

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 7 May 2019

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Colin Clark; Alex Sobel; Mr William Wragg.

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Representations made

[I](#): Ann Clwyd and Tom Brake

[II](#): Chris Green

[III](#): Fiona Bruce

Ann Clwyd and **Tom Brake** made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is a bid by Ann Clwyd, supported by Tom Brake, on the continued importance of international humanitarian law in protecting civilians in conflict. Ann, over to you, please.

Ann Clwyd: Thank you very much. I was going to apologise for the absence of Tom Brake, but I am very pleased that he is here.

Chair: In the nick of time.

Ann Clwyd: Andrew Mitchell and Stephen Twigg also wanted to be here. We are asking for a debate to highlight the ongoing importance of international humanitarian law in protecting civilians affected by conflict, given the changing nature of warfare and military goals such as, on the one hand, increased urban warfare and, on the other, the adoption of deliberate policies by rogue Governments and non-state armed groups to cause or worsen the suffering of civilians.

The serious international repercussions of a lack of respect for international humanitarian law by armed parties, including the difficulty of building sustainable peace and reconciliation, and increased refugee flows, will also be raised. In addition, MPs would want to stress the need for all state militaries and armed groups to apply the core principles of international humanitarian law, such as humanity and proportionality to provide balance to military objectives in their use of force, and the important role that the UK Government plays as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and as the lead on the Security Council on the protection of civilians, in reinforcing that message through various Departments such as the FCO, DFID and the MOD.

The debate would allow MPs the opportunity to raise concerns about serious violations of international humanitarian law in current conflicts around the world, including those in which the UK Government has some involvement, including through assistance given to an armed party, or support given to civilians in need, such as in Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, Cameroon, Libya, Nigeria, Colombia, Burma and Afghanistan. The debate would be particularly timely, because it would follow the UN Secretary-General's annual report on the protection of civilians, expected next week, and will serve to mark the 70th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 20th anniversary of the UN Security Council protection of civilians mandate, as well as the UK Government's current review of the protection of civilians strategy.

As far as we know, there has not been a debate on this topic for some time, with the last related debate having been in April last year in Westminster Hall on the protection of children in conflict. That is why we think it would be particularly timely. We have a list of people who would appear in the debate. We are particularly keen to have it on a Tuesday, if possible, in Westminster Hall, rather than on a Thursday, which tends not

to have quite as much support.

Tom Brake: I wanted to add that the application is cross-party in nature, as Members can see from the list. Ann has underlined the timeliness of it in terms of the publication of the UN Secretary-General's annual report. We are not being greedy; we are seeking not the Chamber but Westminster Hall and a 90-minute debate, for which, as you can see from the list of Members who have expressed an interest, I am quite confident that we could secure sufficient speakers to take place.

Chair: The one fly in the ointment is that we have already pre-allocated our Tuesday Westminster Hall slots until the end of May, because of applications that we had prior to yourselves coming here, but we still have some slots on Thursdays. I'm just throwing that out there.

Q2 **Alex Sobel:** I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on West Papua and vice-chair of the all-party group on drones. The Committee allocated a debate that we had this morning on women human rights defenders, where we touched tangentially on the issue, so there clearly is a big appetite for this in the House. In terms of the timing, would you rather have a Tuesday further away or a Thursday nearer 13 May? Is there another international event that you could hook this debate around, apart from 13 May, or would you rather have a Thursday close to the UN Secretary-General's report? What would you prefer?

Ann Clwyd: From my own past experience, I'm afraid getting people to stay here on a Thursday is very difficult. That is why I really feel that a Thursday is not appropriate for such a substantial debate. I would press again for a Tuesday. If it has to be further away, I am sure we could find a slot for it. A peg is what you were asking for.

Chair: You would then be looking at June, okay? Everything else is allocated before June.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Which Department would you see answering the debate?

Ann Clwyd: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I think it is necessary to have the FCO answering.

Bob Blackman: To add to what the Chair has mentioned, we do not yet know which answering Departments will be scheduled in June, because there is some doubt about the Whitsun recess, so we cannot even say we would allocate you a particular date. We will have to wait until the FCO comes up.

Chair: The beauty of a Thursday is that you can have the slot and then the answering Department has to come along. Can I suggest you take it away and think about it? We have got your application on the record, Ann and Tom. We have received the application and it appears to be entirely in order. We can do some negotiating about the allocation of a date afterwards, so long as you are aware that, in terms of Tuesdays, it would not happen until June at the earliest.

Ann Clwyd: Thank you.

Chris Green made representations.

Q4 Chair: The next application is on supporting clinical trials and the UK's future clinical research capability.

Chris Green: I would like to request a debate on supporting clinical trials and the UK's future clinical research capability. A number of different issues come into this. One aspect is the Government's industrial strategy and how it impacts on the life sciences sector as a whole. It is incredibly important to the Government's agenda and what they are doing in getting R&D spend across the UK from 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP and how that is reflected in the interests of the scientific community and life sciences, but specifically how it supports clinical trials.

The Government are looking at their immigration policy, which has a significant impact on clinical trials and the technicians that work within the sector. There is a £30,000 pay threshold for people coming from abroad. We must remember that clinical trials, the life sciences sector and the scientific community as a whole have a very mobile workforce and we need to be able to bring in talent from across the world, so that £30,000 boundary that you have to get over will have an impact. More so, it will have an impact on areas in the north of England. Perhaps in London and the south-east it might not have so much impact, but in the north of England it will have a more significant impact.

Brexit is a significant concern for the clinical trials. The European Union has legislated to change from the clinical trials directive to the clinical trials regulation. We have not yet adopted this, and the EU has not yet adopted it, but having the UK's regulatory framework in sync with the European Union's regulatory framework is of enormous importance, and the Government are not yet doing or saying enough to give a clear direction on what we are going to do in this area.

Also, in terms of clinical trials, especially for rarer diseases and conditions, you need a pool of patients, which the United Kingdom alone could not provide. Therefore, you need collaborations. Yes, you have collaborations internationally, across the world, but our closest partners in so many of these collaborations are in France, Germany—across the European Union—and we don't know whether, post Brexit, we will have access to the databases to be able to share the information that is vital to underpinning what we are doing in the UK. If we do not have access to that, that undermines our sector, and with the doubt that there is at the moment, because the Government are not being as communicative as they might be, over our ongoing agenda in terms of clinical trials and life sciences, we need to provide more reassurance to the sector, so I think this debate, at this time, is of great importance.

Q5 Alex Sobel: I also have a particular interest in this subject, as a vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions. We had a meeting last week on the broader issue of life sciences and were talking particularly about gene therapy and orphan medicines and their ability to—well, not to come to market, but to be paid



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for by the NHS for treatment. That was cited as one of the reasons why life sciences would potentially leave the UK as well. Do you think that that element, of the medicines actually reaching UK patients, will be a factor in this debate?

Chris Green: Absolutely. There is the whole framework, the way we recognise other trials and the developments in terms of medicines, but also, our friends across Europe have to recognise the trials that we are doing. Whether there is incompatibility or there are just concerns and fears over compatibility, there is a huge amount of doubt. I think that, when we talk to people within the scientific community—people facing Parliament, people perhaps coming into Parliament to lobby and raise concerns—they understand where we are and what we are doing, but with the wider scientific community, because there has been so little communication with them, there are very significant fears. If those fears are felt within our community in the UK, then because this is such an international area of research, those concerns are being communicated more widely, and that is having an impact at the moment.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Chris, I note that International Clinical Trials Day is 20 May. Your debate could take place either the Thursday before or the Thursday after. Do you have a preference for which Thursday you would like in Westminster Hall?

Chris Green: I think the one after would probably be better.

Bob Blackman: So, 23 May?

Chris Green: Yes.

Q7 **Chair:** That is quite possible. Just bear it in mind that it might be the Thursday just before a recess—but it might not.

Chris Green: A great many people are interested in this, and I think that more speakers would want to attend if we did get the debate, because the life sciences sector is right across the UK, so we would like a day on which people could attend.

Chair: Okay. That's excellent. Anyone else? No? In that case, thank you very much indeed, Chris.

Fiona Bruce made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Last up this afternoon, but certainly not least, is Fiona Bruce, on National Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week. Fiona, over to you.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Chair. This year they coincide. I'm sure that all of us at some time could say that our marriages have caused us some mental health problems! But there is a serious side to this. And before I start, let me say that I do have some additional supporters for this application: Jeremy Lefroy, Derek Thomas and Steve Double.

Increasingly, research is showing that the attachment a child has with its parent or guardian is a central predictor for health and mental wellbeing,



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in adulthood but also in teenage years. That has come from the Mental Health Foundation. It says that toxic relationships and negative experiences can have a serious impact on young people's mental health. The quality of our relationships can be as critical as not smoking and more important than eating well or exercising in adulthood. The Office for National Statistics did a survey that shows that children aged two to 16 living in families that struggle to function well are more likely to have mental health challenges than those from healthy, functioning families. The Marriage Foundation produced a number of statistics, and I will just quote two of them, which are quite interesting. Among teenage children—14-year-olds—living with both parents who are in a married relationship, 20% are likely to have mental health problems, compared with almost double—38%—of teenage children who are not living with both their parents who were never married.

We are all aware that mental health in young people is a major problem, and we do not believe that the issue of the parental relationship and the relationships that children grow up in have been sufficiently explored compared with, for example, social media. All the information that we are getting is that the close relationships that surround a child are far more important than the impact of social media. We are seeking a debate to explore the issue and to look at how the Government ought to be addressing this.

The Centre for Social Justice has just produced a report saying the same thing about the outcomes for children if you are not growing up in an intact family. They are more likely to underachieve at school, more likely to use drink and drugs, to get involved in delinquent or offending behaviour and indeed to go to prison, be unemployed or experience welfare dependency.

Q9 **Chair:** Thank you. Is there any particular time sensitivity?

Fiona Bruce: There is. The reason we have linked these together is that next week, the week of 13 May, is both National Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week. They do not normally coincide. I appreciate that this is short notice, but those of us who work on this issue all the time realised only last week that there is an opportunity here to explore the relationship between the two issues in a week when they are being looked at from both sides.

Q10 **Chair:** You are a bit short of speakers. You added Steve Double and who else?

Fiona Bruce: Derek Thomas and Jeremy Lefroy, and we have Jim Shannon and Tim Farron. As I say, I probably could have gathered more, but it was only last week that we realised that these two weeks coincided.

Q11 **Chair:** Given that the week beginning 13 May is the week you are looking at, if we could rustle up Thursday 16, what would you say?

Fiona Bruce: I would be absolutely delighted.

Chair: If we could.



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Fiona Bruce: Yes, if you could. Thank you very much.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just say that you need to get some more Opposition speakers?

Fiona Bruce: I am working on that.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Potentially, if you can rustle up a total of 14 speakers, you could have Westminster Hall for three hours.

Fiona Bruce: Wow. Thank you very much.

Chair: Fiona, thank you. That concludes our public deliberations. We will now go into private session.