

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 7 September 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; David Johnston; Nigel Mills; Kate Osborne.

Questions 1-21

### Members making representations

[I:](#) Caroline Lucas

[II:](#) Andrew Bowie

[III:](#) Andy Slaughter and David Jones

[IV:](#) Cherilyn Mackrory

[V:](#) Miriam Cates



**Caroline Lucas** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This is the first manifestation of the Committee as a physical presence, as opposed to our talking to one another through computer screens. You are all welcome.

We have a number of applications for debates, the first of which is from Caroline Lucas. Caroline, you are very welcome. The title of the debate you are applying for is "Keeping 1.5° alive at COP26." Over to you, Caroline, to explain why you want this debate to be heard.

**Caroline Lucas:** Thank you very much, Chair, for this opportunity. May I pass on apologies from Clive Lewis, who was going to co-present with me, but is now participating in the debate on the Elections Bill, so there is a clash of timing?

We would like to apply for a three-hour general debate in the main Chamber on preparations for COP26. On timing, it would be helpful if the debate could take place before COP, which essentially means before the end of October: COP meets between 1 November and 12 November. We are hoping for three hours in the main Chamber before the end of October. Hopefully, it is fairly self-evident why this is such a critical debate. It has been said that, with the UK as host of the meeting, it is likely to be the largest gathering of Heads of State and Governments ever hosted by the UK. As you will know, the meeting is on one of the most critical issues that we could possibly face. Right now, a high-profile debate in Parliament—a high-profile moment—to scrutinise the Government's preparations and the results of their engagement with other Heads of State on the key priorities and other outstanding issues would be substantively important in itself and would send a message to the wider world that we take this extremely seriously.

About 45 MPs support the application. I apologise, as the names have come in in bits and bobs, so I am not sure that you have the most recent total, but at the moment 45 MPs from all political parties support the application. I imagine that we will secure many more names—they are still coming in—but there is difficulty in doing so just as a new parliamentary term is starting; some people have not seen the email.

The last substantive debate in the main Chamber on climate was in November. It considered the outcome of the Climate Assembly UK report. By the time our debate takes place, if the application is granted, it will be almost a year since that debate. The critical thing that has changed in recent months is the most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which came out last month. Basically, it said that keeping below 1.5° will be even more difficult than we thought, because we are much closer to that threshold than we previously thought, so a key theme of COP26, which is basically about keeping alive the aspiration to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

stay below 1.5°, is even more politically important than it was before. I will leave it there, but I am happy to answer any questions.

**Q2 Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. You might be aware, Caroline, that we have received an application for a debate on COP26 that has been provisionally booked, but it is about something specific: the role and responsibilities of the devolved Administrations in COP26. That has been pencilled in for Thursday 16 September. Your application is for a more general debate about the whole issue—the other application refers specifically to the devolved Administrations.

**Caroline Lucas:** It is really important that there is a debate about the role of the devolved Administrations, but I imagine that the people who have made that bid would be more than a little miffed if it were rolled into a general debate.

**Chair:** I understand that, Caroline, but I thought that you should be aware of that application. Any questions, colleagues?

**Q3 Bob Blackman:** One or two. Regarding the speakers on the list, it is fairly light on the Government side. As you say, you have 45 names, and I am sure that more Government Members will sign up. However, it would be helpful if you passed a full list of speakers to the Clerks so that we are up to date on who we expect to see.

As you are probably aware, we have no idea when Chamber time will be available after the conference recess, and our series of slots on Thursdays before that recess is already fairly full. Would you give us a flavour of the latest date which you consider to be reasonable for the debate, so at least we have a backstop?

**Caroline Lucas:** As long as it happens before 1 November. Mid-October, shortly after we get back from conference recess, would be ideal. One could always make a good case for why it is on the eve of COP—Parliament is sending its final message to the Government, saying, “These are the priorities that we have”—so anytime up to 1 November would be fine.

**Q4 Chair:** The problem is that we have these three weeks until conference recess, and then effectively, after that recess, there are two weeks, so we are limited. We will try our very best.

**Caroline Lucas:** Could I make a response about Government Members? I absolutely take your point, Mr Blackman, and I will make sure you have an update on all the names. I wonder if I could cheekily make a case for the quality of my supporters from the Conservative side. We have Sir Peter Bottomley, Sir Roger Gale, the leader of the—what do you call it?

**Chair:** The Father of the House.

**Caroline Lucas:** Thank you—as well as the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. All of those carry significant weight. I have four Conservatives so far, but I will send you the full list. We have the DUP as well, and many others.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** I don't mean to chide my friend and colleague, but the thing is this: if you only had 15 names on there, four would be okay.

**Bob Blackman:** But we don't have 15, and we don't have four Conservative names on this application.

**Chair:** There we go. Caroline, that is marvellous. Thank you very much indeed. We will be having our consideration at the end, and will let you know as soon as we possibly can. It is of course all contingent on us being given the time by the Government in the first place.

**Caroline Lucas:** Absolutely. One parting shot would be to say that I am sure that civil society would be extremely organised around such a debate. I have no doubt that the pressure on MPs from all sides of the House to attend would be quite high, and there would be an expectation around that, so I think we would have no trouble filling the speaking time that we might get. Thank you so much for your time.

**Chair:** Thank you.

**Andrew Bowie** made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Your application is on the national memorial to the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. Have we had this before?

**Andrew Bowie:** Yes. I have inherited this debate from two Members of Parliament: Luke Graham, who is sadly no longer with us—well, in his capacity as Member of Parliament; he is very much alive and kicking—and John Howell, who had the debate approved when he applied last year, but as a result of the snap general election and then the coronavirus lockdown, he was unable to bring it to the Floor of the House.

The reason I am applying for the debate is because it is on an important issue. The Photographic Reconnaissance Unit of the RAF suffered more casualties than any other unit throughout the period of the war between 1939 and 1945, primarily as a result of the fact that the Spitfires that these men flew were completely unarmed. The weapons and armaments had been removed, to be replaced by photographic equipment. These men were sent beyond enemy lines to take photographs and to scout strategic places of importance for their allies. As yet, sadly, there is no national memorial to these men in this country.

I have support for this application from 19 Members of Parliament from nearly all parties in the House, who would like to contribute. These men were obviously drawn from all corners of the United Kingdom. They and I think it is about time that their unit and their contribution was debated on the Floor of the House, and that the charity that is championing the idea of a national memorial has its arguments heard on the Floor of the House. That is why I am putting that forward for consideration.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I remember that we had a previous application. If it never got heard, that adds weight to the application. Questions, please? Bob?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** On your application, Andrew, you have ticked three hours and six hours. Obviously, you are very optimistic about the amount of time.

**Andrew Bowie:** I am always optimistic—I am a Scottish Conservative, Bob.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** However, as I recall, when John Howell had the application, we allocated it to Westminster Hall, but Westminster Hall closed down, so the debate did not take place. Would you consider that? Chamber time is in extremely short supply. Westminster Hall time is more accessible, but it would be for a 90-minute debate.

**Andrew Bowie:** Obviously, the Chamber is preferable, due to the interest in the topic from outwith Parliament. However, it is important that this is heard in Parliament, and I would not be too precious about having the debate in Westminster Hall—nor would I be at all precious about the time limit being drawn down from six or three hours to 90 minutes.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Are there any significant dates?

**Andrew Bowie:** There are no significant dates. The charity is keen, as you can imagine, for this to be heard as soon as possible so that it can proceed with its campaign. However—I know that this is some time away—5 March marks the day on which Sandy Gunn, who was a member of the photographic reconnaissance unit, was shot down over Norway. He was sent to Stalag Luft III, took part in the great escape, and was shot by the Gestapo before he reached the Baltic coast, so 5 March would be the date, if we were to pick one, to aim for, but the charity is quite keen that we aim for a date sooner rather than later.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Is it important to get it in before the conference recess?

**Andrew Bowie:** No, it is not necessary before the conference recess.

Q10 **Kate Osborne:** I was going to make the point that was made to Caroline Lucas about cross-party signatures. You said that you have secured support from all parties, but there is only one Labour signature. Do you anticipate being able to secure more signatures?

**Andrew Bowie:** Yes, absolutely. I am very confident that I can secure more signatures from across the House, not least from the Labour party and the SNP, whose Members have come to me and said that they would have added their names to the application if they had known that time was so short when we were applying for the debate. Yes, I am confident that we will get more names.

Q11 **Chair:** The thing is, Andrew, we regard these applications as live. In other words, the application is submitted and registered with us, and you can add more names at any juncture. Thank you very much indeed.

**Andy Slaughter and Mr David Jones** made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Next we have Andy Slaughter, whose application is on the UK Government's recognition of the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Andy Slaughter:** Thank you very much, Chair. I am delighted to be joined by David Jones. I will try to keep my comments short so that, with the Committee's permission, he can add a few words. There are four joint sponsors of the application, as Philippa Whitford and Layla Moran are both keen to support the application, but both are in other Committees or participating in other business this afternoon and send their apologies for not being here.

To refresh the memories of Committee members, on 13 October 2014, Grahame Morris led a full-day debate in the Chamber of the House of Commons on a motion on the subject. It was a votable motion, and the House voted by 274 votes to 12 at the end of the debate in favour of the proposal to recognise the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. This is not an unfamiliar topic of debate. There have been lots of different debates, and recognition has been mentioned from time to time. However, what is unique—and why we are asking for this debate in the format that we have suggested—is that our motion would ask the Government to do something. The Government's position has not changed over those seven years. The form of words changes a little, but what Tobias Ellwood said in that debate as the then Foreign Office Minister was that there would be recognition when it was appropriate as part of the peace process. The debate about whether recognition should be a precondition or part of the negotiations has never really moved forward during that time.

Effectively, there are two issues. The main issue is recognition. In the context of the peace process, which has stalled almost entirely, that takes on an additional significance. We would also go back and see what the effect of the first debate was—what effect, if any, it has had on the Government and why they should look at this again.

Thirty MPs are named on the list so far. Some of the members of this Committee will have contributed to previous debates on the subject, and they will know that there is never a shortage of people who wish to speak. That is a blessing and a curse for those of us who take an interest in the area. The debate in 2014 was slightly curtailed—it was about four and a half hours long because of a statement—but there were 20 Labour speakers, 15 Conservative speakers, and speakers from at least five other parties. Very senior parliamentarians spoke, particularly those with Foreign Office history, including Jack Straw, Gerald Kaufman, Lisa Nandy, Malcolm Rifkind, Alan Duncan, Hugh Robertson and Nicholas Soames.

There were many other Members present, who either could not speak because of time constraints—the time limit had gone right down to three minutes by the end of the debate—or could speak only in an intervention. I don't think I will have to persuade the Committee in this instance that we can fill any time that is made available on the subject.

There is a particular UK role here, given the history. Perhaps one of the few things that is not controversial to say is that the UK rather over-promised to both sides, which is part of the reason that we find ourselves in the dilemma that we do at the moment. There are quite complicated issues of international law here.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

To do justice to the subject and to the large number of Members who wish to be heard, one does need quite a lot of time. That is why we have asked for a debate in the main Chamber—we think that is appropriate, given that it was in the main Chamber before—and to have a full day's debate, of six hours. We have put in three hours as well. Clearly, any less than that would not do it justice.

In terms of timing, it would ideally be as near to the date as possible, so Thursday 21 or Thursday 28 October, after the conference recess. If you asked me what would happen if it slipped back beyond that, I don't think we would die in a ditch over that, as, effectively, the premise would be, "We have just passed the seventh anniversary."

I have gone on for longer than I intended.

**Mr David Jones:** Andy has outlined the situation admirably well. It is seven years since that debate, which resulted in a convincing vote in favour of Palestine. I and Andy, and I am sure many others in this room, have been involved in subsequent debates on the issue of Palestine and Israel and middle eastern affairs, where the Government's position has consistently been that the state of Palestine will be recognised when the time is right.

We are at quite an important historical moment. We have just passed the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration. This year is the centenary of the establishment of the emirate of Jordan, and Jordan is of course intimately involved in the Palestinian issue, not least because even now several thousand Palestinian refugees are living in the state of Jordan. We have also recently had the Trump proposals—the peace plan—which were the cause of considerable concern in Parliament and more widely. Yet, the Government's position, throughout all this, never seems to change.

I think it is appropriate for Parliament to press the Government to set out its position clearly, as to when it considers the recognition of Palestine would be appropriate, and in what circumstances. I think that this debate, seven years after the last one, would come at a very sensible juncture.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. For information, Grahame Morris is self-confining with covid at the moment.

**Andy Slaughter:** Oh, I am sorry to hear that, but I am sure he will be fit to take part in the debate, which he has put his name down to.

**Chair:** I am sure he would.

**Andy Slaughter:** If you are in touch with him, Chair, please pass on our best.

Q13 **Chair:** Questions, please, colleagues? The one thing I am wondering about is a votable motion, Andrew. In terms of booting up the importance of the subject matter, we know it is highly important and would be a very sought-after speaking engagement for people, but a votable motion would, I think, ramp it up our priority list in terms of getting Chamber



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

time. Chamber time is at a premium and we have, as a matter of precedent, looked to try and give debates with a votable motion time, over general debates.

**Andy Slaughter:** I hear what you say, Chair. We thought about this carefully, and we decided in the end not to go for that, partly because what we are looking of—rather than people getting into silos and trenches, and Whipping, and “Who can be here on a Thursday?” and so on and so forth—is something slightly more reflective in terms of what expectations people have, and in terms of trying to clear the divide between a Government position that is in aspic, and has ossified over that time, and different views, perhaps, as to exactly when recognition could take place, what conditions there should be and whether it is a precondition in that way. I hear what you say, Chair, but, respectfully, I am still of the view that it would be a better debate, curiously, without a vote.

**Chair:** All right—that’s fine. That is a judgment to be made.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** My only comment is that, as you will appreciate, we have a huge backlog of applications for debates. On your application here—this may not be the case now—there is a fairly sparse number of speakers on the Government side. Obviously, if you have speakers on the Government side, that helps to balance the party political debate, notwithstanding, obviously, the fact that, as you say quite rightly, back in 2014 we had a huge number of people both wanting to speak and being able to speak. I am sure that more people would come in, but in terms of balancing up the applications that we have to consider, obviously the more cross-party the number of speakers, the better.

**Andy Slaughter:** That is a very clear point. Two points on that. First, as I said, if the debate is given, I have no doubt that a large number of Conservative MPs will come forward, as they did seven years ago. There were at least 15 speakers and more intervening from the Conservative side, and about 20 from the Labour side. It was a very even debate in those terms. The other thing is that, in terms of the list, I decided not to disturb David’s recess by getting him to get some more Government speakers. Without giving away any secrets, there are more Labour than Conservative MPs on my WhatsApp groups.

**Bob Blackman:** What a surprise.

**Chair:** As with the previous application, the application is in and it is live. If you want to add names that is okay. Thank you very much indeed.

**Cherilyn Mackrory** made representations.

Q15 **Chair:** Cherilyn, you are very much welcome. Your application is on Baby Loss Awareness Week, which sadly falls during the conference recess.

**Cherilyn Mackrory:** Indeed, Chair. Thank you, Committee, for your time this afternoon. It falls on me for the third time to ask for a debate on behalf of the APPG on baby loss. The fifth anniversary of the debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week falls this October. It has become rather a



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

tradition in the House where Members can reflect and speak of personal tragedy, or tragedies that they have come across throughout their work as a Member of Parliament, and to talk about issues relating to that within their constituencies. We have 30 Members on the application, and I think a fairly good spread of parties and geographical spread as well. I am sure that more people will come forward. We recently had the Health and Social Care Committee report on maternity safety, as well as various investigations at hospitals around the country where maternity services and maternity safety has come into question. I think that this would be a very good time to debate that and to keep it front and centre in Ministers' minds, given the constraints that we are now seeing on the health service and the actions that the Prime Minister is having to take, including what has been announced today.

I had the unusual experience of becoming an APPG chair during the covid response, so I attended only one in-person meeting as a non-chair, and it was the only APPG that I have attended that had a packed room. We regularly have online at least 50 to 80 participants, and the reaction in inboxes when I have spoken on this subject is absolutely phenomenal and something that you cannot quite describe. It is something that breaks down a taboo, and every year more and more families who have experienced this horrible tragedy in their lives feel that they can talk about it, and it helps them to come to terms with their grief.

There are lots of reasons why I hope that we can put this on again this year. As you say, Baby Loss Awareness Week falls in the conference recess, and I understand that Chamber time is at a premium, but last year we were in Westminster Hall, and it was commented on by the Minister and others that it was a shame. None of us can remember what was in the Chamber at the same time, but we can all remember the Baby Loss Awareness Week debates and how they make everybody feel. I urge you, if you possibly can, to please try to fit us into the Chamber this year. It gives this subject the profile it deserves and helps an untold number of families.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, Cherilyn; that's great.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** One question: obviously we can't hold the debate during the week concerned, but there is an outside possibility of 23 September, which is obviously the last day before the conference recess. Would that be a potential time you would like to take up if we are able to offer it?

**Cherilyn Mackrory:** I will say yes, if that means it can be in the Chamber. Obviously, our preference was for the week commencing the 18th, but if that—

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** That is potentially the alternative.

**Cherilyn Mackrory:** That would be the alternative—only because it is nearer to the actual dates. I am in your hands, Committee, and whatever date you can give us, if it is Chamber time, we will make it work. Thank you very much.



**Chair:** Thank you. Patricia, did you want to ask a question?

**Patricia Gibson:** No—I have signed the application.

**Chair:** In that case, Cherilyn, your ordeal is over. Thank you very much indeed.

**Miriam Cates** made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Our final in-person application this afternoon is Miriam Cates. Welcome, Miriam, and good afternoon; it is nice to see you. The application is on the subject of the vaccination of children against covid-19. Over to you, please.

**Miriam Cates:** Yes, and thank you very much for this opportunity to present it. Events have moved on slightly since I put in the application on Friday. As you are aware, the JCVI made a recommendation that mass vaccination of children was only of marginal health benefit to them when considering the known risks of the vaccination, but they were concerned about the unknown risks of the vaccination. The Government have referred it to the chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, to look at the wider benefits of vaccinating children against covid.

My concern is that opening up to the wider benefits beyond the pure health benefits to children, which is how the JCVI has decided all the other cohorts in the prioritisation of vaccination, makes it a political question rather than just a scientific one. If we mention things such as educational disruption, closing schools is a political policy rather than a scientific consequence of covid rates or covid vaccination rates. I appreciate there are a wealth of different views in favour of or against educational disruption and those kinds of policies, but if we look around the world at the different numbers of school days that children have missed in different countries, it is not related to covid rates—it is very much a political decision,

My feeling is that, if we are going to go down the route of vaccinating healthy children when it is not of clear-cut benefit to them, it becomes vitally important that we debate this in Parliament and that MPs get to share views on both sides. We are actually talking about the wider benefits to society and ethical questions of whether we should be vaccinating children when it is not necessarily in their best interests, but it could be in the best interests of wider society. I have a particular view on that, but there is a wide range of views that I feel need to be heard, because this is a big question—particularly when children are vulnerable, just as elderly people have been vulnerable throughout this pandemic, but they do not have a voice, they do not have a vote, they cannot be elected and they cannot sit on Committees. Therefore, it is even more important as MPs that we are able to speak up for them.

Because the Government would not have to put through any legislation to override the JCVI recommendation, or indeed to override the CMO's recommendation, although we do not know what that will be, there will be no debate on this in Parliament unless an application such as this is

successful. Time is of the essence in this, rather than necessarily the amount of time given to debate, because we are expecting a decision on this very soon and potentially a roll-out of vaccinations, should that decision go a particular way.

**Chair:** Okay. Questions, please?

Q19 **David Johnston:** Did you consider a UQ instead of a debate?

**Miriam Cates:** I applied for a UQ for yesterday, but it was superseded by a statement, and I was therefore first on the list to ask a question, but I think there are some deep moral and ethical questions around this that a statement is not suitable for. Obviously, a statement is useful, but a one-line question and potentially a two-line answer are not really the depths of the politics and ethics around this that need to be considered. Vaccination risks are very low, of course, but the Pfizer vaccine is an experimental one and we do not know the long-term consequences in children, so there are a lot of issues that need to be debated if we are going to go down this route.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** The earliest date we could offer a debate would be Tuesday 21 September. As you quite rightly say, things have moved on quite rapidly. Do you have any information about whether 21 September would almost be too late for having a debate?

**Miriam Cates:** No, I don't think it would be too late, because even if the CMO made his recommendation this week, the Government then have to consider that and make a final decision, then there have to be the practical aspects of asking for parental consent in schools and gearing up for the physical delivery. I don't think that would be too late. Even if a vaccination programme had potentially started, I still think this is a matter of political and public interest that needs to be debated in Parliament.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** So if we offered you 21 September, you would take it?

**Miriam Cates:** I would absolutely accept that, yes.

**Chair:** Miriam, that is great—much appreciated. Thank you very much indeed. We will now go into private session.