

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 5 July 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 July 2016.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Wendy Morton; Gavin Newlands; Mr David Nuttall; Jess Phillips.

Questions 1-18

Witnesses

Jim Shannon

Kevin Hollinrake

Tom Elliott



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This afternoon we have two applications, the first being that of Mr Jim Shannon on persecution of religious minorities in the middle east and its effect on the United Kingdom. Over to you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: First, I make an apology for Fiona Bruce because she had also hoped to attend. I think she has got held up somewhere; but if she arrives, she arrives and if she does not, she asked me to go ahead. This issue is something that Members will know is very close to my heart in relation to this House. I am chair of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief. I am also chair of the APPG on Pakistan minorities. There are issues that I am very concerned with. This is something that Fiona and I have been discussing for some time: the persecution of religious minorities in the middle east.

I am very conscious of time and that we might get called to a Division, but I will look quickly at the countries in the middle east where these issues are important. In Iraq, rated second in the World Watch List of places where Christians are persecuted immensely, in a population of 37.5 million, 250,000 are Christians. It is forbidden for Muslims to leave Islam to be Christians and believers often hide their faith. Afghanistan is ranked fourth in the World Watch List; in a population of 33 million there are just a few thousand Christians. Again, three South African Christians working for a relief organisation were killed when their guest house in Kabul was attacked. Syria, ranked fifth in the World Watch List, has a population of 18.6 million with 770,000 Christians and 1 million Christians displaced in Syria—therefore, the impact upon us in the UK is one we are very conscious of. Even though the Government is sympathetic to Christianity, conversion from Islam is illegal.

Sudan, ranked eighth in the World Watch List, has a population of 41.2 million and 2 million are Christians. Two pastors were arrested and charged with various crimes including conspiracy and espionage. Twelve Christian girls were arrested by the morality police for not abiding by sharia dress codes and two churches were demolished by the Government. Iran, which is ranked ninth in the World Watch List, has a population of 80 million, 475,000 of whom are Christians. Converting from Islam is punishable by death—life imprisonment for women—in Iran and 108 Christians were arrested just last year. In Libya, which is ranked 10th on the World Watch List, out of some 6.3 million there are 20,000 Christians only. Migrant Christians are allowed to practise their faith in Libya but many have paid the ultimate price—many have been murdered for their faith.

Q2 **Chair:** Jim, I think we've got the gist.

Jim Shannon: That's the last one, you will be glad to hear. I just wanted to outline the top ones that were important for us. We are concerned about the impact upon the UK. The group that I chair just did a report

Comment [HG]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="29 June 2016"
ServerTime="00:00:00"
ServerTimeZone="00:00:00"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:30:24"
ServerTimeZone="14:30:24"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:31:01"
ServerTimeZone="14:31:01"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:32:09"
ServerTimeZone="14:32:09"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:32:33"
ServerTimeZone="14:32:33"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:32:46"
ServerTimeZone="14:32:46"
LocalTime="GMT" />



HOUSE OF COMMONS

very recently on fleeing persecution and asylum claims in the UK on religious freedom grounds. We will be tying this in with that issue as well. In the paper that the organisation on the freedom of religious belief brought forward, we made 10 recommendations. We are keen to pursue those recommendations with the Minister responsible.

I have managed to gauge support from all parties in the Chamber—Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, SDLP, SNP, Independents and, of course, my own party the DUP. We are very keen to have an opportunity to address this issue in Westminster Hall on a day that is suitable to the Committee—not this side of the summer. We are happy to have it in September or October.

Q3 **Chair:** You would rather have the debate post the summer recess?

Jim Shannon: October time would be nice.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Jim, you have asked for either the Chamber or Westminster Hall, but you have not suggested that you could take a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday. That is in our gift and we could offer 19 July. If you were offered that, would you take it?

Jim Shannon: That's a Tuesday, isn't it?

Bob Blackman: It is.

Jim Shannon: Yes, I probably would. I didn't expect to get one before the July recess—that's why I never even asked for it. But yes.

Q5 **Chair:** We have a number of applications on the stocks, Jim, but they don't fit the bill of the answering Departments for that week, so there is a possibility that you could be offered that date.

Jim Shannon: Yes, I'd jump at it.

Q6 **Kevin Foster:** Obviously, it is a rare treat to have you here today. Would it be you or Fiona who led the debate, if we did it on that date?

Jim Shannon: On this one, I would lead. Fiona led the last one. We work together as a team.

Q7 **Chair:** Do you spin a coin?

Jim Shannon: Yes—she always wins. She says, "You lead on this one." So that's where we are.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else? That's fine, Jim. Thank you very much for your application. Good afternoon. It was a delight to see you once again.

Kevin Hollinrake and **Tom Elliott** made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Kevin, the application is for the universal service obligation—USO—and rural areas. That is broadband.

Kevin Hollinrake: Absolutely. The primary reason for bringing this debate forward is its huge importance. It is clearly a massive business priority—the Institute of Directors specified this as its No. 1 business

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:33:26"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:26"

Comment [TA]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:33:54"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:54"

Comment [JL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:33:50"
ServerTimeZone="14:33:50"

Comment [TA]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:34:25"
ServerTimeZone="14:34:25"

Comment [TA]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:34:24"
ServerTimeZone="14:34:24"

Comment [TA]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:34:26"
ServerTimeZone="14:34:26"

Comment [TA]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:34:26"
ServerTimeZone="14:34:26"

Comment [TA]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:34:53"
ServerTimeZone="14:34:53"

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:34:48"
ServerTimeZone="14:34:48"

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:35:02"
ServerTimeZone="14:35:02"

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:35:07"
ServerTimeZone="14:35:07"

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:35:07"
ServerTimeZone="14:35:07"

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:35:55"
ServerTimeZone="14:35:55"



HOUSE OF COMMONS

priority. I think most people would see that we need superfast broadband rolled out across the country, particularly to those hard-to-reach areas, because it is seen now as a fourth utility.

The general feeling of the importance of this is reflected in the number of supporters we have. We have cross-party support and 30 people already wanting to speak in this debate. If they all had a very short time to speak, that would take a considerable length of time, so we need a three-hour time slot to be able to speak to this issue at the right length. In a recent Westminster Hall debate that I spoke in—not that recent actually; it was some months ago—you could hardly speak because so many people were interested in getting in to talk about their particular position on broadband.

Of course, the Digital Economy Bill was announced in the Queen's Speech. The universal service obligation forms a key part of that, so the issue is very timely as well. A lot of people have expressed their interest in speaking in this debate who have huge experience from a technical perspective, from an industry perspective and from a business perspective. It has been quite interesting, following some of the recent debates about a new Prime Minister and a new Conservative party leader, to hear the discussion about infrastructure. This is a huge part of the infrastructure challenge that we need to meet.

I think the timing of this is critical to inform the debate. Like a number of people, I think it is an opportune time to stand back from our current solutions to providing broadband to those hard-to-reach areas.

Tom Elliott: I came here to support Kevin, because I listened to the Westminster Hall debate, where they were saying, "We need to get to the last 5% without high-speed broadband." I come from a constituency that hasn't even got 70% reach with high-speed broadband. It is the same across Northern Ireland. I think there are only four constituencies that actually meet the 92% target for high-speed broadband—all the others are down round 60%, 70% and 80%. I have had individual businesses and companies who have had to move their architectural drawing rooms to Belfast simply because they haven't got high-speed broadband. It is a huge disadvantage to my constituency and its people. I fully support Kevin. This is a massive issue for us in Northern Ireland, as I am sure it is in rural parts of Wales, Scotland and parts of England.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** What exactly do you want to achieve from this? There have been a number of debates about this particular **area**.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Government are developing policies right now on how they are going to deliver the universal service obligation. They have stated that they want to bring forward the universal service obligation by 2020. There is no clarity on how they are going to do that. I believe the Government would welcome some of the experience we have in this House and the opportunity to be able to talk about the solutions: what they have been in the past, the difficulties around those solutions and what they

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:39:24"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:24"
LocalTime="GMT" />



HOUSE OF COMMONS

might be in the future. I think we need a step change from what we have seen in the past in developing those solutions.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** The reason I say that is because at the moment you have asked for a general debate. There have been numerous debates of a general nature, including a Westminster Hall debate. So why not have a substantive motion?

We no longer have Philip Hollobone here, but you could have something on the lines of, "This House calls on the Government to introduce a universal service obligation for high-speed broadband by"—whatever date you want to put in—"to ensure that 100% of the country is covered." That would obviously frame a debate, and the Government can either say, "Yes, we can achieve it," or "No, we can't." My concern is that we have another general debate that does not necessarily lead the House to deliver a message to the Government.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Government set out a clear timescale, don't forget, and announced the Digital Economy Bill in the Queen's Speech. So they have said there will be legislation in this area. We want to hold the Government's feet to the fire as to what the solutions will actually be. Are we going to go by the same solutions? I respect your knowledge of the process, which is far better than mine, Mr Blackman. It seems a good opportunity for all that knowledge and experience to come from both sides of the House.

Bob Blackman: Hence my suggestion of holding the Government's feet to the fire by establishing the will of the House before they publish their legislation. But it is your application, not mine.

Q12 **Mr Nuttall:** We are not up to date with this. This Bill—the Digital Economy Bill—is on the Order Paper today, being presented by the Secretary of State. How will this debate vary from Second Reading and all the ensuing debates on the Digital Economy Bill? If you have got changes, why can't they be tabled as amendments to the Digital Economy Bill?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not believe that the Government have currently provided a clear solution.

Q13 **Mr Nuttall:** So you could amend the Digital Economy Bill.

Kevin Hollinrake: Potentially, but I think this is an opportunity to inform the debate, to help the Government put that Digital Economy Bill together.

Q14 **Mr Nuttall:** Which you could do on Second Reading.

Kevin Hollinrake: That may be an appropriate way forward but, rather than get too far down that road and have to reverse back up, would it not be better to inform that debate today, so that the Digital Economy Bill is put together in the right way? Again, you understand the process of these things far better than I, Mr Nuttall.

Mr Nuttall: It has already been put together.

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:39:50"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:50"

Comment [SL]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:39:50"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:50"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:39:51"
ServerTimeZone="14:39:51"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:40:00"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:00"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:40:46"
ServerTimeZone="14:40:46"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:41:15"
ServerTimeZone="14:41:15"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:41:25"
ServerTimeZone="14:41:25"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:41:28"
ServerTimeZone="14:41:28"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:41:59"
ServerTimeZone="14:41:59"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:42:02"
ServerTimeZone="14:42:02"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:42:04"
ServerTimeZone="14:42:04"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:42:09"
ServerTimeZone="14:42:09"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:42:11"
ServerTimeZone="14:42:11"

Comment [SS]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:42:32"
ServerTimeZone="14:42:32"



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: I am afraid we have got a Division, so we will have to adjourn. Could you return as soon as possible after the Division, please?

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Q15 **Chair:** We have reconvened. We were in the middle of an application from Kevin Hollinrake and Tom Elliott on the universal service obligation for broadband in rural areas. David, do you want to come in?

Q16 **Mr Nuttall:** Before the Division, we were exploring the way in which the debate may be separated from the debate on the Digital Economy Bill. The underlying problem is common to virtually every constituency. Some constituencies are fully covered, I suspect, but the vast majority have some homes which are not covered. It is all about trying to come up with solutions. The Government have come up with their solution but, as you know, there are others.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to look at that, Mr Nuttall. You are absolutely right that we seem to be very polarised in our solutions. There are solutions available today for rural areas, yet BT are determined to go to those areas in five years, 10 years—we know not when. Yet those people, who have businesses, households and young children trying to study for their exams, do not have a solution. I think we need to look at alternatives, and the alternatives need to knit together with the overall solution for the nation.

Chair: Although I've got an entirely urban constituency, I share your frustration. In my constituency, I've got a pretty large industrial area called the Team Valley Trading Estate, which employs more than 20,000 people and has got some significant not spots within it. It is damned frustrating for businesses that have got particular technical requirements for broadband, but of course we are the north-east of England and we always expect to come last in the queue.

Q17 **Gavin Newlands:** Just a quick one. I note from your list—I have not got the full list—that there is a high number of SNP MPs, which is always a good thing from my perspective, but a lack of Labour MPs.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, and that's probably a reflection of some of the chaos that is going on in the House at the moment.

Chair: I'm terribly sorry; I haven't got the faintest idea what you're talking about.

Kevin Hollinrake: We have got some Labour names. John Woodcock has agreed to support the debate. We probably have not worked hard enough, in terms of getting Labour Members, but I'm sure we would find a good deal of support, such as Mr Mearns perhaps.

Q18 **Mr Nuttall:** One of the MPs you've put down is Emma Barr. Which party is she?

Comment [JB]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:31:48"
ServerTimeZone="14:31:48"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [JB]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="14:31:48"
ServerTimeZone="14:31:48"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:03:35"
ServerTimeZone="15:03:35"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:03:52"
ServerTimeZone="15:03:52"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [CM]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:03:50"
ServerTimeZone="15:03:50"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:05:50"
ServerTimeZone="15:05:50"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:06:05"
ServerTimeZone="15:06:05"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:06:23"
ServerTimeZone="15:06:23"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:06:43"
ServerTimeZone="15:06:43"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:06:43"
ServerTimeZone="15:06:43"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:06:47"
ServerTimeZone="15:06:47"
LocalTime="GMT" />



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kevin Hollinrake: I didn't put this list together, Mr Nuttall, but I can check that for you.

Jess Phillips: She's the new shadow—

Mr Nuttall: I have not met Emma Barr.

Chair: We've had ghost MPs and MPs from previous Parliaments. It's not uncommon; don't worry about it. Anyone else with questions? Thank you very much, Kevin. I really would put your mind to thinking about the substantive motion, because with the impending Bill we need something that makes this distinctive to award parliamentary time.

Gavin Newlands: If you're asking whether you can do something, you can go and get a bit more Labour support for it as well.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes our business for the afternoon. I thank everyone for their attendance.

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:06:54"
ServerTimeZone="15:06:54"
LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [HJ]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 July 2016"
ServerTime="15:07:40"
ServerTimeZone="15:07:40"
LocalTime="GMT" />