



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 21 May 2019

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-11

Representations made

[I](#): Debbie Abrahams

[II](#): Angus Brendan MacNeil and Robert Neill

[III](#): Ellie Reeves and John Cryer

Debbie Abrahams made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us. The first is Debbie Abrahams on improving the lives of people living with dementia.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you very much. You have all had the application we put in for a debate in Westminster Hall, hopefully on Tuesday 25 June. This week is Dementia Action Week. One reason we have applied for this debate is, as Members will be aware, the increase in people who are living with dementia—850,000 people currently. By 2021, it will be 1 million.

Dementia has overtaken cancer and heart disease as the leading cause of death in this country. Although we did great work—I pay tribute to the former Government for the funding they provided for the Challenge on Dementia and the activities they have supported—we have not had a debate since 2016. Last year, dementia overtook cancer and heart disease as the leading cause of death. We increasingly find a need to highlight the issues around quality and sustainable care for people living with dementia and the funding that would be needed for that. It is opportune, given the imminent spending review, that we raise this issue.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** You have asked for 25 June. Could you do 11 June, if that was offered, or would you prefer 25 June?

Debbie Abrahams: I know that we can definitely do 25 June. That is based on trying to co-ordinate with Members around their availability. I can certainly check to see if 11 June is okay, but obviously we want to ensure that as many Members can be there as possible from all sides of the House.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Angus Brendan MacNeil and **Robert Neill** made representations.

Q3 **Chair:** Next up is Angus Brendan MacNeil on refugee family reunion. Welcome, Angus. Nice to see you again.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I have brought with me my distant cousin.

Robert Neill: That is probably true, Chair, given the size of Barra.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: His ancestors are from the same place as I am from, so in a way there is a family reunification going on right in front of you.

As we know, the week commencing 17 June is Refugee Week. It has been quite a while since Parliament has touched on this matter. The Immigration Bill is too narrow. We have a bid for a debate that is very widely supported by five political parties. I know there will also be people

from Change UK, which makes it six political parties. It is something that we have to air and discuss.

We also have to give credit where credit is due. The UK Government have given 5,806 family reunion visas to partners and children of refugees in the UK. But we have to ensure that we highlight the fact that the UK is one of the few countries that does not give the same rights to child refugees as it gives to adult refugees. That is the norm in Europe and across the rest of the civilised world, and we have to bring the UK up to speed on it. Refugee Week will be an ideal time to raise that issue.

Robert Neill: I agree with Angus. I was one of the co-sponsors for his private Member's Bill application, which is why I am here. I know that Anna Soubry, who is not on the list and who was then a member of my party, also supports the Bill. That is why Angus says that there are people in Change UK who support the debate as well.

We stress that this particular issue had a great deal of support in the House—130-odd people voted for the Bill. It relates to the same issue, which we think needs to be debated. A debate would be timely, because all parties in the House have a commitment to World Refugee Day and to the proper treatment of refugees. This highlights a particular area, and we are looking to deal with a very specific topic that the House has already regarded as being of importance. A debate would be a timely way to do so.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Is there a preference to hold the debate on 20 June?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Yes, or around that time. That is a Thursday, isn't it?

Bob Blackman: We will get allocations for Thursdays.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Preferably that week, if possible.

Q5 **Chair:** We had a debate in the Chamber yesterday, which took up three and a half hours and without which the House would have risen very early. If we were to get any other allocations of time at a week's notice—on a Monday, say—would you be up for that as well?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It would be challenging to marshal the forces for that.

Robert Neill: I suppose to get people there, particularly those who come from Scotland, it would be decent to get it as proximate as we can. World Refugee Day is such a well-known and internationally recognised day, and we can say something about the UK's good international record on that.

Q6 **Chair:** It is just that there is that possibility—the Government seem to have warmed to the idea that we keep putting to them that if we have days when business might finish early, rather than doing that, they give the Backbench Business Committee an allocation of time.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I hear what you are saying, and I understand the deeper nuance of the question, but this sort of work around World Refugee Day involves a lot of NGOs and sometimes celebrities. The background work for them to tee it up is not easy to do at short notice, so we would need a lead-in time from now until then.

Q7 **Chair:** So you would prefer to try to get it on 20 June, if possible?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Around that time, yes. Also, it helps if when things are happening here, they are happening in other places across the world, so that we are acting in unison with other people.

Chair: That is fine. Thank you very much indeed.

Ellie Reeves and **John Cryer** made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** This application was supposed to be Harriet Harman and Maria Miller, but that actually looks very like John Cryer. It is about making Parliament a more modern, family-friendly and accessible workplace.

Ellie Reeves: The context for this is a couple of things. First, after the 2017 general election, a group of newly elected MPs got together and thought about ways that Parliament could be a more modern workplace, including by making it more family friendly. We co-authored and published a pamphlet—it was launched in the Speaker's apartments about six months ago—about how we thought that could be achieved. A whole range of issues were discussed, from sitting hours to our processes for voting, or how Prime Minister's questions are conducted.

More recently, at business questions the week before last, I raised the issue of making Parliament more family friendly, and how we could break down barriers for people who perhaps want to enter Parliament. The Leader of the House and the Speaker were both quite encouraging in response to that question, and they suggested that I apply for a Westminster Hall debate or a Backbench Business debate. Although Mr Speaker indicated that my application for a Westminster Hall debate would be looked upon favourably, when I applied it was, unfortunately, unsuccessful, so I thought, "Why not put in for a Backbench Business debate?"

In many ways, given that it is a question for the Leader of the House to respond to, it probably lends itself more to being in the Chamber than in Westminster Hall. I appreciate that we have had various debates, many before I was elected in 2017, about Parliament and parliamentary procedure. Since my election, things have tended to concentrate on very specific issues—for example, proxy voting—rather than a more general look at parliamentary procedures. Particularly with the restoration and renewal conversations that are going on, now would be a good time to talk about making Parliament a more modern, accessible and family-friendly workplace.



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John Cryer: There is only one thing I would add to that. Part of the debate is accessibility. I can remember when I was a political officer for the Transport and General Workers Union, we had a high proportion of disabled members. There was one time we were having a lobby in here, and most of the people on the lobby were wheelchair users. It wasn't a big meeting—there were only maybe 15 or 20 people—but it must have taken an hour and a half to get everybody down to Carriage Gates and then away in cabs.

Generally, there is a lot of demand among MPs to debate these issues. I'm just throwing that in because there is a serious accessibility issue. We have all had constituents come and visit us here who are disabled, perhaps in wheelchairs. That was the experience that stands out in my memory. Organisations who have a high proportion of disabled members have great difficulty organising lobbies and meetings in here because it is just not sufficiently accessible.

- Q9 **Bob Blackman:** You have requested time in the Chamber. Chamber time is very limited and we have a huge queue. We have just been talking now and have already allocated up until the end of June, before we start on today. If you were offered an opportunity to get three hours in Westminster Hall, would you take it, given the number of speakers?

Ellie Reeves: Yes, I would.

- Q10 **Mr Wragg:** In terms of Members supporting the application, I can only see one Government Member. Applications that have a wider balance of party make-up tend to be viewed more favourably.

Ellie Reeves: Thirty-eight people have supported the application. There is cross-party support. There is support from Liberal Democrats, a Conservative MP and the SNP. I was keen to not lose momentum. Having raised this in the Chamber, I wanted to make sure that I didn't lose the momentum and got the application in quickly. Perhaps if I had taken more weeks, I would have got more names, but I thought it important to get it submitted.

- Q11 **Chair:** It is a live application and we are always very open to names being added after the presentation.

Ellie Reeves: Okay. Thanks for that. I wasn't aware of that.

Chair: It is a little trick of the trade. It is important to get the application in and registered and on to the list, but if you can add more people from the Government side, that would be very useful.

Ellie Reeves: Thank you very much.

Chair: Your ordeal is over. Thank you very much.

I apologise to the people who have just joined us in the Public Gallery, but that concludes our business for today. You are all very welcome, but we are now going to go into private session; I do apologise.