

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 30 April 2019

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Watch the meeting

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

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Witnesses

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Grahame Morris made representations.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have eight applications in front of us. For our avid watchers outside this place, apologies for our inability to meet at 4 o'clock last Tuesday. We carry on regardless.

First up this afternoon, we have Mr Grahame Morris, MP for Easington. His application is to do with the Mineworkers Pension Scheme. Grahame, over to you, please.

Grahame Morris: Thanks, Chair, and thanks to you and the Committee for letting me make my pitch first. I hope to hand in a petition about cancer services at 3 o'clock, so I am grateful to have the opportunity to put the case.

First, the House has not had an opportunity to debate fully the surplus sharing arrangements of the Mineworkers Pension Scheme, although it is fair to say that on Valentine's Day—14 February—there was a 30-minute Adjournment debate by my colleague, Stephane Peacock, MP for Barnsley East. It demonstrated a significant level of interest for an end-of-day Adjournment debate. More than 20 Members congregated, with their short interventions to the proceedings.

Prior to February, the issue was last debated on 5 December. Again, that was only a 30-minute Westminster Hall debate. Can I point out to the Committee that currently 70 Members—more than that now, in fact—across five political parties have signed the early-day motion 235 calling for a review of the pension surplus schemes for the Mineworkers Pension Scheme?

There is a significant level of public interest. On 6 March, a petition signed by 106,000 people was delivered to Downing Street by the Campaign for a Fairer Surplus Sharing Arrangement. A review of the Mineworkers Pension Scheme surplus arrangements last took place in the early 2000s. It is long overdue. The number of recipients of this scheme is decreasing quite rapidly due to the passage of time and the lower than average life expectancy of those who work in the mining industry, including my late father. To date, successive Governments have removed £4.4 billion from the scheme, while the average pension payment is £84 a week, some less than that.

Without wanting to rehearse the arguments, the country owes a massive debt of gratitude to mineworkers across the whole of the nation who have toiled underground in sometimes the most difficult and dangerous conditions to the detriment of their health. I believe that a three-hour debate in the main Chamber will allow Members to press for changes to the surplus sharing arrangements of the scheme that will safeguard and ensure former mineworkers and their dependants in coalfield communities have an improved quality of life in their retirement.

Chair: Thank you. Questions, colleagues.

Q1 **Bob Blackman:** Can I be clear about what you actually want the



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Government to do as a result of the debate? Just to preface this: obviously you can apply for a general debate, which may then be allocated to Westminster Hall, even though you have asked for the Chamber. If you actually want a specific action from the Government and to put it into a motion, then obviously you have to have the debate in the Chamber.

Grahame Morris: We do want a specific action from the Government. We want the Government to commit to carry out the review of the current surplus sharing arrangements whereby the Government receive 50% of the surplus and the beneficiaries receive 50%. We feel that that is a disproportionate share, given that the Government guarantee has never been activated. It was negotiated 20 years ago or more and it needs to be reviewed in the light of current circumstances.

Q2 **Chair:** What Bob is saying, Grahame, is that your application has been received, it is on the record, and it seems entirely valid. But if you want to submit a substantive motion for debate in the Chamber, you can do that subsequently.

Grahame Morris: Thanks for that advice. I would specifically ask for the Government to commit to a review.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Can I also suggest that, while Bill Cash can speak for ever, it would be helpful to have some other Government names to participate in the debate?

Grahame Morris: That is an absolutely valid point. More than 70 Members have signed the EDM, including quite a number from the Government Party. Just yesterday, Jacob Rees-Mogg said he may be coming. You do not have to support the idea of a greater share for the beneficiaries; he may well have a different perspective. He said he would participate in the debate. Other Conservative MPs represent coalfield areas who have also indicated that they would be interested in participating. I will firm up their commitment when I resubmit the application.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Is there is any time-sensitivity to the debate?

Grahame Morris: The time-sensitivity is the rapid tail-off in the number of beneficiaries.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Okay, but there is not any pending Government review or decision?

Grahame Morris: No one has said anything about the timing of a review.

Bob Blackman: Okay.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I wish you every success in your foray to Downing Street. We now have a trio of applications from Mr Matt Western.

Matt Western made representations.

Matt Western: Thank you. It was not supposed to be three in one—it is like London buses, in a way. Do you want me to start in any particular order?

Q7 **Chair:** The first on the agenda is “One Public Estate”.

Matt Western: Thank you for listening to me today. As we all know, local authorities are going through significant change. There is a widespread proposal of asset review and asset disposal. Credit to the coalition Government, who came up with the concept of one public estate, looking at how authorities in the public sector—whether health, police, fire rescue or councils—look at the estate and how each may benefit from others’ disposals or from sharing those assets.

Given that it was first introduced six years ago in 2013 and given the scale of what is going on, I thought it would be really valuable to revisit this to see how successful it is.

From my own experience, I do not think it has been working quite so well of late. A lot of silo thinking is coming through from the different organisations and authorities. But other agencies are also coming into play, which I think should be scrutinised. That is the purpose behind this. It has support and interest from right across the political spectrum. That is what I am putting forward.

Q8 **Chair:** If we could get some time when the appropriate Government Department is answering in Westminster Hall, I would totally accept that.

Matt Western: Great, thank you.

Q9 **Chair:** We understand Cabinet Office, which I think would be appropriate. Do you think Cabinet Office?

Matt Western: Yes.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** And HCLG?

Q11 **Chair:** Well Cabinet Office and Housing, Communities and Local Government are both answering Departments on Tuesday 14 May, so that would be a possibility, Matt, okay?

Matt Western: Great, thank you.

Q12 **Chair:** We now move on to Mr Matt Western and local bus drivers’ working hours.

Matt Western made representations.

Matt Western: The fact that Jim Shannon is not here perhaps allows me to have three in one day; he taught me everything I know. This stems from a ten-minute rule Bill that I put forward back in February. It originates from a particularly sad tragedy that took place in Coventry. There was cross-party support for the ten-minute rule Bill. There is a differential in our legislation in the UK versus the EU working directive for bus drivers. Suffice it to say that it is actually safer for a box of cornflakes to be delivered to a store than it is for a seven-year-old child to be taken



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on a bus journey, because of the restrictions on the number of hours worked by lorry drivers as opposed to bus drivers.

The tragedy that took place was caused by the fact that this driver had been driving an average of 72 hours a week for the preceding four weeks. His age was 77 years at the time of the tragedy, and there is a loophole in the legislation that allows this kind of practice. What I am calling for—which, as I say, has support across the House and from different parties, but also the encouragement of trade unions—is to bring the working hours of local bus drivers into line with those of long-distance coach and bus drivers.

If you are in a National Express driving between Manchester and, say, London, the number of hours would be restricted more for that driver than for a local bus driver. Now, I would say that local bus driving is just as risky as long-distance driving. You may be aware that in London, about 15 or 16 fatalities a year are caused by bus accidents. What I am asking for is to bring this back into line with long-distance drivers, but also drivers of heavy goods vehicles.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** I presume the answering Department is Transport, is it?

Matt Western: Yes.

Q14 **Chair:** I do believe, if I am not mistaken, that Transport would be an answering Department for Tuesday 21 May. We will try and get you a suitable date for that when we can.

Next up—quelle surprise!—is Mr Matt Western. This is one on public libraries.

Matt Western made representations.

Matt Western: Apologies for this. I won't be long.

I apologise in advance, because Sir John Hayes's name is down on this, and my intention was to have spoken to him. I haven't; however, when I raised it in a particular series of questions on a similar topic, John issued a similar question and concern. You may know just how erudite he is and how much he likes to quote Bunyan or Yeats at any opportunity. He is particularly concerned about public libraries, I know that, so my apologies, but I am sure he would be supporting it. I can get his written confirmation. Again, there is widespread support, including SNP, Lib Dem, Conservative and Labour, and an Independent.

This stems from the significant increase in library closures that we have suffered since 2010—the fact that libraries are not simply places for lending, of course, and for learning. For a great many people, they are places where individuals can apply for jobs and can research, and are social spaces. As far as I am aware, there has not been a debate on our libraries, which I think are a really important asset. Andrew Carnegie described them as one of the greatest benefits that any civilised society could provide for others. There hasn't been a debate since 2015, and I

think it is really important that we ensure there is future protection for this valuable amenity in our communities.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Any questions, colleagues?

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** One quick point: I think there are 21 speakers in addition to yourself, and I am not clear whether John is sponsoring this or not. But clearly for a 90-minute debate, you will be lucky to get two minutes each as a speaker. You might—it is your application—want to change this to a three-hour application for a Thursday, which might find favour quite quickly in this Committee. It is an important issue, and clearly a number of people want to speak.

Matt Western: Thank you. Yes, I would consider that for sure.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. No one has any more questions. In that case, the triumvirate of Matt Western applications now comes to an end.

We now have Ruth Smeeth and Emma Lewell-Buck, who are deputising for Mr Frank Field, I believe. This is a report of the Children's Future Food Inquiry.

Ruth Smeeth and Emma Lewell-Buck made representations.

Ruth Smeeth: Thank you so much for hearing from us. Obviously, we will not do the issue as much justice as Frank would. We have undertaken a piece of work over the last 12 months in which more than 400 children from up and down the country have put forward their opinions and views on what is really happening in terms of children's food at home and at school and child food poverty—but from their perspective, not from all the other work that has been done previously.

It has been genuinely heartbreaking and devastating to hear about what they have experienced and what they experience on a day-to-day basis—both those currently on free school meals and those who are just above free school meals, and about the school holidays and how their parents struggle.

The reason we are asking for a debate on the Floor of the House is that we think that their voices should be heard in the Chamber, because they came and gave their opinions, and they were very brave. When you are a child of 11 on free school meals, it is brave to come and sit in front of MPs and say that your school charges 90p for water and that comes out of your free school meal allowance, so you cannot get a full meal at lunch time. That is heartbreaking testimony.

There is huge cross-party support. The official co-sponsor with Frank Field is Graham Brady. There is significant cross-party support on the issue; everyone has been working together. All four countries of the United Kingdom and all four Children's Commissioners have been involved to make sure that their views were heard. We really want to give it an airing.



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The findings of the inquiry were launched last week. We have five recommendations.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The inquiry is being launched in Northern Ireland today as well. Ultimately, we want the debate to consider the key recommendations from the children themselves. They had five key recommendations that we would like the Government to have a look at. We think that those recommendations will go some way to easing the stigma and shame around the hunger that those children have told us, very vividly and bravely, that they are suffering.

Ruth Smeeth: We would very much like to be able to do this before we break for summer recess—if we break for summer recess—on the basis that one of the issues that was touched on was holiday hunger and what happens to children who qualify for free school meals during the school holidays. We would like the opportunity to discuss that on the Floor of the House as well.

Q16 **Ian Mearns:** Apart from the summer recess, which we do not yet know the dates of—if it happens, that is—there is no other time sensitivity.

Ruth Smeeth: No.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: No.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Why a general debate, given that the report has been issued with recommendations? Presumably, what you actually want the Government to do is adopt the recommendations of the report.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I think this can be seen as an initial exploration and an initial airing of the views. Having a debate will test where the Government are on potentially implementing some of these issues. We could then move forward and do it in a different way. For now, the report has been launched and there was lots of press and lots of interest around it. We owe it to these children to air their views as soon as possible on the Floor of the House.

Ruth Smeeth: And to continue to work with the Government in the background. Also, I think this was Frank's first proper application, so that might be one of the reasons.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** His first proper application?

Ruth Smeeth: I think this is, yes—in terms of positioning the paperwork.

Q19 **Patricia Gibson:** I was shocked to hear you say that children are charged 90p for water.

Ruth Smeeth: Yes.

Patricia Gibson: It is more shocking—well, this is not a poor country—because Parliaments and local authorities have free water for staff.

Ruth Smeeth: Since we took the evidence, I have gone round to every one of my schools asking what they do. In several schools, especially



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those that have tried to get rid of plastic, you have to buy a water bottle and some of them cannot afford it. In several other schools, if they have not got big enough kitchen facilities or big enough storage, or for whatever reason, you have to buy water. There are not traditional jugs, like we had when I was a kid. For most of my schools, in fact all of my schools, this was not an issue, but we had three different children raise it, didn't we?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Yes, and a lot of them were saying things such as, you get £2.30-odd to cover the free school meal, but sometimes the bottles of water could range from 90p to just over £1. The money that they get covers only their lunch break; it does not cover other breaks. If they do not drink the water in the bottle through their lunch break, some of the schools are chucking it in the bin and saying, "You can't take that with you for the rest of the day." You have to drink it in that lunch break.

Ruth Smeeth: And there were two schools where there was a fixed-price lunch; it would be £2.30 for a main course and a dessert, but that would not have included the water. So they were not able to buy the main lunch and they end up eating badly, as well. They will have the water and chips, because that comes within the budget, because they cannot get access to the full meal offering because they have gone over the minimum spend.

Q20 **Patricia Gibson:** The only reason I raise it is that I am surprised—although it is a bit clearer now that you have explained it—that the school does not identify these children.

Ruth Smeeth: It is if they have outsourced their catering to a different company—an external company that is doing the provision—or if there is a headteacher who does not recognise the link between attainment and food, and lots of people have not.

There are other situations, as well. One of the other things that was also quite shocking was that there were only 20 minutes available to eat lunch, because the dining halls were so small and they are phased, so no one is really paying attention to what the kids are eating, because it is just about getting the kids through and eating in an hour, not what their experiences are.

The most important part is that these are not our words, or an academic's words—these are children's words.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: There is this report here—it is quite lengthy—and this was produced by the kids. Their voices run through this whole report and we really owe it to them to make sure that it is given a good hearing.

Q21 **Patricia Gibson:** Are headteachers getting copies of this?

Ruth Smeeth: Mine are.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: They probably will be. It had a lot of publicity. Dame Emma Thompson is one of the people helping to lead the inquiry, and one of the ambassadors for it as well.

Q22 **Chair:** Which answering Department would you want?



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Ruth Smeeth: Education. And we will send you a copy of the report.

Patricia Gibson: Please do. I would very much like to see it.

Chair: Okay. Any other questions, colleagues? No. In that case, thank you very much indeed for your application.

Charlie Elphicke made representations.

Charlie Elphicke: Good afternoon. The first thing is: what are mortgage prisoners? This is something that we have been looking at quite a lot in the Treasury Committee. They are people who are trapped in a mortgage with a really high rate—maybe as much as 7%, or maybe even more—and they have been stuck in that situation since 2007 and before. Often, they are customers of Northern Rock, and they are in a situation where they cannot access the better rates that are available today.

There are about 200,000 of these people up and down our land. The purpose of this debate is to make the case that we should free the mortgage prisoners, and we should free them in two ways. First of all, after the event—after they took out their mortgages—the rules changed, for regulatory purposes and affordability tests came in, so they are trapped, unable to move their mortgage, and in a terrible situation. The case I want to make is that they should effectively be treated as grandfathers and have extra rights to be able to port to other banks and other providers.

The Financial Conduct Authority is looking at this area. It has come up with a consultation about the idea of doing it on a voluntary basis, but I do not think that a voluntary basis is enough. We need to make sure that the banks have an obligation to help to free these mortgage prisoners and get them a better rate. Instead of paying 7%, they could be paying 2%.

A lot of these mortgage prisoners have suffered stress, relationship breakdown, mental health impacts and, frankly, a lack of money, because they have to hand over to vulture funds that the Treasury keeps selling the Northern Rock book to, rather than getting a better deal and being able to spend money on the things that matter to them and are priorities to them. And if they were anyone else, they would be able to do that.

So there are two key things. The first one is to make it easier for mortgage prisoners to be able to change their mortgages to a new provider and, secondly, to stop this practice of the Treasury selling their mortgages to vulture funds. There is nothing wrong with selling a book in terms of the interest—what is called a sub-participation in that book—but selling the book itself, and impacting the mortgage holder themselves, is harsh and unfair, and it has led to injustice and unfairness.

That is the reason for a two-pronged attack to free the prisoners: first, to ensure that they can get new mortgages from regulated providers, such as your average high street bank, on a grandfathered basis; and, secondly, to make sure that their books are not sold off by the Treasury to vulture

funds, which then press them hard and will not help them to escape the penal rates that they are paying.

Q23 Chair: So these people are literally tied into mortgages, aren't they? The word mortgage means "chained until death".

Charlie Elphicke: Effectively, yes. Since the financial crash, for very good reasons, affordability tests have come in, but I will give you one example. There is a lady who has a loan to value on her mortgage of just 62%. You would think she is a great proposition. This is the Adams family, who live in Bournemouth and took out a Northern Rock mortgage. They had their mortgage sold to a vulture fund called Whistletree, which is owned by TSB Bank. They said to TSB Bank, "Can we have one of your normal mortgages?" "Oh no. You are not our customer; you are the customer of our vulture fund."

Q24 Chair: Did TSB actually call it a vulture fund?

Charlie Elphicke: Funnily enough, no, but it is owned by their fund, and what should be happening is that, in a fair and reasonable world, TSB would say, "Well, you are really our customer; we will give you access to one of our decent products." Instead, they are saying, "Affordability tests mean that you are not our customer, so we cannot take you on because the affordability test means it is a new mortgage. Therefore, you're stuck." They are paying a rate of 5% when they could be getting a much better rate, particularly with a 62% loan-to-value product.

That is why it is about putting pressure on the FCA, pressure on the Treasury to lend a helping hand rather than a tin ear, and pressure on the banks such as TSB and other providers to be there to help their customers and put their customers' interests first, particularly when those people have in fact passed a real-world affordability test. They have been paying their mortgages for the past 10 years. They have not been defaulted. Why impose a fictional affordability test when they have passed the real one and these mortgages have all been performing?

Q25 Chair: Can I ask, is the term "vulture fund" widely used?

Charlie Elphicke: Well, it is used in the vernacular. I think it is fair to say that Cerberus, the American outfit, who do not pay tax in this country and who the Treasury have been selling the Northern Rock book to, would say they are not a vulture fund. They would say they are just in business and perfectly reasonable. It is perhaps a pejorative shorthand, but the reality is that they are unregulated providers who are not issuing new business or providing new mortgages, and therefore these people are trapped as their customers unless we here in Parliament put pressure on the regulators and the banking system to allow them to have parole and to escape.

Q26 Chair: I suppose the question I am asking is, is it a term you would see in the financial press, for instance?

Charlie Elphicke: Yes, that phraseology is frequently used.

Q27 Bob Blackman: Just one quick point. You are a bit short on numbers of



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speakers. I think you are on 12; we would normally expect 15.

Charlie Elphicke: I will certainly get more. The sponsors would be me and Martin Whitfield; Sammy Wilson is interested, as are Luke Graham, Stephen Kerr, and Angela Crawley from the SNP. I spoke to Nicky Morgan in the Tea Room earlier, because it is something we have been looking at on the Treasury Committee, and Rushanara Ali, and I will be asking them to join in, because it is a big issue.

Q28 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just cut across? We do not need your list now, but it would be helpful if you could supply the list to the Clerks so we can then see it.

Charlie Elphicke: Yes. I will make sure it is a full house—and cross-party.

Bob Blackman: Of course.

Charlie Elphicke: There is one other issue. The reason we need a debate now, and the reason I want it to be a votable motion in the House of Commons, is that the FCA are currently having a consultation. That consultation closes in June, so the more pressure we can put on the authorities, the Treasury and the regulators, the more chance we have of helping 200,000 people and making a genuinely massive difference to their lives.

Q29 **Chair:** So before the end of May, ideally?

Charlie Elphicke: Ideally, yes.

Chair: I suppose I should declare an interest, because I come from the very region where Northern Rock was based, and where they had a large customer base. Thank you very much indeed.

Nick Herbert made representations.

Q30 **Chair:** Next up, Mr Nick Herbert, please. This is on International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. Thank you very much.

Nick Herbert: That is right, Chairman, thank you very much indeed. I only have one application to make to you today. Last year, you very kindly granted a debate to mark International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, or IDAHOBIT day, as it has become known. It is now quite widely noted in the international media. It was very appropriate that the House of Commons was able to debate LGBTI issues on that very day. It was a well-supported debate on the Floor of the House: there were 19 speakers, and 30 Members attended. We would be very grateful if it were possible to hold a debate to mark the day again this year. It will fall on Friday 17 May, so we would be grateful for a debate as close to that day as possible—perhaps on the preceding Thursday. If possible, we would like to hold it in the main Chamber.

So far, 19 cross-party Members of Parliament have supported the application, and another 10 have indicated to me that they would like to take part in a debate once they know on which day it will be held. We have made the application on a cross-party basis through the all-party



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parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, which I chair.

I do not think that I need to labour the importance of these issues or why global breaches of LGBTI rights need to be discussed. There is ongoing violence against gay men in Chechnya, including murder. The sharia penal code has recently been adopted in Brunei. There have been some truly terrible developments in the Armenian Parliament: extraordinarily, just a couple of weeks ago, Armenian Members of Parliament threatened to burn a trans activist alive. It is a tale of two worlds: in some parts of the world these rights are advancing, along with other human rights, but in other parts they are going backwards.

This Parliament has played an important role over the past few years in drawing attention to these breaches of rights and in encouraging our Government, civil society and business organisations to take action, so I think I can be certain that this will be a well-supported debate. There is a lot of interest in these issues, and it would be a very appropriate day to mark.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q31 **Bob Blackman:** One quick question. You mentioned that the debate is time-sensitive and that you would prefer that it be held on 16 May. If we could not give you any time in the Chamber on 16 May, but we were in a position to give you three hours for a debate in Westminster Hall, would you accept that?

Nick Herbert: I think we would rather have a debate than none at all, but given the salience of these issues, it would be very nice to think that the House of Commons was able to debate them in the main Chamber, as we did last year. However, if we could not otherwise have the debate, I am sure that colleagues would rather have it in Westminster Hall than not at all. If it could be in the Chamber, I think that would be appropriate because of the gravity of these issues.

Q32 **Chair:** The only thing that I would say about that, Nick, is that with a Westminster Hall debate you are guaranteed three hours. Last week, two important debates in the Chamber got two and three quarter hours between them because of Government business and urgent questions. I ask you to consider that, because we do not yet know whether we have 16 May to allocate.

Nick Herbert: I see. I think my position stands: if it could be in the Chamber, accepting those risks, I think colleagues would prefer it. But I appreciate the position that you are in, and we would be grateful for a debate on that day anyway.

Bob Blackman: We know that we will get 16 May in Westminster Hall, but we do not yet know about the Chamber.

Nick Herbert: I see.



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Bob Blackman: And we have to give preference in the Chamber to anything with substantive motions, whereas yours is a general debate.

Nick Herbert: Right. When will you know?

Chair: Probably not until Thursday 9 May.

Nick Herbert: Right. Perhaps we could discuss the best way forward subsequently.

Q33 **Chair:** But at the moment, your position is that you would prefer the Chamber but would take Westminster Hall if that was all there was.

Nick Herbert: Absolutely. I hope that that is reasonable.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Nick Herbert: Thank you very much indeed for listening.

Patricia Gibson made representations.

Q34 **Chair:** Last, but certainly not least, we have an application from our very own Patricia Gibson for a general debate on pre-eclampsia. Over to you, Patricia.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you, Chair. I should point out before I begin that there is a mistake on the application: I said I wanted it in the Chamber, but of course, knowing the pressure on Chamber time, I would be happy to accept Westminster Hall.

Coming up on 22 May, we have World Pre-eclampsia Day. I have checked with the House of Commons Library, and there has never been a debate of any kind on the issue of pre-eclampsia itself, so I think it would be a timely debate to have. There have been three or four questions asked about it in Health questions over the years, but there has not been a dedicated debate. This is a huge issue; there are no central figures collected, but it is thought to affect between 6% and 10% of pregnancies across the UK. Worldwide, they reckon that between 80,000 to 100,000 women die globally of this extremely dangerous condition during pregnancy.

We know that in the UK around 1,000 babies die every year as a result of complications of pre-eclampsia, and we have also had recent developments that I think would give the debate a lot of its focus. A new blood test has been developed that indicates whether a woman is likely to develop pre-eclampsia, and can reliably indicate to medics treating the mother how quickly or how soon they would need to deliver a baby in order to prevent further serious, and perhaps fatal, complications for both mother and child further down the line.

That is a cause for great hope, and of course given that 500,000 babies die across the world each year because of pre-eclampsia in poorer countries, this test offers hope right across the world. It is being rolled out across the UK, both in England and Scotland, very soon, and obviously



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that will allow us to monitor just how much good can be done from that particular blood test. There is no cure, of course, for pre-eclampsia, so the best we can do is treat it as best we can. This new blood test offers real hope to what is a worldwide problem, and a problem right here in the UK.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Questions, colleagues?

- Q35 **Bob Blackman:** I have just one quick question. You amended your application from being in the Chamber to Westminster Hall; would you prefer a Thursday for such a debate, or a Tuesday? It is a 90-minute debate as scheduled, but you do have a large number of speakers, I think.

Patricia Gibson: You know, it's funny you're asking me that, because I did wrestle for quite a long time as to whether I should ask for three hours or 90 minutes. I actually couldn't decide in my head what was for the best. If you were offering me three hours, I would take it; if you are offering me 90 minutes, I'll take it.

There are quite a number of speakers, and I know that quite often we have a lot of speakers. Some of them, for a variety of reasons, are not able to turn up on the day. I think I can say with some confidence that pretty much everybody on that page would like to speak, although I appreciate that things happen and plans change. If I had three hours, I think the people attending could probably fill that, but on the other hand I don't want to be greedy, so I'll take whatever you can give me.

- Q36 **Chair:** Is there any particular time sensitivity?

Patricia Gibson: Well, World Pre-eclampsia Day is on 22 May, but I am also extremely mindful of the fact that the EU elections—should they go ahead—are on 23 May, which I would be worried about in terms of people being available for attendance. I don't know if you're allowed to say that out loud.

Mr Wragg: I shouldn't worry.

Patricia Gibson: If you gave me the following week—

- Q37 **Chair:** The end of May? That might then fall into the Whitsun recess, though, if Whitsun recess happens.

Patricia Gibson: Is 26 May—

Chair: Wouldn't Whit Monday be the 27th?

Patricia Gibson: Would that be Whitsun?

Chair: Yes, that's Whitsun.

Patricia Gibson: Right, okay. If I were in control of the process, Chair—which of course I'm not—I would then ask for early in the week of the EU elections, the Monday or the Tuesday.

Chair: We only have time allocated usually on a Tuesday.



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Q38 **Bob Blackman:** Well, Tuesday 14th is possible. I presume it is Health answering?

Patricia Gibson: Yes, I would think so.

Chair: Tuesday 14th would be possible, yes. We will consider that, Patricia. Thank you very much indeed.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you, Chair.

Chair: We now go into closed session. Thank you very much to our watchers.