

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 24 June 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 24 June 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 1-20

### Representations made

[I](#): Jim Shannon

[II](#): Jim Shannon

[III](#): Chris Curtis

[IV](#): Dawn Butler

[V](#): Jas Athwal and Gurinder Singh Josan

[VI](#): Katrina Murray

**Jim Shannon** made representations.

**Q1 Chair:** Order. Welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. Once again, we will be considering applications from hon. Members for debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. The first request is from our season ticket holder, the hon. Member for Strangford, for a debate on brick kilns in Pakistan. The request is for a 90-minute debate on a Tuesday or Thursday in Westminster Hall.

**Jim Shannon:** Thank you very much, Mr Chairman, and thanks to the Committee. I secured a debate related to this in, I think, '22, in the last term of Parliament. Since then, the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, has brought forward a report about the brick kilns. We presented that report to the Pakistani Government, and have had another visit to Pakistan since then. I would love to report that things have changed, but they have not.

Unfortunately, there are some 20,000 brick kilns across Pakistan, which employ some 4.5 million workers. Despite its prohibition in 1982, the problem continues. Punjab province is probably the worst of the whole lot. Christians make up less than 2% of Punjab's population, but 80% of the brick kiln workers, alongside lower-caste Hindus. They face systematic exploitation, discrimination and violence. I also chaired the APPG for the Pakistani Minorities. Some of those involved in that group attempted to free these people, to buy them out—that is the way it is.

We are very concerned about this issue. It is something that we have tried to change for some time. Christian workers have been offered debt relief in exchange for converting to Islam: their right to have their own Christian belief is being negated—or people are trying to negate it. I felt it was time for another debate on the brick kilns in Pakistan, in this term of Parliament, because since that earlier debate we have had a report that has made recommendations to the Pakistani Government, to which they have not responded, which is disappointing.

We had quite a lot of interest in this debate. I am not sure if you have the full list of names but I am happy to leave it with you, Mr Chairman. We have some 16 Members: five or six Labour, two Lib Dems, three Conservatives, a number from my own party, plus independents.

The request is genuine, and on behalf of my brothers and sisters, Christians who are suffering, persecuted, discriminated against, abused, and taken advantage of across the world, including in Pakistan.

**Q2 Chair:** The title may need to be changed to make it more obvious what the debate is about. The title is "Brick kilns in Pakistan", but you are looking at the workers, the persecution, and the slavery more than anything else.

**Jim Shannon:** Okay. I am happy to change it.

**Q3 Chris Vince:** That is exactly what I was going to say. I read the title, "Brick kilns in Pakistan", and thought, "Why have you brought this here?"



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

But when I read through it, I realised there is actually a very serious issue that you want to talk about. My suggestion is either, "Religious persecution in brick kilns in Pakistan" or, potentially, "Modern-day slavery in Pakistan".

**Jim Shannon:** You are absolutely right. I come in here, and I know exactly what it is about, but the title does not portray that. You are absolutely right.

Q4 **Chair:** According to the application in front of me, we have eight speakers. Is that right?

**Jim Shannon:** I will leave this list with you. We have 16.

Q5 **Chair:** You have more speakers?

**Jim Shannon:** Yes, we have more people interested. Sarah Champion has added her name, as have David Smith, Valerie Vaz, Siobhain McDonagh, Iain Duncan Smith, Sarah Dyke, Jamie Stone, and Ruth Jones.

**Chair:** If you could kindly pass the list to the Clerks, we can deal with that. Thank you for your attendance, Jim. The Clerks will contact you in due course.

**Jim Shannon:** There is another request.

**Chair:** You have a second one.

**Jim Shannon:** You get two for the price of one here.

**Chair:** Well, you are the season ticket holder.

**Jess Brown-Fuller:** I do not know if you are aware, Jim, but of the 104 debates that we have approved as a Committee, 10 of them have been yours; 10% of all Backbench Business debates have been secured by the hon. Member.

**Jim Shannon:** You are incredible generous, and I bow to your generosity.

**Chris Vince:** What percentage has he spoken in?

**Martin Vickers:** He'll try and get up to 15% now.

**Chair:** Yes, it sounds like a challenge.

**Jim Shannon:** I did not know that statistic until now, but thank you.

**Jim Shannon** made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Your second application is for a debate on religious minority persecution in Myanmar. It is, once again, a request for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or Thursday. By the way, which would be the answering Department for your first application?

**Jim Shannon:** It will be the FCDO—both of them will be, actually.

**Chair:** And this will also be FCDO. Okay.



**Jim Shannon:** Thank you for the second go. Obviously, these things are incredibly important. I met Dr Sasa, a Christian from Myanmar. I know there are many ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar who are persecuted, especially the Rohingya Muslims, but there are also the Shi'as, the Sunnis, the Christians, the Baha'is and many others. This gentleman came from one of the villages. Unfortunately, they are given unspeakable abuse by the army, and that concerns me greatly.

There are not just religious freedom violations but humanitarian crises as well. Since the military coup of 2021, Myanmar has descended into widespread violence, with religious and ethnic minorities facing some of the harshest persecution. Christian communities in Chin, Kachin and Kayin states—those are the three that the gentleman who came to see us mentioned—have seen their churches destroyed, clergy imprisoned and aid blocked.

I mean no offence here to people who are Buddhist, but Buddhist-nationalist extremism continues to fuel anti-minority sentiment. Muslim communities, including the long-persecuted Rohingya, remain stateless and displaced. The humanitarian crises that were happening there not so long ago still did not stop the army bombing Christian villages on some 200 occasions. When you need help, what are they doing? They are making it even more of a—if I can use this word—hell on earth for those people. It gets me incredibly angry, Chair. Those actions represent violations of the freedom of religion and belief and of international human rights.

We have never had a debate on this before—it is the first time—and, again, nine Members have expressed an interest in taking part. I would be very happy, if it is at all agreeable to the Committee, to have a 90-minute debate on a Tuesday or a Thursday. These are my brothers and sisters, and I want to speak for them.

**Chair:** Thank you. Are there any other questions from colleagues? No? Okay. As I said before, the Clerks will be in touch with you in due course when we can find time to allocate the debate.

**Jim Shannon:** Again, Chair, I thank you and the Committee for your kindness to me, and for the information that I never knew existed.

**Chris Curtis** made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** The next application is from Chris Curtis and Mike Reader on the performance of the Building Safety Regulator. This, once again, is a request for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Chris, over to you.

**Chris Curtis:** Thank you, Chair, for giving me the opportunity to present this application. We want to have a debate to scrutinise the performance of the Building Safety Regulator amid growing concern from both the commercial and residential development industries about the significant delays in regulatory approvals. These delays are now having a material impact on economic growth and housing delivery in this country. That is

particularly true here in London—when you look out the window, you see a fraction of the number of cranes that you should be seeing building homes for the future—but it is also true right across the country. Probably most importantly, it is also having a material impact on building safety in the UK. The BSR was set up in the wake of Grenfell in order to improve building safety, but I think there is a case to be made that it is now hindering it.

There are currently more than 80 high-rise building applications awaiting determination, some of them stuck in the system for up to a year. That obviously has big economic impacts because it means that companies are having to hold on to capital for that extra period of time.

The BSR is routinely missing its statutory eight-week and 12-week timescales for regulatory decisions. As a result, development projects are stalling, investment is being deterred, and jobs are being lost across the supply chain. Once we lose those jobs and that supply chain, it is much harder to bring them back.

These delays are particularly affecting higher-density urban developments: the type of developments that are most appealing, that we most want, and that are essential to meeting the Government's 1.5 million homes target. Without fixing this problem, we need to be blunt and acknowledge that we are not going to hit that target.

The same regulatory bottlenecks are also affecting remediation works on buildings with unsafe cladding, driving up costs and leaving leaseholders facing prolonged uncertainty.

There is widespread concern that the BSR currently lacks the resources, staffing and digital infrastructure to function effectively. Confidence in the regulator is declining, with developers and industry stakeholders increasingly resorting to freedom of information requests to obtain basic performance data. This debate, I hope, would provide a vital opportunity for Parliament to examine the reasons for these systematic issues and to explore solutions, including the need for improved resourcing, clearer guidance and greater transparency and accountability. Thank you.

**Q8 Chair:** Thank you. The application is for a Tuesday or a Thursday, so which would be the answering Department? I assume it would be MHCLG.

**Chris Curtis:** Yes, MHCLG.

**Chair:** Okay, thank you. Are there any other questions from colleagues? No. We are all content? Then thank you; the Clerks will be in touch when we can allocate time.

**Dawn Butler** made representations.

**Q9 Chair:** Next up is Dawn Butler. This is a request for a 90-minute debate on high street gambling reform on a Tuesday morning.

**Dawn Butler:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee. Our high streets are really important to our health and wellbeing. You should be



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

able to pop down to the high street, get something to eat and do some shopping, but we are finding an overwhelming number of gambling establishments. In Brent, we have 10 within 10 minutes' walk. It is absolutely crazy. I approached the council to say, "Look, we need to stop these gambling establishments," but councils are not allowed to, because there is an "aim to permit", which is part of the Gambling Act 2005. Councils have to agree to gambling establishments going wherever they want to, and they normally go in more economically deprived areas. In Brent, for instance, we have 111 licensed gambling establishments.

I would like to have a debate to talk about that and how we can change the law. When one person is addicted to gambling, it affects at least seven other members of their family. It is costing the UK £1.7 billion a year. We found an alarming rise in the number of young people, especially young men, committing suicide because of their addiction to gambling. It is a really important debate and conversation that the whole House needs to have. We need to change the law so that councils can look at the environmental impact of these establishments and be able to say no.

**Q10 Mary Glindon:** Is this specifically about betting shops, as opposed to the one-armed bandit sort of activity?

**Dawn Butler:** It is a mixture of both. The betting shops are more closely regulated, but you have the fixed-odds betting terminals, for instance, which the Government did actually change from the 80:20 rule. They wanted to change that so that more of the most expensive ones could be put in, where you just see people putting money in for hours. Establishments are making it easier for people to gamble on their credit card. To attract younger people, they have now started to offer wi-fi and free tea and coffee. It is both, basically.

**Q11 Chair:** Which would be the answering Department, because this is complicated, isn't it?

**Dawn Butler:** It would be DCMS.

**Chair:** Okay, fine. Any other questions?

**Q12 Jess Brown-Fuller:** Dawn, you mention at the bottom of your application, "Gambling reform proposed by Dawn Butler will—", and then you mention a couple of things you would like to see happen, which are very logical, such as ending the duty to approve gambling venues and letting councils say no. Do you feel that you want to have a motion attached to the debate, or do you want it to be a general debate to explore the principle, before potentially exploring a motion?

**Dawn Butler:** I would like to have a change in legislation. That is the ultimate end game here. I have written to the Minister, and the Minister has actually come to Brent to have a look at the short walk to the number of gambling establishments—we have a huge one that is going to be open soon. Ultimately, I would like to see a change in legislation.

**Q13 Will Stone:** I think this is a much-needed debate. Not to challenge you on it, but is it culture, media and sport, or would it be housing and planning?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

The way to change the mechanism would be to give local councils the ability to reject planning applications. In Swindon, for example, we are now rejecting planning applications for fast food and stuff like that because it is not good for the community. Would that not be the focus you would be looking at, as opposed to culture, media and sport?

**Dawn Butler:** I think it comes under DCMS. We are looking at where we can make a quick change in legislation and change the Gambling Act or the new planning Bill that is coming through. We want to have the debate, and then we want the Government to think about where they can make this change quickly. It is a hangover from 2005, when it was brought in, that just got out of control.

Q14 **Chair:** You may recall that when I was deputy leader of Brent council, we stopped the super-casino coming to Brent.

**Dawn Butler:** The one on the north circular?

Q15 **Chair:** Yes. So you have my sympathy with this. The challenge for councils with this particular issue is always whether they want an empty shop or something being used for some purpose.

**Dawn Butler:** But we could always have start-up businesses and pop-up businesses on the high street. It is about how we make our high streets like they used to be, rather than just having them full of gambling shops that fuel addiction, make people poorer and create problems not only on the street but in the home. We saw how important it was to have high streets where people want to walk to and spend time over covid, and it should be a vital bit of society.

**Chair:** The Clerks will be in touch when we can find time to table your debate.

**Dawn Butler:** Thank you very much.

**Jas Athwal** and **Gurinder Singh Josan** made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** The next application is from Jas Athwal on the contributions of Commonwealth troops in world war one, and this is for a general debate in the Chamber.

**Jas Athwal:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for considering this application. I understand that the requested title emphasises the contribution of the Commonwealth troops in world war one. However, because there was a repeat, I would like to expand that premise to both the world wars, because it is the same thing. I can also confirm to the Committee that I had cross-party support within the first five minutes of sending out the request, and I am sure, if I reached out to all the parties, I would have got them all to sign up as well.

The debate would highlight the contributions of the troops from what is known as the Commonwealth countries who fought for our freedom. In this very place, on 17 September 1914, Lord Kitchener made that speech—he was the Secretary of State for War—when he announced that



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

there were troops coming from over 80 British dominions, including undivided India, to support the war effort. To mark 111 years since that historic address, I request that the debate be held as close as possible to 17 September. That falls on a Wednesday, so I fear that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition might have something to say about that, but Thursday would be greatly appreciated.

I chose to apply for a debate that focused on the contributions in both the wars because there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the contributions. Exhibitions like “The Indian Army at the Palace” at Hampton Court Palace have seen sustained increases in visitors from ethnic minority backgrounds. That is because people want to see themselves in their history. Only recently, when records were digitised, I found out that my great-grandfather fought in Belgium, and I have always known that my grandfather fought in Burma.

People want to celebrate the contributions of their ancestors that span well before post-war migration, and this debate would allow us the opportunity to do that. I think there is a real aim for all the parties to speak in this one, and it would be a great way to honour the 3 million soldiers from across the British empire who contributed to both the world wars, and to commemorate the biggest volunteer army that the world has ever seen.

As someone who was born not in this country but in India, I feel immense honour and pride knowing the vital contributions that my ancestors made to our freedom. Especially at a time when racial tensions have heightened, this debate would serve as an opportunity to reflect on the collective efforts of those who came before us—efforts that helped restore peace and reinforce national pride and co-operation across communities. This debate would allow us the opportunity to honour the bravery, sacrifice and unity of our diverse communities, who stood shoulder to shoulder in the fight for our shared endeavours.

**Q17 Chair:** Thank you. Gurinder, do you want to add anything?

**Gurinder Singh Josan:** Just to support that, we live in a country that is very diverse—certainly parts of the country are more diverse than others. Relationships that were initially formed on the battlefield actually resonate today within those communities—that is a really important aspect of this debate. We can see today that within the national security strategy, and the focus on partnerships and key allies across the world, our Commonwealth partners are key allies in a lot of places. To them, what happened all those years ago has strong relevance even today.

It is important that we understand what happened all those years ago, as very often, people do not. I was talking to my children who have grown up here about it and realised that you have to go out of your way to understand that history and what happened at that time, because it is not taught as part of the national curriculum. It is not within our museums, our cultural institutions or our creative industries. These are not topics that are regularly explored. Within our political debate, while we all respect and understand that history, it is not something that we go into

detail on. This debate will help aid that understanding and education process, and ultimately help with community cohesion in this country.

**Q18 Chair:** Just to check, the House rises on 15 September for the conference recess, so we do not know yet what the allocation of business will be in September. Ideally, do you want it as close to the anniversary of 17 September as possible?

**Jas Athwal:** Yes. As close as possible, please. If the House rises on 15 September, which will be the Tuesday, that is the closest.

**Chair:** Obviously, we do not know about allocation of time just yet. I suspect that the Committee will get the 15th, but we will wait and see. We may even get the day before, as well. Thank you for your presentation, and the Clerks will be in touch in due course.

**Katrina Murray** made representations.

**Q19 Chair:** Our final application is from Katrina Murray, for a debate on new towns. It is a request for a half-day debate in the Chamber.

**Katrina Murray:** Thank you very much. As somebody who grew up in Glenrothes, and who currently represents Cumbernauld, the New Towns Act 1946 was a very strong part of my 1970s primary education. Cumbernauld celebrates its 70th anniversary on 9 December, and we are getting close to the 80th anniversary of the Act and the establishment of Stevenage as the first new town. Thirty-two new towns were established under that Act between 1946 and 1970. They currently house 2.8 million people, with a mixed provision of housing, set targets for green spaces and a strong economy within that.

Members who represent new towns and those who were born and brought up in them, regardless of where they have gone on to represent, have shown significant interest in and support for a debate. The first call went out to the Members who represent the 32 new towns, and the application was more than oversubscribed by Labour Members who wanted to talk about their towns. The relevant Northern Ireland Members were also keen to be involved.

There is a lot that is good about our towns, but an awful lot of challenges also exist. A simple Google search of Cumbernauld will highlight the number of Carbuncle awards it has received for some of its more experimental design and innovation. It was very much part of that 1950s, 1960s and 1970s build. The legacy of the wind-ups of the development corporation has also provided a significant challenge.

Probably the next biggest housing expansion since the new towns were created is now being promoted. I believe that a general debate in the Chamber will give us an opportunity to explore the learning from the last time we had that level of expansion, so that we do not revisit some of the problems of the 20th century on the much-needed expansion of housing into this century.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q20 **Chair:** Thank you. Is it your intention to have the debate around one of the anniversaries?

**Katrina Murray:** I would really like it if it could be around the December anniversary, but I might be a bit late to get in for that.

**Chair:** You might be just about okay in terms of our waiting list. We will look at what we can do.

**Chris Vince:** It would be wrong of me not to declare an interest. I did not sign the application because I am a member of the Committee, but I gritted my teeth a bit when Katrina mentioned that the first new town was Stevenage because it just beat Harlow.

**Katrina Murray:** It was two days or something—not a significant amount of time!

**Chair:** The Clerks will be in touch in due course. Thank you very much for your application.

**Katrina Murray:** Thank you very much.

**Chair:** That concludes the Committee's public business. We will now retire to consider the applications in private.