

Backbench Business Committee

Proposals for backbench debates

Tuesday 14 January 2025

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Bob Blackman (Chair); Jack Abbott; Jess Brown-Fuller; Mary Glendon, Will Stone; Martin Vickers; Chris Vince.

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Representations

Alex Sobel, Sarah Olney and Ellie Chowns made representations

Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee, in which we will be considering applications from colleagues for debates. We have 10 applications before us for consideration, so, for those presenting their applications, short introductions would be helpful. Then, obviously, we will have questions for them.

First up is an application by Alex Sobel, Lisa Smart and Ellie Chowns for a debate on proportional representation for general elections. Alex, over to you.

Alex Sobel: Thank you, Bob. First of all, it is a pleasure to be back in front of the Committee. I served with you many years ago, I think it is fair to say, and you do sterling work in terms of delivering parliamentary business for us on the Back Benches, so thank you for your service, all of you.

Chair: Flattery will get you everywhere.

Alex Sobel: The issue of proportional representation has really moved up the public's agenda and the news agenda, particularly since the last general election. Sarah might expand on this, but we in Parliament had a ten-minute rule Bill—we have a ten-minute rule Bill, Sarah's ten-minute rule Bill—which actually went to a Division, which is unusual. However, as you know, the rules are that ten-minute rule Bills are short sessions—I will not even call them debates—with just the proposer and, if it is being opposed, the opponent speaking. I wanted to speak, but that was declined by the Deputy Speaker, and many other Members wanted to speak in that too.

I am not wanting to undermine Sarah's Bill, but it is unlikely that it will get to a debate on a sitting Friday, so it is important that there is an opportunity for the House to debate this important subject. As you can see, we have many Members wishing to debate it. Those are mainly on the pro side, but I know that there are others—I was just speaking to Jim Shannon outside—who oppose PR in Westminster and would be willing to speak against it.

I know that many other debates have particular weeks or timeframes that they need to abide by, but we are more flexible, so whenever the Committee is willing to offer us a slot, I am sure we would take you up on that offer. That is pretty much all I have to say, but Sarah and Ellie may want to expand on that.

Sarah Olney: I am here to represent Lisa Smart because she was unable to make it, but also because, as Alex has mentioned, I had my ten-minute

rule Bill before Christmas. As Alex said, there is a lot of interest in this particular topic right across the House. That is against the backdrop of an election that saw quite a poor turnout by historical levels and a Government who were returned on a historically low proportion of the vote.

We need to grasp the nettle on this. Even if we are not discussing these issues within Parliament, they are being discussed outside, and we need to be able to continue to demonstrate that Parliament is the forum for debates about democracy. That is why it is really important that more people than just myself and the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) get to speak about this really important issue, and do that in a timely fashion.

Chair: Thank you. Anything to add?

Ellie Chowns: I think that Alex and Sarah have really covered it, but I would just emphasise that there is a great degree of public interest in this topic, as well as interest from parliamentarians, so I think it would be not just well attended within the Chamber but of great interest to the general public, too.

Q1 **Martin Vickers:** Sarah, you just said that you have support across the House, but there were no Conservative Members listed. Do you think that is a weakness?

Sarah Olney: Well, I would say that actually there are many other Opposition parties apart from the Conservatives. Obviously, it is entirely up to the Conservatives what their particular views are on this, but this would be a great opportunity for them. I understand that it is Conservative party policy to defend first past the post for parliamentary elections, and we need to hear those voices. It would be a great opportunity for Conservative Members to stand up and explain why they think that is the case. As I say, it is very much Liberal Democrat party policy to have PR, and there is support for it across other parties, but the point is that we need to have a debate about this. The status quo should not continue undefended and unexamined.

Alex Sobel: We want to have a contested debate. In my party there are views on both sides, and as Sarah says, it is an opportunity for Conservative Members to defend first past the post in Westminster.

Q2 **Martin Vickers:** You do actually say, under "Reasons for the debate", that "The governing party has formally recognised that First Past the Post is...flawed". Is that—

Alex Sobel: Yes, at the Labour party conference. That is what it said in our motion, which was passed at the Labour party conference. That is the Labour party's—

Martin Vickers: But it is not the Government's position.

Alex Sobel: Maybe we should have worded it slightly differently; I apologise to the Committee on that point.

Ellie Chowns: Doesn't the manifesto talk about eroding trust?

Alex Sobel: It does, yes. Anyway, we are getting into the minutiae.

Q3 **Chair:** You have made your case. Your application is for the Chamber; would you consider a Westminster Hall debate? You could possibly be waiting quite a long time for Chamber time.

Alex Sobel: If we were going to be waiting post the February recess, then we would consider a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall.

Chair: Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly after the meeting is concluded.

Jerome Mayhew made representations

Q4 **Chair:** The next application is from Jerome Mayhew—which means we will be considering 11 applications this afternoon. Jerome, your application is for improving financial education.

Jerome Mayhew: Yes. Thank you very much for hearing me. I feel like I have queue-barged; sorry about that. I am here because I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people. For the very few Members of Parliament who have not heard of that, we are one of the largest APPGs, second only to the all-party parliamentary beer group. The reason we are as big as we are is that financial illiteracy is a huge issue. Even lots of parliamentarians are particularly bad at learning how to deal with money. We were not taught about it in school, and yet it is one of the biggest things we have to deal with as adults. The difference between someone who is good with money, in the broadest definition, and someone who is poor with money is profound over the course of a lifetime, yet our educational system does not take it sufficiently seriously. This is a cross-party issue which we really have to focus on.

We had a big campaign about 10 years ago, and in 2014 we got fin-ed into the national curriculum for secondary schools. I did some work recently, and we found that two thirds of teachers who are responsible for teaching it did not know that it is on the national curriculum, and only a third of students have any recollection of the financial education they received while they were in education.

That is at secondary school. Even though the Money and Pensions Service has done some work that suggests that people's base approach to money is fixed at about the age of seven, it is not in the primary curriculum.

I started off thinking about this in terms of pensions, ISAs and that side of financial education, but actually it is about debt. If you come from a financially chaotic family, financial management is a middle-class secret. You do not learn it from school, and you do not learn it at home, so we are condemning generations to follow each other in the poor use of money. It

is about budgeting and debt management—not going to loan sharks, and dealing with debt.

For all those reasons, this is a huge issue. It is topical, because the Government are undertaking a review of the national curriculum. We need the voices of Members of Parliament, and particularly Back Benchers, to be heard on this. It is one of the few areas where, as Back Benchers, if we can make a small change in Government policy, with no money associated with it—we are not asking for big Treasury support, because it is about a change of focus in our educational approach—over the course of the next 20, 30 or 40 years fixing the financial education lacuna could have a really profound impact on the quality of our constituents' lives. It is topical, it is really important, it is absolutely four-square behind what Back Benchers should be doing, and there is wide interest in it.

I have a list of 21 Back Benchers who are supporting it. There is a wide spread across the parties. I could have got more, but we needed to get comfortably over the hurdle of 15—I used to sit on your esteemed Committee. We are looking for a general debate for half a day in the Chamber, and I think we can more than fill that.

Q5 Will Stone: Thank you for bringing this to us. I completely agree that financial education is massively important, but the one sticking point for me is that there are not enough Government Members. You need at least a 50:50 split. I think you would be able to get that.

Jerome Mayhew: You want more Government?

Will Stone: More Government, yes. Currently, you have five out of 21 speakers. You want at least 50% Government Members, if not a bit more, in favour of the motion. I don't think that would be a struggle, because I agree that this is an important issue. I would happily come and support this debate.

Jerome Mayhew: Well, there you go. That is six, in that case.

Will Stone: That would be one of the things I would say. Get more Government Members.

Jerome Mayhew: I can easily do that, as you well know. Claire Hazelgrove is the deputy chair of the APPG. I will set her a task, and I am sure she will do that.

Will Stone: Other than that, it looks good.

Q6 Chair: Thank you. Jerome, the first opportunity is actually next Monday in the Chamber, but you will know that last night we had to pull the second debate because of Government statements and urgent questions. Next Monday, we have already allocated the debate that got lost last night, so you would be in the second slot. If that is offered to you, would you accept it?

Jerome Mayhew: Probably, but what would be plan B?

Chair: Plan B would be that we would offer it to another application, and

you would go in the queue.

Jerome Mayhew: Yes, I think so. Speaking for myself, I would say yes.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Ruth Jones and Ben Lake made representations

Q7 **Chair:** We move on to an application from Ruth Jones and Ben Lake for a debate on Welsh affairs on St David's day.

Ruth Jones: Thank you, Chair. It is a pleasure to sit in front of the Backbench Business Committee this afternoon. I sit here as the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Select Committee, and Ben Lake, from Plaid Cymru, is my honorary deputy.

As the Chair has already alluded to, we are here to request a St David's day debate looking at Welsh affairs. As you know, St David's day is on 1 March, and we are looking for a debate on 6 March, because that ties in with our Wales Week London. Although it is called a week, it spreads over 10 days, so the debate would fit in. Businesses and important VIPs from Wales will be up in London at that point, so it would be very timely for us. We are looking for a three-hour debate in the Chamber, which I realise is of a precedent, but these debates have happened in the past, and I am sure that my colleague, Ben, will elaborate on that in a minute.

We also have an opportunity. As the Committee will know, the number of MPs in Wales went down from 40 to 32 at the last election, and the majority are now new Members. So this is an ideal opportunity for all of them, if they have indicated that they want to, to come and speak about the interests and values of Wales, and it is important that we get those aired in the Chamber.

Of course, this is a cross-party request. We have eight Members from the Government and seven from the Opposition parties, so hopefully that would fulfil the criteria. I will hand over to my colleague, Ben.

Ben Lake: Thank you, Chair, for allowing us to make this application. We have been very lucky in the past that the Backbench Business Committee has granted us a debate on St David's day. Indeed, it has been held annually now since 2010, and the first, similar event took place back in 1944, so there is a great deal of precedent here. As a historian, I think it is quite important that we keep some of these traditions going.

Last year, the debate attracted a great deal of media attention, given that it was very kindly given to us at the same time as Wales Week London and the St David's day celebrations. In addition to quite widespread coverage in the media in Wales, it hit some of the headlines in Radio 4 bulletins, which was very good. That debate was about whether St David was born in my constituency or that of my previous neighbour, the right hon. Stephen Crabb.

At the last debate, in 2024, the Deputy Speaker at the time, Nigel Evans, was in the Chair and he commented on just how well attended it was. At

the end, he stated: "I have chaired a few Backbench Business debates in the past that have finished early, but if this debate had been allowed more time, it would clearly have gone the distance, and people would have had the opportunity to say far more things." There is never a need for a Welsh person or a Welsh MP to have an excuse to say more things, but I very much hope that the Committee might look kindly on our application.

Chair: Thank you for getting the application in nice and early because, once we know what time is allocated, we can then allocate it. Obviously, we do not know the position in March, and it is up to the Government to allocate time to us, but we will look at that appropriately, and you will join the queue if that is appropriate.

Any questions from any colleagues? No? Thank you for your presentation. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly.

Dawn Butler and Karen Bradley made representations

Q8 **Chair:** We now move on to an application from Dawn Butler for a debate on International Women's Day.

Dawn Butler: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee. In 2016, I was instrumental in ensuring that we had the first International Women's Day debate on the Floor of the House, and I worked with the then Government to ensure that it happened. Since then, we have had a well-attended debate every year for International Women's Day.

This year accelerating action is the theme of International Women's Day, and I think we need to ensure not only that we have a full-day debate but that we accelerate the charge in talking about all things women. It is important that we have this debate, especially with DEI under threat in some countries—for example, with the rights of women in Afghanistan being taken away. We need to have this International Women's debate.

Dame Karen Bradley: I fully support this application. I have taken part in the debates myself over the years, both as a Minister and as a Back Bencher, and they have been the House at its best. They have been the kind of debates that have given Members the opportunity to speak about really difficult issues, particularly global issues such as the treatment of women around the world. It would be a great shame if this House did not mark International Women's Day in the traditional style and have this debate.

Dawn Butler: International Women's Day falls on 8 March, which is a weekend, so I would imagine that we would have the debate during the week, on the Wednesday or the Thursday—the 6th maybe.

Q9 **Chair:** It is extremely unlikely that we would be allocated time on a Wednesday. Normally, our time is Thursdays, but the Government have taken to giving us Mondays for some reason—it could be because the sitting goes until 10 pm, but that is another matter. We do not know what time we will be allocated. Obviously, we will work with you to try to make sure it is an appropriate day close to International Women's Day, but there

can be no guarantee.

Dame Karen Bradley: The following week is the UN conference on the status of women, and a lot of the Select Committees and APPGs will be in New York discussing the status of women. If it is the week after 8 March, we will not have such a good turnout, because the global conference is happening at the UN at that point.

Chair: We just heard that the previous application is probably looking for the same Thursday as you are, so we will try and see what we can arrange. Are there any questions from colleagues?

Q10 **Jack Abbott:** You say that you want a full-day debate, but we might need some more Opposition speakers to make sure there is a better, 50:50 split. I think there are 36 speakers down overall, which is a really fantastic number, but there are only 12 Opposition speakers at the moment, so we might need a few more to make sure that there is a better split on the day, with a full day's debate.

Dawn Butler: No problem. I am sure more people will add their name—those 36 came within 24 hours.

Jack Abbott: Yes, I am sure there will be the demand for it.

Chair: Thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch with you.

Karen Bradley made representations

Q11 **Chair:** Karen, your application is for a debate on the Modern Slavery Act 10 years on.

Dame Karen Bradley: It is, and thank you very much, Chair, for giving me the opportunity to put forward this proposal. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 was absolutely world-leading. We were the first country to pass a dedicated Modern Slavery Act, in which we introduced new offences, new protections for victims, different ways of approaching perpetrators and protection orders, and so on. It was, at the time, a real landmark achievement, and the House came together in a very consensual way to pass it. It was actually the very last piece of legislation to get Royal Assent in 2010-15 Parliament.

Since then, 10 years on, there have been reviews and there has been talk of further legislation and further work, but very little has materialised, if I am honest. We have seen other countries take up the mantle on this issue and probably start to improve on the legislation that we brought in. So I would very much like to have the opportunity to discuss this issue. It is the biggest human rights scandal in the world that 50 million people globally are estimated to be victims of modern slavery and human trafficking, with over 100,000 in the UK. This issue does need to be raised and spoken about.

You will see that we have 10 Government Members and five Members from Opposition parties, and I am confident that we could have more—as with the previous comments, these signatures were received quickly.



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I should say that I have co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery since 2019, and towards the end of the last Parliament it was getting harder to find Members. We have now had our first meeting of the APPG in this Parliament, and it was absolutely wonderful to see so many new Members taking a real interest in this area and joining the APPG. I am absolutely confident that we could fill a day's debate marking that 10-year anniversary.

I should just mention the date. The Act came in on 25 or 26 March 2015, so we would be looking for the end of March, if possible, to mark as close to the 10 years as possible—I think 26 March is a Thursday this year.

Chair: Off the top of my head I do not know—I would have to look it up.

Q12 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** Do you feel that having it at the end of March is key to getting speakers along, or would you be interested in having it slightly earlier, before the February recess, if we are able to offer you an appropriate slot?

Dame Karen Bradley: We want to do quite a lot of events to mark the 10 years, and it would be more powerful to have it as close to the 10-year mark as possible. Clearly, if the only opportunity we have is to do it sooner, we will not say no, but there will be a lot of things happening in Parliament and beyond to mark the 10 years, and it would be very effective to have it in the same week.

Jack Abbott: I have a similar comment to Dawn's. If there were a couple more Opposition speakers to make sure that we have an even split, it would be fantastic, but I am really supportive. Funnily enough, I was a county councillor at Suffolk county council, and we had a modern slavery motion passed a couple of years after the Act. The impact it had on national Government and local government overall was really significant, so I would be really happy to do this.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch shortly. Thank you.

Andrew Pakes made representations

Q13 **Chair:** We now come to an application from Andrew Pakes. Your application is on the recognition of the value of apprenticeships and National Apprenticeship Week.

Andrew Pakes: Thank you, Chair. Hopefully, it is relatively self-explanatory. I have done my own apprenticeship—this is the first time I have done a Backbench Business Committee application, so I feel I am living the learning experience as well. Apologies if there are some errors in it. We have had Peter Bedford come forward as a Conservative Member and put his name down, so we are beginning to get the 50:50 split.

As all of you will be aware, apprentices are in all our constituencies. The debate would be an opportunity for people to speak about their locality, their place and the challenges. We know there is good cross-party support. I speak in support of this application as the co-chair of the all-party



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parliamentary group on apprenticeships, which in the last Parliament brought together a good cross-party group of MPs and peers in support of the apprenticeship model and giving it more visibility and prestige within the policymaking process. In the new Parliament, we have continued with a good cross-party group of peers and MPs in support of apprenticeships, and I think we will be able to generate some wider support.

The week is 10 to 16 February, and it would be ideal, if the Committee were so willing, if the debate could be as close to that as possible, because there will be a focus on apprenticeships across the country and in all our constituencies. As I said, the debate gives us that chance to highlight our local patch but also to put the challenges and opportunities of apprenticeships on the national stage.

- Q14 **Chris Vince:** You have touched on it, and this is your first application, but you will need some more Opposition names. It should be roughly 50:50; it does not have to be quite that, but you need some more Opposition names. For a topic like this, I think you will easily get them, but if you could go away and get some more—any Opposition party will do, and you obviously already have Conservatives and Lib Dems—that would be really useful. That is doable.

Andrew Pakes: Very doable.

- Q15 **Chair:** Your application is for a Tuesday slot in Westminster Hall. Obviously, we have to allocate your debate when the right Department is answering. I am assuming that Education should be answering?

Andrew Pakes: Yes.

- Q16 **Chair:** The closest slot we have when Education is answering is Tuesday 4 February. Would that be appropriate, if you were offered that?

Andrew Pakes: I would happily take another day. I filled the form in the way I did because it gave me a forced choice of when the date was, in terms of picking a Monday or a Thursday. I would happily look at another date if you think there is a more appropriate one.

- Q17 **Chair:** It is either a Tuesday or a Thursday in Westminster Hall that we are able to offer.

Andrew Pakes: If there was a Thursday that was close, I would be happy with that, as well.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly. Thank you very much for your attendance.

Adam Jogee made representations

- Q18 **Chair:** The next application is from Adam Jogee on Government support for coalfield communities. Over to you.

Adam Jogee: Thank you, Chair. This is the first time I have been able to appear before the Committee, so thank you for listening. Mr Shannon said

he would share one of his season tickets with me, if that helps guide the Committee.

Chair: Don't be tempted.

Adam Jogee: It is for Manchester United, so it works for me.

As members of the Committee will see, I seek a half-day debate in the Chamber on Government support for coalfield communities. I represent a very good coalfield community in Newcastle-under-Lyme. As you will see from the reasons I have set out for the debate, there is so much more that we need to do. We have seen the Government make progress on the mineworkers' pension scheme, but there is more work to do on the BCSSS. We need to give voice to the concerns that exist in coalfield communities like mine, and those up and down the country.

I draw colleagues' attention to the signatories. Having listened to colleagues, I think we have the most of any applicant today. We have 32 from the Government Benches, five from the main Opposition party, five from the third party, four from Northern Ireland, including from both sides of the political divide there, and one independent, so we give voice to all parts of the House and the country in this debate.

The important thing I would like members of the Committee to take on board is that this debate will not be about moaning or complaining; it is actually about identifying the challenges and finding solutions. The issues might include job insecurity, health inequality, and ensuring that the Government's plans for growth are developed and are—all being well—successful, or that coalfield communities are not left behind and forgotten. It will be a positive debate that acknowledges not just the age-old heritage and history of our coalfield communities, but the immense potential that remains in them.

Q19 **Chair:** Any questions from colleagues? No? I see you have a very large number of potential speakers. Is there no priority in terms of dates?

Adam Jogee: As soon as possible, Chair. Some colleagues who have indicated that they will speak have said that it depends on the date. On the advice of Mr Shannon and the Clerks, I only asked people who were interested in turning up if they were able to do it. The fact that we have former Cabinet Ministers from the Opposition and senior Back Benchers from the Government side speaks to the interest in this.

Chair: Lovely. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly with an offer of a date.

Adam Jogee: Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon made representations

Q20 **Chair:** We now come to our season ticket holder. Jim Shannon has not just one application, but three. We will take them in order, starting with the benefits of medicinal cannabis. Over to you, Jim. At the moment,



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according to what we have, there are three supporters.

Jim Shannon: First of all, thank you for giving me the chance to come along, Mr Chairman. I have additional names. I can read them out if that is useful.

Q21 **Chair:** How many, and from which parties? We do not necessarily need the names.

Jim Shannon: Fourteen in total. They are Labour, Labour, Labour, DUP, Conservative, Labour, Labour, Labour, independent, Labour, Lib Dem, Labour, Labour, Labour.

Q22 **Chair:** Okay, fine. Could you pass those names to the Clerks so we have them for our records? Please present your application.

Jim Shannon: First of all, this is a very personal one for me, Mr Chairman. Many moons ago—back in 2018, I think it was—I brought a mother over from Northern Ireland to ask for the first medicinal cannabis prescription under the Government process. Her child was not able to travel. I was saying to somebody the other day that when Danielle came to present the case, her wee girl was having as many as a dozen epileptic fits a day. It held back her growth and her ability to interact and be socially engaged. She could not attend classes, because she was always having epileptic fits.

I think the Minister was Mark Field, and I suspected that if I put forward the case, he might have paused, but if Danielle put forward the case, there was no way in the world he would say no, and he didn't. We got the first prescription for medicinal cannabis under the process that he had led.

It has been a long time since we have had a debate on this issue. I have to say that I was really quite intrigued when I asked for those who had an interest. I think I said to you last Thursday that I was wondering whether I would be able to get enough MPs who wish to speak, because it is a bit of a niche issue. If you have somebody getting medicinal cannabis for a medical purpose, it is easier to make the case. Joani Reid, Scottish Labour, and David Mundell, Scottish Conservative, suggested these names that were formulated through debate. I am rambling a bit, but the debate is an opportunity to discuss the matter. It can help with long-term chronic conditions, chronic pain, mental health conditions, neurological conditions and epilepsy in particular. That was the one that I was presented with as an MP. I think it is time, Mr Blackman and fellow colleagues, to have this debate.

Despite the legislation, access remains limited; that is the issue. It would be helpful to have the debate so that patients could find an easier way through the system to help those wee youngsters and the wee girl in particular, Sophia. I knew that wee girl when she was born. I suppose when you are my age you maybe know lots of people from when they were born, but the point I am making is that I knew her progress from when she was born. I knew that the medicinal cannabis reduced all the seizures to one epileptic fit per day. Some people might dispute that, but



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we had the physical evidence to prove it. I am not pro-drugs—that will never be the case—but I am very much pro medicinal cannabis, because I see the benefits. I am sorry for rambling, but it is an issue close to my heart.

- Q23 **Chair:** Thank you, Jim, for that. You have obviously added extra names. The first slot available will be Thursday 30 January in Westminster Hall. If that slot is offered, would you be able to take that?

Jim Shannon: I think I probably would, yes.

- Q24 **Chair:** Any questions from colleagues? No? We will move on to your second application, on supporting the vascular sector in a future NHS.

Jim Shannon: I have two new names for that as well: Lewis Cocking from the Conservative party and Robin Swann, an Ulster Unionist who has been the health spokesperson for Northern Ireland. It will be good to have them on board. I am chair of the APPG on vascular and venous disease. I understand the issues. We have a real chronic problem with it back home, although it is a devolved matter. But the chronic matter that we have back home is mirrored here in Westminster in the United Kingdom. The lack of focus has resulted in lower public and clinical awareness. We are hoping that this debate will lift that focus and lift that awareness. We have called for the establishment of a national clinical director for vascular diseases. That will be the focus of what we are asking for, because it is at that level of importance and criticality as well.

The NCD would help to standardise the care pathways, alleviate workforce shortages and ensure that those with particular interests in health can be there. We believe that the request gives an opportunity to improve outcomes for patients and strengthen the NHS's resolve to meet the future challenges within the sector. I am a health spokesperson and I am very pleased to chair the APPG. As a health spokesperson, I request this debate, along with all my colleagues here who have a particular interest in health issues as well.

- Q25 **Chair:** Thank you. This application only has seven signatures at the moment. Are there any extra ones?

Jim Shannon: Lewis Cocking, a Conservative, and Robin Swann, an Ulster Unionist. He is a former health spokesperson and has an interest in vascular health. I think we have got a team there who are particularly interested in the issue.

- Q26 **Chair:** Any other questions from colleagues? Okay. The Clerks will be in touch with you. There is a third application. Sorry, I have skipped over one because we are inundated with your requests. This one is for the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne.

Jim Shannon: First of all I thank you for giving me the chance to present this. An early-day motion was printed. I got a copy of it from the Library. It was from 2005. Some of the MPs are still here, but most of them have moved on, or maybe went upwards or wherever they were going. Some have retired.



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"SAS: Rogue Heroes" on Sunday nights is compulsive viewing for me, and probably for most of the nation. Is it true? Well, no—not entirely. The Blair Mayne that I would have been aware of as a small boy in Newtownards was a man who never swore, according to those who served with him. He certainly was an incredibly courageous guy. He had a level of courage, determination—I could bore you to death, Mr Chairman, with some of the stories I know from reading Blair Mayne's autobiography. In the main square in Newtownards, in the middle of town, we have a statue to Blair Mayne. We have named the leisure centre in Newtownards—which is the major leisure centre for the Ards and North Down council—after Blair Mayne.

We have managed to galvanise all the active MPs from Northern Ireland—it is highly unlikely Sinn Féin would ever sign up by the way, but they are not MPs here—to add their names to it. We have got Scottish Conservatives John Cooper and John Lamont. We have Adam Jogee and Scott Arthur from Labour. From the Lib Dems we have Jamie Stone.

We are hopeful that this will be a chance to correct a wrong. Let me explain why we are doing this. There was a soldier from New Zealand who fought in Vietnam and in the last month, after 50 years, he got a posthumous award of a VC for his courage. We therefore figure that the time is right for Blair Mayne to get his posthumous award, for 80 years ago when he fought in the second world war. He got four DSOs. The fourth was withheld due to a typing error, and I say this because I want to have it on record: "These acts of courage and bravery have stood the test of time, as has the desire of my constituency to have the wrongful decision to withhold from Blair Mayne the highest honour of Victoria Cross. The honour withheld due to a typing error"—of a single act of valour rather than a signal act—"should be bestowed posthumously and that is the aim of this debate."

I believe the TV series has lifted the profile. People who did not know Blair Mayne suddenly do. He was a leader of men, that guy you see on TV. He was a man with courage. When he got up, all the soldiers followed. The only person I have ever met like that is Bob Stewart, the former MP. I always thought that Bob Stewart was a leader of men. Maybe not everyone knows him, but I could understand why the people followed Bob Stewart, because he was a soldiers' man, a leader, an officer—he could do it. Blair Mayne could do the same.

This is an opportunity for this posthumous VC to be awarded. A precedent has been set. I think the mood of the nation is to let it happen. We in Newtownards, and in Strangford in particular, want our boy Blair Mayne to get the award he should get.

Q27 Chair: Thank you. One thing I would say about this application is that it is a bit light on Government names supporting.

Jim Shannon: I have two; I can probably get more. I am working with John Cooper and Adam Jogee to do that. There are a couple of other Labour people who have asked me to add their names, but I am afraid



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today has been a busy day and I do not have them on there. I will have those.

Chair: More Government names would help your case.

Jim Shannon: Okay. Could I make one request? I am of an opinion that this debate should be one we have in the Chamber. You might think differently and I would defer to your knowledge over mine—

Q28 **Chair:** It would help if you met us halfway by submitting the application for the Chamber rather than just for Westminster Hall.

Jim Shannon: Okay. Let's get that corrected, then.

Chair: Anyway—

Jim Shannon: Either or, okay.

Q29 **Chair:** As you are a Member well experienced in applying for debates here, if you can get the extra names from the Government side then we will look at the request favourably, I am sure.

Jim Shannon: I have not done too much chasing with the Lib Dems, but you are very fortunate this time round to have a number of ex and former serving soldiers, who I think might—

Chair: Sorry, but it is about getting the balance between the Government and the Opposition, whoever the Opposition might be.

Jess Brown-Fuller: You need some Labour Members—try to get five and then you will have enough.

Jim Shannon: Okay, thank you.

Chair: Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch with you about all your applications.

Jim Shannon: We will try to think of a few more ideas for another week.

Chris Vince made representations

Q30 **Chair:** The final application is from one of our Committee members, Chris Vince, on educational opportunities for young carers. He will present his application and take no part in the deliberation over it.

Chris Vince: I am proud to put forward this application for a debate. Young carers, as many people know, are close to my heart. Up until July 2024 I worked for a charity that supported young carers, and before that I was a teacher.

There are plenty of things that we can consider about young carers and how we can support them, but I wanted a debate that was focused on a particular area, and educational opportunities is a really good one. There is lots to be said on that. The previous Government made it mandatory to report young carers on the school census, but we know that 72% of

schools still say that they have no young carers. That is not correct—I will put that out there.

I also want to talk more generally about the barriers that young carers face. I could talk—I have talked in this place a number of times—about my experience of what that looks like. That is a good place to start when we talk about young carers, not just in terms of school, but moving forward to the transition to university as well. It was interesting to hear some young carers talk about that transition period as well.

Obviously, as you will see, I have Members from a range of political parties who are willing to speak. I would add another Labour name—Jess Asato. There are lots of Liberal Democrats there and one Conservative, because I spoke to him about it and he was keen to do it, but I am sure that there are more who would be interested to speak if the debate came forward. Hopefully, there is quite a nice mix of Government and Opposition Members.

I will also mention that 12 March is Young Carers Action Day. I recognise that a lot of people are talking about debates in March, so I would be happy if it was before that, but I would ask for it not to be after that. If you were to say to me, “We can’t do March; you can do it in February,” that would be absolutely fine. I would just rather have it before than after, so that obviously, when it comes to Young Carers Action Day, we can talk about the debate. That is the way that I would look at it. I am happy to answer any questions.

Q31 Chair: The Clerks will be in touch. That concludes the applications.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi made representations

Q32 Chair: Tan, I know that you are requesting a Defence Committee statement. To prejudge what you are likely to say to us, the Committee in its deliberations before the meeting agreed to have two statements, one from the Defence Committee and one from the Treasury Committee. But—here is the big “but”—as I warned you privately, we will now get to a stage where there are competitive bids for Select Committee statements, so because you have had so many, you are likely to fall off. That will not happen this time, because there are only two, but when we get to the stage of having a lot of Select Committees doing reports, your chances of getting a Select Committee statement will be lessened because of the number that you have already had.

Mr Dhesi: It is a very knowledgeable Committee that has already agreed to it before I was able to make my pitch, but hopefully you will have seen that the Defence Committee has been doing a lot of work. In fact, just as your Committee is hard-working, this is our third report. If others have not quite got to that level yet, that is their business, but as far as I am concerned, all the issues that we have produced reports on are matters of great significance to the country.

For example, service accommodation was an issue of great concern to our brave servicemen and women as well as their families, so thank you for



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granting that one. The second report, on artificial intelligence—or the lack thereof, as was felt by the Committee—in defence was very important, so thank you very much for granting that one. This report is on the global combat air programme, which is a multibillion-pound programme that will have a significant impact on our nation's defence, our national security and our collaboration with international partners, as well as on thousands of jobs across the UK. There are also economic opportunities from exports and so on. All those matters are of huge importance.

In taking on board your comments during our earlier discussion, Chair, I felt that there may be Committee members who thought, "One minute: we keep getting Defence Committee, Defence Committee, Defence Committee," when there were lots of other submissions, but these are hugely significant issues. Please do bear that in mind for future submissions from us as well.

Q33 Chair: I will gently say that we do not normally take oral evidence, if you like, for statements to be made. I have made an exception in this case, but we should not consider that to be a precedent for the future, because we do not want competing Select Committee Chairs coming along to request such things. The answer is that we pre-agreed that it would happen, so thank you for coming along and we look forward to the statement on Monday.

Mr Dhesi: Thank you very much, Chair.

Chair: That concludes the public business for the Committee. The Committee will now retire and consider the applications in private.