



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 22 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 22 March 2022.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Jerome Mayhew; Nigel Mills; Kate Osborne.

Questions 1-25

### Representations

[I](#): Sir Charles Walker.

[II](#): Deidre Brock.

[III](#): Yasmin Qureshi and Kate Green.

[IV](#): Damian Collins.

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Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



**Sir Charles Walker** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome, everyone, to the Backbench Business Committee. We haven't much time because, we understand, Divisions will take place very soon. If we have to suspend the sitting, we will reconvene immediately after the last Division.

The first application this afternoon is from Sir Charles Walker on supporting parliamentary democracy: providing services that enable Members to perform their duties effectively. Charles, over to you.

**Sir Charles Walker:** Thank you, Chair. As you know, I am Chair of the Administration Committee. To cut a long story short, the House Service strategy is being revised at the moment. The House Service strategy is targeted at House Officers, of whom there are many hundreds, and their job is to support us. I think it is important for colleagues to feed into this strategy, because unless we let the House know what we want, some of the things that are important to us will be missed.

No one on this Committee has served in the House for 30 years, but a number of Members have served for 30 years, and they will tell us that the demands placed on MPs have changed dramatically in those 30 years. When I was a researcher here in 1992, many Members had one staffer; in fact, in some cases, two Members would share a staffer between them. We now have five or six staffers each and, as the Committee knows, IPSA has increased the budget by £35,000 this year so that we can have additional support. The demands on us have grown exponentially. We have 24-hour media. We each have 75,000 constituents—voting constituents—who are now largely networked via email and social media. And I think the House would really value knowing what is important to us in a well-resourced business environment.

I hope colleagues would take part in a debate in the main Chamber, on the Floor of the House. The areas we could touch on or explore at greater length in that debate include, for example, getting first-class legislative advice. We all benefit from that, and it is becoming increasingly important. As we have seen, Bills are getting longer—they have more clauses—and more complicated, and more constituents are engaging with legislation, so we need first-class legislative advice.

Another area is IT services. With the best will in the world, IT services in the House of Commons are lagging behind what most modern business environments would call being on the money. The House recognises that, but we need to explain to them in the debate what great IT services look like and why we need them. This process is ongoing, but one problem is that there is a war for talent at the moment and we might end up having to pay more money, because we are just not competing with other organisations for people.

We also need a well-resourced and expert-led Library. We have always taken that for granted, but we need to let the House know how important

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it is to us to have sector experts at the end of the phone and why that needs to be built on and maintained. Yesterday we had the Clerk of the House before the Administration Committee, saying, "Look, if that's a priority area, we'll make it a priority area when we do our forecasting and budgeting."

- Q2 **Chair:** I have to cut you short because the Minister has sat down, by the look of it. We will just deal with this quickly. Who would answer the debate, Charles? That is a big question.

**Sir Charles Walker:** The reason I would like to have it on the Floor of the House, in the main Chamber, is that I would like to have the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House there, because they are in a position to make things happen. We could have a member of my Committee—Maria Miller, for example—open the debate, and I could wind up the debate, but I would like to have contributions from the two Front Benchers at some stage during the debate.

**Chair:** Well, we can only ask. Are there any other questions?

- Q3 **Bob Blackman:** This seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse, by asking people what they want before actually presenting proposals from the Administration Committee. Would it not be better, possibly, to have a debate in Westminster Hall, ask people to contribute, come forward with a report and then have a debate on the Floor of the House?

**Sir Charles Walker:** Colleagues know what is available; they know what services are available.

**Bob Blackman:** We are talking about what should be available.

**Sir Charles Walker:** The reason why we want to have the debate on the Floor of the House is that is where it would get most attention, and it is where we would get the buy-in from the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House. Also, I think House Officers would watch it more closely than a Westminster Hall debate. It is not a whingeathon I am asking for; it is a proper debate about services. A proper Library brief will be prepared and supplied to colleagues in advance. It is also a chance, I hope, for us to showcase the work we do, the demands we are under and the good things we do in this place. For example, the education unit is outstanding and has transformed the level of engagement between schools and this place and the understanding of what we do as legislators in Parliament, as opposed to what happens in local authorities.

- Q4 **Chair:** Is there a time sensitivity, Charles? Ideally, when would you want this debate? Would before the Easter recess be possible?

**Sir Charles Walker:** No.

**Chair:** After the Easter recess—okay. In that case, thank you very much, Charles. We will now suspend the sitting for the Divisions and reconvene immediately afterwards.

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

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**Deidre Brock** made **representations**.

Q5 **Chair:** Welcome back to the Backbench Business Committee. The next Member presenting this afternoon is Deidre Brock on the subject of food security.

**Deidre Brock:** I thank the Chair and the Committee for being prepared to hear my submission. I have some more names to add to the list. I will obviously send them to the Clerk, but they are Andrew Percy, Simon Hoare, Peter Aldous, Neil Parish, Wendy Chamberlain from the Liberal Democrats, Stephen Farry from Alliance and Ben Lake from Plaid Cymru. Those are just the Members I approached because I know they have an interest in this topic, and I am pleased they are all so keen to support the debate and to take part if they can. I have not sent a general round robin at this stage, although I could.

I honestly feel that a debate on food security was needed even before the crisis in Ukraine, and it is now really urgent. Of course, our immediate focus must be on doing everything to support the people of Ukraine and to address their humanitarian need. In addition—this is the other aspect of the debate on food security, although I expect DEFRA to answer it—we need to be prepared to support countries that would be most affected by a potential global food emergency, which includes some of the poorest and most unstable parts of the world. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation warns that, during 2022, something like 15 to 20 million people could face serious food insecurity, so that always needs to be at the back of our mind.

The crisis has also heightened existing concerns about the price and supply of food across the UK. Concerns have been raised by organisations such as the National Farmers Union of Scotland and the National Farmers Union; indeed, they sent a briefing to me today on this very subject. I have also heard from representatives of the agrifood sector. These concerns are about the possibility that domestic food production is dropping. It is not a possibility but a fact, because the UK's food self-sufficiency is now below 60%, compared with 80% two decades ago.

Their concern is that we are beginning to rely too much on food imports, and of course the Russian invasion of Ukraine has heightened those fears, with the real possibility of a global food shortage. For example, in March, the prices of maize and wheat—a very large percentage of which comes from Russia and Ukraine—have already soared by 43% and 83%, with future rises likely. It is suggested that UK food prices could rise by 15% for consumers. Ukraine and Russia provide 50% of the world's sunflower oil. Ukraine provides nuts and fruit to many sub-Saharan countries, Egypt and so on, so it is a big problem for the world, not just the UK.

The suggestion is that action is needed to support our agriculture and food-related sectors. There has been a series of shocks in recent years, in terms of disrupted supply chains and new barriers to trade, so millions across the UK are already seeing their food bills escalate, and that is before the consequences of the crisis in Ukraine take effect. There were

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big increases in shop price inflation between January and February this year; it leaped, with the highest rate of inflation in shop prices recorded since November 2011. We have energy bills and acute impacts on fertiliser production. The Russian invasion has sent prices of fertiliser, which were already surging, up nearly 50% to £1,000 a tonne from £650.

**Chair:** You do not need to rehearse your contribution to the debate, Deidre. The point is that it is obviously an important subject and could well generate a very interesting debate, and the case you put is well made from my perspective. Of course, the additional names help to make an almost, if not completely, perfect application from our perspective.

**Deidre Brock:** Well, that is lovely.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Just three quick questions. The answering Department would presumably be DEFRA. Is that correct?

**Deidre Brock:** That is right, I think.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** Secondly, would you be available to do Tuesday 19 April, which is the first day back after the Easter recess? I am conscious of your travel, because the day before is Easter Monday and it would be 9.30 in the morning.

**Deidre Brock:** Yes, I would have to come down the day before, but that is fine; I am prepared to do that. The sooner we can talk about this, the better, really. It is getting quite urgent.

**Chair:** We are not saying you will get that slot, but we will confirm it. That slot is available. Any further questions?

Q8 **Chris Green:** I do not know if this would normally be in scope at this stage of the debate, but the range of areas—international trade, energy, national security, people in food poverty in other parts of the world, people in food poverty in the UK—gives the question a huge scope. I was just wondering whether 90 minutes would be sufficient, given the interest this is likely to generate with its topicality.

**Deidre Brock:** Obviously I would be delighted if we could do something in the Chamber, but I have never previously applied for a Backbench Business debate, so I thought I should perhaps start—*[Interruption.]* The immediate reaction I have had from the people I have approached has been, “Oh absolutely, yes definitely, keen to do that.”

Q9 **Chair:** I think a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall might be a good opening gambit. If it proves to be a very, very popular debate, we could probably look for another application from you, possibly with a votable motion asking for the Government to do something, which would go into the Chamber at a later date.

**Deidre Brock:** I hear what you are saying. Food security is a huge topic. I suppose this debate would focus on the domestic, but I do want to raise the spectre of the impact on African countries.

Q10 **Chris Green:** It all happens in a context, and these things will be raised.

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**Deidre Brock:** Yes. Okay, brilliant.

**Chair:** Does anyone else have a question? No. In that case, Deidre, thank you very much—your ordeal is over. It was good to see you.

**Yasmin Qureshi and Kate Green** made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Next up is Yasmin Qureshi. Yasmin, your application is on the commemoration of Srebrenica.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** That is correct, and we would like the debate in the main Chamber because we are asking for a vote at the end. We would like it in the week of 4 to 11 July, because the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide is on 11 July, and obviously the debate has to be before that. The last debate on this subject was in Westminster Hall, led by my colleague Kate Green, since when seven years have elapsed.

Let me give a bit of background. In 2013, the European Parliament proclaimed 11 July as the commemoration date for Srebrenica. Britain can be very proud of the fact that we are the only country outside Bosnia and Herzegovina that commemorates it at national level, with local commemorations normally taking place throughout this country. A commemoration has been held every July, but there has not been a debate on it in the main Chamber. We think that this year, particularly in the light of what is happening in the Balkans, it would be timely to have this debate. The debate has cross-party support, with about 40 colleagues signing up for it.

Please remember that this genocide took place 27 years ago, and it was the planned and industrialised conclusion of the forced deportation, torture, mass murder and systematic sexual violence that took place across Bosnia by the Bosnian Serb forces as part of their goal to create a Greater Serbia. In fact, some of those tensions have resurfaced following the actions of the secessionists, who are operating with the support of Russia. There is real concern that this conflict could return. The many survivors have already endured so much pain and suffering, and they are now very fearful of a repeat and what might happen to them. We therefore think it is not only appropriate but very timely to have this debate at the current time.

Just as a footnote, in recent years it seems that Serbia has actively tried to wipe off the fact that a genocide occurred at all, and Serbia is being systematically supported in this endeavour by Russia. It is important that the debate is in the big Chamber, where everybody can see it and it can be highlighted.

**Kate Green:** I travelled to Serbia with Remembering Srebrenica several years ago, as I know many colleagues have. I should probably place that on the record, Chair.

I completely echo everything Yasmin says. It is important every year to commemorate the genocide, but it is especially pertinent now because of what is happening in the region with the resurgence of Serbian nationalism

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and the threat it poses to peace in the Balkans and to the security of the Bosnians. I think it will be a well-attended and very well-supported debate right across the House. There is a very deep strength of feeling that we must remember and learn from the last genocide to have taken place on European soil.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, Kate. Are there any questions, **colleagues**?

- Q12 **Bob Blackman:** I declare my interest: I have travelled to Bosnia and seen Srebrenica at first hand, and the museum that has been created. My only question is that you do not mention in the motion the Croatians and their involvement in the murders that took place—but I agree with you completely. We were just looking at when it is likely to be between 4 and 11 July. Obviously, we would get a Thursday for the **Chamber**.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** Yes, so it would be the 6 or 7 July.

**Chair:** It would be Thursday 7 July.

- Q13 **Bob Blackman:** Would you want it during that week?

**Yasmin Qureshi:** Yes. Ideally, we want it before 11 July—that would be really nice. I should also refer you to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Srebrenica, and I have also travelled to Bosnia with the Remembering Srebrenica charity.

**Chair:** As long-standing Committee members will know, I actually went to Bosnia myself, but it was to see Newcastle play a team called Željezničar Sarajevo—Newcastle won 1-0. The particularly striking thing was that the parkland surrounding the large stadium in Sarajevo was full of graves. It was really quite striking from that perspective, and very sad.

If there are no further questions, thank you very much indeed, Yasmin. We will do what we can to facilitate that, but there is a major caveat: at the end of this Session of Parliament, before the Queen's Speech, this Committee ceases to be and has to be reconstituted in the new Session with a new Chair and members. We may all be the same; we may all be different. We will put this on the list and bequeath it to the new Committee with the recommendation that the debate be held that week if we get the time from the Government.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** I thank you all for your careful consideration of the application.

**Damian Collins** made representations.

- Q14 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome, Damian—it is good to see you again. Your application is on World Press Freedom Day 2022. Over to **you**.

**Damian Collins:** Thank you very much. It is nice to be able to do this in person again—the last few times have attended virtually. I made this application last year, and we had a Westminster Hall debate on World Press Freedom Day. The day itself is 3 May, which is not great for the

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parliamentary timetable. A significant number of Members of all parties support having the debate. In last year's debate, there was considerable focus on issues that have been quite topical recently, particularly strategic lawsuits against journalists, and the way in which they are used by oligarchs and other organisations to suppress journalistic endeavour.

In the light of the war in Ukraine and the way in which journalists have been heroic on the frontline and the targets of violence, I think the role of journalism in bringing the truth about the war in Ukraine and other atrocities in the world is very important. This would be a way for the House to mark not just World Press Freedom Day, but the work of all those brave people working on the frontline to report what is happening.

- Q15 **Chair:** You are right to point out the problem with the date; we do not know if we are going to be here. There is a potential Prorogation coming up, and it may be around that time—we just do not know at the moment. We will do what we can to facilitate the debate. You have asked for a 90-minute debate in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. There are a number of options there.

**Damian Collins:** I think it would probably be better after World Press Freedom Day, but if you want to fill a gap before Prorogation, I am sure that we would do that as well. I know that enough Members are interested and well-versed in this topic that they would be happy to speak whenever.

**Chair:** It would probably be in the couple of weeks that we will be back after Easter—an opportunity may well come up in the second of those weeks.

**Bob Blackman:** Probably 28 April.

**Damian Collins:** Which would probably be nearer World Press Freedom Day than a date after Prorogation.

- Q16 **Chris Green:** Just for clarification, how much emphasis would there be on countries around the world? Would the focus be on a UK element or more international?

**Damian Collins:** It is more international. I put this forward as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom, which is supported by the global organisation Reporters Without Borders. Certainly, the last time we held this debate, there was quite a lot of focus on journalists such as Catherine Belton, who was targeted by Roman Abramovich using strategic lawsuits. There has been a focus on the work of journalists operating out of the UK or, indeed, British journalists operating in war zones as well. Given the timing of this debate and the uncertain situation in Ukraine, I imagine there would be a lot of focus on people who have been reporting that conflict.

- Q17 **Bob Blackman:** If we offered you, say, Thursday 28 April, which could be a Prorogation date, would that be acceptable? That would be in advance, but it is probably the last date we can offer.

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**Damian Collins:** Yes. My one slight concern about debates on those days is always how many people will be there. We have been pretty flexible in the application, so whatever slot you can make available around that time works. I do not mind doing it either before or after Prorogation.

Q18 **Bob Blackman:** I don't know how long Prorogation will be. It may be a week, but it may be longer, so it may be that we have come back. If there was a Prorogation on, say, 28 April, we might come back on 9 or 10 May.

**Damian Collins:** And then the Committee would need to be reformed. It might be better to have it that last sitting week if we can.

**Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much. Last up this afternoon is our own Committee member, Kate Osborne.

**Kate Osborne** made representations.

Q19 **Chair:** Kate, your application is on the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

**Kate Osborne:** Thank you to the Chair and to the Committee. As you can see, the title of the debate I am looking for is "the recruitment and retention of foster carers". I declare an interest as a member of the APPG on foster care work. I believe, Chair, that you are the chair of that APPG.

**Chair:** I declare that interest. I do chair the all-party group on foster care work.

**Kate Osborne:** I also declare an interest as an ex-foster carer before I came to this place. I have had some meetings with The Fostering Network and another charity called Home for Good. I was extremely surprised and concerned when they highlighted, in an Ofsted report from November last year, that a shocking 1.3% of people who set off to become foster carers actually get to the end of that process and become registered. I have my own views on this, having been through the process. The process is extremely lengthy and very intrusive. Once you are a foster carer, in terms of retention, it is very demanding. I imagine even more so now post covid with things like children's mental health needing more and more support.

I want to have the debate to highlight some of these issues, to hear about some of the experiences of other Members, and to see if we can come up with some solutions about how we can get that awful figure higher and what we can do to keep foster carers caring and doing such a brilliant job.

Q20 **Chair:** Is this time sensitive, Kate? I think you are looking for something in mid-May.

**Kate Osborne:** Foster Care Fortnight is from 9 to 22 May. I have put a Tuesday. If there is difficulty, I am open to a Thursday. I have a dozen names. I got these names very quickly. I am pretty confident that I could get more names to push it to a three-hour debate, potentially. I will be

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**Chair:** But they would be back again during the fortnight, wouldn't they?

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**Bob Blackman:** Yes, but—and it is a big but—because this Committee does not exist then, we will not nominate.

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**Chair:** We could talk about—

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**Bob Blackman:** It would be for the Chairman of Ways and Means to allocate—

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**Chair:** What we do is send a letter to the Chair of Ways and Means for the different slots and what our suggestions for them would be.

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**Patricia Gibson:** We leave a legacy.

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**Chair:** That is right.

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**Bob Blackman:** Yes, except for Westminster Hall debates. I may be wrong, but I do not think we can steer them before this Committee is reconstituted, can we?

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**Chair:** I am told by the Clerk that there are no Westminster Hall debates before the Queen's Speech. And after the Queen's Speech, it usually takes a little while for the Committee to be set up again. Again, I am told by the Clerk that the Committee would not exist, so there would be no real body for suggestions to come from. It would be the office of the Chairman of Ways and Means that would decide.

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**Patricia Gibson:** Would the Chairman of Ways and Means be looking at what we would have nominated and—?

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**Chair:** I am told by the Clerk that it is possible that we could raise it with them. We would write to the Chairman of Ways and Means with our suggestions.

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There will be some slots that we have suggestions for and other slots that we do not have suggestions for, but I think that with time-sensitive applications, such as this one, it is incumbent on us to write a letter to the Chair of Ways and Means. Okay?

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Q25 **Bob Blackman:** Yes. It is just, from Kate's perspective, about getting a guaranteed debate, really, because for 26 April we will be able to allocate, but after that we cannot.

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**Kate Osborne:** If you have no other applications that fit 26 April, I would be happy to take it.

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**Chair:** Noted. In that case, Kate, thank you very much indeed. Would you like to resume your place on the Committee? We now go into private session.

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