

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 22 February 2022

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Kate Osborne.

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Representations made

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Jim Shannon and **Dr Lisa Cameron** made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We are a little late starting, due to the Divisions in the House, so we will get straight into it. Our first application this afternoon is from Lisa Cameron and Jim Shannon, and its subject is gender-specific religious persecution. Over to you, please.

Jim Shannon: First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for hearing us and our request. In the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, this is one of the issues that concerns us. Lisa is one of our officers and also keen to have this debate.

We had a conversation some time ago—apologies for not coming back earlier—when we were asking whether it was possible to have a debate as close as possible to Tuesday 8 March, International Women’s Day. The hope would be for the debate to be scheduled for that Tuesday, or to coincide with it, to mark that important international day.

Gender is an inseparable aspect of the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief, and Lisa and I believe that it is inseparable from religious or belief-based conflict and persecution. Social attitudes and practices around gender influence patterns of the perpetration of violence, discrimination, persecution and exclusion.

While we understand that there is the persecution of religious minorities, we really do feel that there is specific targeting of gender—of those who are females. The gender aspect of violations of freedom of religion or belief identifies that this violence needs to be given greater attention by policy makers, so we have asked for a debate.

Aid to the Church in Need asked us as an APPG—the two of us in particular—to see if we could bring this debate forward. We were both at the launch of a recent report by Aid to the Church in Need, which is entitled “Hear Her Cries”. I found it very hard to listen to some of the stories of the ladies and what they went through. That particular booklet was a report that detailed the “kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls” in various ethnic groups. It investigated the global problem of women being targeted for sexual violence because of their religious beliefs—a very specific issue—and then forced to convert, often under pain of death.

We are keen to have the debate, because we feel it to be of such importance. If possible, we want it to be as close to International Women’s Day as we can have it. We have been active in sourcing those who wish to speak on it. We have a good cross-section, probably one of the best we have had for a long time, with some 18 Members, which includes all parties in the Chamber—Conservative, Labour, Plaid Cymru, the Scots nats and independents—

Q2 Chair: But Green-less?

Jim Shannon: Almost—



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Dr Cameron: We are almost perfect, Mr Mearns.

Jim Shannon: I am particularly green-less, because of my orange affiliation—but that's by the way. *[Laughter.]* A different subject for a different day.

Q3 **Chair:** It's just when you say things like "I've got all parties represented". I am sorry for being such a pedant. I apologise. Anything to add, Lisa?

Dr Cameron: Just that during the work that I did with the International Development Committee, I had a very personal experience, and I know that a number of Members who wish to speak in the House also did, in terms of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, which related to the young girls who were kidnapped in Nigeria by Boko Haram. These issues are very important to parliamentarians right across the parties and to our constituents. We have had a great many emails linked to the report from Aid to the Church in Need, which shows that the public are really keen for such a debate in Parliament.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, please, colleagues.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** The answering Department for this would be what?

Chair: FCDO.

Bob Blackman: Is it FCDO?

Jim Shannon: That's my understanding, yes.

Chair: And there, Bob is now going to inform you that your impeccable logic falls to the ground, I'm afraid, because the FCDO is not the answering Department on 8 March.

Bob Blackman: But almost certainly it will be on 15 March.

Jim Shannon: We are quite happy with that.

Q5 **Chair:** Alternatively, there would be a slot in Westminster Hall on Thursday 10 March.

Jim Shannon: I think if we have the choice, we will take 10 March—the closest to International Women's Day. We were sort of hoping for that day, but obviously we bow to the expertise of Mr Blackman and are very happy to take 10 March.

Chair: If there are no further questions, Jim and Lisa, it was lovely to see you both and thank you very much for coming in.

Dr Cameron: Thank you so much.

Chair: Much appreciated. Thank you very much.



Tony Lloyd made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Tony, I understand that your application is on the Irish in Britain. I understand that you would like the debate to coincide, if possible, with St Patrick's Day, or thereabouts.

Tony Lloyd: Yes, thanks, Chair. I should say that I do feel little bit like taking the "Mastermind" chair. You are used to this, but me less so.

Obviously, St Patrick's Day comes on a very specific date in the year, and as it happens it is a Thursday this year. On that basis, it would be a matter of great coincidence if the two could be merged. The argument for the debate is very straightforward. Those of us who grew up, as I did, in a family whose background partly came from Ireland have always been intensely proud of that. Probably something like 10% of the population in Great Britain would claim an Irish grandparent. There is always a lot of interest. From Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, Cardiff, London to many other places there will be St Patrick's Day celebrations, not necessarily on St Patrick's Day. In Manchester, St Patrick's week now lasts a fortnight, which is a wonderful happenchance. It is a celebration of the role that the Irish have played in this nation of ours, like many other of the communities that make up modern Britain.

I do not want to make a political point about Brexit, but we have had a complicated relationship between the island of Ireland and Great Britain over 900 years, roughly speaking. It got considerably better in probably the past 50 years and during the period of the Good Friday agreement and so on, but it probably has taken a degree of pressure in recent years. The debate would genuinely be a good opportunity to celebrate not simply the role of the Irish in Great Britain but the relationship between the Irish in Ireland and people generally in Great Britain, not just the Irish. That is the essential logic of the application.

It is worth making a couple of other quick points. If we missed the opportunity to merge the debate and St Patrick's Day, it would be another 12 months before we came round to the same event. The request is therefore highly specific.

I am glad to say that among the sponsors there are eight Conservatives—you will have the list in front of you—including two former Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, and the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. On the Labour side, I am a former shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Four SNP Members have signed up. Importantly, so have a Member of the Alliance party, a Member of the DUP and a Member of the SDLP from Northern Ireland. We were determined to make the point that this is not about creating division; it is about creating unity. It is a celebration, not a political polemic. That is the logic around it.

If you have any questions, I am happy to attempt to answer them.

Q7 **Patricia Gibson:** The old question: what would the answering Department be?



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Tony Lloyd: I didn't know that I had to answer that, I confess. I am not sure. Would it be the Home Office?

Patricia Gibson: The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?

Bob Blackman: It could be the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Patricia Gibson: Anyway, I will just say that this looks like a very good debate. I am a little bit miffed, Tony, because I think I am correct in saying that I am the only Member in the House of Commons whose parents are both Irish and I was not asked to sign the application.

Chair: The reason you were not asked to sign it is because you are a member of the Committee. If you had signed it, we would not be quorate.

Patricia Gibson: You're getting Tony off the hook.

Tony Lloyd: Patricia, I did speak to some of your colleagues, and they said you were a member of this Committee—if it is any consolation. It did not seem appropriate to have an insider.

I would make the obvious point that many people who could not sign would be interested in speaking in a debate like this, particularly in the Opposition parties—Opposition Front Benchers and so on.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just clarify one issue? You have ticked the Chamber. We do not know if we will get the Chamber for the 17th. If you want to have the debate on the 17th and with three hours guaranteed, you could have Westminster Hall. We could guarantee you that. If it is the Chamber, we don't know if we will get that, and very rarely do we get a Backbench debate that lasts three hours. It is always squeezed because of statements and UQs. Would Westminster Hall be acceptable to you? It is not ticked on your application.

Tony Lloyd: I am bound to be guided by the Committee. You do this regularly, and I have never appeared before you before. Clearly, the advantage of the Chamber, as we all well know, is that it is a bigger showpiece, and I hope this debate can be something that genuinely creates a healthy attitude between people in the island of Ireland and people in the island of Great Britain—as well as Patricia's parents. That is the ambition. If it does not fall that way, then I have got to be guided by your judgment.

Q9 **Chair:** We have managed to get on the stocks date-specific applications, so the Government will hopefully allocate us time for the first two Thursdays in March. Your application would be for the third Thursday in March. We will keep our fingers crossed, Tony.

Tony Lloyd: I am very happy to leave it to you.

Q10 **Chair:** But I will put down a marker with the Leader of the House at business questions on Thursday, just to say that we have an application in that is date-specific for the 17th.



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Bob Blackman: He'll have the Irish Members right across the House against him if he doesn't grant the time.

Chair: I should myself declare an interest, because, although Mearns is a Scottish name, my dad was actually adopted by a family called Mearns. On his birth certificate, his mother's name was Maguire—with a "g"—née Mullen. I think that makes me from the Irish diaspora somewhere back there.

Tony Lloyd: I would imagine so. Scratch most people and you get there somewhere.

Chair: Thanks, Tony. Much appreciated—thank you very much.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Next up is Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger, with an application for a debate on the motion "That this House has considered Commonwealth Day 2022". Over to you, Ian.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Thank you very much. Commonwealth Day is on Monday 14 March. This has always been the way it is. Our membership of the Commonwealth is hugely important to many Members of this House. In fact, there are people on this Committee who have been incredible stalwarts of the Commonwealth. I don't believe for one minute that there are a lot of colleagues who haven't been on a CPA visit over the many years and been able to take part in CPA inward delegations. In fact, we have a load in this week.

I think it is very important that we try to celebrate something of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, as it is the 70th anniversary this year of the Queen's accession to the throne and I think her dedication to the Commonwealth in her reign has been quite outstanding. This year also marks the 70th anniversary of the annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Westminster seminar, and we will be welcoming here members from around the world between 14 and 18 March. Of course, we have the Commonwealth games in Birmingham this year and therefore it is a chance to celebrate that. We are also 110 years old, believe it or not, and we have some challenges today—

Chair: You are wearing well, Ian, so well done.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Thank you very much indeed. Just chugging on, I think you could say.

I have also put in today a private Member's Bill to do with the charitable status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. We need to change it to a parliamentary organisation, and that I would include in the speech. The debate would encompass a celebration of what we are and what we stand for. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Ian. Do colleagues have any



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questions?

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** I think the same thing applies here. You would accept any opportunity to have this debate?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Bob, I am absolutely in your hands, as long as we have a chance to celebrate the Commonwealth; I know Members would like to come along and speak. I am totally in your hands. Thank you.

Q13 **Chair:** There are opportunities that week in both Westminster Hall and, hopefully, the Chamber, so we will see what we can sort out for you.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Thank you very much indeed.

Chair: It is good to see you. Thank you very much indeed.

Mr Virendra Sharma made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** Next up is Mr Virendra Sharma, on World Tuberculosis Day 2022. Over to you, Virendra.

Mr Sharma: Thank you, Chair. The request is in relation to 24 March, a Thursday, which is World TB Day—one of the official WHO global public health campaign days. The request is that we get a place on that particular day, as TB was the most dangerous disease before covid-19, when millions of people were dying, and at present it is felt by me and many others that this disease is forgotten and people are not taking it seriously. We have a vaccine that is over 100 years old. No further development has taken place; no further investment has taken place to find the latest vaccine for TB. It is felt that it is forgotten. Not much is expressed about it. We need to raise awareness among parliamentarians and certainly outside Parliament as well.

I am glad that 16 Members have already supported this application, and others will be very willing to support us. So the request is there. I am quite happy to answer any questions or to go into more detail about the disease if that is wanted.

Q15 **Chair:** Are there any questions, colleagues? I think we have all had our BCG, haven't we? I remember my BCG with horror, but there we go. Bearing in mind how much vaccines and vaccination are in vogue, the topic is very worthy of a good discussion in this place.

Virendra, thank you very much for the application. We will try to meet your requirements regarding the date if we can, but we are dependent on the time being allocated in the Chamber by the Government.

Mr Sharma: Thank you very much.

Philip Dunne and **Danny Kruger** made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** Next up are Philip Dunne and Danny Kruger, who are making an



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application for a debate on the Government's strategic priorities for Ofwat.

Philip Dunne: Thank you very much. I am really grateful to you for giving us the opportunity to put forward a topic that is of intense interest across the House. You will have seen from our application that we have support from Members of five different parties. I omitted the DUP I regret to say, because Ofwat does not have responsibility for Northern Ireland. That was a slip on my part, because I am sure that they would have supported us.

The Government published at the beginning of this month their strategic policy statement for Ofwat. It is a five-yearly guidance note that the Government give the regulator for the water companies, to prioritise what the Government would like to see them prioritising for capital expenditure over a five-year period. That period begins April 2025; it is a long way off because the Government take a long time to get the water companies to produce business plans, which they then deliver against during that five-year pricing period.

The statement this year was heavily influenced by the campaign that has been raging through the nation for the past two years on trying to improve river water quality. That affects virtually every constituency across the UK, although Ofwat's remit does not run to Northern Ireland or Scotland. You will have seen, Mr Mearns, the amount of press attention that the matter has been given and the consumer concern from river groups up and down the country that are worried in particular about the pollution of our waterways by sewage discharges, in some cases illegally. We are getting increasing attention and opposition to that. This is a matter that will attract a lot of interest for a debate in the House.

I have raised the matter with the DEFRA Secretary—it will be the Department that will have to respond to the debate—and the Prime Minister about whether we could have a statement when they issued the strategic policy statement. They did not do so, and there is no indication that they will provide Government time for a debate on this, which is why we have come to you. Frankly, it would have been my preference for the Government to have explained their position.

The Government have actually taken a lot of advice from the Environmental Audit Committee, which I chair and which did a report on the matter that was published in January. We have written and given evidence to the Government's consultation on their strategic policy statement. I am pleased to see that they have taken forward some of our recommendations in their strategic policy statement for Ofwat. I do not think it is terribly contentious; it is contentious as an issue, but politically there is considerable cross-party support for the proposals. The Front-Bench spokesmen for the Labour party—Luke Pollard, Helen Hayes, Fleur Anderson and Olivia Blake—are not eligible to put their names down on my application, but they have all indicated that they are very supportive of such a debate.

We would very much like to have the opportunity to have a debate, which I think should be in the Chamber, if possible, and I certainly think we



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would fill a three-hour debate slot were one available. We would like to try to have that debate during the praying period—under the Water Industry Act there is a 40 working-day period in which the document is laid before the House. That expires on 22 April, I think, and we obviously have a recess. I know that you do not have your dates going up to 22 April, but at some stage between now and then it would be highly desirable if we could have a debate.

Q17 Chair: I believe 21 April might even be a Thursday, which would be the day before the consultation period closed. That would be the first week back following the Easter recess, if we could not fit you in immediately prior to that.

Bob Blackman: Except you don't want something the day before, do you?

Philip Dunne: Ideally we would do it before the Easter recess, if we could. But if you can't get us a main Chamber slot, I might take that if that was all that was on offer. May I allow Danny Kruger to say a few words, because this is very much on his agenda as well?

Chair: Indeed; please do.

Danny Kruger: Thanks. I chair an informal group of colleagues who represent constituencies with rivers running through them in the south of England. I have been lobbying the Government on the strategic policy statement as well as Philip. My simple point on why I think it important that we have a proper debate in Parliament is that the quality and health of our rivers is largely determined by a bunch of actors quite a long way from Government. There are the private water companies, which are regulated by the independent regulator Ofwat, as well as the Environment Agency, which is an arm's length quango. DEFRA is the responsible Government Department, but there are a whole bunch of agencies in between DEFRA and our rivers.

It is only once in every so long that Government creates policy that affects the quality of our rivers, and this is that moment. A very important document has been issued, and it feels wrong that Parliament has not had the chance to debate it properly. I don't think it would be a particularly contentious debate. It would probably be a very expert one, and very constructive, but there is a strong rationale for Members across the House to be able to make their views known on it.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Between Kate and I, we represent about 15 miles of the southern bank of the River Tyne. I am Gateshead and Kate is the next-door constituency of Jarrow, so together we have about 15 miles of the River Tyne between us on the south bank. Believe it or not, the River Tyne is one of England's most prominent salmon rivers by catch, so that is something to throw in there.

The quality of the river water is heavily influenced by tide, because the river is tidal as far as Wylam, but it is important to ensure that the quality of water coming into the river from land is as clean as it can possibly be. So, this is a subject of interest to both of us, I am sure. If you are thinking



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about expanding your group from the south to the north, we would be great candidates.

Any questions, colleagues?

Bob Blackman: I was beginning to think the debate had started.

Patricia Gibson: I was going to start bobbing.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** Can I just gently say that you have 11 names of speakers on the list in front of us? For a three-hour debate we would normally expect 15. You have indicated that Front Benchers from Labour were sympathetic, but it would be helpful to have a few more Opposition speakers from the Back Benches, if that is possible.

Philip Dunne: I think that is a point very well made. I have 15 names on here—

Bob Blackman: I only have 11 on mine.

Philip Dunne: Is your last name Derek Thomas?

Bob Blackman: Anthony Browne.

Philip Dunne: Well, I have 15 names ending with Anthony. Have you got Claudia Webbe, Independent, there?

Bob Blackman: No.

Philip Dunne: Derek Thomas, Cheryl Mackrory, Jerome Mayhew, Felicity Buchan, Matthew Offord, Anthony Browne, Caroline Lucas, Sally-Ann Hart, John Mc Nally for the SNP, Clive Lewis—

Q19 **Chair:** So the additional names—I beg your pardon—are Valerie Vaz, Claudia Webbe and Jerome Mayhew. That takes you up to 15. Was there a question of Jesse Norman being a co-sponsor?

Philip Dunne: Jesse Norman is a co-sponsor. I had 135 MPs sign my private Member's Bill in support 18 months ago, which was very much on topic, and I am very confident.

Q20 **Chair:** So you want a three-day debate on that basis.

Philip Dunne: I think three hours will probably suffice, Mr Chairman.

Q21 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, the concern is that we do not know what time we will get allocated, Chamber-wise. We have to give priority in the Chamber to debates with divisible motions, so if you were offered a Westminster Hall debate, because of the time sensitivity, would you take that? By the way, you would get three hours, if we allocated you. You would definitely get a guaranteed three hours in Westminster Hall, as opposed to two hours.

Chair: Well, quite recently, in fact, because of statements and urgent questions, we have had what should have been three-hour debates in the Chamber down to about an hour and a quarter. That is the difference.



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Bob Blackman: You do get badly squeezed.

Philip Dunne: To be honest, I prefer a Chamber debate because we have had a number of Westminster Hall debates in the past on aspects of this. If it were possible, I would prefer a shorter period in the Chamber to a longer period in Westminster Hall.

Bob Blackman: Okay, that is fine. It's your application.

Chair: The thing that strikes me, Philip, is that if we were to try to squeeze you in prior to the Easter recess, it may well be that the Thursday that would come up would be the very last Thursday before the Easter recess. Bear that in mind. Thank you very much indeed.

Sarah Olney made representations.

Q22 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least, our last application this afternoon is Sarah Olney. Your application is on reports of misogyny and sexual harassment in the Metropolitan police. Over to you, Sarah.

Sarah Olney: Thank you very much, Chair—thank you very much for hearing my application this afternoon.

The title speaks for itself. I am sure all members of the Committee will be very well aware—I know it is not just London MPs who are very well aware—of some of the incidents in London that have given rise to my request to hold this debate.

I want to draw particular attention to the fact that next month it will be a year since the death of Sarah Everard. A debate of this sort would be an appropriate way for Parliament to mark that event. It was a very significant event in policing—in London in particular, but it has wider implications. It would be a respectful way to mark the occasion, to have a debate in the Chamber.

I feel quite strongly, as a London MP, that this is not an issue that we have really had an opportunity to debate as MPs. It has come up a number of times in questions to the Home Secretary, but the wider issues that have been thrown up—not just the death of Sarah Everard, but many of the other incidents that have either come to light or have occurred since that time, and most particularly the very recent revelation of the sorts of behaviour that were going on at Charing Cross police station—deserve scrutiny by MPs.

I feel very strongly, as a constituency MP served by the Metropolitan police force, that I would like the opportunity to speak up on behalf of my constituents, many of whom have written to me expressing their distress and their concern about these events, and what it means for individual Londoners and the faith that they can have in policing.

I feel that it is really important that we have a proper debate around the subject, rather than just questioning the Home Secretary, because there is

quite a lot of nuance here. My local police force, for example, is fantastic—the local police in Richmond and in Kingston. I feel that they can be quite badly served as a local police force by the fact that we are reduced to just asking questions in the House about a narrow range of subjects, because I would like to reflect the fact that many Metropolitan police officers do a fantastic job for their communities, but they are being let down by management structures, by recruiting decisions, by disciplinary processes. I would really like the opportunity to say more about that side of things, and to express my support for those officers who are working hard, as well as expressing my dismay at some of the things we are hearing.

I think my constituents—many constituents, not just across London, but across the country as a whole—would like to hear some of those concerns expressed. We haven't really had a forum as MPs to talk about those issues and really reflect how our constituents feel about them. That is what is behind my application for this debate.

Chair: Thank you. Bob?

Q23 **Bob Blackman:** Just one thing: you have mentioned either the Chamber or Westminster Hall on a Thursday. There is also the opportunity of Tuesday Westminster Hall, which is a 90-minute opportunity, which, funnily enough, comes up on 8 March, when the Home Office have to respond. Would you consider that opportunity?

Kate Osborne: That is International Women's Day as well.

Bob Blackman: It's International Women's Day as well. So that would fit rather neatly.

Sarah Olney: From a timing point of view, I think that would be ideal and I very much favour that. The only thing I say is that I feel that the importance of this topic, the fact that it hasn't had an opportunity to be really properly debated, and to show sufficient respect to the people who have been past victims of misogyny and sexual harassment, means that I think a debate in the Chamber would be wholly suitable. Given what you have just said about the appropriateness of that date—

Q24 **Bob Blackman:** The slight problem is that if we do get that Thursday, that Thursday will be given to International Women's Day as a debate, rather than a more specific debate on the Thursday in the Chamber, if you see what I mean.

Sarah Olney: Okay.

Chair: The reasoning behind that is that we have had that application in for, I think, about three months, and I have been raising it at business questions for about the last month, just trying to remind the Leader of the House that we have date-specific applications.

Sarah Olney: Yes. I don't want to get in the way of that.

Q25 **Chair:** And of course the debate on 10 March for International Women's Day, which is on 8 March, is something that I have raised quite a number



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of times, having been exhorted to do so—but there we go. The bottom line with that slot on the 8th is that, bearing in mind that we might have, for instance, a debate on St Patrick’s Day on 17 March, Chamber time is very squeezed.

Sarah Olney: I accept that. If this debate could be in Westminster Hall on an appropriate date, that would be fantastic. Because of the proximity to both the first anniversary of the Sarah Everard incident and, as you have mentioned, International Women’s Day, 8 March would be fantastic. If that was not possible, I would be very happy to wait until a suitable time was available in the Chamber. As I say, I think a Chamber debate would give this topic the respect and attention it deserves.

Q26 **Chair:** Notwithstanding how fundamentally important the topic is, the problem is that because of other date-specific applications that we have had in for Chamber time, you might be waiting until after—

Sarah Olney: That is why I would be happy to wait, given that this isn’t date-specific. There is obviously an appropriate date to do it, and that would be fine in Westminster Hall, but if that was not possible then I would be happy to wait until sometime later in the summer when a slot became available.

Q27 **Chair:** The thing is, Sarah, if you were to take 8 March in Westminster Hall, that would not preclude you from applying again for a Chamber debate. It may well be that that debate is squeezed, in terms of the amount of time that people have to speak, because it is so popular. That would not preclude you from applying again for something later in the year. Okay?

Sarah Olney: Yes, that sounds great.

Chair: In that case, thank you very much indeed.

Sarah Olney: Thank you very much for your time. Thank you for hearing my application.