

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 14 December 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 December 2021.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Duncan Baker; Bob Blackman; Nigel Mills.

Questions 1-35

Witnesses

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Dame Margaret Hodge and **Robert Jenrick** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a busy afternoon in front of us, with no fewer than nine applications for the Committee to consider. We begin proceedings with an application from Dame Margaret Hodge. The subject matter is Holocaust Memorial Day.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Thank you, Chair. I draw to your attention an error in the submission: we have Stephen Crabb down as Labour. Much as I would love that to be true, I do not think it is yet.

Thank you so much for hearing us, and for hearing us first. I discovered, in preparing for this, that the person who started the annual debate on Holocaust memorial was actually Andrew Dismore. Given that I went to his recent fundraising party to celebrate his many years of public service, it is appropriate that I am here today to try to ensure that we continue the tradition that he established of an annual debate.

There are events up and down the country commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day. I think it is really important, in that context, that Parliament has its own event. I have been going to the debates for a number of years now, and—I think Robert will say the same—there are always some really moving speeches, and every year there is something new. The width and breadth of the debate now—it covers people such as the Uyghurs, on whom you will have a request later, is really important.

The debate is always well attended. I think it is a consensual day. Particularly as we come to a point when there are so few survivors left in Britain, it is really important that we do what we can to draw attention to the day, to get people to remember what happened, and to work towards it never happening again. I hope you will grant this debate, given that it has always been held in the past.

Robert Jenrick: I concur with everything that Margaret said. This is entirely cross party—more so than almost all other requests for debates that will come before you. The request has support from throughout the House, as you see from the names on the form that Margaret kindly compiled, and there is no shortage of others who would have put their name to this. I have participated in these debates in previous years, as a Back Bencher and as a Minister, and as Margaret said, they are always well attended, and they always draw new, interesting stories—often personal reflections from Members of Parliament about their families or things happening in their constituency.

The last Holocaust Memorial Day was challenging, because it had to be conducted largely virtually. It still attracted a great deal of interest and attention across the country. Let us hope that this one will be somewhat normal. Given that there will be more events than in previous years happening across the country, it is fitting for Parliament to play its part and have its customary debate. I strongly support Margaret's application.



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Chair: You may or may not be aware that we have had a second application for a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. Between the two applications, there are almost 50 MPs who have subscribed. Since yours was received first, Margaret and Robert, yours will be the one that goes to the top of the list. Also, more MPs subscribed to yours. Thank you very much. Any comments or questions, colleagues?

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I have one quick question. I declare my interest as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on holocaust memorial. Your application—it may be a typo—talks about holding the debate in the week prior to Holocaust Memorial Day, the week of 20 January, rather than on 27 January. I assume that you would prefer a debate on 27 January, the day after Holocaust Memorial Day.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Yes.

Chair: Holocaust Memorial Day is the 26th?

Bob Blackman: It is Wednesday the 26th.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Is that a day that we have at the moment?

Bob Blackman: We don't get Wednesdays. They are for Government business. We get the Chamber, probably, on the 27th.

Dame Margaret Hodge: The 27th is all right, isn't it?

Robert Jenrick: Yes. I think that would be preferable, because on the day itself, some Members will go to the service, assuming it is held opposite Westminster Abbey as usual. It would be very good to do it the next day.

Q3 **Chair:** I thought I saw somewhere that Holocaust Memorial Day was on the 27th, not the 26th. Have I got that wrong?

Bob Blackman: It is on the 26th.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am trying to find which day it was this year.

Bob Blackman: It is on the application. The main service is definitely on Wednesday the 26th.

Chair: In other words, Thursday 27th would be the closest Thursday. That is smashing. Margaret, Robert, thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon and Ms Nusrat Ghani made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Next up we have Mr Jim Shannon, making sure that his season ticket with us is secure. It is an application on the Afghan resettlement scheme.



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Jim Shannon: My colleague and friend here is a co-signatory. Do you want to join me?

Ms Ghani: May I come forward, Chair? I have my own application for a debate, but I am more than happy to sit here.

Chair: Yes.

Jim Shannon: Thank you again, Chair, for the opportunity to request another debate. My honourable friend on my right hand side and I have cross-party support for this. I have given you a copy of the list of those who have signed the application, and I hope it has been circulated. I have had various discussions with the Minister on the Afghan resettlement scheme. A number of businesses in my constituency—this is not a criticism, by the way—two of them major employers, were offering jobs, accommodation and everything possible to these people, in order to resettle them, but we have not got any closer to getting them to Northern Ireland, to Newtownards, where we want them to be, for either of those companies.

Fiona Bruce, my colleague from Congleton, has also signed the application. One of the other issues with the Afghan resettlement scheme is that it does not seem to be focused in the way that we would perhaps have liked, and that is reflected in the number of people who have signed the application. Those with a Christian faith are coming from Afghanistan and want to resettle, but there does not seem to be the same focus from the Departments on getting those people into position.

My request is about considering the issues—and they are all issues. The debate will be about getting people there, into the jobs and the accommodation. I am not sure, Mr Chairman, if there are many places in the whole of the United Kingdom where they would have a job and a house, and we have that. To me it is quite simple: get them there, get them settled, and try to get them rehabilitated in their life. The Minister has been extremely generous, and the Government have been generous. We would very much like to see this happen.

Q5 **Chair:** You have submitted a supplementary sheet with 14 signatures—is that right?

Jim Shannon: Yes.

Q6 **Chair:** Is there anything you want to add, Nusrat?

Ms Ghani: I support the application. I have a number of church groups in my constituency who were working with Christians over in Afghanistan and were quite keen to bring them back home, but we have not been able to do so. I am also working with female parliamentarians and young women involved in sports, and we are anxious about how long they will be safe if we cannot get them to a safe place, and potentially over to the UK, where there are people able and willing to host them.

Chair: Thank you.



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Q7 **Bob Blackman:** To clarify, for this and the other application, Jim, you have ticked the “either” box. Does that mean the debate could be either in the Chamber or Westminster Hall, or in any of the Tuesday or Thursday slots we might get?

Jim Shannon: One of my great ambitions would be to get a debate in the Chamber. I have never had a debate in the Chamber—

Bob Blackman: That is because you occupy Westminster Hall all the time.

Jim Shannon: I am quite happy with Westminster Hall, Tuesday or Thursday.

Q8 **Chair:** Here is the \$64,000 question. There is potentially time in Westminster Hall on 6 January—the first Thursday back. Would that be acceptable to you?

Jim Shannon: Shall we?

Ms Ghani indicated assent.

Jim Shannon: I think we should, yes. This is one that we would like to score early, if we can.

Chair: Noted. Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon: On the other one—

Chair: We will move on to that in a moment.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Our next application this afternoon, colleagues, is from Mr. Jim Shannon. It is on eye health and macular disease. Jim, over to you.

Jim Shannon: The Committee is most kind, as are you, Mr Chairman. I am my party’s health spokesperson, so I have a particular interest in health issues. I met some charities in the House about six weeks ago, and the issue that they brought to my attention was that of macular disease. I was hoping that we might have a debate about this in Westminster Hall sometime. The issue is not just the loss of eyesight; things can be done if the disease is caught early. Early diagnosis of any health issue, but particularly macular disease, is what we wish to see. We also have to look at the funding for research, so the debate would be dual-purpose, and it would allow us to ensure that there was the necessary advice and support.

Macular disease is the biggest form of sight loss in the UK today; I did not realise that until I met the people I mentioned. It predominantly affects older people, but children and young people can be affected as well, which is rather surprising. That indicates that we need a debate on the issue. I understand that a debate on macular disease has not been requested for some time. Teachers and education leaders seek support on the issue. We



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are asking for the debate on behalf of the charitable institutions I mentioned, but we also want to help children with central vision loss.

Q10 **Chair:** If we could not find a slot on Thursday 6 January for your first debate, could you fit this one in on that day? Which would be the priority?

Jim Shannon: The first one, on Afghan resettlement. For the other one, I would be happy with the end of the month, or early February.

Chair: That is very useful to know. Thank you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: May I wish you, Mr Chairman, and all your colleagues a merry Christmas and a happy new year? Thank you for all your support and help with debates throughout the year.

Chair: Your kind sentiments are noted, Jim. Your season ticket is safe; don't worry.

Q11 **Duncan Baker:** Would it be a wide-ranging debate on eye health, or would it be specifically on macular disease? Do you see the debate going into detached retinas and all manner of other eye impairments?

Jim Shannon: It is just on macular disease, because that is the greatest cause of loss of eyesight in the whole of the UK. I do not say this critically, but we feel that it may have been overlooked, or not given the priority that it should have. That is why we want the focus on macular disease.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Charlotte Nichols made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** In a very timely fashion, we come to our next applicant: Charlotte Nichols. Your application is for a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. I should let you know, though, that our first presentation today, by Dame Margaret Hodge, was for a debate on the same subject, on or around Holocaust Memorial Day, so we have two applications. Is there anything specific or different about yours?

Charlotte Nichols: My application was intended to be in support of Margaret's, in case she was unable to put hers forward for whatever reason. That was because of the importance of Holocaust Memorial Day and the need to make sure that it is considered by the House. I am happy for my application to be withdrawn, or merged with Margaret's. I just wanted to make sure that the subject was given proper time and consideration.

Chair: To be fair, when you submitted your application, I was not aware that another application was on its way. That is very welcome. Thank you very much indeed.

Charlotte Nichols: Thank you.



Chris Bryant made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Next up we have Mr Chris Bryant. The title of the application is, "Committee on Standards' Review of the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament". Chris, over to you, and thank you for coming.

Chris Bryant: Thank you very much for having me—I feel like I am going to a Christmas party.

In a sense, we have already had the debate in the Chamber; we have obviously produced a draft code of conduct, and there are various questions for the House about how we want to proceed. Quite a lot of people on all sorts of different sides of the debate want to express concerns, or to push or pull us in one direction or another. The Government is refusing to give us Government time, and there is a legislative argument that it is perhaps better if this is led from the Back Benches and by the Committee, rather than by the Government, so we have applied for time for a debate on the Floor of the House—I think it would need to be on the Floor of the House, rather than in Westminster Hall. We would also want to engage as many Members as possible in the consultation process we are now going through.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, please.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** One of the concerns is that your Committee's consultation ends, I think, on 20 January.

Chris Bryant: Yes.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** When we come back, we have two Thursdays when this debate could be held, the 6th or the 13th—the 20th is probably too late for people. At the moment, there are likely to be no Conservative MPs present on the 6th, which would potentially leave us only with the 13th.

Chris Bryant: Can I stop you, Mr Blackman? The breaking news is that the Committee today decided that we would extend our consultation period until the half-term recess in the middle of February.

Bob Blackman: Excellent. That is good news.

Chris Bryant: We thought that might be one of the things that helped you give us time a little later on.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** So, notwithstanding the application, we could allocate the debate slightly later than this rather constrained timeframe?

Chris Bryant: Yes. We will still be doing other consultation processes, more in a roundtable, rather than on the Floor of the House, and we will also be sending some quantitative questionnaires to all Members, but we would really see this debate as the centrepiece.

Bob Blackman: Excellent.



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Q17 **Chair:** In that case, what would your perfect timing be, Chris?

Chris Bryant: I guess it would be the first half on a Thursday.

Chair: Sorry, timing in terms of—

Chris Bryant: The month?

Chair: Yes.

Chris Bryant: I don't mind. The 6th would obviously not work. If there are not going to be Conservatives around, that does not make any sense at all—you want to get a full impression of the whole House. The 13th is fine, or the 20th or, I guess, the 27th. I think it would be better before the end of January. In fact, on the 25th and 26th, we will have had two days-worth of evidence sessions, so there is an argument for going the day after that. That might work as a week of focusing on this issue; everybody's minds would be a bit focused on it. I know that, for lots of colleagues, you never think about the code of conduct until, suddenly, the commissioner's office gets in touch—I am not saying you personally, individually, but if you ever want to come before my Committee, you are always very welcome.

Q18 **Chair:** Right. I am thinking that if we get time on the 20th, that might be the ideal day, because the week after that, on the 27th, there is likely to be a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. Given that the 20th would fall in with what would have been the end of the consultation period, that might seem appropriate. I don't know if we can manage to do that.

Chris Bryant: I am relaxed about that.

Q19 **Chair:** In that case, Chris, thank you very much for coming. It is much appreciated.

Chris Bryant: Thank you very much for having me. I support Sir Bernard's application as well.

Chair: That is a mark of approval, Bernard.

Sir Bernard Jenkin made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** Over to you, Bernard. This is an application on Russian grand strategy.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Since I first made the application, I have added quite a number of names, including those of some more senior figures from the Conservative party, and indeed Harriet Harman from the Labour party. It includes a number of other Select Committee Chairs. That is in the hope that you might be able to allocate the debate to the Chamber, rather than just to Westminster Hall. The urgency is the most important thing.



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There is not an appreciation in the west or in western Governments and their culture that Russia is conducting a hybrid war against the west. We tend to focus on individual subjects such as Ukraine, the migration crisis from Belarus, the rearming of the Serbs in the western Balkans, the cyber-attacks, the assassinations and attempted assassinations, the military build-up, or the occupation of Crimea. We tend to react to those things as individual events. There is no appreciation that this is a concerted strategy. Indeed, Russia is leveraging China's influence, and is sometimes working with China, to destabilise and divide the west.

President Putin's objective is to recover as much control as possible of the former Soviet Union and to re-establish his domain of influence in western Europe to try to divide western Europe from the United States. At the moment, western Governments are divided and more concerned about their short-term economic interests. Western democracies tend to operate as peacetime Governments, whereas Putin's Government are effectively on a war footing. There is also too much emphasis on the military build-up, for example, as though he intends to use the military capability he has and that that is his only option. Actually, he is using that to intimidate the west and, under cover of that military build-up, to use other weapons in his hybrid arsenal to carry out destabilisation of the west.

I think it very important that there is a proper debate. There have been debates about Bosnia, about Ukraine, and about individual issues, but there has not been a proper debate questioning the Government about what machinery they have to respond comprehensively and in a timely way on a daily basis to what Russia is carrying out daily, and about how we are co-ordinating with allies in NATO and the EU and across the Atlantic.

Q21 Chair: You are probably not aware, but we already have an application in the waiting room, as it were—it has already been heard by the Committee—for a debate on a substantive motion on the United Kingdom's relationship with Russia and China. That was put in by Bob Seely, and it is on the stocks. From your perspective, if we could get a debate about Russian grand strategy, when would be the perfect time for it?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am sorry that this is not a very convenient answer, but frankly, as soon as possible. People are speculating that, given the bluster that we have seen from western Governments over the military build-up in Ukraine, Putin might actually use his military force—perhaps not to go all the way to Kiev, but to take back into Russia some of eastern Ukraine, which he would say is disputed territory anyway. He would use the Christmas holidays to do that, as he has done on previous occasions. He used the Beijing Olympics to take Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia; he went into Crimea on our Christmas day. Those are opportunities that he will exploit. Ideally, we would have a debate on Russian grand strategy before Christmas, but if not, as soon after Christmas as possible. It is very urgent.

Q22 Chair: Given that the Christmas recess starts in two days, that would



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make life a little difficult. The problem we have is that the time allocated to the Committee is normally on a Thursday, and we are told that an awful lot of Conservative Members will not be available on 6 January.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Well, I would certainly settle for 6 January.

Chair: That is useful.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am aware of Mr Seely's application, which I support. Frankly, he said that the more, the merrier, and I agree. In my view, if you wanted to combine the two debates—I do not know whether his is on a substantive motion—we could, but you would need to ask him if he is happy with that.

Chair: Bernard, that is very useful indeed. Are there any comments or questions?

Q23 **Bob Blackman:** The problem with combining the two debates is that only one person can lead the debate.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Yes, well, there we are. Perhaps you could make it a three-hour debate split into two one-and-a-half hour debates.

Chair: That is always possible, given the importance of the subject matter. I echo the concern, certainly that it is not just military, but political interference across Europe.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Interference in elections. We are definitely seeing interference in the French elections.

Chair: And even, we are told, referendums, but there we go. Thank you very much indeed, Bernard.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Thank you very much. I am supporting the next application.

Chair: There is a lot of mutual support—that's excellent.

Peter Aldous made representations.

Q24 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome, Peter. Your application is on the case for levelling up in the east of England. Over to you.

Peter Aldous: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. It is a pleasure to be before your Committee this afternoon.

The application is for levelling up in the east of England. It comes out of the all-party parliamentary group for the east of England, which I co-chair with Daniel Zeichner. Daniel would like to be here today, but obviously he has Front-Bench commitments for the Opposition, so he cannot co-sponsor the application, but he has indicated that he will speak in the debate.



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The east of England has fairly porous borders. Technically speaking, it is the six counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. We have 33 Back-Bench MPs.

The application comes out of a proposal that we put to Government before the Budget and the spending review, which, from the region's perspective, we would describe as a qualified success, in that we feel that perhaps Government could have done better and that, in some respects, we have been overlooked. The east of England has the second lowest per capita spend of all regions in the country. We feel that we have significant opportunities in our area, but also challenges. Certainly in the coastal areas, such as the area that I represent, there are deep pockets of deprivation and we think perhaps there is a danger of their being overlooked.

As the Suffolk Community Foundation showed in its report on hidden deprivation, there are also pockets of deep deprivation in rural areas. We want to highlight those issues and the region's challenges and opportunities and emphasise the need for infrastructure investment—not just in road and rail, but in digital. The broadband gigabyte roll-out is very important for our area. It is a large geographical area, with populations spread over a wide area, and there is concern that a digital divide might emerge, and we wish to highlight that. There is also a significant need for investment in skills to take advantage of the emerging opportunities in the low carbon economy—offshore wind, nuclear at Sizewell C—and also in food processing and agri-science in places such as Cambridge and Norwich.

We are looking to get in a debate in the immediate aftermath of the comprehensive spending review and the Budget, highlighting where we felt Government could do more, but ahead of the publication of the levelling-up White Paper and the local government funding settlement, which is provisionally due to be announced just before Christmas.

Chair: Thursday, I was told.

Peter Aldous: Yes, but I anticipate we will have the debate on that probably towards the end of January/beginning of February.

That is what predicates the application. Your region is very good at making its voice heard in Westminster. We in East Anglia have perhaps at times hidden our light under a bushel and we wish to replicate you.

Chair: In East Anglia, you have more bushels to hide your light under than we do in the north-east.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** Your application is for a Tuesday morning debate. I am making the assumption—although, given the range of things that you have just covered, almost any Government Department could answer—that you want the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to answer.

Peter Aldous: I think it would be the obvious one to answer, yes.



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Q26 **Bob Blackman:** So would Tuesday 18 January suit?

Peter Aldous: I think my immediate reaction is: yes, it would.

Bob Blackman: That is the right answer.

Chair: Any other questions?

Duncan Baker: What an excellent debate to pick.

Bob Blackman: You haven't got an interest, have you?

Duncan Baker: No.

Chair: Peter, thank you very much indeed.

Ms Nusrat Ghani made representations.

Q27 **Chair:** Next up is Nusrat Ghani. The subject matter of this application is Uyghur Tribunal's judgment in London on 12 December—that the People's Republic of China has committed genocide, crimes against humanity and torture against the Uyghur people. Nusrat, over to you.

Ms Ghani: Last Thursday, the independent Uyghur Tribunal, under the chairmanship of Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, who oversaw the Bosnian genocide investigation, declared that after a year of investigating the evidence, the PRC is responsible for three things: torture, crimes against humanity, and indeed genocide. It focused on biological genocide, physical genocide and cultural genocide.

I have colleagues here supporting the debate, and can always talk about other colleagues who are prepared to put their names to it. The reason I would like to have this debate is that it is quite a milestone moment; there has never been a court or tribunal that has been able to assess the evidence of any ongoing genocide. We in the UK Parliament also had a motion to see whether we felt that the evidence met the definition, and we decided that it did. We had a unanimous vote, which was then reflected in five other Parliaments in Europe.

This judgment is groundbreaking. It validates the decision that parliamentarians took here in the UK Parliament. That evening, the United Nations also put out a statement to say that it would go forward and start investigating some of the evidence put forward in front of the tribunal. It links very much to the UK Parliament. A number of UK parliamentarians have been sanctioned, and a number of reports commissioned by Select Committees here in the UK have been sanctioned.

The UK Parliament has been at the forefront of assessing the evidence and working out how we can try to prevent, and ensure that we are not complicit in, the genocide—for example, by blacklisting firms that are basing their manufacturing in Xinjiang, where the genocide is taking place.



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This is why the timing is very good, if we are able to secure a date in January—if we are able to move forward with this debate. Given that the tribunal took place in London, I think there is an extra responsibility for the UK Parliament to have a say on the discussions that took place and on that profound judgment.

If possible, I would like to have a debate in the main Chamber, which is where we had our previous debate on genocide. I would like it to be a debate where a Division could be called, if necessary. There are a couple of quite practical points that the UK Parliament has already been in favour of, including blacklisting firms that are linked to the area, and putting sanctions on individuals. I have listed Chen Quanguo. I can always reduce the list if there are far too many items. Chen Quanguo is one of the lead players in managing the prison camps. He has already been sanctioned by the United States. The debate is also about ensuring, now that we know, that at the very least we do our due diligence and ensure that we do not have slave-made products on our shelves here in the UK. That is my pitch.

Q28 Bob Blackman: In terms of timing, obviously we have the Christmas recess and then we are back. When, ideally, would you like to hold the debate?

Ms Ghani: If the opportunity was available, I would love it to be on the third Thursday in January. I know that is a tall order.

Chair: Thursday 20 January?

Ms Ghani: Yes. If that date has gone—

Q29 Bob Blackman: Is there a reason for that?

Ms Ghani: Well, having listened to the applications earlier, I believe that the first Thursday has now gone. I think that there is a problem with the second, although I am not quite sure what, but I can go back and find out. Fundamentally, we would take any Thursday in January. We have 15 names here because this is what is required for the list, but you will see from the contribution made in the Chamber last time that I could bring 50 names forward for you, if you needed them.

Q30 Chair: I don't think there is any particular problem with the 13th. We have had a tentative nod from the Government that we will be getting the 6th and the 13th definitely, but it is a nod, you know.

Ms Ghani: I would have loved the 6th but I am anxious there may not be many colleagues here. That is my anxiety. We would need colleagues on all sides, and there is also a security in discussing this issue in the Chamber, because it protects colleagues from any issues from the Chinese Communist party. A number of us have been sanctioned. I think they need the safety and security of being able to debate this in the Chamber.

Q31 Chair: On the 13th, we have already pre-allocated one debate, but we will get two debate slots, so it would be a possibility. Okay?

Ms Ghani: Of course—that would be fantastic.



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Chair: Thank you very much. That is great.

Robert Halfon and **Kim Johnson** made representations.

Q32 **Chair:** Last but not least in what is hardly a marathon session, but a longer than usual session of applications this afternoon, we have Mr Robert Halfon, supported by Ms Kim Johnson, on the effectiveness of Government's education catch-up and mental health recovery programmes. Over to you, and I am sorry to see you did not get your UQ in today.

Robert Halfon: It's okay. I am going to put it in again tomorrow—third day in a row, third time lucky. First, good afternoon. I am very pleased to be here with my colleague Kim Johnson, a member of the Education Committee. I am bidding for a Backbench debate on school closures and the catch-up programme. You may not have received all the names, because there was a problem with the thing, but we have 25 Members who have indicated they want to participate in the debate—senior Labour figures such as Nick Brown, the Liberal Democrat shadow education spokesman, an Independent MP and a DUP MP, as well as a number of Labour and Conservative MPs. We also have the support of the Education Committee, which as you know I chair.

A spectre is haunting our children, the spectre of school closures once again. We do not know what is going to happen in January, and we need to know what the Government plan B is for schools—I would say plan KO, to keep the schools open. We also need to understand the effectiveness of the catch-up programme, because there have been a number of reports, both from the Public Accounts Committee in the House of Commons and from the newspapers, suggesting that the catch-up programme is not reaching the most disadvantaged students. There are also huge regional disparities, with very low take-up in the north-east, for example, but 100% take-up in the south-west. We believe this is a matter of urgency, given what has happened to our young people during lockdown, particularly with their educational attainment, their mental health and safeguarding hazards. We know that poor Arthur, who passed, was not in school, and perhaps it would have been found out if he had been in school.

We believe there should be an urgent debate, and we are asking for a debate in the House of Commons, respecting all the other Members who want debates. Obviously, given the number of Members who want to speak, we would like a three-hour debate, but we would accept one and a half hours, understanding the pressures you face. I will just pass to my colleague Kim, who wants to say something.

Kim Johnson: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, panel; I am really happy to be here to support the Chair of the Education Committee as a Labour party Committee member. We are aware that children have suffered the brunt during this pandemic, and we know that for children in particularly



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disadvantaged areas the educational attainment gap has widened. If we are all interested in levelling up, this is a debate that really needs to happen, to ensure that the funding that has been allocated is going to those in greatest need and has a significant impact.

Q33 Bob Blackman: Your application is for the Chamber. As you will appreciate, Chamber time is very limited. There is, however, a possibility that if you took a 90-minute Tuesday Westminster Hall debate, you could get 11 January. That would probably be the earliest we could allocate to you. Would that be of interest?

Robert Halfon: If you were to grant an hour-and-a-half debate in the House of Commons, if not a three-hour debate, roughly when would it be?

Bob Blackman: There is a queue, which is the problem.

Chair: We make offers to people and they are not always accepted, so time might become available on 13 or 20 January. You probably do not want 6 January.

Robert Halfon: Sadly, most Conservatives will be away on 6 January.

Q34 Chair: The Government allocate us so many days in the year, but they have allocated us a day when they know that half the Members will not be here, which makes life more difficult for us. Those dates are possible, but if you want to be allocated a three-hour slot in Westminster Hall, which would be on a Thursday, you will get three hours. If you get a three-hour slot in the Chamber on a Thursday, you might end up with two and a quarter hours or an hour and 45 minutes because of statements and urgent questions. Wherever you are, you will still have a Government Minister answering the debate. We tend to give priority for Chamber time to debates that have a substantive motion.

Robert Halfon: I am very happy to send a substantive motion to the Committee. I have conferred with my colleague and, given the importance of this debate—millions of families will be interested in this debate—we would prefer to have it in the Chamber. I understand it might end up being an hour and a half instead of three hours, but we would both rather have it in the Chamber if that is still possible.

Q35 Bob Blackman: Reflecting what you said earlier, the problem is that we do not know what is going to happen in January, so we need to have this debate earlier rather than later. Our problem is that, unless you can take 6 January, 11 January is the earliest date you can have. If you were not to get the answers you want from the Minister, the Committee would be sympathetic if you came back to seek another debate. Otherwise, I suspect the debate would not be until February. It is your debate and your application, but that slot is definitely available and will be guaranteed if you take it.

Robert Halfon: I think we still want to stick with the Chamber. I appreciate your kind offer, Bob, and I know the pressures on the Committee—I completely get it—but this is genuinely such a national emergency that it is vital we have the debate in the Chamber.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: That is very much heard and understood. Rob and Kim, thank you very much indeed.