

Backbench Business Committee

Oral evidence: Proposals for backbench debates

Tuesday 6 May 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 6 May 2025.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1 to 15

Representations

I: Carolyn Harris.

II: Stella Creasy and Richard Tice.

III: Jamie Stone and Patricia Ferguson.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Carolyn Harris made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee, where we will be considering applications from colleagues for debates. We have three applications before us this afternoon. The first is from Carolyn Harris and about World Menopause Day. This is a request for a debate in the Chamber.

Carolyn Harris: It is. Thank you, Chair. The reason why I am so early is that I took heed of your comment in the Chamber on Thursday, when you said that anyone who had an application needed to get it in early. So here I am.

World Menopause Month is October, and since 2018 we have had a debate on the subject in the Chamber every year, because colleagues have come to realise the importance of the menopause as an issue for women and women's health right across the policy spectrum—from the Home Office and the Health Department to the DWP and the Cabinet Office. There is not an area of social policy where the menopause does not have an impact; I could constantly be asking Ministers for things to do with menopause.

Given the influx of new Members since the last time we had a debate on the subject, I think it would be really important for them to get an opportunity not just to hear other people's stories but to understand the importance of the subject—how important looking after the health of women and, in particular, menopausal women is to us as a society. It is a subject that, since we first showcased it in a Backbench Business Committee debate back in 2018, has received global attention and is hailed as something that the UK Government talk about. They are applauded for doing so.

Chair: Thank you for your presentation and for getting the application in nice and early; as things stand, colleagues will be waiting till November for a debate in the Chamber. Are there any questions from colleagues?

Q2 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** Just for clarity, Carolyn, is it World Menopause Month or is there a specific day on which the menopause is recognised?

Carolyn Harris: Well, 18 October is World Menopause Day, but World Menopause Month has grown since its inception in 2018, so a whole series of events go on throughout October. We will have some in here; there will be some out there, and across the world. The 18th is the actual day, and the month is October.

Q3 **Chair:** I do not have a calendar in front of me. Is 18 October—

Carolyn Harris: I have no idea, Chair.

Q4 **Chair:** You don't know what day it falls on?

Carolyn Harris: I am not that organised; I just managed to get the names.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you, but if it falls on a weekend, would you prefer the debate before or after the date?

Carolyn Harris: It does not matter. I would be happy to say “last week” or “next week”—whatever.

Chair: Are there any other questions from colleagues? No. Carolyn, the Clerks will be in touch with you in due course.

Carolyn Harris: Thank you Committee, and thank you Chair.

Ms Stella Creasy and Richard Tice made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** The next application is from Stella Creasy regarding the EU-UK summit. This is a request for a debate in the Chamber.

Ms Creasy: We come as a double act.

Martin Vickers: Very odd!

Richard Tice: Inspired.

Ms Creasy: We forgot our “Two Ronnies” glasses.

Chair: You might have a joint application, but are possibly not in total agreement about the subject.

Ms Creasy: Well, we hope that that is a compelling case to show why the debate needs to happen. If we may, we will spend our first minute simply on what the debate would be about and then our second minute on why we think that would require a full debate in the Chamber.

First, the debate would be about the EU-UK summit. The fact that Richard and I are here shows that this is a matter of extreme national importance, I would argue. This Government have made a manifesto commitment about resetting relationships. The summit will be the first formal opportunity to hear the results of that reset process and to lay the path for future agreements. It is a fundamentally important moment for the UK economy in a world full of tariff disruption and with the security threats that we face, particularly from President Putin. Richard and I may disagree about how to address those, but we both believe very strongly that our constituents and, indeed, constituents of Members from across the House would want us to debate and discuss the outcomes of the summit and particularly issues about defence and security, trade, fishing, AI, energy, and youth mobility and apprenticeships.

My second minute is simply about the fact that the alternative is very limited for us as Back-Bench Members of Parliament. The Commons scrutiny role on European affairs has been reduced by the lack of a

dedicated Select Committee following the abolition of the European Scrutiny Committee and the DExEU Committee. This would be the first chance for parliamentarians, particularly Back Benchers—among whom there is a wide range of views as to what should happen at this summit—to express their views. The Government could therefore hear those views and there could be a proper and learned discussion about the outcome.

The fact that there are co-sponsors from, shall we say, different sides of the track shows the cross-party support for doing this. We believe it would be most appropriate to do it after the summit, so that we have some tangible outcomes that we can all have a barney about and that we can then feed into the Government's thinking.

We are looking particularly for that week after the summit, which is 19 May, if that is at all possible. We would like a substantial amount of time because there are a range of views on this issue. With that, I shall now be quiet unless, Richard, you would like to add anything.

Richard Tice: As Stella has said, the EU-UK relationship is such a big subject and there are so many different big views. If there is just a statement from the Prime Minister or whoever afterwards, we Back Benchers have only one minute to ask one question, but there is still so much more that all Members of the House may want to say about different issues—whether it is defence, fishing, phytosanitary and all the other aspects.

I think this is a strong opportunity to have a longer, deeper analysis from all the various Members, with different views and particular concerns. This may be the only prospect the House has to do that. I think it is a really important part of the scrutiny process. Stella and I joined forces in trying to keep the Scrutiny Committee, but we were rebuffed.

Ms Creasy: We are hoping, Bob, that you will not rebuff us this time.

Q7 **Chair:** In terms of timing, your request is for almost immediately after the summit. Is that right?

Ms Creasy: Partly because we recognise that there is the Whitsun recess. The summit is Monday, 19 May.

Q8 **Chris Vince:** You will be aware of the number of applications we have, and the potential backlog. I recognise you want to have the debate as soon as possible after the 19 May. I also recognise the timing. Would you consider—I am just throwing this out there; it may not be possible—a double slot in Westminster Hall?

Ms Creasy: We tag team?

Q9 **Chris Vince:** With my debate on young carers, I had two slots in Westminster Hall so I had double the time for the debate. Would you rather it was nearer 19 May and in Westminster Hall or would you rather

wait for the Chamber? I think those are probably going to be the options.

Richard Tice: My instinct is that it is such a big issue for so many voters around the country that they might wonder about it. Many people will not understand what Westminster Hall is. That is my only observation.

Ms Creasy: Our priority is the debate because we think it is going to be a big moment and there will be lots of views, opinions and hot takes to be had. I think Richard is right that the public will see this as the first step in a different direction, perhaps, for this country, and therefore wants to be sure that there is parliamentary scrutiny. And after all, if taking back control meant anything, it meant this place doing something.

Q10 **Chair:** We can control the timing in Westminster Hall. In the Chamber we normally get Thursdays; if there are UQs or statements, that compresses the amount of time available for Backbench Business debates.

I think in this Parliament we have not had a three-hour debate at all in the Chamber, so it is extremely unlikely. Every debate has been constrained to probably two and a bit hours maximum. If you want a full debate, with people being able to give reasonable-length contributions, that tends to lead you to Westminster Hall. But it is your application. You must set your stall out and then we will decide.

Ms Creasy: We really appreciate that feedback and we will be guided by you. We really want to just show the strength of opinion and feeling that this needs to be more than a statement, and there does need to be a proper opportunity for people to be heard.

Q11 **Martin Vickers:** Both Stella and Richard could each speak for 90 minutes themselves about their different perspectives on this. You can guarantee that it would be a well-subscribed debate, which means that people end up with three minutes or something like that, which is not adequate to articulate the pros and cons of EU collaboration.

Richard Tice: But is it better than nothing, or than a minute after a statement? I would say yes.

Q12 **Martin Vickers:** Well, you can guarantee that, if it was in the Chamber, the Government would make sure that there were statements on that day to squeeze it.

Ms Creasy: I think, Martin, you are making our case as to why we have come to you, to ask you to protect the ability of Back Benchers to discuss something that we may have conflicting views on, but both agree is a matter for Parliament.

Martin Vickers: I agree.

Ms Creasy: And I am sure that Richard and I will commit to a time limit on our own contributions.

Richard Tice: Oh, completely.

Ms Creasy: There we go, you see? Consensus breaks out across the House.

Chair: I am sure that the Speakers would impose a time limit, even if you didn't. Anyway, thank you for your contributions; the Clerks will be in touch.

Jamie Stone and **Patricia Ferguson** made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Our final application this afternoon is from Jamie Stone on devolution in Scotland, and it is for a Chamber debate.

Jamie Stone: Thank you very much, Chair. I appear before you as a long-standing supporter of devolution, so I do not want there to be any misunderstanding. I am the only person in this place whose name is on the Claim of Right for Scotland. I served as part of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which drew up the scheme for the Scottish Parliament, and Patricia and I were founder Members of the Scottish Parliament, elected almost 26 years ago. It is ironic that very shortly we shall mark the 25th anniversary of Donald Dewar's death.

The Scottish Parliament came into being, and I would suggest that the intention of Donald Dewar, or the intention of the Scotland Act, which was the parent of both the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government—well, I think the reality today is not quite what was intended. I would suggest, for a start, that the Committee system seems particularly powerless in terms of challenging the Executive. I am sure that all of you can cast your minds back over the last months and years to legislation or initiatives that perhaps should not have been undertaken in the first place. I would suggest that a more robust Committee system might have challenged those, and might have, in fact, ensured better government.

I am not anti-devolution in any way whatever but, 26 years on, I think it is time, perhaps, for the parent of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government just to take a look and see whether what we see today was within the intention or the mood in which that Act was passed by the Blair Government. I think it would be a timely opportunity for us to comment, and, of course, one would hope that that might lead to a dialogue with the Scottish Government—I know not. I would rest my case at that, at this stage; I think it would be instructive and informative, and I turn to my colleague.

Patricia Ferguson: Thank you. Next year, 2026, will see what I think is the seventh election to the Scottish Parliament, and while I do not think it is for this place to dictate to an incoming Scottish Government what it should or should not do, it is always good to reflect and to have critical friends who help you in that process.

A lot about the Scottish Parliament is very good, and there are a lot of lessons that we here could learn from it. I am conscious of the fact that we have a Modernisation Committee at the moment, which will be looking at how we reform our processes. There are a number of areas where that Committee could be informed by the Scottish Parliament.

However, as Jamie rightly said, there are some downsides to what has happened in the years leading up to this point. I remember very well the excitement and enthusiasm that heralded the opening of the Scottish Parliament. Since then, we have seen it sometimes perform to its very best, and, in other occasions, not quite. One area where it fails—and where the Committee system fails—is in the sense of not being able to do post-legislative scrutiny. It is a unicameral Parliament and depends very much on those Committees to get it right with legislation. That is an area where we have seen a number of failures over the years.

It is a good time for there to be reflection on the Scottish Parliament—what it has and has not achieved—and to be honest with our friends in it, and in the Scottish Government, whichever complexion it happens to have next time around: perhaps it needs to look again at some of the things that it does, and some of the ways that it does them.

- Q14 **Chair:** You mentioned in your application that it has been 25 years this month, effectively, since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Is there any time sensitivity that you are looking at for this debate?

Patricia Ferguson: Only in the sense of not wanting to butt up against the election next year in May.

Jamie Stone: Patricia speaks with some authority, because she was a Presiding Officer and a Minister in the Scottish coalition Government that we had in those days. She knows what she is talking about.

Chair: There is no question about that. I am looking at where we are at the moment. The applications we received today are likely to get a debate in November. We have to look at whether there is any time sensitivity about the application.

- Q15 **Chris Vince:** This is just my usual question again, because I am aware of what you just said about timings. You have put down for the Chamber. I recognise the importance of this debate, and I am not saying it should not be there, but are you wedded to the Chamber or would you take a Westminster Hall debate if it were sooner?

Jamie Stone: If necessary, we would go with Westminster Hall. I just think this is a subject that would, as Patricia said, be good for modernisation in this place. It is probably about time to have a look at it.

Chris Vince: We keep meeting like this in these Committees, but there is a valid point about what we can learn from other Parliaments, including the Scottish Parliament. Our colleagues in Wales may also want to reflect



on that.

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