

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 15 May 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel; and William Wragg.

Questions 1-32

Representations made

[I](#): Kirstene Hair

II: Jim Shannon

III: Alex Sobel, Andrew Percy and Jim Shannon

IV: Liz Twist

V: Joan Ryan, Tommy Sheppard and Jim Shannon

VI: Lloyd Russell-Moyle

Kirstene Hair made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this week's Backbench Business Committee. This afternoon, we have six applications in front of us, beginning with Kirstene Hair and coastal erosion.

Kirstene Hair made representations.

Kirstene Hair: I would like to call for a debate on coastal erosion and the effect it has on communities throughout the United Kingdom. I have called for support from other Members and received cross-party support from all parts of the United Kingdom. This is an issue that is becoming ever more urgent as the rate of erosion has gone from 1 metre a year to 1.5 metres a year since 1970.

It is really important that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations work together on these issues. By other Members bringing their points to the Floor, we could learn from how other areas are dealing with it, because there is simply not a one-size-fits-all for this issue. It is having a big impact in my constituency and there is a lot of concern around flooding and its effect on sporting facilities such as world-class golf courses, which naturally are often on the coastline.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Thank you for your application. There are two issues. The first is, there is a large preponderance of Government-side speakers on your application, without too many Opposition speakers. Is it likely that you will be able to get some more Opposition speakers to balance up the debate?

Kirstene Hair: I will do my very best to ensure we have an equal number of speakers—or at least a more representative number of speakers.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** I also understand that Thursdays are often a bit of a challenge, particularly for Scottish MPs travelling back to Scotland. In that case—your application does not say this—would you take a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday morning?

Kirstene Hair: I would be delighted to, yes.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Presumably it would be the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—fisheries and so on—that would answer the debate.

Kirstene Hair: Yes.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** So that potentially gives us the options of either Tuesday 12 June or 26 June. Either of those dates may be available. Would either of them suit you?

Kirstene Hair: Either would suit. Sooner would be preferable, but I am open to both dates.

Chair: When looking for other speakers, you would have thought a good

place to start would be MPs with coastal constituencies. Having said that, there might be a political imbalance in that around the country—that's probably the case. Thank you very much, Kirstene.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Using his season ticket again is Jim Shannon. Good afternoon, Jim. Jim has an application on the role of universal health coverage in tackling preventable and treatable diseases.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Chairman and the Committee. I am very pleased to be here, as always. This is a time one, but it is not an immediate time one. The request is to have this debate in the week starting 2 July—I am aiming for 5 July; it is Tuesday 3rd or Thursday 5th. Anyway, as you all see in front of you there, the issue is quite clear. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the national health service, the oldest and most successful model of universal health. There is a debate on that in Westminster Hall tomorrow morning. Our NHS is testament to the fact that health for all is achievable.

The issue is that, across the world, it is not. Too often, health is used as a privilege rather than a right. Some of the facts are particularly worrying. According to the World Health Organisation, 400 million people lack access to essential healthcare services and 100 million people are rushed into extreme poverty by healthcare expenses. That happens in many, many countries.

Behind these horrifying statistics are tragic human stories of unnecessary loss and suffering. The debate—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: Order. Sorry. Can we just have one meeting, please? I do apologise.

Joan Ryan: I'm so sorry.

Jim Shannon: The debate is on a very important issue, and it is trying to tie in world health issues at a timescale when we want to be there. We have some terrible infectious killers, but pneumonia, which is preventable and treatable here in the UK, is now the biggest infectious killer of children, claiming nearly 1 million lives per year, which is two children every minute. That puts things into perspective and is really worrying. We wish to have a debate on preventing those child deaths regarding the target date of 2030. We will see around 3 million children die from preventable illnesses before their fifth birthday. That is the perspective, and why it is so important. As always, I have sought cross-party support, and the names on that are from all parties, including the Conservatives and Labour, Plaid Cymru, Liberal Democrats, the Scottish nationalists and ourselves. We are seeking a 90-minute debate, preferably in Westminster Hall, either on Tuesday 3 July if possible, or on Thursday 5 July. I am conscious that sometimes we have some of the people here who will go away, but hopefully they will stay for a debate of an hour and a half if we get the full slot.

Chair: We have not got your list of names, Jim.

Jim Shannon: I will leave this here. Could somebody copy it and get it back to me, as it is the only work copy I have?

Chair: A copy will be made and the original sent back to you.

Q7 **Alex Sobel:** On that point, how many names have you got? We expect at least eight to 10 names for a 90-minute debate.

Jim Shannon: I think I have 14 names from all the parties. Ultimately, it is a specific debate, which those with an interest will come to. As for the others that I would like to be there, I will speak to them in the meantime and send them an email when I hopefully get confirmation of when it is going to be, as I think that there are others who would want to participate. Many of us are moved by health issues, not just in this country, as we debated this morning, but across the world. I asked the Leader of the House about this in business questions on Thursday and she suggested that I seek a debate through this Committee. She is right; I sort of knew that, by the way.

Chair: I am sure the suggestion had already occurred to you, Jim.

Q8 **Alex Sobel:** You just indicated that you would like a Tuesday, and you indicated 3 July. The answering Department on 3 July will not be the Department of Health and Social Care, and I assume you want that Department? They are answering on 26 June and 10 July. Do you have any preference in terms of those?

Jim Shannon: It would be preferable to tie in with the 5 July date, somewhere close to that: the Tuesday or Thursday. I am happy with Thursday 5 July if that could be done. An hour and a half, in the full stretch, would probably be okay, if that is okay with the Committee of course.

Chair: Thank you Jim.

Alex Sobel, Andrew Percy and Jim Shannon made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Next up, we have a member of our Committee, Mr Alex Sobel. For clarification, Alex will not be involved in the determination of his own application. The subject for his application is the Polish anti-defamation law.

Alex Sobel: Thank you, Chair. I am here because Poland passed this law earlier this year. If I was to describe—I am going to describe—Auschwitz-Birkenau as a Polish “death camp”, that would be illegal. It is illegal for me to say it here, and it would be illegal for me to say it in Poland or anywhere else in the world. I assume I am not under parliamentary privilege in front of the Committee, so I could potentially be prosecuted in Poland for saying that. After the law was passed by the Parliament, the Polish President sent it for review because he said that parts of it would be unconstitutional—for instance, saying what I just said outside Poland—but much of the law is not considered unconstitutional. I think this law is a



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revision of history and it opens up a whole load of other issues related to the holocaust, which I know everybody in Parliament is opposed to.

Last week, Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum revealed that they had had thousands of abusive and hate-filled emails after the law was passed, because people felt they could legally abuse them, revise history, deny the holocaust and exaggerate the holocaust because of the law. It is time that we had the debate and time that we pressed on the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office to press on their counterparts in Poland to drop this law. That is my application.

Andrew Percy: I agree with everything that Alex said. It reverberates into the UK, because this is part of a revisionism that is going on, sadly, in many parts of Europe about the holocaust and the complicity of some people in that. Lots of Poles were doubtless very brave in saving the lives of Jews, but others were complicit with the holocaust, and of course this law specifically prevents our having a factual, evidence-based debate about that complicity and that involvement. It reverberates through to the UK and particularly to the Jewish community, who feel it is yet another attack on them, and that it is the holocaust being weaponised in a way. That is why I fully support this and hope you will be able to find some time for the debate.

Jim Shannon: Very quickly, just to back up Alex on this, I am always wary of those who try to rewrite history. History is factual and historical. It has happened. We have many people across the world who try to rewrite history. In Northern Ireland, they are trying to rewrite history—or at least one particular political party is trying to rewrite history. We will be doing our best to make sure that does not happen. I do not want to see it happen in Poland, so I support Alex. He told me he was coming here and I was very happy to support him, and when the debate comes to Westminster Hall or the Chamber, whatever the case may be, I will certainly be there to support him.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Two quick questions. The available Tuesdays would be, presumably, 5 or 19 June. Do you have a preference for either of those, if we decide on a Tuesday?

Alex Sobel: The law is under review, so the more quickly we can get the Foreign Secretary to put pressure on his counterparts in Poland, the better. The 5th is fine, but either way is good.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Would it be your intention, following the debate, to potentially present us with an application for a debate on a divisible motion?

Alex Sobel: Potentially, depending on what the Foreign Secretary or the Foreign Minister says in that debate.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application.

Liz Twist made representations.



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Q12 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Liz. Your application this afternoon is on access to treatment, support and innovative new medicines by phen—what?

Liz Twist: Phenylketonuria.

Chair: That's easy enough for you to say.

Liz Twist: PKU is easier.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Over to you, Liz.

Liz Twist: Recently we have established an all-party parliamentary group on PKU, to cut it short. Phenylketonuria is a condition that very much limits the amount of protein that a person can take. For adults it is difficult, but clearly for children it is very difficult. What we want to do in this debate, and through the APPG as well, is to raise awareness of the condition and to argue for proper consideration of treatment for PKU.

There is a drug available, called Kuvan, which is in the system at the moment, and we are talking to Ministers about that through the APPG. We know from the work we have been doing with NSPKU that many MPs have constituents—maybe only a few, but they do have them—who have real problems in their life because of the limits on their diet from PKU. Additionally, there are concerns about the full impact—the behavioural—effect of restrictions on PKU and problems with people not conforming to their diet.

We are very much hoping to raise awareness of the issue, to raise it with Health Ministers, to get a response and to seek to improve conditions for people with this condition. As I say, there is a lot of concern about how it affects children and their progress through schools, but it is increasingly difficult for adults as well because of the restrictions being placed in some areas on prescriptions for the food and the protein replacement supplements that people need. We would very much like to raise this issue in the House. We are approaching a national awareness day for PKU on 28 June, so we think it is entirely appropriate we give this a good start and get the debate going in the House.

Q14 **Alex Sobel:** Just a couple of questions about the condition: how rare is it, and is it a genetic condition?

Liz Twist: Yes, it is a genetic condition, and it is rare, but most MPs will have people in their constituencies with it, whether or not you know about it yet. That is the other thing about people coming together to share experiences.

Q15 **Alex Sobel:** Is there an issue around diagnosis of the condition as well? It is quite common in these cases that it is difficult to diagnose.

Liz Twist: No, actually, the diagnosis is the easy bit, because it's the pinprick test that they do on babies when they are born. That diagnoses the condition. Hopefully, most people will find that that is a clear return, but if they don't, that is when the problem starts, and that is when we really need to make sure these children are properly supported and have the best treatment they can have.



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Q16 **Bob Blackman:** You have said that you don't mind where the debate is and that it's a general debate with a 90-minute request. Would a Tuesday morning suit you better than, say, a Thursday afternoon in Westminster Hall?

Liz Twist: A Tuesday morning would be great, yes.

Q17 **Bob Blackman:** Is there time pressure? You mentioned the date of 28 June.

Liz Twist: Yes, 28 June is the national day.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** So, presumably, sometime before that?

Liz Twist: Yes.

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** I potentially have, for Health—presumably it's Health and Social Care that would be answering—either 12 or 26 June. Are either of those dates inconvenient?

Liz Twist: Either date would be fine.

Q20 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Liz.

Joan Ryan, Tommy Sheppard and Jim Shannon made representations.

Q21 **Chair:** Joan, your application is on early elections, human rights and the political situation in Turkey.

Joan Ryan: It is, Chair, thank you. It would be a timely debate, given that early parliamentary and presidential elections are to be held in Turkey on 24 June, a year ahead of scheduled elections. President Erdogan is on a current three-day visit to London. He was at Chatham House yesterday, and he is meeting the Prime Minister and the Queen today.

These elections are going to be held under a state of emergency, which will severely curtail freedom of expression, assembly and association, and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs. These elections will also see Turkey in transition to a new Executive presidency. The elected President will become the Head of State, the Head of Government, the head of the police, the head of the army and the head of the ruling party, and the office of Prime Minister will be abolished. So pretty significant events are about to take place in Turkey.

We have a large Turkish population in this country, particularly in London, but also spread across the UK. They are very concerned about what is happening. You will know that, since the alleged coup, some 10,000 people have been detained, and 70,000—often army, civil servants, politicians and others—have been dismissed from post. We now have 11 Members of Parliament stripped of their parliamentary membership, nine of whom are detained in prison. We are told by the Committee to Protect Journalists that Turkey is now the biggest jailer of journalists in the world. We understand that harassment has increased since the situation in Syria and in Afrin—I will leave my colleague here to talk about that.



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We last had a debate on 9 March 2017, so we haven't had a debate so far in this 2017 to 2019 Session. When we asked for that debate, we had a 90-minute debate and we had some 16 speakers. There were others, but they did not get in. At the time, you asked me, "Should we go for it? Should we wait?" You said that if there was a good turnout, it would strengthen our hand in the future. There were people who couldn't get into the debate. As of this morning, we have 20 names on the application, and there are more coming in. I draw attention to the fact that the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat, has also supported the call for this debate. It is timely and necessary. There is a deep level of cross-party concern. There are 132 Members currently on on-going EDMs about the issue.

Tommy Sheppard: Just to reiterate, I think there is cross-party concern on this issue. There is wide-spread concern in my own party. I know from speaking to Labour and Conservative Members that there is a lot of concern across the House. A debate would be well received and would get a lot of participation.

Secondly, the timing is important. I think it is important that the House gets the opportunity to consider this before the 24 June elections in Turkey. I am a Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which is referred to in the application. At the last meeting in Strasbourg, the assembly had a discussion about this and expressed concern about the democratic processes in Turkey, which is of course a member of the Council of Europe. We were able to hear representations from the HDP and other opposition parties about the situation. They made it clear to us that the more discussion there is in member states about what is happening inside Turkey, the better it is for them in trying to get a voice and being able to at least appeal for fairer rules to apply than appear to be in force at the minute.

This will also give us an opportunity to consider some aspects of what is happening on Turkey's border and how that relates to the domestic situation inside Turkey itself. I am thinking of the Turkish invasion of Afrin, in particular, and their general foreign policy objective, as it seems, to suppress the democratic aspirations of the Kurdish people. That feeds back into domestic politics in Turkey in the sometimes quite vehement suppression of people trying to represent the Kurdish community's interest inside Turkey.

Jim Shannon: I am very happy to support Joan on this one. Human rights issues is my portfolio. I am also Chair, as everyone will know, of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief. This is important because there are small ethnic minorities in Turkey. Turkey's Alevi ethnic group are being directly, specifically and spontaneously persecuted. Kurdish and other communities are deeply worried about what is happening to them. From a purely human rights and religious persecution perspective, I think this is important.

I have been very critical—others have as well—of Turkey's abuse of civil rights. It is despicable what they are doing. They are our NATO ally as



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well. You ask yourself, how come our NATO ally is doing what they are doing? You have to understand the angst and, to be truthful, some anger that we have. I know that I find it hard to control that exasperation I have with what is taking place.

Joan has mentioned that some 20 Members want to speak. I suspect that there will be more who will want to speak on this issue. It is not for me to say, but hopefully we will get a bit of time to express ourselves on this one. I would certainly look forward to the opportunity to explain very clearly our absolute annoyance on the main Floor of the House, and to have the Turkish Government, through our Government, actually do something, and not to ignore us every time.

Alex Sobel: On the point Tommy made, I tried to make a number of points about Afrin in the Syria debate, but I could not get into the debate to raise issues around cluster munitions, chemical weapons and so forth. In terms of the time, I think three hours would be more than subscribed, so would you look for protected time for this debate? Obviously, we get squeezed, as we are today with urgent questions and ministerial statements. Would you look for a motion? You have already had a debate in Westminster Hall that had no motion. Would you look to put a motion to this debate if you were to get time in the main Chamber?

Joan Ryan: We have deliberately left it very broad, because as you can hear, there are so many strands that play into this. I am not certain that looking for a motion is helpful, in that it would narrow the debate. What we are really looking for is for the temperature of the House to be taken, as opposed to forcing a vote on a specific element of the problem. I don't know what Tommy is going to say further on Afrin, but I just want to say that we seem to be in a very peculiar position here. If it was not for the Kurds in Afrin and that whole region—Rojava, Cizre and so on—ISIS would never have been pushed back. In fact, we gave air cover, so they were the troops on the ground, because we did not want to put boots on the ground, for all the obvious and historical reasons that we all know. The fact that we are leaving them in this position is shocking. I don't want to rule out anything on that either.

I am not sure about asking for protected time, because the important thing is, as my colleague said, that we get this debate before the 24th, when the election happens. Another added factor is that there are a lot of Turkish people here who can vote, but their polling station is always located in south Kensington, arranged by the consulate. I have already written to the European Council election monitors and others, because the whole community is predominantly over in north London, they have children and all the rest of it, and they have to hire buses on a particular weekend to get over there. That is why there is an urgency, aside from the question of how much impact we can have on what is happening in Turkey—I think they should hear the view of Parliament, given that the President has just been here. However, our own population are entitled to vote in that election, and it is not being properly facilitated.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** There are two potential options, and I completely



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understand the request for a debate. On 24 May, we have a potential gap in the Chamber, but it will be the second debate. Alternatively, we have Westminster Hall, where we would probably get three hours of protected time. The risk for you is this: if we get statements or urgent questions, then both debates on the Thursday in the Chamber get squeezed, so your time would be shorter, whereas if we have Westminster Hall for that day, and we can guarantee three hours, you will get a three-hour debate. Of those two options, which would you prefer?

Joan Ryan: The main Chamber, I think, because of the import of the issue in international and domestic affairs.

- Q23 **Bob Blackman:** I understand. Would you accept if we offered you the opportunity to have that on 24 May in the Chamber, which would be the second debate?

Joan Ryan: Yes.

Bob Blackman: Literally the last day before we rise for the recess.

- Q24 **Chair:** Thank you very much. The issue of protected time only really comes up if we get some time allocation on a day other than Thursday—say, if we were to be given a three-hour slot on a Tuesday because there was limited Government business, and then other, unforeseen things happen. So we have asked for protected time and been granted it, but we do not tend to ask for protected time on a Thursday, because it is Thursday and—particularly before a recess—people want to get home.

Joan Ryan: Is there any other possibility beside that last Thursday? I am just thinking.

- Q25 **Chair:** The whole thing is, Joan, we know what we have until Whitsun. After Whitsun, we just don't know.

Joan Ryan: Right.

Tommy Sheppard: I suppose this applies to any debate, but obviously the Thursday before a recess—the last item of business—it may put pressure on attendance for various reasons.

- Q26 **Chair:** That is accepted.

Tommy Sheppard: If something else becomes available, can we move to that, or do we have to—?

- Q27 **Chair:** The thing is, we have a number of applications that are live, and yours is one of them. What we have to try to do is find something that works.

Joan Ryan: Okay, but the main Chamber would be what we would want. Thank you.

- Q28 **Bob Blackman:** Just to explain, it is likely that we would not be able to hold the debate in the Chamber if you don't accept 24 May. That's the reasoning, because of other—



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Joan Ryan: I realise what you are saying. The first priority for us, I think, is the main Chamber.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle made representations.

Q29 **Chair:** Last, but certainly not least, this afternoon, we have Lloyd Russell-Moyle, and the application is on the future of the Erasmus+ scheme after 2020.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: You have my application in front of you. Currently, negotiations in the Council are ongoing for the Erasmus programme post-2020, because 2020 is also when the EU funding period runs out and a new programme needs to be negotiated for. Currently, our Government have committed to taking part up to exit day, and up to the financial requirement, which is 2020, but there has been no commitment, or no commitment to take part in the negotiations that are happening at the moment for us to be bound into a new programme. Non-EU states can be bound into the Erasmus programme, but most of them—Ukraine for example—are already in the stages of negotiating their accession into the 2020 programme.

At the moment, this Government have not been clear about it. We think that the Government are positive about it, but we want to be able to be clear on that, and that is why a substantive motion is what I wanted to put down. There are 31 Members who have indicated that they wish to speak, including my co-sponsor Ken Clarke, the Father of the House, and a number of others.

The Erasmus programme is, of course, one of the big flagship programmes of the European Union. It was piloted in my local university—the University of Sussex—so I have a local interest in this, but it is much wider than that. It has become widely known across the whole of Europe. It is a programme that non-EU and EU states take part in, but it is key for university exchanges. We held a Westminster Hall earlier in the year about the youth part of the programme specifically, but it is the university part that is the most well-known part and the most vocal part. I would expect to have a decent attendance for the debate.

I guess that is my application to you. You can read the rest. I suspect most of you know about the Erasmus programme and the importance of taking part in it early so that the programme post-2020 reflects our needs and British needs and wants. There is no point in just joining in after it has already been designed, because then we will have to fit in with whatever the programme is, rather than making sure that the programme fits in with our needs.

Q30 **Alex Sobel:** It is a good application. I have never seen the Father of the House be a lead Member since I have been on the Committee. It is not quite clear to me who the answering Department would be—whether it would be the Department for Exiting the European Union or the Department for Education. Or could it be either?



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Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I slightly smile because when we held the Westminster Hall debate, I went around three different Ministries trying to work that out, and none of the Ministries themselves were clear. In the end, because I focused on the youth part, I asked for DDCMS, because they, in the youth and sports Council of the EU, take part in that part of the discussion. Erasmus is a cross-sectoral programme. But they kept saying, "No, it's Education", and when I asked Education, they said, "No, we think this is the Brexit Department". I am easy. I want the Department to respond that will make the decision about engaging in these discussions, and if it is Education, which is where I think it should be based, I would like to see Education, but if the Government come back and say, "Actually, it's Brexit that is really going to be leading on this", I want the most appropriate Department. As I say, I believe it is the Department for Education that should be doing this.

Q31 **Bob Blackman:** Is there any particular time sensitivity for having such a debate?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It is not urgent. It doesn't have to be before the recess or anything like that. The negotiations have been ongoing now for a couple of months in the Council, and the expectation is that they will go on probably for just under another year. So it is not that it needs to be urgent, but clearly we need to have this debate before the end of those negotiations, because if we have passed a resolution asking the Government to take part in the negotiations and they have finished, the horse has bolted. The earlier the Government take part in those negotiations more actively, the more we will be able to influence the future shape of the programme. So it is not urgent. Turkey, for example, which we have just heard about, sounds to me urgent. But this one we would be wanting in the next month or so really.

Q32 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. That concludes our public session. We will now go into private session.