

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench debates

Tuesday 8 October 2019

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Colin Clark; Patricia Gibson; Nigel Mills; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-26

Representations

I: Fiona Bruce and Kelvin Hopkins.

II: Gavin Newlands.

III: Mr Edward Vaizey.

IV: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi.

V: Jim Shannon and Fiona Bruce.

VI: Philip Davies.

VII: Bob Blackman.

Fiona Bruce and **Kelvin Hopkins** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have a flurry of applications in front of us this afternoon. Apologies for the cancellation of the meeting last week.

First up, we have Fiona Bruce and Kelvin Hopkins on tackling alcohol harm. As we have so many applications this afternoon, I ask for brief presentations.

I point out that we have no time to allocate, as Parliament prorogues imminently. All we will be able to do is to pass on a list of unheard debates to our successor Committee in the new Parliament and to the Leader of the House for any Government time that may become available before the Committee is reconvened.

Kelvin Hopkins: Thank you for letting me go first, as I have another meeting to go to immediately afterwards.

We are concerned about the terrible harm that is and continues to be done by alcohol to individuals and families. People are dying and families are being destroyed by alcohol as we speak. We do not think that successive Governments have taken the issue sufficiently seriously.

There are three particular areas of concern. First, the enormous burdens on the health service are frightening. Medical experts have come along to some of our meetings to talk to us precisely about the burdens that fall on the health service.

The second concern is foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. We still do not take it seriously in Britain. We do not have sufficient warning on drinks containers as they do in other countries. I have an example of the wording that they use in America, which I think is much more appropriate.

Thirdly, there is the success of minimum unit pricing, which is already starting to see a reduction in private purchases of excessive alcohol, particularly of very strong drink, to which people become addicted early in life.

There are some very serious issues that we have to raise again with the Government and we have to press the Government to take more serious action to deal with the country's alcohol problems.

Fiona Bruce: We are supported by colleagues from four different parties. I will make three points. First, there has not been a substantive debate on this issue for a considerable time. The last time it was spoken about at any length was in June 2018, when I presented a ten-minute rule Bill on minimum unit pricing, which was unopposed.

Secondly, the Government's recent prevention Green Paper was, quite frankly, a travesty of what ought to have been an opportunity to address this issue. Although the Government acknowledge that there are about 10 million people drinking at levels that put their health at risk, the only answer in the Green Paper appears to be to change the definition of what



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constitutes an alcohol-free drink and to say that the Government will work with the drinks industry more closely. There is no sign of the long-awaited alcohol strategy, which we desperately need. At the same time, it has been proven that regulation has worked to reduce smoking levels.

Thirdly, there is the report that was published the week before last on the success of Scotland's MUP introduction in 2018. Evidence shows that sales of alcohol there have fallen to a 24-year low while they continue to rise in England. Strong white cider sales have fallen dramatically; as we know, that is what causes the most damage, particularly to young people. Implementation was smooth and the evidence is therefore compelling and clear that MUP would save lives, reduce illness and cut crime.

The last thing I would like to say, which we always say on occasions like this, is that we are concerned about harmful drinking. None of us are opposed to enjoying a drink.

Q2 Bob Blackman: As has been explained, the Committee ceases to exist after this evening and will be recreated in the new Session. On the application, you have ticked either Westminster Hall or the Chamber. Can we clarify that if there is a Westminster Hall slot available on a Tuesday available, you would be able to take that?

Fiona Bruce: Yes. Ninety minutes would do justice to it—shorter than that would not.

Bob Blackman: Fine. Thank you.

Fiona Bruce: Clearly, of course, we would prefer the Chamber.
[Laughter.]

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Gavin Newlands made representations.

Q3 Chair: Next up, we have Mr Gavin Newlands. The application this afternoon is on the collapse of Thomas Cook and the future of the travel industry. Over to you, Gavin.

Gavin Newlands: Thank you, Chair. It is a pleasure to be back again in front of the Committee. I do not propose to be long, because my application is relatively full and the details should be in it.

I am the MP for Glasgow Airport, and 300 or so Thomas Cook jobs in my constituency were affected. The two other Members represent the head office of Thomas Cook in Peterborough. There is a cross-party spread of speakers on the application. I did not try to attract any further interest because of the confirmation of Prorogation of Parliament, but I strongly suspect that there would be strong support for such a debate and that a number of Members would take part in it.



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I thought it best to keep the first debate about it general, because there are ongoing investigations. I perhaps reserve the right to come back at a future date with a motion, following any results of the investigations. If this debate is granted, either by yourselves, a successor Committee or the Leader of the House, it would perhaps help inform some of the investigations by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

In terms of the answering Department—I am just trying to pre-empt any of Mr Blackman's questions—I have a slight preference for Transport, mainly because Grant Shapps gave the national Thomas Cook statement, but equally BEIS has huge relevance to this, as does the Treasury. I would not be too fussed if it was Transport or BEIS, if it ended up that way.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** I still have a question. Given that you are almost at an exploratory stage, with a list of questions and detail, if this Committee or the successor Committee allocated you a slot in Westminster Hall for a general debate, with a proviso that you could come back, having had that debate, with a request for Chamber time and a motion, would that be acceptable to you?

Gavin Newlands: I did not pre-empt that question because I was hoping that it would not be asked. I would strongly consider it. The issue is not choosing between Westminster Hall and the Chamber; I do not mind that. It is the length of the debate that might be an issue. Ninety minutes might be enough.

- Q5 **Bob Blackman:** No. Just to be clear, if we allocate a three-hour debate—

Gavin Newlands: On Thursday.

Bob Blackman: The advantage is that you get a full three hours, whereas in the Chamber you may be—

Gavin Newlands: Yes—we may be squeezed.

Bob Blackman: Squeezed to two and half or even two hours.

Gavin Newlands: I appreciate that, and I would strongly consider it. The only problem with a Thursday afternoon slot is the number of Members who are away, but obviously beggars can't be choosers.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Gavin—it is nice to have you back.

Mr Edward Vaizey made representations

- Q6 **Chair:** We now have an application from Mr Ed Vaizey on the value of the arts and creative industries. Over to you, Ed.

Mr Vaizey: Thank you very much, Chairman. I have applied for a three or six-hour debate on the arts and creative industries. As far as I recall, there has been one Opposition debate on the arts and creative industries since I was elected to the House—that is the only debate in the Chamber I can recall that was wholly focused on the arts. There are obviously random

debates in Westminster Hall on individual sectors of the creative industries or individual aspects of the arts, but there has been literally only one major debate on the arts in the 14 years that I have been a Member of Parliament.

This is a long-overdue opportunity for MPs to talk about the importance of the arts and creative industries. As you see from my application, they represent one in 11 jobs, and are growing at twice the rate of the economy as a whole. Their economic importance is vital, but obviously their social importance is also vital, whether in supporting healthcare or criminal justice outcomes, or in the need to increase diversity in access to all forms of the arts for many different people. This would be a fantastically timely debate, particularly given the political climate that we are all operating in at the moment.

Your guidelines say that you need 15 supporting MPs; we have 32 MPs supporting this debate. My researcher says that there are MPs from six political parties supporting it—the SNP, Greens, Plaid Cymru, Labour, the Lib Dems and the Conservatives—but I have realised that, thanks to the Prime Minister, there are seven, because I am an independent MP now. So you have seven parties, which must be an all-time record for a Back-Bench application for a debate of this kind. I should also say that one of the attractions of its being a Backbench Business debate is that, of course, every single MP participating will have a local constituency example that I am sure they will want to bring up to illustrate the value of the arts or the creative industries to their local area.

Q7 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Having the Sage Gateshead and the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in my constituency, I have to say—

Mr Vaizey: Without wishing to detain you further, Chairman, with that investment in Gateshead, led by a fantastic council and local leadership—I am trying to sell ice to the Eskimos—I am sure you would agree that the impact of culture on your local economy has been significant.

Chair: I will declare my interest, having previously been deputy leader of that very council. Thank you very much indeed.

Mr Vaizey: I did not know that when I sucked up to you, Mr Mearns.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi made representations.

Q8 Chair: Next up is Tan Dhesi, please, on commemorating the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of the Sikh faith. Over to you, Tan.

Mr Dhesi: Thank you very much, Chairman, for giving me this opportunity. As you have highlighted, it is a huge landmark moment within the Sikh faith globally; it is the 550th anniversary of the founder of the Sikh religion. Over the more than two years that I have served as a Member here, I have not applied for any debates with regard to the Sikh

faith, because I did not think there was anything befitting of the main Chamber, but this, as a landmark moment in history, is something that I think Members from across the Chamber would be very interested in. Millions will be flocking to his ancestral home in the Punjab, but there will be celebrations across the world, including in constituencies across the UK. That is why, since I went out to the wider membership of 650 MPs, within 24 hours we have had more than 50 Members indicating that they would be willing to support and speak in the debate if you were minded to grant it.

Chair: Thank you very much.

- Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Tan, one of the issues we have is that this Committee will cease to be after tonight and will be resurrected at some stage after next Monday. The key issue is the timing of any potential debate, because we will recommend to the Leader of the House debates that may happen. I understand when this should be, but for the record, could you just detail the best day for this debate to be held?

Mr Dhesi: It would be ideal if it was at the beginning of November sometime, but with the Brexit deadline and whatever, I would rather that the debate took place, rather than having other events take over and missing the celebrations. In the Punjab, the key celebrations will be conducted between 9 and 12 November. That is why I have put in for a debate in October, with the proviso that we actually have the debate, rather than its being missed.

- Q10 **Alex Sobel:** I spoke to the hon. Member when he was drafting this application; it is a very good application and you have a large number of names on here—more than enough to fill a debate of the time you want. But I did point out that Members who serve on the Front Bench or shadow Front Bench should not be included, and you have 11 names. Just for future reference, if you were tight, it might have knocked you out, but as you have so many it is unimportant. That is just for future reference.

Mr Dhesi: My apologies for that. It will be corrected in a future submission. There were many Front Benchers from both sides who were looking to speak. Some of them did say, “Oh, I can’t put in for this,” but because we were sending lists of names in tranches in emails to Sarah, some of them will have gone through in the previous list.

Alex Sobel: They will be able to speak, but they can’t be on the application.

- Q11 **Chair:** Alex is of course talking about a future submission when you put in for a debate on the 600th anniversary—

Mr Dhesi: I am sure Mr Chairman himself will be in a position to take part in that debate! I will make this request of the Committee. It would be great if we could have three hours in the main Chamber—that would be ideal—but even if you were able to grant only 90 minutes, I would rather have that in the main Chamber than in Westminster Hall. One reason is

that I think there would be a lot of people. Secondly, the media attention on this globally will mean that it would be befitting of the main Chamber.

Chair: Thank you very much, Tan. It is very good of you and it is good to see you.

Jim Shannon and Fiona Bruce made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Next up is Mr Jim Shannon. Welcome back, Jim; it has been a little while since we last saw you. Your season ticket was starting to be in jeopardy, so it is good to see you back. This application is about International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. It is a pleasure to come to the Backbench Business Committee to request a debate at any time, and I can tell you now that I will be back in a few weeks' time, hopefully, with some other questions—I have some other debates to ask for.

As you know, I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. That is very important—freedom for those of a Christian faith, those of other faiths and, indeed, those of no faith. We are coming up to International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, on 27 October.

This issue is also topical because of the Prime Minister's appointment of Rehman Chishti MP to the position of special envoy in September 2019, so something has changed in relation to it. A debate would offer an opportunity for Members to comment on the new appointment and, just as importantly, to examine the special envoy's plans to advance this fundamental human right.

It continues to be a massive issue in my mailbag. Just last week I met some Government officials from Vietnam, and I had the opportunity to impress on them the need to deal with the issue of persecution of different religions and ethnic groups.

This issue is also topical because the Government agreed, before the summer break, to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's review of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's work to support persecuted Christians. A debate would provide a vital opportunity to assess the Government's progress in this regard.

Some 80% of the world's population live in countries in which they experience high or very high restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief. It is the case that 100,000 Christians will die in the next year for their belief; 100 million will be persecuted for their faith; and 2 billion live in what would be referred to as an endangered neighbourhood.

I know that in the last while there has been more attention to this issue than there had been, but I think it is important that we look at it again, for

those three reasons: the appointment of the envoy; the fact that the Bishop of Truro's report has just been finished; and the opportunity to reiterate again the interests of right hon. and hon. Members in this House in this very important issue.

Chair: Thank you very much. Fiona.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Chair. Jim and I had not compared notes before I prepared, a short time ago, to present to you, but actually all three points that I wanted to make are virtually identical to his. On the Bishop of Truro's report, there were over 20 recommendations, fully accepted by the Foreign Office, but my experience has shown that we need to press the Foreign Office for action and not just words. Addressing this issue has been one of its priorities for 2019, but halfway through the year, when I asked what progress it had made, it said that it was awaiting the report. We are now three quarters of the way through the year, and I think that Members would be exercising their proper role in challenging the Department and saying, "Well, what action have you taken, rather than just saying that you have received the report and welcome it?"

Secondly, I am absolutely delighted that Rehman Chishti has been appointed as the Prime Minister's envoy, and he is no longer also a Foreign Office Minister, because for some time we have been saying that that dual role is inappropriate. You cannot be judge and jury. But we are still very concerned about the lack of resources for that role. If we are to make a global impact on what is a very serious issue, we need to ensure that that office is properly resourced.

There is considerable interest across the House. We need to ensure that we have enough time, because I think on one debate we were limited to about 90 seconds each because so many Members came. I will just close with one point: we need to hold other Departments to account. The Bishop of Truro mentioned this. He referred, for example, to the Department for International Development, which we have been saying for some years. There is also the Home Office, but DFID really needs to do a similar report to the Foreign Office as well, because in so many areas we are paying out vast amounts of UK aid to deal with an issue that could have been prevented if this issue of religious difference had been addressed at a much earlier stage. I will close by saying that I hope the Committee is resurrected after the recess—

Chair: We will be, but in what form we don't know.

Fiona Bruce: —if I may say so, without wanting to influence your decision on any of the remarks I have made today—with you in the Chair, because I think you have done an excellent job over the last period of time, Ian. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is very kind of you to say. The cheque is in the post.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Very briefly, I note that you have applied for a three-hour debate. We are going to recommend a series of opportunities for the



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Leader of the House to choose debates. I think you have asked for the week of 21 October, before the international day. Is that correct?

Jim Shannon: That is the idea, yes.

Chair: The 27th is the day.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** So ideally you would like it that week, if it is possible, but if not—?

Jim Shannon: If not, the following week.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** You would accept the following week?

Jim Shannon: Definitely.

Fiona Bruce: We would rather have the length of time than the exact date.

Jim Shannon: In the last debate, as the Member for Congleton has said, Members were very much restricted in their contributions. I think a number of people would probably feel that this time around; they would like a wee bit more time to expound their thoughts and ideas on how we can address these issues. I am always mindful that, since the Bishop of Truro's debate, the issues of unlawful detention, torture, harassment, sexual violence and even death are ongoing. Therefore, this issue continues to be a priority for the Government, to be fair, but also a priority for us.

I am sorry, Chairman, because I have a lung infection and a bit of bronchitis, so my voice is not as strong as perhaps it would normally be, but I want to say that you are ably supported by all your Committee members, who support you and make your job much easier.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q16 **Patricia Gibson:** You were talking about the importance of the three hours and how over-subscribed these debates are, so much so that I would like to add my name to it, but before I do that, if you have it in the Chamber, the chances of getting three hours are dramatically reduced because of all the urgent questions and statements. If you want the full three hours, Westminster Hall would be the way to go. That is just my opinion.

Jim Shannon: I appreciate that. I think I have indicated either/or, so that should make it a wee bit easier.

Q17 **Chair:** Just bear in mind that the 27th is a Sunday, I think.

Jim Shannon: Yes, I know it is.

Q18 **Chair:** So, although I know you would like the week beginning on the 21st, but if it were just after that, the week beginning the 28th, it would not be too bad.

Jess Phillips: We could have a sitting Sunday!



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Jim Shannon: I will be at church on Sunday.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you both very much. I hope the successor Committee reissues your season ticket, Jim.

Jim Shannon: May I just ask a wee question, Chairman? I was down for the diabetes debate on Thursday, and obviously, with the way things are with Prorogation, that is not going to happen. I presume that any debates that have been requested, even though we are in a new Session, will carry over?

Q20 **Chair:** Well, because it has been two and a half years now in this parliamentary Session, we are going to make the insurance policy of writing to our successor Committee—because they may be totally different—suggesting what would be on the list in terms of their legacy.

Jim Shannon: That is fair. Thank you.

Patricia Gibson: May I just say to both of you—just out of interest; it does not add anything, but I just want to say it—I have only in the past fortnight written to the Foreign Secretary on this very issue.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Philip Davies made representations.

Chair: Next up is Mr Philip Davies. Philip is, of course—

Jess Phillips: A season ticket holder.

Chair: Not only a season ticket holder, but a former member of the Committee—welcome back. The subject is International Men's Day. Philip, over to you.

Philip Davies: Thank you very much. I am here for my annual fixture: to request a debate to coincide with International Men's Day, which is on 19 November. I have 22 Members signed up from different parties—men and women, including the Chairman of the Women and Equalities Select Committee.

As you will recall, Mr Chairman, last year you very kindly allocated time in the Chamber, but the Government did not give you any time in the Chamber for that particular week, so we ended up having to do it in Westminster Hall. When the debate has been in Westminster Hall in the past, the people contributing have said it should be in the main Chamber, so you have very kindly tried to accommodate that in previous years.

International Men's Day, as I learned earlier today, is now celebrated in over 80 countries around the world. It focuses on issues such as men's and boys' health, levels of male suicide and educational attainments amongst boys. That will be the focus of the debate again this year.

Q21 **Alex Sobel:** Obviously we have no time to allocate, but you have been



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here and seen the number of debates proposed by Members who want three hours of time and who have many more names on their application than you do on yours—it has only 10 names, which is a little short for a three-hour debate.

Philip Davies: I am grateful that you mention that, Alex. My application was a bit rushed because I was under the misunderstanding that I would have to wait until after Prorogation, when a new Committee is formed. It was only a chance conversation with Bob Blackman that made me realise otherwise—I literally only found out on Thursday last week. In the time since then I have got it up to 22 names. It was originally fewer, but that was because it was such a rushed job at the time.

Q22 **Chair:** I did hear you say 22, Philip, but we haven't got the list.

Philip Davies: I will leave you that, if that is okay.

Chair: That is very good of you.

Q23 **Bob Blackman:** What about the timing of the debate? As your application says, International Men's Day is 19 November. Do you want it that week or the following week? Do you have a preference?

Philip Davies: Ideally, I would like it in the same week, but obviously, having been on the Committee, I appreciate that you are often hamstrung with the dates that you are allocated. I ask you to do the best you can with the resources available, but ideally I would like it in the same week.

Q24 **Chair:** So that would be the week beginning 18 November.

Philip Davies: I think that is right, yes.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Philip.

Bob Blackman made representations.

Chair: Lastly this afternoon, we have one of our own.

Patricia Gibson: As the Speaker says, we have been saving you up.

Chair: We have Mr Bob Blackman, on errors in payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal. Bob, over to you.

Bob Blackman: Thank you, colleagues. I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders—I have held that position since 2010.

We have battled away as an all-party group to get the Government to actually do the honourable thing, which is to provide full compensation to victims of the Equitable Life scam. Sadly, successive Governments have failed to come up with full compensation for the victims, and I am afraid that this Government are no exception: we have recently received a communication from the Chancellor saying that, as far as he and the Government are concerned, the scheme is closed.



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We have put in applications and had debates in the past about the scandal and the scam, but this application is about the transparency of payments to victims. The fact is that individuals who have been receiving payments of compensation seem to differ in the amount of money that they have been allocated. We have never been able to get to the bottom of how this allocation has taken place. The Government claim that there are no errors in the allocation of funds, but there are clear discrepancies between individuals who have exactly the self-same investments and rights to compensation but have been paid different sums of money.

Our suggestion—our request—is for a 90-minute debate. We do not need to debate it for a lengthy period, but we need a debate in order to encourage the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to establish a Joint Committee to look into the accuracy—or more likely inaccuracy—of the payments that have been made to the victims of the scam.

I have spoken to the Chairs of both Committees, and their view is that they do not necessarily wish to open inquiries into the details of the amounts of compensation or whether they are justifiable, but that they will look at the process. I think we are pushing at an open door, so we are seeking to get a motion agreed by the House that asks those Committees to inquire into that aspect in the new Session.

I believe that there are 29 speakers drawn from five political parties, and obviously there are a great range of views. At the moment, we are not looking at getting the Government to do the right thing—paying full compensation—but looking at the specifics of how much money is being paid out and on what basis.

- Q25 **Chair:** With that in mind, and in view of the fact that you have a substantive motion, would you like this to be kept out of the list to go forward to the Government for general debates? Would you like to wait for the successor Committee to take it on?

Bob Blackman: Yes. Basically, I think there was a bit of a mix-up when we submitted this application; it did not get past the Clerks in time for the normal arrangements. Clearly this is a substantive motion and we want it debated on the Floor of the House. We want a decision by the House that confirms all the other decisions that the House has made about justice for Equitable Life policyholders, but that looks at the Committee side of things.

- Q26 **Chair:** So you would prefer it not to go to the Government for a general debate?

Bob Blackman: Correct. I don't think the Government are going to be terribly supportive.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application.

That concludes our formal consideration. We will now go into private session, and that will conclude the business of the Backbench Business



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Committee in this Session of Parliament. Thank you very much indeed, everyone.