



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 11 June 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 11 June 2019.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-8

Representations made

[I](#): Mrs Maria Miller.



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Maria Miller made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have only one applicant this afternoon: Maria Miller, on the Cox report and the status of implementation of its recommendations.

Mrs Miller: Thank you, Mr Mearns, and thank you to the Committee for allowing me to make this bid along with other Members who are listed on the paperwork. The reason I have asked for this debate is that Dame Laura Cox reported on her deliberations on 24 October last year. That was some eight months ago and I think it is time for the House to take stock of how far we have made progress in implementing those recommendations.

There were, as you will recall, three key recommendations in Laura Cox's report, and when the report was published the House of Commons Commission was very clear that it accepted those recommendations in full. While significant progress has been made on establishing a new grievance scheme, it is less clear what progress has been made on the other recommendations.

I note that there has been a move to put to consultation the issue that caused particular concern for the Equality and Human Rights Commission around historical cases, and the way in which those are being treated. I very much welcome that, but it is very difficult for somebody like me, as a Back Bencher, to find out what is actually going on, so part of the reason for the debate is not only to allow Members to express their views on the progress but to allow those who are responsible to come forward and set out much more clearly the progress that is being made.

I will underline one further point before I close. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has questioned whether the House of Commons is acting lawfully in terms of our public sector equality duty, and we have to take that very seriously as Members. We have a responsibility to ensure that those who lead this place in our name are doing so in the right way, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission has questioned that. I believe that it would be right and proper for Members to interrogate what is going on.

My very final point is that I was a little bit confused about who should answer the debate. This is at the root of the problem. I know we should not talk about urgent questions, but I will in this case. I asked an urgent question about some of these issues and I, in error, thought that it should be the Commission that dealt with it, because the Commission received Dame Laura Cox's report and the Commission has responded to that report. Yet it was the Leader of the House who ended up answering the urgent question on the issue of Laura Cox.

It is confusing and I don't think that is acceptable. Hence, in my application I have put "House of Commons Commission/Speaker" because, even as somebody who has been here for 14 years, I don't actually know who should be answering for this. I think it should be the Commission, but in the past they have not been forthcoming in doing so.

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- Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. Given the nature of the application and that the report was published last autumn—eight months have elapsed—I guess you would want this as soon as possible.

Mrs Miller: I believe it would be in the interests of the House of Commons and our reputation to hold this debate urgently. I was slightly cautious, but if possible I would want to have it in the main Chamber. Of course, I think it is more important to have it speedily than it is to have it in the main Chamber. The House really needs to update itself on what is going on here, particularly with the change in the Leader of the House. The former Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom, has obviously done a huge amount in this area, and I am sure that the new Leader of the House, Mel Stride, would want to make us aware of how he is taking things forward.

- Q3 **Chair:** We have been made aware that there is a possibility of a two-hour slot next Tuesday. I know that is very short notice. We have only been offered a two-hour slot, so we are going to go back to the Government and say we will happily take it if it is protected time. An awful lot of our debates are meant to be scheduled for three hours, but because of other business they are then closed down somewhat. If we could get two hours protected time on Tuesday, would you be happy to take that?

Mrs Miller: Mr Mearns, I would be delighted to take it. I would do everything I can to make sure that Members are well aware of the opportunity to raise issues. At what point do you think you will be able to clarify to me who might be responding?

- Q4 **Chair:** I think it would be entirely appropriate to address the motion to both the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commission.

Mrs Miller: Perfect. I stand ready to be advised as to whether or not that slot becomes available. Having looked at my diary, I think possibly a lot of Conservative Members will be here on Tuesday.

- Q5 **Chair:** I can't imagine why. Obviously, we will make that application back to the Government on protecting the time. If they don't protect the time, I think we would have to think about that. If things overrun and we have very little time left, it would be incumbent on us to pull the debate rather than give too short a time.

Mrs Miller: I couldn't agree more.

Chair: I would hope to think that we would have that clarified by the time the Leader of the House makes the business statement on Thursday morning.

- Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Usually, for a three-hour debate we would expect 15 speakers. If you accept the two-hour debate, we would accept your 10 speakers.

Mrs Miller: Apologies, Mr Blackman. I could probably have got more, but life has been a bit busy.

- Q7 **Bob Blackman:** I am sure you could. If for some reason we don't get

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Tuesday or the Government don't give us the protected time, would it be more important for you to get a general debate in Westminster Hall on the subject, just to clarify the issue, if nothing else? In that case, you could have Thursday 20 June.

Mrs Miller: The answer is yes. The most important thing is a debate to get clarity. I would bite your hand off for the Floor of the House, but I was expecting Westminster Hall, and that would be entirely appropriate I think.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** The likelihood is that if it is not next Tuesday, it will be delayed quite a while because of other things that are going on in the Chamber.

Chair: That is the offer on the table. It is Tuesday if we can get the two hours protected. If not, it is three hours on Thursday in Westminster Hall.

Mrs Miller: Could I ask when you would be able to confirm that it would be Tuesday?

Chair: Probably at the business statement. We might know the day before. We might know this Wednesday evening.

Mrs Miller: Tomorrow?

Chair: Yes. Of course, if it was to be moved to Westminster Hall, it would just be a general debate, without the motion.

Mrs Miller: Understood.

Chair: Thank you very much for the application.

Mrs Miller: I thank the Committee for your time.

Chair: That concludes our public deliberations. We will now go into closed session to make our very difficult decisions.