



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 25 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Bob Blackman (Chair); Jess Brown-Fuller; Jonathan Davies; Mary Glendon; Alison Hume; Will Stone; Martin Vickers.

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Brian Mathew made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee, at which we will be considering colleagues' applications for debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall.

The first application, from Brian Mathew, is for a debate on the USAID funding pause and its impact on UK international development. It is for a debate either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday morning. Brian, would you like to present your application?

Brian Mathew: Thank you. Members will be aware of the implications of Trump's cuts to USAID. I spent three days in Geneva last week with the International Development Committee. We heard what the effects are on the World Health Organisation and other United Nations organisations. They are truly terrifying, if I can use that word. This would be a wonderful opportunity for Members across the House to take part in the debate and learn from it. That is the main reason for my application.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you for the application. I think everything is in order. I assume that the FCDO would be the answering Department.

Brian Mathew: Yes.

Q3 **Chair:** For a Tuesday morning, we would have to allocate it when the FCDO is the answering Department. I am not promising you this, but the first available date would be 29 April. Would that be acceptable to you if it were offered?

Brian Mathew: I am sure it would, yes.

Chair: There are no further questions, so thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch shortly.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Our next application, from our season ticket holder Jim Shannon, is for a Westminster Hall debate on either a Tuesday or a Thursday, on prisoners of conscience. Over to you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: It is a pleasure, as always, to come along; thank you so much for the opportunity. I am the chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, which has launched a programme whereby parliamentarians can adopt prisoners of conscience. The reason I have asked for the debate is that there has never been one on prisoners of conscience; I asked a business question on it the other week, but the UK Parliament has never officially held a debate on the subject.

Prisoners of conscience are individuals who are detained or subject to unlawful treatment around the world for their religion or belief. The US Congress and the European Parliament have actively advocated for prisoners of conscience worldwide, so although we have not done it here, it is happening all over the world. If you do not mind my saying so, Mr Chairman, I think it would be good for us in this House to do something similar.



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The European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the ongoing arbitrary detention of tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience in Egypt, but the issue does not exist just in Egypt; it exists in Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Vietnam, Belarus, Russia and many other places. Given the gravity of the situations faced by prisoners of conscience, I would hope, with the blessing of the Committee, to bring the matter before the House for debate, to facilitate discussion and prompt, necessary action on the part of the UK, both domestically and internationally.

I am fortunate to have representatives from all the parties, and there are two more names to add: Dan Carden, who is to my left, and Lizzi Collinge, who is to my right. I have been seeking them out for weeks, and coincidentally I happened to meet them both together just a short time ago.

Q5 **Chair:** That was going to be my question. You were a bit light on Government names.

Jim Shannon: I thought I might have been, but these two comrades have been able to support me.

Chair: You are such a seasoned applicant that I would expect you to have an application in order before you submitted it. Anyway, do colleagues have any other questions?

Jess Brown-Fuller: Less of a question, more of a statement: on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, many happy returns on your birthday today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much. Everybody is most kind. I have been reminded of it all day, and I know what age I am—I might have forgotten, but they have reminded me and I know.

Chair: You didn't bring the cakes!

Jim Shannon: Cakes? I'm a diabetic. I can't eat cakes.

Chair: All right. As you will know, the Clerks will be in touch.

Jim Shannon: I know them, and I appreciate their help. Thank you so much. If you don't mind, I have to go to Westminster Hall—

Chair: I am sure you do.

Dan Carden made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Our next application, from Dan Carden, is on guaranteeing the right to maintain contact in care settings. It is an application for a Thursday in Westminster Hall. Dan, please present your case.

Dan Carden: Thank you, Chair. I am grateful for the Committee's time. In the last Parliament, I was successful in securing a similar debate on maintaining contact in care settings. You will remember that during the covid pandemic many families were denied access to loved ones in social



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care settings, hospitals and other settings. From that, many campaign groups were born which have fought on this issue. We brought them to Parliament and heard some of the harrowing accounts of what people had endured.

We had a successful debate, which led to Government and parliamentary changes and a new regulation 9A that enables the Care Quality Commission to guarantee this right. A Government review of the regulation is imminent, and campaigners and parliamentarians feel that now is the right time for the House to consider whether the regulation has gone far enough in guaranteeing people's right to be with their family when they most need it.

Q7 Will Stone: When is the review set to take place? Presumably you want to have the debate beforehand, so you can feed into it.

Dan Carden: It was due by the end of the first quarter of this year, which I think is in the next few days.

Will Stone: It will not be beforehand, then, but as close to the review as possible.

Q8 Jess Brown-Fuller: You are slightly low on Government names, but I am sure someone would support the application, to get you equal numbers.

Dan Carden: How many do I have?

Jess Brown-Fuller: You have three; you need four.

Sonia Kumar: I would be happy to add my name.

Chair: You might need to volunteer again in a minute.

Sonia Kumar: I will hang around. As someone who worked in a care home during the pandemic and saw the stress caused by families being kept away from their loved ones, I think this is an important debate to have. Thank you for bringing it forward.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch in due course.

Lizzi Collinge made representations.

Q9 Chair: We have an application from Sarah Edwards, Lizzi Collinge and Freddie van Mierlo for a debate on humanist marriages, either on a Tuesday morning or in the main Chamber.

Lizzi Collinge: Absolutely—whenever is convenient. Thank you.

The issue we are asking to debate is the legal recognition of humanist marriages. That recognition is not currently available in England and Wales, but it is available in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This touches on fundamental issues of freedom of belief, but in the light of experience in Scotland and Northern Ireland, it also touches on wider issues of economic growth, surprisingly enough. If anyone needs to me explain what a



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humanist is, I am happy to do so, but I will take it as read unless I am asked.

Case law has it that there should be legal recognition in England and Wales. It would be a very simple matter for the Government to lay an order providing for that. We would be grateful if the matter could be debated by the House.

Q10 **Chair:** Obviously there is a large contingent of people wanting to speak.

Lizzi Collinge: I should say that we had late notice that a Conservative Member, the Member for Bexhill and Battle, would have been willing to support our application had he seen the email. I will be happy to get an email to the Committee if it helps.

Q11 **Jonathan Davies:** How does a humanist marriage differ from a registry office wedding?

Lizzi Collinge: Humanism is a belief system. It is a non-religious belief system, but it is a belief system in the same way that a religious belief system is.

If you get married in a church, for example, you have a ceremony personalised to the religious beliefs of that denomination. Equally, a humanist marriage would be framed around humanist belief and personalised to the couple. In a civil ceremony, you are not allowed to have aspects of belief in the marriage, so humanists are currently not able to express their belief system even though it is protected in the same way that a religious belief system is. They are not allowed to express that in their marriage ceremony, which is pretty fundamental.

Q12 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** So you are not looking for a change in where people can get married; it is about the context of the civil ceremony.

Lizzi Collinge: I believe it would allow for humanist celebrations at any other venue, so it would not have to be at a registry office; it could be in a registered place such as a hotel. The aim is simply to allow humanist celebrants to have a humanist ceremony, and for that to be legally recognised in the same way that a vicar conducting the ceremony is legally recognised.

Q13 **Chair:** Presumably the position at the moment is that a humanist couple would have to get married in a registry office and could then have a humanist ceremony elsewhere.

Lizzi Collinge: That is correct.

Q14 **Jonathan Davies:** Who would regulate this?

Lizzi Collinge: It would be regulated in the same way as marriage in any other belief system. I would have to check the details, but the legal powers are contained in the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, so whatever that Act says.

Jonathan Davies: That is interesting. Thank you.



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Q15 **Chair:** As that this is an application for a Tuesday, we have to allocate when the answering Department is due. Which is the answering Department?

Lizzi Collinge: The Ministry of Justice.

Chair: That is interesting.

Lizzi Collinge: It is something fun for the Ministry of Justice.

Chair: You would think that faith belongs in MHCLG, but all right.

Lizzi Collinge: It is about the regulation of marriage, so it is the MOJ.

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

Sonia Kumar made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** The next application, from Sonia Kumar, is for a debate on incontinence. This is a request for a Chamber debate, I believe.

Sonia Kumar: That is correct.

There has never been a debate in the Commons Chamber about incontinence. Incontinence affects 14 million people and 33% of women; faecal incontinence affects one in 10 people. I am an NHS physiotherapist by background, with a decade of experience; that is why I am requesting this debate.

The first lines of treatment for incontinence include pelvic floor exercises and physio treatment. It is about time that we discussed incontinence because it affects so many people—someone in this room will have some sort of incontinence. It always has a stigma around it. We need to break that stigma by having a debate in the Chamber, not just in Westminster Hall.

Q17 **Chair:** Is the aim of the debate to create awareness of the issue?

Sonia Kumar: The first line is getting awareness, because we have never discussed it here, but it is also to break the stigma. The issue starts to come into policy when we are discussing it in women's health hubs, or when we are talking about the long-term strategy for women. It will cover a number of Departments, but the Department of Health would be answering the debate.

I have a special request. The third week of June is World Continence Week. I would absolutely love the debate to coincide with it, if the Department of Health is answering that week.

Q18 **Chair:** If we were not able to allocate Chamber time, for which I am afraid we have a very long queue, would you accept a Westminster Hall debate in that week?

Sonia Kumar: My preference is for the Chamber, because this is a big topic and the debate should reflect the onus of what it means to people. In



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the Chamber, the debate would get a lot more coverage. People would see it as us putting a stamp on it.

- Q19 **Alison Hume:** Thank you for your important application. Do you think that the title of the debate, "Incontinence", is enough? Should it be "Raising awareness of incontinence", or something that gives more context?

Sonia Kumar: I would be happy to change it. Internationally, it is called "contenance", not "incontinence". I will be happy whether the motion refers to "Awareness of continence" or to "Awareness of incontinence"; I just think the issue should be given its onus, considering how many people it affects in the UK.

- Q20 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** This is slightly separate from your application, but the Committee has allocated a debate on Thursday about valproate and pelvic mesh. For a lot of women who had pelvic mesh, it was to do with incontinence. I am sure your expertise would be appreciated in that room.

Your application was slightly short of Opposition names, but I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells has just put his name to it, which equals you out nicely.

Sonia Kumar: This debate would be about both urinary and faecal incontinence, which is what people do not want to talk about. People talk about urinary incontinence, because it has less stigma around it. That is why I do not think the debate should be in Westminster Hall.

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

Mike Martin, Jim Dickson and Polly Billington made representations.

- Q21 **Chair:** The final application, from Mike Martin, is for a 90-minute debate on a Tuesday morning, about SEND provision in the south-east.

Mike Martin: You have all read the application, so I will not go back over that ground. It is well known and accepted that SEND provision is a huge problem. We know that the Government are looking into it, but that is very long-term and costs a lot of money. In the meantime, a lot of families are suffering.

The problem can be broken down into three areas. The first is the provision of EHCPs, which can take a long time. In Kent, for example, the latest figure is that only 13% of EHCPs were issued within Government timelines.

Secondly, when those EHCPs arrive they are often incorrect. Sometimes they have the wrong names, the wrong schools or the wrong provision, or provision is allocated but funding is not matched up.

Thirdly, a lot of the problems are pushed to tribunals. It is a particular problem in Kent, which is the county with the worst pushing of cases to tribunals—in other words, the highest percentage in any county of cases going to tribunal. There is a feeling among parents of children with special educational needs that it is a mechanism to suppress demand. A tribunal



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is expensive, time-consuming and emotionally draining. If mistakes have been made in the process, it can be pushed to tribunal instead of the mistakes being fixed. A percentage of parents will automatically drop off because they cannot afford or do not have the time or emotional bandwidth to fight it.

The result of those three stages is that the most vulnerable children in our society, the ones we should be looking after the most, are not receiving the specialist care and attention that they require and deserve.

Jim Dickson: These are all issues with massive resonance on the doorstep in my Kent constituency. We all deal with the same education authority, and we all have very similar problems. I know that there have been similar debates on this very issue as it relates to other parts of the country, but Kent has not yet had a chance to air the issues in the way we would like. If the debate is agreed to, it will be a great opportunity to do so.

Polly Billington: All I would add is that in some cases the way the system works, particularly in Kent, is actually driving up costs. People are not being allocated to maintained schools and are ending up in private provision because they are successful at tribunal. Arguably, Kent's budget is being bust because of the way they are approaching the system. It is not just about the national regulation; it is also about the way that that is administered at county level.

Mike Martin: This debate sits across the south-east, so a number of Surrey MPs have signed as well. Further to Polly's point, 90% of tribunals in Surrey go in favour of the parents. That illustrates the point that cases are being pushed to tribunal to suppress demand.

Q22 **Chair:** We have two applications in the queue for debates on SEND provision. One is a failed application for an estimates day debate from the Chairman of the Education Select Committee, and the other is from Graham Stuart on SEN provision, which is a more widespread issue. Yours is quite specific to the south-east; theirs, I think, are on the generalised issues. We will obviously consider your application, but it might help if the three groups could get together and agree a joint debate, so we can arrange for that to happen appropriately. It is up to the applicants, but otherwise you will join the queue for debates when we have time to allocate.

Mike Martin: When do you think that allocation might be?

Polly Billington: If we talk to them, what might the timetable be for securing a debate?

Chair: The first thing I would say is that we have another two days of estimates day debates coming up in May, but I do not know when. I suspect that the Education Committee will resubmit their bid for such a debate, particularly on SEND. As there are two days of debates, and as they were turned down for the last one, they are likely to find favour with the Committee.



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However, there is nothing to stop you having your application in the queue. It will depend when Westminster Hall time becomes available. At the moment, we have 31 applications in the queue for the Chamber and Westminster Hall. Adding today's will make it 37.

Mike Martin: Could the Clerks perhaps send us some provisional dates?

Chair: We will send you the details.

Mike Martin: If those dates are miles away, perhaps we can then work with the other teams. If they are near, we will probably keep them separate.

Chair: Westminster Hall debates are easier to come by because of the time available, and because everybody puts the Chamber. The Clerks will be in touch once we have considered the applications.

That brings to an end the formal business of the Committee. The Committee will now retire to consider the applications in private.