

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 18 October 2016

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Gavin Newlands; Mr David Nuttall; William Wragg.

Questions 1-23

Witnesses

[I](#): Ian Blackford, Kirsty Blackman, Kirsten Oswald and Jim Shannon.

[II](#): Siobhain McDonagh.

[III](#): Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods, Helen Goodman and Dr Daniel Poulter.

[IV](#): Mr John Baron.

[V](#): Stephen Twigg and Chris White.

[VI](#): Philip Davies.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Ian Blackford, Kirsten Oswald, Kirsty Blackman and Jim Shannon made representations.

Q1 Chair: Are we sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin. This afternoon's business starts with Ian Blackford's application for a debate on the acceleration of the state pension age and its effect on women born in the 1950s.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to appear before the Backbench Business Committee. I am joined by Kirsty Blackman and Kirsten Oswald. The list in front of you is of 17 Members across five parties. We can add Kirsty and Stephen Twigg, who is in the room, to that list, making 19 Members in total.

Some Members of this Committee might say, "Not another WASPI debate! What has changed since the House last debated the issue?". You will recall that, in a previous debate, the House divided and supported the WASPI campaign. But one thing that the Government said at the time was, "Where are the proposals that will deliver mitigation to the women affected?". That is the thing that has really changed over the past few weeks.

Landman Economics was commissioned to provide a report, which it has now done. That report gives five options and, in particular, talks about mitigating the impact for the women affected by the rise in the state pension age by pushing out the increases over a further two-and-a-half-year period. That is important because it is worth dwelling on the real nub of the problem.

Take the example of a woman who turned 63 in February this year. She would have received her state pension in January 2016, just short of her 63rd birthday. A woman born in February 1954 will not retire until July 2019, when she will be almost 65 and a half. It is that sharp acceleration in pensionable age that is causing the problem, because I think that everyone has accepted that there ought to be equalisation of pensionable age between men and women.

The report has come up with a reasonable proposal, which we are asking the Government to look, that mitigates the effect and delays some of the increases in state pensionable age. It deals with the women who are worst affected, if I may put it that way. The report has identified that the cost of its proposals would be £8 billion. In previous debates in the House of Commons, the Government suggested that the cost would be as high as £30 billion. The programme is fully costed, and it is important that we have a debate that says to the Government, "You can do this on a much more affordable basis." That is the first thing that has changed.

The second thing that has changed is that more than 100 MPs across parties have submitted petitions in the Chamber over the past week. Given that there has been so much pressure from MPs on the basis of support from constituents, it is right that we raise the issue in the Chamber again. That is why I am asking, with cross-party support, for a



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debate to focus not just on the issue, but on a solution that we hope the Government will look upon favourably.

Kirsten Oswald: To back up what Ian said, the scope of the issue is interesting. Women all over the UK are affected. Women still come to my surgery even now—new clients, if you like—with this problem. That is common to all MPs, as we have seen from the number of petitions. It would be difficult for us MPs to justify to those women not looking at the issue again in the Chamber on the basis of the new facts in our possession. It is incumbent on us to do that.

Our responsibility as Members is to examine the facts in the most open and transparent way, and the way to do that is to bring the subject back to the Chamber, so that the details can be discussed in full and in the most transparent way possible. The women who are affected by this difficult issue can then understand exactly where everybody sits.

Kirsty Blackman: For me, this is a real Back-Bench issue. This issue has been brought to all of us in our surgeries. People are regularly coming to all of us, and those of us who are not Front Benchers do not have the opportunity to raise these issues easily and have debates on them. This truly defines a Back-Bench issue, so it is really important that the Backbench Business Committee considers the bid.

Chair: Any comments or questions?

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** This reads like an Opposition motion for an Opposition day debate. The SNP has the opportunity of an Opposition day very soon. Why is it not taking that opportunity to have this debate? I ask that question because we have a queue of debates with no time allocated, so the likelihood is that even if we think it is a good subject to debate, it will be Christmas before we can contemplate you getting a debate.

Ian Blackford: I hope the Committee will look favourably on this. Jim Shannon has just joined us at the table. I do not look on this as an SNP motion. That is not what we seek to achieve. This motion has been signed by Members from five parties.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** It is hardly phrased to seek Government support. The phraseology condemns the Government, so I cannot see a single member of the Conservative party supporting this motion as it is phrased.

Ian Blackford: I hope there would be members of the Conservative party who would support this, certainly in a debate. What all of us were asked to do is bring forward solutions, and that is exactly what we are doing. The only way this will work is if there is support on a cross-party basis. More than 100 Members of Parliament, including several Conservatives, have put in petitions over the last week; one Conservative Member had thousands of signatures from their constituents.

This is an important issue, and as the pensionable age is going up so quickly, there is a sense of urgency about dealing with it. I do not think an Opposition day motion will do that, because that is more likely to be seen



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as something that has particular party interest and not cross-party interest. I am certainly willing, if there are issues that cause offence, to look at the wording of the motion.

The whole purpose behind this is to seek to build unity across the House, so that the Government recognise that they have to look at this report. Of course, the Government may go away and come up with other propositions and solutions, but we are saying to the Government through this motion, "Here is a way that you can deal with the problem for the women who are worst affected." I have never seen this issue as being just about the SNP—far from it. This is an issue for the House that must be looked at on a cross-party basis.

- Q4 **Mr Nuttall:** I should declare that I am one of the Conservative Members of Parliament whose name is down on the Order Paper to present a petition today from residents of my constituency who asked me to do so on their behalf. We all present petitions on behalf of our constituents when asked to do so, and when they are in accordance with the rules of the House, which these of course all have been. I have one preliminary point. I seem to recall that an application was brought before us to discuss this topic a few months ago, but was never proceeded with. Am I right? Was it not to do with the findings of the Work and Pensions Committee?

Ian Blackford: I am sure your Clerks will be able to help you with that. My understanding is that Frank Field, on behalf of the Work and Pensions Committee, considered putting a motion forward but withdrew it, for reasons I am not fully aware of.

- Q5 **Mr Nuttall:** In some respects, that is not material right now, but it does raise the point that no one can deny that this issue has been raised time and again on the Floor of the House. It was raised this week extensively in DWP questions. I am not sure where the debate will go. That is my concern.

Ian Blackford: Let me answer that specific point. We have talked about what has changed, about the petitions, and about the fact that specific options have been put on the table by Landman Economics. There are five options in that paper. The other thing that has changed, which I do not think was understood, certainly by many Members in the Chamber, is that national insurance is sitting with a surplus of close to £27 billion. One of the arguments up to now was that there was no available money to do this. The straightforward response to that has always been that the women involved have an entitlement because they have paid national insurance. That argument is significantly strengthened because we know that there is such a surplus in the national insurance fund.

Material changes have taken place since the last debate. First, the petitions have been presented; secondly, proposals have been made; and thirdly, we know that those proposals are affordable on the basis of the available surplus. I think that these matters demand that the House debates the issue in the Chamber and takes it seriously, simply because of



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the impact on the women involved. We have a duty and a responsibility, and it would not reflect very well on us if we did not have that debate.

Q6 **Chair:** Are there any more comments? Jim, do you want to say something quickly?

Jim Shannon: Just to say that I am very pleased to come along to support this request for a debate in the House. Ian has clearly outlined the issues; such a debate would be different because of the facts and figures that have not been debated or considered by the House, including the five options to which he referred. That changes the scenario, with regard to why the debate is applicable now. My constituents who have approached me about this still feel aggrieved, and the people who have written to me about this come from all political parties. I must reflect that opinion in the House, as we all do, because that is why we are here.

The debate should be held in the Chamber to give us all the chance to address the issue. The Government have made it clear right down the line that the reason why they have said no is affordability. The facts and some of the options on the table will address that concern, and that key issue is why it is so important and critical to have another debate. Despite what Members may think, it is not groundhog day; it is different this time, because the debate will be different.

Q7 **Chair:** I should point out that, even though Jim was speaking, it isn't groundhog day; he has got a season ticket to this Committee. Thank you. We will consider your application later this afternoon.

Siobhain McDonagh made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Siobhain's application is on the living wage and the implementation of the national living wage strategy.

Siobhain McDonagh: This debate will be held in Living Wage Week, so it will be very timely, if the Committee agrees to it. It has cross-party support. It will celebrate employers who pay the living wage, but highlight those employers who choose to use the living wage to get round employment terms and reduce terms and conditions. The House has already been very effective in this regard. The debate held in May helped to get the offer to staff at B&Q increased from a one-year one-off payment to a two-year payment. That was a direct success. We continue to work with B&Q because they are still willing to pledge that their long-standing staff will not be worse off at the end of that two-year period. It would be good to have an opportunity to remind them of that pledge. Marks and Spencer, the queen of the high street, has just issued new contracts to its long-standing staff—those who were employed prior to 2002—and told them that they will be sacked by Christmas for some other substantial reason should they not choose to return those signed contracts. A debate would be particularly timely for those people.

I have done quite a bit of campaigning on this. We have lots of long-standing members of staff at Marks and Spencer, B&Q and other retailers who say that hearing this spoken about in the House of Commons makes



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them feel that they are not on their own, and that people understand what is happening.

The debate would also be timely given the statements of the new Prime Minister, Theresa May. She is setting up a commission under Matthew Taylor to look into new employment regulations and problems. We believe that the debate could channel into the new review. We could also look at the gig economy, which has been highlighted recently. As I said, this has cross-party support. I have signatories in addition to the ones I gave the Committee on Friday: Anna Soubry, Mark Hendrick, Alan Meale, Marie Rimmer, Gareth Thomas and Virendra Sharma. We have extensive support among all parties. A debate would be timely for our constituents and given the plans of the Government.

Chair: Any questions?

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** On the timing, 31 October is the beginning of Living Wage Week. You are presumably looking for a debate in that week.

Siobhain McDonagh: If the Committee agree to it.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** At the moment, as I am sure the Chair will tell you, we don't have time to allocate that week. If we were not in a position to allocate time in that week, but could maybe accommodate the debate at some stage soon after, would that be acceptable?

Siobhain McDonagh: Yes.

Chair: That is all. Thank you.

Siobhain McDonagh: Would you like the list of names?

Chair: The list of names would be useful. Thank you.

Helen Goodman, Roberta Blackman-Woods and Dr Poulter made representations.

Chair: The application is on future co-operation with EU member states on scientific and university research projects.

Helen Goodman: Thank you for seeing us. The university sector is very large and extremely successful in this country. It accounts for £73 billion of output in the British economy. That is 2.8% of GDP. The universities employ three quarters of a million people and also account for £11 billion worth of exports. They are more if not equal to the automotive industry and pharmaceuticals in terms of exports. But of course the universities also underpin the future of the British economy and the nature of our society, and they are extremely important in that respect. They support modern manufacturing. They are the reason why we are in a different place in the world economy compared with the Chinese or the Turks or lots of other countries one can think of. The most successful industries—pharmaceuticals, engineering or finance—are particularly dependent on research that is done in the universities.



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Most people do not know to what extent research and scientific developments have become internationalised in recent years. Now, 6% of students at British universities are from overseas and 16% of academics are from the EU—not just foreign academics from across the world. Half of research papers are international collaborations and we have had a significant amount of money from the EU. If you put together the money that comes from the EU budget and the European Investment Bank, we have had £5 billion in recent years. This means that the vote to leave the European Union has a significant impact on the university sector, and we need to decide as part of the Brexit negotiations what kind of relationship we want British universities to have with EU universities—whether that means joining in European structures or developing new structures outside. This is extremely complex. It is very important that Ministers are apprised of these issues before they finalise the negotiating strategy and trigger article 50. It is something on which many Members have been subject to a significant lobbying by people in the sector. When we wrote round asking for support for this debate, 12 people said yes within 20 minutes.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Roberta, I gather you now have a Front-Bench position on the Labour side, but when the application was submitted you were still on the Back Benches. We are allowing a little bit of licence on that basis.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Thank you. Can I add two very quick points to the case that Helen has made? In addition to this being a critical issue for universities, universities have lots of partnerships with business to carry out research on behalf of business—particularly their R and D. A lot of this is funded through European programmes, and there is a very early need to flag up how that shortfall is going to be met, particularly for the R and D development. The same is the case for medical research charities, for example, which also undertake their work in partnership with universities and are part of European networks. There are lots of protocols in place covering this sort of research, and that is some of the complexity that Helen was referring to. These real concerns about how all this research is going to continue post-Brexit need to be flagged very early and attended to.

Dr Poulter: I would like to add two things to what has already been said. First, partly because of free movement within the European Union, and more generally because of the way that university research has moved over the past 10 to 15 years, many collaborative research bids and projects that have been put together across universities in different EU member states are intrinsically linked to one project, for which funding has been allocated to a number of universities. That is perhaps unique to how some of the EU funding towards the university and research sector has worked, and there is a high degree of uncertainty about the future of those funding schemes, or indeed where some of those projects perhaps need to be extended and taken forward over a longer period. That is true particularly in areas of medical research, but also in many areas of scientific research, where those collaborations are already in place.



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Understanding where the Government's thinking may be going in terms of ensuring ongoing funding for established research projects and how well-established collaborations between EU member state universities will continue merits a discussion and an answer from the Government as part of the discussions about triggering article 50.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Which Department do you envisage answering the debate?

Helen Goodman: My understanding is that Jo Johnson is part of two Departments. Whether he comes with his BEIS hat on or his Education hat on, we really do not mind, but we do want to get the key person.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** At the moment, we have a huge queue of debates, and this is a general debate, for which there is more time to allocate for Westminster Hall than there for the Chamber. I understand the concern for the university sector, and given the priority, if we allocated you time in Westminster Hall to give the opportunity for a Government response, but you did not like that response, I think we would smile on an application for a debate in the Chamber on a motion. But my strong advice, given the huge queue for debates at the moment, is that it is going to be a long time before you get any time allocated in the Chamber.

Helen Goodman: What do you mean by a long time—three months or three weeks?

Chair: Before today's six applications, we had 10 unallocated debates. Of those, about eight were requests for Chamber time because they were debates on substantive motions. We have, as a matter of course, given Chamber time priority to debate applications that have a substantive motion, because we do not vote on debates in Westminster Hall.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** There is the possibility of a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on 1 November, which would give you the opportunity to get an answer from the Government. As I say, if you then were not happy and wanted to table a motion, it would not prejudice your application, but we need to know today if that is acceptable to you as a form of promoting your debate.

Dr Blackman-Woods: That seems a sensible way forward. At least we will get to raise the issues at an early stage, and then perhaps we can come back, if the Minister does not answer all our queries at a later stage with a more substantive motion. I think that is what I am hearing.

Q14 **William Wragg:** As we all know, Brexit means Brexit—we are all Brexiteers now, aren't we? Of course a Back-Bench business debate has to have broad cross-party support—I'm sure your debate has that—but on the list of Members backing it I do not see the names of any who advocated a leave vote in the referendum. In order to get that broad range of opinion, I wonder whether you would want to do more to encourage Members who backed a leave vote to put their names to this



application.

Helen Goodman: I did not know that. Let me begin by saying that I did not do it by looking down lists of remainers; I looked at who was on the Back Benches. If Back-Benchers are disproportionately remainers, well, that is the political situation in which we find ourselves. Maybe when we come back and ask you for a motion, we will consider what you say on that point.

Chair: Gavin Newlands?

Gavin Newlands: Thanks, Chair, but I think Bob read my writing; he asked the exact same question that I was going to ask.

Chair: Simpatico, you see. In that case, that concludes that. Thank you very much indeed for the application.

John Baron made representations.

Q15 **Chair:** Good afternoon, John. The application this afternoon is “Cancer strategy—one year on”.

Mr Baron: I will keep this short, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for seeing me about this application. The prevalence of cancer is becoming increasingly apparent: 2.5 million people live with it, and it is deemed that 1 in 2 people will suffer from cancer during the course of their life. That is an increase, partly because we are ageing. Something like 500,000 people over the next five years will also become cancer patients.

We are at quite a milestone on this issue. In July 2015, the independent cancer taskforce established by NHS England published its recommendations for the next cancer strategy, which is really going to govern the Government’s approach to setting about combating cancer and to its priorities over the course of this Parliament until 2020. One year on from that publication last year, the all-party group on cancer—following a public consultation and a series of oral evidence sessions, including with the cancer Minister and the good and the great of the cancer world, such as NHS England and Cancer Research—has compiled a report assessing the progress that has been made and making its own recommendations to the Government and the NHS. We have been very inclusive; the public consultation and oral evidence sessions were very wide.

This debate would give all colleagues an opportunity to question and debate not only NHS progress generally, but the matters arising from our report. One or two colleagues may be aware that although good progress is being made on cancer, we still trail behind international averages by a long chalk when it comes to survival rates. That is mostly because we diagnose too late in this country. Although improvements are being made, if we could match international averages, we could save tens of thousands of lives a year—those figures are uncontested.

The debate would give all colleagues an opportunity to discuss cancer issues. In fairness to the Committee, we obviously try to raise these issues



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in Health questions, but often the questions have to be terribly specific. We try to raise the issue in statements, but again, in all honesty, there tends to be a bit of point scoring and all the rest—one can understand that to a certain extent. There are many colleagues who are interested in cancer, as you can see from the list, which did not take long to compile—I could certainly get a lot more, if you wanted. A debate allows all of them to come together in a non-party political fashion and debate this important issue. I will also say that I am sitting here not only as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, but in a quasi-capacity representing all the other cancer-specific APPGs, and the chairs of many of those are listed on this paper.

We do try to raise the issue as best we can during the course of the year, but this is about having one good debate and putting the Government on the spot. We will be trying to do that in a constructive manner, because we do not try to score political points on this, while not being afraid to ask tough questions if we have to—the Committee knows me well enough on that front. We will have a really constructive debate, which sends a terribly positive message out to the wider cancer community about our role here within Parliament.

I would request the main Chamber, because it helps to send that positive message out, but I accept that this is not going to be a substantive motion on this occasion's debate—it is really just for probing questions and not being afraid to ask tough questions.

Chair: Thank you very much John.

- Q16 **Bob Blackman:** I raise the same issue that I raised with the last applicant. Obviously, Health would answer this particular debate. There is an opportunity for a 90 minute debate in Westminster Hall on 1 November. If we were minded to offer that, would you accept it?

Mr Baron: The short answer is yes, because something is better than nothing. In response, I would ask you to consider in kind that the half-day debates in the past have been very full debates. They have been very packed debates and, if anything, we have run out of time. If we want to give this due debate and send a positive message out, I would recommend at least a half-day debate because we have shown a good track record in the past.

- Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Is there any time constraint on when you would ideally like to have the debate?

Mr Baron: As soon as possible—that is the short answer. I am not going to try to make life difficult, so as soon as possible. The previous half-day debates have shown—we even had a full-day debate on one occasion—we are not short of speakers.

- Q18 **Chair:** In essence, the anniversary—one year on—was July this year, so there is no time-sensitivity.

Mr Baron: That has gone, but our report came out one year on. So without leaving it too long—I realise there is great pressure on you, but if

we could have something in the main Chamber for half a day by the end of the year, that would be great. I promise we would pack the Chamber.

Q19 Chair: Thank you very much John. Next up we have Mr Stephen Twigg with an application about Yemen.

Stephen Twigg and Chris White made representations.

Stephen Twigg: I am joined by Chris White and I will just say a few words by way of introduction. This is a request supported by 30 MPs from five parties for a debate in the main Chamber on a votable motion. You last kindly granted a debate on Yemen in February, and a great deal has happened since then. The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is tragic and breathtaking. It is a country on the verge of famine with very large numbers of people severely malnourished, including large numbers of children.

Since the previous debate, a number of Commons Committees have considered various aspects of the Yemen crisis, including in the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which Chris chairs. In July, the Foreign Office had to correct previous answers that it had given to Parliament relating to alleged violations of international humanitarian law by the Saudi-led coalition. The United Nations Human Rights Council in September carried a resolution on the situation in Yemen. Of course, the latest incident happened on 8 October, when the Saudi-led coalition bombed a funeral in Sana'a, with 140 people losing their lives.

The UK holds the pen on Yemen at the UN Security Council. That puts a great responsibility on us. I think we would all agree that the crisis in Syria is appalling, and it is right that Parliament has devoted a lot of time through statements and debates to the Syria crisis. I ask that we do not fall into the trap of treating Yemen—as it is sometimes treated—as the forgotten war. That is why there is an urgency to the issue being addressed in the House.

Chris White: I thank the Committee for granting my application for the industrial strategy debate, which takes place on Thursday.

I have been closely associated with the conflict in Yemen through my role on the Committees on Arms Export Controls. There is a clear level of parliamentary interest and national media interest. Stephen is right. In Foreign Office questions this morning, the tragedy in Syria was extensively covered. If the Speaker had not gone into extra time, we would not have reached the question on Yemen. A debate would give us an opportunity to put the different cases before the House and raise the awareness of the humanitarian crisis that is taking place.

Chair: From my perspective, that is a straightforward and important application.

Philip Davies made representations.

Q20 Chair: Last but not least, Mr Philip Davies has an application for a debate



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on International Men's Day.

Philip Davies: Thank you very much, Chairman, for allowing me to present to you today. My application follows on from last year's successful debate, which you kindly granted, in Westminster Hall on International Men's Day. There was a lot of support in that debate and I am delighted to say that as many women spoke as men, which shows that the debate was not about one particular gender. My application has a list of 20 names, including 10 from the Government Benches and 10 from the Opposition Benches. Seven women are on the list, which shows that the debate appeals to lots of people.

The issues are still relevant today, and are rarely debated and discussed in the House of Commons. Those issues include: male suicide; the underperformance of boys in schools; the way that men sometimes have difficulty getting access to their children; and the impact of the criminal justice system on men. Only recently, the new Prime Minister raised the issue of how black men are particularly affected in the criminal justice system. This debate would allow all those issues and others to be discussed.

There is only one difference in my application this year, in response to last year's debate. If you read *Hansard*, you will see that virtually all the speakers last year said that they thought the debate should have been held in the main Chamber, as the debate on International Women's Day is. Last year, I said that I was quite relaxed about where the debate was held, but that was the feeling of the people participating in the debate, particularly the Chairman of the Women and Equalities Committee and the other Members of that Committee who spoke in the debate. As a result of their feedback last year, I have requested for this debate to be in the main Chamber.

Chair: Thank you. Are there any questions?

- Q21 **Bob Blackman:** What is the ideal time for you to hold the debate? Doing some quick maths, I think that International Men's Day falls on a Saturday.

Philip Davies: That is right. I should have mentioned that; I apologise. I am grateful to Mr Blackman for raising that point. The date of International Men's Day, which is commemorated in 60 countries around the world, is 19 November. As Mr Blackman rightly identified, that is on a Saturday.

In an ideal world, given the days that are normally allocated to the Committee—and I appreciate that, at this stage, no days will yet have been allocated for that time—I would have thought that Thursday 17 November would be ideal, as it leads up to 19 November. However, I appreciate that that is not necessarily within your gift, particularly at this stage when the days have not been allocated.

- Q22 **Chair:** In business questions on Thursday, I said that if we get early notice of date-specific applications, we can put a note into the office of



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the Leader of the House to ask whether time can be afforded in that week. It is not always possible for the Government to accede to that but we can try to do it through negotiation.

Philip Davies: I appreciate that.

Q23 **Gavin Newlands:** There are a number of substantive motions in the queue at the moment. I take it that you are asking for time in the Chamber. Would you accept time in Westminster Hall if that was the only way to get the debate close enough to the date of International Men's Day?

Philip Davies: That is a perfectly fair question. I have not come here to try to dictate to you where the debate should be. I was on this Committee for the first two years of its existence, so I appreciate fully the demands and the fact that you are not able to keep everybody happy. The last thing I want to do is to pour even more pressure on you. I will rely on your good judgment.

I merely mention the very clear feedback from people who spoke in the debate last year. Holding the debate in the Chamber would give it the same Chamber as International Women's Day, which, although not on a substantive motion, is always debated in the House of Commons Chamber. That is the only point that I would make. I appreciate the pressures that the Committee is under.

Chair: Thank you very much for the application. That concludes the formal business of the Committee.