

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Procedure under coronavirus restrictions, HC 300

Monday 8 June 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 8 June 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Kirsty Blackman; Sir Christopher Chope; Chris Elmore; Andrew Griffith; Anthony Mangnall; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson; Liz Twist; Suzanne Webb.

Questions 58 - 119

Witness

I: Rt Hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons.

Examination of witness

Witness: Mr Rees-Mogg.

Q58 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Lord President of the Council, for agreeing to join us today for our second public evidence session. We are very grateful that we are able to speak to you and go through a number of questions that colleagues have on the operation of the House during the pandemic, and what plans there are for the future.

Before we get going with the questions, Lord President, do you wish to make any comments?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you for holding this evidence session, and for the work that you and your Committee have done to produce reports very rapidly in relation to the pandemic and how Parliament should sit.

The general point I would make is that since the crisis started the overriding objective has been to ensure that Parliament could continue to sit. It is very easy to forget that, when we came back on 21 April, the question was whether we would be able to sit at all. We managed to implement a hybrid system that ensured that there was some continuity in Parliament, even though it was not perfect. It was a very considerable achievement by the House authorities to ensure that the basics of scrutiny were continued and some element of legislation. It has developed from there at pace with the rest of the country to get back to the fuller participation, scrutiny and legislative programme that the Government need. I look forward to discussing more of the detail of that with you.

Q59 **Chair:** On that topic, on 12 May, you announced to the House that you did not envisage having to propose any extension of the hybrid Parliament arrangements, which of course, as you will recall, we were all present physically for bringing in on 21 and 22 April. Last week, that changed and there is now virtual participation in some proceedings and there has been an extension of proxy voting. Could you set out for the Committee what led the Government to change their mind?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is very much the House of Commons moving with the country at large, so as the country was beginning to open up and we were making proposals for when schools would come back, we were ensuring that Parliament was in line with that. The message continues to be that if you can work from home do, but if your work requires you to return to your place of work you should be going back to it. That was the messaging that the Government were beginning to give very clearly at that point.

The question then was whether Parliament was working properly in a virtual or hybrid sense. As your Committee recognised, it was not. It was not doing its job completely. It certainly was not meeting the requirements of the Government's legislative programme. The scrutiny was very stilted, so that was why some weeks later we wanted to move,



with the pattern of the country at large, to come back after the Whitsun recess in a physical rather than in a hybrid sense. As I made clear on 12 May, and subsequently on 20 May, that was very much in line with the general advice, and not going way ahead of it, but none the less recognising our leadership role.

Chair: I am on record as saying that the previous way we were doing things in the hybrid arrangements was suboptimal. It would be fair to say that they are still suboptimal in some respects, but we all need to work together on improving that. Anthony Mangnall has more questions on this topic.

Q60 Anthony Mangnall: Thank you, Lord President, for being with us. First, I would be interested in knowing how many weeks of the legislative timetable have been lost over this period. Secondly, this Committee produced a report on the idea, before the Government published their motion to rescind support for the virtual participation. I am wondering what account the Government took of that report before asking for the removal of the hybrid settings.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have lost about seven weeks of the legislative programme. We were able to continue with a little bit of work on the Floor of the House in the Chamber, but it was primarily non-contentious work. What we lost most of all was work outside the Chamber, particularly Bill Committees.

On the legislative programme, the rights of Back Benchers to debate the legislation were severely hampered. Second Readings of the Finance Bill are not time limited; they are until MPs get fed up with talking. That is really important, because those are charges on the British people. They are increases in taxes and so on, yet all that you had were five-minute speeches for about four hours. We were not only behind, but what we were getting done, we were not doing in a way that I think was satisfactory for the British people.

We have considered the Procedure Committee's reports all the way through. They have been very valuable. When you go through your recommendations and what the Government have actually done, we have done a great deal of what you recommended, but not necessarily immediately you recommended it, but they have been very much where the Government have been going.

Chair: Yes; the right recommendations but perhaps not in the right order. Perhaps that is the way we should analyse it.

Q61 Andrew Griffith: I fear that your point is probably going to be well made already, Lord President, because we are sitting here at 3 o'clock and I have yet to see the call list for the third set of urgent questions and ministerial statements. The status of having a hybrid is still problematic compared with going back to a fully physical Parliament. Is there any scope to extend that to substantive debates themselves, notwithstanding my reservations about the way this one is currently operating?



Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a very good question. It is something that is obviously open to review. The difficulty is how you make a debate work as a debate when you cannot have interventions. In our first day back with physical debating, we had something like 60 interventions. In my own speech on us coming back, I think I took over 20 interventions in one speech. That is how debates need to work. It is testing the argument, developing the argument and evolving the argument. It is not a series of monologues that were written hours before and take no account of what has been said during the course of the debate.

With questions, that is fine. The question you asked half an hour ago is likely to be the same as the one you want to ask now, but in a debate your speech ought to evolve, and that makes it particularly clunky to have legislative debates involving people coming in remotely, and having to reset the programme every two hours to get the technology up and running and so on. It is not something that I am opposed to in principle. It is just, in practice, will it work? If I could be persuaded that it would work, I would have no objection in principle.

Chair: The Committee will perhaps want to take that up with you because we have some ideas of how it could work and how practically we could allow participation in substantive debates.

On the topic of other business, we are going to have some questions later on, but Chris Elmore, who cannot stay for the whole session, would like to come in particularly on the point you have just made about Public Bill Committees.

Q62 **Chris Elmore:** Good afternoon, Lord President. The Government did not make any nominations to Public Bill Committees until last month, which was when, as you will be aware, the Domestic Abuse Bill was put forward. You have made statements on the Floor of the House that one of the reasons for ending the proceedings before Whitsun, or at Whitsun, was that it was restrictive to have Public Bill Committees or rather that Public Bill Committees could not sit. Can you explain why that is the case, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: You might want to speak to your own Chief Whip in that regard. He will be able to fill you in on the issues that were arising. These things are arranged between Chief Whips, as I am sure you are better aware than most. It is not for me to speak on behalf of Chief Whips.

Q63 **Chris Elmore:** It is for the Government, Lord President, to appoint a Public Bill Committee through a Committee of Selection. I appreciate that you know that; I am not trying to tell you your job. My understanding is that the Government did not put forward any option for Public Bill Committees. I am aware, through the usual channels, that the Clerks and the Public Bill Office were able to do a hybrid proceeding for Public Bill Committees that did not involve coming into the House. That was tested with Whips from both sides of the House.

I am confused that you say I should refer to my own Chief Whip, or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

indeed to the Government Chief Whip, because there was testing done. It was not progressed by Government. It is not in the Opposition's gift to put that forward. There were names from the SNP, Liberal, Plaid and the official Opposition for Public Bill Committees. I am asking specifically what the logjam was in the Government in bringing forward the Public Bill Committees, because it appears that other things were in place, apart from the Government putting forward names.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My understanding on that is different from yours. First of all, on hybrid or virtual Bill Committees, it was never confirmed to my office that that capability had been tested satisfactorily. I am interested that you heard that and I did not. There was never any question about them having sufficient capacity. We will have four Bill Committees up and running, and that was never suggested in a virtual system.

I am afraid I simply heard something different in terms of the willingness of the Opposition to nominate to Committees. I am genuinely interested that you have been told that names had come forward, because my information was the opposite. That is why these things are best taken up by calling the Chief Whips to give evidence. They discuss things directly between them, and you and I hear things at second hand. My understanding of the Government position is that we were very keen to get the names to the Committee of Selection.

Q64 **Chair:** There is some confusion. When we were taking evidence previously, there was no suggestion but that physical Bill Committees could meet, even when the Chamber was operating a hybrid system. There was nothing to stop a physical Public Bill Committee meeting. The hybrid arrangements were for the Chamber only. Can you clarify the situation, because it does not seem to be in line with some of the other things we have been told?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is right. Bill Committees could have sat physically, but my understanding was that we were not getting names from the official Opposition for those Bill Committees, and that was a major logjam. But I have just heard differently, and that is why I think it is a matter that needs to be taken up with other people who have the actual answers rather than second-hand answers.

Q65 **Chair:** Lord President, could we ask you to find out exactly what the situation is? It feels as if we are being told different things by different people. We would like clarity on that matter. We are all frustrated, particularly those of us who were elected on the same manifesto, that some of our legislation appears to have been held up, and there is not clarity as to why it has been held up.

Some are saying it is because Public Bill Committees could not meet. You have clearly said that that is not the case. Physical Bill Committees could have met over the period of the hybrid Parliament, but your understanding is that it was about not having appointments to the Committee of Selection. If that is the case, there has been some



HOUSE OF COMMONS

breakdown in the usual channels, which is not acceptable. We have heard other concerns. We would like to know, and perhaps you could write to us with the correct position.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will tell you my understanding because that may be helpful. Bill Committees could meet, although there was a question of how many. Nominations were not being made by the Opposition. That is the position as I understood it.

Kirsty Blackman: The statement—*[Inaudible]*

Chair: Sorry, Kirsty, we have lost you. Can you start again?

Kirsty Blackman: The statement that was made in the House about us—*[Inaudible]*

Chair: We have lost you again. Can you put your microphone closer to your mouth? We get the beginning and then we lose you.

Kirsty Blackman: Leader of the House—*[Inaudible]*

Chair: It has gone again. If you type the question to me, I will read it out to the Leader of the House to be absolutely clear. You have the next set of questions, Kirsty, so perhaps we can try to find a way of resolving the sound issue before we go on.

While we are trying to resolve that, could James Sunderland take his question? We will come back to Kirsty. Lord President, what we are seeing is one of the many suboptimal issues around virtual participation. We are, all of us, understanding of that, but we also need to understand exactly where we have got to.

Q66 **James Sunderland:** Lord President, thank you for joining us. My question is in two parts. First, on Wednesday 3 June what notice did you have that the Prime Minister planned to make an announcement about extending proxy voting?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The position the Prime Minister outlined was the agreed Government position. I notified the Chairman of your Committee beforehand, and Mr Speaker had had an indication the night before that it was likely; I do not think he had been told formally that it was going to happen. It was pointed at, it would be fair to say, in a meeting with the Speaker the night before, rather than formally advised.

Q67 **James Sunderland:** The second part of my question is, when did the Government first give notice to the Commons authorities that they would be expected to devise an extension to the current pilot scheme?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Procedure Committee itself mentions proxy voting in one of its reports. This was something that was very much under discussion as one of the methods that could be used with a virtual or hybrid Parliament ending, and getting back to a more physical Parliament. All sorts of discussions were going on.

Q68 **Chris Elmore:** Lord President, on the area of proxy voting, will Members



eligible for proxy voting under the scheme retain their eligibility for as long as NHS advice to them to stay at home continues, and that it is very broad brush, as long as that advice stays the same?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The specific details of the scheme, following the broad motion passed by the House, is agreed by the Speaker and the three party leaders. It will continue as set out in the motion into July, and we will have to see where we are in July as to any renewal of it. The details of the scheme, as I say, will be a matter between the three party leaders and the Speaker to agree.

Q69 **Chris Elmore:** The Committee was undertaking, as you will be aware, an inquiry before the pandemic started around proxy voting. Would you be of the view that proxy voting for parental leave has become permanent? It is not a trick question, Lord President; I am suggesting that things have moved on a bit. That is all I am trying to say.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am nervous of pre-empting your Committee's report into how it has been working. If I were to say that I had absolutely no qualms about bringing forward the motion to extend it, so that your Committee after the election could report, that may give you an indication of my view without pre-empting your report.

Q70 **Chris Elmore:** In relation to advice from the different nations, I know the Lord President and I took a different view in the debate in the Chamber last week about what the right to attend meant, but if the advice in any of the nations of the UK is that you should be staying home, and that is different from the neighbouring nation's advice in terms of the United Kingdom, does the Member follow that advice?

Secondly, in terms of the proxy system, does the Lord President have a view on Members who have to, on clinical advice, not attend the House. Does he have a view on parental responsibilities? We have to remember that Members have family pressures or may have to stay at home because a family member is shielding. NHS advice is clear on that. Could you expand on those two points, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, certainly. Everyone has sympathy for people with parental responsibilities. It is such an important responsibility for all of us. As it happens, this evening I shall be moving a motion on sitting Fridays, and one of my children is going to have to come into the House of Commons and sit in my office while I am doing that because there is no one else to look after her. My family are at home in Somerset and one child is back at school. It is very complicated, and I sympathise with Members. I have some experience of it, inevitably. It is important to be sympathetic.

As regards different advice, Members must to some extent decide for themselves. Each Member will come to a view on whether, as a key worker, that Member decides that the role as a key worker requires him or her to attend Parliament in line with the advice that is being given. It is important to remember that we are key workers, and that, therefore,



going to our place of work is a reasonable thing to do. That has been in all the Government's advice since the beginning of the lockdown.

I do not think there is any inconsistency, although when you get on to ancient constitutional rights it is worth bearing in mind that considerable elements of our constitution are not in specific legislation. That does not mean that they are none the less important rights. The right of a Member of Parliament to attend Parliament is an absolutely fundamental right in a democracy, and any effort to stop a Member attending Parliament would be fundamentally undemocratic.

Chair: We have some specific questions on that issue later. Owen has a follow-up specifically on proxy voting.

Q71 Owen Thompson: Lord President, there have been criteria put in place for Members who are eligible to apply for a proxy vote. I have seen some organisations suggesting that that could be discriminatory. I am keen to hear your views on the fact that, certainly when the Procedure Committee considered our report, we took great care to remove all references to medical or any specific reasons as a requirement to be eligible. By having eligibility criteria, rather than a general allowance for any Member to apply for a proxy vote in this circumstance, would you consider that actually what has been put in place is discriminatory against some Members?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I would not. It is very important with all proxy voting that you want to set out criteria, because it is important that in the normal run of events Members attend Parliament to vote. That is quite proper. It is particularly important in relation to Ministers because Ministers often need to be away on governmental business, but that should not be an excuse for not attending Parliament. You cannot just say it is carte blanche for anybody who wants a proxy vote. You need to set out criteria.

When you set out those criteria, of course Members have a choice. I absolutely accept that Members may well want to maintain confidentiality around any medical condition that they may have, but any Member in that position may arrange to have a pair. Therefore, their view will be represented through the pairing system, which is very well established, rather than having a proxy. If your choice is either that everybody can have a proxy or people have to have a reason but they are able to maintain confidentiality if they wish, I would go for the second option.

Chair: Kirsty has a few questions. Apologies, Lord President, as we will be going back slightly to the previous conversations we were having about Public Bill Committees, and then on to virtual participation.

Q72 Kirsty Blackman: I apologise for the issues I was having with my hardware.

Leader of the House, I have a couple of questions. The first is on what you have just said about the disclosure that people are going to have to



make on their health condition in order to get a proxy vote or to participate virtually. As the criteria have been published, it is now possible for the general public to work out whether or not an MP fits into one of those categories. Do you not think that we have to give enough information to members of the public without having to disclose personal health conditions as well? Maybe it is not something that people have even told their family.

Mr Rees-Mogg: First of all, the Speaker has written to Members setting out the conditions under which they will be allowed remote participation. Those are a wide spread of circumstances that I do not think will interrupt people's confidentiality. It has been set broadly enough that simply appearing remotely will not indicate that one has any particular condition but merely that, because of the current crisis, attendance at Parliament is problematic because of personal circumstances.

Details of the proxy vote will be agreed by the three party leaders, together with what requirements there are of Members in relation to their health and what information they have to give in confidence. It is not public information. They will have to be in one of three categories: over 70, clinically vulnerable or extremely clinically vulnerable. It will be a choice for them as to whether to apply for a proxy vote, or whether they in fact decide that they would rather be paired, in which case they do not have to give that information at all nor apply for a proxy vote. I think confidentiality is maintained.

Q73 Kirsty Blackman: I would suggest that it is for those Members to decide whether or not they feel that they have been discriminated against. In fact, there are Members who believe that they are being discriminated against by the system. It may be that the Leader of the House needs to reconsider the way the system works in order that the Members do not feel that way.

I have a couple of other questions. Leader of the House, you said during the debate last week: "This House plays an invaluable role in holding the Government to account and debating legislation, which can only properly be fulfilled when Members are here in person." Can you let us know why it was required that virtual participation would be cancelled in order for Bills to proceed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We simply were not getting Government business through. The legislative agenda that was set out in the Queen's Speech based on the general election was not making sufficient progress with a hybrid Parliament. Scrutiny was, to use the term of your Chairman, suboptimal. Even the shadow Leader of the House from the SNP was calling for an exclusively virtual Parliament, because he recognised that appearance in the Chamber was beneficial over a virtual appearance. It seemed to me, therefore, very important to try to get back to proper scrutiny once it was safe to do so, in line with health guidelines and in line with the rest of the country.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q74 **Kirsty Blackman:** Now that we are going to have a hybrid situation continuing, does that mean it will be impossible for legislation to proceed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We are not having a hybrid in legislation. Bill Committees will sit physically.

Q75 **Kirsty Blackman:** There are questions around virtual participation and where things are in virtual participation. This will elapse on 7 July. Can the Government tell us what criteria would need to be in place in order for it to continue? Is the Leader of the House aware that shielding guidance in Scotland has been extended until 31 July? People in Scotland who are shielding will be required to do so until 31 July. Would you consider extending both the virtual participation and the proxy voting on the basis that shielding has already been extended?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand that the proxy voting is going on until later in July anyway, in line with the experiment in proxy voting for maternity and paternity leave. That has a later end date. The date 7 July is in relation to the potential opening up that may take place slightly before that. We will carry on following the advice that is being given nationally as to how we should proceed. That is the reason for that date. We will follow what the rest of the country is doing.

Q76 **Chair:** I accept the point you are making, Lord President, about 7 July being after the next likely changes in terms of the way the lockdown operates, in England certainly. On 20 May, when the decision was taken not to extend the virtual Parliament, we did not know at that point; we understood and expected that schools would reopen, and so on. On the same basis, surely it would have been better to continue with the previous motion, with a virtual Parliament and remote voting, until we had come back to Parliament after the Whitsun recess, rather than having this strange situation of having to recall Parliament in order to bring forward amendments to the resolution that had been resolved on 21 April. That in itself had been suboptimal, because we had had to come back physically at a point when we did not want to be there physically.

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I would not agree with that. We were looking at the position that the Government were announcing in relation to the reopening of schools on 1 June. We were coming back on 2 June, a day later. There was always the possibility that events would change between 20 May and 1 June/2 June, and our motions had been promised to Members as temporary.

For us to have extended the motions beyond the point at which the Government were advising schools to go back would have shown a lack of leadership from Parliament. Therefore, we needed to be looking at what was happening elsewhere. The comparison with schools is very good; some schools have made great strides in hybrid learning, but hybrid learning is not as good as learning in the schoolroom. We see that with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliament. A hybrid Parliament is not as good as a real Parliament. We were trying to get back to it, as I say, in line with the rest of the country.

Q77 Chair: In that case, would it have been better to have done the motions that we did on Tuesday last week on 20 May, before we rose for the Whitsun recess? I do not understand why the recall of Parliament needed to happen in order to do things that we could have done before the Whitsun recess.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We could not have done it before the Whitsun recess because things were evolving. A mere fortnight during the course of the pandemic can see a significant change in either direction as to the requirements that there are going to be. You could not be certain on 20 May what the position would be on 2 June. A technical recall—a recall of a couple of hours—meant that motions could be put down on the Monday for the Tuesday, whereas, if we had not had that recall, any motions for Tuesday 2 June would have had to be put down on the day that Parliament rose for the Whitsun recess. That was in a position when it was not entirely clear what the situation would be nationally. It was clear what was hoped for, but not what the actuality would be. That is why we had to do it as more information became available.

Q78 Chair: We of course recommended that the motion should have been extended to 3 June to avoid the need for the recall. As it would have expired on 3 June, would that have been so bad?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we wanted to be getting back to normal in the same way as the schools were. The schools were planning to go back on 1 June, as indeed they did in a limited way, and we wanted to get back to normal at the same time. I think that made absolute sense and gave us the ability to consider where we wanted to go at that stage, which we have done. It is always important for us to be going with the country at large.

Q79 Kirsty Blackman: Leader of the House, you have been very clear with us about the fact that things were evolving quickly and changing. You are right that things could have gone either way during that two-week period. Do you not accept that you made a mistake, that it was the wrong thing to do and that the Government should apologise and say, “We are sorry, we should have done this the other way around”? That would have meant much less upheaval and much more certainty for everybody.

Mr Rees-Mogg: You cannot provide certainty in an uncertain world. That is a general point of principle. No, I think it was right for MPs to come back. We have a leadership role in our communities. The very clear message from the Government was that people who could not work effectively from home ought to go back to their workplaces.

I think you have to recognise that there was a change of emphasis between the early stage of the lockdown and the second stage of the lockdown. Once we were into the second stage of the lockdown, the emphasis on going back to work, if that was the only way you could do



HOUSE OF COMMONS

your job properly, was much stronger, and that is what we were following. It is only right that MPs do what they are telling their constituents to do.

- Q80 **Kirsty Blackman:** The only reason that we could not work from home was that the Government removed our ability to work from home. We were put in that position.

My next question is about proxy voting. I am sorry if I missed this when I had to leave because of my sound issues. Can you let us know when you think proxy voting will be brought in?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On your first point, the reason we could not carry on working from home is that we were not running Parliament properly working from home. We could not do our job properly that way.

The details of the proxy scheme are being discussed between the representatives of the three party leaders and the Speaker, and modelled on the Standing Order for paternity and maternity leave. They are the ones who have to agree the system, and they are working on that. I think the Speaker said last week that he hoped that it would be introduced early this week.

- Q81 **Kirsty Blackman:** On the question of doing things properly, does the Leader of the House not agree that the scenes that we saw in Parliament last week with voting—the very long line, the 45 minutes, people having to stand outside and the lack of social distancing—were certainly not doing our job properly?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The first vote took 45 minutes. The second vote took just over half an hour and the third vote just under half an hour. People got used to the system. As I said in the debate that preceded that vote, there were bound to be teething problems. Later this week, there will be an even better system, which Mr Speaker has been working on to deliver for MPs.

Inevitably, in the midst of a pandemic and the crisis surrounding it, some things are introduced and they will improve with time. That is just how things work. I do not think MPs should be ashamed about queuing for 45 minutes. I do not think that was an impossible burden to put on Members of Parliament. It is something that our constituents are quite used to.

- Q82 **Chair:** I concur they are quite used to it, as I think we all are when we are queuing for the supermarket, but they perhaps do not have to do it on their way to work. I think our constituents want to make sure that we have the maximum time available to do the job that they elected us to do. I hope we will be moving away from that particular form of Division as soon as possible. You have indicated, Lord President, that there will be a change in the way Divisions operate. Are you able to give us any more information on that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is really a matter for Mr Speaker. I do not want to tread on his toes.

Q83 **Chair:** Do you know when we are likely to be able to use the new form of Divisions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I saw a test of it this morning and it seemed to work efficiently. The aim is during the course of this week, but quite rightly the Commons officials are trying to ensure that it works properly before introducing it. It is being worked on. I am not trying to be coy. It involves using your MP card to swipe in the Division Lobby. It seems a quicker and more efficient system, but it is being tested and it is, as I say, a matter for Mr Speaker.

Q84 **Chair:** We would be very interested in trying out those tests. It was one of the things we were keen to do when remote voting was being introduced, at the recommendation of the Government's motion that asked for remote electronic voting. We on the Procedure Committee took part in a number of trials before there were trials of the full system. It is disappointing that Members of Parliament were not able to try out the system that we tried last week, before votes went live under that system.

Likewise, I recommend that if at all possible there are some opportunities for Members to try the new system so that the teething problems, which we saw on remote voting when we did our first widespread trial of it, and other things can be ironed out before it goes live, and we do not end up with, for example, the security issues we saw with the previous system.

I have one final question on Divisions before I move to Owen, who will ask further questions on Divisions. This is specifically on how much time votes take. Clearly, with 2-metre distancing, any Division, even using card readers in the Lobbies and more opportunities to vote, is still going to be longer than we had previously in the ideal world when we could all be in the Division Lobby, get through and declare a vote within 15 minutes.

Will the Government be looking at extending the amount of time in programme motions that is allocated for scrutiny, to compensate for the fact that we may be spending a great deal of the day not scrutinising Government but actually queuing up to vote?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It obviously depends on the stage of the Bill you are at. For Second Reading and debates on motions, where the vote is taken at the end of the day, it merely means we stay a bit late; it does not mean that any time for scrutiny is lost. I am very conscious of your point in relation to Committee of the whole House and Report stage. Your point is noted. Let us see how long it takes for the new system.

There is always a balance. We all know that the call for Divisions is always subject to the desire to debate, and that works in a way that ensures the major issues are voted on, but that Divisions where the results are known before the votes take place and simply eat into time are not always forced. MPs have the right to force a Division if they want



HOUSE OF COMMONS

one. As so often in the House of Commons, it is a balancing act, with everybody recognising that ultimately business needs to be concluded, but there needs to be proper debate around it, and how you adjust the time requires an element of good will on all sides.

- Q85 **Chair:** On that point, will you consider changing Standing Orders so that more deferred Divisions can be used? At a time when we are in a pandemic, Members are naturally nervous about coming into close proximity with colleagues, particularly as we are in this unique position. We do not do our jobs close to our home most of the time. We are among the few key workers whose jobs are almost certainly a long distance from our homes, and we are travelling back to our homes, potentially taking with us whatever we pick up here, or bringing with us whatever we have from our constituencies. I suspect the more that movement can be minimised, the happier people will be, so I wonder whether you will look at deferred Divisions as the Committee recommended.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am well aware of your recommendation. It is a helpful recommendation and it is under discussion. It is simply a question of how you make it work. The point at which the most time would be saved by deferred Divisions is when deferred Divisions are the least helpful in terms of progression of business.

- Q86 **Owen Thompson:** The system of electronic voting that we used between 12 and 20 May was a system that many Members got used to. Have Ministers identified any technical defects in that system, as opposed to user error?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Inevitably, there is user error with new systems. The problem is not within the system; the problem is how MPs should be carrying out their job. You may have noticed MPs tweeting about how they were voting. With every piece of legislation and change in the law, you are restricting people's freedoms and potentially creating new criminal offences. It seems to me that that is a serious thing that should be done not when people are going for a nice walk, or whatever they are doing, but when they are physically in Parliament attending to the business of Parliament. That is the real problem with remote voting.

- Q87 **Owen Thompson:** I absolutely agree that a fundamental part of the job is the ability to cast a vote. The electronic system we were using allowed between 500 and 600 Members to vote without error in each Division, and it could be completed in about 15 minutes without any queue. Could you tell us why a system that now excludes a couple of hundred or more Members at a time is preferable to the one that allowed all Members to participate and carry out their job fully?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Because it is an understanding of what Parliament is. Parliament is an assembly of the nation coming together to make a decision; it is not somewhere people remotely send in their views. Parliament is a single whole; it takes place at Westminster with people representing, arguing, putting and discussing their views and coming



HOUSE OF COMMONS

together as one, not remotely sending in an opinion. It is about the oneness of Parliament as much as anything else.

Q88 **Owen Thompson:** Is it preferable to exclude a couple of hundred Members from the ability to participate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Proxy voting has been introduced for Members who have a particular medical need, and pairing is available as well, so there are systems to compensate and to ensure that all views are taken account of.

Q89 **Owen Thompson:** Pairing does not record the view of either Member. That is a point on which we can possibly agree.

Moving on from that, do you expect that the system you touched on, of touchpad voting, will require further modification of Standing Orders to come into operation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The system for Divisions, as I indicated, is a matter for the Speaker. I was trying to be helpful to the Committee.

Q90 **Owen Thompson:** But if it happened to show particular efficiency, do you consider that it should be extended to the end of the pandemic rather than for another short-term period?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Let us see how any new system works before jumping to conclusions. I hope the Procedure Committee will have views on it anyway, which would be very valuable to further consideration.

Chair: We need to see how that new voting system operates. Perhaps there can be some tests in which we can participate. We would appreciate that. Can we move back to the question of scrutiny of legislation?

Q91 **Rob Roberts:** I apologise for being late for the meeting. My first question relates to Bill Committees. We have scheduled four Bill Committees to run this week, with 18 sittings. I am interested to know what estimate you have made of the number of House staff required to attend in order to service those Committees.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The number of House staff needed to attend physically is about 100.

Q92 **Rob Roberts:** Is that the normal number that would be required, or have we deliberately scaled it down to the minimum number? Would it normally be 100 for that level of sitting?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We are running at a much lower level of staff working in the Palace of Westminster. Anybody who can work from home is continuing to do so, in accordance with Government guidelines.

Q93 **Rob Roberts:** With regard to scheduling and the calendar, which Bills do the Government anticipate putting through Committee by the time the House rises for the summer Adjournment, and how many statutory instruments do the Government require to be considered in DL



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Committees during the same period?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I cannot pre-empt my weekly business statement about the exact number of Bills that will go through, but you are absolutely on the money with your question. The issue about needing to be back is that there are so many important Bills going through: the Domestic Abuse Bill, the Trade Bill and the Finance Bill. We have an active programme. We have four Committees this week, and we may need more. We had over 30 Bills in the Queen's Speech on which we need to deliver and we lost seven weeks of business, so you are asking the right question. There is a busy programme.

As regards statutory instruments, not only have there been statutory instruments in relation to the coronavirus crisis, but there are all the usual statutory instruments that are required. In an average month, there are about 100 statutory instruments. I would expect it to be not far short of that, excluding recesses, for the rest of this year.

Q94 **Chair:** Is that 100 Statutory Instrument Committees per month?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, it is 100 statutory instruments on average a month.

Chair: That makes more sense.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a sitting month; it is not as many as that in a recess.

Q95 **Chair:** Understood. Can I go back to the physical issues around holding Public Bill Committees? There was nothing to stop a physical Bill Committee being held between 21 April and last week when they started being held. Nothing in the resolution of 21 April stopped that, but we know there are issues about the rooms that can accommodate them. I think the minimum number in a Public Bill Committee is 16. Is that right? What is being done to make sure there is space available to run Public Bill Committees? Are you considering running Public Bill Committees not just on the usual Tuesdays and Thursdays but four or five days a week?

Mr Rees-Mogg: You are absolutely right. Consideration is being given to all of that, including which Committee rooms are large enough to facilitate Public Bill Committees, and whether the room off Westminster Hall, not Westminster Hall itself, should be used for Public Bill Committees.

Q96 **Chair:** And more hours per week for debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Whether other days should be used is certainly being considered.

Q97 **Chair:** Given that we have lost the time that was available, this Committee is keen to make sure that we make progress quickly. Therefore, speaking on behalf of the Committee, I would be happy to endorse increasing the number of days on which Public Bill Committees meet. I know that is an imposition on members of those Committees,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but, as you rightly say, this is the important work of scrutiny that Members of Parliament are elected to do, and it is quite right that that scrutiny should happen.

You touched on Westminster Hall and other opportunities. As Members of Parliament, we have three core responsibilities: scrutiny, the passage of legislation and representation. Scrutiny can be achieved for now through the virtual participation of Members who have health concerns and obviously through those of us who can be here physically.

On the passage of legislation, we need to clarify what went wrong over the seven weeks and we can see that happening, but representation is a problem in terms of our constituents and Backbench Business. If the Grand Committee Room off Westminster Hall is to be used for Public Bill Committees, what is going to happen to the normal run of Adjournment debates? I know we have some Adjournment debates. How are we going to manage private Members' Bills? You have a debate about that later. What about Opposition days and Backbench Business? How can we make sure that as Back-Bench MPs we properly represent our constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that the Clerk of the House gave you evidence recently. He said in relation to Westminster Hall that staffing was going to remain difficult and that the effort to keep people working at home if possible means that Westminster Hall will not come back immediately. But you are quite right; it is important that we have the representation of Members.

As to Backbench Business days, we have a backlog of Government business. Therefore, Government will take most of the time currently, but I am very conscious of the Standing Order requirements to have Backbench Business days made available. I am particularly conscious of the requirement of the Committee on Petitions for debating time. We are looking at ways that we may be able to facilitate that as well as the legislative and normal scrutiny agenda.

Chair: Lord President, we were both Members of this Committee when it recommended the use of Westminster Hall for petitions, so we can both take some credit for that.

Q98 **Kirsty Blackman:** The staffing issue is quite concerning for the Committee. We included in our report that we were concerned about any increase there may be in the number of staff. We were told by the Clerks last week that the number of staff had gone from 672 to 1,065. I would appreciate it if the Leader of the House could agree that in any decisions that are taken about legislation, for example, consideration is given to the staffing requirements for any of those things that happen. I appreciate what the Leader of the House just said about Westminster Hall. I appreciate his stance, but if he will agree to do that going forward it will be appreciated.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House authorities are very conscious of the need to encourage people to continue working from home, but to go back to work



if at all possible. As I understand it, the number quoted for the increase in staff on site includes contractors. Some of the building contracts are coming back into operation as well, so it is not a figure that relates to the return of Members of Parliament, which is a much lower number in terms of the increase.

Q99 Kirsty Blackman: There are not that many others. There is an additional 200, for example, as between Commons staff and PDS staff. Those are 200 additional staff who are there purely to service Members; it is not just about the contractors.

My substantive question is in relation to the business. Given that there are significant restrictions on travel for some Members, some may not fall into the categories who are able to participate virtually or allowed a proxy vote. Would the Leader of the House give us an undertaking that he will consider giving us more than one week's business in the business statement, because travel is very difficult at the moment? For example, there is only one flight a day from Aberdeen—not even every day—and Northern Ireland has similar issues. If he could consider extending it as far forward as possible, it would be really helpful for Members who have to attend Parliament physically at this time.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is an extremely good point. I am always keen to give as much information about future business as possible, and I had got back to giving a fortnight's business earlier in the year. If I can get back to that, I will try to do so. I think it is helpful to Members.

Q100 Chair: We are now going to move on to questions about answers to written parliamentary questions.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Chair, if I may come in first, I have been handed a note clarifying the issues on the delays to Public Bill Committees, which may be helpful to you and may save further correspondence.

There are a number of problems. It was not purely the putting of names to the Committee of Selection; it was a question from the House authorities about capacity issues and facilitating enough PBCs physically, with social distancing, which was not going to work for the Government. That led to a delayed start on virtual Public Bill Committees. By the time preliminary testing on virtual Public Bill Committees was possible, it was clear that the country was already going back to work and schools were going back, and there was then a move to come back here physically. Now it is possible to have four concurrent Public Bill Committees, which is going up from now.

It was more complicated than I initially said. It was not just the names from either side; it was a question of what could be facilitated virtually, how the testing was going and the changes in the Government's policy with regard to reopening things.

Q101 Chair: That is helpful. It perhaps raises more questions, because physical Bill Committees could have met in rooms 10 and 14, which we know are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the only rooms big enough for them at the moment. Some work was being done on virtual Public Bill Committees. I do not understand why the Government, given the urgency and the need to press on with legislation, did not go ahead with just two physical Public Bill Committees, as they could have done pre the Whitsun recess. I think we got through five Second Reading debates in the virtual system, and we could have started those Public Bill Committees. Perhaps the way to put it is that it needs further questions to be answered.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Speaking from the Government's point of view, we were very keen to get Public Bill Committees going.

Q102 **Chair:** We are saying that it would have been possible to have a physical Public Bill Committee meeting before Whitsun in the rooms that were big enough. There were some questions of debate; there was some talk about whether a virtual way of doing it might be possible. That was not the case, but in any event the Government somehow managed to lose seven weeks of time for Public Bill Committee debates for various reasons.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We were very keen to have Public Bill Committees.

Chair: Let us move on to written questions.

Q103 **Sir Christopher Chope:** As the champion of Back Benchers within Government and of Back-Bench rights, perhaps the Lord President can do something about the unacceptable delays in responding to written questions. I and a lot of other Members have raised this before. The latest figures show that, as of yesterday, there were 189 priority written questions to the Department of Health and Social Care that had not been answered on time and for which holding replies had been received, with no indication as to when replies might be forthcoming.

I know the Lord President has been sympathetic to the burden on the Department of Health and Social Care, but I remind him that it is essentially an English-only Department, so this is a lack of service to English MPs, and it is the lead Department at the moment in suppressing individual freedom. That is why a lot of questions are being raised about the restrictions on individual rights. To give one example, I have been trying to raise the justification and rationale for the 6-feet social distancing measure. I am finding it impossible to get timely answers, although it is of great public importance.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very conscious of this. I am slightly defensive in regard to the Department of Health and Social Care because it is at the forefront in tackling the crisis. A lot of the officials there who would have been answering parliamentary questions are dealing with the crisis, and therefore I ask Members to have a certain sympathy and patience with that particular Department.

However, I now have figures across Departments for those that are not performing well, and I undertake to write to the responsible Ministers to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

encourage them to improve their responsiveness. As it happens, the Department of Health and Social Care, although it has the most outstanding holding answers, does not have the lowest percentage of answers for named day questions on the figures I have. I will not name the Department at the moment, but I can assure the Committee that I will take this up. I take it very seriously.

When I was on this Committee there was a problem with a particular Department, and the Committee called in a junior Minister and the Secretary of State to answer questions as to why the Department was not answering questions fast enough. That is something your Committee has the authority to do if the situation deteriorates further or does not begin to get better, but I will do my best to make sure that it gets better before you need to do that.

Q104 Sir Christopher Chope: Thank you. The figures we have been given are that the Department in second place for not answering is the Department for Work and Pensions, with 29 outstanding replies, which compares with 189 for the Department of Health and Social Care. What can be done to try to help the Department of Health and Social Care give priority to answering these questions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As for that particular Department, I ask for a little bit of patience. It is at the forefront in dealing with the crisis, and that requires a little bit of time. In its defence, sometimes as it has been drafting answers, events have overtaken the answer that was being drafted, which is not normal. Normally, an answer does not change in the few days it takes to draft it.

Q105 Sir Christopher Chope: Do you accept that the Department of Health and Social Care is the Department that has the greatest public interest at this time? If Members of Parliament raise questions on behalf of their constituents, the only avenue for them, because we do not have Adjournment debates, Westminster Hall debates and so on, is to table a written parliamentary question.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I absolutely agree with that, and I recognise the importance of holding Departments to account. On the figures I have, the Department of Health and Social Care has answered 80% of its ordinary written questions within five working days. The number of holding replies is too high, but in the round, considering the pressures on it, it is not doing as badly as all that.

Q106 Sir Christopher Chope: From my experience, it seems to me that what is happening is that the more sensitive questions are being delayed and delayed, so the Department does not have to account for its behaviour.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Fortunately, the Secretary of State has been coming to the House regularly, and, now we have a physical Parliament back, there is more opportunity to ask him testing questions. If that were its strategy, which I am sure it is not, the Secretary of State will be on the Floor of the House to answer directly.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: We will now move on to the points we touched on earlier about the right of a Member of Parliament to attend Parliament.

Q107 **Suzanne Webb:** In your view, Lord President, can individual Members lay claim to a right to attend the House without interference? If you believe that is the case, is it a right that attaches to individual Members or to allow the institution of Parliament to function?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right to attend Parliament is very ancient. *Erskine May* dates it back to 1340. It is absolutely right to say that it attaches to the individual Member for the purpose of allowing the institution to operate. The institution could not operate if nobody was allowed to turn up. In giving evidence to you, the Clerk quite rightly pointed out that it must not be an undue interference. It has been well established that a Member of Parliament committing a criminal offence can be arrested for that criminal offence, regardless of whether or not that Member is going to Parliament. A Member of Parliament can be held in prison for a criminal offence.

What happens if a law is passed that makes attending Parliament a criminal offence is a very interesting question, and one that would give our learned friends food for thought and fees to pay for food. As far as I am aware, there has never been previously any suggestion of a law that would make the attendance of Parliament illegal. There I think you would have a clash with constitutional principle, and I hope that the right to attend Parliament would override it, because that is an absolutely fundamental right within our democracy.

Q108 **Rob Roberts:** You have pre-empted my question with skill and alacrity, Lord President. Very well done. My question was about what recourse a Member would have against regulations that may appear to prevent travel to Westminster to attend the House. This is perhaps particularly relevant in the devolved Administrations, who have slightly different rules from England. What happens if a Member, potentially in breach of regulations, tries to get to the House and is detained by an authority enforcing said regulations?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is helpful that MPs are key workers, and key workers have throughout the crisis been allowed to travel. Therefore, this has not arisen even theoretically. That is worth remembering and bearing in mind. I would expect the clash to be resolved in favour of the Member of Parliament because it is a most important right. Democracy depends upon the Executive and agents of the Executive not being able to stop those who hold the Executive to account doing their job. There is a clear difference between somebody who has committed theft, or another crime of that kind, and somebody whose mere crime is to try to attend Parliament because of a state regulation. We would be in very dangerous territory if the state tried to stop Members attending Parliament.

Q109 **Owen Thompson:** We have seen regulations laid that suggest that we could even go down to regional variations in lockdown, never mind for



different nations in the United Kingdom. If one part of the UK were to legislate to propose lockdown regulations in a way that would prevent Members attending, would Parliament be entitled to remove that restriction?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are a number of points. First, essential travel has been allowed throughout the lockdown, even in the most severe part of the lockdown, and attending Parliament is clearly essential travel. No regulation can be passed without ultimate parliamentary authority for it. The question that the courts would face, if any regulation purported to stop an MP attending Parliament, is whether it was valid on the Act that it was supposed to be drawn from. That would be a legal question. Personally, I would be surprised if it were held that anything short of primary legislation could restrict the right of a Member of Parliament to attend Parliament.

Q110 **Owen Thompson:** Is there any indication how many other key workers are required on a weekly basis to travel maybe 400, 500 or 600 miles, or, as I think the honourable Member for Orkney and Shetland, indicated, to make an 18-hour journey to attend their essential place of work?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The role of a Member of Parliament is an exceptional role, and a very privileged one.

Q111 **Chair:** To pick up on those points, last week I had a conversation with my local authority about local lockdowns that might come in as a result of test and trace. Clearly, we can all agree, and we agree, that, yes, there is a role for parliamentarians in scrutinising the Executive and representing their constituents in Parliament, but our job is wider than that.

We have a place of work that is also in our constituencies, representing our constituents and ensuring that we are dealing with casework. While I accept the point you have made, Lord President, that getting back to Parliament is an important statement that needs to be made—although we were in Parliament before Whitsun recess and that was, of course, possible—we also have the job of representing our constituents. It would be fair to say that Members of Parliament and their staff have worked incredibly hard over the last few weeks, dealing with an unprecedented amount of individual casework from constituents who needed help and support to obtain the very welcome financial support from the Government, and to help people who had issues around childcare and benefits. As I say, there was an unprecedented number of cases, and we do that job in our constituencies.

To go back to my point, when I spoke to my local authority, they told me that if there was a local lockdown in my area, if I was in Westminster, I would not be allowed to return to my constituency and enter the local lockdown, and if I was in the local lockdown they would not expect me to leave there, because it would go against the Government's own advice on how to manage local lockdowns. How do we square that? There is a tension, and we need to resolve it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Rees-Mogg: That somebody has a right does not mean that that person always wishes to exercise that right, and I think that is important to bear in mind. If the test and trace system said to me that I ought to quarantine myself, in spite of my undoubted and ancient right to attend Parliament, I would not attend Parliament for 14 days, but I would do so as a choice, because my absolute and undisputed right to attend Parliament is not something that ought to be taken away.

I think most MPs would make the same choice, and you, in your constituency, if advised by your local authority, would similarly be entitled to make a choice as to what you then did, without affecting your right. The principle is none the less very important, because if a very broad area was unable to come you might find that a whole area of the country was unrepresented, which would seem to me potentially dangerous in terms of our democracy.

Q112 **Chair:** Or, potentially, MPs could be stuck in Westminster and unable to get back to their constituencies to do that very important part of their job in their constituencies.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I must confess that, before I came back to Westminster, I checked with the powers that be that I was in fact allowed to go home to my family. The answer was that I was allowed to go back to my family, and that is true for MPs.

Q113 **Chair:** But is that the case if there was a local lockdown in the area your family was in?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There have not yet been any local lockdowns so—

Chair: No, understood.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we are getting very hypothetical at this point.

Q114 **Chair:** Perhaps, Lord President, it might be worth your consulting with your ministerial colleagues, because I think Members will be very concerned that they could find themselves in a hotel for two weeks or more, away from their constituency and unable to carry out their constituency duties. If you are in a hotel, you may not have technology, and so on. People will be very concerned about that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you make a very important point about how much has been done by MPs in their constituencies during the course of this crisis. The volume of work that MPs have had has gone up very significantly. The commonplace view that MPs do not do any work except at Westminster is very unfair, not just to MPs but to our staff, who have done an additional amount of work over an exceptionally busy period.

Q115 **Chair:** Hear, hear. We should all put on record our thanks not just to our parliamentary staff, all of whom we are making sure work from home and do not come into Parliament, even if we are here physically—as they were not, of course, in the period between Easter and Whitsun recess—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but to the staff of the House of Commons, with all the changes that they have dealt with. You will recall that we made a report on, I think, 8 April, saying that it did not seem at all possible that we would be able to have any kind of remote voting, but, within weeks, that remote voting had been delivered. That is a great testament to the professionalism of the staff and the risks they are putting themselves at by attending Parliament physically.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House of Commons authorities have done an absolutely magnificent job and have done things that no one thought could be done when we went away for Easter. I am full of admiration for what they have done.

Chair: We are going to move on to what happens next. We have just a couple of questions, Lord President. I know that you have a debate to prepare for, and some of us will be participating in it.

Q116 **Suzanne Webb:** What particular concerns have you had about the operation of Commons procedures since you took up your role as the Leader of the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very important question, because the Commons procedures are to facilitate the efficient operation of Parliament, rather than being an end in themselves. We have had the most extraordinary period of flux in the understanding of procedures, and the Procedure Committee could be enormously helpful if it were to look at how things have changed over the last couple of years, not just in relation to coronavirus and how we have had to adapt, but at things that happened before that, to see whether we need any areas of clarification. What is most helpful with procedure is that Members, Clerks and so on know precisely where they stand, rather than finding that things move erratically.

Q117 **Suzanne Webb:** I think you have answered my next two questions, which were about plans to address those concerns. I am glad you said that the Procedure Committee can help and assist you on that. My next question was to ask how the Committee could assist you, and I think you have answered that one, too.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Can I add one thing? When I was on the Procedure Committee, we looked at a revision of the Standing Orders, simply to tidy them up and get them back into a coherent whole, because they have been edited and sub-edited so much over the years that they are not in the order that one would like. We did that work very thoroughly, and the then Government just put it in a drawer and ignored it. It would be a very useful exercise to review that work so that we could have a more orderly book of Standing Orders.

Q118 **Chair:** Lord President, you have pre-empted my final question, which was about when you will bring forward proposals for a revision of Standing Orders. Are you keen to look at forthwith questions and the use of SO No. 24 debates?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Rees-Mogg: Your advice on that would be very welcome. We have an SO No. 24 debate today. They have a very useful role in bringing forward things that Members want to discuss urgently, but they are not there to overturn Standing Order No. 14. Forthwith was a rather complicated ruling, I think.

The problem with a system that operates on precedent is that, if a precedent is arbitrarily broken, that becomes a new precedent until it is reset. The Procedure Committee could be extremely helpful in looking into that. If you look into it, it has the virtue of being done impartially, rather than being seen as a Government settling scores, which I have no desire to do. I just want a Standing Order rulebook and procedures that work to the benefit of the House, so your work on that would be very welcome.

Q119 **Chair:** We look forward to seeing your proposals for amendments to Standing Orders. I assume that, should such motions be put on the Order Paper, they would be a matter for the House to decide, as is customary with House business. We look forward to that.

I thank you on behalf of the Committee. You will have noticed that, as we are all in different places, I have been chairing the meeting via WhatsApp, which is, again, a new technological way of doing these things. One of our Committee members was keen to make sure that we credited you with being such a technological innovator and being the Leader of the House who has overseen such technology revolutions, so we thank you for that, Lord President.

Thank you again for your time. I know that you have a debate to prepare for, and we appreciate that you have given us a significant amount of time today. We will reflect on all that you have said.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you very much. It has been a pleasure.