



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 7 December 2021

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

Questions 1-17

### Representations

[I](#): Bob Seely.

[II](#): Tim Farron.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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**Bob Seely** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have two applications this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Bob Seely on the subject of the United Kingdom's relationship with Russia and China. Bob, why would you like the Backbench Business Committee to give you time for this debate?

**Bob Seely:** I think the simple answer is because it's incredibly important. We know what is happening in Ukraine, which is potentially very serious. The Russians are massing forces; whether for a largely conventional attack or a more hybrid form of warfare in the future, one is not clear. The extent to which the west can resolve to stop Russia is also unclear, but if war does break out, it will fundamentally change the nature of Europe, and will do so for any number of years and possibly for a decade or more, so it is potentially extraordinarily important. My gut feeling—I literally defended a PhD on this the other week—is that we do not quite grip the idea and understanding of what contemporary Russian warfare is, because it is fought on so many fronts.

So this is an important debate, and although this is a criticism not of this Government but any Government, my sad gut feeling is, slightly, that Government will say that we understand methods of Russian warfare—hybrid war, call it what you will—but in fact we do not. I therefore think there is a very good reason for us to be talking about Russian politics and our relationship with Russia in the round, but very much specifically focused on Ukraine.

I would add to that that I have no doubt that if the Russians did not want the Belarusian leader Lukashenko to be throwing middle eastern refugees at the Polish border, he would not be doing so. This is a perfect example. We think this is new. It's not new: the Russians did it in 2016 up against the Norwegian border. And, for those of you who followed the Syrian war, the Russians used mass refugee flows to destabilise the opponents of the Syrian regime back in 2016, 2017 and 2018, and if war comes to Ukraine, they are likely to use mass panic as a way of destabilising the Ukrainian state.

We have a hugely delicate relationship with Russia, which is even more delicate because of the situation in Ukraine. I would add to that a slight little coda. I find it very frustrating that we do not think through some of what the Russians are doing in this country, the most obvious example of which is the way that they are using libel law at the moment to silence journalists who are writing books about Putin and the Putin regime. Our silence on that, while some of the most expensive lawyers on earth, who are also British citizens, are effectively being paid to attack freedom of speech in this country, is breathtaking, as is the continued exposure of loopholes, tax loopholes and, effectively, the Russian money-laundering machine, which uses the City of London. I think it is profoundly unethical. How we can say we are dealing with Russia in an effective way when we are not doing that, I don't know.



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Ukraine might be at war with Russia in the next two to three weeks; it might also be that this is another round of threat and intimidation. But I do think it is important for MPs to speak on the Floor of the House, and not just in Westminster Hall, and hold Ministers to account, because there is more that the Government should be doing.

On China, very specifically, there is a cross-Government review of China, which is to take place by the spring. So the Government are currently working on a cross-Government review of our relationship with China. Do we think it is a good idea for Members of Parliament to put into that debate now, rather than just commenting on it once it's happened? For me, I think it is good for Parliament and parliamentarians—there are some China experts out there and quite a few people who have experience with China, although I don't count myself as one—and I think it would be an important and valuable exercise for the House of Commons to collectively, or individually, give its opinion on our relationship with China, but also on what the China review and a cross-departmental approach to China would look like. I think there is genuine public worth in that and worth for parliamentarians.

The question then is—Ian, tell me if I'm going on too long—why both together? You could say, "Why don't you just do Russia and Ukraine?" Fine. My blunt attitude is that, just from what I have seen, people sign up to things that are worthy but then don't necessarily take part. You agreed recently on the need for a debate on a public inquiry into Afghanistan. There were four speakers—or six, or something; I can't remember. Tobias—fantastic, we love him, great idea. People who then supported it just didn't turn up. So I would rather have a guarantee of a full house on these two critical debates about these two rising authoritarian states, rather than say, "Let's split them out," and not have the numbers to make them worthwhile debates.

I think there are significant differences between both of them, but there are also enough similarities to make it worthwhile to try to combine both together in one debate. I would obviously speak, as ever, for no more than 10 minutes to give as many people as possible the time to contribute, but in opening the debate I would try to frame it by recognising both the differences between them and the importance of dealing with neo-authoritarian adventurist states in a coherent way. I would find coherence between them.

**Q2 Chair:** Thank you very much, Bob. A number of questions have come out of that. To a certain extent, you have covered one of them, in terms of whether the subject matter regarding the two countries is big enough for two separate debates. There are different circumstances. I am also wondering about the time that it would take. We are talking about complex issues, and it may take considerable time to try and develop a point in the debate. That time might not be available.

**Bob Seely:** I am very happy to take your advice if it was that, actually, you can see the benefit of just doing the Russian one now because of what is happening. You might ask, "Why doesn't somebody else put in for a



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three-hour debate on China for the following month?" If it is February or March, then my worry is that we might have run out of time to influence the cross-Government review. You could ask me, "Why not separate them out?" I agree, if you feel there is the time.

**Q3 Chair:** I am also thinking about it from the perspective of the answering Department, which I take it would be the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

**Bob Seely:** You would have two different Ministers, so who would you get? You might say that we should just do Russia now. I don't know what your schedule is like, Chair, but if you could get both in January that would be wonderful. They are both incredibly important debates. There is enough of a difference between them and probably enough people to speak on both of them for three hours once you have taken into account Front-Bench contributions and so on. I just did not want to be cheeky about demanding two debates or assuming that I would have the time to before going back to Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Chair:** We have previously had Members of Parliament putting in multiple applications. We have one particular Member who has a season ticket to the Committee. We are always happy to see the hon. Member for Strangford. It is not beyond precedent.

**Q4 Kate Osborne:** I just wanted to pick up on the comment you made earlier about the number of speakers that turned up to the debate you referenced. You have only four Labour MPs and one independent Member. The rest are Government. Would you be confident that there would be enough speakers on both sides of the Benches?

**Bob Seely:** For Russia and China, undoubtedly. The urgent question on Ukraine today ran for 50 minutes. It is not as if much happened—okay, NATO leaders had a meeting last night. Absolutely. Am I confident that, if you split it out and had a three-hour debate on Russia and a couple of weeks later a three-hour debate on China, there would be enough speakers? I think you would probably fill the time slots again, because, as Ian said, you would give people more time to develop arguments. It just depends how long you are willing to give Members. From my own experience, putting a five or six-minute limit on speeches actually focuses the mind. If you give people 12 minutes, they will waffle for six and talk for six. That is my experience—apart from me, obviously; I don't do that.

**Q5 Nigel Mills:** If we are having separate debates, you will obviously need to tweak the wording of your motion—more than tweak, I suspect. Wouldn't the China debate be one that needed a motion and a full Chamber, or could that one be a general debate, given that there is not that pressing issue? A general debate on the China strategy may not need an actual motion to be debated.

**Bob Seely:** Nigel, thank you. Again, I am happy to be guided by you. If you are basically saying, "Let's split the debates out because there is enough for two," then I will go and do that, happily, and resend the words. We could have a motion on one or a motion on both. I do think China is



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pressing, if we want to influence the Government and the FCDO. I am a big believer in trying to get parliamentarians to feel that they are having input in stuff, whether that is me, or focusing all different parties, because I think it is in the public good, frankly, that we air these things and not just react to them. I am fed up with MPs just reacting to stuff, because we just, you know, do a bit of grandstanding, say how outrageous something is or how we must sort of fight everyone on the beaches and all that. I would much rather be contributing with ideas and trying to shape policy, so I would say, for China, we need a debate in January, if we have that China review coming up.

**Nigel Mills:** The reason why I was asking was because if you felt you didn't need a motion, it makes it more flexible for us to allocate. We can allocate Westminster Hall for that, or we can allocate a second debate on the Thursday.

Q6 **Chair:** The point about that, Bob, is that if you had to have one of the debates, I would take it that would be the China one, because that seems to be, although urgent, less urgent than the current situation in Ukraine. If you got a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall, you would get three hours, whereas in the Chamber, we know from experience, because of urgent questions and statements, the time for Backbench Business debates on a Thursday gets curtailed. Quite often, we get two hours or one hour and 45 minutes, or something of that nature.

**Bob Seely:** That begs the question, why not keep them together and try for a three-hour debate. I am very happy to take your steer and leave it as it is for a three-hour debate and if somebody wants to put in for a Westminster Hall debate for 90 minutes on China, I am sure people will be doing that anyway. I would be putting in for just a specific hour-long or 90-minute debate on the China review. That might be an argument, or, Nigel, it might be an argument for leaving it for having both and just having people be relatively concise in what they are trying to say.

Q7 **Chair:** The application is in—it is live. If we can find a slot, we will certainly try, but if you get contact from our Clerk to try to negotiate a way forward, please get back to us as soon as you possibly can.

**Bob Seely:** I shall absolutely look forward to it. Thank you very much, everyone.

**Chair:** A real pleasure. Thank you.



**Tim Farron** made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Next up, we have Tim Farron. The subject matter for your application, Tim, is second homes and holiday lets in rural communities. Over to you, Tim.

**Tim Farron:** Thanks, Ian, and thanks to the Committee for giving us the time to consider this. It is a huge issue. Many of you will know it and will not need me to tell you.

Across rural communities, particularly in national parks but not just there, even before covid, we had a situation where communities may have 85% or 90% of the homes within them not lived in all year round. These are desirable places, with expensive homes that are privately bought, but wages are relatively low locally.

Normally speaking, my patch has unemployment levels of less than 1%, and average wages or household incomes of around £25,000. You are not talking about high wages, but high employment. The average house price in my patch is getting on for £300,000. In the lake district itself, it is probably nearer £450,000. That was a problem two years ago, but covid has exacerbated it enormously, which is why we have a very strong cross-party group who have signed up to this, and many more besides. There is one Cornish MP and one Devonian who has signed the call for a debate—I know all the others will have the same concerns. In terms of there being enough people to contribute to a debate, I am absolutely confident.

To go into the extent to which this is a problem, for instance, I could list you lots of towns and communities in my constituency where second home ownership is in the 80% to 90% bracket and the village is effectively dead. There are plenty more in the 50% to 60% bracket, where it is on the cusp of being, and action could be taken to prevent it getting to the point where you do lose the permanent population, the school, the bus service and everything that goes with a vibrant living community.

During covid, for a variety of reasons that we have all observed, the demand for second homes, and the desire for the bucolic existence if you have the cash to buy an additional home, has gone through the roof—no pun intended. Talking to estate agents in Cumbria, we would see between 40% and 80% of all house sales during the pandemic being to the second home market. That is an absolute cleansing of communities of a local full-time population, which is devastating for them and for everybody who is left behind.

There is another thing that is particularly awful. The Government did a really good thing at the beginning of the pandemic in creating the eviction moratorium. Of course, we understand that it had to come to an end at some point, but since that window something quite tremendous has happened—tremendously awful. Private landlords have seen the opportunity to go Airbnb.

To give you two stats, in North Devon there has been a 70% reduction in the number of private rents available. The last time I checked, my district



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of South Lakeland is, outside of London, the most visited place in the United Kingdom, so you can imagine that there is a vast number of holiday let properties to start off with. From June last year to June this year—it is really March this year to June this year, since evictions became possible—we have seen a 32% rise in the number of holiday lets. A small number of those will be second home owners who have chosen to cash in on the staycation boom. That does not do any harm, but the vast majority of the 32% are local people cleared out of our communities for the holiday market.

We want the ability to control that. A variety of things could be done, whether it is planning changes, taxation changes or changes when it comes to development control, to limit that problem and to preserve and protect rural communities, which should not be available just to those who have the money to go and visit them now and again but should be full-time, permanent communities, not least because otherwise how do you run the businesses that serve the tourism economy, as well as the social justice side of things? There are things, and we are desperate for the opportunity to present to Ministers the scale of the problem, so that they might do something about it.

**Q9 Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. One thing about your application that I happened to notice, given my political side, is that you do not have any Labour Members who have signed up to take part.

**Tim Farron:** They are very welcome. I probably ought to have asked my neighbour, Cat Smith, frankly. I guess the problem is that it is in the nature of things that, just as I am the only Liberal Democrat between Edinburgh and Oxford, Labour is a bit sparse in rural communities. I think that is the only reason, but I know Cat's patch very well. I am sure that it would be an issue that would appeal to her.

**Q10 Chair:** I've got a funny feeling one or two might have second homes.

**Tim Farron:** I know of one or two in my patch, and I would not be so rude as to dob them in.

**Chair:** Any other comments or questions, please?

**Q11 Duncan Baker:** Just a comment: Tim, I am surprised that you did not come and ask me. I would have signed straight away. In North Norfolk it is a huge issue as well, and I think it is quite relevant because, although I do not know what the timetable is for the planning Bill, this is exactly the sort of thing that is going to fit squarely into that. I think it is incredibly relevant, and it is something that everyday people really care about in their communities—not being able to rent a property or get on the property ladder because villages have turned into dormitories, and the properties are all owned by second home owners. I am really supportive of it, and I wonder whether we could shoehorn it, if we knew at all, under the planning Bill, because it cannot be that far away. It is really relevant to wrap these things together. That is an idea.



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**Tim Farron:** Thank you, and obviously I agree with all that. There is the levelling-up White Paper, which I suspect planning things will find their way into. From my perspective, Michael Gove is a very open-minded person who likes to think the unthinkable, and some of the things that you would need to do to deal with this would be, up until now, considered unthinkable. In a country with a population the representation of which tends to be more urban than rural, the issue is presenting this in front of Ministers in such a way that they understand the scale. It is not immediately apparent if you do not live in a rural community, but it is if you live in one.

As you know, the problem was there two years ago. It has just got awful in the last two years. There has been an erosion in the number of homes available and affordable for local people for decades but, as I remember from my geography O-level, erosion takes place over millennia and then, as you will know in North Norfolk, a whole piece of cliff falls in the sea in one go. It feels like that is the kind of erosion that we have had in the last year or two, and we are desperate to try to rebuild the cliff and protect the rest of it.

**Chair:** While trying to ensure that we do not get involved in longshore drift.

Q12 **Patricia Gibson:** I was going to say that there is some interesting work on this going on in Scotland, which you may know about and I am sure you would be interested in. I think the important thing in your application is the talk about mortgage tax relief, which I think is a very important tool. This is a debate that I probably want to speak in.

**Tim Farron:** Lovely.

Q13 **Chair:** In terms of time sensitivity, when would you like this?

**Tim Farron:** Duncan rightly points out that we may be seeing an opportunity for the Government to do something about this in the levelling-up White Paper and the Bill that might come soon afterwards, so we hope sooner rather than later, given the fact this is a thing that is hopefully under active consideration.

Q14 **Chair:** If you could get a nailed-on debate in Westminster Hall next Thursday, would you take it?

**Tim Farron:** Probably. I don't know what I'm doing next Thursday.

**Chair:** To put it into context, it is the last day that Parliament sits before the Christmas recess, but there is a slot available.

**Tim Farron:** Am I allowed to just check my diary?

**Chair:** Indeed.

**Tim Farron:** The question is whether other colleagues are able to make it as well. I've got a surgery up in my patch—literally in Coniston, which is



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the worst affected town, so I wouldn't want to ditch them. I don't think I'll be here next Thursday, on this basis.

I think sooner rather than later, for lots of reasons—not least because the beginning of another tourism season will tempt a whole bunch more private landlords to kick out their tenants. We should deal with it before they start thinking about that.

Incidentally, there are lots of other issues we want to raise. Government activity is the principal thing, and Patricia is right that the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government have things that we can learn from and there are issues that we share. But there is also the behaviour of certain companies that might be affected, and we might want to encourage them. I have spoken to Airbnb directly and asked them, for instance, to have a policy, which they clearly do not at the moment, to deny on to their platform any landlord whose properties become vacated via section 21 eviction. So there are some issues about exposing the behaviour of certain companies, which we would like to, as well as persuading Government to take action. Long before we get into the tourism season again would be preferable.

Q15 **Chair:** Therefore you would be looking at something early in the new year.

**Tim Farron:** Please.

**Chair:** All right. Thank you very much indeed.

Q16 **Patricia Gibson:** On Airbnb, you are talking about rural communities, but Airbnb is causing a lot of disruption in cities in Scotland—probably in cities in England as well.

**Tim Farron:** We often think—and these are issues for the debate—of places in my community that are more urban. Kendal is our big town, and you think Kendal is largely immune. However, you are literally a stone's throw from the Lake District, and so ex-council houses are now on Airbnb. It has brought the second home market into places we thought were safe. It is an interesting business model, but the reality is that it is doing untold damage to lots of communities.

**Duncan Baker:** I think there is so much interest in this, in the south-west, Devon, Cornwall, Tim's patch, my patch, Suffolk, the Lake District, obviously, and the Peak District.

**Patricia Gibson:** And the islands.

**Duncan Baker:** It is so massive. Without giving away too many secrets, in terms of the area that gets a lot of juicy debate on our internal groups, it is planning—Bob Seely, who was just before us, is the expert. I wonder whether the main Chamber is more appropriate for this, because I think you will have a lot of people interested in it.

Q17 **Chair:** I suppose the thing is that a lot of this will be a devolved matter, wouldn't it?



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**Patricia Gibson:** Not when you talk about mortgage regulations, because that is reserved.

**Chair:** But planning would be.

**Tim Farron:** It would be, but some of the taxation issues, which are potentially part of the solution, are reserved matters. I also think that we'd really appreciate Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Members, because they do things differently when it comes to planning, and we can learn from them.

**Chair:** And there are some interesting perspectives and experiences that could be learned from in the debate.

**Duncan Baker:** The Welsh are moving ahead faster than others.

**Tim Farron:** They are, yes.

**Chair:** Let's not have the debate now. It is thoroughly interesting, and I think you're right, Tim, in as much as covid has brought about an urge in city dwellers to find space in which they can socially distance more easily. That's understandable, but it does have a detrimental impact on rural communities. That's understood. Thank you very much indeed.

**Tim Farron:** Thank you. I really appreciate it.

**Chair:** That brings to a close our public deliberations; we now go into private session.