

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 19 October 2021

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-18

Witnesses

I: Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

II: Jim Shannon.

III: Jim Shannon and Paul Howell.

IV: Fiona Bruce and Jim Shannon.

V: Nick Fletcher and Fiona Bruce.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Bell Ribeiro-Addy made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have five applications this afternoon. The first is from Bell Ribeiro-Addy on the subject of Black History Month 2021. Bell, over to you. Why would you like a debate on Black History Month?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Black History Month has been celebrated for a number of years in the UK during the month of October. It is important that we celebrate the contributions and achievements of black people throughout our history. The recent Black Lives Matter protests have highlighted how people across the country feel about this more generally—people of all races and all classes, right across our country.

It is important that the House of Commons and what we discuss here reflect the views of the public. We have been told more and more that people want to see black history in our education system. I found out from the Petitions Committee that last year, the subject matter that received the most signatures over a variety of petitions was the teaching of black history in our schools. I know that people put forward petitions all the time, but for so many people to sign up for this subject, over a variety of petitions, shows how strongly the public feel.

It is key that we reflect that. I am concerned that we have got to this stage in the month and it does not seem that the House has done much. If we did not have a debate, that could be frowned on quite heavily by members of the public. We have a week and half left of October, so we have time to show the country that we do care about the issues that they care about, by debating the matter and allowing Members of the House to put forward their views on black history in this country and to discuss it thoroughly.

I hope you can consider that, and that we are able to get a debate in the next week or so. It does have to be in October. I understand that there may be issues with venues because of the business we have coming up, and the tragic death of Sir David means we have to move some things over. I do understand that, but I would appreciate the debate being held in October. If it were outside October, that could cause a lot of offence to those who hold the month dear.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you for that. We do have a problem, in as much as we have already allocated the business for this week in the House on Thursday. Next week, the Budget debate is on Thursday, so we will not have any time in the Chamber in what remains of October. If you are dead keen to have the debate in October, the only alternative would be to have it in Westminster Hall. If we could find a slot in Westminster Hall, I take it you would accept that readily.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Absolutely.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** I have one question. You are brand new to applications



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to this Committee, so we understand, but your application is a little light on Government-side speakers. It would be helpful to get three or four extra Government-side speakers. You clearly have a lot of individual speakers who are keen to speak and I understand that, but it would be helpful for us, to ensure that there will be a balanced debate across the Chamber, if you could get the names of three or four Government-side speakers to participate.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I will accost people in the Lobby.

Bob Blackman: Very wise.

Q4 **Chair:** If you look over your shoulder, you might see some friendly faces—I don't know.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Hello! I think the debate last year was quite equal in speakers from different parties. There were a number of Conservative speakers, I believe. I was encouraged to hear that.

Bob Blackman: There is a slight problem, which the Chair has mentioned. The only chance of getting this debate on in October is in Westminster Hall, and it would be a 90-minute debate, so you only really need eight or nine speakers, but you do need some from the Government side as part of that.

Chair: Okay Bell, that's lovely. Thank you—

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: One last question: would anyone here like to sign up for the debate?

Jim Shannon indicated assent.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you very much. We have Jim Shannon.

Bob Blackman: He's not from the Government side, I'm afraid.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Any more for any more?

Fiona Bruce indicated assent.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: There we go. I'll get you some more.

Chair: It's a start. Thank you very much.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Fresh from yet another appearance in Westminster Hall, we have Jim Shannon. His application is on improving asthma outcomes in the United Kingdom. Jim, over to you.

Jim Shannon: Thank you for this opportunity. I was reminded by you, Chairman, that there were no debates with the Backbench Business Committee with my name attached, so with that in mind I am here to ensure that there will be two at the end of this sitting—*[Laughter.]* I say



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that somewhat in jest, because both my applications relate to important issues.

I did not realise until I did my research on respiratory health that there hasn't been a debate on asthma for over 20 years—it is quite remarkable. In the Lords, Viscount Simon last raised the issue in 2008—some 13 years ago—but there has not been an asthma-specific debate in Government time in the Commons since at least the end of the second world war.

I am chair of the APPG for respiratory health, so this matter is important to me. Indeed, I know that it is important to us all—it is no more important for me than it is for anybody else.

Some 68% of sufferers say that asthma attacks hold them back in work and school, 71% say that severe asthma affects their social life, 54% say it stops them going on holiday, and 66% say severe asthma has made them or their child anxious. My second boy was asthmatic as a child, and he still uses inhalers, so this is also a personal issue for me.

I am quite happy—you know I'm not a hard person to deal with, Chairman—for a 90-minute debate, whether in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall. It doesn't really matter. The important thing is that we get a chance for a Minister to respond. If it has been 20 years since this type of debate, it is about time we had it.

Chair: Thank you. Any questions?

Bob Blackman: No, that's fine.

Jim Shannon and **Paul Howell** made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** We will move swiftly on to your second application, Jim, which is about public access to automatic external defibrillators.

Jim Shannon: My colleague, Paul, and I are incredibly interested in this matter, and you will see that we have a cross-section of the political parties. Paul and I have both done a lot of lobbying within Government on this, and I have had various meetings with Ministers. The Government have indicated that they would appreciate a debate on the issue before 10 December, when the relevant Bill will come before the House again. The purpose behind that is to give the Minister a chance to update us and to chart out where they hope things will go.

Every MP in this House will have someone in their constituency whose life has been saved by an AED. There isn't an MP in this House who does not know of a case—some of us perhaps know of more than others. I will tell you very quickly about one case, which happened at a football match in Portavogie in my constituency. A man had a heart attack at the side of the pitch and they were able to save his life, there and then, because the local football club had an AED. The availability of AEDs is so important when it comes to saving lives, and in working hard for those first two minutes.



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I am very proud of my heritage in Northern Ireland. Frank Pantridge, who invented AEDs, was from Hillsborough in Northern Ireland, so it is with great pride that we propose this debate, ever mindful that, once again, Northern Ireland has led the way.

Chair: Thank you very much. Do colleagues have any questions?

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** The Chair and I were both at St James' Park on Sunday.

Jim Shannon: Well, there you are.

Bob Blackman: So we saw exactly the point you were making.

Paul Howell: I was there, too.

Chair: So was I.

Bob Blackman: At least one of us was satisfied with the outcome.

I just want to be clear—this is a key point—about the Bill you are referring to. You refer to the First Reading of the Automated External Defibrillators (Public Access) Bill, but I assume you are talking about the Health and Social Care Bill.

Jim Shannon: No, it is a Bill specific to this issue. It is for 10 December, which is a Friday. I have had discussions with party Whips on both sides of the Chamber, and they have charted a way for us to bring this forward. We have a number of ducks to get in a row, if I can put it that way. My colleague also wants to say a few words.

What a story that you, Mr Mearns and my colleague have to tell. I watched it on TV and I watched what happened at the Euros as well. I came in late and was trying to figure out what was going on in that football match, without realising that he had fallen in the middle of the pitch and they were saving his life.

This is a no-cost Bill coming to Westminster. It will enable AEDs to be made available in leisure centres, public venues and schools. I will sit down and have a word on this, but from an education point of view AEDs are already going into schools. From a health point of view, the Ministers that I have spoken to are ready and initiating this. This Bill would make it law—that is what we are hoping to achieve. We need a debate and for the Minister to come along and update us so that we are ready for the Bill's return to the House on Friday 10 December.

Paul Howell: My father passed from a heart problem a number of years ago. A constituent of mine is a real advocate for making AEDs available. He is a local councillor now, but his whole ethos is about making AEDs available. The gentleman's name is David Sutton-Lloyd. It isn't people like him who should be driving this, but he is passionate and has brought home to me the importance—and the simplicity—of these devices.

I think that too many people are afraid of AEDs because they think they could do the wrong thing with them, but once you have had the training



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you can't do it wrong, so to speak. It is one of those things where the more we can get them out into the public domain and the more natural it is to have them spread around public buildings—as you saw at the weekend, they are critical—that will only help the community as a whole, so I am very much in support of pushing this.

Chair: Thanks, Paul.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** I am wary about the timing. What would be your ideal day or date to hold this debate?

Jim Shannon: We want the debate to be in early November, if possible.

Bob Blackman: It wouldn't be possible before then anyway.

Jim Shannon: I heard you say that earlier. I am only asking for what I can get, if I can put it that way.

Chair: In that case, thank you very much, gentlemen.

Fiona Bruce and **Jim Shannon** made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Welcome back to the Committee, Fiona. Fiona Bruce is a former member of the Committee, of course. The application is on freedom of religion or belief and the 40th anniversary of the declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Chair. It is really good to be back with the Committee again, and to see some familiar faces from when I served on it not that long ago. I have an application supported by 24 colleagues.

I hope that the Committee will allow me a moment to remember Sir David Amess. It was characteristic of his kindness that when I contacted a range of colleagues to ask for their support for this debate Sir David was the very first one to respond, saying, "Of course I will support." He even beat Jim Shannon. There is no pressure, therefore, Chair, to grant permission for this debate.

The application makes a request for 25 November because that marks the 40th anniversary of the 1981 declaration on freedom of religion or belief. It was the first international statement to that effect, and it is being marked internationally. I am very much aware of that, with my hat on as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. For example, the UK is participating on the Tuesday of that week in a virtual ministerial, which will have contributions from Ministers and envoys from across the world.

The week of 25 November is also Red Wednesday Week. Traditionally since 2016, we have had a debate in the House on or about Red Wednesday, so I would be grateful if you would consider that as a further reason. That is the day, of course, when an increasing number of public buildings, like the House of Commons, the Foreign Office and town halls



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across the country, are being illuminated red to highlight the injustices perpetrated against faith groups across the world.

This is a huge problem: 83% of the world's population live in countries where their right to practise their religion or belief is curtailed in some way, and it is growing. Some of the figures are phenomenal. In Nigeria, for example, in the past 12 years, 47,000 Christians and 29,000 moderate Muslims have been killed for their faith. In China, we now have well over 1 million Uyghurs held in so-called re-education camps. More than 2,700 Yazidi women and their children abducted by Daesh in 2014 still remain in captivity in the middle east, subject to unimaginable abuse. In Pakistan, about 1,000 young girls a year are abducted from their homes—Sikhs, Hindus and Christians—raped, forcibly married and forcibly converted. It is a huge problem.

A further reason why I would like this debate is that my predecessor, I am told, said that there would be an annual opportunity within Parliament to review the Truro review recommendations. It would be about a year since he held a debate here to that effect. It is particularly important that we review them now, because the three-year limit for the Truro review to be completed is July next year, so it is right that there is a focus on progress. July next year also marks the month when the UK is going to host a ministerial on FORB. It is going to be a major conference, and will be hosted the same week, virtually, as the Truro review results are independently scrutinised.

Furthermore, the same day—25 November—is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Many women across the world suffer a double jeopardy, like the young girls in Pakistan I described: they are women and they have a particular belief. For that reason, they are often victimised. A debate would give us an opportunity to highlight the violence against women in particular across the world on that particular day. I am asking for a three-hour debate, please, in the Chamber, and I would ask you to consider, please, whether it could be the first debate of the day.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you. Jim?

Jim Shannon: This is a particular issue that I have an interest in. I am chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. I am also chair of the APPG for the Pakistani minorities. The hon. Member for Congleton and I, from the very beginning of our time in 2010, when we both came into the House of Commons, have had a particular interest in this issue. I am very pleased to see the hon. Lady as the Prime Minister's special envoy, because she has a particular interest.

I believe we have had a debate at about this time nearly every year—we have always tried to do so anyway. There will be similar celebrations—if that is the word—or things to highlight and raise awareness of the issue taking place here in Parliament and not too far away, organised by the churches, as well as back home.



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I have a burden. It is a real burden for my Christian brothers and sisters. We both feel genuinely that our purpose in being here is to highlight that and to raise the issue. We look forward very much to a debate. The hon. Lady asked for a three-hour debate, and I believe in my heart that a three-hour debate in the main Chamber will give us all a chance to tell our views. I see Members here, by the way, who would participate in such a debate. I think it is important for us to have that opportunity.

- Q11 **Bob Blackman:** I have one quick question. You asked for 25 November. We do not yet know whether we will get any time, so we do not know whether that is available. In the event that the main Chamber is not available on the 25th, but we could put you in Westminster Hall, would that be acceptable as an alternative?

Fiona Bruce: I really ask that we can be in the main Chamber. If we cannot be in on that particular day, my personal preference would be to defer it for a week or so in order to get into the main Chamber. The year 2022 will be an important year for the UK as a global year on FORB. There are other reasons that I have not troubled the Committee with today. It would be very appropriate for us almost to launch our global leadership. If necessary, therefore, if we have to defer to December—which approaches Christmas and is of course a time when people think about this kind of issue—I would rather that than a Westminster Hall debate on this occasion.

- Q12 **Patricia Gibson:** I am very supportive of the issue and have spoken in a number of debates that you and Mr Shannon have secured in the past, but I am mindful—as you will be—that three hours in the Chamber with statements and everything might be cut to two hours or even an hour and a half, so it is a delicate balance. I understand what you mean about the status of the main Chamber, which is important.

Fiona Bruce: Yes, we will take that risk.

Jim Shannon: We want the status of the Chamber.

- Q13 **Chair:** The fact that you have brought this application early for that date gives me a chance to highlight it at business questions to the Leader of the House. Sometimes, we get a positive response to that.

Fiona Bruce: That is excellent. One final reason why I would like the main Chamber is that I know there will be international interest in this debate. I am part of an organisation on FORB, of 33 countries now, with representatives such as me, and they will be watching what the UK is doing on this issue, in particular as we go into 2022.

Nick Fletcher and **Fiona Bruce** made representations.

- Q14 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least this afternoon, we have Nick Fletcher making an application about International Men's Day. And hello again, Fiona!



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Nick Fletcher: This is a debate to coincide with International Men's Day, which is 19 November. Ideally, we would like a debate in the Chamber on 18 November.

The purpose of the debate is to raise awareness of the issues that disproportionately affect men: suicide rates, poor education and the criminal issues that men fall into much more easily these days, which we believe is down to a lack of male role models. We need to make the country and the Government aware that this is happening, and to do everything that we can to help young boys, basically, as they progress into young men.

We seem to be spending an awful lot of time not being proud to be men. This is a chance to celebrate being a man. There are an awful lot of good men in the world—a huge amount of them—and, unfortunately, at the moment I think they are getting a bad rap, for want of a better word. We could do an awful lot of good with this debate.

In my constituency, I see lots of young children struggling—lots of young boys with no male role models at home, or in primary school. There seems to be a real issue with getting male teachers to go into primary teaching. Such issues will, we hope, be addressed by this debate.

Q15 **Chair:** Fiona?

Fiona Bruce: I am delighted to support this application. For many years, I have promoted strengthening family life. This debate would give us an opportunity to highlight again what fatherhood means and its responsibilities. For that reason and the others mentioned, I support the application.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** I have two quick points to make. First, obviously, International Men's Day is 19 November. Ideally, the potential Thursday available would be 18 November—

Nick Fletcher: Yes, ideally.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Secondly, which is almost a corollary to what we were asking earlier, this application is very heavy on the Government side and light on the Opposition side. Could we have some more Opposition Members, to make sure that we get a good and balanced debate?

Nick Fletcher: Yes. I am sure that I can drum some up this week, now we are back.

Chair: Traditionally, the way in which we deal with this is that the application is in, it is a live application, so if you can add names via our Clerk, that would be very good of you. Thank you.

Q18 **Kate Osborne:** On the answering Minister, because you mentioned crime, health and schooling or education, which Department or Minister would you anticipate responding to the debate?

Fiona Bruce: That is a very good question, which we have toiled over for many years with regard to strengthening family life. It has been variously



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responded to, including by the DWP, so there are a number of options: Health, Education, DWP—

Patricia Gibson: I think I recall Health answering in the past.

Nick Fletcher: One of the points that I would like to make is that there is a women's health strategy, but there is no men's health strategy. That would definitely be another good line for us to follow.

Fiona Bruce: You put your finger on the very point: sufficient responsibility is not taken by a Minister in Government for this whole area. Often, the issues and responsibilities relating to supporting the family are divided between a number of Ministries. For a number of years, we have been saying, "This really needs to be pulled together." This debate would be an opportunity to highlight that again.

Patricia Gibson: If it is okay for me to say this, Chair, given that my name is on the application, there is an argument to say—I know this will be controversial—that it should be the Equalities Minister. There is an argument there, but I will leave it dangling.

Fiona Bruce: There is, yes.

Nick Fletcher: Yes, a very good point—thank you.

Chair: As there are no further questions, Nick and Fiona, thank you very much indeed. That brings us to the end of our public session. We now go into private session for our deliberations.