

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench debates

Tuesday 9 October 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 October 2018.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Colin Clark; Patricia Gibson; Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-15

Witnesses

[I](#): Marie Rimmer and Jim Shannon.

[II](#): Karen Lee.

[III](#): Owen Smith.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome back from the conference recess to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon.

Jim Shannon and Marie Rimmer made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** The first application is headed up by Jim Shannon and Marie Rimmer and is on International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. Over to you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. The 27 October is International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. It is very topical, as we all know. We wish to have the opportunity to record our concern about the tragic failure to protect freedom of religion or belief in countries such as Iraq and Myanmar. Both Marie and I were in Pakistan last week, and we will develop that if the Committee agrees to the request. We learned things last week that are absolutely horrendous. Sexual violence against women is one example—the figures are mind-boggling. Another is the persecution of those with minority religious beliefs. Thousands have been displaced or killed.

The other reason why we think it is important to secure a debate is that we know the Prime Minister appointed Lord Ahmad to the new position of Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief in July. He is going to Pakistan, I think, in a couple of months' time or maybe less. It would therefore be an opportunity to comment on his role and examine the Special Envoy's plans to advance this fundamental human right. We have spoken to him personally, but we think this debate would be opportune.

Over 80% of the world's population live in countries where they experience high or very high restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief. These come in different forms, including social harassment, education, employment, gender issues, unlawful detention, sexual violence and even death. It is not just the likes of Pakistan or Iraq, but North Korea. There are so many countries in the world where this is happening. There is growing evidence that the freedom of religion or belief does not only prevent these harms. It is good that the Government have committed themselves to doing this, but it is important that we parliamentarians also ensure that we have an opportunity to raise awareness about International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day and to contribute our views on the appointment of the PM's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

We have asked for a general debate in Westminster Hall on a Thursday or Tuesday. Mr Chairman, you and I discussed this issue just before the recess, when I also requested a debate on Nigeria. I would be happy for this debate to take the place of the Nigeria debate, which can be left until November. We can do it after our inquiry is complete. I was hoping to secure the Nigeria debate for when the inquiry started—that was the idea. But we are where we are in this world; we move on and try to find

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

solutions to things rather than gripe about them. We are very keen to have this debate close to the time of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

Ms Rimmer: I do not have much to add to what Jim has said, but there is growing evidence that protecting freedom of religious belief or non-belief not only prevents harm in different countries, but can play a role in countering violent extremism at home and abroad by teaching us and helping us to understand and respect—not just tolerate—people's right of belief or non-belief, as the case may be, which would lead to much better relationships between people. There is evidence to prove that.

I think it is more important now than ever because countries are becoming more isolated. It is less joined together. I think people are going away from each other rather than towards each other. There isn't another avenue for a debate. The Government introduced a ministerial position about freedom of religion, but there is nothing else underneath that. We do not see any actions coming from that, so having a debate, be it a Back-Bench debate, would enlighten it, and open people's hearts.

I don't know whether you do, but I get many letters about belief or non-belief as the case may be—for and against. I believe myself, but there are people who don't believe, people who believe differently to me, and people who put pressure on. I think it is important that we try to raise awareness of people's rights to believe differently than other people.

- Q2 **Bob Blackman:** You have requested two potential weeks—the weeks commencing 22 or 29 October. Given that the Budget is on 29 October there will be no Chamber time at all that week for us. Equally, we do not know about the week of 22 October, but you could have three hours in Westminster Hall on Thursday 18 October or Thursday 25 October, which is the week commencing 22 October—one of the weeks you asked for.

Jim Shannon: I think we would probably take that one if that is okay. I think there is enough interest to justify a three-hour debate, if I could say that very gently to the Committee as well.

- Q3 **Bob Blackman:** The other advantage, of course, that you get from Westminster Hall is a guaranteed three hours. Colleagues probably know about the pressure on Chamber time. Today we have allocated two debates. It is likely that only one of those will actually be debated as a result of UQs and other statements.

Jim Shannon: Thursday 25 October is very close to 27 October, which is International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day as well.

- Q4 **Chair:** That is not confirmed, Jim. We have your application. It is a consideration. We might get a better offer, but it is certainly a major consideration. Is there anything else you want to add?

Jim Shannon: Very quickly, on the Nigerian debate, which is a separate issue by the way—

Chair: Jim, you do not need to say any more. I have noted that. That

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

application is very much on the list. I apologise that it had slipped off the list for some unknown reason. If you are happy, we will leave that until November.

Q5 **Patricia Gibson:** Can I just say to Mr Shannon before he goes that I expected to find my name as a supporter of your debate, because I will support it and I will be keen to speak?

Jim Shannon: I never doubted it, Mr Chairman. The fact that her name is not there does not mean that she will not be present, because she will be.

Chair: All right. I think that is Patricia kind of declaring an interest. Thank you very much indeed.

Karen Lee made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Next up is Karen Lee, please, on the future of breast cancer. Karen, over to you.

Karen Lee: Thank you, Chair. This is the first time I have done this, so apologies if I am a bit nervous or if I get anything wrong. I would like to hold a Backbench Business debate on the future of breast cancer care and treatment. I have done some subheadings about why.

On the topicality and the timing, October is breast cancer awareness month. I do not know whether people know this, but every year around 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer. It is the most common cancer in the UK. The Prime Minister announced at her party conference last week a new cancer strategy, and the long-term economic plan for the NHS is being decided. I think it is really important that MPs have the chance to discuss what that strategy would look like for breast cancer care.

There was also the announcement in May 2018 of the error in the breast screening system in England. Almost 200,000 women were sent letters informing them that they had been affected. I think it is something that is in the minds of many people following that.

Why is holding a debate important? I have already talked about the number of people who are diagnosed, but every year, 11,500 women and 350 men die of breast cancer.

One of the big things for me is that outcomes vary tremendously across the country—they are not even. I used to be a nurse, and while for 12 years I was in cardiology, for the last two or three years, I worked in gynae outpatient clinics, where we used to have an oncology clinic on Tuesday mornings, and access to treatment was so different.

My daughter actually died of breast cancer. She was just 34. She was ill for 13 months and died. She had triple negative breast cancer. When I got to Parliament, one of the things that I really wanted to do was to be an ambassador for Breast Cancer Now, one of the charities. Her care was much better than what they get in Lincoln, where I live. There are huge, huge differences. For example, whether women have access to a clinical

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

nurse specialist, which is the sort of thing that we need to talk about and that the cancer strategy needs to take on board.

Breast cancer is a trailblazer in terms of cancer treatment, and it often leads the way for other cancers. It had, for example, the first NHS screening programmes. There are so many different treatments around now and I think we need to have a really good debate, see what the results are and plan this cancer strategy properly. There are 700,000 British women living with or beyond breast cancer. I think it is really important that the House considers what the future of the care for those women looks like, as it is such a huge issue. It is very personal to me, but I think it is of interest to everybody.

On the number of MPs who might be likely to take part: I have not actually got any signatures yet as I did not know how to do that—I am sorry; I am quite new to this—but, in September, over 230 MPs attended Breast Cancer Now's "wear it pink" event in Parliament, and that charity has nearly 300 MPs as ambassadors. The APPG on breast cancer is one of the most active and cross-party groups. Earlier this year, at the launch of its report into geographical inequalities, it attracted 37 MPs. I know that there are a lot of parliamentary colleagues who have been affected by breast cancer.

Finally, whether a debate has been held or is likely to be arranged through other routes, the House considered the cancer strategy in February of this year, but it did not focus explicitly on breast cancer. I was one of only two Members to discuss breast cancer. In May, the House considered cancer targets and, again, I was one of only two Members to explicitly discuss breast cancer. I talked about the failure of screening, but we did not actually talk about the future or where we would go from there.

I am sorry I have had to refer to my papers—I am quite nervous about this—but those are, broadly, the reasons that I want this debate. I think it is of huge interest to us in this House and to the people out there who we represent. If I were successful in securing the debate, I would really like it to take place this month if possible, because it is "wear it pink" month. If not, the opportunity to have a debate about it, whenever possible, would be wonderful.

Q7 Bob Blackman: Thank you for your presentation. Just to put your mind at rest, you have enough speakers to fulfil our criteria in terms of the debate, so that is fine. You might want to get one or two extra Government-side speakers, just to balance things up a bit better, but you have enough speakers overall.

Obviously we have very limited time in the Chamber, so there are two points that I will make. We have lost a debate today which had been allocated. We will have no time in the last week of October because of the Budget. We have got two debates pre-allocated for a week that we are aware of, so the only time that we potentially have available that we know about is Thursday 18 October in Westminster Hall. That gives you a guaranteed 3-hour debate and obviously an answer from the Minister.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Given that, I think, you wanted to tease out—I am not putting words in your mouth—what the strategy is and what is going to happen on breast cancer, I think the offer that the Committee will make is Westminster Hall, because it is a serious and important issue. If the Government have not come up with the answers that you and your colleagues would like to see, you might want to come back with another application with a divisible motion that has to be debated in the Chamber.

Karen Lee: That would be great, thank you. I would really appreciate that.

Q8 **Chair:** Anyone else, please? In that case, Karen, thank you very much indeed for your application.

Owen Smith made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least, we have Owen Smith; I know that you are meant to have Nigel Dodds with you, but he has been held up elsewhere. Your application is about fortified flour. Over to you, Owen.

Owen Smith: Thank you very much. Mr Dodds sends his apologies; I think he has been called away to a meeting with the French ambassador, presumably about Brexit.

Thank you for seeing me today, Chair and Committee members. My application is for a debate to be held during the world awareness week for spina bifida and hydrocephalus, which starts on 22 October. Spina bifida and anencephaly are conditions caused by defects in the neural tube—the part of the body that forms the spinal cord and the brain stem—that occur in the womb between the 18th and 28th day after conception. If the tube does not close, it can lead to issues that are life-changing and often life-threatening. Anencephaly is when the brain does not develop; spina bifida you will all be familiar with.

In our country, there are two terminations every day as a result of spina bifida and anencephaly being discovered in the womb, and two babies are born with the conditions every week. They are much more widespread and problematic conditions than is currently perceived.

The true tragedy is that they are largely preventable. In the early 1990s, Professor Sir Nicholas Wald did a groundbreaking piece of research that showed that supplementing women's diet prior to conception and during pregnancy can prevent up to 70% of all neural tube defects from occurring in the womb. Some 81 countries across the world responded to that research by introducing mandatory fortification with folic acid of all flour and flour products to tackle spina bifida and anencephaly, but our country took a rather more conservative approach. Unlike America, South Africa, Australia, Canada and 80-odd other countries, we decided to advise women, in the light of the research, to supplement their diets with folic acid during pregnancy. The problem with that approach is that it is not working: we still have two live births with neural tube defects every week. If we had taken the same route as the 81 countries, we could have prevented over 3,000 live births with neural tube defects.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

The reason why our country has not gone down the mandatory fortification route is that there has been scientific debate over several years about whether there is an upper level of toxicity associated with folic acid. Earlier this year, however, a definitive piece of research was carried out, again by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald, showing that there is no upper level associated with toxic effects for folates. It is therefore safe, in the view of the scientific community, both to mandate the fortification of all flour products and to allow women to supplement their diet during pregnancy if they wish.

Mandatory flour fortification would be cost-minimal: we have about 10 flour mills in our country, with three large producers, so it would cost less than £200,000 nationally. If we had done it earlier, it could have prevented neural tube defects from occurring in 3,000 births since 1998. It is backed by just about every learned and medical profession and by Professor Colin Blakemore, and it has been done in 80-odd other countries. In my view, it is a no-brainer, so I was pleased that in our Westminster Hall debate on the subject in May, the Minister, Steve Brine, said that he would take advice and refer the matter to the Committee on Toxicity for its view on the question of an upper level of toxicity. The committee has still not come back to us with an answer, but I feel that flour fortification is such an important potential public health intervention that it ought to be more salient in our debate.

Around 14 Members have told me that they would definitely speak in this debate, and another 25 have spoken about the subject in Westminster Hall, signed EDMs on it or otherwise expressed an interest. I think that there would be significant interest in such a debate, whether it was held in the Chamber or elsewhere.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** You have had a Westminster Hall debate—as you say, you have done all these other things. The divisible motion that you want is clearly going to have to be taken in the main Chamber. Our problem is that we do not have any time in the Chamber as yet. We know that the week of 29 October will be given over to the Budget debate. I just wonder what the time implications are. Is there any real urgency to get this done? We want to see it done—we want to have the debate—but is there a real time requirement here?

Chair: It is outlined on the form that world spina bifida and hydrocephalus awareness week commences on 22 October.

Owen Smith: That is the issue. It isn't urgent, but it would be timely, obviously, if it coincided with that. There will be a briefing for MPs by the charity Shine, which supports families and children with spina bifida, that week, it will be in the media that week, and an EDM will be tabled that week.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** So ideally you would want it on 25 October, if we got the time. That would be the ideal time. The other issue is that you have applied for 90 minutes. After you allow for Front Benchers to speak and for either you or whoever leads off the debate to have 15 or 20 minutes,

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

everyone else will be limited to about two minutes each, at best.

Owen Smith: True.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** It is your application, but for the number of speakers you have, we would normally expect this to be a three-hour debate.

Owen Smith: I would obviously be delighted if it were a three-hour debate. I thought there was a threshold of 15.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** There is, but you are at 12, I think.

Owen Smith: I am at 14 or possibly 15, but there are others who—

Q14 **Chair:** It is a rough guide, Owen, but from our perspective there would be nothing to stop you adding names. You have submitted the application, you have pitched the case and you could add names. We do not normally allocate 90-minute debates in the main Chamber. Having said that, as we are seeing today, Government business squeezes our time, and a three-hour debate might end up being a 90-minute debate anyway, depending on what else—urgent questions, statements and so on—happens on that particular day. The idea would be that we would be heading for a three-hour debate, which may be squeezed—we don't know.

Owen Smith: Sure. From my perspective, there would easily be enough speakers to fill a three-hour debate. As I said, another 25 or so Members have an interest in this issue but I suspect have not had a chance, because of the recess, to indicate their willingness to speak. I also think it is actually a rather controversial issue that would attract attention from others.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** The other consideration is that we normally get Thursday allocations, but occasionally, if the Government have a short time slot available, we get an end-of-day debate, which might be limited to 90 minutes or two hours. If we got one of those, which we might, would you be able to put the debate on at relatively short notice? It would be published on the Order Paper in the usual way, but not necessarily with a couple of weeks' notice. Would that be achievable?

Owen Smith: Yes.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

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