

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 19 July 2016

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-12

[I](#): Richard Burden and Tommy Sheppard.

[II](#): Mrs Helen Grant and Stephen Twigg.

[III](#): Jim Shannon.

Richard Burden and Tommy Sheppard made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the last meeting of the Backbench Business Committee before the summer recess. We have three applications to look at this afternoon. First in front of us are Mr Tommy Sheppard and Richard Burden on Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Can you outline the reasons for application, please?

Richard Burden: Perhaps I can say a couple of words, and then I will hand over to Tommy. He has been the driving force behind this application, for the simple reason that I did not qualify to put in this application until very recently. *[Laughter.]* I will just leave that hanging in the air.

Chair: That is a very large boat you're in, Richard.

Richard Burden: Absolutely. The first thing to say is that although there are just two parties represented here, this application goes beyond that. Kelly Tolhurst said that she hoped to be here, but as things work, she has to be at another meeting. William Wragg, who was here, has said that he supports the application too. Helen Grant, who is here in relation to another application, also supports it.

Any time a debate is held in this place on Israel and Palestine—there have been several, particularly in Westminster Hall, on specific issues such as child prisoners, Gaza and various other things—it is always oversubscribed. There is clearly a huge amount of interest, and in each one somebody stands up and says, "Isn't it time that we had a full debate on the broader context in the main Chamber, so we can explore a lot of the key issues?" On every occasion, the Minister of the day agrees, but says that it is not a matter for him or her to agree that.

Tommy prepared this application—I absolutely support him in doing so—to ask for a Backbench Business debate on the broader issues: specifically, the question of the impact of settlement building on the prospects for a two-state solution and the UK's attitude to the French initiative on the Palestinian state. The latter issue is important because in 2014, the UK Parliament became world-famous for passing a resolution to support the recognition of a Palestinian state. That had an impact throughout the world, and it was the last time we had a full debate on the issue. Particularly as the French are now taking initiatives, we felt it was timely for Parliament to discuss these matters. Tommy, would you like to speak?

Tommy Sheppard: I do not have much to add, really. The new intake of MPs like myself, who were elected last year, have never had the opportunity to discuss this in the main Chamber. As Richard says, there have been a couple of incredibly well attended debates in Westminster Hall where everyone, including the Ministers, has agreed that we ought to have a main Chamber debate. This would give us the opportunity to do so. The situation in Israel-Palestine is not going away, and in many ways has worsened since the last time the House decided to discuss it. Hopefully,



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this will give all Members across parties the opportunity to express their views on the matter. I am hopeful, given the recent changes in the ministerial line-up in the Foreign Office, that we may be able to get slightly more progress from the Government in responding to this debate than we would have hoped for before.

- Q2 **Kevin Foster:** I am conscious that anything that touches on Israel and Palestine can quickly become quite a debate. In terms of looking at the issue and the type of debate we are going to have—I don't want to get into expressing views on the motion itself—are there people supporting the debate application who have more traditionally spoken from the point of view of supporting Israel in the Chamber, or is it just those who are more inclined to support the Palestinian cause?

Richard Burden: For the reasons I gave at the outset, I am going to defer to Tom on that.

Tommy Sheppard: It is fair to say that this initiative has come from those people who support a two-state solution and have a degree of concern about the actions of the Israeli Government in enabling that to come about, so I would expect those concerns to be aired. I would also expect contributions to be made by people who take a different position.

- Q3 **Kevin Foster:** Not to give a particular view on it, but in terms of thinking of something that will make a genuinely interesting debate in the Chamber, rather than having—if I can put it this way—everyone agree with each other for three hours, we should have a debate that gives them a chance to tease out what they see to be the options.

Richard Burden: I think on the experience of what has happened in previous debates in Westminster Hall and elsewhere, whichever side—I hesitate to talk about sides, because it isn't a matter of sides—

Kevin Foster: We would like to see them come together.

Richard Burden: The focus of this is on the upholding of international law, which we would all support, and how we approach an international negotiation to bring the sides together. The experience of when debates happen, whichever position initiates them, is that people from different sides and different perspectives tend to come together to contribute. Whether they agree is another matter, but there is never a shortage of people wanting to give their view.

- Q4 **Chair:** From my perspective, can I ask whether there is any time sensitivity about this? We are currently looking at applications, and we have a waiting list. We are potentially looking at two Thursdays in September, and if we are not able to fit you in it would move back to October after the conference recess. Is there any particular time sensitivity? Are there any particular dates in the diary that you would want the debate as close to as possible?

Tommy Sheppard: The French Government has talked about the NATO Act by the end of the year, so I think September or October would be timely.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. Thank you for your application. We will be making decisions as the day progresses.

Mrs Helen Grant and Stephen Twigg made representations.

Chair: The next application is from Stephen Twigg and Helen Grant.

Mrs Grant: Thank you very much, Chair and Committee members, for considering this application. I am joined this afternoon by the Chair of the International Development Committee, Stephen Twigg, who is sitting to my left, and Pauline Latham MP, who is sitting to my right and is also a member of the IDC.

This debate relates to the abduction of 276 girls from their school in Chibok in Nigeria in April 2014 by the group Boko Haram. The application was prompted by a visit that the Committee made to Nigeria at the end of February and the beginning of March this year. It was a pretty humbling experience, but we had the opportunity to meet campaigners from the group “Bring Back our Girls” in Abuja at a place called Unity Fountain, where they campaign every single day to try to keep the matter of the girls in the spotlight.

Shortly after the girls were abducted, thankfully 57 of them escaped and I know that one was recently found; but that means 218 young girls are still missing, notwithstanding world condemnation—condemnation from our past Prime Minister, David Cameron, Michelle Obama and many others. It is likely that many of the girls are still held by Boko Haram. Many of them are pregnant now, having been raped repeatedly, often by different men. Many will have been forced into marriage. Some, we know, have been used as suicide bombers and some are no longer alive because of the mental and physical abuse that they have had to endure.

The Chibok girls are a small proportion of the many women and girls who have been taken from this area of Nigeria. It is estimated that 2,500 women and girls were abducted by this group in 2014 and we believe that hundreds have been taken since that time. This matter was last debated in the main Chamber of the House in July 2014, and we believe that another debate is in order to keep this important issue in the spotlight, to continue to raise awareness and to make sure that we put the maximum possible pressure on our Government and other Governments around the world, to try to have these young women found and, as the campaigners say, “Bring them back now, safe and alive.”

Stephen Twigg: Can I just briefly add to what Helen said? I think we all agreed that it was perhaps the most powerful part of our visit to Nigeria earlier this year when we met with the campaigners on their daily vigil in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, and we gave them an undertaking that we would find ways to ensure that their cause was not forgotten here in the United Kingdom. To emphasise the strong cross-party support for this application, there is the entire membership of the International



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Development Committee, members of the Women and Equalities Committee and a number of other colleagues on a cross-party basis.

Pauline Latham: I do not think my name is actually on the list because I was a PPS to a Foreign Office Minister. As have lots of people, we have all been sacked, so I can put my name down. I am completely supportive of it; it is a really important debate. From our Committee's point of view, it is one of those opportunities that we have to try to help people from afar and I hope that you will grant it to us.

Chair: You will be delighted to know you are actually on the updated list that we have as members of the Committee. I have two members of the Committee who wish to declare an interest.

Q5 **Wendy Morton:** I wish to declare an interest As a member of the International Development Committee. May I also ask a question at the same time? Following on from that, are there any time pressures or time sensitivities around this debate? I know that there was an issue of an anniversary.

Mrs Grant: The anniversary passed a couple of months ago, but it is still two years and that is quite a landmark. It is quite an important point. Also, the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign group ran a campaigning week not that long ago. It would dovetail very nicely if the Committee saw fit to grant our application a little later this year.

Jess Phillips: I'll just declare an interest because I am one of the speakers listed, so obviously I am supportive of the debate.

Q6 **Chair:** You are asking for Chamber time. Normally we give priority for Chamber time to those applications that have with them a substantive motion.

Stephen Twigg: Westminster Hall, Chair.

Chair: I do beg your pardon. I am sorry. It is Westminster Hall; fine, that is all right then. Thank you very much. Can we just quickly get Doctor Who in here and rewind the clock for about 30 seconds—I did not actually say that, okay? Fine, that is super.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** In terms of debating time, we potentially have the two Thursdays in Westminster Hall—I have got to get the dates right now—of the 8th and the 15th. Would either of those dates be a problem for you if it was offered?

Stephen Twigg: I think both of those work for us, don't they? I think that if you were minded to grant us a slot in September, either of the Thursdays work for us.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes the application. Thank you for coming along, that is great.

Jim Shannon made representations.



Q8 **Chair:** Jim, could you come and get your season ticket stamped please? You are quickly amassing frequent flyer points as far as the Committee is concerned. Welcome.

Jim Shannon: I am here to ask for a debate on forced organ removal in China. My colleague, Fiona Bruce, has been doing an inquiry on that in the House. Unfortunately, she has not been all that well today so she is not able to attend.

As always, I will give a very quick background as to why we are asking for the debate. I am not sure whether all Members of the House are aware of the brutality of the surgical operations that are taking place in China. They are quite grotesque. They are the forced removal of organs that keep people alive from prisoners of conscience, those of the Falun Gong mediation, Christians and those of other ethnic and religious minorities.

All the facts point very clearly to forced organ removal. If you are waiting for a liver transplant in Canada, it would take 32 and a half months; if you wait for one in China, you get one in a week. You can almost book it in advance. The moneys involved are incredible—anything from \$100,000 to \$160,000. I carry a donor card; if something happened to me, if I was brain dead and my body was still alive, I would donate my organs as a volunteer. In China, if you are a prisoner of conscience, you are donating your organs. They take your blood to see if you are of a certain DNA and then they advertise it. This is a grotesque, obscene form of surgery that is taking place. It is forced upon people. I believe that it is of great importance, as my colleague, Fiona Bruce, would reiterate if she had been able to be here, with the inquiry she has held.

We had an organisation here called Ride2Freedom which used the opportunity to highlight this in the House. Some of the young people who came to speak told very harrowing and emotional stories of what happened to their family members. I think it is an issue that we need to move up the list.

Even though we are leaving Europe, I should say that more than half the MEPs signed a motion against forced organ harvesting in China. They made a written declaration just this year on stopping organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience in China. There is also a similar declaration signed in the United States. In June the US Congress passed House Resolution 343. China states that it currently does 10,000 organ transplants per year, but the figure is much larger than that—between 60,000 and 100,000; it is massive. China, until recently, had no voluntary donation system, so up until recently you were unable to donate yet they had all these organs for purchase.

In conclusion, potentially one million innocents have been killed for their organs in China since 2000, based on the number of operations taking place. I believe that this issue is of such importance and is so grotesque that it is only right that we debate it. I am quite happy to go with whatever the Backbench Business Committee says but we have asked for a debate in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or a



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Thursday: whatever is suitable we will accept. I am quite happy to have this debate sometime in October, if that is okay.

Q9 **Chair:** In October?

Jim Shannon: I am happy to put it off until that time. It would be better after the Recess, I think, if at all possible. Again, as I always do, I have cross-party support. I have 21 names from all political parties in the Chamber on the list. They are all equally disheartened and angered by what has taken place.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Jim, what do you want to achieve by the debate?

Jim Shannon: I would love to see it stopping. Are we going to put something in place to stop China doing it? No, we can't do that.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** It is very difficult to understand that any of the speakers you have listed is going to be saying, "I support forced organ removal in China." Clearly, everyone is going to be saying, "This is a disgrace. It should be prevented. How are we to prevent it?" That strikes me as being—potentially; don't get me wrong—a half-hour Adjournment debate either at the end of the day or at Westminster Hall. Does it really warrant 90 minutes in Westminster Hall or in the Chamber, as you have requested, given that it is a straightforward issue?

Jim Shannon: I don't think there is any doubt. These are just some notes I have, six or seven pages, probably 15 minutes of the debate from me personally, but because of the interest of others who have expressed a wish to participate, communicate and speak on this matter, I think it has to be a 90-minute debate. We are not going to convince China to change, but I want my Government, our Government, to approach the Chinese authorities and ask them to change. That is one thing we can do.

The second thing we can do—I haven't mentioned it but I mention it now—is that there is organ transplant tourism. There are people from this country—I have asked questions about it and I hope to get answers—who unknowingly or whatever, go across to China to have an organ donation, as they see it. If they knew where it came from I think we would have to change that as well. So there are some changes I want to see. If we can do something in this country to stop that happening, I believe it is something we should be doing. There are a number of things I want to happen. Can the Government act on it? Yes, they can. Can they change China's opinion? Not entirely, but we can certainly influence what is happening and we can prevent people from this country and from Europe going across.

Q12 **Mr Nuttall:** There are 16 names on the list we have and you mentioned the figure of 21. In a 90-minute debate, allowing for the fact that you will make 10 or 15 minutes of opening remarks, if all these people turn up it is likely that they will have around three minutes each. Are you confident that they will all be able to restrict their comments to three minutes?

Jim Shannon: I can't speak for anyone else. I could speak for them all but that wouldn't be the right thing to do. They have expressed an interest



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in participating: I can't tell you if they will be available on the day, to be fair, but they did say that if this debate comes up, they would like to participate. That is all I can say. Were we all to have a chance to do so, a 90-minute debate is probably a fairly good way of doing it. If it were longer, we would have a wee bit longer to speak, but I think 90 minutes is probably the best time.

Chair: Thank you, Jim, for your application. That concludes the formal part of our proceedings.