

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 24 February 2026

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

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Representations made

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[III](#): Matt Western

[IV](#): Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi

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Sarah Champion and **Sam Rushworth** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We will be considering two groups of applications this afternoon. The first is from—I think almost inevitably—Select Committee Chairmen, or their equivalents, for estimates day debates. The second is, if you like, normal applications for debates in Backbench Business time in either the Chamber or Westminster Hall. The first application we will hear is from Sarah Champion on spending of the FCDO, I presume in particular on international development.

Sarah Champion: Thank you, Chair. I am joined by Sam Rushworth, a member on my Committee.

This Committee will know that I do not come before you often; I come when I really feel that the International Development Committee needs some floor time. Whenever we have a debate on official development assistance—ODA—it is always oversubscribed; we normally have about 50 people standing for it, so many do not get the time to speak.

The reason I am coming to you today is karma—and hopefully the Committee is kind. There is an existential crisis facing our official development assistance. The estimates show that there has been a 5% in-year cut to ODA. Let us remember that that comes off the back of a cut from 0.7% to 0.5% and this Government's intention to reduce it to 0.3% by 2027. An in-year cut was a surprise to us, because we were told that the final amount would not happen until 2027.

The cut also comes against the background of the US dramatically cutting all its foreign aid. We are seeing other countries, predominantly in Europe, but also Australia and Canada, cutting their aid. This is at a time when we find global conflicts escalating, vulnerabilities escalating and the number of people in poverty escalating. Indeed, the concern of UK citizens about people coming to our shores to seek sanctuary or opportunities is also escalating.

It frustrates me that our ODA has always been the first line of defence, both for keeping people safe and prosperous in their own countries, but also, when disasters happen, trying to give them some degree of support and stability. It is being dramatically cut. We know that the decisions have now been made, that the announcements are likely to be given to the larger organisations next week, that it will be coming into the public domain the following week and that the Minister has indicated the intention to put it to the House the week of 17 March. That means that next week is our last opportunity to allow Members to have their say on what should be saved, where savings might be found and which should be priority countries.

On top of all that—if that was not enough—we are also seeing unprecedented cuts to FCDO staff. That comes on the back of development staff being cut a few years ago. We are looking at a prediction of between 25% to 40% of cuts. My Committee has been



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working closely with the unions, because due process has not been followed in our opinion. A work plan was not in place when the first staffing changes happened, which meant that the Department did not know what skills it had. Also, those cuts were being made from September before the new Foreign Secretary was in place and before the priorities relating to the cuts were even considered. Staff were being cut before we knew what the funding priorities were going to be. We are extremely concerned that this will hit the development sector harder than anything else.

We are facing a double whammy: the money going and the staff going—and then layer on to that the most uncertain world that I have known in my lifetime. I really appeal to the Committee. We need to allow Members of this House the chance to have their voice heard.

Straight after this meeting, I am going to a meeting to try to save ICAI, which is the independent scrutiny body that is in existence due to 2015 statute. It reports directly to my Committee, and we are told by the relevant Minister that it will likely be cut.

The one independent organisation that scrutinises what the FCDO spends its ODA on, and the one thing that gives public assurance of transparency, is likely to be cut, and those decisions are being made in live time right now. So please, Committee, I would be grateful if you take our application seriously.

Chair: Thank you. I should have said to all colleagues who are presenting for the estimates day debates that we have only one day, and we are likely to try and choose three of the seven applications for debate, so you are competing against one another for the slots. Mary?

Q2 **Mary Glindon:** Following on from what the Chair said, Sarah and Sam, the Foreign Affairs Committee has also applied for a debate on the spending of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Do you think your debates could be combined, or do you think your International Development Committee requires a separate debate?

Sarah Champion: I have just come from an inquiry into Sudan, which we co-hosted with the FAC. There is, of course, a lot of crossover between our two Committees. Our role at IDC is to scrutinise overseas development assistance. The FAC has a broader remit than that. I would be very happy, if it gave Members a broader bite, to combine the two. It is most important that Members have the opportunity to speak. What heading it comes under is less of a concern for me.

Q3 **Chair:** Do you want to add anything, Sam?

Sam Rushworth: The only thing I would say, Mary, is that no other area of Government spending, in other Department, is being cut as savagely as ODA. The consequences of that are incalculable, but it will inevitably affect the British people, whether through the implications for global health, for refugees and migrant flows, or conflict or British soft power. We have not

yet had a proper exploration of what those consequences are, so this is a particularly important area for parliamentary scrutiny.

Chair: Thank you. Any other questions, colleagues? No. Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch as soon as possible.

Sarah Champion: Thank you so much. We appreciate it. I should say, Chair, that Brian Mathew from my Committee is here as well.

Emily Thornberry made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** The next application is from Emily Thornberry on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry: I completely agree with the International Development Committee Chair. I have no doubt that this will take up a portion of whatever debate there is, if there is to be one.

I have applied for a debate on the Foreign Office as a whole before, because, while the world is on fire, we are seeing in the Foreign Office the biggest cuts of any Government Department overall. Even if we park ODA, they are the biggest cuts. I believe there are between 15% and 25% cuts in staff happening. There is great concern among the unions I have spoken to and among a number of staff about how it is happening and what it means.

The way it seems to have happened is that they have begun with the directorates and merged them down to a certain number, and then given the directors the job of cutting their staff by a certain amount, and it cascades down. That is one way of doing it. It is not necessarily terribly strategic in terms of looking at what it is the Foreign Office wants to achieve and the priorities of Ministers. I think it is something that we need to look at. As I say, no other Government Department has cuts of this size. We had a debate on ODA, and I am quite clear it will come up in a wider Foreign Office debate, if we decide to have a wider Foreign Office debate.

It is also important to look at our diplomatic strength. The Foreign Office is responsible for Britain's position on climate change; the war in Europe, in Ukraine; the old-fashioned war or the new war, the hybrid war; what we do about Donald Trump, the EU reset or our relationship with the Commonwealth and the overseas territories. At a time like this, to be cutting back on staff in the way that we are, without being clear about the strategy, is alarming.

It is clear, as you can see from the list that 21 people from across the House who have signed, that there is wide interest and great concern about what is happening. It is not just about our diplomatic strength; this is also obviously about our soft power. I am sure that Members will have heard the alarm raised about what is happening with the British Council, which seems likely to go through a completely radical turning upside down and a large number of job cuts. There are rumours of 40 offices being under threat across the world. We are losing our presence, in terms of the

British Council and development people paid for under ODA, and we are now also losing our diplomatic presence. The opportunity to have a debate on the Foreign Office as a whole will cover all those things.

There is also wide interest in the BBC World Service. Although it got an increase in its funding last time, it only used that to patch the holes. At a time when China, Russia and Iran are investing the amount that they are in disinformation and spreading lies, there are many ways in which we can counter it—but the most important is to tell the truth and to do so through an organisation that is badged with more trust than any other broadcasting organisation: the BBC. The idea that, at a time like this, we might be cutting back—or just not expanding—the World Service seems to me to be recklessly irresponsible. I know that the World Service has a huge amount of support.

Having an opportunity for Members to talk about the ODA cuts, the British Council, the World Service and Britain's position in the world and what our priorities ought to be, along with how that can be reflected if we are going to cut our staffing by 25%, is why we are before the Committee.

- Q5 **Martin Vickers:** Emily, you have given a very broadbrush view of things, and I can understand why. In the limited time that you are going to have within a debate, what would you want to focus on? Yes, there is soft power and staffing in embassies. However, would you want to focus on the threats from Russia, China and other troubled spots? Or would you focus on projecting our soft power in a much broader sense?

Emily Thornberry: It would not be for me to tell Members how they should take this opportunity. The reason I put it broadly is because there are so many opportunities in a debate such as this. I am just suggesting the sort of things that there would be. I would like to talk about Britain being a force for good and how, at a time like this, we have never needed Britain and a good Foreign Office working at the top of its game more. I am concerned that there is this major distraction of the ODA cuts and now the 25% cuts and Donald Trump, and so on and so on. It is extremely challenging, but a multilateralist country such as ours, a middle-ranking country with our history and experience—which we are in danger of losing through these cuts—ought to be a force to be reckoned with.

- Q6 **Chair:** While you are both in the room, if this Committee were to grant you a debate but merge the two debates together, would you accept that?

Emily Thornberry: Of course.

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

Matt Western made representations.

- Q7 **Chair:** Next up is an application from Matt Western on Cabinet Office spending.

Emily Thornberry: Can I stay and hold Matt's coat because I am very supportive of him?

Chair: Of course.

Matt Western: That is very kind of you, Emily.

Chair and Committee, I thank you very much for your time. It is a rarity for me to come before you, and certainly to do so on behalf of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. It is a Committee that very few people in this place know much about. It has on its books my right hon. Friend Emily but also the Chairs of other Committees: Sarah Champion, Liam Byrne and Tan Dhesi, as well as people such as Lord Sedwill, Lord Hutton and others from the House of Lords. I just mention that because of the work that we are doing, which does not typically get much visibility.

We often say, and the Government speak to this, that national security is the first responsibility of any Government. In recent days, by way of example, we have seen what Friedrich Merz, the Chancellor of Germany, said at the Munich security conference: that the international order as we have known it for decades no longer holds, and that “freedom is no longer a given.” Closer to home, the head of MI6, Blaise Metreweli put it like this: “We are now operating in a space between peace and war. This is not a temporary state or a gradual, inevitable evolution. Our world is being actively remade, with profound implications for national and international security.”

Anyone who thinks that security is defence is misunderstanding what this is about. The United Kingdom is the third most cyber-attacked nation in the world and the most cyber-attacked in Europe. Why? Of course, most of it is down to our relations, say, with the United States, but a lot of it is down to our positioning over Ukraine. This has real impacts on the lives not just of people who work in businesses that have been attacked successfully, such as Jaguar Land Rover, Marks & Spencer, Co-op or whatever. We have seen the attacks on the Electoral Commission. We have seen attacks on the British Library. We have seen them on individual local authorities as well. We are the third most attacked, and we have to wake up to the reality of why that is and respond to that threat.

The reason for asking for an estimates day debate is that, although the Government have said quite rightly that they want to commit to 1.5% spending on security over and above the 3.5% for defence, the challenge is what that looks like. Our Committee has put challenges to the Government and those who have expertise in this area about what this should look like and what is being done by Government. Unfortunately, so far we have not had direct answers to those questions. The reason for pushing this is that, if we really believe, as many say, that we are in a kind of 1930s parallel, our security is under threat, but the nature of conflict has very much changed. That is why it is important that we as a Parliament hold the Government to account and really understand their thinking behind this 1.5%.

Q8 Chair: You heard the applications from Emily and Sarah in relation to the FCDO. Why would this be a bigger priority than either of those, given that



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you are talking about FCDO spending? *[Laughter.]*

Matt Western: Well, they obviously both have their real merits, but what I would say is that I think—

Emily Thornberry: Just don't rise to it, Matt. It's not worth it.

Matt Western: We live in incredibly unusual times, and I think we are at a juncture where we have to give focus and attach importance to this area of security. Jaguar Land Rover is not just impacting my constituency; it impacted UK plc's growth last year, as did Marks & Spencer. It is not simply their concern. The concern has to be wider, about the threat to food security, our economic security and so on. We cannot simply say that it is down to corporate responsibility.

It is an unusual request. You will not have ever had this Committee or this area come before you before. I absolutely support the requests that have been put in by Emily and Sarah. They are linked.

Emily Thornberry: We have signed each other's forms.

Matt Western: They are linked. There is a lot of commonality, but there are some distinct differences. I would not necessarily suggest that the Committee choose either/or. If time allows on the day, I would hope that we would all be able to be accommodated.

Chair: Well, it is not going to be possible to do everyone, much as I would like to be in that position. Are there any other questions from colleagues? No. Thanks, Matt. The Clerks will be in touch.

Matt Western: Thank you.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** We move on to Tan Dhesi with an application on behalf of the Defence Committee. You are almost becoming a season ticket holder.

Mr Dhesi: Thank you, Chair—that is how much I love the Backbench Business Committee. You may be aware that this is the first time I am appearing before the Committee to discuss an estimates day debate. You will have seen that the application in front of your good selves has the cross-party support of over 70 members, not just from the three major parties of Labour, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems, but from Plaid Cymru, Reform and the SNP. There are many others who wanted to sign the application but were not in a position to do so because of their particular roles.

We all know that the MOD is one of the highest-spending Departments in the Government. Expenditure levels since 2022-23 have significantly increased, from £60 billion to over £75 billion, and they are expected to rise further, to nearly £85 billion, by 2028-29. The quantum of that expenditure—as well as the situation in which we find ourselves, with the illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine and US President Donald Trump's assertions that European nations need to take more control of their



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defence and security, which is why all European nations are now significantly increasing defence spending—will highlight that it is a very important time for defence, not just in the UK but across the wider continent. At a time when all these extra tens of billions of pounds are going in, it is important that parliamentarians debate where that money is going and ensure that there is value for money. That is why we want a debate on the spending of the Ministry of Defence as well as on armed forces maximum personnel.

With regard to spending, the Prime Minister said at the Munich security conference that to meet the wider threat we need to go further and faster. We need to increase defence spending, but it is not clear what that means in practical terms. When are we going to reach certain levels? Where will that spending happen? We have had the strategic defence review, but we do not have the defence investment plan, in which there will be a clear demand signal for the defence industrial base, as well as a clear signal to our allies and adversaries.

There are so many issues that need to be worked through. I know that there is strong feeling across the House, not just in the Defence Committee, and it is about time that we had a detailed look into scrutinising what the Government are doing and what their plans are. That is why we want this debate. We had a meeting with the National Audit Office. I will give you one example from its publication. The MOD requested an additional £9 billion for depreciation and impairments. That is a non-routine request, but there is no meaningful explanation as to what it relates to. These are mind-boggling numbers, and it is important that all these things are brought to the Floor of the House, where Members are able to hold the Executive to account.

The debate is also an opportunity for us to reflect on the numbers of armed forces personnel. We are all aware that there has been a decline over recent years and decades. We want to get into that as well, because this may well be the House's last opportunity to authorise maximum numbers in our regular and reserve forces, by a mechanism called "Votes A", in their current form. That is something that I have raised on the Floor of the House, but I think it is also something that we need to tease out from across the House.

So, there are lots of issues. Given the increasing importance of defence and the trajectory—we have said that we will go from 2.3% to 2.6%, and then towards 3.5% in terms of conventional military spend, not to mention the extra 1.5% on defence-related expenditure—as well as many other reasons, I request, Chair and members, that you look favourably on our application. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you. Are there any questions?

Q10 **Will Stone:** You are really good at getting people to sign up to debates. You have phenomenal numbers. Do you reckon all 71 will realistically want to speak in the debate? If so, how long do you think you will need for the debate? I ask because that is a lot of people, with not a lot of time.



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Mr Dhesi: Ultimately—notwithstanding parliamentary diaries for different Members—they have all said that they are strongly in support. Whether that is in the form of speeches or interventions—however it is—a lot of Members feel that the scrutiny isn't there and that we need to get that debate. We could have a very long debate, but obviously it is up to the Backbench Business Committee how much time they allocate. My request is this. I am fully mindful of the fact that you can support only three applications, but I would say to Committee members that in defence, at this point in time, given the level of uncertainty and the lack of scrutiny that we have been able to effect, Members want the opportunity to come and have their say.

Chair: Are there any other questions? No. The Clerks will be in touch—shortly after the meeting, I suspect. Thanks, Tan.

Lewis Atkinson, Mr Clive Betts and Matt Bishop made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** We now come to a joint application on behalf of the PAC, Home Affairs Committee and Justice Committee. The Chairmen of the Committees are not able to be present, but we have excellent substitutes.

Lewis Atkinson: We will try our best, Chair. Thank you for having us. As you said, this is a joint application from the three Committees; I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee. That reflects the fact that although this bid is specifically about the spending of the Ministry of Justice, it reflects the concern—*[Interruption.]* Oh, here is Mr Betts.

Mr Betts: Sorry, Bob: I had an urgent call. It was something about Sheffield Wednesday, but I won't tell you what.

Chair: You haven't bought the club, have you?

Mr Betts: I'm having a whip-round, so I might do tomorrow!

Lewis Atkinson: I was just 30 seconds into opening, Clive. Do you want to take over?

Mr Betts: No, you carry on—I agree with what you have said.

Lewis Atkinson: It is a joint bid, because the pressures facing the Ministry of Justice are a concern of all our Committees. Clearly, there are concerns about the prison system, the courts backlog and today's announcement from the Deputy Prime Minister about jury trials and revising estimates for next year, which has an impact on issues around violence against women and girls. The Met Police Commissioner has raised concerns about the functioning of the prison system and the impact of that on the police. It is a cross-cutting application for those reasons. This is something that all our Committees have taken a significant interest in.

Clearly, from the Home Affairs Committee perspective, there is a significant police reform agenda, which is partially predicated on some of those wider changes in the justice system. Where there have been statements in the House recently about these issues, whether about jury trials or prison capacity, there have clearly been a number of urgent



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questions. The police reform statement from the Home Secretary was significantly subscribed. It is for those reasons that we are collectively seeking the debate.

Mr Betts: From the Public Accounts Committee point of view, we tend to look across Government and see the bits that do not join together. That is why I think a debate like the one being sought can enable you to have a look at what is going wrong or right and how the issues that are created in one bit of the service then cause problems elsewhere. We have seen the issue with the police. They improve detection rates and prosecutions of people, and then that leads to more people in prison and prison overcrowding.

Another issue is that, as they get more people in prison, more people come out, or should be coming out, and often get in connection with the probation service. We did a report recently on the Probation Service; it was really quite shocking. The service is just falling apart. Prisoners and ex-prisoners are not having the number of visits they need. They are not having visits in prison, they don't come out ready for the outside world and they all too often end up back in prison, which generates more problems of prison overcrowding. This debate would be a very good opportunity to talk to the join-up across the piece.

Matt Bishop: I am on the Justice Committee, but I also have a unique background, as I was a police officer until fairly recently. We all know the stats and the figures about delays in the court systems and prison overcrowding. In the most up-to-date figures, we have 76,000 cases open in the Crown court by March last year, although sitting days reached a decade high last year, so something is obviously going completely amiss here somewhere.

I just want to pick up on what Clive said about the police. It is very true that police officers try their hardest. They go out, fight crime, serve the public and protect everybody. It is very demoralising to think that we could be in the court backlog for however many years or that we might not end up with a conviction because of people backing out, for whatever reason, over the delays, and then we can't send people to prison.

All of that is having a big impact on police officers. It is important to recognise that these police officers—it is true that I am a former one, but I have not been one for a while—continue to serve everybody to the best of their ability. To see that we are—hopefully—debating topics such as this gives them a bit of confidence. I speak to the police here on site, and they say all the time, "There's no support, there's nothing coming from Government and we don't see enough. Why is that?" That is what they are looking for.

Not to take away from any of the other applications, but if nothing else, police officers are out there fighting and, in many cases—even here—getting killed. They need to know that we are supporting them, and we need to give them a little bit of confidence that we are trying to bring the backlogs down.

Q12 Jonathan Davies: This Committee allocated a debate on the spending of the Ministry of Justice on criminal justice at the last estimates day, in summer last year. Do you expect this debate to cover similar matters?

Matt Bishop: Possibly, but not necessarily all of them. There will be lots of new ones coming up, with the updates today from the Deputy Prime Minister.

Lewis Atkinson: As Matt alluded to, there have been significant changes, including just today with the announcement of supplementary estimates in terms of the courts system. For example, there has been significant public concern about releases and the functioning of the prison system, in terms of prisoner transfers and so on that have taken place since then.

We also have a significant police reform piece and funding piece that has been announced since last summer. Frankly, when it comes to the police funding settlement, although it clearly would not be directly in scope for this debate, the adequacy of police funding is dependent on how far the police are expected to deal with a set of criminals who may be released early from prisons, and so on. That is why we are jointly applying for this.

Mr Betts: You could also throw in the prison arrangements on top of that. We did a PAC report into what has been a really unhappy experience at Dartmoor prison, which lost spaces rather than gained them, because of the challenges and the problems there, which should have been foreseen, but weren't.

Chair: Any other questions? No. Thank you for your presentation. The Clerks will be in touch.

Layla Moran made representations.

Q13 Chair: The next application is, I think, from just Layla Moran, representing the Health and Social Care Committee, on spending on pharmaceutical procurement.

Layla Moran: It is actually a joint application between us and the Science and Technology Committee. Chi is in the Chamber doing the online harms Opposition day. She sends her apologies, as she really did want to be here, and really wants to make the case.

At the start, I should say there are now three Conservatives who have also signed up. I am sure a challenge you would have set me is that we don't have any—that was because of when we pulled it together—but Joe Robertson, Greg Stafford and Kit Malthouse are happy to add their names. I am confident it would be of interest to a lot of people.

The debate would centre on the UK-US pharmaceutical deal that was struck at the end of 2025. Much lauded at the time by the Government, it has elements of uncertainty, particularly about where the money was going to come from. Despite the questioning by me of Wes and by the Science and Technology Committee of their Ministers, it was not clear until more recently that the money in the medium and long term was certainly coming from the NHS budget.



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The deal itself changes two key things in NHS spending. The first is the NICE threshold. As some of you might be aware from your constituency inboxes, that is the amount of money that NICE can choose to spend on new treatments, so that would rise. The pharmaceutical industry said that that was a great thing, but quite a lot of health economics suggests that actually thresholds were already too high and that the thing we should do is reduce them. A paper in *The Lancet* made that case just a couple of years ago. There is therefore a debate to be had about whether that is the right thing to do at all. The second change is the rebate.

Lord Vallance, who was the one who struck the deal, lauded it as something brilliant for our pharmaceutical industry and our economy, but he also made it clear that the combination of the two changes are worth about £1 billion in extra cost in England, and that is just over the current spending review period. The wonks who have looked at it over time have suggested that it could be worth up to £3 billion in cost if some trajectories take hold.

That is important because the question has to be, where is that money coming from? The answer is—the OBR has been quite clear about this—that it is going to be coming from the frontline. We have a Government who are, quite rightly of course, wanting to reduce waiting lists and put more money into mental health, community and all the big changes that are happening in the NHS—the backdrop is those huge NHS changes and the reorganisation, with the Bill coming—but meanwhile, at the same time, they have signed up to this deal that looks to be taking money away from that very frontline. The bit that Chi really wanted me to stress to you is where the money is going—fundamentally, that money is being taken from the NHS and is being funnelled towards American pharmaceutical companies.

I think that is something that deserves its airing on the Floor of the House, because at its core—this was a point made to me by a whistleblower from a part of the NHS, who was deeply concerned and came to a surgery about it—that is actually a fundamental change in the purpose of the NHS and the use of taxpayer money. We assume that all taxpayer money that comes into the NHS is spent on making the nation more well, and that is what is in the constitution. What has happened in this deal is that the NHS has essentially been used to strike a favourable deal with another country. That is the first time that has ever happened. We have not seen the impact assessments and even the estimates have nothing on that. All this detail that I have described to you came to light after the estimates were made.

This debate would therefore be an opportunity not only to get the Department to come forward with a better understanding of where the money is going to come from, but to challenge some of the basic premises about what the purpose of the NHS is. The title might feel quite narrow, but I think the implications for spending in the NHS and for the NHS more widely—consistently one of the top three concerns of the public in any

polling, particularly over the past five years—means there is great public interest in this, as well as interest across the House.

Q14 Chair: Can you clarify the timeline, if the deal has started?

Layla Moran: An MOU has been signed and that is as far as they have got so far. That is my understanding. The details I do not know, and that is part of the issue. A lot of the transparency around this deal we have not had sight of. I understand that there is an impact assessment—it does exist. At the moment, the Government are saying that they cannot release it, for all sorts of commercial reasons and so on. I also understand that some people in the various Departments are minded to get that out there in the public domain, so that we can understand the impact, but we have not seen the impact assessment. There is not enough transparency around this deal, which is why we think it would be timely to bring it to the House.

Chair: As there are no other questions from colleagues, thank you, Layla. The Clerks will be in touch after the meeting.

Layla Moran: Thank you very much.

Liam Byrne made representations.

Q15 Chair: Our final application for an estimates day debate is from Liam Byrne on behalf of the Business and Trade Committee. Liam, you were not here at the start, and I understand why, but we have seven applications and potentially three slots. We have to decide which ones are the major priorities.

Liam Byrne: Thanks, Chair. I appreciate that you have already given us one, and we are back for a second. There are three reasons for asking again. First, DBT got the biggest single uplift in supplementary estimates, so of all the supplementary estimates tabled, DBT was top of the list. It is about £1 billion extra—it is an 18% increase in departmental day-to-day funding, or about £360 million, and about another £600 million in capital. It is a big increase, and it therefore probably warrants a debate, in our book.

The second reason for asking is to help Members get stuck into whether that money is being spent on the right things. The Department has basically earmarked the extra £1 billion for three things: steel, with £375 million; the British Business Bank, with £200 million; and Post Office provision is up to £1.2 billion. Obviously, with steel, where is the steel strategy? Tata has just told us that there are eight weeks to save the steel industry, which is a big concern. The British Business Bank is a big concern for a lot of Members, because scale-up financing is one of the pressing needs that all businesses talk about. The Post Office is also obviously not yet finished.

Within the spending settlement, there is a question about why this extra money is needed. Is it being spent on the right things? We would say that there is a challenge for the Department. We took evidence from 1,000 witnesses last year, and the priorities that we get back from the business

community are AI and productivity, problems with the industrial strategy, inward investment, employment rights, cutting red tape, fostering enterprise and consumer protection. We would like to give Members the chance to debate whether the Department is, first, spending the money that it has been given wisely and, secondly, spending it on the right things. That is the second reason for pitching.

The third reason is really the fact that these debates are always quite well-attended, because everybody wants to talk about businesses in their own constituencies. Growth is not where the Government want it to be, and there are all kinds of arguments as to why. Debates like this give us a way of making sure that the work we are running through our inquiries is genuinely the stuff that matters to colleagues in the House.

The three reasons are basically: first, it is a big number that this Department has just enjoyed; secondly, there are real questions about whether it is spending the money on the right things; and thirdly, helping the Business and Trade Committee do what Members are actually interested in is a lot easier when we have debates like this.

Q16 Chair: Is there an argument that, with the money for Post Office Horizon scandal compensation, and the money for keeping the steel industry going, there is no new money for Business and Trade, and that the extra is really to compensate for what needs to be paid out? Is that fair?

Liam Byrne: It is new money in the sense that they have had to put extra money into steel and the Post Office. There are obviously then questions about whether that money is being wasted, because there is not a steel strategy that tells us that this is a sensible investment. On the Post Office, the big question is: when on earth is Fujitsu going to put its hand in its pocket? This is now, in total, a £2 billion cost to the Exchequer, when you add up the redress payments and all the legal costs. There is a real question as to why the Government have not yet asked Fujitsu for any cash. There are a lot of quite meaty issues at stake here, and a debate like this would give people a chance to get stuck in across a wide front.

Chair: Any other questions?

Martin Vickers: Well—

Liam Byrne: Martin, you know about this!

Martin Vickers: I should declare an interest in wanting more spending on the steel industry.

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

Navendu Mishra made representations.

Q17 Chair: That concludes the applications for estimates day debates. We have one other application, on the emerging risks of advanced AI, which is from Ben Lake, but I think you are substituting, Nav.

Navendu Mishra: Yes. Thank you to all Committee members. Ben Lake cannot be here today for some reason, so I am covering for him. I will be honest with you: I am not an expert on AI. Once again, thank you to all the members of the Committee and the Chair for hearing this application.

I think most, if not all, MPs would agree that artificial intelligence is one of the most defining technologies of our time, if not the most defining. The impact of AI transcends constituencies, national boundaries and international boundaries. It is such an important issue. This proposal is for a three-hour general debate in the Chamber on the emerging risks of advanced AI.

Without getting too much into the detail, I want to make a couple of points. Models developed by leading AI companies are now able to perform complex reasoning, write code, win gold medals in international maths olympiads and operate autonomously in ways that seemed out of reach even a few years ago. However, as the capabilities continue to increase, so do the risks. As I understand it, the fundamental problem is that, as AI models become more capable, they become increasingly more difficult to understand and, more importantly, control. Dario Amodei, the CEO of one of the largest AI companies, Anthropic, stated that we understand around 3% of how these systems work.

The UK Government have rightly warned that we could see the irreversible loss of control over advanced AI systems. In October 2025, in his annual threat update, the director general of MI5 highlighted the need to prepare for “the potential future risks from non-human, autonomous AI systems which may evade human oversight and control.” The AI Security Institute’s recent “Frontier AI Trends” report, published in December 2025—just a few weeks ago—warns that current models can already deceive researchers during testing and sabotage evaluations to avoid being shut down. AI systems are increasingly capable of self-replication, and “In a worst-case scenario, this unintended behaviour could lead to catastrophic, irreversible loss of control”.

The warnings are not new. Leading experts have highlighted the civilisational stakes involved since 2023, when they came together to sign this statement: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.” The statement was signed by two British Nobel prize winners, AI scientists and CEOs of major AI companies.

I could go on for much longer, but there is a cross-party appetite for such a debate. The proposal is signed by 16 MPs: seven Labour MPs, three Liberal Democrats, two Conservatives, two Plaid Cymru MPs and two independent MPs. I am sure many more MPs would be interested in speaking, contributing or at least listening to the debate. I am grateful to the Committee for considering the application on behalf of Ben Lake.

Q18 Chris Vince: Thank you very much. I thought you did very well, considering your admission at the start that you do not know a lot about AI. I do not either, so I am with you on that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We have a really long wait for the Chamber. I am aware that this is a really important debate, and issues like this move forward at pace, as you have established. I appreciate that you might have to go back to Ben and ask him, but would you consider a Westminster Hall debate on a Tuesday or a Thursday instead, just to get the debate in ahead of the summer recess?

Navendu Mishra: As I said, I am covering for Ben, but my briefing says that we would prefer to maintain a general motion in the Chamber; however, we are happy to hold a Westminster Hall debate and look to raise a substantive debate in the Chamber at some point in the future. A Tuesday would be preferable because many MPs are not here on Mondays and Thursdays.

Chris Vince: Yes—and that answers my question about the motion as well, so thank you.

Q19 **Chair:** The Clerks will be in touch in due course. To be clear, on behalf of Ben, are you saying that you would accept a Westminster Hall debate?

Navendu Mishra: Would it be a 90-minute one?

Chair: It would be, yes.

Navendu Mishra: Yes. I did have some “Terminator” jokes lined up, but I think I will save them for my actual speech.

Chair: Please do. Thank you very much. That concludes the Committee’s public business. The Committee will now retire to consider the applications in private.