



Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Monday 28 February 2022

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Watch the meeting

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

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Representations

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Layla Moran made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this session of the Backbench Business Committee, which is sitting at an altered time. Just for the watching viewer on Parliament TV, we have a problem with the Committee, inasmuch as we have only five active members and a quorum of four, and we got the message round that we would struggle to get a quorum for the normal time tomorrow. I do apologise for having to drag people away from other commitments to sit at this altered time, but it seemed to me that it was either this time or not at all this week.

Our first application this afternoon is from Layla Moran, who is seeking a debate on the impact of long covid on the United Kingdom workforce. Over to you, Layla; lovely to see you.

Layla Moran: Lovely to see you again; thank you Chair, and thank you Committee.

So I'm back. We were very grateful that this Committee granted the first ever debate on long covid, just over a year ago. The Committee I hope will remember how emotional and how well subscribed that debate was. At the time, we were concerned that the number of people experiencing long covid would be in the order of something like 400,000. I am afraid to say that the ONS study then showed that we are looking at more in the order of 1.3 million people in this country suffering from long covid, many of whom are now approaching their second year of suffering with long covid.

What has changed since the first debate, though, is that many of the schemes that had been keeping people in some kind of an income—notably furlough, but also the NHS scheme—are drawing to a close. That is leaving literally hundreds of thousands of people destitute. We think that there is a really important debate to be had in the House about the impact of long covid on the British workforce as a whole, but also that Government have not come up with a joined-up plan across all Departments to deal with this.

Our request is to hold a very similar debate in the main Chamber. I am sure it will be well subscribed again, just by virtue of the enormous numbers affected, but also because of the personal stories that need to be told. The debate would hopefully not be answered by the Health Department this time, but rather by DWP or BEIS, because this is specifically about the workforce rather than the condition itself—which is its own important matter, but perhaps not what we think the debate should focus on at this time.

Q2 **Patricia Gibson:** The application is a bit light on Government Members.



Layla Moran: It was just a matter of how quickly we could draw it together. With the last debate we were in the same position, and I assured the Committee that we would get good numbers of speakers from the other side. In the end the debate was pretty balanced, and I feel confident that both sides would be very interested in this.

Q3 **Chair:** The application is in, Layla; if you can add names, that would be really useful from our perspective to add weight to it, if that is all right.

Is there any time sensitivity from your perspective? In a perfect world, would you like to try and get this in before Easter, or would it not matter if it was after the Easter recess?

Layla Moran: We will always take what we can get. Certainly, after 7 March, which I think is very likely, would be helpful. The anniversary of the first lockdown, 20 March, is the date we wanted to focus on, because that is the two-year mark for many of the people affected by this.

Chair: Any further questions, colleagues? No? In that case, thank you very much indeed, Layla; good to see you.

Angela Crawley made representations.

Chair: Hello Angela—nice to see you. Your application is on the introduction of paid miscarriage leave. Over to you.

Angela Crawley: Thank you. First, I wish to put on the record my thanks to all Committee members for hearing my application and to the Committee staff for their support and assistance.

As I indicated in my application, the current provision of two weeks' paid bereavement leave for parents who experience stillbirth or the loss of a child after 24 weeks is very much welcome. The change has been championed by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran and many others, and has been a real and transformative recognition of the loss for many parents. However, all too sadly, as I indicated when I introduced my private Member's Bill last June, too many parents do not receive support. Sadly, there is currently no provision in place for parents who experience that loss at 23 weeks and six days.

Like my private Member's Bill, my debate would call on the Government to introduce a minimum of three days' paid leave, in line with the situation in New Zealand and the recent introduction of paid leave in Northern Ireland, as well as with the Scottish Government's introduction of three days of paid leave in the public sector.

I am quite prepared to consider a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate on the issue. The online petition has received staggering support, with 37,534 signatures, which shows the strength of feeling on and support for this matter. We have cross-party support, including 114 signatures across four EDMs from Members from seven different political parties. As you will see from my application, 13 Members



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have indicated that they wish to speak, and six political parties have signalled their support for the application.

Q4 **Chair:** Have you added some additional names? The form I have has only 11. *[Interruption.]* I am told there is Philip Davies and Sarah Olney as well.

Angela Crawley: Sorry—they were quite late entrants this afternoon.

Q5 **Chair:** That is super. You say you would like the debate to be on the Floor of the House. We would try to give preference to an application with a votable motion that asks the Government to actually do something.

Angela Crawley: A motion is indicated in the application.

Chair: Ah right, okay. That is fine. You have a vote on a motion. That is great. It is not on my copy of the application but that is super. Thank you very much. Do colleagues have any further questions?

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** I apologise for being slightly late—I have just come from an interesting discussion about the levelling-up White Paper at the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

If the previous application, from Layla Moran, was light on the names of Government Members, this one is empty of them, other than that of Philip Davies, which you have just added. To get a balanced debate on this issue, we would want to see three or four speakers from the Government side. With respect, you would need to get that to qualify for a debate from our Committee. What would be the answering Department for this debate? Would it be BEIS?

Angela Crawley: BEIS would be the answering Department. We would be seeking either to amend the employment law Bill or to have miscarriage leave introduced in its own right. I believe that there would be enough support across the House and that sufficient Members from both the Government side and the Opposition side would speak on the motion. I am confident that we could send in additional names.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** I am sure you would, but as a Committee we require guarantees of that through people actually putting their names to it. The problem is that if we are going to allocate Chamber time, that is in short supply, so we have to make sure that there is a good, balanced debate across the Chamber, which means colleagues actually putting down their names to say they will speak. Otherwise, we can end up with the embarrassment of not many people speaking.

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. I am happy to follow up with the Committee and ensure that we have additional names.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue is that for a votable motion in the Chamber the normal time would be Thursdays, but there is a possibility of Westminster Hall time on a Tuesday morning. Would that be acceptable to you if it was offered? You would obviously not then be able to have your votable motion.



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Angela Crawley: As indicated, we would be grateful for any debate on this subject. If it were possible to have a debate in Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate, I would gladly consider that. I assure the Committee that I am quite confident that we would have sufficient support from Members across the House, so I can submit further names if that is something you would be willing to consider.

Q9 **Chair:** That is entirely in order. The application is in—it is live—and if you have the opportunity and the time this week to try to get some additional names from the Government side, that would be really useful.

Angela Crawley: Sure.

Chair: Thank you.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Next up we have Mr Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: It is always a pleasure to come here to ask for a debate. I have been here fairly regularly this last while, but there are plenty of issues that need to be aired. When such things come to my attention, I always look to the Committee.

Q11 **Chair:** The application that you have in is on the subject of forced labour in the NHS PPE supply chain. Over to you.

Jim Shannon: I originally brought this to the attention of the Leader of the House on 10 February. His suggestion was that I should request a Backbench Business debate, and I may have whispered to you that I would do that.

The reason why this has come about is, first, that the matter was brought to my attention as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The House of Lords is currently reviewing the Health and Social Care Bill, and during their discussions concerns were raised about PPE supplied to the NHS made using forced labour of prisoners of conscience in Xinjiang, China. It emerged that PPE contracts worth some £173 million were awarded to China Meheco and Winner Medical, both of which have been linked to Uyghur human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

The Committee will know that the issue of the Uyghurs has been brought up on many occasions in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall. When we found out that this had happened as well, that represented an evidential base for requesting this debate. Steps need to be taken to ensure that British taxpayers' money does not allow perpetrators to profit from acts of genocide or crimes against humanity. We are living in a troubled world—even more so over the last few weeks—and we are watching what is happening in Ukraine. However, there are many countries across the world in which wrongs have to be righted. One of those wrongs is in Xinjiang province in China.

The scrutiny of the Health and Care Bill and the approaching second anniversary of covid-19 highlight the urgency of this debate. We have been fairly successful in getting a cross-section of Members to support the proposal. I will not claim to have every party, because you brought me into line last week, but that is not because have not approached the Green party Member—I will do that. We have a representative number from all the parties: Conservative, Labour, SNP, my own party, Alba, the Liberal Democrats, and independents. All of them are quite keen to participate and be involved.

Chair: Thank you. Any questions, colleagues? The thing is, whatever you ask Jim Shannon, we know he's got the answer.

Jim Shannon: I'm not going make that claim.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** What would be the answering Department?

Jim Shannon: I was thinking about that, and it would really have to be a Health and Social Care Minister. You could say that it should be FCDO, and maybe it should, but if the contract is offered by the Health and Social Care Department and the NHS, surely they would have to be the responsible—

Chair: It is departmental procurement, isn't it?

Jim Shannon: Yes. I think that's where we are.

Bob Blackman: That's fair enough.

Jim Shannon: And you've a list of all the names there?

Bob Blackman: There are 16 names.

Jim Shannon: Perfect. That's grand.

Q13 **Chair:** Am I right in thinking that if we could only offer you Westminster Hall, you would happily take that?

Jim Shannon: Yes. I was wondering, if you don't mind my asking, whether it would be possible to get a Tuesday for a change?

Chair: It is entirely possible, as long as the appropriate answering Department is available.

Jim Shannon: I understand that. I will leave it to your discretion, as always.

Chair: Thank you.

Sir Robert Neill made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** Good evening, Bob. Your application is for a debate on addressing deterioration in people with long-term conditions during the covid-19 pandemic.

Sir Robert Neill: It is a general debate that we are seeking. The reason is simply that there has been a great deal of publicity around a number of areas consequent on the pandemic and backlogs, but there has not been anything that has really addressed this issue. We have had concerns about delayed hospital appointments and access to GP surgeries, but we have not had anything on people who are suffering long-term conditions, such as Alzheimer's or dementia, or who are survivors of catastrophic events, such as stroke survivors and so on.

There has been talk from time to time. We have had short debates around the position of individual sectors, but nothing that looks specifically at the overall position of those with long-term conditions. We therefore think a debate would be timely, as we are looking to pick up on the backlog. We want to make the case that we should not forget these people, many of whom are living in particularly difficult circumstances, and social isolation made their situation much worse during the pandemic.

We have, I hope, a spread of names across parties. We will continue to press for more, but I would hope you are satisfied that we have enough for a one-and-a-half-hour debate, which we are thinking would be sufficient to go across the piece. Obviously, we would like the Chamber, but we will take what is going, because we want to get the issue up on the agenda and across Ministers. The Department of Health and Social Care would obviously be the answering Department.

Q15 **Chair:** Is there any time sensitivity in terms of the timing of the debate?

Sir Robert Neill: We would take the soonest slot that we can get. We would like to get this up on the agenda and across the Department's desk.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Nickie Aiken made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** We have Nickie Aiken. Her application is for a debate on the abuse of short-term letting and the sharing economy.

Nickie Aiken: This is my first application to the Backbench Business Committee. I decided to do this because short-term letting—Airbnb and Booking.com-type letting—is out of control, particularly in my constituency. In Westminster alone, we have 13,000 Airbnb properties. But it is not just about central London; this is an issue that affects so many different parts of the UK. When I put out the call to arms to support this application, I was really taken aback by how quickly MPs from all over the country came back to me. There are an awful lot of other payroll MPs who also want to back it but cannot, but they said they will speak in the debate.

Short-term letting is having a fundamental impact on the housing supply in the UK. You will have seen issues in the south-west and in places such as London, but also across the coast. The Government are looking at a registration scheme, and I think it would be very timely if we could have a debate in the Chamber to highlight the issues that short-term letting brings—not just the shortage of housing supply—and the fact that it puts



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up longer-tenure rent. There is also the antisocial behaviour, the noise and the rubbish collections, and local authorities do not have the enforcement powers to be able to go after rogue landlords who basically choose to turn their properties into hotels. That is why I would like to bring this debate to the Floor of the House and seek a Minister to respond.

Q17 **Chair:** Would it be the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities responding?

Nickie Aiken: It could be, but it could also be DCMS, because DCMS are undertaking the registration of tourism provision, as in accommodation. They are leading a consultation at the moment. It could be DCMS, or it could be DLUHC—or whatever it is called this week.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** You do not have a divisible motion, so you are not calling on the Government to actually do anything. It is to tease out the issues.

Nickie Aiken: It is basically around the consultation.

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** The issue then becomes one about Chamber time being extremely challenged at the moment. There is a much stronger chance of you getting a Westminster Hall debate. If you were offered Westminster Hall, would you accept it, or do you want to join the queue and wait until after prorogation?

Nickie Aiken: I could apply for a Westminster Hall debate, but we have already had quite a few of those recently, such as one on the short-term letting's effects on the rural economy, which Tim Farron secured. I think it is time that we had time in the main Chamber, because this is an issue that affects the whole of the United Kingdom. I have had several SNP Members support it.

Q20 **Bob Blackman:** I understand that. In that case, my strong recommendation—it is up to you if you take it—is that you have a divisible motion. You have had debates in Westminster Hall about those issues and you are clearly not satisfied with what the Government have done. You need the Government to do something, so you therefore need a divisible motion. Otherwise, you have Chamber time, but nothing happens as a result because you are not asking the Government to do anything.

Nickie Aiken: Okay.

Q21 **Chair:** The application is in, and it is live, but you are going to add the divisible motion after the fact, as it were. Okay?

Nickie Aiken: Absolutely—I will.

Alison Thewliss made representations.

Q22 **Chair:** Alison, your application is on the two-child limit of working tax credits and universal credit.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you very much. I apologise for coming in late; I was covering a statement in the main Chamber and only just got away.



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As you may be aware, this April will mark five years since the introduction of the two-child limit for child tax credits and universal credit. Every year since it has come into force, more and more children are caught in this limit. We are now at the point where 1.1 million children across the UK are affected by the two-child limit—237,000 more than in the previous year.

There has also been an impact from covid during this time as well, because there are a number of families across the UK who will have claimed universal credit for the very first time and would not have known or anticipated that this will have affected them. As only the first two children within the family are entitled to the universal credit payment, there is no support for any other children within the family unless there is a particular exemption. Exemptions could include, for example, multiple births—if you had one child and then went on to have twins—and if you are a kinship carer. If you had a child as a result of a coercive relationship or due to rape, there is also an exemption for a third child.

In light of the increasing numbers of people affected, the impact that covid has had on new claimants who could not have anticipated it and, more broadly, in light of five years of this policy, it is important to have a debate. It would be a debate to talk about who is affected by this, the impact on our constituents and constituencies and the broader impact of the policy. I do not believe there has been a proper opportunity for the UK Government to review the impact of the policy more widely.

Q23 Bob Blackman: It is obviously a great subject for a SNP Opposition day debate. At the moment you have no Government speakers at all, and we want to see a balanced debate between the Government and Opposition parties. Are you able to get speakers from the Government side? If not it is unlikely that this debate will be granted time.

Alison Thewliss: I will certainly endeavour to do so. I have sent an email out to all MPs; you have all had applications, I am sure.

Bob Blackman: We cannot sign it because we are members of the Committee.

Alison Thewliss: I know. It was proof that I have attempted to get that from people. I am certainly keen to try and find people to sign, because some of the constituencies most affected by this are Conservative seats. There is real interest in this, and one aspect is of particular interest to some Conservative Members, as this has had an impact on people of religious faith and belief.

There are two aspects. First, there is some evidence to suggest that people are opting for abortions rather than going ahead with a pregnancy. That is something that people of religious faith do not want to do, and that will then have an impact on their living in poverty. The other side of that is that many people of religious belief consider children to be a blessing—that is true, too, for many people who do not have religious belief—and they will continue with a pregnancy, even if it has an impact on their ability to provide for their family as a whole.



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That will have an impact on Conservative seats, particularly Conservative Members who have an interest in this. I am seeking to endeavour to contact those Members to encourage them to participate, because they will have an interest in both aspects of the policy.

Bob Blackman: If you could supply names that would be very helpful.

Patricia Gibson: Something else has arisen when we have had this discussion at previous meetings of the Backbench Business Committee. It is difficult to get MPs from the governing party to sign up to some proposals, but that should not prevent a debate from taking place. If the debate is in the Chamber, I am sure it will be case of, "Build it and they will come." Government speakers will come to defend the Government's position, if nothing else. We have to be mindful of the fact that, just because you cannot secure Tory names—

Bob Blackman: There are other avenues. You can apply for an Adjournment debate in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. There are also Opposition day debates. We pride ourselves on trying to get balanced debates in Backbench Business time. That is fair when there are competing requests for debate.

Patricia Gibson: It is a discussion that we have had.

Q24 **Chair:** The application is in. You have an awful lot of names on the proposal, Alison, but if you could add three or four names from the Government party that would legitimise it from the perspective of our custom and practice.

Alison Thewliss: I am certainly happy to do that.

Chair: Super—thanks a lot.

That is all the applications this afternoon. One application has not been presented, and one has been deferred.