



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 1 February 2022

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-23

Representations

[I](#): Bob Seely.

[II](#): Marion Fellows.

[III](#): Owen Thompson.

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 a number of applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Bob Seely and is on forecasting and modelling during the covid-19 pandemic. Bob, over to you.

Bob Seely: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Mearns. Good afternoon to you all, and thank you for listening to me again.

We had a one-hour debate on this a few weeks ago, but I felt at the time, as I think many of our colleagues did, that a one-hour debate was not adequate. The first thing I want to say is that this is not about covid scepticism but about questioning science and modelling, which I think we have a right to do, considering how important it is and that we should be living in a transparent democracy. I am a big fan of science, and there has been some fantastic science during the covid pandemic, as we know from the injections we have all been having. However, there have been some justifiable questions about the modelling. I feel very strongly about this, but I accept that other people either do not feel strongly about it or may be nervous about debating it because it is seen as being disloyal to the NHS and disloyal to science. It is not, in my opinion.

There is now a growing body of evidence, which I am very happy to send to you. At least 20 academic papers have questioned the science of modelling, but there have also been some papers that have questioned the science of modelling for foot and mouth disease. There were a couple of peer-reviewed academic studies of foot and mouth, and what surprised me was the extent to which the criticism of the modelling of foot and mouth mirrors the modelling that has taken place for covid.

At the beginning, when we went into lockdown with the prediction of 500,000 deaths, we might not have had much of a choice, given what other countries in the world were doing, what China was doing and so forth, although I note that Sweden went down a different route. But after that first summer and since then, there has been a growing body of evidence to question the efficiency and accuracy of modelling. I do not attack the modelling at all, because I am not a scientist. I have a PhD, but it ain't in modelling—that's for sure. But I quote other scientists and mathematicians who are now saying that we have a problem.

Whether it is the most recent prediction of 6,000 deaths a day being a good result when we hit the top at 260 or 320 over a seven-day average, whether it was Swedish academics looking at the Imperial College modelling, or whether it was an assessment of the modelling that took place during foot and mouth, there are serious questions to be asked, and I would like to use the Floor of the House to respectfully—as I did in Westminster Hall—challenge and question what has been going on and what learnings we can succeed in making. I am very respectful of scientists, even the ones who have got it wrong, but, frankly, whether you



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agree with me or not, I think it is strongly in the public interest that we share this information on the Floor of the House.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** You have put this down as a divisible motion but, actually, the motion is, "That this House has considered", so it is a general debate.

Bob Seely: I suspect so, yes.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Is there anything you actually want the House or the Government to do? You have talked about considering it. You have had a Westminster Hall debate already, as you have said. You clearly have not got the answers you would like to have received. I wonder whether you would consider changing the motion to be one that requires the Government to do something about this.

Bob Seely: I want everyone to be able to join this, so people can come and defend the modelling. A divisible motion that is divisive is not necessarily a good thing for a Backbench debate—that is my experience, but you tell me if that is wrong, because you have much greater experience of this.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** No, that's a good debate, because people can speak for and against a motion, as opposed to everyone agreeing with each other on the same topic.

Bob Seely: Okay. In that case, yes. I would like a Government-instructed, peer-reviewed study of the modelling. That ain't going to be done by Parliament, but it is something that we could ask for.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** It is your application—it stands in your name and that of others. You can revise the motion as you wish.

Bob Seely: Then it is my ignorance of the scope of motions for Backbench Business debates. The priority for me is getting this talked about. I am not sceptical about the power of Back Benchers and I am not sceptical about the power of Parliament, but I am realistic that the Government do not always listen. Yes, for sure, I would like a Government-instructed study of the science of modelling. I think it is in the public interest. But there are some people who would object to that, I am sure.

Q6 **Chair:** The thing is, Bob, we are booked up until the half-term recess. Your application is in. If you want to add a divisible motion to it, you can do that, and then we can consider that divisible motion to see if we can allocate you some time after the half-term recess.

Bob Seely: Do you wish for a divisible motion to be attached to this?

Chair: No, it is your property.

Bob Blackman: However, divisible motions often get greater priority in our order of debates.

Bob Seely: Okay, thank you.



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Q7 **Chair:** While we have you here, Bob—

Bob Seely: Yes, I was going to ask you about the Russia and China one.

Chair: You will be aware that there was a fairly lengthy debate about Russia's grand strategy, which was sponsored by Bernard Jenkin. I know that you might feel some sort of unease that we gave that precedence over your debate on Russia and China, but it seemed pertinent from our perspective at the time. Would you still want that debate to go forward in the form you applied for it, or would you like to finesse that in any way?

Bob Seely: I don't think I mind losing out to Sir Bernard. I am tempted to say I will take your advice. Can I put an argument to you? If a war kicks off, we will have an emergency debate, probably Government-led. If not, I would put in for a SO 24 debate, but the Speaker says, "If you are putting in for an SO 24 debate, it is not going to be granted because the Government will already have made time for their own emergency debate."

I do think right now to be debating Russia and China is a good thing. I also think that it needs to be spaced out. There is no point having the same debate two weeks after Bernard's.

We are focusing very much on Russia at the moment. China is about to have the Olympics. It is about to show off its different forms of hybrid power. Taiwan still feels that it is very much under threat. If you are saying, "We advise just another debate on Russia, or a separate debate on China," I will almost certainly take that on board, because I value your advice on what we should be doing. You have a very good idea of what is in the wider parliamentary interest.

Towards the end of the Olympics, in two or three weeks' time, that might be a good time to tie these two major powers together. China will have been in the news. I am sure there will be more on the Uyghurs in that time as well. If the Russians haven't yet invaded or haven't yet upped the ante in some way by moving into the annexed territories, I still think it is worthwhile to combine those debates.

A final point on that: there are similar themes that we need to be taking on board about how to deal with both these rising authoritarian states who use a full spectrum of state tools, albeit with a slightly different ingredient set. There is still a lot that unites it, although I understand that the focus very much at the moment is on Ukraine, but I am happy, frankly, to be advised by you, as ever.

Chair: Thoughts, colleagues?

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** I don't know if you know, but we have already scheduled a debate provisionally, dependent on getting time from the Government, on the position in Taiwan.

Bob Seely: Taiwan—Alicia Kearns's debate.

Bob Blackman: So a certain aspect of what you are saying is covered.



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Obviously, there is increasing pressure on Taiwan from China, so there is that element. Equally, we don't know what the situation will be in Ukraine going forward. At any time, things could erupt.

Bob Seely: Do you want me to put in another application?

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** No, we don't want another application. You have got an application, it is live, and it is on our list to allocate. The issue is, do you want us still to proceed with that allocation?

Bob Seely: Yes, I would love you to. If you are saying, change the name to Russia and Ukraine and you can do it in maybe three weeks—

Q10 **Chair:** Given the fact we already have an application on Taiwan that would be immediately before the recess, if we are allocated time and we can find time at the end of February, would that be ideal?

Bob Seely: Yes. What on earth is going to be happening in the world in the next two or three months? I am not quite sure.

Chair: What's going to be happening in the next 10 minutes? Bob, that is much appreciated. Thank you very much indeed.

Bob Seely: Thank you very much for your time, as ever.

Chair: A real pleasure.

Marion Fellows made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Next up, we have an application from our friend and colleague Marion Fellows on the UK's commitment to the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Marion, over to you.

Marion Fellows: Thank you very much, Chair. I have brought this forward because the second ever global disability conference is going to take place in our recess. Unfortunately, I cannot attend it, but I will be attending the regional summit. I think it is really important that the House hears what the Government are going to do on this.

We hear a lot about global Britain and its importance, and about all the work that is done on foreign aid. It is really important that people with disabilities—disabled people—do not get lost in the mix. The Government have already ratified the UNCRPD, and I think it would be really useful to tease out from the Minister what else is going on. They have already made reference to it in the UK disability strategy, and there is wide interest across the House. I have just been to a debate on the disability strategy and disability assessment in the UK, but I think we really need to start putting this into some sort of global context, especially as we are trying to recover from covid and countries across the world are in exactly the same position.

As you can see, I have got a wide range of names. I found it more difficult, unfortunately, to get more Conservative MPs to add their names.



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They have all been quite busy recently, so I did not like to go around pushing folk too hard. I really think it is important that the House hears what the Government's strategy is on this and finds out exactly what they are going to do with the ratification.

Q12 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Am I right in thinking that you have added some names to the list that we had?

Marion Fellows: Yes, I added Ben Spencer, and I think there were another couple of Conservative MPs—my apologies, Chair; I have just come from Westminster Hall and I cannot remember. Yes—Mark Menzies.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** You have said in your application that ideally you want the debate before the February recess.

Marion Fellows: I realise now that that is not going to be possible. However, somebody from the Government will have taken part, and that will give us more to ask the Minister about. The date itself is not crucial. It would have been nice beforehand, and if I am still here in four years' time I will make sure the application is in a bit earlier, but I think it would be useful to tease it out further.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** What would be the answering Department?

Marion Fellows: The FCDO?

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** We think it is possibly the Department for Work and Pensions.

Marion Fellows: Because of the disability strategy? I took a 50:50 chance, because it could be either. I think you probably know better than me, in this instance.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** I don't know that, but this is your application. The reason I asked was this: how would Tuesday 22 February suit you? That is basically the Tuesday after recess.

Marion Fellows: That would be fine.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Okay. That would be 9.30 am to 11 am.

Marion Fellows: All right; I do a lot of those. I would prefer something slightly more sociably timed, but that's fine. It is important that we have it, and I won't turn down the opportunity to bring this forward, no matter what time you give me.

Chair: It's a possibility that that offer may be made to you, Marion. Thank you very much indeed.

Owen Thompson made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Owen. Your application is on war pensions and armed forces compensation scheme payments. Over to you.



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Owen Thompson: By way of saying how this came to me, I had a constituent get in touch to raise concerns that they had with their own situation, with regard to trying to get an uprating in their compensation payments. Sometimes as an MP, when you get a case like that, you start to look at it and you have your engagement with the Department, but something just does not feel right. As we did a bit more digging and as we looked into it a bit more, it became very clear that there were a number of issues with this as we progressed with it.

It now appears that there are in excess of 2,000 or 2,500 individuals facing similar issues with extended delays in trying to get a resolution to their claims. My constituent has been battling for over 10 years to try and get a resolution, having sent the same documents to the MOD 50 times. I think at the moment there are something like 1,500 pages missing from their evidence bundle. That is just one case: when you multiply that out by multiple thousands—

Q19 **Chair:** Is this the case that you raised at business questions?

Owen Thompson: Yes, it is. That was where we came from, and we started to think that this is actually much bigger than an individual situation of one constituent having a really difficult time and trying to get a resolution to the case they brought to us. I raised it at business questions over the last two weeks in different formats, because in the time from raising it the first time, I got an answer to a written question I had put in, where I found out that the MOD does not even know how many veterans are currently giving up the applications that they have in. This situation might be far larger than it seems, so I thought, "This is a topic that really needs to be aired. It really needs a good look at it, and ultimately we need a review of the entire process around how these claims are assessed, and how Veterans UK is looking at this and the whole process around it."

I am pleased that I have got a good cross-party spread in the support for the application so far. I appreciate that I probably need some more Conservative Members to back it, and I am reaching out to try and secure them. We are having a conversation with a number of people around that, and I have also reached out to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on veterans to see what more we can do to work with them.

Taking this to the Floor of the House to raise these issues would be very important, but in many ways, that is simply the next step of what is potentially a much bigger thing that we need to do to look at this and actually get resolution for veterans. It is one of those issues where, regardless of what position we are coming from politically, we can all get behind the fact that we need to be doing everything we can to ensure that our veterans are getting the support they deserve.

Q20 **Chair:** If you were to secure a debate, you have mentioned that you understand that you would need further Conservative names. Obviously, you've got Johnny Mercer on board, so talk to Johnny and see if he can help you do that. How urgently would you want this debate? As you are



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probably aware from the previous discussions, we haven't any time to allocate prior to the February recess.

Owen Thompson: I absolutely appreciate that. I am obviously in the hands of the Committee; I would welcome an opportunity at the earliest possible opportunity, but I also appreciate that there are significant demands on the time that the Committee has available, so I am very happy to work within that, realising that I've also got a job to do in working with others who have supported it to make sure we get those extra names.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously you recognise the need for extra Government names. Johnny Mercer is obviously a key one for you, as you have said, and I think it is a particular issue. Are there any particular time pressures on this? I know you have raised it a couple of times, but is there anything—

Owen Thompson: Obviously, we've got people who have been battling a system for over a decade. That is in one situation alone, and I know that there are countless others in similar situations, so for them, trying to get a resolution as quickly as possible is ideal. However, "as soon as is practical" is not unreasonable. It is not that we must have it within the next two or three weeks, but having it at the earliest opportunity would be ideal.

Q22 **Nigel Mills:** You have put in a request for a divisible motion in the Chamber. If you could get time in Westminster Hall quicker, would you be tempted to have a general debate without the motion, or are you wedded to the fact that you want a motion to be passed?

Owen Thompson: In some ways, having the debate earlier, yes—but I think on this one, it is important that the divisible motion is there, because we are asking for the Government to carry out a review of the process. That is a pretty fundamental part of what I think needs to happen here, so I would be willing for it to take a bit longer to be able to get to that position. I think it is important that we have the chance to make that point.

Q23 **Patricia Gibson:** Relating to what you have just said, given the scale of the problem you have outlined, I think the status of the Chamber is entirely appropriate here. It has just popped into my head that there are a number of people on the Government side of the House who I think would sign this, because I can remember those who stand up for veterans quite frequently. They would be happy to sign this, I think.

Owen Thompson: Absolutely. I have been reaching out to a number of folk, and I know that there are always pressures on time and actually catching these things. The lack of Divisions in the last few days has made it a challenge to physically catch people, which in some ways is the easiest way to do it, because you all know how emails can come in: "Please support this." "I'll look at that later." I do get where we are at, but I am confident that it will not be too much of a challenge to get the additional names that we are looking for, because the subject is as it is. I think it is something that many Members would have something to say about.



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Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Owen. I think that is all from us this afternoon. It is good to see you, and thank you very much for coming in.

Just for the record, colleagues, we had another application this afternoon from Caroline Nokes, which is for a debate on International Women's Day, but since 16 November we have already had on the stocks an application on International Women's Day from Maria Miller, so I think that must have registered in the fact that we did not want two applications for a debate on the same day on the same subject. I am just saying that for the record. Thank you very much indeed, and that concludes our public utterances today.