

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 26 February 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 26 February 2019.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-36

Representations made

[I](#): Jim Shannon

[II](#): Liz Twist, Jim Shannon and Mary Glindon

[III](#): Brendan O'Hara

[IV](#): James Duddridge and David Hanson

[V](#): Jim Fitzpatrick and Sir David Amess

[VI](#): Matt Western, Andrew Lewer and Sir David Amess

[VII](#): Kirstene Hair and Gillian Keegan

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a veritable cornucopia of applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from our season ticket holder, Mr Jim Shannon. Jim, over to you please. This is on the issue of forced live organ extraction.

Jim Shannon: Yes, Chair; thank you so much. I had hoped that Fiona Bruce would be here, but unfortunately it seems that she has not been able to make it. That is by the by. She is my co-sponsor and lead Member in this.

This issue is something that we are all very aware of. I am very aware of it through my position in the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, and I am aware of the issue of the Falun Gong: a religious minority and ethnic group in China, who have been specifically persecuted and are disappearing.

When I spoke to Fiona about this, I suggested that we call it organ harvesting. She said, "No—we've moved on to new terminology. It is forced live organ extraction." That does not take away from the issue; the problem is still the same. We want to highlight the issue for a number of reasons. It is not just about Christians, Falun Gong and other religious minorities who are going missing; it is about the Uyghur Muslims, who were mentioned in the Chamber today by Ann Clwyd in questions to the FCO. One million of them have been imprisoned and a large number of them are disappearing.

I believe that the debate is topical because it coincides with the independent people's tribunal that is inquiring into the organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience in China. All the evidence points very clearly to an orchestrated state plan and strategy to remove organs from those who are in prison, or who are prisoners of conscience. Work started back in December 2018. It therefore ties in well timescale-wise. The panel is led by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, and they just released an interim judgment that stated that it is "beyond reasonable doubt" that forced organ harvesting is taking place in China. Therefore, at this moment in time, in the light of the panel inquiry that took place in London just in December of last year, I think it is important that we have an opportunity to press this matter.

There are also people who have been sentenced to imprisonment for criminal activity. They have rights as well, and they unfortunately are also having their organs removed.

If I get the opportunity in a ten-minute rule Bill, I might try to bring this in: we should outlaw organ transplant tourism, because we definitely have some people, I believe, who go from the United Kingdom and other parts of the world to receive live organ transplants from people who have no choice in the matter.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I believe in organ transplant, by the way. I want it to happen and I would contribute to it, should I find myself in a position where someone's life could be saved by my passing away. I have no problem with the principle of it, but I have a problem with what China is doing. I have spoken to the Minister about how we can press upon China in a way that will influence what happens through our economic ties, but that is a different issue for a different day. We have cross-party support, and are seeking 90 minutes.

- Q2 **Chair:** Okay, thank you very much indeed. You have asked for 90 minutes. As you know from your previous experience, our time is limited, particularly in the Chamber. I take it that Westminster Hall would be acceptable to you.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely.

Chair: I know that you are no stranger to Westminster Hall, Jim.

Jim Shannon: I spend about 30% of my time there.

- Q3 **Chair:** Which answering Department do you suggest? Would it be the FCO?

Jim Shannon: Yes, the FCO—most definitely.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned in your application that an interim report has been produced. Is there any pressure in terms of timescale to hold this debate?

Jim Shannon: I'll leave the timing with you.

Bob Blackman: There is no upcoming release of a report, or something.

Jim Shannon: It does not need to be immediate. Absolutely not.

- Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Fine. In your application you have basically ticked all the boxes, so you would accept a Tuesday or Thursday in Westminster Hall.

Jim Shannon: A Tuesday or a Thursday, yes. I would, absolutely. I am quite happy to.

- Q6 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Anyone else, please? In that case, Jim, thank you very much indeed for your application.

Jim Shannon: Can I just thank you, because the last time we were here we were asking for two debates—one for myself and one along with another person? We have had both those debates—one this morning in Westminster Hall and one last Thursday. Thank you.

Chair: You are very welcome. Thanks very much, Jim, cheers.

Liz Twist, Jim Shannon and Mary Glendon made representations.

- Q7 **Chair:** Next up is Liz Twist, aided and abetted by Jim Shannon and Mary Glendon. The application this afternoon is on NICE appraisal processes for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the treatment of rare diseases. Liz, over to you.

Liz Twist: Can I start by saying that this application is a collaboration between four all-party parliamentary groups? We have the all-party parliamentary group on PKU, Mary's group on muscular dystrophy and Jim's group on cystic fibrosis. I can also tell the Committee that Catherine West, who chairs the APPG on rare diseases, has added her support. We also have support now from Will Quince and Robert Courts, so we do have widespread support.

We are making this application because of the discussions and questions, with which Members will be very familiar, over access to drugs for people with less common diseases—with rare diseases. We have spoken before about phenylketonuria and we have spoken before about muscular dystrophy, I think, Mary, haven't we? Orkambi is also, of course, very famous.

We think that this reveals a common issue with how NICE appraises the efficacy and the availability of drugs. We think it is worth having an overall debate about the appraisal process to which each of our groups can contribute, so that we have proper time to consider the overarching issue, and also to ask the Government to respond in the first instance and to look again.

Mary Glendon: Could I just add that this issue with NICE has been highlighted by what has happened with the drug Spinraza, which is going to be given to people with SMA in Scotland from April? Type 1 SMA patients already receive the drug in Scotland and in another 25 countries across Europe. It has been wrongly classified for approval by NICE, we believe, which is why we are not getting it in this country. The urgency for the debate is that the approval in Scotland will come into being in April, which is causing a lot of grief and aggravation for affected families in this country and those whose loved ones have got SMA, so the focus has been sharpened. We feel that having a debate as soon as possible would really help not just to highlight the issue about the appraisal, but to help those families who feel very aggrieved at the moment.

Liz Twist: Just to support Mary's comments, we know—because I am part of Mary's APPG as well—that there are children who are suffering. Doctors are talking to us about having these drugs—it is the same with Orkambi and with Kuvan for PKU. Their lives are being made much worse, so it is important that we have the debate and make sure we are giving them a fair chance.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously this is a very worthy cause to support, but what do you want to see happen as a result of the debate?

Mary Glendon: Our ultimate aim is for NICE to reappraise its appraisal system that it uses, and to bring some pressure to bear on NICE and NHS England to actually change and come into line with Scotland and other countries. This has been going on such a long time. The Spinraza issue is bringing it to a head, with the contrast with what is happening in neighbouring countries in the UK.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liz Twist: To add to that, what we want to see is a good examination of that appraisal system, which many of the people in our groups feel is not fit for dealing with those rarer conditions. It really needs to be looked at again to ensure that people in those categories do not lose out. The people with very rare conditions are dealt with one way, the group that we are dealing with are in the middle, and then there are people with much wider concerns. We think we are getting caught in the middle. We really want to see the appraisal system re-examined and improved, so that it meets everyone's needs.

- Q9 **Bob Blackman:** That is laudable; I would agree with you, but for the moment this is just a general debate that will result in a nice debate but no action. There is also pressure on the Chamber versus Westminster Hall. I would suggest that you are likely to get allocated time in Westminster Hall for this debate as it stands but, if you actually want some action, you need a motion to the House, which might go along the lines of, "This House calls on NICE to reappraise their method of prescribing or approval of these particular medicines for these various diseases." That would be quite a simple motion but would actually call on NICE to do something, but it is your application not mine.

Liz Twist: We would be happy with that.

Mary Glindon: That is a really useful suggestion, thank you.

- Q10 **Chair:** You have submitted the application and presented it. It is your application but, if you want to amend it by attaching a votable motion, that would be entirely in order.

Liz Twist: Okay. When would we need to do that by, Chair?

Chair: The sooner you do it, the quicker the Committee can start to determine if we have any time. At the moment, we don't have a huge amount of allocated time, but there is always the possibility of slots becoming available because Backbench business in this place is, as we know, a moveable feast.

Liz Twist: We do think there will be huge interest in this from across the group.

Mary Glindon: We had 50 or 70 MPs at an event yesterday.

Chair: The sooner the better, Liz and Mary. Thank you very much.

Brendan O'Hara made representations.

- Q11 **Chair:** Moving swiftly on, the next application is from Mr Brendan O'Hara on the effect of leaving the European Union on the UK's health and social care sector.

Brendan O'Hara: This is my debut appearance in front of your Committee, so bear with me. I have applied for this debate because I put forward a private Member's Bill recently looking for a review of the health



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and social care sector post-Brexit. As we all know, private Members' Bills, unless you are extremely lucky and come at the top of the ballot, will go nowhere.

I was taken aback by the effect the tabling of that private Member's Bill had, both on hon. Members here but on the wider health and social care community. I was inundated with requests and offers of help and support. At the moment, there are approximately 105 health and social care organisations from across the UK that have offered support to that private Member's Bill.

I have explained to them the way things work and that it is highly unlikely that the private Member's Bill will ever see the light of day, but it is really important that the effect of Brexit on the health and social care sector is specifically debated in the House of Commons. I don't think it has been until now. It has been touched on and has been part of other debates, but I don't think it has been specifically examined. There are millions of service users and workers who could be affected by this. I hope that the debate gives voice to people living with disabilities, the old, the young, carers and people with long-term health conditions, so that a year from now, wherever we are on the Brexit timeline, no one can say that they did not know what the sector was thinking and saying.

As I said, I have had widespread support; I have a list of the 100-odd organisations that have pledged their support. Many of them will be in Portcullis House this afternoon to lobby support for the private Member's Bill. As we speak, I have had folk sign up from eight groups and parties: Conservative, Labour, SNP, Plaid, Lib Dem, DUP, Green and the Independent Group. In addition to the names in front of you, I could add Jim Shannon, Stella Creasy, Liz Saville Roberts and Ronnie Cowan.

Q12 Bob Blackman: You are very light on Government names. There is only one Government Member.

Brendan O'Hara: There were two at the time.

Bob Blackman: That might be a movable feast as well, but clearly we would expect to see more Government names on there to give a balanced debate.

Brendan O'Hara: I appreciate that. Rather than take a blunderbuss approach, I thought that, if I got all seven groups as it was then—eight as it is now—involved and signed up, that would give breadth and depth to it. I accept that I could perhaps have got more Government names, but I went for two Government, two SNP, two Plaid and two Lib Dem as much as I could to give the debate that breadth of support.

Bob Blackman: For a 90-minute debate, we would normally expect to see two or three Government speakers; for a three-hour debate, it would be five to seven.

Q13 Patricia Gibson: Do you think you will have any difficulty in getting another member of the Conservative party to sign this?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Brendan O'Hara: No, not at all. I could leave now and get it. As I said, I did not want to take that blunderbuss approach. The people I spoke to were pretty targeted, and I could—

Chair: It is custom and practice that Members can leave, having submitted their application, and add names in the immediate aftermath, so that is quite possible.

- Q14 **Nigel Mills:** On Thursday 22 March last year, there was a Backbench-sponsored debate titled "Leaving the EU: NHS", so we did sort of do this a year ago. Are you expecting a broader debate by bringing in social care?

Brendan O'Hara: I think the effect of Brexit on the national health service a year ago would have been markedly different. This is specifically on the health and social care sector. It is about the delivery of health and social care to, as I said earlier, the poor, the vulnerable and the long-term sick. It is also about the deliverers of it. There are huge issues around recruitment and retention after Brexit, so it will be a far more focused debate than just the wider effect on the national health service.

- Q15 **Patricia Gibson:** To add to that, I can see in my own constituency that there are real issues around the potential difficulty for EU workers in care homes. That is a real issue, and that is not necessarily discussed in a debate about the NHS.

Brendan O'Hara: An NHS debate is far wider. It is about access to medicines. It is almost limitless. I would like to have a very focused debate about health and social care. You can see from the 104 organisations that they are very much health and social care deliverers, rather than representatives of the national health service as such.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Brendan. That is very good of you.

James Duddridge and David Hanson made representations.

- Q16 **Chair:** Moving on, next up we have James Duddridge and David Hanson, please.

James Duddridge: Thank you very much, Mr Mearns. I am here before you as chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, with David Hanson, the vice-chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I am here following a meeting of our executive committee, where unanimously the 14 Members of Parliament who are members of the executive asked me to present to you the case for a 90-minute debate on the Commonwealth.

In particular, we are asking for this debate because it is the 70th year of the Commonwealth. It is Commonwealth Day on 11 March, which kicks off Commonwealth Week, which 53 nations—a third of the world's population—will be celebrating. A plethora of activities, both at the Palace

and cross-Government, start on that Monday and continue through the week.

The Commonwealth is particularly important. It is particularly important at the moment because of Brexit. It is particularly important because last year the UK Government led the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, which means that we chair the Commonwealth. That means specifically that we are in charge of implementing the recommendations of the 53 nations.

One of the reasons we want to have this debate is to hold the Government to account at the mid-point of their delivery of the various promises they have made. We expect the debate to be well attended. All Members of Parliament are members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and just last week eight members were in Fiji, the Seychelles, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. People will bring forward some very topical issues, such as Brexit, as well as issues over 70 years of CHOGM, then hand over to the Rwandans for what will hopefully be a successful CHOGM next year. We are encouraging them to involve Parliament in the way that we involved Parliament.

David Hanson: To support James as vice-chairman, the key thing is to focus on the CHOGM outcomes. The Government made a ministerial statement on 14 January, and we have discussed this among CPA executive members. There are a range of issues, including sustainability, girls' and women's education, a secure future, cyber-security, modern slavery and child exploitation. We want to examine what the Government are doing to ensure the implementation of the agreed statement, and to hold them to account. That would give a wide-ranging debate, which would cover everything from modern slavery through to climate change and women's and girls' education.

Q17 **Chair:** You have mentioned 11 March. Is that particularly time-sensitive? It might be quite difficult to facilitate that.

James Duddridge: There will be a lot of focus during that whole week. Paradoxically, 11 March is already quite a focus of activity. What would be ideal is some time that week, or the Thursday before or after. The Thursday of the week starting on 11 March would be perfect if there is any availability, because it would be quite a sweet spot and allow us to rally the products of what the executive are doing. Some people from the Commonwealth will still be around.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** My question is: would you accept a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate on 7 March or 14 March if it was made available?

James Duddridge: Absolutely. It would be greatly appreciated.

Q19 **Nigel Mills:** Is 90 minutes enough to debate the wide range of issues you have just outlined?

James Duddridge: If you debate them purely through the prism of the Commonwealth, 90 minutes is sufficient. It is a broad subject, so people

would fill any more time, but I am conscious that you have a number of other bids on your plate. David mentioned things such as modern slavery, the environment and security—it is a very broad subject area, so we could easily fill more time. I sense that 90 minutes was being suggested as a plausible and better solution, but I do not want to cut off a longer period of time if it fits in the Committee's timetable.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Fitzpatrick and Sir David Amess made representations.

Chair: Next up, we have Mr Jim Fitzpatrick and Sir David Amess. Your application this afternoon is on fire safety and sprinkler systems.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Thank you very much to the Committee for the opportunity. As you can see, we have good cross-party support. The all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group—David is the chair and I am the secretary—strongly supports this bid to debate sprinklers. Sprinklers have been covered in a number of debates, especially post-Grenfell, but there has been no specific debate on fire sprinklers since February 2014, five years ago. There is a patchwork approach across the United Kingdom, with new regulations coming in in Scotland. Some have been introduced already, and others are coming in in 2021. There are new regulations in Wales on the requirement of fire sprinklers in residential properties, but there has not been much progress in England, despite a national campaign by the National Fire Chiefs Council.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has a consultation at the moment on Approved Document B, which is the guidance document covering fire sprinkler systems. The consultation closes soon and the Department will be considering this issue, so it is topical. Following Grenfell, obviously people are worried about a number of issues in terms of high-rise flats in their constituencies and the cost of replacements and remedial firework that has been going on. There are issues in care homes, residential places for elderly vulnerable people and, in particular, schools. There was a requirement for fire sprinklers in schools, from the 2008 guidance, which we would argue has been weakened. We are engaged in a lobby with the Department for Education about that. This would give the opportunity to articulate that.

Finally, we have a campaign running by the National Fire Chiefs Council on fire sprinklers, so we think the subject is relevant, topical and well supported, and we would very much welcome a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall. We hope the Committee will be able to afford us that.

Q20 **Chair:** Is there any particular time sensitivity? It is not the anniversary of Grenfell or anything like that, is it?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The MHCLG consultation concludes next week, so not really. But over the next couple of months, it would be useful to be able to feed into that and to get the Minister to have a dialogue about it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir David Amess: I overwhelmingly agree with everything that Jim has said. This is a wonderful opportunity to skewer Ministers and it will be very well subscribed. This is overwhelmingly the strongest bid that you have had today. Should you not grant us this debate and let us queue-jump, there is a strong possibility that we will never talk to you again and will go into a massive sulk.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Good cop, bad cop.

Chair: If it was a toss-up between securing this debate and getting city status for Southend—

Sir David Amess: City status.

Jim Fitzpatrick: That's not fair!

Chair: You know, if he has to play bad cop, I have to play bad crook.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** Just one clarification: I assume the answering Department will be the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but the fire service is the responsibility of the Home Office. Which Department would answer?

Jim Fitzpatrick: It would be MHCLG. The fire service is under the Home Office, but the regulations for building, construction and so on are with MHCLG.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** If we offered you a Tuesday morning slot, would that be acceptable?

Jim Fitzpatrick: Ninety minutes in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or Thursday, yes.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Matt Western, Andrew Lewer and Sir David Amess made representations.

Q23 **Chair:** Next, we have Matt Western and Andrew Lewer.

Matt Western: Sir David is going to join us.

Chair: Of course—the more the merrier.

Matt Western: Thank you for inviting us today. The last time I put in for a major debate was about a year ago, so I am not a season ticket holder like Jim. I try to use your time sparingly.

This is a simple debate about social housing. The last time there any such debate was put forward, I believe, was my Adjournment debate specifically on social housing, which was a year ago. You will be aware that we have 1.1 million families on the housing waiting list, and there is certainly cross-party concern for this issue, hence the number of signatories on the application. I have been going around talking to many people cross-party to gain support. You may be aware that I chair a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

campaign with David Drew, who sadly could not be here today. That is also cross-party, and promotes the issue of social housing.

The key statistic to be aware of is that in the 30 or 40 years post war we built 126,000 social homes a year, but in the last 40 years we have built an average of only 25,000. Parties and Governments of all colours have not been supplying this need. Having spoken to people such as Gary Porter at the LGA, housing associations and others, and looking not just at the 1.1 million statistic but the numbers of rough sleepers and the argument for housing first, there is a wider issue.

You may be aware that Shelter produced its report in January, which was a cross-party commission that looked at this whole issue. It said that we urgently needed to address this crisis. That is why we are putting it forward today, recognising that there is an urgent need, with everything else going on, to bring this back to the top of the agenda.

Andrew Lewer: Matt has made a very clear case for the debate; you can see the level of interest in it in the country, but also among MPs. What I wanted to chip in was that the other danger in these debates—beyond the danger of poor attendance, which is not going to happen with this—is that it will be one of those “motherhood and apple pie” debates where everyone agrees that we all need more housing and social housing has a crucial role to play, and so on. I think that danger can be avoided, and would be avoided, in this debate, because within the social housing space there are quite a lot of debating points to be had and some genuine areas of interest and difference that could be teased out in a debate of significant length—things such as housing associations versus traditional council housing, arm’s length management organisations versus stock transfers, right to buy, the role of shared ownership, the role of Homes England and the balance it has between private and social housing stock, the level of rents, what affordable means, the morality of compulsory purchase orders, and so on. There is a lot to go at there. It is not only a debate on an important topic and one that will be well supported, but a debate that has some significant and real debating points within it as well.

Sir David Amess: I really do salute Matt, because as a relatively newly elected Member of Parliament he has come to this place with a mission. To me, as someone who benefited from the sale of public housing many years ago when I represented Basildon, that was all a long time ago now and I think this is perfect timing to revisit the issue and come at it with a fresh approach. I absolutely agree with Andrew that you would have no difficulty in terms of the number of speakers.

Q24 **Bob Blackman:** I have every sympathy with the request for the debate, but you have asked for a general debate in the Chamber, and while you have probably seen that we have a large number of applications today, what you will not have seen is the number of applications still pending for Chamber time. To strengthen your case, it would be very helpful if you had a motion that was divisible, rather than “This House has considered...” I don’t know if there is something you would wish to put as a substantive motion, but it would strengthen your case for getting time



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in the Chamber. Otherwise, I suspect you will be allocated time in Westminster Hall. But it is your choice, because it is your application.

Matt Western: I am not experienced enough to be able to respond, but I understand the point you make, Bob. I am not sure how to respond right now and whether you need an answer, or whether I can come back—

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** No, you do not need to answer now. It is your application; it is up to you whether you wish to put a substantive motion to it.

Sir David Amess: We will just agree and come back.

Q26 **Bob Blackman:** Then you can come back with a motion if you so choose. Since we have to consider these, the likelihood is that these applications will go on the list and we will allocate them when we have time made available to us, so there is time for you to go away and come up with an appropriate motion. You can phrase it here, but you have colleagues around you who are well capable of crafting extremely good motions.

Matt Western: Thank you for the advice.

Q27 **Chair:** There is no particular time sensitivity? Obviously there is an urgency within the housing market and the waiting list, but is there a time sensitivity in terms of clashing with publication of a report or anything of that nature?

Matt Western: No, Chair. There is not anything specifically, although obviously with the spending review and the financial case it would be good to get this in before the next financial year, so sometime in March would be ideal.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, in that case.

Kirstene Hair and Gillian Keegan made representations.

Q28 **Chair:** Last up this afternoon we have Kirstene Hair and Gillian Keegan. Your application this afternoon is about National Apprenticeship Week, which I believe is next week, isn't it?

Kirstene Hair: That is correct. As you outlined, we are looking for a debate around National Apprenticeship Week. We have cross-party support from the three largest parties and it is co-sponsored by the three largest parties as well. National Apprenticeship Week runs from 4 to 8 March next week. Across England alone, we have 780 events taking place to highlight its importance. It is only right for Westminster to promote the week as well.

We have lots of fantastic success stories in all our constituencies. Everyone feels strongly about this, and I believe a lot of people will want to make contributions to and take part in the debate, highlighting not only what is going on in their areas but where we could improve. This is a

movable feast, and we need to touch base with Government continually to ensure that policy is going in the right direction.

Gillian Keegan: I only want to add that, in terms of Government, we are obviously keen for the right focus to be put on further education, colleges and the funding of colleges, which are integral to apprenticeships. That is another strand of why we think it is important to keep a spotlight on apprenticeships, to make sure that we are funding colleges adequately.

Q29 **Chair:** Are you aware of any particular barriers to youngsters getting apprenticeships at the moment?

Gillian Keegan: There are, but it depends on the level of different apprenticeships. If you start at the top, with degree level, about 100 apprenticeships are stuck with the Institute for Apprenticeships, waiting to be approved—so there is obviously some slowdown in the system—and you still have some sixth forms that do not promote apprenticeships adequately enough.

Q30 **Chair:** Do you mean that they don't follow the Baker clause and are therefore breaking the law?

Gillian Keegan: They do not follow it enthusiastically. That is one thing. You can either really promote apprenticeships or, basically, pay lip service. I think you still find a lot of schools that do not give parity of esteem to apprenticeships. Also, very few young people still are aware of degree and higher-level apprenticeships. Those are still not very widely known, and I think they have only about 5,000 starts, compared with 450,000 university students, so that is something else that we want to push, because it is a good alternative route into the workplace.

Kirstene Hair: We must also encourage more industries to get involved in apprenticeships as well. Predominantly, people believe it is a male, construction sort of area that we are looking at, but we want to see more females getting into apprenticeships and for other industries such as agriculture—all industries—to see that that door is very much open to them, and how they can get further involved. This is about promoting that aspect as well.

Bob Blackman: Right, the minor technical problem.

Q31 **Nigel Mills:** Yes. We don't generally let PPSs sponsor debates.

Kirstene Hair: May I come in on that point? I read that, and I checked with the Whips, who said that as long as it was not within the Department that I look after it would be accepted.

Nigel Mills: Sadly, the Whips do not have writ here.

Q32 **Chair:** In terms of the application itself, it is well enough sponsored. There are not many names from the main Opposition party.

Kirstene Hair: I am happy to collate more names if that would help substantiate the application.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q33 Bob Blackman: We should clarify this issue for Kirstene's appreciation. The rule that we have adopted over many years is that Government PPSs, irrespective of their Department, should not bring applications. They may speak during the debates—that's up to them—but they cannot be sponsors or lead Members on applications, for the simple reason that the Government have plenty of time in the Chamber to do things. This is for non-Government time, for Back Benchers. The rules that the Whips will have advised you of is that you can speak on issues that do not relate to the Department of which you are a PPS. We have a premium on time in the main Chamber and Westminster Hall. Therefore, we cannot allow sponsored requests from PPSs. With one or two other colleagues who were here previously, you would not have even got to the stage of presenting your case, I think it's fair to say.

Gillian Keegan: This is my first time here, and we didn't even know that, but obviously we are PPSs so quickly because most other people have resigned and we didn't have time to apply for Backbench debates.

Bob Blackman: I understand that completely.

Gillian Keegan: Would it be helpful if we got two other colleagues to sponsor it?

Q34 Chair: That would be extremely useful. From our perspective, it would be dotting the i's and crossing the t's because, as it says on the tin, we are the Backbench Business Committee. Okay?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, okay. PPSs are in between all stools, aren't they?

Chair: Indeed.

Mr Wragg: Once you take the Queen's shilling.

Gillian Keegan: Which is zero, the payroll without pay. Okay, so if we do that, and we get some more Opposition Members?

Chair: Absolutely. The application is in, and we can make the changes from an administrative perspective after the presentation has been made. I am conscious, though, that the application is for next week really, so make your changes as soon as you possibly can, so that we have got a possibility of doing something with that.

Q35 Bob Blackman: It would help if you went through and deleted all the other PPSs from the request to speak in the debate—there are already others on there, like Vicky Ford or John Howell. I could go through, but they all need to be struck out, I am afraid.

Gillian Keegan: All the PPSs on the application—my God!

Q36 Chair: The thing is, when it comes to the debate itself, if it is timetabled, it is quite within individual Members' remit to put in to speak, but in terms of the application, we as the Backbench Business Committee have got this custom and practice over the past eight and a half years now, so I am afraid to say that that is the custom and practice of the Committee.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kirstene Hair: We will update the Whips. Thank you.

Chair: That concludes our public deliberations this afternoon.