

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF BILL

*Wednesday 24 April 2024*

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### CONTENTS

CLAUSES 1 AND 2 disagreed to.  
CLAUSE 3 agreed to, with an amendment.  
New clause considered.  
Title amended.  
Bill, as amended, to be reported.

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**not later than**

**Sunday 28 April 2024**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:***Chair:* SIR GRAHAM BRADY

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| † Blackman, Bob ( <i>Harrow East</i> ) (Con)  | † Robinson, Gavin ( <i>Belfast East</i> ) (DUP)                    |
| † Bruce, Fiona ( <i>Congleton</i> ) (Con)   | † Rosindell, Andrew ( <i>Romford</i> ) (Con)                       |
| † Cameron, Dr Lisa ( <i>East Kilbride, Strathaven and<br/>Lesmahagow</i> ) (Con)                  | † Selous, Andrew ( <i>Second Church Estates<br/>Commissioner</i> ) |
| † Champion, Sarah ( <i>Rotherham</i> ) (Lab)  | † Shannon, Jim ( <i>Strangford</i> ) (DUP)                         |
| † Cruddas, Jon ( <i>Dagenham and Rainham</i> ) (Lab)  | † Smith, Cat ( <i>Lancaster and Fleetwood</i> ) (Lab)              |
| † Fuller, Richard ( <i>North East Bedfordshire</i> ) (Con)  | † Swayne, Sir Desmond ( <i>New Forest West</i> ) (Con)             |
| † Ghani, Ms Nusrat ( <i>Minister of State, Foreign,<br/>Commonwealth and Development Office</i> ) | † Vickers, Martin ( <i>Cleethorpes</i> ) (Con)                     |
| † Glindon, Mary ( <i>North Tyneside</i> ) (Lab)   | Chris Watson, <i>Committee Clerk</i>                               |
| † Holmes, Paul ( <i>Eastleigh</i> ) (Con)   |  |
| Jones, Ruth ( <i>Newport West</i> ) (Lab)   | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                                    |

# Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 24 April 2024

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

## International Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill

10 am

**The Chair:** Good morning. Before we begin, I have a few preliminary reminders for the Committee. First, please switch electronic devices to silent if you have not done so already. No food or drink is permitted during sittings of the Committee, except for the water provided. *Hansard* colleagues would be grateful if Members would email their speaking notes, if they have any, to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk). My selection and grouping list for today's meeting is available online and in the room. There will be a single debate on all clauses and amendments.

### Clause 1

SPECIAL ENVOY FOR INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF  
RELIGION OR BELIEF

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 3, in clause 3, page 2, line 8, leave out “International Freedom of Religion or Belief Act 2023”, and insert

“Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Act 2024”.

*This amendment adjusts the Bill's short title so that it refers specifically to the special envoy.*

Clause 3 stand part.

New clause 1—*Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief*—

“(1) There continues to be a special envoy called the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

(2) The special envoy is to be appointed by, and may be removed from office at any time by, a Minister of the Crown.

(3) The special envoy must act with a view to—

(a) promoting freedom of religion or belief abroad, in particular by working with the government of the United Kingdom, with other governments and their representatives (including special envoys), and with organisations outside government;

(b) raising awareness of cases in which people abroad are persecuted or discriminated against on the grounds of religion or belief and advocating for the rights of such people.

(4) The special envoy must from time to time give a report about their work to the Prime Minister.

(5) A Minister of the Crown may give the special envoy directions about the exercise of their functions.

(6) A Minister of the Crown—

(a) must provide the special envoy with such staff, accommodation, equipment and other facilities as the Minister considers necessary for the carrying out of the special envoy's functions;

(b) may pay allowances or other payments to or in respect of the special envoy.

(7) The special envoy's functions are exercisable on behalf of the Crown.”

*This new clause is intended to replace clauses 1 and 2. It includes largely the same material as those clauses but with several drafting and clarity-related changes.*

Amendment 4, in title, line 1, leave out from beginning to end of line 3 and insert

“require the continued appointment of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief and make provision about the special envoy's functions.”

*This amendment adjusts the Bill's long title to reflect its contents more clearly. It is consequential on NCI.*

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham.

Before I start, may I pay tribute to our former colleague, the former hon. Member for Birkenhead, Frank Field, who died yesterday? He was a courteous gentleman of integrity and independent mind, and has already been much missed in this place. We worked together on a number of issues, notably on the lengthy passage of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and I was privileged to take up his role as canon of Chester cathedral when he was obliged to relinquish it.

Frank had friends across the House, and that is not irrelevant today. So does this Bill. It is supported by colleagues from every political party; indeed, I do not know of a Member who opposes it, and I hope not to discover one today. I thank all colleagues who have turned up this morning to support the Bill. The hon. Member for Newport West is supportive and wanted to be present, but family illness prevents her.

I am delighted to speak to new clause 1, which replaces clauses 1 and 2. With the agreement of the Committee, clauses 1 and 2 will not stand part of the Bill. To clarify, if colleagues support the Bill, as I hope they will, I ask them—somewhat counterintuitively—to shout “No” when we come to the first two decisions. I thank Sir Graham for suggesting that I clarify that. The original clauses 1 and 2 as drafted will thereby not stand part of the Bill, and what replaces them will become the Bill going forward.

The Bill is a shared enterprise. There has been a cross-party effort over many years for the fundamental and universal human right of freedom of religion or belief to be taken seriously, and for article 18 not to be “an orphaned right”, as the inaugural report of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief report put it as long ago as 2012. Having the Prime Minister's special envoy as a permanent fixture in statute will embed the progress that has been made, and make the UK a global leader on freedom of religion or belief, or FORB. It would also fulfil the Government's manifesto commitment to fully implement the Truro review.

The object of the Bill is international freedom of religion or belief, but its subject is, of course, the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. It puts the role on a statutory footing. Amendment 3, which is in my name, therefore adjusts the Bill's short title so that it refers specifically to the role. Amendment 4, which is in my name, provides explicitly for the continuation in legislation of the role of the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom or religion or belief.

As the Committee will appreciate as much as I do, there is already such a role, which I have had the privilege of undertaking for over three years now, as the third incumbent. This short piece of legislation does not seek to create anything new, but gives the role the permanence proposed by recommendation 6 of the landmark review by the Bishop of Truro of the Foreign Office's response to the persecution of Christians.

I pay particular tribute to the noble Lord the Bishop of Winchester, who was previously the Bishop of Truro, for taking up with such gusto the challenge of the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who commissioned the review. He has continued to pay a keen interest in the progress of the recommendations. As my right hon. Friend mentioned recently, the bishop's continuing and passionate engagement on the issue has helped put FORB into the mainstream, as well as, I hope, into statute.

The Bill, if approved, provides for the continuation of the role of Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I will set out for the record the wording of my mandate in this role from 2020, as published and still remaining on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website:

"The Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief: brings together UK efforts to promote religious tolerance abroad, and works on how the UK government can protect and promote this fundamental freedom internationally;

works with the members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to raise awareness of cases of particular concern, advocating for the rights of people worldwide who are discriminated against or persecuted for their faith or belief;

supports implementing the Bishop of Truro's recommendations on Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) support for persecuted Christians around the world.

The Prime Minister's Special Envoy undertakes these activities on behalf of, and reports to, the Prime Minister."

I also confirm that I have always, in fulfilling this role, sought to advocate for and support all those persecuted or discriminated against, of whatever faith or belief, as I know have so many in this Committee Room today. Indeed, the support for that work is remarkable. The all-party parliamentary group for international FORB has on record over 170 Members of the Commons and the Lords, which I believe makes it the largest APPG on record.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is one hundred and seventy-four.

**Fiona Bruce:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is the chair of the all-party group, for correcting me. There are 174 members. He also gives me an opportunity to thank him for his remarkably committed work on the issue. Barely a day goes by where he is not speaking in the House on it or diligently undertaking some other meeting, task or work to promote freedom of religion or belief. We are very fortunate to have his passionate enthusiasm on this issue in the House.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

**Fiona Bruce:** New clause 1 reflects the continuance of a role that has the title of the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. That is significant. As I know from my travels across the world, it provides the appropriate authority internationally to advocate

on behalf of the UK, and, in this country, to hold the FCDO to account on how it is protecting and promoting this fundamental human right.

New clause 1 reflects the purposes, which I have just quoted, of the Prime Minister's special envoy, which were also set out in the original clause 1. New clause 1(4) reflects the original clause in saying that the special envoy must report to the Prime Minister, which provides for the direct accountability of the role.

In terms of technical changes, it is almost unprecedented for the Prime Minister to be referenced in legislation. While it is recognised that it is the Prime Minister who does and will appoint their special envoy, the legislative description required is "a Minister of the Crown". When it comes to the practical resourcing of the Prime Minister's special envoy's office and travel expenditure, it makes sense for that to be flexibly handled by the relevant Minister of the Crown.

Further, the other drafting change from the original Bill is to avoid the ambiguity of the creation of a separate—that is, a new—office, distinct from the current office of the Prime Minister's special envoy, which I have within the FCDO. Accordingly, subsection (6) of new clause 1 gives provision for the resourcing of the office of the Prime Minister's special envoy and for fulfilling the purposes set out in subsection (3).

I thank the Minister for her presence today and note, with thanks, her fulsome response in the House to the Bill's money resolution earlier this week, in which she said that she was

"absolutely committed...to providing the support services to enable the role to continue for as long as it can."—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 698.]

I trust the Minister will join me today in ensuring that the office of the Prime Minister's special envoy will continue to be staffed by at least the two current positions of a private secretary and an assistant private secretary. The role and its relevance across every country of the world—apart from the UK, which is covered by a faith Minister—means it is a demanding one that requires resources. It involves working with countries that actively support article 18 of the 1948 universal declaration of human rights, notably through the alliance I mentioned earlier that now comprises 43 countries; working with those on a journey towards that support; or challenging those countries that, regrettably, do not support it. In reality, the staff level currently enjoyed by the role is the absolute minimum required.

My role has also received support from my parliamentary office and, in particular, the support of the Prime Minister's deputy special envoy, David Burrowes, whose significant time is not funded by the FCDO. Indeed, I want to put on record my profound appreciation for all David has done throughout my holding of the role, for his consistently wise and calm advice and for his considerable support of the drafting and passage to date of the Bill, without which fulfilling the role would not have been possible. I am deeply indebted to him.

If colleagues will indulge my gratitude just a little longer before I close, I wish to put on record my thanks to the Deputy Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the noble Lord Ahmad for their strong support for the Bill. I also want to thank the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary for their personal and wholehearted support

[Fiona Bruce]

for my role and for the Bill. As the Foreign Secretary, the noble Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, said in the other place on 5 March:

“A Bill is being passed through the other place, and will, hopefully, come here, which will put that on a statutory footing. That would be the first time one of those envoy roles would be treated in that way, and that is quite right.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 March 2024; Vol. 836, c. 1547.]

He also said on 16 April:

“I very much agree with the Bill. In fact, I insisted that it went forward with government support... That reflects the importance that we in this Government and in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office attach to celebrating freedom of religious belief.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 April 2024; Vol. 837, c. 871.]

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): I have two questions to ask, but I want to start by honouring the right hon. Frank Field. It was a shock today. I know that he was much driven by his faith. I think we all feel his loss.

I also hugely congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton. She has done an amazing job in this role and we should all be proud of the conference she organised a few years ago. Bringing forward the Bill and putting the role on a permanent footing is something we all welcome.

That leads me to my two questions, which I hope can receive a response. First, religious persecution is widespread worldwide and it seems it is only getting worse. A Christian is killed every two hours somewhere in the world, antisemitism is on the rise, we see Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims being systematically persecuted, and in Iran followers of the Baha'i faith are victims of what Human Rights Watch has called “crimes against humanity”. I am interested in how the role of the special envoy could raise concerns, particularly within the FCDO, about persecution and discrimination and therefore try to prevent atrocities in future.

My second point was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on Second Reading. She asked how the Bill would “balance the other rights that may occasionally collide with this question of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief?”—[*Official Report*, 26 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 572.]

She gave the example of the rights of women and girls, particularly thinking about reproductive rights. Similarly, there are concerns about the message the Bill may send to the LGBT+ community around the world. I therefore seek reassurance on how the Bill will ensure, when rights potentially collide or create tensions, that a hierarchy is not created by placing the rights of one group ahead of the other.

10.15 am

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous)**: I shall be brief. As the Member with the privilege of speaking on behalf of the Church of England in this place, I want to put on record the Church of England's very strong support for this Bill and what it will do to protect the ability of people to practise their Christian faith around the world, but also to protect those of every faith, whether they are Jewish, Muslim or of any other faith, or of no faith and are persecuted. This Bill really matters because the situation globally has never

been so bad and it continues to worsen. Those of us with the immense freedom to practise our faith or not practise any faith, as we enjoy in this country, have an absolute duty to speak out and give this Bill our wholehearted support.

**Jim Shannon**: I commend the hon. Member for Congleton on promoting this Bill. The glory will not be to her, but to the one that she serves and that we all serve.

I want to make a couple of quick comments. I am minded of the history of this, which the hon. Lady and others present will be aware of as well. Baroness Berridge approached me back in 2012 to ask whether I would consider starting an APPG on freedom of religion or belief with her. I was very happy to do so. It was on her heart and my heart as well. At that time, it was in the hearts of about 25 or 30 other MPs. It very clearly grew from that to be in the hearts of 174 Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It is important that the issue has been brought forward.

This issue has captured the attention of those of all political parties, political opinions and religious beliefs? I speak at the APPG for those with Christian faith, but I also speak up for those with other faiths and those with no faith, because I believe sincerely and in my heart—the hon. Member for Congleton believes it as well—that we will be a voice for those across the world whose human rights are being suppressed and who are being subjugated and persecuted. The hon. Lady and I have spoken up on the persecution of Christians across the middle east, Pakistan and India, of Sikhs in Pakistan and India, of Hindus in Pakistan, of Muslims in India, of the Myanmar Muslims, of the Uyghurs, and of others across the world. These are all groups of people that this special envoy that the hon. Lady is promoting will be speaking up for.

I will say two things in conclusion. Last week, we had a special event at which we highlighted the issue of those in Pakistan who are being persecuted. We had a number of groups at a committee: Muslims in particular but also Christians, Sikhs and Hindus who are subjected to persecution in that country. Just yesterday, we had Nigeria, whose case is particularly worrying. Some 5,000 Christians have been murdered in the past year, and there have been abductions as well—five times more than there were even in 2020. Hundreds have been kidnapped. What about the 87 small schoolchildren—those young girls? Two hundred and fifty were kidnapped, but 87 have still never been returned. Those are the things that the Prime Minister's special envoy will hopefully deal with, whether that is the hon. Member for Congleton or someone else in the future. It is really important that we speak up for those people across the world. I had not intended to speak, Sir Graham; I have just written some scribbles down on a bit of paper—if you saw my writing, you would understand it is extremely difficult to interpret at a later stage.

I believe in my heart, as does the hon. Lady and others hon. Members on both sides of the Committee, that our God is a great God—he is a God of love. The role of special envoy is a burden on the hon. Lady's heart. I believe that others in the Committee have the same burden and will want to see the role of special envoy in place, and I very much look forward to its endorsement.

The hard work of the hon. Lady has pushed the role of special envoy forward, and I know that we all love that work and love her for what she does. Through the special envoy, we speak up on behalf of all those across the world who have a religious belief and suffer from human rights suppression or persecution. This role that the hon. Lady has put forward gives us the opportunity to be a spokesperson for those people. I look forward to all contributions; we are brought together and united in trying to achieve that goal. I especially thank the Minister and the Government in advance for what they have done, because they have recognised its importance.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): Like many colleagues, I rise to support this Bill wholeheartedly and to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for the dedication she has shown in the role. It is extremely important that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office supports this role—as it does—and I thank the Minister in advance as well. This role is exemplary, and people contact me from many different countries to commend the work that is being done, such as those who have been persecuted and those whose families have been persecuted. I think that it places the UK in a real leadership position in upholding article 18 of the UN charter, and it is very important internationally.

We were fortunate that my hon. Friend came to East Kilbride when she did a tour of different areas of the United Kingdom. It is one of the most memorable events that I have had the privilege to hold in my constituency. Many different faith groups came to that meeting and many people of all different faiths, as well as those of no faith, spoke with her about the importance of the role. It is an internationally important role, but we should also remember that it means so much to people in our constituencies across the United Kingdom. Those who attended that meeting in East Kilbride, at which we were privileged to host the Prime Minister's special envoy, have given me their very best wishes for the Bill's progress today and for the work that my hon. Friend does.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and to be here in this Public Bill Committee, given that I was pleased to support the hon. Member for Congleton on Second Reading in one of our Friday debates on private Members' Bills. Few people know that although some of those Bills come out of the ballot, there is an opportunity immediately after the ballot, and the hon. Lady was prepared to sleep in a tent on the third floor to ensure that she was first through the door to secure this opportunity—and she was. We are grateful to her for doing so.

Regarding the Bill, it is odd in parliamentary terms to walk into a Committee knowing that I support the Bill, that this process will completely change the Bill by removing the two substantive clauses and replacing them with a new clause, and that we will leave with the Bill still having gained unanimous support, because it is the essence of what the hon. Lady is trying to achieve through the Bill that we support. As the Democratic Unionist party's leader in Parliament now, I wanted to be here to place on record not only our support for the Bill but our personal appreciation of the hon. Lady for

the steadfast and committed way in which she has approached the issues that we are discussing over many years.

I know that the creation of a legislative underpinning for the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief was a Conservative party manifesto—a commitment of this Government. I am sorry that we have had to enter the last Session of this Parliament before we have taken the strong opportunity to finally land that legislative commitment.

The essence of the hon. Lady is that she has never made this process about herself. It is not about securing a role that she currently holds. It is about sustaining the role for future generations to impact all those who benefit from having a singular advocate in this Parliament to act on our collective behalf and on our country's behalf to speak up for all those internationally who need that. I have reflected on many occasions that the hon. Lady is small in stature but mighty in her passion and her determination, and in the faith that underpins her drive in this regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, and I am delighted, on behalf of our party, to give our full-throated support and our prayerful endeavours for the hon. Lady regarding this legislative process, which I trust will have a successful and profitable conclusion. It will be the enshrinement of a role that we all benefit from.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton is a truly honourable Member of this House. She has shown courage and determination to stand up for freedom of religion, freedom of belief and freedom of speech, not only in this country but throughout the world. She has shown the vital importance of maintaining this role as a UK prime ministerial appointment and I am proud to serve on this Committee to give her my support for her Bill today.

Throughout history, the United Kingdom has been a champion of freedom: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of worship and freedom to choose one's own way of life. Throughout the Commonwealth, there is much work to be done. There are many countries that may have inherited our ancestry, our history and our heritage but they have not necessarily followed through in the way that they apply their laws. There is much work to be done to uphold those values of freedom, particularly freedom of religion. That is why the role should be permanent and why, from now on, all Prime Ministers should appoint someone to the role, so that there is always a person leading the fight to spread those values of freedom, including freedom of religion and belief, and all the other things that hon. Members have spoken about today.

I give my full support to my hon. Friend and I thank her for her service and her true beliefs. Many Members of this House do not stand for something clear, but I have to say that she is the one person who I have always known to do that.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I want to make a brief contribution because in the February recess, I accompanied my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton on a visit to Kosovo, where I was travelling as the Prime Minister's trade envoy. On my previous visits, our ambassadors in Pristina and Tirana had both said that

[*Martin Vickers*]

they would welcome a visit from the special envoy, so that they could show her how the faith communities are working well together in those two countries, although of course, in the wider western Balkans, there are tensions because of ethnicity and religion.

As I say, I travelled to Kosovo in February as the trade envoy and my hon. Friend travelled as the faith envoy. We were welcomed by people from the President and the Prime Minister downwards and it was evident that they welcomed the opportunity to engage with someone who held that position. While we were there, my hon. Friend made some useful contacts and is working on staging a conference in Pristina later this year, which will enhance the relationship between our two countries and, more importantly, between the various faith communities. Having seen her in action, I am delighted to be able to support the Bill.

10.30 am

**Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): I am honoured to be part of the Committee and to be able to congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Congleton. As other hon. Members have said, we are saddened today by the death of our colleague Lord Field of Birkenhead. I am sure there will be many tributes, and we are grateful for what has been said this morning. We will remember him and his family.

That sadness aside, this is a great morning for the hon. Lady because of all her work, as has already been said. Learning that she slept in a tent in the corridor to bring the Bill forward shows there are no bounds to her tenacity—I hope she had a comfortable night. It was well worth it, however, and we are grateful that she could bring forward the Bill and embody this role, as proposed by the Truro review. As all hon. Members have expressed, the Bill is important for people to recognise that our country feels that, in the world we live in today, the expression of freedom of religion and free speech are important, as we try to bring peace to our world.

On the questions put by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham, I echo the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) who spoke on Second Reading. In supporting the Bill, I would like to stress what she said then, referring to the shadow Foreign Secretary:

“In his role and during these meetings, he has made it clear that Labour will ensure that the UK stands against persecution and oppression in any form, and will promote freedom of religion or belief as a key component of our foreign policy”—[*Official Report*, 26 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 571.]

in future, should we form a Government.

With that, I again congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton and wish her well as she continues in her role. We are thankful for what she has done on the world stage for Parliament and the UK.

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: It is an absolute pleasure to be serving under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I must begin by putting on record my tribute to Frank Field. I had some limited interaction with him, and I know that he would be proud of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for all the work she has done in this space.

I do not think I have ever been in a debate where there has been so much approval for a piece of legislation or so much love—the word was used by an hon. Member—for a Member. I put on record my thanks for all the considered contributions and I join hon. Members in their gratitude to my hon. Friend for her leadership. It has taken some time for her to reach this place, but she is dedicated—I had not realised it stretched as far as sleeping in a tent. I put on the record my thanks to her and, of course, to David Burrowes, who was able to get his sister access to me on Saturday to ensure that I did everything I could to keep my hon. Friend happy, which is indeed my job.

When it comes to protecting people who are persecuted for their faith, my hon. Friend and I go way back. We worked on tackling the persecution of Christians in Pakistan and other countries, and of course the persecution of the Uyghur by the Chinese Communist party, so I am incredibly pleased to help the progress of this Bill. We have all expressed our gratitude to my hon. Friend, the current special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and I pay tribute to her for the work she has done. She will be leaving behind a legacy, which is very rare for a parliamentarian.

I now turn to the Bill. Clause 1 requires the Prime Minister to appoint a special envoy for international freedom of religion or belief. Establishing that role permanently and in perpetuity was a recommendation in the Bishop of Truro’s 2019 independent review into the work of the FCDO and the freedom of religion or belief, and our 2019 manifesto committed to its implementation. The clause also sets out the duties of the special envoy and requires them to report periodically to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister will determine the terms and conditions of the appointment.

Clause 2 requires the Prime Minister to establish an office of the special envoy to support the work of the special envoy. Clause 3(1) provides that the Bill will come into force on the day it is passed, and clause 3(2) provides that it will extend to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

New clause 1(1) provides that:

“There continues to be a special envoy called the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.”

Ensuring that the role continues to be known as the Prime Minister’s special envoy will mean that it maintains its international authority and recognition, as hon. Members have said. The new clause also seeks to reduce the statutory duty on the Prime Minister to appoint and provide resources to the special envoy; the duty is delegated to a Minister of the Crown. That change is essential, as legislation relating to the Prime Minister’s powers is extremely rare and limited, especially where the processes can be dealt with administratively. I thank the special envoy for her understanding on that point.

The new clause also clarifies the duties of the special envoy. It states:

“The special envoy must act with a view to...promoting freedom of religion or belief abroad, in particular by working with the government of the United Kingdom, with other governments and their representatives...and with organisations outside government;...raising awareness of cases in which people abroad are persecuted or discriminated against on the grounds of religion or belief and advocating for the rights of such people.”

Those revised duties reflect the status of the work undertaken by my hon. Friend in her role as special envoy.



My hon. Friend has worked with other special envoys to secure numerous achievements on FORB. Perhaps the most notable of those achievements was her co-hosting of the fourth international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, which brought together Government delegations, faith and belief group leaders, human rights actors and civil society representatives from more than 100 countries to address challenges to the right to FORB. She subsequently hosted a series of roundtables on individual countries, including Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran and Myanmar, which brought together key stakeholders, including embassies and non-governmental organisations, to promote respect for FORB.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on her accomplishments as chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. She was asked to carry out the role of chair for a second time last year—the first time in the organisation’s history that such a request has been made. As chair of the IRFBA, she established a scheme to raise awareness of prisoners of conscience each month, including individuals from Vietnam, Nicaragua, Cuba and Myanmar. In three cases, individuals were subsequently released, which is a tremendous result.

That is a small sample of the important work my hon. Friend has undertaken. Reflecting that work in the revisions to the special envoy’s duties will set the same high expectations for delivery for future incumbents. New clause 1 also simplifies the provision of resources to the special envoy by no longer requiring the establishment of a separate office for the special envoy. The envoy’s work is currently supported by her FCDO private office, the FCDO FORB team, the FCDO media office and other officials across the organisation, with an annual budget covering staffing costs and, of course, travel expenses. Resources should continue to be provided in the established manner.

New clause 1(7) makes the special envoy’s functions exercisable on behalf of the crown. Amendment 3 adjusts the Bill’s short title to “Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief”, so that it refers specifically to the special envoy. That adjustment to the title more accurately reflects recommendation 6 of the Bishop of Truro’s review, which specifically states that the role of special envoy for FORB should be established “permanently, and in perpetuity”, as I mentioned. The amended title clearly aligns with our manifesto commitment to implement the findings of the Truro report. Amendment 4 adjusts the Bill’s long title to reflect its contents more clearly, and removes references to the Prime Minister, for reasons previously discussed.

Let me respond to the hon. Member for Rotherham. The authority of the role is that it is established in the Department. The special envoy has access not only to her own staff, but to Ministers and officials across Government, as well as having the ear of the Prime Minister. The hon. Lady talked about a hierarchy of human rights. She and I know that there is no hierarchy. The persecution of individuals on the basis on their faith often involves not only their faith but other levels, including gender and, potentially, sexual orientation. There is no hierarchy of human rights; the UK defends the full range of human rights as set out in the universal declaration of human rights.

In conclusion, the Bill reinforces our commitment to the position of special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. It will support the FCDO as we ensure that

progress made on the freedom of religion or belief is embedded, and that the freedom of religion or belief is central to our wider human rights work. The role has only been established because of the sheer determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton.

**Fiona Bruce:** I thank the Minister for her response to several points and issues. I will also draw out some of the points made by colleagues across the Committee.

Let me respond to the hon. Member for Rotherham, the much-respected Chair of the International Development Committee. There is, of course, a range of envoys. The reason that the special envoy for FORB in particular is being put into statute is that doing so was a manifesto commitment. However, that does not in any way diminish the importance of the work of other envoys, nor the fact that the UK defends the full range of human rights, as the Minister said. Those rights are set out in the universal declaration of human rights and in international human rights treaties. Much of the work on human rights, including the work in the special envoy role, is often integrated and interrelated with other human rights. For example, the Minister mentioned the concerns that we have for women and girls. Many of us will be aware that millions of women and girls around the world experience discrimination, inequality and violence on the grounds of both their religion or belief and their gender: they are doubly jeopardised. That can be at the hands of state and non-state actors.

History has shown that, where freedom of religion or belief is under threat, other human rights are often also at risk. That is why my particular focus has been on this human right, while other people work on others. It is one of a number of this Government’s human rights priorities. In supporting the Bill, I hope that the Government will be further enabled to positively contribute towards protecting not only FORB but other human rights across the world. One practical example is that the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which now has 43 countries that work to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief, has six working groups, one of which is specifically on gender, for the reasons that I just mentioned.

I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, for his kind remarks. From the many times that he has responded to questions in the House, I know that how keenly he supports the Bill and, indeed, the Church. I am grateful for that.

I could not fulfil the role without the support of the hon. Member for Strangford. It is utterly invaluable. One might say that we are divided in a political sense, but our hearts are inextricably interlinked on this issue. I thank him for having such a huge heart and for all that he does in this place.

I also thank others for the work that they do, because this is not an isolated role. Colleagues have been very kind in commending my work, but it really is teamwork. The UK should be proud of the global leadership that it has shown, but that can be done only because it is so collaborative.

It was a privilege to visit the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow—I managed to get that out!—and to see the strong relationships that she has built up across the

[Fiona Bruce]

faith groups in her area. That was such a positive example of what we should all be doing in our country as well as internationally. I thank her for inviting me to visit as part of the roadshow that my deputy envoy and I did in more than 20 towns across the UK. It was great fun.

We did the roadshow—I briefly digress—because we felt that people did not know how big the issue is internationally and how many people are affected. I will pick a statistic from the Open Doors world watch list, but of course there are many other statistics I could cite. Open Doors says that across the world about 360 million Christians are at risk of discrimination or persecution—that is just Christians. The Pew Forum has produced a recent report that says that restrictions on religion have reached a new peak globally:

“Religious groups faced harassment by governments in 183 countries... the largest number since the study began.”

Strengthening and building relationships across faith groups and showing the UK as an example of that is important.

10.45 am

I want to thank the right hon. Member for Belfast East for his remarks. He is absolutely right: this work is not about me; it is to secure a role for someone else to take up. If I may inject a brief note of humour, my eldest son said to me, “Oh, I see. You are changing the law, like any authoritarian dictator, to make your role permanent.” Not so!

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Romford for his kindly words in saying that I am a truly honourable Member. May I say this? It takes one to know one. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes and I had a most enjoyable visit to Kosovo. I was overwhelmed by the welcome that we received from those in Government and others in Kosovo. They really value a special relationship with the UK. It was my privilege to go there and witness the effective work of my hon. Friend as the Government’s trade envoy. He was on his seventh visit and is already urging me to return in three weeks’ time.

International roles are important as a bridge or a way to promote relationships internationally; we should not undervalue that. It is important in a world that is now increasingly endangered and insecure.

I thank the hon. Member for North Tyneside for her support and friendship on this issue. I must confess that I would have been willing to sleep in a tent if it had been required or in the corridor alongside the Public Bill Office. Fortunately in recent years that tradition has been expunged and it is now a matter of applying electronically on certain days at a certain time—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry—I have completely ruined my image.

**Gavin Robinson:** I feel a bit bad because I said that the hon. Lady was prepared to do it. For fear that rumours start spreading, I am glad that she has set the record straight. I am sure *Hansard* will back me up on what I said. But she would have done it, of that I have no doubt.

**Fiona Bruce:** In closing, I thank in particular my long-serving and, I think, long-suffering, over 14 years, chief of staff, Harriet Crompton, because she successfully pushed the button on her computer at exactly the right time to bring this Bill, as a presentation Bill, to the very top of the more than 100 Bills that colleagues sought to bring to this House to make legislative change. As I have said, I am very fortunate. It is very much not just me involved in this work; it really has been teamwork.

*Question put and negatived.*

*Clause 1 accordingly disagreed to.*

*Clause 2 disagreed to.*

### Clause 3

#### COMMENCEMENT, EXTENT AND SHORT TITLE

*Amendment made:* 3, in clause 3, page 2, line 8, leave out “International Freedom of Religion or Belief Act 2023”, and insert

“Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Act 2024”.—  
(*Fiona Bruce.*)

*This amendment adjusts the Bill’s short title so that it refers specifically to the special envoy.*

*Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### New Clause 1

#### PRIME MINISTER’S SPECIAL ENVOY FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

“(1) There continues to be a special envoy called the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

(2) The special envoy is to be appointed by, and may be removed from office at any time by, a Minister of the Crown.

(3) The special envoy must act with a view to—

(a) promoting freedom of religion or belief abroad, in particular by working with the government of the United Kingdom, with other governments and their representatives (including special envoys), and with organisations outside government;

(b) raising awareness of cases in which people abroad are persecuted or discriminated against on the grounds of religion or belief and advocating for the rights of such people.

(4) The special envoy must from time to time give a report about their work to the Prime Minister.

(5) A Minister of the Crown may give the special envoy directions about the exercise of their functions.

(6) A Minister of the Crown—

(a) must provide the special envoy with such staff, accommodation, equipment and other facilities as the Minister considers necessary for the carrying out of the special envoy’s functions;

(b) may pay allowances or other payments to or in respect of the special envoy.

(7) The special envoy’s functions are exercisable on behalf of the Crown.”—(*Fiona Bruce.*)

*This new clause is intended to replace clauses 1 and 2. It includes largely the same material as those clauses but with several drafting and clarity-related changes.*

*Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.*

**Title**

*Amendment made:* 4, in title, line 1, leave out from beginning to end of line 3 and insert

“require the continued appointment of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief and make provision about the special envoy’s functions.”—(*Fiona Bruce.*)

*This amendment adjusts the Bill’s long title to reflect its contents more clearly. It is consequential on NCI.*

*Question proposed,* That the Chair do report the Bill, as amended, to the House.

**Fiona Bruce:** May I conclude by thanking all those who have been involved in working on the Bill’s passage to date? I thank in particular my private secretary, Sue Breeze, who is indispensable to my role. I just regret that it is not possible to include her name in the Bill, so that subsequent special envoys of the Prime Minister would have the benefit of her very many years of experience on freedom of religion or belief and the global respect that she carries and that I have noticed whenever she has travelled with me across the world. We are truly fortunate to have her as someone in our FCDO who has been working on this issue for very many years.

May I also thank my parliamentary office for its support? I have mentioned my chief of staff, Harriet Crompton. May I also thank Lucy Williams? I particularly thank, for her unfailingly unflappable support, the Clerk

responsible for private Members’ Bills, Anne-Marie Griffiths, who is always willing, whenever one goes into her office, to be interrupted from whatever she is doing—

**Gavin Robinson** *indicated assent.*

**Fiona Bruce:** I see the right hon. Member nodding. I thought it was just me! No, Ms Griffiths is always willing to be interrupted to support colleagues. I also thank, for her energetic support, the Whip, my hon. Friend, and the hon. Friend of many in this room, the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), otherwise known as the Friday Whip.

It may not surprise people to hear that I believe in providence and the Lord’s hands on these proceedings. On the subject of Lords, I am delighted that if the Bill passes through its remaining stages, the Lord Spiritual who will, fittingly, take the Bill through the other place is the Bishop of Winchester, formerly the Bishop of Truro. He will, uniquely, be ensuring that his review’s recommendation to establish permanently and in perpetuity the role of the Prime Minister’s special envoy, with sufficient resources and authority, is implemented, and I wish him all haste and good speed as he does so.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill, as amended, accordingly to be reported.*

10.54 am

*Committee rose.*

