because of what is happening on the other side of the Red sea with Yemen, and the influence of the Houthis on shipping going through that very important and busy waterway. For us to have stable allies in the horn of Africa is of particular importance and attraction to the UK and the USA, as well as European allies, hence we



want to start the ball rolling by our Government taking Somaliland rather more seriously. So far they have declined to recognise Somaliland as the independent republic that it wants to be. They have also failed to recognise the memorandum of understanding, even though it is with a very large economic player in that part of Africa, which could be particularly game changing for Somaliland and very important to Ethiopia itself—another important ally in the region.

Very easily and in a very short space of time I got 15 colleagues, and there have been others since we submitted the application, from the SNP in particular. It is supported by Labour, Conservative, SNP, DUP and Lib Dem colleagues; this is not a partisan issue at all. We are keen that it will be on a substantive motion. The fairly raw motion that I have put down is a starter for 10, but the Government may get slightly alarmed at that, so we would possibly be prepared to negotiate a motion requesting the Government to set out a timetable and criteria for the recognition of Somaliland, if that wouldn't frighten the horses quite so much. Ideally, we would like to have something that will send a clear signal that we think Somaliland should be taken seriously and that the UK, as the former protectorate, has a key role to play in that.

There is a large Somaliland community in the UK, spread across cities such as Cardiff, Birmingham—everyone we met in Somaliland seemed to come from Birmingham—Liverpool and other parts of the UK. There is a substantial part of the population with links to Somaliland.

Q7 Chair: What is the status of Somaliland in the Commonwealth? Presumably, as it is not recognised as a state, it is not part of the Commonwealth.

Tim Loughton: It is not recognised by the UN, the Commonwealth or other international authorities. It has diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and potentially full recognition with Ethiopia, depending on the outcome of the MOU.

Q8 Chair: As you say, it is a niche application, and it has a motion that is potentially divisible. If the Committee were minded to allocate you the second slot on Thursday 6 June, would you be able to take it?

Tim Loughton: On 6 June? On 13 June I was going to say that I definitely cannot, because I am not here, but let me check 6 June. That is a Thursday as well, I suppose.

Chair: Yes. We only get Thursday allocations for the Chamber.

Tim Loughton: Very possibly. It is not ideal, but we would work around it, I am sure. Is there another option after that?

Chair: After that would be 13 June, which you have said you cannot make, and after that it gets pushed back to the queue.

Tim Loughton: That is for the main Chamber, isn't it? I am not fussy about whether we have something in Westminster Hall, as an alternative.



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Chair: In Westminster Hall you wouldn't have the motion. It would be a general debate.

Tim Loughton: It wouldn't be a substantive motion—of course.

Chair: If colleagues have no questions, the Clerks will be in touch with you. Because it is the week after the recess, we are quite keen on getting that slot filled, so if you can't take it then we are going to have to consider what else to do.

Tim Loughton: I am sure we can work some things around it, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Next up is Andrea Jenkyns.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I am here to speak in support of my application for a debate on the true costs associated with meeting our net zero targets. I have secured support from the Government and Opposition parties, as you can see, with 10 Conservatives and seven Opposition Members—one Labour, four DUP, one Reform and one independent. I have also secured a former Cabinet Minister as a signatory. I declare an interest, because I am an unpaid director of Net Zero Watch, which I took on last year.

I think this debate would allow Members across the House to consider the true cost associated with meeting our net zero targets, in terms of both the economy and society. Personally, I do not think Parliament has had sufficient opportunity to consider the implications of what meeting our net zero obligations means for the ordinary person, who is quite often struggling to make ends meet during the cost of living crisis.

There is also the impact on industry. If I can give an example of that, I am a Yorkshire MP, and we have Drax in Yorkshire. They made the business decision to try to meet net zero targets by overhauling their whole system. They now cut down trees in Canada and import pellets to burn in the UK. It seems that sometimes quite bizarre decisions—and quite nonsensical ones—are being made for this push.

I want to know what the impact on the taxpayer is as well, and to think about the unforeseen consequences of making too many drastic decisions too quickly. One example of this is the boiler tax policy, which I am sure was well-intentioned by Government at the time, but it will put the cost of a new boiler up by £120 for consumers who are already struggling. We need to look at the true cost and the impact on the consumer.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you, Andrea. Before other colleagues come in, there is obviously a slight concern because you have just one Labour Member. While you have other Opposition Members, have you made any other attempts to get Labour Members to sign?



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Dame Andrea Jenkyns: No. There are not many Labour Members who speak up on this thing. I searched and I just found one, to be honest with you. I did try looking. I looked through *Hansard* and so on to see who has spoken up about it.

Q11 **Chair:** All right. You have asked for a Tuesday slot—

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: If possible, please.

Chair: And we are assuming that the answering Department would be Energy Security and Net Zero.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Yes please.

Chair: Which would lend itself to the potential offer of a debate on Tuesday 4 June.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Perfect.

Chair: Okay. Colleagues, any other questions? If not, then the Clerks will be in touch with you. Thank you, Andrea.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much, Chairman.

Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Finally, but by no means least, we have Selaine Saxby.

Selaine Saxby: Good afternoon. Thank you for seeing me. I am here to request a debate on floating offshore wind and AR6, which is the next leasing round to assign the contracts for difference. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea. We have been very involved in floating offshore wind, and have previously been here to seek a debate on getting floating offshore wind afloat.

Not a single floating offshore wind project bid into the leasing round last year, because the strike price was too low. There is now grave concern as we head into this leasing round, which has now closed—the commercial bids have literally gone in in the last 10 days—that the bids outperform the budget fourfold. We are looking at a situation whereby we have projects that were unsuccessful in the last leasing round wanting to bid into this one, and there is a growing view across the industry about what will happen if we don't change the budget, in particular, and possibly even the structure of how we look at floating offshore wind. We have three different regions—there are the two Scottish projects, the project in Blyth and the projects down in the Celtic sea—and the MPs from all those regions are supporting the application. There is a growing view that, if we do not extend the budget or treat each region as a budget pool, we are going to lose whole regions of wind.

As we know, the wind blows in different directions in different bits of the country. I know that there is a concern with wind power that the wind doesn't blow all the time, but you obviously need to optimise your chances of that by having some projects in each place, and there is a real risk to



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that. We had a late-entrant project into this leasing round that would take the entire budget, which would mean that the other three smaller projects, which could not bid last time, would not be able to bid at all.

There is a lot of complexity around this. I have already spoken with Ministers, who know I am here today. I think it is an important debate to have on the Floor of the House. There is real support for this technology and we are committed to huge amounts of it going out, but the current way the leasing round works means that we are potentially looking at entire regions dropping out of the process at this point in time.

I need to apologise to Liz Saville Roberts—I know that she is Plaid, not Labour, as on my application.

Q13 Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation. You have made a full application for Westminster Hall on Tuesday or Thursday, or the Chamber. The earliest date we could offer you would be 23 May in Westminster Hall. That is next week.

Selaine Saxby: Is that straight after the potholes?

Chair: No, because potholes will be in the main Chamber.

Selaine Saxby: Oh, potholes is in the Chamber.

Q14 Chair: There are two slots in Westminster Hall, and remember that they now start at 12.30 pm and 2 pm. If we were to offer it to you, you would get the 2 pm slot, which would finish by 3.30 pm.

Selaine Saxby: Okay. I am inclined to say yes.

Q15 Chair: Good. Thank you. Any questions from colleagues?

Patricia Gibson: I was just going to add that the wind always blows in Scotland.

Selaine Saxby: I feel it always blows where I live as well, to be honest.

Chair: It's an ill wind. Anyway, thank you for your presentation. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly.

Selaine Saxby: Thank you very much for seeing me.