

Modernisation Committee

Oral evidence: Backbench Business Committee and Petitions, HC 152

Tuesday 19 May 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 May 2026.

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Members present: Sir Alan Campbell (Chair); Mr Alex Barros-Curtis; Markus Campbell-Savours; Wendy Chamberlain; Kirith Entwistle; Daniel Francis; Rachel Hopkins; John Lamont.

Questions 1-32

Witnesses

Bob Blackman MP, Chair of the Backbench Business Committee 2024-26, and Jamie Stone MP, Chair of the Petitions Committee.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Backbench Business Committee](#)

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Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Bob Blackman MP and Jamie Stone MP.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to today's meeting of the Modernisation Committee. This is the first oral evidence session in the Committee's inquiry into use of time, particularly focusing on Backbench Business Committee and Petitions Committee debates. Thank you to our two witnesses for coming today. They are Bob Blackman, the most recent Chair of the Backbench Business Committee during the 2024-26 Session—thanks, Bob—and Jamie Stone, the most recent Chair but also the current Chair of the Petitions Committee. I know that Bob, in particular, needs to be somewhere later on, so hopefully we can make quick progress.

With that in mind, I am going to ask the first question, which is for you, Bob. In your 15th anniversary report, you referred to the Wright Committee's description of Thursdays as the "backwater" of the parliamentary week. We have all experienced busy Thursdays but, to be fair, we have also experienced Thursdays that are not that busy. Do you think the answer to moving them from being a backwater is relocating Backbench Business to another day, or are there things that we can do to encourage stronger attendance and engagement on a Thursday?

Bob Blackman: Thank you for that introduction, Chair. Thursday is not necessarily a backwater, in my view. The reality is that, certainly over the last Session, Backbench Business debates have gone right up to the moment of interruption almost inevitably, and often time limits have had to be introduced for speakers. To be fair, one of the problems we experience is that, frequently, Government statements and urgent questions push the debates into being shorter. It is very frustrating for colleagues when they have long speeches, or speeches of a reasonable length, and they get constrained to three or five minutes.

When we have experimented with having Backbench Business debates in the Chamber on the first day after a long recess, they have been very well attended. Equally, it is fair to say that we have suggested—we did so in our report—that when Government business is potentially going to collapse earlier in the week, we could offer possibly 90-minute general debates without a divisible motion, so that those colleagues who wished to go could go and we could get a reasonable debate in that timeframe.

We did a lot of work on estimates day debates, when we try to ensure that there are three debates on one day. To be frank, that requires protected time for those debates, which allows a lot of colleagues to contribute to them. We have thought about whether we could put on three debates on Thursdays, because, as I have said frequently in the Chamber, we have a huge queue of subjects that Back Benchers want to debate. If we changed Thursdays so that there was protected time for the Backbench Business Committee, the issue would be that the debates would need to start by, say, 12.30 pm, and if we had protected time, that would probably take us to 5.30 pm or 6 pm—beyond the moment of interruption. That is



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something we could think about, but obviously it would have implications for staffing and for Ministers replying to debates. That is something that we would consider, though.

I would welcome the opportunity for us to have debates on days other than Thursdays, because that would give colleagues opportunities. When I was first elected in 2010, the House sat till 10 pm on a Tuesday, for example. There is no reason why we couldn't have Backbench Business debates on a Tuesday after Government business, just as an experiment.

Q2 Chair: There are a number of points in there that are of real interest and feed into the wider debate about how we use our time best. It is not for me to answer the question, but there is some frustration in there, I think. You will know my frustration at the first day back after a recess, when nobody knows how many statements there will be and how long they will run for. We thought it was quite innovative to put Backbench Business debates on, but there are a couple of examples of where that simply didn't work. I think that is something to be looked at in the round. What you said about scheduling debates if Government business finishes early is also interesting. You can predict it to some extent, but you cannot absolutely predict it; nevertheless, they are really interesting things that we should be looking at.

Jamie, may I ask for your view on the best use of Thursdays—or is it better to put things on at different points of the week?

Jamie Stone: Just to make it clear at the start, the Committee see our Monday slot as sacrosanct—we are strongly of that opinion. I am aware that sometimes the Government do use Thursdays for legislation and so on. Perhaps one could build in a certain amount of flexibility by working through clerking teams with the Government. I would not rule any of it out—let's just put it that way.

Chair: Thank you. That is very useful.

Q3 John Lamont: Good morning. Bob, in your written submission, you reminded us that the Backbench Business Committee gets 35 days per Session, but there is an informal relationship with the Government, in that if the Session runs longer than that, there is a pro rata reallocation of time. Could you explain how that informal arrangement works and whether you would like to see it formalised?

Bob Blackman: I would like to see it formalised, obviously. The last Session, for example, went on for nearly two years, and therefore we would be looking for almost double the number of days. With a new Government being elected with a wide-ranging legislative programme, some Thursdays were taken, which I understand completely, but I do think we should be allocated more time. Often, we have been in the position of getting half days during Government time, in order to put on debates that are topical.

One thing that we want to do is have topical debates. At the moment, we have a very long waiting list for debates, and one of the problems is that



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we get advised of the Chamber being available only a week or so in advance. That means either that we have time-sensitive debates, which are key, or that we advise people on the waiting list that they are going to get their debate. They may have been waiting for six months, and then their availability and the availability of their people is a challenge. If we knew longer in advance that we were going to get certain days and we knew we would get a proportionate amount for an extended Session, that would allow better planning and better opportunities to encourage colleagues to take not only Chamber debates, but Westminster Hall debates, because we do promote Westminster Hall in a big way as the second debating Chamber.

Q4 **John Lamont:** Thank you. Is the waiting list longer than in previous Sessions?

Bob Blackman: Yes. Generally speaking, historically there have been fewer requests towards the end of a Parliament, as Members want to be in their constituencies, but at the beginning of a Parliament, there has more interest from new colleagues who want to get debates on subjects that they want to talk about rather than the ones that the Government wish to debate. Our waiting list is now such that we can schedule debates in the Chamber every Thursday until the November recess. We probably have enough Tuesday morning debates in Westminster Hall to take us up until the summer recess. And we probably have enough Thursday debates in Westminster Hall to last until mid-summer, because we are getting through those quite quickly.

Q5 **John Lamont:** Does the Committee have Members who are serial offenders, in terms of always making applications or always supporting applications?

Bob Blackman: As you will probably know, the hon. Member for Strangford is a season ticket holder—rarely does a meeting of the Backbench Business Committee go by when he is not in front of us with an application. In his defence, his applications are interesting and it is really quite important that they are debated. We have a tendency to ration his opportunities and to ensure that a wide spread of colleagues can have those debates. Our job is to facilitate debate and to encourage a broad range of people to commission and lead debates.

Q6 **John Lamont:** Have you done any analysis about whether Members who support an application go on to participate in that debate?

Bob Blackman: Our process is that when an applicant comes before us for a Chamber debate, we expect 15 colleagues, evenly split between Government and Opposition parties, to have signed that application and to participate. We monitor those who sign applications and then turn up and actually speak. Funnily enough, the number of speakers is normally the same as the number of people who signed the application, but they do not necessarily have the same names.

One issue, particularly with Thursday debates, is that because we are giving colleagues only about 10 days' notice of the debate, they may have



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made other plans. They may have said, "I want to participate in this debate", but then they are unavailable at the time when we are able to grant the debate. We are able to advise the timing of Westminster Hall debates longer in advance, so there is less excuse for colleagues. If we find that people are signing applications and then not turning up, we monitor that and we are sceptical—if I can put it politely—when further applications come forward.

Q7 Chair: Is one of the disadvantages of a longer lead-in and waiting lists that they reduce the opportunity for topicality?

Bob Blackman: Yes. We would like to be able to grant topical debates. One reason why I say that we could potentially have three debates on a Thursday is that two of them could be scheduled in advance and then in our meeting on a Tuesday we would then consider topical debates which could be granted for the Thursday, or alternatively for the following Monday or Tuesday. Such debates would be very topical for colleagues, but we do not have that flexibility at the moment.

Q8 Chair: When I see you on a Thursday and I say to colleagues who are asking for a debate to apply through the Backbench Business Committee, I look at you and you shake your head, as if to say that they will be waiting for quite a long time.

Bob Blackman: The problem is that we get five applications a week on average, which then build up over periods of time. When the Backbench Business Committee began, colleagues went in front of the Committee to make their application, and they were either granted the debate or they had to reapply—that was it. The drawback of that was that we would end up with immense meetings, with 20 colleagues coming before the Committee to ask for a debate. I am not sure if there will be any more applications today, but since the Session started, we have already had nine applications for further debates to add to our waiting list.

Chair: Okay. Let's bring in the Petitions Committee.

Q9 Rachel Hopkins: Jamie Stone, in your submission, your Petitions Committee said that it was broadly content with its allocation of time on Mondays in Westminster Hall, but you expressed some concern about "losing" Mondays—for example, the Monday after a recess or when Monday is not a sitting day. Do you think that the Government should compensate the Committee for that? If so, how?

Jamie Stone: We can predict which Mondays we are going to lose because we know what the timetable looks like. One possibly helpful suggestion would be to say to the Government, "Could we have the equivalent time that we have missed, say on a Wednesday?" That would mean that we could plan in advance. I think that could work. Losing Mondays is definitely a problem—we have a time problem, if you like. That is all part of why I am appearing in front of you today, but looking at a Wednesday, or something like that, might work.

Q10 Rachel Hopkins: That moves me on to my next question, which is to



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both of you. Would there be any merit in holding shorter debates within your allocated time so that you could cover more subjects?

Bob Blackman: The drawback would be that fewer people get to speak or people make shorter speeches. You would have to weigh the options. On Thursdays, almost inevitably, we already have a time limit on speeches. Nominally, the debates are supposed to be three hours, but in my experience we have never, ever had three-hour debates; they are concertinaed to two hours at best. We always advise colleagues who come before us, "You get guaranteed time in Westminster Hall—debates start and finish at guaranteed times." You cannot do the same for the Chamber, because of the flexibility of the agenda.

Jamie Stone: Indeed, that is the beauty of Westminster Hall. You can tell the petitioners what day and when the debate will be: Monday at 4.30 pm. If they have to travel far, that is very good for them, whereas short notice is not so helpful. We could go down to a one-hour debate within our three hours and have a one-hour debate and a two-hour debate. I have to say that the practicalities of doing three one-hour debates would be unworkable from our team's point of view. We would have enormous trouble finding debates that would fit the criteria for that. Does that answer your question?

Rachel Hopkins: It does. Thank you.

Chair: Let us move from the when to the question of where.

Q11 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** This question is for both of you. What do you see as the benefits of Chamber debates over Westminster Hall debates? What does the Chamber bring to the debate?

Bob Blackman: Colleagues, when they are presenting, often say they want a debate in the Chamber because it has greater focus, greater attention and more popularity, and of course it is screened out to the waiting world. Westminster Hall tends to be a second choice for colleagues. We promote it, both because of the timing and because we can configure those debates and know they will take place on the days in question.

If I may say so, one of the anomalies in the system at the moment is that we get the 90-minute debate on a Tuesday morning—we determine that—but all other requests for Westminster Hall debates, other than on Thursdays, go via the Deputy Speaker. We say to people who come in front of the Committee that they have to have eight people—four Opposition Members and four Government Members—to justify having a debate. To get a debate from the Deputy Speaker, all you need is to put in your application, with your name, and then you are granted it or you are not. I would like to see certainly the other 90-minute debates that are granted for Westminster Hall go through our Committee so we can make sure that those are proper applications. Whether the 30-minute and 60-minute debates could go through our Committee is a matter for negotiation, I think.



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Jamie Stone: Given what I have said about the niceness of the 4.30 pm debate on a Monday and how we can give advance warning, we have had in recent times three debates—on indefinite leave to remain, special educational needs, and digital ID—where, as you probably will know, we couldn't get the MPs into Westminster Hall. As Chair, I found it deeply worrying that MPs came as far as Westminster Hall, took a look and went away again. We know why this is—there are many reasons—but we all of us go online and see that 2,000 people have signed a particular petition and say, "I'd better go and say something or do something." That was a real worry, which is why I have said what I have in the past about this issue.

This is a side point, but on other occasions we have not been able to accommodate the number of people who want to come and watch the debate. We only have so many seats in Westminster Hall. That, too, really worries me. Both our Committees are doing something whereby the public can see an issue that concerns them being aired, but if they cannot get in to watch it if they want to, that is a big problem.

Q12 Markus Campbell-Savours: Bob, in your submission of written evidence, you state that the Petitions Committee can apply to the Backbench Business Committee, which could prioritise that application, to see a petition debated in the Chamber. Could you tell us a bit more about that idea?

Bob Blackman: It is a way for the Petitions Committee to get a debate in the Chamber. Personally, I have no objection to the Petitions Committee getting time in the Chamber, as long as it does not come off our allocation. These big petitions with large numbers of MPs who wish to debate them should get time in the Chamber; obviously, that is far more sensible and practical.

We had this rather bizarre arrangement with the different Committees around estimates day debates, for example. I am pleased that we have now resolved that, so that we allocate those days and give up some days to the Liaison Committee as a result. Technically, the Liaison Committee has the opportunity for debates in Westminster Hall, although it very rarely takes that up. There is a way we can facilitate this under the existing arrangements if the Committee is not minded to grant Chamber time for the Petitions Committee, which I think could be done for 90-minute debates or whatever might be appropriate.

Jamie Stone: To add, this mechanism does exist, but we have not used it in the past. We could request something similar from the Government, but we felt that we should try to use the time we have, and that, in a way, it might be difficult for everyone concerned.

I have two small points. Yes, it is a mechanism, but I am just a touch apprehensive. If it came to the Petitions Committee, we agreed it and then it went to Bob through the mechanism, would the petitioners see that as, "Oh, more gates being closed"? I am sure that the Committee would not, but you would be worried about that interpretation.



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Also, if we did go down this road—if we could agree something—it would be helpful if, rather than my having to appear bothered about being in charge of the experience before Bob's Committee, there could be a mechanism for a conversation between officers. Also, maybe we should look at the Standing Orders on this to get it right, so that there is a proper, good mechanism.

Bob Blackman: We should remember that the Petitions Committee stemmed from the Backbench Business Committee. Originally, petitions came to the Backbench Business Committee, and we had to find time to have debates. We said, "No; there should be a separate Committee to do it," which is how this arose in the first place.

Q13 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Sorry—I am a relatively new person here—but at that time, was there a chance of those petitions being debated in the main Chamber?

Bob Blackman: Well, yes, but in practical terms not really. It would be end-of-day business more than anything else.

Q14 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** You have both touched on the next question I had, so I will say what I think I heard and you can let me know if I have interpreted it correctly. You would welcome the Petitions Committee sending petitions in the direction of the Backbench Business Committee. Yes, you could prioritise some Chamber time for them to have those debates. You would rather it did not come out of the allocated time for Back-Bench debates.

Bob Blackman: No, it could not come out of that. To be straightforward, the problem with the current position is that we would have to make the judgment of Solomon: does the Petitions Committee get time in the Chamber or does another colleague who has a valid request for a debate get time in the Chamber? The time is precious, so we will have to make very clear judgments. If we had to take that out of our time, it would be a problem.

Q15 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** So really, from both your perspectives, the preference would be for the Petitions Committee to be allocated its own time.

Bob Blackman: Yes.

Jamie Stone: Yes, that is fair. It is not as if we want to lay hands on the time of Bob's Committee.

Chair: Sorry, but can I bring in Wendy on that?

Q16 **Wendy Chamberlain:** You both bring to life the fact that when the Backbench Business Committee and Petitions Committee were created, it was alongside the Wright reforms, which recommended a House Business Committee—some of the negotiations that you are discussing here might work better in that Committee.

There was something you said, Jamie, about the petitioners. Markus's



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question has captured what Members see as the benefits of a Chamber debate over a Westminster Hall debate, but what is your perception of what petitioners think—from a Petitions Committee perspective? At Backbench Business Committee, Members often bring forward Committee topics that come from APPGs, which have charities or other organisations behind them. What do you think they think the difference is between a Chamber debate and a Westminster Hall debate?

Jamie Stone: First, it is what I said already, which is to accommodate the numbers of MPs. You would have to make a judgment and be as scientific as you can be as to what the likelihood is, which would be very important, and I really cannot countenance MPs being turned away. That is why it would mean something.

Another point worth making is that, on my and the Committee's watch, we have only debated the ones that cross the 100,000 threshold. There are, however, petitions that almost get there, which, in another world, could be very worthy of debate, but we do not do them. We have the freedom to make that choice and debate those petitions, but we have not been able to because of time constraints, which takes us back slightly to the Chamber issue.

I also want to make the simple point that Bob's Committee is about Back Benchers, and our Committee is fundamentally different in that we are about the petitioners, and the petitioners are paramount. I would suggest that the reason why we have such high hit rates in terms of *Hansard* or people going online is that the public are engaging. I have to be honest and say that I have been taken aback by that since I became Chair of the Committee, but they really do—they stop you in the supermarket and say, "I have signed this."

Q17 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Is that the Tesco in Alness again?

Jamie Stone: Yes—my Tesco experience.

Wendy Chamberlain: I think that that is right. I suppose that, given that our last inquiry was about accessibility, and some of that was about transparency of Parliament and making it understandable, a petition is a straightforward way to do things.

Bob Blackman: To trigger a debate in Westminster Hall, you have to get 100,000 signatures. That is 100,000 people—constituents of all of us—saying, "We want this issue debated; we think this is really important." One of the problems is what happens to that petition and that subject after the debate has happened in Westminster Hall, and the same would be true of the Chamber.

As we know, so many colleagues present petitions. They are read and off they go, and the public think, "Well, what happens next?" I think that that is really important in the whole process. As Jamie says, the position with Backbench Business is that Back Benchers are initiating debates. They can come from APPGs, charities and worthy causes all round, or just be

straightforward issues that they want to be debated—but it is Back Benchers leading that rather than petitioners.

- Q18 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** I have one last question for Jamie; he has touched on it, but I think we could be clearer. If the Petitions Committee was provided with Chamber debating time, how would it go about selecting which e-petitions would be suitable for that larger venue?

Jamie Stone: We would have to put some real thought into that. At the moment, we are already having to make a judgment, as I outlined in my letter, about whether there should be a 90-minute or three-hour debate. You are trying to say what the likelihood is, and that is learning process. Depending on what you good people decide or recommend, we would have to go away and look at that and be very careful about it, because you would have to get it right.

We put in our letter that we thought that perhaps there should be six debates per Session, but we also said, "Or possibly not, if we haven't got one that we think would fill that time." There has to be a degree of responsibility about this so that, if you decide to give us time in the Chamber, we do not just bung debates through automatically, and we also have the power to say, "Actually, no, we could deal with this more easily, and we do not think it is worthy of the time." Is that helpful?

- Q19 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** You mentioned this earlier on, and one of the compelling arguments you have made is around people not being able to get into Westminster Hall for these bigger debates. Is there potential for some sort of Member involvement in terms of which ones are escalated to the Chamber?

Jamie Stone: Yes, I think there is. There will be mechanisms whereby, electronically or whatever, you can start to anticipate what the level of interest will be. The website itself will give you a slight indication in terms of the hits per constituency. But yes, I think that one could work on that. In fact, you would have to because otherwise it could get a bit chaotic, and we do not want that.

- Q20 **Chair:** Thank you. Bob, I am conscious that you need to be somewhere else in a moment, but can you just bear with us for a couple of minutes?

Bob Blackman: Sure.

Chair: I want to move on to, and perhaps tease a little bit more out of, something that we have already touched on: managing demand.

- Q21 **Daniel Francis:** You have touched already on topical debates to an extent, so I think you have answered the first part of my question. My second part is this: can you give us your view on the previous system of granting debates closer to the day when they were to be debated? I understand that some debates that were not accepted fell and then had to be resubmitted. Do you have a view on that?

Bob Blackman: Technically, at the end of a Session the queue goes into abeyance and we start from scratch. In practice, obviously at the end of a



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Session we write to the new Committee saying, "There are all these debates in the queue; what do you want to do about them?" We would obviously write to the Leader of the House if general debates were needed before the Backbench Business Committee was set up to consider these topics.

As I say, historically, when the Committee was set up, it was literally a case of you apply, you are granted a debate, or you are not. If you are not granted a debate, you have to reapply—there is no queue. That was a very cumbersome process because it meant large numbers of people coming in wanting their debates.

We always have a time sensitivity issue. For example, if there is an anniversary or a major campaign or week of action or something like that, we always try to accommodate those debates as close to the relevant time as we can. Of course, there are many debates that come up each year, for example International Women's Day or Holocaust Memorial Day, that we will always grant for the days in question. Otherwise, it is a case of prioritising on the basis of the length of time that people have been waiting.

Q22 Chair: Should it be more explicit? You talked about the days; I remember that when Backbench Business was set up the expectation was that debates would happen on certain days, for example national days. It does not always happen. I know you tend to, but you do not have to.

Bob Blackman: That is because we are dependent on someone submitting an application. If colleagues do not submit an application, I suppose we can generate an application from within the Committee for particular national days when we may want particular debates. Obviously, the Government quite rightly often decide to have a debate on International Women's Day. Therefore, it is not a Backbench Business allocation. The bigger disadvantage, of course, is that the Government open the debate, then the Opposition Front Benchers also open, and then they close as well. That reduces the amount of time for Back Benchers to participate.

Q23 Chair: The other downside from you is that, previous to Backbench Business, there used to be five Defence debates a year: one for each of the services, a veterans debate and a procurement debate. There used to be an annual fishing debate before the Minister went off to Brussels. We do not need to do that now—not in that format, anyway. The only way we could reconstitute some of those days would be to take them out of your allocation.

Bob Blackman: The key point was that when the Committee was set up, all of those various days were put into that allocation. But, as I say, we are dependent on applications.

Chair: Absolutely.

Bob Blackman: If people do not submit applications, we have to conjure them up. We maintain a calendar of the days that we are likely to get



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applications for, and we encourage colleagues to submit for those particular days. In terms of the Defence days, you are absolutely right. We have had relatively few Defence applications but, frankly, that is up to colleagues to say that they want a debate on X, Y or Z.

The other thing that we have to balance in the Chamber and Westminster Hall is that we do not have, say, four Health debates happening on a Thursday, because Ministers reply to these debates. We try and balance things up so that different Departments are answering and we get a broad range of subjects.

- Q24 **Chair:** I am sorry to keep this going, but we also need a balance between the public's expectation of what we might want to talk about—they might expect us to be talking about defence a bit more than we get the opportunity to do, unless there is legislation or we put on a general debate—as opposed to some of the specific issues that Back-Bench colleagues feel they ought to talk about. There is a balance to be struck, but I do not know whether the balance is right.

Bob Blackman: As I say, at times before the last general election, when we were not overwhelmed with applications, members of the Committee would discuss what other issues we might want to raise, and then we would have debates so that we use the time effectively on subjects that the Committee wanted to debate. One of the great things about being on the Committee is that you get a range of subjects you have never heard of coming in front of you. All are very interesting and fascinating, but they also educate people as to whether there should be a debate on this or that. Possibly, the longer the Session runs, the more we will get into that position.

- Q25 **Mr Barros-Curtis:** Jamie, I want to go back to something you were touching on in terms of its popularity and how it has blown you away, which is petitioners using the e-petition system. You touch on this in your submission, where you talk about demand and how the system is obviously very popular with the public. I think you said that your average rejection percentage sits at around 70%. What are some of the reasons for that? Is it because the criteria are not well understood, or are there other reasons?

Jamie Stone: First, I would pay tribute to the clerking team, because they spend an enormous amount of time talking to the petitioners. We reject for a number of reasons: it might be a devolved matter, and we say that it is not pertinent to Westminster; it might be that the language is totally inappropriate, so we reject it; and it might sometimes be that our advice to improve it is ignored or that people do not respond to it, so the petition would fall by the wayside. We are pretty careful about filtering.

I am repeating myself, but the team really do work hard—and not just by helping while the petition is getting ready. They then work with the petitioner and say, "Right, Jamie Stone is going to lead this debate." They then set up a series of online meetings—or face-to-face meetings, if necessary—between me and the petitioner. I led a debate on whether to stun animals before they were slaughtered, so you had to talk to the

Jewish community, halal and religious organisations and so on. The team are very thorough about that. However, before we reach that stage, it is made sure that the petition is fit for purpose.

- Q26 Mr Barros-Curtis:** Part of that is an iterative process for petitioners, some of whom do not engage with the expertise the secretariat are providing, or who are very passionate about a topic but whose petition needs refining to allow it to be continued? It is not a wider misunderstanding; it is generally in the kind of brackets that you have talked about and, broadly speaking, in those sorts of buckets?

Jamie Stone: It is fair to say that petitioners and the public are generally pleased by this interaction. One thing that would be nice, if we can do it in due course, is to go back to the petitioner and say, "You heard what the Government said. What is your reaction to that?"—the follow-up bit as well. There is nothing worse in terms of public confidence than a petition going in and people saying, "Well, that is the last we will hear of that. That has gone straight into the dustbin." That not just erodes but deeply damages public confidence in what we do.

- Q27 Mr Barros-Curtis:** Linked exactly to that point about the brilliant work the secretariat, yourself and others are doing in terms of the relationship with the petitioners, we understand that a lot of manual processing goes into this. Is there anything, whether technology or other means, that you and your team could benefit from that would allow for what you have talked about: more of the follow-up or work on pastoral and other interactions with petitioners?

Jamie Stone: That is a good question. The new website has been up for a number of days now. In going online, people can see that there has already been a petition like theirs or—similar to what was said earlier—that the Government are about to have a very similar debate or have had a very similar debate. I think that helps inform the public about that, which is helpful. I make it my policy, personally, if I am leading the debate, to meet the petitioner afterwards. In the case of the gentleman who got the first "Let's have another general election" debate, I was not terribly pleased with the Government's response, so I bought him a couple of pints in Strangers—perhaps I shouldn't be saying that in this public forum! MPs in all parties are human beings and are all, I think, trying to do their best; I think that is an example to showcase that a bit.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I think you are setting expectations of what petitioners can expect from you in future petition debates—I might put an application in myself.

- Q28 Chair:** I will draw this to a conclusion. I think I can anticipate the answer to the final question, which is whether you need to be allocated more time. I think we probably know what you will say.

Bob Blackman: Of course. One thing that I do want to say is that I think the Chair of the Procedure Committee has written to this Committee in relation to what we do about Select Committee statements, and I think those suggestions are really quite valid. You mentioned, of course, defence



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debates, and the Defence Committee has produced more reports and had more Select Committee statements than anyone else, for any other Department, so defence has been debated. But Select Committee statements could be allocated to times when, for example, there are no ten-minute rule motions; that would allow a 20-minute slot in the day. Equally, the end of the day, just before we go into petitions and the Adjournment debate, is potentially another time when Select Committee statements could be made.

We could then encourage Select Committees to actually do a statement to Parliament when they release a report. I think that would be quite a good thing to do. At the moment, we have to juggle applications and try to get to a position where, on a Thursday, we can allow one Select Committee statement so that we do not squeeze the time. We have allocated time in Westminster Hall for Select Committee statements, but that squeezes the time available for the two debates on a Thursday.

In terms of spreading this out, I am pretty pleased that we facilitated the Standing Order change to make it 10 days after publication, rather than five. But now we should look at saying, "How can we get Select Committees to actually promote their reports, in both the Chamber and Westminster Hall, where appropriate?"

Q29 **Chair:** Thanks. Jamie, do you want to add anything?

Jamie Stone: My plea is very similar to that of my good friend sitting beside me. I think we are very united as a Committee, and I think we have all been quite drawn into the idea of the petition and what it means out there. That is cross-party, which is an interesting dynamic.

Secondly, I have—and Irene Campbell has—met visiting delegations from other Parliaments, most recently Kenya, and they have a deep interest in how we do this, because they are looking at how they can support and enhance democracy. I rest my case with that.

Chair: Excellent; thank you. Do any colleagues want to come in?

Q30 **Kirith Entwistle:** Apologies for joining late. Obviously, I had some experience with the Backbench Business Committee prior to being a PPS, and I am very grateful to have had that. Do you feel that the demand for applications outweighs the time available to allocate for Backbench Business Committee debates? Is there more demand than there is available time?

Bob Blackman: As I said at the beginning—I obviously accept that you were a bit late—we have a queue of applications that, for the Chamber, takes us through to the November recess, even if we got every single Thursday between now and then. That is the primary issue: people want a debate in the Chamber. Westminster Hall on a Tuesday morning and a Thursday afternoon is less oversubscribed, but we still have a waiting list for both those slots. Indeed, since we prorogued, we have already had another nine applications submitted, and I suspect that, by Friday, we will



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get another five or six coming in. We have a huge amount of work to get through those and prioritise where they should be.

It is very disappointing for colleagues when they are told, "Well, you're going to be on the waiting list and may not get a debate this side of Christmas." I anticipate that we are going to be in that position.

- Q31 **Kirith Entwistle:** I noticed in some of the information we have here that there has been an increased allocation of Mondays and Tuesdays, but because they tend to be before or after long recesses, Government statements or urgent questions take precedence. I noticed that we had a submission from Andy MacNae about the baby loss debate. I am trying to understand whether you feel there are ways we could perhaps protect some of that time. If a debate has been granted on the Floor of the House, that is quite substantial.

Bob Blackman: It would take an act of bravery from the Leader of the House to prioritise a Backbench Business debate ahead of Government statements—for example, by having the debate first and Government statements afterwards. There could be a way of doing it, but that is obviously not how Standing Orders allow the position to be, so they would need to be changed to facilitate that.

I do take the point, with colleagues having to make speeches at 11 o'clock at night on such a subject. We regarded it as a really important debate, which is why we wanted time for it. The Leader of the House kindly allocated protected time for the debate, but we then had statement after statement. There is a balance for the Speaker and Deputy Speakers in allowing colleagues to get in on statements, because those statements are important, but that obviously means the debate starts later.

Perhaps restructuring the day after a recess to say, "We're going to have a 90-minute Backbench Business debate followed by statements," might be a better way of doing it. Maybe if there were a House business Committee.

Chair: That is a big call.

- Q32 **Wendy Chamberlain:** On protected time, that is all very well and good on a Monday or Tuesday, but protected time on a Thursday is not the answer because, frankly, even if we want to be there, people like me will prioritise getting home on a Thursday night. That is because we do not want to lose both Thursday and Friday in terms of constituency time. We have to be very careful about how we utilise protected time.

Chair: I think it is about saving the parliamentary week as a whole, and this is part and parcel. It is a very important part of that.

Can I thank both of you? This has been genuinely useful. It has given us a great deal of food for thought. The next session, on 9 June, will have two former Chairs of the Backbench Business Committee, Natascha Engel and Ian Mearns. No doubt they can give us an historical perspective. Genuinely, though, thank you very much—this has been extraordinarily useful.