HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 21 September 2021

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

Questions 1-5

Member making representations

I: Lloyd Russell-Moyle

Lloyd Russell-Moyle made representations.

Q1   **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This is our last meeting before the conference recess. It is good to have along a friend and colleague in Lloyd Russell-Moyle, who is making an application for a debate on Kurdish political representation and equality in Turkey. Lloyd, over to you: could you please explain to the Committee why you would like a debate on this issue?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Thank you very much. Over the last nine months, the all-party parliamentary group for Kurdistan in Turkey and Syria— It is probably best not to go into too much detail about why we have different APPGs for the Kurdish regions in different areas, but part of it because the political situation is very different in each area, and there was a desire not to contaminate some of the Iraqi Kurdish issues, which are very separate from the Turkish ones. The Syria and Turkey APPG—I am a member of all of them—conducted a report on the political representation of Kurdish peoples in Turkey in particular. It was co-chaired by me and Crispin Blunt, and the application is supported by ourselves, Chris Stephens from the SNP, Nav Mishra, Dawn Butler, Apsana Begum, Alexander Stafford, Feryal Clark, John McDonnell and Adam Holloway, so we have a number of Conservative, SNP and Labour Members, all of whom attended the sessions at which we heard the evidence—in different configurations, of course.

As you will know, the political situation in Turkey for Kurdish peoples has been particularly difficult since the end of the peace talks. The reason why the talks ended is complex and complicated. Part of it is about the attempted coup that happened in Turkey, part of it is about Erdoğan's consolidation of power, and part of it was the need for the ruling AKP to form a coalition with the far-right nationalist party.

To some extent, we don't really want to touch on that in the debate; we want to touch on the lived issues that are now affecting Kurdish peoples because the ceasefire has ended, which means there has been a political clampdown. The majority of Kurdish MPs, whether they be members of the HDP or the CHP, which is the founding centre-left, centrist, Kemalist party, have found themselves being stripped of their parliamentary immunity and arrested. We have 100 MPs under that process in Turkey at the moment. We also see that with Kurdish-linked journalists and youth organisations. Even some judges and members of the judiciary have been repressed and arrested. We have seen over half of the mayors in Kurdish regions removed and replaced with Government appointees.

We think this is a serious issue, and the end of the report touches upon the fact that the Turkish Government justifies it by relating it to the PKK. The PKK is clearly a terrorist organisation, but the Turkish Government will say that if someone shares any of the PKK's views, they are a terrorist. It is a bit like saying that if someone shares any views about Ireland being unified, they are IRA. That is just not the nuance of the reality. Clearly there is a legitimate argument for some Kurds to make that they want autonomy. In fact, we heard in evidence that a lot of the Kurds don't now

want independence; they just want some sort of what we would call devolution within their country to be able to have some sort of peace settlement.

We think it is useful to have this debate because the Government are very close to Turkey, and they need to put pressure on it. They need to be clear that Turkey is a NATO ally and is fulfilling the obligations that we would expect, particularly because other MPs have been arrested and indicted. There is a need for MPs to look out for each other across the world in terms of protecting democracy and upholding the rule of law.

When we sent the report to the Minister, the response was perfunctory—a page and a bit—and it focused just on the last chapter, which was about the PKK element. It is an interesting element, but the substantive point here is about how parliamentarians, judges, civil society and journalists are being treated. We think that warrants a wider debate about Turkey's role and its repression of the Kurdish people. That is why we are applying for it.

I am happy for the debate to be whenever—we don't have a particular time—but we would like it to be in the next few months if possible. Again, we don't mind whether it is in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. We would like it to be a 90-minute debate, which we think is probably sufficient. I would not say no to a three-hour debate, but I think 90 minutes will probably be sufficient to air the issues. We had a 60-minute debate in Westminster Hall two years ago about a small element of the issue, but now we have the report out. It would also be a general debate—non-divisible.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Lloyd. I think that sets it out and answers just about all the questions. Bob, any points?

Q2   **Bob Blackman:** Which would be the answering Department? I am assuming FCDO.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: FCDO, yes.

Q3   **Bob Blackman:** And you'd be happy to take a Tuesday morning slot if it becomes available?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I would be, yes.

Bob Blackman: I think the first Tuesday is the 28th, is it?

Chair: It's the 26th, but that is not FCDO.

Bob Blackman: So it's the next one.

Q4   **Chair:** It will be 2 November. That is a possibility if we get updated in terms of who the answering Departments are. FCDO is certainly not answering on the second Tuesday back after the recess, but we think the third Tuesday back, which would be 2 November, will probably be them.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That sounds like it could work, but I will wait for your further advice.

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Chair: We literally have to wait until we get notification of the right answering Department.

Q5   **Bob Blackman:** Is there any time sensitivity on the debate at the moment?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The situation does change. For example, even while writing the report Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul convention for women's rights, so we added a chapter about women's representation. I am sure that the situation will have changed by the time the debate comes around, so we would like not to wait too long, but I don't think there is any urgency due to a particular attack or demonstration that is happening right at this moment.

Chair: In that case, thank you very much indeed for your application. If we can help out in that way, we will certainly try.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Thank you.

Chair: That now brings us to the end of our open session, so we will now go into private session for quick deliberations.

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