

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Procedure under coronavirus restrictions, HC 300

Monday 1 February 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Aaron Bell; Kirsty Blackman; Jack Brereton; Bambos Charalambous; Sir Christopher Chope; James Gray; Nigel Mills; Douglas Ross; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson; Liz Twist; Suzanne Webb; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 457-514

Witness

I: Rt Hon Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House of Commons.

Written evidence from witness:

– [HM Government \(CVR 90\)](#)

Examination of witness

Witness: Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg MP.

Chair: I welcome our witness, the Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg MP—my right hon. Friend. Thank you very much for appearing in front of the Committee today—virtually, once again, I am afraid. We will have plenty of questions for you about that issue and others as we go through the course of the day.

As you will know, the Committee is not just looking at the way the House is operating under coronavirus. We have started an inquiry into the operation of the territorial system of the United Kingdom and the way in which the four legislatures operate together. I suspect there will be lots of questions about coronavirus, but to ensure that we can cover all those points, we would like to kick off with questions about that inquiry. We will then move on to the sifting Committee—the European Statutory Instruments Committee—and then to questions around coronavirus. We have many Members wishing to ask you questions, and we will kick off with Nigel Mills.

Q457 **Nigel Mills:** Jacob, good afternoon. The Chair has outlined our inquiry on the territoriality of our procedures. Given all the change and all the upheaval, would you agree with this initial statement: our House's procedures need to reflect and take account of the nuances of all the various aspects of our constitutional settlement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The way the House legislates obviously needs to take account of the devolution settlement. That is absolutely right; hence the Sewel convention, legislative consent motions and the various Standing Orders in relation to devolved issues, or issues that arise because of devolution.

Q458 **Nigel Mills:** I wondered if you were cut off in mid-flow and we were to get more there. Further to that, can I ask you about English Votes for English Laws? I think when we were both elected for the first and second times it was a hugely important issue in our constituencies, if perhaps not in everybody else's. Obviously, we have had those powers suspended during the pandemic. Do you and the Government see those as an important part of our House procedures and look forward to them being reinstated when the situation allows?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think there are issues around them—they are certainly quite complex. I am not convinced that there is as full an understanding of them as one might hope. Procedures need to be clear, both to Members of Parliament and to the wider electorate, and I am not sure that the EVEL procedures manage that.

The other thing to bear in mind is that English Votes for English Laws is perhaps most important in the event that a different party holds the majority across the United Kingdom as a whole, as opposed to the party that holds the majority in England. It is quite difficult at the moment to see the circumstance where we would lose a vote on an EVEL basis that we would win on a UK basis.

Q459 **Nigel Mills:** As a matter of principle, it would not be realistic to expect an incoming Government to decide, "Well, we haven't got a majority in England; let's reinstate the EVEL processes." They need to be there as a permanent feature or not at all, don't they?

Mr Rees-Mogg: They need to be well embedded to work, which is why their complexity may be something of a drawback, because I do not think they are well understood as they currently operate.

Q460 **Nigel Mills:** Does that suggest that the Government want to reform the EVEL procedures? In a response to our inquiry, the Government said that the objective was for all parts of the UK to feel better connected to Government, politics and politicians. Is that what that alludes to?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think it is right that we want people in all parts of the United Kingdom to feel well connected to our processes, and there is therefore a virtue in our processes being relatively simple.

Q461 **Nigel Mills:** I still do not quite understand what you are planning for EVEL, then. Are you planning to bring it back as it was, not to bring it back at all, or to work on something different?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This brings us on to the issue of the reinstatement of procedures at the end of the pandemic. I think the understanding is that procedures will come back and that there will be an opportunity for reform in future, if people think that suitable, for all sorts of procedures. The suspension was agreed on a unanimous basis, on the understanding that the procedures would be brought back, rather than things being changed by happenstance.

Q462 **Nigel Mills:** That seems fair. In the longer run, do you think that the Government will come back with some reforms to EVEL law, or is that a matter to be considered on another day?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the Government would be very interested in any recommendations the Procedure Committee has to make on how EVEL might work better. You make a very good point about the need for Parliament to work for all parts of the United Kingdom, but I think it is recognised that EVEL is a complex system. That is why it has had to be suspended: the complexities in applying it.

Chair: Thank you very much. As I said, we will go on to questions about the procedures under coronavirus and how we return to whatever normality might look like at that point, but continuing on the territorial issues, I will bring in Owen Thompson on the Sewel convention.

Q463 **Owen Thompson:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you Lord President. The



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Government have now passed three Acts in two years without the consent of all or some of the devolved Governments. The Committee has received written evidence stating that that exposes the limitations of the Sewel convention and undermines the trust between devolved Governments and the UK Government. Do you agree that those are the limitations of the Sewel convention?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Sewel convention is an important one in the relationship between the UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures. It is worth bearing in mind that even in the current legislative session, 42 legislative consent motions have been granted, so by and large, the Sewel convention is working well. There have inevitably been some issues that have been of heightened political controversy and where the UK Government has needed to act without legislative consent motions, but it has correctly asked for them on all occasions. As has been pointed out by the courts, the Sewel convention is a political convention, and this therefore becomes part of the political discussion. I think the Sewel convention is actually working pretty well.

Q464 **Owen Thompson:** From that, I suppose I would ask: what would be your view of the Institute for Government report, which suggests that the Sewel convention should be put into Standing Orders?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the idea that it is a political convention, rather than a constitutional convention, is important. Our Standing Orders are in some ways a major part of our uncodified, but none the less written, constitution, so I would favour it remaining the type of convention that it is. I would say that the Government acts without a legislative consent motion only after very, very careful thought. It is not something the Government does lightly.

Q465 **Owen Thompson:** Are there parallels that we could draw between this and the EVEL processes that we just touched on, regarding whether it is political or not?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Well, the EVEL processes are written into Standing Orders in relation to England, but of course England does not have a separate devolved power and there is very little argument in favour of that. The EVEL conventions are there—I suppose you could say in parallel to legislative consent motions—to ensure that a majority of English MPs are supportive of English-only regulations, but I think legislative consent motions are in a way rather more straightforward.

Q466 **Owen Thompson:** Finally from me for now, I am wondering whether Standing Orders should be used to change, or even to structure, the constitutional settlement.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very broad question about whether or not we should have a codified constitution. I am a strong advocate of the uncodified constitution that we currently have, but Vernon Bogdanor, who is perhaps the most respected constitutionalist in the country, takes a different view on this. If the Procedure Committee were to do an inquiry into it, I would recommend summoning Vernon as a witness.



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Q467 **James Sunderland:** Hi, Leader. Thank you for coming to speak to us this afternoon. I have two questions for you. The first one is about the intergovernmental relations review. In its evidence to the Committee, the Government recently said that: "An essential and core part of the Government's ambitions for future intergovernmental working is enhanced transparency to support parliamentary scrutiny and accountability." With transparency in mind, could you please tell us when you will publish the findings of the review?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't have a date for when the findings of the review will be published.

Q468 **James Sunderland:** Could you perhaps enlighten us at this point in time as to what the review might say?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't think I can before it is published—it is slightly Catch-22. Obviously, intergovernmental relations are of great importance for the good governance of the country at large. Trying to co-operate with Administrations with whom one does not share a political philosophy is an important way of governing the country, so improving those relations, and having them improved transparently, is a good idea. There are suggestions for enhanced working between parliamentary Committees and the devolved authorities' parliamentary Committees as well. I think all these things are well worth looking at, to try to improve the links and associations we have between Parliaments.

Q469 **James Sunderland:** Could I quickly ask you what might be holding up publication?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't think there are any specific reasons holding up publication, but you know that Government documents do not always appear as quickly as one might like, because they have to be agreed with various different people and consulted on widely. This is just the normal process of Government, particularly when there are so many other calls on Ministers and officials' time.

Q470 **James Sunderland:** Thank you. Will it be this year?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be wrong of me to give you a date. It is not a document that is under my direct authority.

Q471 **James Sunderland:** Thank you, Leader—I'm doing my best. My next question is about the Dunlop review. I believe that the review has been completed, but the Cabinet Office has not yet published it. Again, could you please tell the Committee when this might be published?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you need to ask another Minister from the Cabinet Office, whose responsibility this is. It is not my responsibility as Leader of the House.

James Sunderland: That is all I have. Thank you.

Chair: I think, James, you are learning that in the civil service spring lasts until the last day in July that Parliament sits, and autumn then starts and continues until Christmas eve. They are the two seasons of the year and



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things happen in due course. Thank you, Jacob, that has been very helpful. It has been helpful to have answers to those questions as we frame our work on our inquiry on territorial matters.

I will now move on to issues around the European Statutory Instruments Committee. Liz Twist, a member of that Committee, has some questions for you.

Q472 Liz Twist: Welcome, Lord President. I would like to ask about the European Statutory Instruments Committee and the sifting of statutory instruments in the future. Will ESIC undertake the sifting function set out in schedule 5 of the European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes. Of course, there will be scrutiny of the future relationship SIs, in accordance with schedule 5 of the European Union (Future Relationship) Act. The ESIC did exceptionally good work in scrutinising EU exit SIs, but obviously that Committee was set up for a particular purpose, and it is yet to be determined whether that purpose extends. However, there will have to be scrutiny in accordance with schedule 5 of the European Union (Future Relationship) Act.

Q473 Liz Twist: Okay, so the European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020 limits the sifting function of ESIC to two years but does not give a sunset clause to the Government's power to make regulations. How will Parliament sift and scrutinise instruments under the Act after two years?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Statutory instruments all have a particular way of being scrutinised, as you know, and some specific additional ones were brought in for European future relationship statutory instruments, but there is always a mechanism for scrutiny of statutory instruments in addition to a wide range of Select Committees that can scrutinise all activities of the Government. Just to reassure you, the Government believe that scrutiny improves Government. There is no reluctance to have proper scrutiny, because it is as beneficial to the Government as it is to the legislature. The Government are keen, therefore, to ensure that there is effective scrutiny.

Q474 Liz Twist: Would I be right in saying that your response is a "don't know" at present, or has a decision been made?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Final decisions have not been made, but the ESIC Committee worked well, and there is a commitment to continue with scrutiny.

Q475 Liz Twist: Thank you. Can you tell us what the Government's expectations are regarding the flow of proposed negative instruments under both the European Union (Future Relationship) Act and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The flow on the sheets that I receive setting out statutory instruments for the next quarter has declined significantly. That is as you would have expected. There was a huge number of statutory instruments that needed to be dealt with last year. It was an extraordinary administrative effort, actually. One success of the transition period was how well the statutory instrument programme was carried out. That has



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been completed and the pace is much slower now. I would expect that to continue as the powers under the European Acts become less relevant and new Acts will, eventually, become more important.

Q476 **Liz Twist:** Has any formal assessment been made of where they might come from or how they might arise in the future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, not in that way. It has been a matter of discussion. Obviously, there are widespread powers under the relevant European Acts and there are things that Governments need to do. It is important to ensure that there aren't gaps in the statute book, but in some instances the ability to bring forward statutory instruments will ultimately require new supporting primary legislation. This is a long-term programme of disconnecting from the existing European law, which has been retained as we have left the European Union.

Liz Twist: Thank you.

Q477 **Chair:** I think the explanatory notes to schedule 5 say that letters will be sent to the relevant Committees explaining the next steps. Do you have any idea when those letters might be sent?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In due course. The commitment to scrutiny is there. The exact formation of that will be decided upon and agreed, of course, with the House.

Chair: Thank you very much. Before we go on to coronavirus, Aaron Bell wishes to ask some questions about the repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

Q478 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for your time today, Jacob. As you know, the repeal Bill is in draft form and being considered by a Committee, on which I sit, as does Dame Angela Eagle, who is also on this Committee. It is a major restoration of Executive power—indeed, prerogative power. I am sure, as a keen parliamentarian, you might regret some of that, but it is, nevertheless, a manifesto commitment. Generally, what lessons are the Government taking from the Committee under Lord McLoughlin? Are there any intentions to amend the draft Bill or, just as importantly, the "Dissolution Principles," which have been questioned by a number of our witnesses? Is there anything you can say about that at this stage?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously, we await the report of Lord McLoughlin's Committee with interest, because it is a very important Committee, and Lord McLoughlin a particularly distinguished figure—he was Chief Whip when I was first elected to Parliament. As it happens, Lord McLoughlin interviewed me for the candidates list, many years ago, so I have a personal reason for holding him in the highest regard, as he pushed me through. I wouldn't be sitting here today without his imprimatur.

It is an important Act. It is a restoration of proper constitutional functioning. The last Parliament, 2017-19, showed the absolute failure of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act in terms of its objective, because we should have had an election in 2015 and 2020, and, in fact, we had one in



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2017 and 2019 as well. So the Fixed-term Parliaments Act turned out to be anything but a Fixed-term Parliaments Act. It made Parliament completely chaotic, unfortunately. It failed to understand the point that the Government needs to have the confidence of the House of Commons, in fact as well as in theory, to be able to govern, and, if it doesn't, it needs to go back to the country, because the country has to decide.

Although you phrase it as a restoration of Executive power, I quibble with that and say it is a restoration of the power of voters, because things get referred back to them faster, rather than, dare I say with the FTPA, a typical Lib Dem stitch-up to try and keep things in the cabal of the influential within Parliament, who could change coalition whenever they felt like it to keep things going for five years without going back to voters. I think it is really important that we restore that.

It is constitutionally important. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act was an act of constitutional vandalism. I am glad to see that this is vandalism that is being repaired.

Aaron Bell: I'll leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are now going to move on to the main event, which is the coronavirus restrictions and the impact they have had on Parliament. As a Committee, we are keen to understand your thoughts, Lord President, on next steps, and how Parliament can follow the Government's advice and show leadership in this area. We will kick off with William Wragg.

Q479 **Mr Wragg:** Good afternoon, Lord President. Can I kick off the questions on this vexed topic by asking you to outline why you think the physical presence of Members of Parliament in Parliament is beneficial and better than appearing virtually?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, though I think you could discourse on this subject even better than I can. I think you just have to watch Parliament. I'm afraid having, as we are this afternoon, a succession of three-minute monologues, without any intervention or real sense of debate, is a second-rate way of conducting business. As a Minister—I probably should not admit this—it is much easier to answer virtual questions than live questions, partly because you have a call list and can work out what questions you are likely to get much more easily, partly because of the lack of spontaneity and partly because questions have become much longer.

It is fascinating, when people are remote, they do not get the signals from the Chamber that it is bored of the question, that it wants the question to be asked and, "Will the Member please get on with it?" You have questions and indeed answers—as mine is doing—that go on and on forever. I cannot see your Chairman pulling a face at me to say, "For heaven's sake, get on with it—answer!", and no one can see Mr Speaker doing the same. So the quality of debate has declined and the spontaneity has declined, and therefore the scrutiny of the Government is less. This is not a good



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way to run Parliament, and the sooner we are back to physical, safely, the better.

Q480 Mr Wragg: Thank you. You hint that scrutiny of the Government has not been what it should. I suppose that is an ironic thing for a Minister to be pointing out. Is there no means at all by which that scrutiny might be maintained with these new approaches?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know you took evidence from the Clerk of the House of Commons recently on the possibility of having interventions remotely and so on. He set out some of the difficulties of that—not the technological ones per se, but the practical ones.

If you think back to a Second Reading debate, where a Minister is at the Dispatch Box being assailed from all sides with interventions, the difficulty that that Minister faces is considerable. The need for that Minister to be completely on top of the relevant brief is huge. When you get the opportunity to make a 20-minute speech with about two interventions, because no one is in the Chamber, you just read out your brief. It is much easier. There is much less need to be on top of the information so, no, I think it is practically very difficult to create that level of scrutiny.

I go back to something I said at the beginning of this session: I think that scrutiny helps Government and makes for better government, rather than being something that Governments have to endure and put up with.

Mr Wragg: Thank you very much, Lord President. I have finished with that question.

Chair: I agree wholeheartedly that scrutiny is a very important thing and that it is important for Ministers because it means that Ministers are also questioning their officials. You need to be on top of your brief and to know exactly what the situation is before you go into the Chamber. It also makes for a better decision-making process. But I think that we also have to accept that it simply has not been possible to have the level of debate and scrutiny physically that we would all like to have.

There is an area where you were very clear that you made a decision to close down proceedings very reluctantly, and that is Westminster Hall. Jack Brereton has some questions on that.

Q481 Jack Brereton: Thank you, Chair. This is an area that is very much an opportunity for Back Benchers to take part, contribute and call debates. Will you please tell us how work is progressing to develop alternatives for operating Westminster Hall?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If I may just respond, Chairman, to a point that you made—essentially, that the virtual is better than nothing—I wholeheartedly agree. When we went into the Easter recess last year, 2020, I was absolutely encouraging the parliamentary authorities to get something up and running as soon as possible, because virtual/hybrid is better than nothing, and it is essential that, even at the height of a pandemic, democratic accountability remains, even in an imperfect form.



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That was so important and, actually, the House of Commons ended up being a world leader with its hybrid accountability.

As regards Westminster Hall, I am very keen that it should come back as soon as is both possible and practicable. There are two aspects to this. One is the technological aspect, and that is actually the lesser of the problems. The technological aspects can be dealt with in a reasonable period of time, as I think you had evidence from Clerks last week expressing.

The second problem is the additional number of people who would come on to the parliamentary estate. Having had very strong representations from across the parties that, for the safety of Members and staff, we needed to suspend proceedings, it would obviously be important that people were comfortable with an increase in the numbers of people coming back. That is obviously the Speaker. The Commission was very clear that it was nervous about Westminster Hall, as were other political parties. When there is a consensus that the increase in numbers would be safe, it will be possible to bring it back.

Q482 Jack Brereton: In the evidence we received last week from the Clerk, he suggested that within a month—the end of February—it would be quite feasible to see an alternative model in place for Westminster Hall. Would you support that alternative and getting in place by the end of the month?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was the least keen to close Westminster Hall, but representations were made to me from, as I say, across the political parties, the Commission and others that they thought that having increased numbers on the estate was not safe. So there is that second point, regardless of the technological capability. The technological capability can be solved and implemented relatively swiftly and at minimal additional cost—I think you have that evidence as well—because it would be using the same technology that a Select Committee uses. There may need to be some rescheduling of Select Committees, but that would be a secondary issue. But it would still require some extra people on the estate. I was the one who was most reluctant to close this when I had lots of representations. I need the people who made the representations to close it to now be saying, “Okay, it’s fine. It’s safe.” That is really important, because it needs to be a consensual decision.

Q483 Jack Brereton: To build that consensus, do you think that a motion could be put forward and co-signed by the Chairs of this Committee, the Petitions Committee and the Backbench Business Committee, to put that idea forward?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It was not just those Committees that were pushing for it to be closed; it was across the political parties. Their representatives need to be pushing for it to reopen and to be happy with the increase in the numbers of people coming on to the estate.

Q484 Chair: One thing we heard last week was that there was a possibility to use the Boothroyd Room instead of Westminster Hall. I think we all



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accept that Westminster Hall, as the hall, has its own problems. It does not have the level of airflow that we would need, it is more difficult to manage as a space, and there is obviously the issue of wiring it to allow for cameras to be in there. But there is obviously the Boothroyd Room, which is being used in this way. Would it be fair to think that the Government would support a move to using the Boothroyd Room to have the debates that would normally be in Westminster Hall? Could we perhaps think about 1 March—four weeks' time—as a reasonable time to start to see that in operation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think the technological barriers are the real problem. It is the increase in numbers on the estate, and that requires a consensus across the House that people would be comfortable with more people coming on to the estate. I have often argued that parliamentary accountability and democracy is an essential work. Therefore, from my point of view, an increase in numbers on the estate is not an unreasonable thing. But that is not a universally shared view, and this is something that involves the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and the political parties, all of whom need to be happy with any increase in the numbers coming on to the estate.

Q485 **Chair:** But if we could reach a point where we were happy and comfortable with the numbers, given the fact that we will hopefully have a recess—for the sake of the House staff, if nothing else—in the middle of February, could we see 1 March as a reasonable time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can give you good news: the recess has been agreed, so we are getting the recess. I hope we do not get a recall.

Chair: That is what I am hoping.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not going for the all-time record, as Leader of the House, of the number of recalls I can have in a year. As I say, the technology is not the obstacle; it is really the numbers on the estate. It is a dangerous business making forecasts about where this pandemic will go and therefore how flexible one can be about doing things.

Chair: Okay. On another topic on scrutiny, you will not be surprised to hear that Sir Christopher Chope would like to ask you some questions about private Members' Bills.

Q486 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Jacob, when you kindly responded to the debate about private Members' Bills, you said that you would think about how we might be able to take this issue forward, either by incorporating the sitting days in the remaining time in this Session or perhaps by having a carry-over into the next Session. I just wondered whether you have had any further thoughts about all that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I hope we will be able to get sitting Fridays back before the end of the Session. I think I have an idea that that will be possible, but I do not want to over-promise, because we are so dependent on developments with the pandemic. If I were to give you a sort of hint, let's think about schools, because I think that if schools are back, then we can



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feel more comfortable doing more things—without making that a promise.

The general view I have got on carrying over to next year is not sympathetic; people seem to want to start afresh in a new Session, as we have always done before. But I am open to representations.

Q487 Sir Christopher Chope: Thank you; that is very helpful. Do you think the House of Lords will take a similar view on private Members' Bills, because there are a number of Bills that are held up now—potentially— because the House of Lords has not been considering any private Members' Bills?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very fair point. The House of Lords has been more virtual than we have for longer, and its business has not gone with its normal dispatch, but I think there is a hope that if we manage to finish off some private Members' Bills, they would find some time for them. But I can't really promise for the House of Lords.

Q488 Sir Christopher Chope: Okay. Can I just follow up on the last discussion? On 22 February, people will be coming back after half-term. Are you hoping and expecting that a number of colleagues who have been unable to get to the Commons, because they have been isolating or have been vulnerable, will have been vaccinated? They will then have the immunity coming from that vaccination, so will you be encouraging those people to come back on to the estate and participate fully in the affairs of Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Since 1340, Members have had a right to attend Parliament and not to be hindered—"not to be molested" is the term used in "Erskine May"—on their way to Parliament. That remains an absolute constitutional right, and it is really important that we don't forget that. In spite of the encouragement of people to be virtual and so on and so forth, that right—that constitutional right, that fundamental right—is not and cannot be affected. It could only be affected, in my view, by primary legislation.

However, I wouldn't encourage people to do things that put their own health at risk, and I note the advice that we are getting very clearly on vaccinations, which is, "Don't go, 'Whoopee!', as soon as you have had the vaccination." You have got to be a bit careful, you have got to wait and we have got to wait for the rest of the country to be opening up before we start doing additional things. It may be difficult to persuade people of this, but it is important that we stick to that advice.

Q489 Sir Christopher Chope: But have you heard that the Lord Speaker is thinking of having different arrangements in the other place for all his colleagues who have been vaccinated for more than three weeks, so that they can sit closer to each other in the knowledge that they are no threat to each other, and that they will then be able to have arrangements that are more similar to traditional House of Lords proceedings?¹

¹ A representative of the Lord Speaker's Office subsequently drew attention to a recent message to Members of the House of Lords dated 31 January, in which the Lord Speaker wrote: "As the weeks go by more and more Members and staff, vaccine supplies willing, will be having their first and second



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Mr Rees-Mogg: I hadn't heard that. Interestingly, the House of Lords is covered by—I think—the 1537 Act of Parliament that sets out the seating for people in the House of Lords, which, you may like to know, maintains a seat for the Lord President of the Council, even if he is not a Member of the House of Lords. *[Laughter.]* As I haven't been vaccinated, I suppose I won't be allowed in, but I don't think it is a privilege used by any Lord President in recent memory.

Q490 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Can I ask if you can impress upon the Speaker that we should try to encourage people, once they have been vaccinated, to feel that they can exercise their right to come back to Parliament physically? That is certainly what I hope to do, and I hope it is what a lot of my colleagues will want to do as well.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I need to be very careful, because the Government advice is not to say to people that once you've been vaccinated, you can mingle again; it is to say that you have got to go in line with the advice for everybody else, because there are still uncertainties as to whether you could transmit the virus, even if you have been vaccinated. So, no, I cannot encourage the Speaker to do that, as a member of the Government. You, on the other hand—not a member of the Government—are entitled to make the representations you see fit to make.

Sir Christopher Chope: Thanks so much.

Q491 **Chair:** If I can just come back to the point about private Members' Bills, there are a number of Bills that are very close to going into the House of Lords; they just need a small amount of time in the Chamber to be nodded through. Would you consider giving that time in Government time in the next few weeks or possibly doing what happened with Philip Dunne's private Member's Bill and having the Government commit to taking those Bills into their own legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I think that would be a mistake because then the Bills would get into the House of Lords as Government Bills rather than as private Members' Bills and they would be subject to different timetabling within the House of Lords, which may delay them rather than help them. But if we are able to get back to having Fridays available, it is worth bearing in mind that Bills that have come out of Committee have priority at Report on the eighth Friday, and they can also be accepted on the nod at the end of business—though that probably depends more on Sir Christopher than it does on me, as to what he decides to do. But—

Q492 **Chair:** Could it not be possible to designate some time, as we have had in the past for opposed private business, with three hours set aside at the end of a day, or something like that, just to get these through?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It might be possible to do something such as deeming the next Friday to be the eighth Friday.

jabs. It is important to note that this does not mean that precautions against the virus can be abandoned. We do not know, for example, whether someone who has been vaccinated can still transmit the virus. For the safety of everyone working in Parliament the rules we have put in place should still be observed."



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Chair: That might be something.

Mr Rees-Mogg: All I want to say is that these things are under consideration. I do not want to give you any promise because I am still not absolutely certain that we will get back to Fridays at all, but I want to leave the message that I am very keen that we should and that we should help facilitate those Bills that have already had widespread support across the House.

Chair: That would be very welcome news to a number of Members who know that their Bills are really good legislation—that the Government have said they support—and they really just want to get them through. If they are not going to be carry-over Bills and we are not going to have those sitting Fridays, trying to find some novel way of making sure they can get to the other place would be very welcome. You have received our urgings on that.

As you will know—you have referred to it—we took evidence on virtual interventions. Aaron Bell has some questions on that.

Q493 **Aaron Bell:** To follow on from your discussion with Mr Wragg earlier, you made the case that it is easier for a Minister when they do not have interventions. It is also easier for Back Benchers, but it is much less fun—it is not much fun at all sitting here waiting for half-past nine to make a three-minute speech on whatever it might be and so on. The strategic director of the House told us that there is a technical virtual solution in principle allowing for virtual interventions. Do you think that would go some way to addressing the loss of spontaneity in debate, or do you fear that it would not work in the Chamber?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I read his evidence. The point he makes is that, in a Second Reading debate, you might have a dozen people standing up from both sides of the House—I obviously paraphrase; I have not learnt it off by heart—and you have to work out which one to take. What do you do? You take your own side primarily, because they will say nice supportive things—you hope—and then you take one or two from the Opposition to show that you are on top of your argument. That, I think, is quite difficult to do when hands are springing up remotely, when you are at the Dispatch Box trying both to read your speech and to look at a screen where people are popping up. You could give way to them, but you have got no imperative to give way.

If you are making a Second Reading debate speech at the Dispatch Box and everybody is jumping up and down, the noise is such that you feel you have got to give way to somebody just to calm things down and keep things broadly orderly. If you just have silent hands pinging up over Zoom it is quite easy to ignore, isn't it? Look, I think it is wonderful that the Commons authorities are looking at this, because if we were going to have to go on with this forever and ever we would definitely want to get a system where we could have virtual interventions. Otherwise, we cease having one of the really great advantages that the House of Commons Chamber has over some other legislatures, which is that we genuinely



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debate, rather than having speeches read into the record. But assuming this isn't going to last forever I think the complexities of making it work are great, and that we need to get back to physical participation.

Q494 **Aaron Bell:** I concur with that. It follows that, in line with what Sir Christopher said, getting people vaccinated—House staff, the vulnerable and perhaps other Members—is a priority. You obviously have to toe the Government line as to the caution that we are employing there. Are you making the case that once we get through the first groups—1 to 9, the most vulnerable people—Members, alongside other key workers such as shop workers and teachers, should be vaccinated towards the start of the second phase, or are you not prepared to do that, and will just leave it up to us to make our own cases?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think it is a very difficult argument to make. I am 51. I think it is quite hard to argue, other than if this is what the experts tell us, that I deserve priority over a schoolteacher. To say that MPs generically deserve priority over schoolteachers or police officers: what would our constituents think of that? I am very keen to get Parliament back—I think it is really important, and I think democracy is fundamental—but we are sitting. We are getting through our business. We are fortunate compared with many in the service sector who aren't actually able to go into their place of work, or who find that their work is postponed in some way. So I think to argue for special treatment for us is really quite difficult. On the other hand, the police who guard us, the security officers who also guard us—security forces and the police are a category that may be looked at more broadly, and not just in terms of Parliament. But that is not a matter for me. That is a matter for the Committee that advises on this.

Q495 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you. My final question is around parity of treatment. In April last year you introduced a system for virtual proceedings, ensuring, in the motion's words, "as far as possible parity of treatment between Members participating virtually and Members participating in person". We have all accepted that the virtual proceedings model had its shortcomings over the following months, but clearly the Government did not continue to have commitment to parity of participation. Could you explain why that was the case last year?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It was done last year because we had very limited technology. We had two-hour slots and then we had to stop and rewind. To give an advantage to people who were here physically to raise points of order, and things like that, or to move that we sit in private, or whatever they wanted to do, would have made the use of the technology time much harder, because you had these interruptions for bits that when you are very short of time are not necessarily your priority. Now, if somebody is in the Chamber and wishes to raise a point of order, a point of order can be raised, if the Speaker chooses to take it. That seems to me to be perfectly fair. It is difficult to do remotely, but just because things are harder to do remotely doesn't mean you should be banned from doing them when you are physically in the Chamber. That applies to interventions as well. If you are in the Chamber you can make interventions and that maintains some good form of debate. I think that is positive.



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Q496 **Aaron Bell:** Do you think as we move out of this we will go back through the steps by which we went into it in? Do you think we will go back to the point where you can only do interrogative proceedings virtually, and debate will be in person again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I wish I knew the answer to that, but I slightly wait upon events with the unwinding of the pandemic restrictions generally and how that works, and with seating in the Chamber and issues that will be for the Speaker, such as call lists. As long as the number of seats in the Chamber is restricted, we will need to have call lists, but will the Speaker wish to keep those once the Chamber can be full again? That will be a matter for him.

Aaron Bell: There are lots more questions on that, but I will leave them to my colleagues.

Q497 **Chair:** On the virtual participation and interventions point, I had a session with the broadcasting team, and let me put on record the incredible amount of work that they have done. You alluded earlier, Lord President, to the fact that we had that horribly clunky two hours of time and then a half-hour reset. They got over that very quickly, and we saw in the other place what was possible in terms of debate. They are very confident that they can work up a technology solution to allow there to be more interventions and spontaneity. Given that we came into this situation never having had to adapt our procedures in this way, would it be so awful to try and let them develop such a solution with a view that even if we do not end up using it now it might be there if we ever needed it again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not hostile to that at all. The evidence you took last week is very interesting about the technological capability to do it, and about the practical difficulties. I agree with you. The broadcasting team have worked miracles. It works much better than it did before. That does not mean that there are not any practical difficulties. Technology improves, and as technology improves things become possible that one thought were not possible before. But it is not easy, and we should bear that in mind. It is not easy to make it so fluid.

Chair: I think we would all agree with that, but certainly on this Committee we are keen to explore what the possibilities are and to perhaps be the guinea pigs to trial some of these ideas. Maybe then we can come back to you with our thoughts for the future.

Q498 **Owen Thompson:** I understand that last Monday I was part of the first fully virtual debate of the House with my Adjournment debate. As things return to being less virtual, I am seeking a reassurance that there will not just be an overnight switch from the ability to participate virtually to everything going back to physical, and that this Committee will be involved in discussions around that. We have seen a couple of occasions where changes have been made at relatively short notice that the Committee had very strong views about.



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Mr Rees-Mogg: It will depend entirely on the course of the pandemic. The current temporary Standing Orders are in place until 30 March, at which point they lapse. Now, 30 March still seems quite a long time away, but the views of the Procedure Committee are always important, and there is time for you between now and then to express any views that you have on how you think it should be unwound, which the Government will of course listen to.

Q499 **Owen Thompson:** On the back of that, are you and the Government looking at any possible positives that we could take out of the virtual participation that we may look to continue, such as some of the things around virtual Select Committees, perhaps, which might bring some benefits as well?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes. I think that that is a very important point. I think you mention the right thing that has been particularly successful, particularly as regards the ability to get witnesses from far distant to come to give evidence. I am very conscious that we got consent for these temporary measures on the basis that they were temporary, and I would not want people, at the end of the process, to feel they had been cheated. Another thing that I think works very well is the card reader system in Divisions. You do not lose the benefits of having physical Divisions. On the other hand, it is a very quick and efficient way of doing it, and has a modest cost saving in overtime for Clerks having to sit at the desk. So I am not averse to those things, but it all needs to be handled very carefully so that people do not feel that we promised one thing and delivered another.

Owen Thompson: Thanks, Leader, and thanks, Chair.

Q500 **James Sunderland:** I have the clear view that Parliament needs to set the example for the rest of the country to follow, and to my regret, empty Benches in the House of Commons have become a feature of covid-19. Do you think that the Procedure Committee has the responsibility to set a clear road map for getting Parliament back to normal, and if not the Procedure Committee, then who?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I agree with you. I have said on any number of occasions that I thought MPs had a responsibility to lead by example. At all points when it has been safe to turn up physically to work, I have been encouraging Members to do so, to lead by example, to try to return to a degree of normality at as early a stage as it was safe to do so, while recognising that under level 4 and under lockdown, we could not do that. That was not always the most popular message to be giving, but our duty as MPs is crucial; we have a leadership role within our communities and in the country at large.

Yes, I think the Procedure Committee plays an invaluable role in reminding people of that and in setting out how we get back to normal, but also in getting the consent for any permanent changes that people may think should come about from the experience that we have had of things that will be beneficial.



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Q501 Suzanne Webb: I have a couple of questions. First, what procedural principles have guided your decision making on parliamentary proceedings over the past year? How have you drawn the line between proceedings that require physical presence and those that do not, and how important is the principle of equal access to your decision making?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I suppose it is an alternative reading of the Duke of Wellington's great line, when he was a politician rather than a general, that the Queen's Government must be carried on. It is a fundamental importance that the Queen's Government must be carried on, but it must be scrutinised by democratically elected MPs as well.

As I was saying, if we go back to the Easter recess 2020, what was I asking for? I was asking that we had as much hybridity as possible to ensure that we could have as full scrutiny as possible, focusing initially on scrutiny of the Government's decisions, then moving to the legislative programme, and then, as we got into June, ensuring that the Queen's Government could be carried on by legislation passing, so that not only could we legislate for coronavirus and have Divisions and so on, but the manifesto commitments could be delivered on. That has been the absolute underlying principle: democracy is always essential. It is never the case that you can say, "Well, we are in the midst of a pandemic. Just let those nice people in the Government get on with it, and let's not bother asking them any difficult questions." We need the difficult questions, which lead to better Government—that is fundamental.

On what should be physical, I think it was important that legislation was physical because legislation is almost always a removal of somebody's liberty to do something that they had previously done, and Governments should really be tested in the case they make for legislating. It is not just one question on one specific issue, as statements and oral questions are. It is about, "Let's understand if removing this right from somebody, making somebody do this, or put this charge on somebody, is a legitimate use of the power of the state." That needs to be challenged as thoroughly as possible before legislation is introduced, and that is unquestionably done better physically than remotely. If people have limited ability to appear, you focus on what is the most important.

In terms of equality of access, as you know I tried to get the motion through to allow the extremely clinically vulnerable to appear in all our proceedings. What I was doing there was trying to follow the Government guidelines to everybody else. MPs always put themselves in difficulty if they argue that they should have better treatment or special treatment compared with what we are insisting upon for our constituents, so I consistently tried to stick to the advice that the Government was giving more broadly to the nation at large.

Q502 Suzanne Webb: Thank you very much. My second question in this section is as follows. In the Government's evidence to our inquiry into procedure after coronavirus, you told us that the Government has kept the effects of the pandemic on the work of Parliament under review. Can you tell us a bit more about how the Government is conducting the



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review? What are your findings thus far, and how will they influence your future decision making? A word that you used earlier, which I liked very much and will be using myself, was “happenstance”. Basically, what we are looking for is how the decisions are actually going to be made, and in what way you will share those findings with the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not mean that we are having a formal review and writing a report; what I mean is that we are reviewing and that we are willing to respond to events. Inevitably, things have changed in the course of the pandemic.

Over the summer recess, we thought very, very carefully about whether in September we could get back to a greater degree of normality. In the end, we didn’t; we decided to stick with the restrictions and not to relax them, because that seemed to be most in line with the Government’s general advice, with PHE’s advice, and we didn’t want to do handbrake turns. As you can imagine, I was very keen that in September, if possible, we would get the Chamber full again, but that simply didn’t match the Government’s vital PHE advice and so, although we kept it under review, we felt we couldn’t do that. Likewise, when the Government was advising that the extremely clinically vulnerable should not go into work, even if their work needed them to go in, we looked to make other arrangements for the extremely clinically vulnerable. Then, when London went to tier 4, and then into the national lockdown, we looked at going back to more hybridity than we had had before.

That’s what I mean by a continual review: discussions between all the interested parties—that obviously includes the Speaker, me, the Chief Whip and the Opposition parties—to try to ensure that Parliament can continue to function as effectively as possible, while recognising its changing situation and that what was right a week ago may not be right today.

Chair: Can I bring in James Gray, who wrote a very good piece on this issue only last week?

Q503 **James Gray:** Flattery will get you anywhere, Chairman; that is very kind of you. Lord President, can I pry a little further into the decision-making process? By your own admission just now, opinions vary on these matters. Sooner or later, the sunlit uplands will arrive and covid will be over or beginning to be over—presumably, that won’t happen in one fell swoop; it will happen by slow degrees. Who decides between the differing opinions on this matter? When will they decide, and what is the decision-making process? Who will actually say, “All right, I’ve listened to all the arguments on this one. We are now going to”—for example—“allow the Chamber to fill up”? Whose decision is that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Various people have various different decision-making authorities, and some depend on motions in the House. In terms of numbers in the Chamber, that is a decision for the Speaker, on the advice of Public Health England.

Q504 **James Gray:** But that might well differ from the Government in that



case—presumably.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The numbers in the Chamber are not set by Standing Order; an authority has been given to the Speaker, by a vote in the House, that he can limit the numbers in the course of the pandemic. Of course, the House could rescind that order, but I don't think that it would; I think it wants the Speaker to have that authority. I think it's a sensible authority for him to have. But he could change that at any time, on the advice of Public Health England.

Q505 **James Gray:** All right, that's the specific one; what about the question of virtual participation? Who is that a matter for?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Ultimately, it is a decision of the House. The motions were passed; they carry on to 30 March, and it will be a decision for the House, ultimately, as to what happens next.

Q506 **James Gray:** Of course—everything is a matter for the House, but you have to lay the orders for the House to vote on, don't you?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Well, there are other ways of laying motions, but usually, yes, the Leader of the House has to lay them, but I won't decide like that. You make it sound as if I'll just wake up in the morning and think, "Well, we'll go back to normal." There will be discussions with the Procedure Committee, Opposition parties and the Speaker. The effort is to ensure that this is broadly consensual, subject to two things: one is that the Government can get its business through and the other is that we are properly held to account by Members of Parliament. If we can do those two things and get agreement, that is how decisions will be made.

Q507 **James Gray:** What I am driving at, perhaps in rather a clumsy way, is that looking in from the outside—this goes back over 25 years looking in from the outside at everything that happens in Parliament—it is a bit Gormenghastian. No one quite knows who does what or why. Would you agree with me that whereas to any normal person Parliament ought to resume normality, because of the complexity of the decision-making processes, Parliament might well take longer to do it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think there is great interest to get back to normal as swiftly as possible, certainly speaking on my own account. Clearly from your account, you would like to get back to normal. I know when I say that the House decides, you point out that I have to put down a motion, but actually the House decides informally as much as formally. It decides because people make their views known. The Whips in both parties get representations from Members as to what they want. It isn't simply that the Leader of the House determines.

Westminster Hall's closure is a case in point. I was more reluctant to close Westminster Hall than almost anybody else, and yet I had to bring forward the motion to do it because, in the state that the pandemic was in, the arguments that were put to me were overwhelming. The motion came forward and went through unopposed. So, I think the House decides even if the motion is put down in my name.



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Q508 **James Gray:** One final question on the process. You have given evidence to us before now that you anticipate everything returning to the status quo ante, but there may be further changes to be made thereafter. Why is that necessary? Surely it should be possible for intelligent people with a cold towel wrapped around their heads to come up with some good ideas that would be brought in as permanent changes? Why do you have to go back to the status quo before you change it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Because I think one should have a healthy suspicion of anything that politicians ever promise is temporary, because it then becomes permanent by default. You know the example of income tax. I feel that, in good faith, people like me said to Members who were very suspicious of these changes and didn't want them to happen, "Don't worry, this is temporary; we will go back to normal." I would be cheating them if, in a widespread way, I didn't do my best to facilitate—caveated by what I said a moment ago about it being a decision for the House, rather than me—and make my best efforts to make sure it goes back to normal, before decisions on permanent changes are made. We managed to get unanimity for most of the changes that we have made by promising people that it was only temporary.

Q509 **James Gray:** So despite what you said, even if the card voting system was a good one, it must be abolished and then, possibly, reinvented.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There may be exceptions if there is unanimous—

James Gray: You can't have both sides of this.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you can. If everybody says, "Look, this is fine," and there is no objection at all, it would be foolish to say we must get rid of it anyway, but if there are things where there is contention, and not almost unanimous support, then it is important.

Interestingly, with the ability of Select Committees to take evidence remotely, they pretty much had that ability already, but just didn't use it very much. I don't think the lack of its use needs to be reimposed now people have used it and discovered it works, when most of it—not all of it—was available under existing Standing Orders.

Q510 **James Gray:** Now you have accepted that the status quo ante is not necessarily what we have to go back to, and that there are good things that you know we will agree to and we can bring them in anyhow, can I inquire who it is that decides which it is to be?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an area where we have to operate by a very widespread consensus, but the default is that we go back to the status quo ante.

James Gray: Right. I think I see.

Mr Rees-Mogg: In terms of the card reader, that does not need any specific vote in the House of Commons, so if all the other temporary Standing Orders fell away and Mr Speaker decided to keep the card reader, he would be entitled to do so.



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Q511 **Chair:** I think there is concern, though, that on 30 March all these motions fall—they all lapse—and, unless you as Leader of the House choose to put a motion on the Order Paper, there is nothing that the House can do about that. There has been a tendency to use unamendable nod-or-nothings at the end of the day, so it is not possible for the House to express its true view. The House can only say, “Yes, we agree with what has been put down,” or, “No, we object,” and nothing happens. That has caused real anguish for Members who felt that that was not the consensus in the House of Commons—that that was not what Members wanted. Will you commit in your capacity as Leader of the House to making sure that there can be a debate on these motions, not just allowing them to lapse, and to allow an amendable motion on which we can all have our say, so that we can get to the point where we move to the next stage with consensus?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we have had a lot of debate in the Chamber on these various issues—debate time provided by the Government and even an SO24 debate on some of the issues arising—and I make weekly statements on business to the House, and these issues are raised then. I think there is plenty of opportunity for discussion, and obviously the Procedure Committee plays an important role in bringing forward its proposals and using Backbench Business time to make a statement on its proposals. I do not think that there has been a shortage of debate.

Q512 **Chair:** But we cannot vote on those. They are not voteable binding motions. They are an opportunity for debate, but we are presented with a nod-or-nothing at the end of the day. We saw what happened with Westminster Hall. We ended up with an additional day of debate in Westminster Hall, which would not have needed to happen had the Government chosen to schedule that one-hour debate at the end of the day—it would not have taken any time from Government business. Had it been scheduled for Tuesday, we could have got through without having the Wednesday debates in Westminster Hall.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Very often, these things have been consensual, and there is limited time for debate in the Chamber. If the House wills something, it can do it on a consensual basis. That is very routine, but if there is an objection, of course there is a debate. If things fall away on a specific date, that is because the House has agreed them.

Q513 **Chair:** Well, the House agreed in the case of the motions to allow them to go to 30 March, because we all want to make sure that they can be properly reviewed and that they are temporary, but it may well be that by 30 March we are simply not in a position to go back to a fully physical Chamber, and the House would like its say on that matter. There is a possibility that we will not have that say if you, Lord President, choose not to give us that time.

Mr Rees-Mogg: You assume that I have greater authority than in reality I have. You know how discussions take place across the House, to seek views from across House. I wish I were in a position to predict where we



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will be on 30 March but, other than that Easter will be shortly following, there are very few things that I can predict.

Chair: Yes, Easter will be very soon after 30 March. I have William Wragg for one final question.

Q514 **Mr Wragg:** Lord President, you were right to allude to me earlier as perhaps being on the “ultra” wing of opinion on our physical presence in the House, and of course you are quite right to point out that Select Committees could previously, if they so wished, take evidence from witnesses in a virtual way. May I merely lend my voice of support to yours in a return to the so-called status quo ante—lock, stock and barrel—with, I suppose, the same unbridled joy that many will be welcoming going down to the pub when they can? I will similarly welcome ridding ourselves of this imposition, necessary though it may have been. Is there anything further that you wish to add in support of that view?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we see how flexible and efficient Parliament is. I think the House staff have done a phenomenal job. The broadcasting team have done a remarkable job. If I rewind to Easter recess 2020, which I have gone back to a couple of times, everything we asked for was thought to be completely impossible, and then within three weeks it was all done. It was really very remarkable, and it has got better since. It was thought that Parliament might have to have a very long recess and things like that, and yet we got scrutiny up and running—not in its best form, but none the less happening.

I think what this level of scrutiny has shown us is the virtues of the traditional Parliament—not three-minute read out speeches, but slightly longer speeches, with interventions, challenge and debate, and not just people expressing their view, but people responding to what others have to say. There is also the spontaneous question—you got this in the Clerk’s evidence—where somebody wanders into the Chamber, listens to an opposing Member’s speech and thinks, “Good heavens! I’m not standing for that. I’m going to make a speech on this because I’ve got something to say and I have been inspired to speak.” That spontaneity is fundamental to making scrutiny work, and I think it is crucially important that we get back to that.

You need both aspects of what Parliament does. You need the theatricality of Prime Minister’s questions. You need the red meat of PMQs, when tensions are running high and the fundamental political decisions of the day are being challenged. But you also need the third hour of Report stage on amendment 72, when detailed points are being made about something on which the speaker is absolutely expert, and the speaker is able to go on about it for 10, 15 or 20 minutes, to explain why it is important. It is not that it will necessarily win the vote that day, but it may, slowly but surely, begin to win the argument, and once you win the argument, politics changes. You can’t do that in three-minute soundbites, so I think it is really important to get back to normal.

Chair: Thank you very much, Lord President, for your time. I think we



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have got to the point where you have run out of time for us—that is understood—but we have covered the ground that we wanted to cover, so thank you for that.

I will just repeat that this Committee would like to be part of the process of deciding what happens next. We are certainly looking at how we might best analyse the decisions that have been taken and the changes, and try to find those that, where there is agreement, were generally a good change that we would like to see adopted in the future, while bearing in mind, of course, that, as you say, it was promised that they would all be temporary measures. Therefore, they do need to be looked at and consideration needs to be given to whether they are things that the House wants.

May I urge you to make sure that, when changes are made, the House has time to debate and consider those changes, and possibly to amend them to reflect the consensus in the Chamber, while also, of course, acknowledging and remembering the guidance at that time and the situation we are in with the pandemic? We appreciate that it is very difficult to predict anything with certainty.

Thank you again for your time. Thank you for your frankness. We look forward to seeing you again—I hope, perhaps, around the time that the orders are due to lapse.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I always look forward to appearing in front of the Procedure Committee, which, as you know, I used to serve on and which I hold in the highest regard. It is one of the great Committees, if not the greatest, of the House of Commons.

Chair: We served on it together, so we are both big fans of the Committee. As did James Gray—he was another member when we were all there together all those years ago. Thank you very much.