



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 12 November 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Bob Blackman (Chair); Jack Abbott; Mary Glendon; Alison Hume; Wendy Morton; Will Stone; Chris Vince.

Questions 1-15

Witnesses

[I](#): Sam Rushworth.

[II](#): Sir Iain Duncan Smith, David Davis and Douglas McAllister.

[III](#): Sarah Owen.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



**Sam Rushworth** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee, where we will be considering live applications for debates. The first applicant is Sam Rushworth with an application for International Men's Day. Over to you to present your application, and we will ask some questions in a minute.

**Sam Rushworth:** I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on boys and men alongside Mims Davies, who is not able to be part of this application because of her Front-Bench role. As you know, International Men's Day is a growing international event and there has been a debate on it in the Chamber for the last several years. It is an important opportunity for parliamentarians to come together and discuss some of the unique issues that affect men.

My background is in international development, working largely with women's empowerment organisations and girls' education, so it turned a few heads when I said I would be presenting this application. But as an MP representing a constituency in the north-east of England, I think some of the issues that are pertinent to International Men's Day are relevant to my constituents, including worrying trends around male suicide, particularly among young men; educational underachievement among boys and men; health disparities in life expectancy; and male victims of crime and abuse.

It is also important to stress that International Men's Day is not a day that sets men's rights against women's; rather, it is about the fact that gender inequality harms everybody and harms people differently. It is important that Members across the House have an opportunity to discuss that, preferably in the Chamber, and to talk about their constituencies and some of the good work being done. There is positive work being done in every constituency. I know there is in mine, with organisations such as ManHealth, which brings men together in peer support groups, among others.

It is also important to think about what we do to address some of the challenges. There is no doubt that some of these issues are gendered—that being born male makes you more likely to find yourself in prison, taking your own life or suffering various health challenges. That is why we have put together this application. As you can see, 21 Members of Parliament—22 including myself—have put their names to the application and indicated a willingness to participate in the debate. I have alternated Government and Opposition Members in the list so that you can see that there is an equal number of both. There are five parties represented: Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, the Green party and the DUP.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you for your presentation. Your application is well subscribed. I note from your application that you wanted the debate on Tuesday 19 November, which is International Men's Day. We are not allocated time on a Tuesday. Our time in the Chamber or in Westminster



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Hall is normally allocated on a Thursday. If we offer you time in the Chamber next Thursday, would you be able to take it?

**Sam Rushworth:** Yes, I believe so. I would need to check with everyone on the application.

**Chair:** I do not suggest you check with them now. We are only just getting time allocated now by the Government on when we will be allowed to schedule debates. That is the nearest time.

**Sam Rushworth:** So we are talking Thursday 21 November?

**Chair:** Correct.

**Sam Rushworth:** I think that would be a good day to do it. It is in the same week.

**Chair:** Everyone happy? Good. Thank you very much.

**Sam Rushworth:** Short and sweet.

**Chair:** The Clerks will be in touch with you about the exact timing and detail.

**Sam Rushworth:** Thank you very much.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith, David Davis** and **Douglas McAllister** made representations.

Q3 **Chair:** Sarah, you have dashed in. We will allow you to get your breath back and take Iain Duncan Smith and, presumably, David Davis.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Our bid for a Backbench business debate is about foreign nationals or detained British nationals at risk of human rights violations abroad. We reckon there are now at least 100 UK nationals being tortured or ill-treated abroad each year. In 2023, the FCDO received 188 new allegations of torture and mistreatment from British nationals overseas. The two people who represent that extreme are Jimmy Lai, for whom I have a badge in my lapel, and Ryan Cornelius, who has been held by the UAE for 15 years. We think he has been in solitary confinement pretty much the whole time. What is going on there is completely corrupt. His business, which I think was worth something in the order of £1 billion and did building work and so on, in the Gulf area—it has been engineered by people close to the ruling group, should I say, in the UAE—has been seized and he has been locked away, unable to get a proper hearing.

We persuaded David Cameron—until then, Ryan had never been mentioned by Government whenever they dealt with the UAE. As you know, the UAE was going to put investments in and all sorts and even wanted to buy *The Telegraph* at one stage, which I opposed completely. I cannot put words into your mouth, Chair, but I have to say that I think you were party to that. Their record on human rights is pretty atrocious,



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but this is particular to a British national, who has suffered a grievous abuse of human rights.

Jimmy Lai's case is well known to the Committee. They are now moving to put him in life imprisonment, but his life will not be that long once he goes into life imprisonment on all these trumped-up charges.

Those are just two peaks, as it were, of what is now a mountain of people being detained. This is about trying to get the Foreign Office to raise it. David Cameron did raise it in the end—the first time I think it was raised. At the time, it was uncomfortable for him to do so, but he said that he was happy to do it, and he raised it a couple of times, I think. But David Lammy, the new Foreign Secretary, went to the UAE and we discovered that he did not raise the question at all.

This is important because we think that the Government—the Foreign Office—should raise such matters consistently and constantly at all levels, if a British passport means anything at all. The words “let or hindrance” seem important to me. Those are British citizens, and we need to make sure that they are represented. The debate has 18 signatures to it, covering all parties, and we all think that it is a very important debate.

Q4 **Chair:** David, anything to add?

**David Davis:** I am just here to be Iain's lieutenant. Under Governments of all colours, there has been an institutional disinclination to defend our citizens. As an ex-Foreign Office Minister, there is always an argument for it—we will upset this relationship or that relationship—so Parliament's role in holding Government and the institutions of Whitehall to account is very important. As Iain said, we are talking about well over 100 people here—you have heard the big names, but it is well over 100 people. That is just an indication of how weak our institutions are, so it is important that we make the point.

Q5 **Chair:** Given that you have asked for a main Chamber debate, is there a motion that you want to put to the House, or are you wanting just a general debate to highlight the issues?

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Not a general debate—it would be nice to table a motion. I would have to refine it slightly, but the motion would be along the lines that all Government Ministers, as a matter of Government policy, should raise all issues concerning British nationals who are detained abroad at risk of human rights abuses. I think that would be a fair motion, and I would much rather have the House decide on it.

Q6 **Chair:** It is your application, not ours, so you can amend it to include a motion, if you so wish, with the permission of the Committee.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Yes, that is what I am saying. That is what I want, to include a motion.

**Chair:** Any questions from colleagues?

Q7 **Mary Glendon:** I am not sure if this is relevant, but it is to me. This is



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about 100 people, but those 100 people must have 100 families behind them. I am wondering whether the applicants have had any contact with the families since they submitted this application. What were the views of the families as to how a debate should be conducted? I am not sure whether you can answer that.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Some of the names of the people who are held are in the Foreign Office, but we are going on reports that even the Foreign Office has accepted, which is that these people are detained. We know a number of them. Certainly, were the Committee to grant this debate, we would have every intention of contacting families and trying to get them to the House to hear the debate. At least they would think that their families have not been forgotten. We would certainly do that.

**David Davis:** From my perspective, there is a general issue here: if I were to speak about an individual, I would of course talk to his family. Automatically.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Yes, that is right.

Q8 **Chair:** From the application, although it is an important issue, there is no hard deadline coming up or anything like that, is there?

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** There is no target deadline publicly. It is just a reality that happens every day. We will take whatever you can give us really.

**Chair:** Fine. You may want to consider an amendment for the motion.

Q9 **Alison Hume:** May I point out that No. 13, Layla Moran MP, is a Liberal Democrat.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Yes, she is. Is she in the wrong column?

**Alison Hume:** She is just down as Labour. It was just a small point, thank you.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** That was just a typo.

**Chair:** All right. Thank you very much for attending. The Clerks will be in touch about potential dates.

**Sarah Owen** made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Our final application is from Sarah Owen on tackling Islamophobia. Sarah, you've got your breath back now.

**Sarah Owen:** Thank you, Chair. Yes, I ran here from a really inspiring meeting of women Ukrainian MPs. I wanted to be with them as long as possible, so I am grateful for that time; thank you.

This is the first time I have done this; it is unusual. We are applying for a debate on tackling Islamophobia. We usually have one once a year. It is Islamophobia Awareness Month at the moment. We feel that this is probably too late for this month, but we would be looking, hopefully, to



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coincide with the UN International Day to Combat Islamophobia, which is on 15 March next year.

I will explain why we want this. Unfortunately, many of us will have seen on our television screens and in the news the horrific attacks on mosques up and down the country. We saw the horrific riots taking place across the country. We saw direct targeting of mosques and Muslim communities and of those perceived to be British Muslims as well. This is not just impacting Muslims; it will be people who are perceived to be Muslim as well.

In the year ending March 2024, 140,000 hate crimes were recorded by police in England and Wales, and of those, 3,866 were anti-Muslim hate crimes. That constituted a 13% increase from last year's figures, so we know that this problem is increasing. I would say to the Committee that we know that there will be Islamophobia within those hate crime figures that has not been properly recorded, because there is not a standardised definition of Islamophobia yet and many forces will have perhaps incorrectly recorded it or missed marking it down as an anti-Muslim or Islamophobic attack.

Muslims continue to be disproportionately targeted, accounting for nearly two in 10 of all religious hate crimes, and therefore are the most targeted religious group. We also know this has a really gendered impact for women who wear hijabs or face coverings in particular, because they are more easily identifiable as Muslims and practising Muslims. Unfortunately, in recent months we have had to see the Government having to step up their security operations to support mosques and to ensure that people can go to and from their place of worship safely. In some places, that is continuing.

This has not taken place in isolation. Islamophobia happens on the streets and is part of many Muslims' everyday life, unfortunately. But it has also heightened online. What we have seen over the last few months is that that has increased.

We are asking for, ideally, a full three-hour debate, because this has cross-Parliament support. We have had these debates in the past, and they have been well attended. They have been insightful; they have called for meaningful action; and we have seen improvements in understanding. But also, in terms of the level of debate around Islamophobia, I believe, given the last year that we have had, that we really do need to see a full three-hour debate.

**Chair:** Do colleagues have any questions?

Q11 **Alison Hume:** Which kind of debate are you proposing? Would you prefer a Chamber debate or a Westminster Hall debate?

**Sarah Owen:** A Chamber debate ideally, please.

Q12 **Alison Hume:** To follow that up, you have a lot of Labour colleagues down, but not so many Conservatives.



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**Sarah Owen:** I have spoken to my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, who is a Conservative, Robbie Moore. He is not on that list, but he should be and wants to be on the list. We are continuing to get other Members' names.

**Chair:** He is actually on the application.

**Sarah Owen:** Good—excellent. I wanted to make sure we got the updated one. But Members are still coming through thick and fast to add their names to the application, so I imagine that we will see many more from across the parties. I think many of our Conservative colleagues were a little preoccupied at the time when we were trying to get hold of names for the debate, but I know that many will support this across the House. There are Liberal Democrats on there. There are Independents as well. This is an issue that affects us all, whether we have large Muslim constituencies or not, because it reflects the sort of society that we live in.

Q13 **Chair:** One thing that we could potentially offer is Tuesday 26 November in Westminster Hall. It is the first debate and is 90 minutes, but it would get you in in November. I say that because of the problems we have in allocating time. As you probably know, this Committee has only just been set up and the Leader of the House is only just giving us—generously—time for debates. Would you accept that if we were able to offer it?

**Sarah Owen:** I would say that that would be less than ideal. Given the number of people who have indicated their support for this, 90 minutes would leave very little time for anybody other than the Minister and the shadow Minister, I think.

Q14 **Chair:** We understand that. It is not ideal. The other issue, obviously, is which would be the answering Department, from the Government side, because when we allocate Tuesdays, they have to be the right answering Department. You have the luxury of choice: MHCLG, taking the faith side, Women and Equalities, or even, potentially, the Cabinet Office.

**Sarah Owen:** All of them would be eminently qualified to answer this, but I do believe that it should fall into the faith category. That is what has happened previously. For previous debates, it's been faith, and I feel that ideally that is where it should lie.

**Chair:** Are there any other questions from colleagues? No. Thank you for coming along. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly.

**Sarah Owen:** Thank you very much for your time.