

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 17 October 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 17 October 2017.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Robert Courts; Patricia Gibson; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-25

Witnesses

I: Mrs Sheryll Murray and Alistair Carmichael.

II: Robert Courts.

III: Jim Shannon and Alistair Carmichael.

IV: Vernon Coaker, Dame Caroline Spelman, Jim Shannon and Jeremy Lefroy.

V: Tim Farron and Andy Slaughter.

VI: Diana Johnson and Andrew Percy.

VII: Nick Herbert and Crispin Blunt.

VIII: Caroline Lucas and Ronnie Cowan.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



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Chair: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. As per the schedule, we will hear eight applications, and first up is an application for a debate on the UK fishing industry from Sheryll Murray and Alistair Carmichael.

Mrs Sheryll Murray and Mr Alistair Carmichael made representations.

Mrs Murray: As you know, Mr Mearns, in previous years we have had to come and make an application for a debate in the Chamber as the annual fisheries debate before the December European Council. In the past, it was traditional that Austin Mitchell, when he was here, would do this, and others have come to do it. The Fisheries Council in December is extremely important, and it is really good for Parliament to have the opportunity to talk about the UK fishing industry and the fishing opportunities that may be decided at that Council meeting, so that the Minister can go to Brussels and negotiate for the UK after hearing what many hon. Members, their fishermen constituents and, of course, the fish processors think.

I have a list of 21 names. About 50% are from the Opposition parties and 50% from the Government side. I am happy to share those names with you. It would be really nice if we could have a three-hour debate, at least, in the Chamber. That would send the right message to many of our constituents in coastal constituencies.

Q1 **Chair:** Is this matter time-sensitive at all?

Mrs Murray: We would prefer the debate to take place in early December, if that is at all possible, because the Fisheries Council normally happens in mid-December.

Mr Carmichael: There is a window here. The really important negotiation is the EU-Norway discussion, which basically sets total allowable catches for the North sea. The December Fisheries Council then splits up whatever the EU takes out of the EU-Norway discussion. So the most meaningful debate that we can have in the House is one that comes after the EU-Norway discussion—so that we know what we have to deal with—but before the Council, which is where the UK allocation of catches will be established.

Mrs Murray: Do we know when the EU-Norway discussion will take place?

Mr Carmichael: It would normally be roundabout the middle of November. I don't know whether there is a date yet.

Chair: Thank you. Does anyone else have any questions?

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I have two quick questions. First, are the 21 names that you have in addition to the ones on the paper?

Mrs Murray: No, that is including the ones on the paper.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** The second issue is this. Obviously, with Brexit coming, the future of the fishing industry is potentially up in the air for decisions.

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Are you looking in this debate specifically at what will happen in the Fisheries Council discussions, or at the future of the fishing industry, because that might suggest that you need a longer debate?

Mrs Murray: I am sure that hon. Members would like to make representations on the future as well. I understand that a fisheries Bill will come through in due course and that that is likely to be early next year, although we might see publication of a White Paper beforehand, but I am not sure when the Department intends to do that. However, if we could have a longer debate, it would certainly provide an opportunity for Members to discuss that as well.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Presumably, you want hon. Members to have the chance to state their views to try to shape the White Paper and the Bill, rather than waiting for the Bill to come forward.

Mrs Murray: Absolutely.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application. We will move on swiftly. Unusually, but not exceptionally, a member of the Committee, Robert Courts, is going to present an application. I will just explain for our watching fan that when such an occurrence takes place, the Committee member will present to the Committee, but not take part in its deliberations when it comes to saying whether or not we grant the debate.

This application is on the 100th anniversary of the Air Force Constitution Act 1917. Robert, over to you, please.

Robert Courts made representations.

Robert Courts: Thank you, Mr Chairman. We will start next year with Air Force 100 events. There will be a great many of them and I know that many Members of all parties want to take part in them. I want to mark with this debate the run-up, so some of the debates that were had around the establishment of an independent air force midway through the first world war. Of course, the anniversary that I am marking here is the Act.

It is particularly appropriate at this time, because in the week that I have asked for—the week starting 27 November—several events will take place here. For example, there will be an event in Speaker's House and I think I am right in saying that they hope to find the Act in the archives and bring it. So it would be a very good opportunity for us, not just to mark the achievements of the Royal Air Force over the past 100 years but to examine and consider the parliamentary process that led to the establishment of an independent air force and everything that went along with it. That is why I would like to mark this anniversary. I think it's quite important that we do it this year, as opposed to simply waiting for next year, when of course there will be all the other Air Force 100 events.

I have Brize Norton in my constituency, which is the largest base in the Royal Air Force, and I know that lots of other Members who have Air Force bases in their constituencies will want to take part. Nine people have signed up at this stage and I would have thought that, when we get to it, there will actually be more than that, because of course the Air Force goes

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wider than simply those Members who have a base in their constituency; indeed, not all those names are registered here.

I have asked for three hours, which I think we would probably use if we had more speakers, although I recognise that with the number of names I have at present you may think that 90 minutes for this debate is more appropriate.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** For a three-hour debate, we would normally expect 15 speakers, so you are four or five short of that number at the moment. Before we granted the debate, we would want to be pretty sure that you've got 15 speakers, given that you have got time—you have got about five or six weeks before you want the debate, which gives you plenty of time to identify other speakers. But we would need to see those before we grant a debate.

Q6 **Chair:** Could this also be called the disestablishment of the Royal Flying Corps debate?

Robert Courts: It could be, if that would widen the appeal. However, as I say, I recognise the force in Mr Blackman's point. I understand that I don't really have the numbers for a three-hour debate. I would prefer that we had something that was 90 minutes long but that marked this event, because I accept that this will not be the only opportunity that Members will have to talk about the Air Force over the course of the next 18 months. The only thing that I do ask for is that I think this debate is appropriate for the Chamber, rather than Westminster Hall.

Chair: As you know, Robert, the thing is that we have a fairly well established situation, whereby it is perfectly in order to submit extra names after submitting the application. So that's okay. Thank you very much.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** The only question, which we ask everyone is, given the general nature of the debate, if you were offered Westminster Hall during that week as opposed to getting Chamber time, would you accept it?

Robert Courts: I would prefer Chamber time in a week either side of the date. If the time period is further apart than that, yes, I will accept Westminster Hall.

Q8 **Chair:** However, I will just also point out for the watching masses that when we ask for extra names, we are actually looking for people who wish to participate in the debate rather than just support the application. Thank you very much indeed, Robert.

We now move swiftly on to our season ticket holder—Mr Jim Shannon, please.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, it's always a pleasure to come back to the Committee to ask for—

Q9 **Chair:** Just give me one second, Jim. I should just point out to our fan

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that International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day is the subject of the application.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman and Committee, this is the first time that international freedom of religious belief will be debated anywhere in this House.

As you know, I am the chair of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief, and we are launching a fairly extensive report. The report has the support of the FCO and DFID, and its launch will take place in Speaker's House on 25 October, which is next week. It would be good to tie in with this initiative, if at all possible. I am also aware that the FCO—there is very clearly a plan from other Departments as well—is sending diplomatic telegrams to all the UK embassies, for them to raise awareness about this human right and to take action to address persecution. DFID is also making a speech that week, announcing its work in this area, so it is critical and crucial for parliamentarians to reinforce these messages and make sure that Government staff know that their actions are being supported.

It is also good to do this in this year, because it is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We have a very proud history on the issue in this House; we have a long history of standing up for those who are persecuted. So it would be very helpful to create some momentum around this day and raise awareness of where and why this fundamental human right has been denied around the world.

International freedom day gives us the opportunity to use it as an important tool and framework to tackle preventing violent extremism and to achieve the sustainable development goals, as well as to tackle violations of this right in different countries. Although Daesh's actions towards religious communities in the middle east are the widest and most systematic example of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, there is a lot happening. We have the issue of the Muslims in Myanmar, and the four death sentences handed out in Pakistan for those who are alleged to have committed blasphemy. There is much that needs raising in the House of Commons.

Mr Carmichael: I have very little to add to that, Chairman, apart from picking up on the final points that Jim made. This is not some esoteric issue in the abstract; it is something that is very real for a number of religious and faith groups around the world. My own involvement is through the APPG on the Bahá'í faith, in which I am an office bearer. The Bahá'ís continue to be persecuted, in Iran in particular.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** On ideal timing, obviously the day is 27 October. If we offered you 26 October, would that be ideal, or would you want—

Jim Shannon: Thursday 26 would be perfect, if possible, but if it is not possible for that Thursday, certainly the following one, to tie in with the FCO and DFID. We have, as you know, cross-party support from all the different parties in the Chamber as well. We are keen to have a chance in

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Westminster Hall, or wherever it may be. We are keen to get it wherever we can.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Your season ticket has suitably been renewed.

Jim Shannon: I'll be back next week.

Chair: Next up are Mr Vernon Coaker and Helen Grant. I think it's just Vernon.

Vernon Coaker, Dame Caroline Spelman, Jim Shannon and Jeremy Lefroy made representations.

Vernon Coaker: Chairman, we have brought a few subs along, given the football analogy you were making. Helen Grant gives her apologies, but Jeremy and Caroline are here.

As you have seen from our submission, this application is supported by a large number of Members of Parliament, from across the four nations and, indeed, from different parties. It is a particularly opportune time for us to debate this. As a country, we have been leading the way with respect to modern slavery, and I think it's fair for us to recognise that. But of course we have all seen the recent reports of increased awareness of child victims of trafficking, of increased numbers of women being trafficked, and of forced labour, particularly of Vietnamese men. We think, therefore, that it is particularly important that we review the progress we have made and challenge ourselves to see what more we can do.

There are a number of issues with the operation of the Modern Slavery Act, including data—exactly how many people are being trafficked—support for victims and what happens to victims, if they are recognised as victims of trafficking, after the statutory requirement ends. We don't know what happens to them. We don't know whether they are re-trafficked. So there are a number of issues, and for those reasons, which I have stated briefly and concisely—I know your Committee likes that, Chair—we think it is really important to discuss this subject.

We asked for this debate to be on the Floor of the House. Given the significance of this issue, the cross-party support for it and the need to ensure the widest possible debate and the widest possible publicity, we think we would be inundated with Members wishing to speak, which is why we have asked for the Committee to consider a three-hour debate. I understand that a motion is usually contentious. We have tried as an all-party group and also with Parliament to try to highlight Parliament's unified view that we need to do something about this issue. If we need to change that to reflect more our calling on the Government to do x, y and z, we would be happy to look at the title of the debate. There is no debate between us all about the significance and importance of this issue. Two and a half years after the Modern Slavery Act and given that tomorrow is national Anti-Slavery Day, it is only right for us again to challenge ourselves about what more can and should be done for those who suffer this heinous crime.

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Q11 **Chair:** Anyone want to add anything?

Dame Caroline Spelman: If I may—to represent Helen, but also because I was on the Select Committee that looked into how the legislation needed to be crafted. Evidence clearly showed that it is one thing to pass a Bill to stop slavery but another to implement it in the best possible way to actually stop it happening. I was motivated to come here by the Committee Chairman's report in the weekend newspapers. Lady Butler-Sloss drew attention to the fact that 8,670 children were recorded as missing. It was particularly concerning that in the Vietnamese community, 152 children have permanently disappeared and 88 others have gone missing temporarily. That is against a backdrop of a rising incidence of this, so in our pitch to you we show that the National Crime Agency's statistics indicate that the number of potential victims of trafficking referred has risen from 1,745 in 2013 to 3,805 in 2016. There is real urgency about the need to debate implementation. It so happens that Anti-Slavery Day is tomorrow, so our pitch to you could not be more timely.

Jim Shannon: Just to back up what has been said, at my church the week before last we had what is called a missionary weekend. Organisations there included AsiaLink and a pastor from Laos, near Vietnam, which Caroline referred to. Children as young as nine are being trafficked—mostly young girls, although young boys are being trafficked as well—and some of them are carrying the most horrific diseases as a result of the activity that they are enslaved into. I tabled an early-day motion today on this issue—on what is going on in Laos—putting down my concerns clearly. We in this House have a duty to express this on behalf of those who cannot express it themselves. If we had this debate, an enormous number of people would be interested and participate, and I think it is important that we all do so.

Jeremy Lefroy: Many people around the world and in this country would prefer that we did not talk about this issue. They do not want a light to be shone on it and I think it is our duty to do so.

Q12 **Alex Sobel:** You all raised quite a lot of issues, including implementation of the Act, victim support and so on. It seems that there is clearly a divisible motion, even though it might not be contentious. It strikes me as the sort of debate, rather than a general debate, where a divisible motion would help.

Vernon Coaker: We are perfectly happy to work with the Committee if there is a need to look at the title. I will just say this to the Committee. Everyone is united by the fact that we need to tackle modern slavery, and we are trying to ensure a cross-party view—a parliamentary view—of how best to deal with it. Even if we are challenging the Government, we are trying to ensure it is not seen as good v. bad. We are all looking for the most effective way of implementing an Act that was passed unanimously with the best intentions.

Q13 **Patricia Gibson:** I am curious. I think you are right that there will be a

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lot of interest in this debate. Is there any particular reason why you didn't ask for a full day?

Vernon Coaker: No.

Jess Phillips: He doesn't want to chance his arm.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** The focus of your application is on victims, as opposed to identifying the perpetrators, which lends itself to a view that the action required relates to victims and to making sure they are looked after. That gives rise to what Alex was saying about the potential for a divisible motion. That's the next step along the way, isn't it?

Vernon Coaker: It is. We are trying to have a broad title so people can raise issues relating not only to victims but to crime, prosecution, the actions of the police and so on. One of the biggest barriers to prosecution is the fact that victims do not feel supported and therefore will not give evidence.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Another good reason to have this debate on a cross-party basis is to raise awareness, because very large numbers of our citizens do not understand the way in which they are implicated. They get jobs done with cash, and they don't ask questions about who is doing it and the terms they are employed upon. I have just come from the launch of an initiative by the Church of England in Lambeth Palace called "We See You", which is designed to wake up the public to the fact that this level of slavery is all around us, so we have to open our eyes and help to support the people who need us to reach out to them to get help.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Next up is Tim Farron on Calais and unaccompanied child refugees in Europe.

Tim Farron and Andy Slaughter made representations.

Tim Farron: We are making this application for a debate on the situation in Calais and on unaccompanied child refugees in Europe on behalf of me, Andy Slaughter, Heidi Allen and Angus MacNeil. It is very much a cross-party application. The long list of Members from across parties who wish to speak in any debate that is granted paints a picture of great cross-party support for and interest in this issue.

We have specifically requested a debate on 24 October because that date marks exactly one year since the Calais Jungle makeshift refugee camp was demolished. There will be interest in Parliament—and, indeed, across the country and elsewhere—in that date and in the unaccompanied children who were transferred at that point and where they have been transferred to. This is the right time to consider this issue.

It is worth bearing in mind that one of the reasons why the French authorities chose that time of year to close the camp was because French law states that after 1 November it would be an offence to make anybody homeless. There was a clear attempt by the French authorities to clear the decks and do something that many of us would consider not to be morally

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right just in time to miss that window. Of course, we are back at that time of year again.

After the demolition, the United Kingdom demonstrated and acknowledged its moral responsibility by taking 750 children to Britain to rebuild their lives. About 200 of them came under the Dubs amendment, and the majority came under the EU's Dublin III family reunion regulation—both section 67 of the Immigration Act.

That makes it very relevant at this particular moment, as the Brexit negotiations are taking place, because Dublin III and our part in that is up for negotiation.

The matter has fallen from the news agenda, but arguably the situation in Calais is as extreme as it was a year ago, without the same definite focus. As I said before, we in this House find ourselves with the ability to shape the debate, and that can help those people who were dispersed a year ago as well as those people who have settled in and around Calais and ports for all sorts of obvious reasons, with particular focus on those who are under the age of majority—who are children—and who are unaccompanied and, in many cases, are orphans.

We hope that you will grant this debate on that specific date because it marks the 12-month anniversary of the clearing of the camp.

Andy Slaughter: I was there about six weeks ago. It is extremely grim—it is much worse than when I was there at the beginning of last year. The difference is that there were 10,000 people in the camps then. At that time, the French were constructing huts and showers and things of that nature for about 1,500 of the most vulnerable people. What has happened now is that if you go to the site, it is wasteland and is completely cleared, and 1,000 people are living rough around Calais—about 200 of them are unaccompanied children. There are well-tested reports of quite brutal action by the police, in terms of attacks, beatings, pepper sprays and the removal of bedding. These are people who are absolutely in extremis. That is the immediate situation. Clearly, the problem has not gone away.

As Tim said, the issue is around how you deal with people. Some of them have a right under Dublin III to come to Britain, some are Dubs children, as we filled less than half our quota. There are also issues around the very large sums of public money from this country that have been spent on policing there and that may have been misused in the ways that I have indicated. So there are a number of issues to raise. It is very much a live issue. The situation is worse than it was before, albeit for a smaller number of people. That is why we are making this application.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** The obvious point is that we do not actually have any time to allocate on the anniversary date of 24 October. It is not a case of whether we would like to or not; we don't have any time to allocate. There is potential time that week, on the Thursday. If you were offered that time, would that be acceptable?

Andy Slaughter: How close to the date is that?

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Chair: It's the 26th.

Bob Blackman: It's the closest date that we would potentially be able to allocate.

Tim Farron: And would there be any time the following week?

Bob Blackman: We don't know.

Q16 **Chair:** I am afraid that the 26th is not yet confirmed. We have been told that we may have it. We have a three-hour slot in Westminster Hall on the 26th, which is guaranteed, but in terms of Chamber time, we do not yet know.

Tim Farron: Obviously, we are open to whatever you can allocate.

Chair: Thank you.

Diana Johnson and Andrew Percy made representations.

Q17 **Chair:** Next up is transport in the north and Diana Johnson and Andrew Percy. I point out for the watching masses that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for rail in the north.

Diana Johnson: Thank you very much for allowing us to make this pitch to you. Obviously, transport is a key issue for all Members of Parliament and we have obviously got the Government strategy for the northern powerhouse, and transport and transport investment is key to that.

This application is to have a debate on transport in the north. A third of MPs across the three northern regions have supported the application, and there are two main reasons why we have come before you today.

The first is rail. Many of you will remember that on the last day of the summer term, the Transport Secretary scrapped a number of rail electrification schemes in northern England. On the following day, 21 July, doubt was cast about the northern trans-Pennine route and its electrification. Obviously, there was no opportunity to discuss that with the Transport Secretary at that time.

Over the summer, we have had announcements supporting Crossrail 2, with another, I think, £41.2 billion for that project. In August, the Transport Secretary made a statement to a regional newspaper saying that people in the north basically had to do it for themselves. So this is an opportunity for people in the north and Members of Parliament for the north to have that debate in Parliament, to discuss the ramifications of some of these decisions, particularly around the bi-modal trains that the Transport Secretary is now saying are the ones that can be used.

Q18 **Chair:** Are they the ones that break down on the first trip?

Diana Johnson: They may well be. Also, about journey times—

Andrew Percy: Built in the north-east.

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Diana Johnson: There is also the issue of passenger rail fares, which go up all the time. We want to debate what is happening with rail and electrification in the north. There is also the issue of road investment. We know that there are ambitious plans around road schemes in the north. However, in March this year the National Audit Office was critical of how some of those investment strategies were working, and a debate would be an opportunity to discuss that as well. Highways England is saying it will need to consider delaying or cancelling 112 major road projects, which include those in the north, because they have been put together too hastily, without certainty on their feasibility or benefit.

We need an opportunity to discuss all that and look at the effect that transport investment is having on the economy, especially in light of the Brexit negotiations that are going on at the moment. We need to get this right, so debating this at the earliest opportunity would be very welcome.

Andrew Percy: I support lots of what Diana said—perhaps not some of the content about rail investment, particularly in the north. It would be an outrage not to grant the debate, which I think we are all agreed upon. Importantly, at the moment about £2.6 billion is being invested in the Transpennine and the Northern Rail network, so big changes are happening already. Lots of that is very positive, but a lot of Members would wish to express their views on how that is progressing—whether quickly or slowly—and also about some of the routes that are not benefiting from that investment. There is a lot of support. When I was the Minister for the northern powerhouse, transport was the number one issue raised with me. Connectivity across the north is truly appalling. That it takes longer to get from Chester to Hull than it does to get from Hull to London is ridiculous. As a northern MP, you know there is a lot of interest in this in the region. If time were scheduled for debate, a lot of colleagues would want to come along and have their two penn’orth—or gob off on the issue.

Chair: I must admit that, when it happens—although I cannot see it happening at any near time—I will miss looking at the rails through the holes in the train floor. But that is neither here nor there.

Q19 **Alex Sobel:** It is obviously quite a broad, general debate about rail and road, and electrification is a big part of that. Do you think it is too broad to bring a divisible motion for the debate?

Diana Johnson: We wanted to keep it broad, to garner as much support as possible, because we recognised that individual MPs will want to bring in their own circumstances in their own constituencies. Obviously, we have not mentioned buses and I am sure that some MPs will want to raise that issue as well—I have just highlighted roads and rail. The breadth of this is helpful, to encourage as many people as possible to take part.

Andrew Percy: It is also about how it has been looked at in the north since the creation of Transport for the North—not just looking at rail but at how that ties in with the infrastructure plan by Highways England. They are now a formal part of the advisory process. I think the two things are

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inextricably linked. The broader the debate, the better, because that is how it has been looked at in the north.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** May I correct one assertion that you made about Crossrail 2, Diana? As a Londoner, it would be remiss of me not to pick up on the fact that it has not got the funding. It is totally dependent on the Mayor of London coming up with funding to support the bid. We are lobbying very hard for Crossrail 2.

Diana Johnson: Okay—I take that point. It is nice that you are getting that kind of support for Crossrail 2, though. That is why we want a debate about what we would like.

Andrew Percy: That is why we need the debate, Bob, so that you can correct the record formally.

Chair: Does anyone else want to ask a question or make a point? Thank you very much for your applications.

Nick Herbert and Crispin Blunt made representations.

Q21 **Chair:** Next is Mr Nick Herbert, with an application on global LGBT rights.

Nick Herbert: Chair, thank you for giving me this opportunity. I am supported here by Crispin Blunt, secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT rights, which I chair. This application is now supported by 25 Members from across the House of Commons.

The prompt for it is that during the conference recess, there were two incidents of quite serious concern in relation to human rights. The first was in Egypt, where, since 22 September, when rainbow flags were flown at a pop concert in Cairo, there have been over 50 arrests of LGBT people by security forces. Some of those arrests have resulted in sentences of six years' imprisonment for the so-called crime of debauchery, or inciting debauchery, and others await their fate. Non-governmental organisations report that victims have been subject to beatings, sexual harassment and forced intimate medical examinations. This is obviously quite serious in terms of human rights abuses, and as far as we know, the British Government has yet to say anything on this matter.

In Azerbaijan, coincidentally, since 16 September, over 80 LGBT people have been arrested in the capital, Baku, in a co-ordinated crackdown by police, simply because they looked gay, on the alleged grounds of taking action against prostitution. Similarly, detainees have been subject to beatings and electric shocks by the police and forced medical examinations, and trans women have had their heads forcibly shaved.

This comes on top of other concerns about abuses of LGBT people globally. In Chechnya, between April and May, there was a vicious gay purge campaign in which hundreds of gay men were abducted, tortured and killed. There has been a cancellation of Pride in Uganda—the demonstration was simply forced down, the organisers were threatened with arrest—and so on; one can list other countries where there have been concerns.

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This has not been discussed in the House of Commons, partly because these most recent episodes took place during the conference recess. The last time this was raised was in an urgent question on the situation in Chechnya on 20 April, well before the dissolution of Parliament. Had these incidents in Egypt and Azerbaijan happened when the House was sitting, I think they would have merited an urgent question. We are now past that point, but I think it is important that the House of Commons has an opportunity to discuss these issues and to ask the Government how they are responding, what support they are giving organisations on the ground and what more can be done.

The final thing to say is that it is also an opportunity to raise these issues in the run-up to the Commonwealth summit next year, and to interrogate the Government on what its stance will be in relation to LGBT rights at the Commonwealth summit, because a number of the countries where there are concerns about these issues are Commonwealth members, and they are taking actions that are in breach of the Commonwealth charter. So the position of the Government on this is important, and Back-Bench Members need the opportunity to quiz the Government to understand what their position is.

Crispin Blunt: The only thing I want to add is that the issues of immediate concern are, obviously, what is happening in Egypt. The Government has taken a political position which is very close to the Egyptian Government; Alistair Burt has been there and had articles published in Arabic in Egyptian newspapers making it clear how closely associated they are with the policies of President Sisi towards the Government that was removed from office in the coup in 2013. So there is an issue about why the United Kingdom is not speaking out on this, which would be utterly congruent with our usual values and presentation on these issues; worse, there has been, frankly, a total silence on what is happening in Cairo.

Q22 **Alex Sobel:** You talked about the Government's response to Egypt. What about the other countries? Have there been any public statements so far about those other countries you mentioned?

Nick Herbert: The Government responded in relation to Chechnya, because it had to respond to the urgent question. The Government has not, as far as I am aware, said anything about the situation in Azerbaijan, or the cancellation of Uganda Pride, despite being prompted by Members to say something.

Q23 **Chair:** Thank you. We have had eight applications this afternoon, and time is at a premium. Are there any time sensitivities here? I understand that we have missed the boat in terms of the conference recess and so on. From your perspective, is it a question of "as soon as possible", or is there any time that would be more appropriate to gain maximum impact?

Nick Herbert: Well, you can see that the number of Members who have applied for this already is quite high. There is a level of concern about this. Obviously, I am concerned that the House of Commons has not said

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anything about the situation in Egypt and Azerbaijan—about things that happened relatively recently, in September—because we were not sitting. The NGOs are looking to us to take a stance on these issues. The further we get away from it, the worse the impression that is given about the willingness of British parliamentarians to stand up. There are obviously other things we can do, but there has not been a debate on these issues for a while. We understand that there is competition, but there is a time sensitivity because of what is still going on in Egypt, so we would be grateful if a debate happened as soon as possible.

Chair: That's fine. Thank you very much indeed.

Caroline Lucas and Ronnie Cowan made representations.

Chair: Last for today, but certainly not least, we have an application from Caroline Lucas on the United Nations treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

Caroline Lucas: Thank you very much, Chair, for the opportunity to make a bid to you this afternoon. I am joined by Ronnie Cowan.

The case that we want to make to you really is that it is a good time for Parliament to have a debate about the UN's new treaty. It is a treaty that was agreed in July of this year that will prohibit nuclear weapons. It was supported by no fewer than 122 other nations. The treaty is now open for signature, and more than 50 nations have already signed. Despite the momentum behind it, as we know, the UK did not engage in the negotiations.

The topic of the global nuclear weapons ban treaty has been raised in departmental questions and at business questions, but requests for a debate in Government time have not been successful. There has been a new push behind the whole issue since the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons—ICAN—was awarded the Nobel peace prize just last week, not least for its work on generating the momentum behind this new treaty.

I want to reassure you that this is not just a rehash of the many debates that we have had about Trident. Obviously, Trident is about unilateral nuclear disarmament—or at least the frame in which that debate normally happens is: "Should we or should we not renew Trident nuclear weapons?" This is a very different debate, and its starting point is that successive Governments have said that they want to work towards a world of multilateral disarmament. I would argue that that is exactly what this process is. This is not about re-running anything to do with Trident; it is about saying, given that this is such a huge issue and that there is a whole new UN treaty with 122 countries behind it, that it feels like we ought to be at least discussing what is happening.

In terms of the number of supporters, I want to reassure you that more Members have signed up since we submitted our original application, including a Conservative Member. We have 15 at the moment. For some

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reason we have not been able to reach any Liberal Democrats, but we will put that right, because they have signed an EDM along very similar lines. I think we will very easily get to 20 and beyond.

Ronnie Cowan: I endorse what Caroline has said. There are 122 countries that saw fit to endorse this treaty. The UK Government did not even see fit to attend; because of that, they have not been held to account. We do not know the reasoning behind their not attending, and we do not know the reason why they do not want to endorse this treaty. We signed up to the non-proliferation treaty in 1968, but we have not really taken it any further from there; we owe it to those other countries, and to the citizens of the United Kingdom, simply to get behind the ideas and the reasoning of the Government and say, "Why are they not prepared to do this?" It is as simple as that.

Q24 **Patricia Gibson:** The only point I would make is that you are talking about 20-plus signatures of people who would want to speak. I would suggest that perhaps three hours is not ambitious enough in terms of the time you would need for people to have their say and express their concerns.

Caroline Lucas: If you are offering us more time, then obviously we would be delighted, but the crucial thing for us would be to have it in the Chamber, so that we could then go to a vote—if we can. We believe that a vote on this, contrary to the votes we have had in the past on Trident, would demonstrate far greater support across the House, because, essentially, signing up to this treaty does not mean to say that you have to get rid of all your weapons before you do, which would be a fairly high bar to set before you join the treaty. It is about signing up to the treaty and then negotiating over time a way of getting rid of the weapons over time.

Q25 **Chair:** Thank you very much. You have said that you have more names; if you could provide those to the Clerk of the Committee, I would really appreciate it. If more names come forward, please add them as well. That is entirely in order. If there is no one else asking questions, then may I thank you very much indeed for your application?

Caroline Lucas: If I may just say it quickly, there is no set date, but we obviously want to build on the momentum that is already behind the treaty, and that happened with the Nobel peace prize and so forth. If it could be in the next couple of months, that would be very helpful.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed; that is useful. That concludes the formal business of the Committee.

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