

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench debates

Tuesday 2 July 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 2 July 2019.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Nigel Mills; and Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-36

Representations made

I: [Jim Shannon](#), Chris Philp, David Linden and Fiona Bruce.

II: Mr Kevan Jones and Frank Field.

III: Siobhain McDonagh.

IV: Andrea Leadsom, Lucy Powell and Sir Norman Lamb.

V: Henry Smith.

VI: Ian Mearns.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Jim Shannon, Chris Philp, David Linden and Fiona Bruce made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a busy schedule this afternoon, with a number of applications. First up is Mr Jim Shannon on the persecution of Christians overseas and the Bishop of Truro review. Jim, over to you.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, as always it is a pleasure to come to the Backbench Business Committee to ask for a debate. This one is really important—they all are, but this particular one is of great concern. It is in relation to the persecution of Christians across the whole of the world. The four Members here are just a small representation of the 60-odd names of those who wish to participate. Chris's last debate in Westminster Hall had about 20 speakers, who got about three minutes, or maybe two and a half minutes, each. Because of the immensity of the issue, the focus of attention from us as MPs and from our constituents who contact us regularly, the recent work of Release International, the Barnabas Fund and Christian Solidarity Worldwide—there are many organisations, including missionary organisations, that tell us what is happening—and the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, which has some 125 members of both Houses, we expect to have a good turnout.

I make this request early on, Mr Chairman, because it is very important. We have never asked for a debate in the main Chamber, but we think it is of such importance, especially with the numbers that we anticipate will be involved in it, that we should ask for that. We also want to tie it in with the Bishop of Truro's report, which will be completed on 15 July. I put in the request, if it is possible—ever mindful that you may not have the time available—to get it sometime after 15 July and before recess or, if not, in the first week of September when we return.

It is self-apparent what the issues are. According to Open Doors, 245 million Christians live where they face high levels of persecution, and the number is growing. Some 100,000 people will die for their faith in this next year; 200 million will be persecuted and 2 billion live in an endangered neighbourhood. Therefore, given the immensity of this issue, the need for us to be the voice for the voiceless across the world and the fact that there are so many people from all parties in the House wishing to have this debate—I am doing this as quickly as I can, Mr Chairman—that is what we are after.

Chris Philp: I strongly endorse what Jim has said. First, in terms of the parliamentary numbers, you can see that there are about 11 colleagues here supporting the application, so thank you very much to everyone who has come along. Some 67 people have signed this application and, as Jim said, when we last debated this in Westminster Hall, so many people came that we were down to two minutes per speech, so there is no question about the numbers of Members wanting to speak on this issue.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The issue is an incredibly important one. Christians around the world are being persecuted and national Governments are turning a blind eye to it. For example, in Pakistan a Christian man was murdered by a group of doctors when he complained about the anti-Christian abuse that his heavily pregnant sister was suffering. Coptic Christians in Egypt are getting routinely beaten up and the Egyptian Government turns a blind eye to it. In Nigeria, Christians are being murdered and the authorities are doing nothing.

In my view, our own Government is not doing enough. We have very significant resources at our disposal, such as diplomatic resources and the overseas aid budget, which is very substantial, and the UK Government is not doing enough to bring to bear the force of those diplomatic and overseas aid assets to stop Governments in other countries from either encouraging or ignoring the persecution that is occurring.

The strength of feeling in the House on this is extremely strong, as evidenced by those of us who are here today. I echo Jim's request to have this debate in the main Chamber. Given the paucity of Government business, I wonder whether there might even be a slot on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, in the absence of any Government legislation, if that isn't cheeky of me to ask.

Q2 **Chair:** I am asking—I keep asking.

Chris Philp: I also echo Jim's request: to have it before the summer recess and to time it with the Bishop of Truro's imminent report on this issue would be particularly welcome. Thank you very much indeed for the opportunity to present our case.

Q3 **Chair:** Fiona, do you have anything to add?

Fiona Bruce: I have one additional point. I support those already made, and it is quite right that, as my colleague Chris Philp says, we should require Governments across the world to pay more attention to this, but our own Government is not doing so. The Foreign Office says that addressing persecution on the grounds of faith is a priority, yet just a few weeks ago, when it launched its most recent report, there was precious little in it about its work on this issue and, when I questioned officials for more details, they were somewhat limited in forthcoming. I think we have a duty, as Back Benchers, to hold our Government—the Executive—and their officials to account on how they are actually undertaking what they say is a priority for them.

David Linden: I have just two points to make. The first is a practical point. We want to ensure that the time allocated for the debate can be protected. As colleagues have already outlined, there were ridiculous scenes in Westminster Hall when we were reduced to two and three minutes. That does a complete disservice to those constituents who have raised a very serious topic with us.

However, the main reason why I am keen to see this debate go ahead relates specifically to our relationship with India. We know that we are going to have quite a strong relationship with them, perhaps seeking to do



HOUSE OF COMMONS

trade deals, but what we have seen in recent years is India moving up the world watch list in terms of persecution of Christians under Prime Minister Modi and particular Hindu nationalists who recently disrupted a prayer meeting, during which Christians were beaten and whipped. So I am particularly keen to use my time in the debate to focus on India, but I would echo what colleagues have said: this is an incredibly important topic. The fact that we have the review is really important, and it's important that Parliament respond to the review, so, like my colleagues, I implore the Committee to grant time for the debate—protected time if possible—in the main Chamber, so that we can hold the Government to account and move forward.

Chair: As you know, the granting of protected time is in the gift of the Government, but I will certainly make the request.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** May I just clarify something? If the Leader of the House were so generous as to give us 18 July, which is a few days after publication, would that be the optimum time for a debate?

Jim Shannon: That's a Thursday, isn't it?

Bob Blackman: It's a Thursday.

Jim Shannon: Yes, I would take that—sorry, we would take that.

Chris Philp: Unless there were any possibility of getting Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday the week after.

- Q5 **Bob Blackman:** The reality is that we won't know about that until much nearer the time. As you know, the business is being announced week to week. But the likelihood is that we would get the Thursday, I think.

Jim Shannon: If we were going to be guaranteed the 18th, that would probably help David to attend, and probably others. We want to get the date, and if the 18th is the one that's available in the main Chamber, I think we would take that, yes.

- Q6 **Chair:** The difficulty is, though, that if we get a full Backbench Business day, it would be unusual—in fact, I don't think we have ever seen the Government protect the time, and therefore statements and urgent questions eat into the time allocated. We may get protected time on another day, so what we will have to do is this. We will ask the question and see whether we can get time on another day and get that protected.

David Linden: May I ask a practical, if cheeky, question? Is it possible to grant just one Backbench Business debate on a Thursday? Sometimes what happens is that there are two Backbench Business debates and they get squashed. Given the seriousness of this topic, is it possible to allocate just one Backbench Business debate so that it gives us the time?

Bob Blackman: It is, but then we will disappoint a lot of people applying for debates. You are first in the queue today, and we have already allocated all the time we have available.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

David Linden: That's why I said I was being a bit cheeky!

Nigel Mills: Especially sat with Jim.

Q7 **Chair:** Jim, you want to say one other thing.

Jim Shannon: To ensure that we get the protected time and the three hours, if the Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday the following week were the option, we would all go for that. We want to be fair to everybody else. I think that's only right.

Q8 **Chair:** The thing is that, when we are being lobbied, as it were, by Members asking for some sort of special consideration, all I would say back is that you need to be light on your feet and flexible, and if time becomes available, you may be able to take it.

Chris Philp: We will certainly do that. The Westminster Hall debate was announced at relatively short notice and the place was absolutely packed. And as you can see, we have very much cross-party support; you can see Members from all parties here today.

Frank Field: We're here for something else.

Chris Philp: Oh, are you?

Lucy Powell: Yes.

Bob Blackman: They are in the queue.

Fiona Bruce: Good try, Chris!

Q9 **Chair:** I think you have some sympathy, but I think that mostly people behind you are waiting to apply for other debates.

Jim Shannon: Well, we have 67 names on the petition; that's more than what's here.

Chair: All right. Does anyone else have a question? No? In that case, I thank you very much for the application.

Mr Kevan Jones and **Frank Field** made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Your application is about the national shipbuilding strategy. Kevan, over to you.

Mr Kevan Jones: I chair the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair. We have spent the last year doing this report—I have supplied you with copies—on the Government's national shipbuilding strategy, taking evidence from industry, trade unions, the Navy and the shipbuilding sector, and we would like an opportunity to discuss it on the Floor of the House. The all-party parliamentary group has all-party support. For example, Chris Stephens, from the SNP, is one of our vice-chairs, as is Anne-Marie Trevelyan.

The report not only examines the existing shipbuilding strategy but also looks at the potential orders coming forward later this year to be procured



HOUSE OF COMMONS

by the Navy, with the main two being the Type 31 frigate and, more importantly, the fleet solid support vessels, which the Government are currently considering putting out to international tender. We make the case for UK sovereign capability in this field. On timescales, we are flexible, because I do not think a decision will be taken while the autumn. However, this subject affects not only existing shipbuilding communities, as evidenced in the report, but the supply chain, which is nationwide, so I think this will attract support from a wide variety of Members from across the piece.

Having published this report, which has been well received by the industry, a debate will be an opportunity to discuss a subject that is not often spoken about on the Floor of the House—shipbuilding. Also, because we no longer have dedicated armed forces days, a debate would also give an opportunity to talk about the importance of sovereign capability for naval ship procurement in the UK.

Frank Field: We now have a Government shipbuilding strategy, and we are applying for a debate on that, but we are an all-party parliamentary group that has produced a report, and we wish to debate it. Many of us have shipbuilding activities in our constituencies, but as Kevan explained, many, many more of us have supply chain companies that make up those great products and ships that are produced. It is very important that we register that with the Government, and register the interest that the Government should have over manufacturing in this country. It is very important to register that these ships should actually be built in this country, with our supply chain, and not, as the Government are thinking on some orders, abroad.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** I have one quick question: how recently was the report published?

Mr Jones: A month ago.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** If we could offer you Westminster Hall on Thursday 11 July, would that be acceptable? I know it is short notice.

Mr Jones: For how long?

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Three hours.

Mr Jones: I don't think we would turn a gift horse down if it is offered. If it is between that and nothing, I think it will be a yes. The important thing is that some of the key decisions being taken on procurement will not be taken until—depending on the change of Prime Minister—later in the year, so it is not time-critical in that respect. However, if we are offered three hours in Westminster Hall, I think we will accept that.

Frank Field: Also, if possible, given the importance of defending the manufacturing base that we have, there is just more kudos in doing it in the House of Commons, on the Floor of the Chamber. The outside world thinks that. As Kevan said, we will not look a gift horse in the mouth, but if the debate could have the status of being on the Floor of the House,

given that we have not had a debate on shipbuilding and its associated industries for a very long time, I hope that that might be a possibility.

Chair: We normally give precedence for Chamber time to debates with a votable motion, which you have not provided. The thing about Westminster Hall is that you get a three-hour slot and you get three hours, whereas that time is often squeezed quite tightly in the Chamber. It is a consideration. Thank you very much indeed.

Siobhain McDonagh made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** We now have Siobhain McDonagh. We move from ships to the state of the British house building industry. Siobhain, over to you.

Siobhain McDonagh: The aim of this debate is to bring together some really high-profile issues: the building of houses, the need for social housing, and pay inequality in the house building sector. As you know, the Government's target is 300,000 new homes per year. Only 6,464 social homes were delivered in 2017-18—the second lowest on record. At that rate, it would take 172 years to give everyone on the current waiting list a socially rented home. In total, the FTSE 350 house building companies built, completed and sold 84,685 last year, but they have planning permission for 472,068 and currently have a land bank of 464,931 plots.

The FTSE 350 house building companies spent £150 million on executive pay last year. The median pay for a FTSE 100 house building CEO is 228 times that of a typical UK construction worker. It would take the average UK construction worker 19 years to save for a deposit on the average UK home, but the average FTSE 350 house building CEO could buy 28 houses outright in one year, and 532 houses over the 19 years that it would take their average worker to save for a deposit. The pay ratio between the average UK construction worker, who is paid £24,964 a year, and the median FTSE 350 executive pay award of house building companies was 89:1. The highest ratios are at—no prizes for guessing—Persimmon, at 1,560:1; Berkeley Homes, at 331:1; Taylor Wimpey, at 126:1; and Barratts, at 113:1. There is an awful lot of stuff there that bothers our constituents and is causing cracks in our society, and a debate would be a tremendous way to bring some of these things out.

Q15 **Chair:** Is there any time sensitivity about airing the debate?

Siobhain McDonagh: No.

Q16 **Chair:** You have a voteable motion, so you are looking for Chamber time.

Siobhain McDonagh: I just ask for your guidance. The figures I gave you were UK-wide, but our motion is on England because housing is a devolved matter for both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. I would like to involve as many people as possible, because it is a UK-wide issue.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Andrea Leadsom, Lucy Powell and Sir Norman Lamb made representations.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q17 Chair: We now have Andrea Leadsom. Your application this afternoon is on inter-ministerial group on early years family support. Andrea, over to you.

Andrea Leadsom: May I first say, Ian, how wonderful it is to be asking you for a debate? It is the first time in a while, isn't it? I was so delighted to help you out every time—just saying.

I want to start off by saying that Lucy, Norman and I have worked on this issue—the first 1,001 days—since we were babies in 2010, when we all came into Parliament. It is an issue that is fundamental to our whole society. The first 1,001 days, and getting it right in the early years period, has such far-reaching consequences for children's mental health, self-confidence, ability to learn and propensity to get into a gang or a life of knife crime or addiction. It is absolutely vital. In recent months, several Select Committee reports—I have named some of them—have highlighted the need for the Government to take action. In the Government's response, each of the Ministers have pointed to the interministerial group that I was chairing on behalf of the Prime Minister, which was looking, cross-departmentally, at what we can do to support the first 1,001 days. Soon before my resignation, we had completed our work and had highlighted the excellent work done by the Select Committees and had put our recommendations to the Government for Secretaries of State to approve, to go around collectively and for implementation.

I am so desperate that we do not lose the excellent work done by a huge range of Select Committees, and the commitment of Lucy, Norman and myself—and not only us. You will see from the names here that there are so many people. Frank Field signed the first 1,001 days manifesto back in 2011. Sharon Hodgson was deeply involved. Philippa Whitford has said she would love to get involved, but as the spokesperson for the Scottish Nationalists, she can only speak if it is not her opposite number who is answering for the Government. There is huge cross-party interest in this area. I would dearly love to have a substantive motion that is calling for action. In particular, with the changes about to take place in the Government, it would be really important to try to do this before there is a new Prime Minister. I wrote to our current Prime Minister with a summary of the recommendations and I am planning to ask at PMQs tomorrow for an update. It really would give us all a chance to give our shared cross-party views on how vital this area is.

Lucy Powell: As soon as Andrea asked me about this, I said yes straightaway, because we have worked together on this vital area of policy for such a long time. This is her first application from the Back Benches, which I am sure will add a great deal of kudos to the application as well. Andrea was doing a really good job in Government with her review. It created a lot of excitement among stakeholders, those involved in the policy world and practitioners on the ground. I went to a number of meetings and events with Andrea because she conducted that review in a cross-party spirit. There was a huge amount of anticipation. Although Andrea could not say that here now, I know that some very exciting, bold and transformative recommendations were going to be brought forward,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

which were long overdue. It is a shame that Andrea was not able to see that right through in Government.

It is really important that we get a chance to hold the Government's feet to the fire on this, so that all that brilliant work does not disappear. Since Andrea left the Government, there have been a couple of seminal reports on Sure Start and the value of that early intervention in Sure Start services and centres. Members of the Committee might be familiar with that. It overwhelmingly shows that early intervention reaps huge rewards to public services later on. We had a UQ on that, which also mentioned the first 1001 critical days, which was hugely well subscribed. I think there is a real appetite in Parliament to discuss these issues at the moment and I think we would have no problem getting lots of speakers in the main Chamber.

Norman Lamb: I endorse everything that has been said. I chaired the inquiry on the Science and Technology Committee into one crucial aspect of this, which is adversity suffered in a childhood trauma, abuse or neglect, and the relationship that that has with the emergence of mental ill health, low education attainment and other adverse consequences in the teenage years and beyond. I have to say that we were very disappointed in the ministerial response from Education to that report. I have spent a lot of time since then talking to every single member of Andrea's working group, including Andrea herself, and was very hopeful that there would be something extremely positive coming out of that. It is just critically important that we air this in Parliament. It is an opportunity to change lives and also to save vast amounts of Government money. This is a case of invest to save, really: you invest in those early years and reap the rewards through the life course. It is not given nearly enough attention. This is a big opportunity, and I think it would be an excellent thing if Parliament were seen to be discussing it in the next few weeks.

Q18 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. You are not quite eligible for your season ticket yet, Norman, but you are getting very close. Jim Shannon is our only season ticket holder, but I think you will be eligible quite soon.

We are hoping to have some time available on Thursday 18 July. If that date becomes available, would you take it?

Andrea Leadsom: I think colleagues would. Unfortunately, 18 July is the one day when I will not be here, which is a great shame. Nevertheless, I think having a debate in the Chamber is so important that I would take it. Equally, I would go and beg the Chief Whip on bended knee to give you a date that I could make.

Q19 **Chair:** Well, if the Government Chief Whip comes to us and says that there is some time available, we will absolutely try to accommodate that. You never know.

Lucy Powell: Ideally, we very much want Andrea to lead the debate in the Chamber before a new Prime Minister is imposed who may want to whisk her off to other responsibilities, and before lots of other things

change. Given that this is a piece of work commissioned by the Prime Minister, it would be important to have that.

Chair: We will ask the Leader of the House and the Government Chief Whip whether we can get some time, and if it becomes available we will certainly try to accommodate that. Thank you very much.

Henry Smith made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** Lastly, we have an application from Henry Smith and Sir George Howarth on the involvement of patients in the use of artificial intelligence in healthcare. Over to you, Henry.

Henry Smith: Thank you very much for your time. Unfortunately, at the last minute George could not be here as anticipated.

Ten other Members and I are asking for a debate on the motion "That the House has considered the involvement of patients in the use of artificial intelligence in healthcare." As you will all be aware, we are living increasingly in a world that is enhanced by artificial intelligence. Healthcare is clearly a key part of that, with the prospect of faster and more accurate diagnoses, personalised treatment, better targeting of demand and better predictions of conditions. Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform our healthcare in quite a profound way, certainly in the light of the recently published NHS long-term plan. We think that it is a key part of that.

I should declare an interest: I chair the all-party parliamentary group on heart and circulatory diseases, which launched a report earlier this year called "Putting patients at the heart of artificial intelligence". We are hoping that any debate that may be granted will highlight the risks of ignoring patients in the wider public development of artificial intelligence in healthcare. We believe that we need to highlight not only awareness, but the full use of AI in healthcare.

The use of patient data is also a relevant issue. There are huge opportunities from artificial intelligence in healthcare, but there are concerns about the way in which patient data is used and about anonymity. There is a real danger that if the issue is not fully explored and if awareness is not raised, there will be a number of misconceptions around AI in healthcare.

We are looking for a 90-minute debate, ideally on the Floor of the House, but of course we are always willing to be flexible.

Q21 **Chair:** We do not normally allocate 90-minute debates in the Chamber; we normally look for three-hour slots, although they are sometimes curtailed down to 90 minutes by other Government business. If a Westminster Hall slot became available, would you accept it?

Henry Smith: Going by the submissions that went before, I am not quite a season ticket holder at this Committee, so apologies for being perhaps a bit cheeky in asking for a 90-minute debate on the Floor of the House. To



HOUSE OF COMMONS

repeat an expression that was used earlier, we would certainly not look a gift horse in the mouth. We would certainly be prepared to consider—or to accept, I should say—a Westminster Hall debate.

- Q22 **Bob Blackman:** Henry, you have talked about a Westminster Hall slot. We get a regular Westminster Hall slot on a Tuesday morning for 90 minutes. If we were able to accommodate you in one of those slots, would that be acceptable?

Henry Smith: I would set the alarm clock early. I am one of those MPs who commutes into London in the morning, but I would be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

- Q23 **Bob Blackman:** Just to make you feel even better about that, I think the first Tuesday back in September is likely to be revised hours.

Chair: It would probably be an 11.30 start.

Henry Smith: Not so bushy-tailed then. That would be fine.

Bob Blackman: Health and Social Care will be answering on 3 September.

Chair: So that is a definite possibility.

Henry Smith: Okay. I very much appreciate your time today.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I will now vacate the Chair.

Bob Blackman took the Chair.

Ian Mearns made representations.

- Q24 **Chair:** For our viewers, Ian Mearns has vacated the Chair because he is about to present an application on behalf of Thelma Walker on the 50th anniversary of the Open University. To make it clear for everyone, he will therefore not take any part in the decision making or allocation of time for this application. Over to you, Ian.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much indeed. As we know, this year is the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Open University. It got its royal charter in April 1969, and started to take its first students that autumn. We want to celebrate the Open University because of the educational opportunities that it has given to broad swathes of our population, who would not have otherwise gone into higher education.

Over the years, it has provided up to degree level and higher qualifications to millions of students, but in celebrating its 50th anniversary we also want to recognise that it faces some problems because of the drop-off in applications from British students. The introduction of higher level fees for higher education courses has had an impact on applicants, particularly returning learners—adult learners who had not gone to university. We think that it is important to bring this matter to the attention of the Government and the wider population.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Open University still does a cracking job. It still attracts students, but is increasingly dependent on students from overseas who can afford to pay the fees. We were provided with the names of interested Members by the Open University itself, so you will see your own name on the list, Mr Blackman. We would like a three-hour slot in the main Chamber on a divisible motion calling for the Government to be aware of what is going on, and to review the position regarding fees for the Open University itself.

Chair: For the sake of clarification, I routinely, whenever requested to put my name to any of these requests, say no, as I am a member of the Committee, so how my name is on this list I do not know. I do not blame you, sir.

Patricia Gibson: I was just going to say Chair, for fear of contradicting you, that I wish my name were on that list.

Chair: That does not prevent you from speaking during the debate.

Ian Mearns: Happy to have you on board, Patricia.

Q25 **Nigel Mills:** I am intrigued to know—perhaps, Ian, you are not very familiar with these processes—whether the people who it says here will speak in the debate have been contacted and asked if they really support the debate.

Ian Mearns: That is my understanding, but if you weren't aware, Bob, I will double check that.

Q26 **Chair:** On a serious point, I think the names should be double checked, because one of the concerns that we will have as a Committee is making sure that there are sufficient speakers to justify the debate and to keep it going. Wendy Morton is a Government Whip. There may be others on here who would be otherwise disqualified.

Ian Mearns: As I understand it, the list was longer than this but it has been culled because of that sort of interest, Mr Blackman.

Chair: Any other questions? No—thank you very much.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much indeed. Thank you for the time. It is wonderful to appear before the Committee.

Chair: That ends the public proceedings of the Committee.