

# 15th Anniversary Backbench Business Committee

## Volume 777: debated on Thursday 18 December 2025

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Backbench Business Committee

*Select Committee statement*

[Madam Deputy Speaker](#)

[\(Caroline Nokes\)](#)

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We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee. Bob Blackman will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement; they must be brief questions, not speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Committee Chair, not to the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

3.05pm

[Bob Blackman](#)

[\(Harrow East\) \(Con\)](#)

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With permission, I will make a statement about the report on the first 15 years of the Backbench Business Committee. As Members will be aware, the Backbench Business Committee came out of the Wright reforms presented to this House, all but one of which have been implemented. The only one that has not been implemented is the requirement for a House Business Committee, but I will leave that to the Leader of the House to consider in the future.

I pay tribute to my two predecessors as Chair of the Committee: Natascha Engel and Ian Mearns. They led the Committee with appropriate dignity and initiated many different reforms in this place. I have had the pleasure of serving on the Committee for 14 of its 15 years, so I have witnessed at first hand the excellent work they did.

Our role is very simple: to encourage debates on a wide range of subjects that the Government do not necessarily wish to be debated in the House. We also have a duty to ensure that requests for debates have cross-party support, to use the time as effectively as possible. We also allow for Select Committee statements to take place, and I remind Select Committee Chairs that they can apply to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate on reports they produce, which may lead to a

motion on the Order Paper if they so wish. There is a slight problem with this, which I recommend the Leader of the House looks at seriously. At the moment, the Standing Order requires such statements to be within five working days of the publication of a Select Committee report. We would like to see that extended to 10 working days, to allow more flexibility for Select Committee Chairs to make appropriate statements to the House on the work they have done.

I turn to the issue of substantive motions, which are divisible motions that the House can consider. Between 2010 and 2012—the first two years of the Committee—63% of the debates in this Chamber were on divisible motions. In the last two years, that figure has reduced to 25%. In our Committee's report, we have summarised how that has changed over the years. I think there is a reason for that: divisible motions are not binding on the Government, and there is hardly ever a vote on them—they are normally nodded through. I urge the Leader of the House to look at this. Could we have a framework for action on the motions passed by this House? What action are the Government prepared to take on those, and will they report back to the House?

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At the moment, generally speaking, we are confined to Thursdays for Backbench Business debates in the Chamber. One of the suggestions we have made in our report is that we should be given more time between Mondays and Wednesdays, possibly with 90-minute debates either before or after appropriate Government time, to allow Back Benchers to have debates on issues that they wish to discuss.

I have to say—and today is another day when it has happened—that our debates are often curtailed by urgent questions and statements from the Government. That is unfair on Back Benchers who are here to take part in important debates that they have sponsored. Indeed, there are often visitors in the Public Gallery who have come to witness those debates. We need to do something about that, to prevent Backbench Business debates from being curtailed and colleagues having to give short speeches.

On Westminster Hall, we have the opportunity to allocate the 90-minute debate on Tuesday morning and debates on Thursday afternoon. We have suggested once again—I hope the Leader of the House will look at this sympathetically—that we bring forward the debates on a Thursday afternoon from 1.30 pm to 12.30 pm and from 3 pm to 2 pm. That would allow Members to get away and close Westminster Hall at an earlier time, which would be much more convenient for staff; we often have rejections of offers—unfairly, in my view—for the second slot on Thursday afternoons.

Given that we look rigorously at the applications submitted, I also suggest that it would be helpful if we looked at more allocation on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in Westminster Hall so that we can ensure that there is sufficient support across parties to make sure those debates are balanced. That is obviously in the hands of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, and I respect that.

The Procedure Committee has made certain recommendations. It does not have to wait for a Government motion to be put, but can apply for time under the Backbench Business Committee for a business of the House motion. I am not accusing the current Government of this, but it has often been the case that a Government have frustrated the Procedure Committee when it wants to make changes by not making time available. I alert the Procedure Committee to that opportunity.

Equally, one of the things that we are looking at—I would want to work with the Leader of the House on this—is the allocation of more topical debates. At the moment, we have a six-month

waiting list for debates. That means that by the time those debates come up, the topicality has often gone. If we could get to a point whereby we could announce a topical debate on a Tuesday, have bids before our meeting and then announce the result of that for a Thursday, that would really give the debate a topical timing. However, I believe that would require a change in Standing Orders.

One of the issues that we have often had complaints about is the fact that our Backbench Business Committee is the only Select Committee in the House that has to have elections after every King's Speech and state opening. That means that there is a delay after the King's Speech until a Chair and Committee members are elected, at just the time when there is often an opportunity for general debates, either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall. May we change that so that the chairmanship is continuous throughout the life of the Parliament?

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There is a further issue: the reform of private Members' Bills. I have piloted three such Bills through this place to successful conclusion. However, they are dependent, frankly, on a raffle—if a Member is successful in the raffle, they will do well. One of the things that the Procedure Committee recommended when I was on it, and that I am glad to see it is still recommending, is for the Backbench Business Committee to be able to consider prioritising for the first four sitting Fridays the bids for private Members' Bills that are well-founded, have cross-party support and for which detailed work has been done, rather than someone getting drawn in the lottery of the ballot and then deciding what they are going to do. I think that would be better way of making law.

I will not continue any longer, Madam Deputy Speaker. I look forward to any questions that colleagues may have.

[Sir Julian Lewis](#)

[\(New Forest East\) \(Con\)](#)

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Has my hon. Friend and his Committee considered whether anything can be done to encourage more media interest in the subject of the debates that his Committee grants? I have in mind a particularly outstanding debate on Ukraine, which was initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on Thursday 4 December. Every speech from every participant—with the possible exception of my own—was outstandingly good, yet afterwards I could detect no coverage whatever. Is there anything that can be done to persuade those whose responsibility it is to report on the proceedings of this House that sometimes it is worth taking note of what Back Benchers have to say?

[Bob Blackman](#)

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The reality is that the sponsor of the debate is responsible not only for the content of their speech, but for encouraging the press to get involved and promote the debate. The debates can be on a wide range of topics. One of the great things about the Backbench Business Committee is that we consider things that most people have never even thought of as possible debates. Importantly, it is therefore incumbent on the individuals who propose the debates to promote them appropriately.

[Adam Jogie](#)

[\(Newcastle-under-Lyme\) \(Lab\)](#)

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I am grateful to the Chairman for the statement. A number of colleagues have found it quite frustrating when putting in debate applications that they have to get 15 Government Back Benchers, eight Opposition Members and the rest of it. I wonder whether any thought could be given to making it a little easier, as the result of the general election last year means there are fewer Opposition Members to add up for those applications.

[Bob Blackman](#)

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Our standard position is that for a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate, eight speakers are required. That is, I think, a reasonable number for a 90-minute debate. Four should come from the Government side and four from the Opposition—that is the combined Opposition, not restricted to one party. For Chamber debates, it is perfectly reasonable that we look to get 15 speakers with, broadly speaking, a balance between Opposition and Government Members. In this Session, 70% of the Chamber debates have had time limits imposed on Back-Bench speakers, and I suspect this afternoon will be another such debate, so we do get enough speakers. There was one debate I well remember—I will not name the colleague, who is no longer in this place—where the Member came along with a huge list of something like 85 Members who wished to take part.

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He stood up and spoke, and no one else had come along to speak. After that, I have been very conscious that we have to ensure that people sign up not only to agree to the debate, but to turn up and speak.

[Jeremy Corbyn](#)

[\(Islington North\) \(Ind\)](#)

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I thank the Chair for his report. He will be aware that when we had a debate on digital ID, inspired by a public petition, there was a massive turnout and massive participation. It was very crowded, which was a good sign, but many of us thought that a debate of such magnitude and importance ought to be held in the main Chamber. Is his Committee making representations to get more time in the Chamber for debates that are inspired by a very large number of people signing a public petition? Certainly, when there are over a million signatures, we ought to be thinking about having a debate in here, not in Westminster Hall.

[Bob Blackman](#)

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The reality is that it is for the Petitions Committee to come forward with those debates. Of course I would strongly support the Petitions Committee having time in the Chamber—as long as it does not detract from the Backbench Business time that is available. Equally, if the right hon. Member and colleagues wish to come forward with an application on the subject that he raises, I am sure that our Committee would look at it very sympathetically, particularly as it was such a well-attended debate.

[Jim Shannon](#)

[\(Strangford\) \(DUP\)](#)

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I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and all the Committee members for what they do to ensure that the debates are held and heard. The Chair has referred to the number of

Backbench Business applications. I understand that it is absolutely ginormous, and that the debates will take us right through to next April or May. The Chair of the Committee has often tried to ensure that extra time is available in the Chamber. Since there is no time available whatsoever in Westminster Hall for all the debates that are presently sought, what can be done to ensure that the main Chamber can be made available for the Backbench Business debates that have been requested?

[Bob Blackman](#)

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I am grateful for the question from our honorary season ticket holder at the Backbench Business Committee. As is stated in the report, prior to the 2019 general election, the hon. Member appeared before the Committee no less than 44 times with applications. He has continued to do that, and of course he is the top Member for number of applications before the Committee, and we are always pleased to grant appropriate ones.

I am encouraged that large numbers of MPs, including new ones who have never been before the Committee, come with an application that is well supported across the House. I think the message has got out that this is the one of the best ways that Members can get a debate on an issue that affects them.

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