

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 19 Dec 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 Dec 2017.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-26

Witnesses

[I:](#) Thelma Walker and Robert Halfon

[II:](#) Vernon Coaker and Jim Shannon

[III:](#) Siobhian McDonagh and Jim Shannon

[IV:](#) Maggie Throup and Jim Shannon

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Thelma Walker and Robert Halfon made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to our last Backbench Business Committee before Christmas. This afternoon we have six applications in front of us, the first being from Thelma Walker and Robert Halfon about the exclusion of foster children from 30 hours of funded childcare.

Thelma Walker: Thank you very much for giving us your time this afternoon. Through the Education Committee and a variety of debates in Westminster Hall and questions in the Chamber, questions have been raised about the discrimination against three and four-year-old foster children, who are not currently entitled to the extra 15 hours of free childcare entitlement. They are the only vulnerable group that are excluded from that at the present time. There have been debates and questions in the past about entitlement to 30 hours of free childcare for all three and four-year-olds, but Government policy at the moment is to exclude this particular group. I am proposing this debate because I think it is obvious discrimination against a most vulnerable group and also against the foster carers themselves, who do not have the right to work.

Some foster carers may choose not to take up the entitlement of an extra 15 hours, but they should have that choice, and certainly the children should have that right. Clearly for vulnerable children who may have experienced trauma in the past, the opportunity to participate in good-quality childcare is bound to be beneficial for development of speech, language and communication and social interaction. The opportunity for foster carers, whose allowance currently does not even meet a living wage, to earn extra income will be beneficial. The other aspect is that a foster carer could have their own child aged three or four living at home and accessing that 30 hours entitlement. A foster child could be in the same household and not be allowed to attend the nursery, which is clearly unfair and unjust.

Robert Halfon: Thelma has explained it very well. In a nutshell, foster children are among the most vulnerable children in society, and we want to make sure that they have access to the 30 hours of childcare, because all the evidence shows that they would benefit from that. Our Education Committee is doing an inquiry into foster care and is shortly to publish a report on foster care and foster children. We have backing for the debate from most of the members of the Education Committee, and we have backing from members of parties across the House. We think this is a very important matter to be debated.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** I have two questions. First, you have ticked requests for both 90-minute and three-hour debates. Can I take it that if we are in a position to offer a 90-minute debate, you will accept that?

Thelma Walker: Yes.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Secondly, I understand that it is more or less the membership of the Education Committee on the list of sponsors.

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Thelma Walker: With one or two extras.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Is the Education Committee doing any work on this issue at the moment?

Robert Halfon: When you say 90 minutes, do you mean in the main Chamber?

Bob Blackman: You have a substantive motion, which can only be taken in the main Chamber.

Robert Halfon: Thank you. The answer is yes, the Education Committee is doing some work, but on a whole load of issues around foster children. We think that this is an incredibly important one. Our report is on wide-ranging issues. This is just one of them.

Thelma Walker: We have had evidence from foster carers.

Robert Halfon: We think that this particular issue is of incredible importance. It is not just the Committee—other Members are supporting this as well.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Is there an urgency in the timing of such a debate?

Robert Halfon: Well, in response to a question I asked in Education questions last week, and also one that the shadow Children's Minister asked, the Secretary of State said that she was looking at this issue, so we want to set out all the facts and continue to make the case, if the Government are open-minded about this.

Thelma Walker: And it was rolled out in September, so that discrimination is already taking place. The sooner we can have some changes, the better.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** At the moment we do not know the business for the first week of January, when we come back to the House. If time was made available to us, on an urgent basis, would you be in a position to take up the debate, which might be at short notice, in the first week back?

Thelma Walker: Yes, I believe we would.

Chair: Just to be open and transparent, both William and I are members of the Education Select Committee, and we are listed, along with other members of that Committee, as supporting the debate. Normally I would absent myself from the deliberations on such a thing, but if both William and I absented ourselves, the Committee would be inquorate, so that would be counterproductive. We will be guided by other members of the Committee in our deliberations later.

Vernon Coaker and **Jim Shannon** made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Vernon is joined by our resident season ticket holder, Mr Jim

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Shannon. Welcome, **Jim**.

Vernon Coaker: He's got a busy afternoon, I think. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to request that the Committee consider this motion on defence. The Committee will have seen that I listened to what was said last time on the modern slavery application, about submitting a substantive motion that may or may not be votable depending on the positions that people take. There is a draft text as well, which we sent in for people to consider. We have also put forward a significant number of Members of Parliament who have supported the application for this particular debate.

As you can see from that list, there is huge interest in this whole area around defence. People will have different views about what should or should not be done. I think you can see the significance of it if I point out that the Chair of the Defence Select Committee has supported the debate. I just draw that to the attention of the Committee.

There is a national security capabilities review going on at the moment, and there is all sorts of speculation in the press both about what that means for resources and capabilities and what it means for our country going forward. I think it is important that there is an opportunity for Parliament—whatever view people take—to have a debate and a discussion, about this whole area. It is about the future of our country. We should not really just be debating through the press whether we have this number of planes or that number of troops, this number of ships or the reduction of that capability, or money poured into cyber at the expense of this or that. All that should be something for Parliament to debate and come to a view on. I think this debate would be helpful to Parliament and, indeed, to all of us in discussing what the best way forward for our country is.

I will just make two further points on that. Given the significance of the debate and, I believe, the interest in it, I have asked the Committee to consider a full day or six hours—whichever way one looks at it—in the Chamber. If that is not possible and the Committee does not feel able to do that, we would accept three hours. However, I would just make the plea to the Committee that this is urgent; there are clearly decisions being discussed and maybe even being made, which I think we as a Parliament should debate and discuss. If we reduce the time too much and there are statements, I worry, not that we would rush it, but that we would not have the time that all Members would wish to see, whatever perspective they have.

Finally, from a personal point of view, I am on the Council of Europe, and were the Committee minded to grant us a debate, I would not be in Parliament for Thursday 25 January, as I am away on Council of Europe business. If the Committee were so minded, I would ask them to consider that.

With those brief remarks—I am obviously willing to answer questions, and

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I am pleased that my colleague Jim Shannon is here—I ask the Committee to consider this request.

Jim Shannon: To reinforce Vernon's interest in this debate, I have an interest in it, too, as I suspect do many Committee members and many of the Members sitting behind me. There is substantial interest in our armed forces—not only in where we go forward but in the money that is spent on care for veterans and in the work that is done for serving personnel. It is an immense issue.

Vernon is right to ask for a debate for six hours. I think, given their interest, that Members would make themselves available for a debate of that length. It would probably be the first opportunity for such a lengthy debate on a subject that interests everyone, and I would fully endorse it, not just as a former part-time soldier but as someone who does the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, which gives you another interest and keeps you alive to the issues. I think that the issues that would be brought up would encompass all facets of defence—the Army, the Royal Navy and the Air Force—and I think that the debate would be one of the House's defining debates.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** We do not yet know what the business of the House is going to be for the week we come back in January. Given the urgency of the review, in the event that that time became available—we do not know that at this point in time—would you be in a position to hold the debate in that first week in January?

Vernon Coaker: Absolutely.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Siobhain McDonagh and **Jim Shannon** made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Ah—welcome back Jim, and welcome Siobhain.

Siobhain McDonagh: I am asking for a debate on the Floor of the House to discuss the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims, both internationally and in the UK.

Ahmadi Muslims are regarded as heretical in Pakistan. They are not allowed to call themselves Muslim. They are not allowed to give the Muslim greeting. They are not allowed to discuss their religion. They cannot vote, because they have to define themselves as non-Muslim in order to do so. They cannot stand for Parliament, or as candidates in elections at any level, as a result. Even in their city, where over 90% of residents are Ahmadi, they cannot stand for local or regional government because they are not prepared to describe themselves as non-Muslim. There is an election in Pakistan next year, so emotions and feelings are running very high. Recent denunciations of Ahmadi by Pakistan

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parliamentarians have led to riots throughout Pakistan, and there are currently three Ahmadis sentenced to death merely because of their faith.

[This] persecution has spread out to other countries. We know there are 34 people in prison in Algeria just because they are Ahmadi. Indonesia has a significant problem, and it is growing. It also has a significance for the UK, because, obviously, of social media and satellite TV. We have had incidents here; there has been a lot of persecution of Ahmadis in the UK. Mr Shah was murdered in Glasgow, simply for being an Ahmadi by another Muslim, from Birmingham, who was radicalised by a cleric from Pakistan who was given entry clearance to do a tour of mosques in the UK. Many Members may actually have one of those mosques in their constituency. This is both an international issue and a national issue, and that is why we ask for the [time] for a debate.

Jim Shannon: I chair the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief. We work very closely with Ahmadis on what is happening. I also chair the APPG on Pakistan minorities. The two issues cover each other and intertwine in many ways. I have been very privileged to have been asked in the last two years to go and speak at their event, as has Siobhain. It is always good to support those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no belief, so that is what I do, and what we all do.

[The] Ahmadis in particular are a highly persecuted Muslim group. We have some of them in Northern Ireland, and they came to see me there three weeks ago. I am going to their event on the last Saturday in December, when they celebrate the new year. It is important that we in this House, as we always do and will continue to do, represent all such groups. I want to put on record our need to support [Siobhain's] request for the debate, because I think it is one that many of us who have an interest in human rights, equalities and the persecution of any religion across this world will want to speak in.

Siobhain McDonagh: You may recognise them as their slogan is, "Love for all, hatred for none." So whenever there is an atrocity, whether it is in Manchester or out on Westminster Bridge, you will always see them out with their signs, "Love for all, hatred for none." Recently—in November—they raised a quarter of a million pounds for the poppy appeal. So they do a great deal for their own community but also [nationally].

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Given the problems you have highlighted both in your oral contribution and in the written request, is there any time sensitivity on the request for the debate? Is there a particular time when you want the debate to be [held]?

Siobhain McDonagh: It would be good if we could have it before the general election in Pakistan, but other than that, [no].

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Forgive me—what is the date of that?

Siobhain McDonagh: I wish I could tell [you].

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Q12 **Bob Blackman:** Okay. Obviously, the other issue is that at the moment we do not know the business for the House for the week we come back. There is the potential for us to get some time; we do not know yet. It may be quite short-notice. Would you be in a position to hold the debate if we offered time, possibly even as an end-of-day debate on one of the days we may **get**?

Siobhain McDonagh: Yes, we can be entirely flexible.

Bob Blackman: Lovely.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. It is much appreciated.

Maggie Throup and Jim Shannon made **representations**.

Q13 **Chair:** Next up is Maggie Throup on the effect of junk food advertising on children's obesity. Jim, your season ticket is well **warranted**.

Jim Shannon: Today it definitely is—my goodness!

Maggie Throup: I am here today to support the call for a debate in Back-Bench time on the impact of junk food advertising on children's obesity. Thirty per cent. of children aged two to 15 are either overweight or obese. The long-term consequences of that are quite horrendous: type 2 diabetes, increased risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease. What is even more frightening is that children are now being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, which at one stage we thought was only for older **people**. The cost to the NHS is £5.1 billion and the cost to the UK economy is £27 billion. I personally think that is an underestimate. So it is an issue that we really need to tackle.

There has been a lot of focus on sugary foods, but there is also the impact on obesity of foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and all of these are advertised quite widely on TV. The Government has also got a goal to reduce obesity in children by 2026, yet we do not feel that the plan for action it produced in 2016 goes far enough. It talks about the sugary drinks tax and reformulation, but a whole chunk was missed out on advertising to children and young **people**. There is a causal link between obesity and advertising, and there are reports of children who see adverts on TV and straight away want that food.

Sadly, the current regulations for TV advertising cover only children's TV channels. Anybody with youngsters will know that they don't just watch those TV channels; they actually watch a wide range of TV programmes, sometimes quite late into the night, including "The X Factor" and "I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!" Those are TV programmes where there are often adverts for some of these high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt foods. They are all having an impact on the future health and wellbeing of our children.

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The current regulations came into being in 2008, so as we hit 2018, 10 years on, we feel that it is a really good time to raise the issue again and see whether we can extend the current regulations across a broader spectrum of TV advertising. We feel that with the way that TV advertising occurs and the way that children watch TV now, especially with catch-up TV and various other ways, the current regulations are not fit for purpose.

There is also a huge link between areas of deprivation and the amount of TV that children watch: the more deprived children watch more TV. So if we could break that link between the advertising of junk foods and obesity and the areas of deprivation it would be a really good step forward.

There is widespread support for this debate. I have got every party supporting the debate, apart from the Green party Member, who I am afraid I did not manage to get to support it. I feel that now is the right time. We are 18 months on from when the Government launched their obesity plan, which missed out huge chunks of what had been recommended by the Health Committee and Public Health England, and now is the right time to push a bit further to get the next steps of that plan for the future of our children.

Jim Shannon: I want to reinforce what Maggie has said. Obesity and education almost go hand in hand. We have children who are—I use these words carefully—couch potatoes. They watch TV, eat whatever they eat and do not have much control, so we have to step in. I think that Government has a role to step in. My colleagues do not always agree with me on this issue, but I think that if people are not doing something, Government has to do it for them. So I believe that if we have to address these issues, we must do so at every level.

Maggie brought this debate forward to address junk food marketing. I am a type 2 diabetic. I got it late in life, but the life I led before was the reason why I got it. I am very keen to see that those at an early stage do not eat the junk foods that I ate, drink the Coca-Cola and eat all the Chinese that they should not be eating and suffer greatly in the years to come. So let us address the issue of junk food marketing at a very early stage.

The interest in the House is substantial enough to justify a debate on the issue. I will certainly come along to make a contribution, and if we listen to our constituents every one of us will want to do the same.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** Which Department do you see answering this debate?

Maggie Throup: That is a very good question.

Bob Blackman: Health would obviously be fitting, but DCMS would be in charge of—

Maggie Throup: Yes. I have a feeling that one reason why we did not see some of the measures that the Health Committee recommended put into the plan was that DCMS actually blocked it to a certain extent. However,

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the responsibility for the health of our nation lies with the Department of Health, so I really think that the remit is with Health.

Coming back to Mr Shannon's comment, when we first looked at this issue in the Health Committee a lot of us were against intervention, but when we saw the evidence we thought that as politicians we had the responsibility to deliver to the fullest. There are actually very few members of the Health Committee supporting the debate—I did not go specifically to the Health Committee to support this debate. I went to a wider range of MPs, knowing that it is supported by many different people.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** Given the content, and given that you will have seen that we have a long list of applicants for debates, if we were able to offer you a 90-minute slot in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday morning, would that be acceptable?

Maggie Throup: We would accept that, yes. May I also say that, like one of the previous applicants, I am on the Council of Europe? So on 25 January, if it would be a Thursday for 90 minutes—

Bob Blackman: The dates that would potentially fit are either the 16 or 30 January.

Maggie Throup: Right; that does not clash with the Council of Europe. The week of 22 January is the Council of Europe.

Bob Blackman: So actually it does not clash at all.

Maggie Throup: No, that is fine.

Chair: I would just make the observation that it has been primarily health concerns that have led to restrictions on the advertising of both alcohol and tobacco, so it is not beyond the realms of possibility that this could come about.

Maggie Throup: Exactly, yes.

Joan Ryan, Mrs Louise Ellman and Jim Shannon made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** Welcome, Joan. Go ahead.

Joan Ryan: Between March 2015 and December 2017, the issue of Hezbollah has been raised some 67 times in oral and written questions and in general debates in the House of Commons, but there has been no specific debate on Hezbollah for more than four years. The last was a half-hour Adjournment debate secured by Michael McCann in 2013. A Back-Bench debate would provide a timely opportunity for MPs from across the House to discuss an important issue.

We have just had a statement today on policing and counter-terrorism funding. We know that more money is going to the Met for counter-

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terrorism, and we have seen a series of really serious terrorist incidents over this past year. I think this whole issue of terrorism, its causes and its perpetrators is something that all parties in the House of Commons are concerned about, and I do not think we can ignore the role of Hezbollah and the danger it poses in any of this.

In my submission, I made it clear that we have support across the House, and there are more names that could now be added to the 14 that you have got. You will know that we are applying for a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall. Certainly, Westminster Hall debates on the Middle East are always very well attended, and we are confident that there is an appetite for this debate.

In a response to a question about Hezbollah proscription, Amber Rudd said: "I will certainly consider what he has suggested and come back to discuss it with him and, if needed, the House." That is what was said the last time this issue was raised with the Home Secretary, so we think this would be an opportunity for Amber Rudd to hear the views more widely across the House.

As I have pointed out, the UK Government has long held the view that Hezbollah's military wing has been involved in conducting and supporting terrorism, and in March 2001, they proscribed the military wing under the Terrorism Act 2000, as Members will know. However, Hezbollah's political wing is not proscribed. The issue here is that this is not a distinction that Hezbollah itself draws between its military and political wings; indeed, its deputy general secretary has said: "We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority."

By their own admission, that is their function. They are a terrorist organisation, and other countries take a much tougher stance on this issue and proscribe Hezbollah's military and political wings. The Clinton Administration named Hezbollah a terrorist entity in 1995, and Canada, the Netherlands and even the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council have adopted the same approach.

The Prime Minister herself has stated that there is "far too much tolerance of extremism in our country". The Government must therefore act to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety. If that is the view of the Prime Minister, it really is important to hear the view of other Members of the Commons and for Parliament to speak, not just the Government, especially if the Government are considering a change in policy. There may well be those who wish to speak against proscription, and for the sake of balance we need to hear all voices in this House.

I will finish by making just a few last points. Why do we think it is so important to have this debate now? Well, there are estimates that Hezbollah has 100,000 to 120,000 rockets hidden among the civilian

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population of southern Lebanon, so there is an immediate threat in that. We also know that Hezbollah's paymasters—the Iranian Revolutionary Guard—boasted earlier this year that they had established underground rocket factories in Lebanon, which are under the full control of Hezbollah.

Also, Hezbollah has not simply exported terror globally to places such as Beirut, Buenos Aires and Bulgaria. It has also sent forces to fight for President Assad's murderous regime in Syria. It is estimated that about a quarter of Hezbollah's fighting force—a quarter is some 5,000 men, so it is a significant fighting force—is engaged in fighting in Syria.

The other thing we know is that, in addition to receiving support from Iran, Hezbollah funds its own activities through both informal networks and centrally run enterprises, which have recently been described by one analyst as being like international organised criminal entities. So Hezbollah is heavily involved in money laundering, arms sales and drug smuggling, which impacts on all the countries around the world; we are not immune to it and the European Union is not immune to it.

So this really is an issue that we need, at the very least, to be debating, if not acting upon. That is why we think that this is the right time for this debate and why we think this debate is very important, Chairman. Thank you.

Mrs Ellman: I would just like to add one further perspective on Joan's very good statement. There is also a community relations aspect to this and the issue of hate speech. Recently, there was a march in London at which Hezbollah flags were waved, with threatening weapons shown on them. When I went in a delegation to see the Metropolitan police about that, the police said it was difficult to take any action because the organisation as a whole was not proscribed and it was not clear whether the flags related to the proscribed body or to the part that was accepted. I think the whole issue of community relations and hate speech is very important and of concern to many people.

As Joan said, there is not just one view on this issue. There are people who believe that free speech is absolutely more important than the issues that I am raising about hate speech and bad community relations. There are others with different views on the foreign policy aspects. I think all of that means that we need to have a proper debate on this issue, so that all views can be put forward and debated.

Jim Shannon: Again, I just want to make a very quick comment. Coming from Northern Ireland, as I do, and having lived through the troubles, as I have, I can well remember the statement by one very prominent activist, which was, "The Armalite in one hand and the ballot paper in the other." Those people were following the joint campaigns of democracy and terrorism. The organisation drew back from its terrorist campaign—it was proscribed—and entered the democratic process, and whether or not we agree with its politics, which in many cases we do not, it is a democratic organisation now.

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It would be our hope—it would certainly be my hope—that maybe Hezbollah might draw back from its brutal, murderous, bloody campaign of terrorism against many, many people. Innocents have been murdered by it, as well. If one organisation needs to be proscribed, it certainly **does**.

I fully endorse and support the debate that Joan has asked for, and I will speak in it, and perhaps I will give a perspective from Northern Ireland in it, because it is important that we try to pull people back from something that is **unacceptable**.

I had the occasion to go to Lebanon as well, through a Defence Committee trip, which two of the staff here were also on. On that, we had the opportunity to see at first hand how the democratic process happens in Lebanon and to ask if Hezbollah was part of that.

We **I** want to encourage Hezbollah not to follow the campaign of terrorism and brutal murder of innocents, which it quite clearly has followed. If this debate is a step in that direction, then let us do **it**.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** **You** have made an application for three hours in Westminster Hall. The current position is likely to be that we will not get a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall before the February recess, so it is a long time before such a debate could happen. However, if we were able to offer you a 90-minute debate on a Tuesday in Westminster Hall, on either 16 or 30 January, which would fit, I think, because it would be the Home Office responding, would that be acceptable to **you**?

Joan Ryan: **I** think it would create a difficulty. You have seen the attendance at some of these debates and people's speaking time reduced to two minutes, and sometimes a minute, which is just about enough time to get out of your seat. I would like to say yes, because we are very keen to have the debate, but my worry about saying yes is that we will not then satisfy what we are asking for and the need to have a debate that all Back Benchers can really take part in. We have heard what the Government are saying, what the Prime Minister's view is and the Home Secretary's view, but it is about allowing Back Benchers to speak—I don't have to tell this Committee that; you are the Backbench Business Committee, aren't you? The last debate we had on the Middle East was a few weeks ago and it was packed. That was, I think, a 90-minute debate. People were a bit fed up that they had prepared for the debate and turned up but could not get in to speak—and even when speeches were reduced to two minutes, plenty of people still did not get called. That is what bothers **me**.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** It is your application. All we can advise is how much time we are **allocated**.

Joan Ryan: I want to be co-operative, obviously, and I want to get the debate, **but**—

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** **The** alternative will be that it is likely that we will get three-hour debates after the February recess, so it will not be until late February or early **March**.

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Joan Ryan: We would not be averse to a debate in the Chamber. I had not realised that you would not get a debate before February. I do not know what to say.

Q20 **Chair:** At the moment, we have some uncertainty about what time will be allocated. What we know is that we have no definite time in Westminster Hall, but things might change. We will see.

Joan Ryan: I do not know what to say in relation to that. I will leave it in your hands, I think.

Q21 **Chair:** I understand that it is difficult. The thing is that it would not be beyond the realms of possibility that if the only slot available was a 90-minute slot, and that was well oversubscribed, it would lead to you making another application, possibly for Chamber time, to have the item brought out and moved on further.

Joan Ryan: That is a fair point. Can I leave it in your hands?

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed.

Derek Thomas and Jim Shannon made representations.

Q22 **Chair:** Welcome, Derek. Welcome again, Jim.

Derek Thomas: Really, Jim is here because he has been waiting for me to speak. That is why he has been here the whole time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to my application for considering marriage in Government policy. It is Marriage Week from 5 to 14 February next year, as it was this year. We were kindly given a Westminster Hall debate on the subject during Marriage Week this year. Marriage Week has been going for more than 20 years and there is good reason to celebrate marriage. Marriage for lots of people can be a fantastic thing—for some, not so good—but the truth is that it is good that we have a week in the year when we can consider and celebrate marriage. If we are successful in securing the debate, however hard we try to bring attention to the issue of marriage and marriage in Government policy, I am sure that the royal wedding will do a far better job. It would be a good thing to secure the debate.

The reason I want particularly to secure this debate is that in recent years the Government have recognised, because of extensive research on the benefits of marriage, that it offers an opportunity in so many ways for lives to be full and fulfilling and provides a secure environment for children to grow up in. There is evidence to suggest that it is the best place to raise children. It would be good to celebrate marriage but also to remind the Government that they must not lose sight not only of the wonderful contribution that marriage makes to society but also of the challenges and difficulties that many people face. There is a role, right through Government Departments and Government policy, to see what we can do

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to support families, the home unit and marriage. I will not say much more than that, except that a few more MPs have indicated that they would like to speak if we secure this debate.

Jim Shannon: I am very keen to support this. I am a great believer in marriage. I am 30 years married. My wife has been with me for that length of time, and it is quite phenomenal that she has done so. I believe in the importance of marriage. This Government—and indeed all Governments, to be fair—believe in the importance of marriage. I cast my mind back; I think it was Margaret Thatcher who said that marriage was a central and core part of society. I genuinely believe in that. The Conservative Government, through our relationship with them in the past but also now, have pushed for the marriage tax allowance to be increased. The Conservative party, in the former Prime Minister's time, agreed to that. We were keen to support that and very pleased to do so. It is not about anybody else's situation in life. It is about why we see it as important. We believe that marriage is important, and therefore I am very keen to support this application for a debate. If I am able to, I will certainly attend to make my contribution.

Chair: You are going to be busy, Jim.

Jim Shannon: I am indeed.

Q23 **Mr Wragg:** Are there any voices from Opposition parties willing to participate?

Derek Thomas: That is a good question. The truth is that I rather rushed this through late last week, so I have not been able to secure names that I can give you, but I am fairly confident there will be some. In the debate earlier this year, three Opposition MPs contributed. When we have had meetings with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and when we have met, it has been cross-party.

Chair: If you can secure names, I suggest you submit them to the Clerk. That will greatly assist the application.

Q24 **Bob Blackman:** Which answering Department do you envisage?

Derek Thomas: I imagine DWP. That would probably cover the broader topics.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** The week in question—Marriage Week—coincides with the February recess. There is potential to have a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on the Thursday beforehand. Alternatively you would need to change the answering Department to get it on the Tuesday preceding Marriage Week. It depends on whether you see this as coming under Work and Pensions, the Treasury or Women and Equalities.

Derek Thomas: Can I go back to colleagues and discuss how to proceed?

Q26 **Bob Blackman:** You will have to get extra names anyway, so we are looking at potentially a debate at the appropriate time, provided you fit

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with the criteria.

Derek Thomas: Brilliant. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I hesitate to say that Groucho Marx said that marriage is a wonderful institution if you want to live in an institution all your life.

Bob Blackman: I'm glad you said that.

Chair: I wish you both a very happy Christmas and a healthy and happy 2018.

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