

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 18 January 2022

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Watch the meeting

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

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Jim Shannon made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have five representations, the first of which is from Mr Jim Shannon MP and is on the subject of the persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India. Over to you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mearns, and thank you for giving me a wee minute or two to get my thoughts together. As the Committee knows, I am Chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. This representation is on one of the issues from across the world that has come to my attention. It was not up to the Leader of the House to grant a debate on this issue, but I did ask him about it at business questions, because 2021 was the most violent year for the persecution of Christians in India. There are other ethnic minorities that have been persecuted. It has been of particular concern to me.

Attackers continue their discrimination with impunity, with few fearing the consequences of their actions. Last year saw a reinforcement of and a rise in that persecution and violence and those attacks. I understand that we have a special relationship with India, but I am asking for a debate because I believe that we have responsibilities in this House. We have a special relationship with India, but the fact that these attacks are continuing with impunity really disturbs me. We have a responsibility. When I say "we", I mean that the Government, and the Minister in particular, have a responsibility to ask questions and raise the issue of human rights in the House.

While India has been a key trade partner, its human rights record is important. It is abysmal, to tell you the truth, and cannot be overlooked. The UK supports India with aid, and its human rights record should be part of that process of consideration. With that in mind, I have asked for a debate on this issue, because it is something that absolutely grieves my soul and heart, and Members will know that.

There are quite a few Members of Parliament who have expressed a wish to speak on this issue. The first eight are members of the APPG, which is cross-party. The other five or six Members are from across the parties and include independents as well, so I think we have made a case for a debate. In a respectful way, we will argue that the Minister should chase up this issue with the Indian Government and the ambassador, because it cannot go on. If no action is taken, the persecution will escalate, as it is at this very moment. I do not believe we can let that happen. Thank you.

Chair: You mentioned additional names, Jim. On the application we have got, there are only eight names. If you could give your list of names to James, they will then be on the record.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** You say a report was published. Who published this report?

Jim Shannon: It was the United Christian Forum.



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Q3 **Chair:** You have asked for a Westminster Hall debate. Could that be Tuesday or Thursday, or must it be Tuesday?

Jim Shannon: If you don't mind, could we have a Tuesday debate, please?

Q4 **Chair:** We are then subject to a particular answering Department. I take it that it would be the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office?

Jim Shannon: It does not matter if we do not have the debate immediately, but I would like to have it at the first opportunity and on a Tuesday, if possible. I ask very respectfully, because I know you are always pushed with applications.

Q5 **Patricia Gibson:** May I just say to Jim that last year also Open Doors published a report on this very issue?

Jim Shannon: Tomorrow there will be an Open Doors report via Zoom, which will feature that issue. It was supposed to be physical, but it will be virtual.

Q6 **Patricia Gibson:** But it actually published a separate report on the situation in India.

Chair: If there are no further questions, thank you very much indeed, Jim.

Crispin Blunt made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Next up we have Mr Crispin Blunt, the subject of whose application is humanist marriages in England and Wales.

Crispin Blunt: This is becoming a depressingly old chestnut because the principle was conceded for England in the debate around the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. An amendment was presented in the House of Lords to enable humanist marriages. The Government invited the proposer to withdraw the amendment, for which there was almost certainly a significant majority, probably in both Houses. The Government said that they would come forward with their own proposals. That was in 2013. Meanwhile, in Scotland, humanist marriages became available in 2005.

A humanist marriage is where you have a humanist celebrant who is able to conduct the service. It is a legal marriage for the state's purposes, and the service is conducted according to the beliefs of, and is built around, the individuals. The concerning thing is that the Government have retreated now, obfuscating, and the reasons that progress has not been made and a proposal has not come forward from the Government have changed, having pursued them over the course of the last eight years. The last serious explanation was that the Government wanted to do a proper, full-scale reform of marriage law, with the Law Commission producing a report. The Law Commission is obviously not exactly terribly speedy.

We know what the statutory instrument looks like because the Government took the powers in the 2013 Act to do this. There is no great mystery about what is engaged here, not least because 22% of marriages in Scotland, where it became legal in 2005, are humanist marriages—they



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have just gone past all Christian marriages. It has not been at the expense of marriage; it has actually meant more people getting married, as they have the opportunity to have a service that reflects their own beliefs. It has been a storming success in Scotland. In Ireland, it has now got to 9%, having been legalised significantly later.

The last time the Government defended their position in court, in a case called *Harrison*, they said, "We're not going to do piecemeal reform." That was in 2020. In the summer of last year, they presented the latest piecemeal reforms of marriage when they changed the rules about where you can get married, in terms of outdoors and everything else. The judgment in the *Harrison* case was quite explicit that the Secretary of State cannot go on forever just delaying. It is the view of all the colleagues who have supported this application—there is very widespread support across all parties—that the time has come, and the Government have completely run out of road.

This is stopping thousands and thousands of people having the sort of marriage that they want, celebrated in the way that they want. It is very difficult to see any harms associated with this. It has become a bit of a racket for the registry offices, because if you want to have the service solemnised under the law at your humanist wedding, you have to have a humanist celebrant. Then you have to have a registrar who comes out at very considerable expense to do it at the same time, splitting the service, or you have to have two separate events. It is long overdue, Chair, and I hope that your colleagues agree. The demand for it could probably sustain whatever debate you think would be appropriate for this issue.

Q8 **Chair:** You have 26 Members who have signed the application, but you have ticked all the boxes, from every perspective: Chamber, Westminster Hall, Tuesday Westminster Hall—

Crispin Blunt: I wanted to leave it to the judgment of the Committee as to what you felt was appropriate.

Chair: Given the number of speakers you have, it would seem to me that 90 minutes would not seem appropriate, because they would get about a minute and a half each or something, once the initial speeches were out of the way.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** This is more my ignorance than anything else: what is the impediment to organising such an arrangement between consenting adults?

Crispin Blunt: The humanist celebrant is not a registrar for the purposes of the law, so it is not a marriage. You have an event, but it is just a party.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Is it the celebrant? If you get married in a place of worship, that is allowed, because it is licensed.

Crispin Blunt: The power to grant the marriage licence is in the hands of the appropriate cleric of the different denominations. Now it is quite



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confusing where you can get married in a faith setting, because there are different rules for different faiths, but humanists still cannot.

Q11 **Patricia Gibson:** I am genuinely curious. This links to Bob's question. Is it the fact that, legally, humanists have not been certificated to carry it out? What is the impediment to allowing that?

Crispin Blunt: Passing the appropriate statutory instrument, of which I already have a draft available.

Q12 **Patricia Gibson:** But what is the impediment to passing that?

Crispin Blunt: The history of this is that in 2013 the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act is passed. The undertaking is given in the Lords that the Government will bring forward their own proposals. The Prime Minister of the time then feels that he has pissed off—pardon my language, Chair—irritated the faith lobby enough with the Act, so this is not presented again by him; he is, "Not now."

Then, there was a view that the daughter of the manse might not have been quite as—there might have been people within the No. 10 machine who had a religious view of this or were important in this; I don't know. There is also natural bureaucratic inertia. It has never been quite the right moment to bring it forward. It has simply not had the right momentum behind it, which is why the debate is important.

Then, in the light of the fact that the last vestige of a legal defence to the human rights cases that are now being brought by UK humanists have been stripped away, it was, "Let's do serious reform all at once, with the Law Commission doing it", but we had piecemeal reform only six months ago. So, it is an opportunity to explore.

I really do not know the answer. I am guessing why it has not come forward. It would seem to create such a super service for people who are really invested in it. The Scottish experience is a huge success.

Q13 **Chair:** What about the timeliness of getting the debate heard? Is there any urgency?

Crispin Blunt: There is no particular date in mind. It is the latest iteration of what is now a tiresomely long campaign to get something done that actually looks terribly straightforward, with no arguments against it.

Chair: It is a pity that Valentine's Day is during the recess, but there we go. If no one else has a question, thank you very much—

Crispin Blunt: I can circulate this if the Committee is interested, but in 2018 the all-party parliamentary humanist group did a report on this, which you can find online. I hope you will be interested.

Chair: Thanks a lot.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Richard Drax, John Redwood, Philip Dunne and **Kevin Hollinrake** made representations.



Q14 **Chair:** With the bit well and truly champed, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown. Good afternoon, Sir Geoffrey. It is lovely to see you. The title of your application is "Giving food production a greater priority in the new environmental land management scheme." Over to you.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: First, I do apologise to you and your Committee, Mr Chairman. I didn't mean to in any way supersede Mr Shannon or Mr Blunt—I assumed we had been given a time slot. I do apologise.

Chair: No slight taken, Sir Geoffrey. None at all.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Before I utter another word, I should start by declaring my interest in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as an active farmer. This is a really timely debate because it is literally about how much food we produce in this country, how our land is managed and how many farmers will survive. It is a matter of fundamental importance for rural areas. It stems from a hearing held last year by the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am the deputy Chairman, which produced a comprehensive report a week ago that received quite a lot of media coverage. Indeed, I wrote an article on it for *The Sunday Telegraph*.

I receive many emails from people all around the country thanking me for what I have done in raising this matter on the Public Accounts Committee. The environmental land management scheme proposes taking at least 30,000 hectares for forestry and environmental schemes. It is my belief, as was mentioned in the PAC report, that if we take that amount of land out of production, the amount of food produced by farmers in this country will drop. As a consequence, we will end up importing more food, and we know what happened when we started importing energy: we will be liable to not only price fluctuations but, much more worryingly, shortages of food and certain commodities. I don't think any of our constituents would thank us if we ended up with that, and I believe it is quite possible that it might happen.

The reason that this debate is so timely is that the Government are, at this very moment, finalising the details of this scheme for 2023 and 2024, when it is due to come fully into operation. It is a very timely point for the House to have this debate. It is not only about the amount of food we produce, how we manage our countryside and how much is going to be devoted to land schemes—rewilding, forestry and so on—there are other important issues in it. As I say, I believe that small and tenant farmers are particularly vulnerable under this scheme and that they need to be given greater consideration. The average profitability of farms in England without any subsidies is just £22,800, after all the investment and labour they put in. The sector is very vulnerable anyway. Some of the money being offered under these schemes is not going to get a terrific take-up unless farmers feel they can make a profit.

Finally, the average age of farming is 55. My son runs my farm, and I know from my situation that whatever we might think, Mr Chairman, the younger generation are much more adaptable at adopting new technology,



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and therefore much more productive than the older generation—such as myself—because they are adopting this new technology more readily.

All in all, I think it is a very timely debate, and I hope the Committee will consider this request worthwhile. I have currently got an application with 11 Members on it—slightly updated from the original application I gave you—including the Chairman of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Neil Parish.

Philip Dunne: As Chairman of another Select Committee—the Environmental Audit Committee—I also support this application, and not only for the reasons mentioned by Sir Geoffrey. I should declare that I am a farmer as well, as is known in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Our Committee has done a lot of work on water quality—as you know, because you were helpful in granting us a statement last week. I think that the measures that farmers are going to have to take to reduce the causes of diffuse pollution from agriculture through water courses will need to be aligned with the potential support available through the ELMS, such as fencing off ground away from water courses so that livestock are not—frankly—defecating into rivers. That needs to be seen as a coherent whole, and I would like to make that point to Ministers on the Floor of the House.

Richard Drax: I must declare an interest, as per the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as a farmer myself. I have set up a farming organisation, and for the last 11 years in Dorset, every quarter we meet and discuss farming issues, so it is not just me saying this: this is a large part of the farming community in Dorset.

They are all unanimously concerned about the future, and the problem with ELMS and what the Government are trying to do is that at the moment, there is a gap between the basic payment that we all receive and ELMS. If the money continues to disappear without any clarity on where ELMS is going, this gap is getting bigger and bigger, and the small farmers—as you have heard Geoffrey say—are particularly vulnerable. They cannot hang on for long: the profits they make are tiny, and if Jeremy Clarkson has done anything in his life, he has certainly made people aware of how vulnerable farming is and the risks that it faces, because unlike any other business, we are entirely reliant on the weather.

Of course, the aim of these moneys we receive is to keep food cheap and make sure there is plenty of it. What the Government are doing, as Geoffrey has said, is endangering food production, and therefore food supply. In the event—let's face it, we are an island nation—of a strategic catastrophe, which is not beyond the realms of possibility, disease or war or whatever, we have to be able to produce our own food. Hitler did a pretty good job in trying to starve us, and I would have thought we should have learned a lesson that for food production in our country, self-sufficiency as much as we can is vital.

Kevin Hollinrake: Obviously, I concur with and endorse all the comments that have been made by my colleagues here, but just to put it on the



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record, I am not a farmer, but my father was. Food production is not just under threat from ELMS: solar farms are basically occupying huge swathes of productive farmland around this country. I have got an application in my constituency near Malton. They particularly affect tenant farms, because the rewards are massively increased compared with farming to put land under solar farms, so we are going to see more and more of our productive agricultural land used for other purposes than producing food, which is a huge threat, as has been described by my colleagues.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Chairman, if I may, I think that Richard Holden would like to say something, if he is allowed to.

Mr Holden: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I just want to basically back up exactly what my colleagues have said. One other thing that has come from my constituency, in the more marginal land particularly—in the north Pennines—is a real concern around the shift towards planting trees and farms being taken over in that regard as well, squeezing it from all different angles with the lower payments and the gearing towards certain sectors. We know that the ELMS schemes have not been brought forwards fully yet. I know that is also a concern shared by some of my Welsh colleagues as well, who have seen some of that land turned over in recent years, and that essential food production side of things just seems to have been sidelined, which is why I am supporting Sir Geoffrey today.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Chair, I think that Jim Shannon from the DUP, who is now one of my supporters on the list, would like to say something.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, I just want to support Geoffrey and all the other colleagues. I also declare an interest as a farmer in Northern Ireland: I own the land. I do recognise that the rural community are concerned about the changes that are taking place, and it is really important that we bring all regions of the United Kingdom together on this issue, which I think we can do through the debate. As farmers, we love the land—the land is part of our blood—but at the same time, we want to leave it for the generation that comes after, so for us, I think that is what this issue is, to leave it right for a family. Geoffrey mentioned a son, who he says can farm better than him. I do not believe that for one second, by the way, but I think it does illustrate the importance that the land has to us personally, and that it has for our sons and daughters who come after.

Chair: Sir Geoffrey, you have just played the trump card, bringing in the Committee's season ticket holder in terms of applications.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I saved the best until last.

Chair: I cannot remember if we have ever refused one of Jim's applications, much to the chagrin of people in other parts of this House, but there we go.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** Briefly, Sir Geoffrey, while you may have provided extra names, at the moment, it is all Conservative names on your application.



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Obviously, we want to see a debate with reasonable balance between the different parties. Have you added any Opposition names, other than the DUP—who I do not regard as the Opposition anyway, by the way?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I have not at the moment. However, I was aware that you might well say that, and if you are favourably disposed towards giving us a debate on this subject, I will undoubtedly be able to go away and find some Opposition Members.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** That leads me on to the second point I wanted to ask you about: you have put in your application that you basically want a 90-minute debate whenever you can get it. We have a potential slot on Tuesday 1 February; I presume that EFRA will be the answering Department. Were you to furnish us with a list of extra names, would you want the slot on 1 February, which might well be the first one you can get?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I think that would be a very satisfactory outcome. I would undertake to use all my energies next week to furnish the Committee with some Opposition names.

Q17 **Chair:** You do not have to wait until next week. The application is in—it is live—and can be added to at any time. If you can get names secured, please add them and we will take that onboard when we meet next week and make that determination. Thank you very much indeed.

Bob Blackman made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Next we welcome Bob “Two Name Tags” Blackman to address the Committee. The title of the application is “UK-India Trade Negotiations”.

Bob Blackman: Thank you. I declare my interest as co-chairman of the Indo-British all-party parliamentary group. I make this application for two reasons. First, the trade deal started negotiations last Thursday and negotiations between the UK and India are going to go on for some time. Trade between our two great countries was worth £23 billion in 2019, and we have agreed to double that by 2030. This is clearly a very significant deal. Other people have been trying to do a trade deal with India for a very long time: the EU has tried since 1997 and not got anywhere and America has put a trade deal with India back on the backburner. This is not an easy trade deal to do.

It is important that we, as Backbenchers, get some input into what we want to achieve from the trade deal. At the moment, the Government have not put out a document, although there was an all-MPs circular detailing that the talks had launched. However, it did not set out the aims and objectives. It is important for MPs to have an input into those opportunities.

There are severe restrictions on exports. If I were to take the Scottish view, for example, at the moment exporting Scotch whisky to India incurs a tariff of 150%. That is an enormous burden on one of our biggest exports to India. We could go through the other elements of opening up Indian commerce to UK involvement.



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The second reason why I want to have this debate is that I raised this issue at business questions, and I was bounced back to this Committee—I do not think there is any prospect of there being a debate during Government time. I have put a divisible motion, which I do not think will be offensive to anyone, down for a debate in the Chamber. I think that because this trade deal is so significant a debate should be held in the Chamber. Since I started completing the application on Friday morning, I have managed to gain eight names on the list and people are trickling in, having been invited.

I would ask you to add this application to the list. I will continue encouraging people to submit their names, particularly from the Opposition parties. Patricia, could you lean on your colleagues in the SNP to speak in this debate, as there will be a huge advantage to Scotland in getting a suitable deal? That would be very helpful. I rest my case.

Q19 **Chair:** Any questions, colleagues? Sorry, when did you say you would like to try to get this in, Bob?

Bob Blackman: I don't mind. I do not want to try to influence the Committee on when such a debate takes place, but the earlier the better so that Back Benchers can have a say about what we are saying over in New Delhi.

Q20 **Chair:** You used Scotch whisky as an example and you said it had a 150% tariff. Is that 150% on duty paid or duty unpaid before it is exported? Is it cheaper than it is in this country?

Bob Blackman: No, no, it is very expensive in India. If you ever go to India, my strong advice is that when you arrive at the airport, you go through duty free and buy some bottles of whisky, because as an individual you can take them in for your own consumption, rather than paying for whisky in a hotel.

Q21 **Chair:** Am I right in thinking, Patricia, that the duty on Scotch whisky and spirit production is about 80% of the retail cost?

Patricia Gibson: I think so.

Bob Blackman: There is a brief, which I have not brought with me, from the Scotch Whisky Association, about the benefits that this trade deal could bring.

Q22 **Chair:** So the tariff that goes on is over and above the purchase tax?

Bob Blackman: It is. India produces its own whisky, which is a very good whisky but an impediment. In Indian high society Scotch whisky is a luxury that they show off about, frankly, when they bring Scotch whisky into the country.

Patricia Gibson: Is this an example of protectionism by India?

Bob Blackman: It is. One of the problems about India is that they are very keen on trade deals that enable their economy to continue to grow. One of the things you have to commit to is making things in India, as well



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as importing them, rather than just allowing goods to flow. Equally, they have a very young, mobile population, so they are able to be quite light-footed on developing new businesses and new products in India.

There are huge trade barriers on exporting to India, and they are very reluctant to remove them. There has to be a quid pro quo on what happens. For example, there will have to be new arrangements on immigration from India, because at the moment the barriers for Indian citizens to come to this country are quite high.

Chair: Okay. Thank you, Bob. That is much appreciated. You may return to your place.