

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Procedure under coronavirus restrictions, HC 300

Wednesday 1 July 2020

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Kirsty Blackman; Jack Brereton; Sir Christopher Chope; Ms Angela Eagle; Mr Kevan Jones; Anthony Mangnall; Nigel Mills; Rob Roberts; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson; Liz Twist; Suzanne Webb.

Questions 120-177

Witness

[I](#): Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House of Commons



Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP.

Q120 **Chair:** I just need to put something on the record before we start asking questions. Obviously, you will know that we are in a slightly different situation, in that this is a private session that will end up as a public session, for the purposes of the record.

Thank you for arranging to see us so quickly to clear up some issues arising from your evidence on 8 June.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Not at all.

Chair: Last night, you tabled motions for the House to agree this evening that provide some clarity about the status of virtual participation in House proceedings. The Committee may also wish to ask you about that.

Exceptionally, this meeting is having to take place in private, because there are no facilities to make it accessible to the public under current coronavirus restrictions. All facilities for broadcasting oral evidence sessions have been taken by other Committees this morning. I should stress that you have not requested that this meeting take place in private. Both you and the Committee would have been very happy for the session to take place in public, but that could not have happened until next week at the earliest. A full transcript will be taken, as would happen with any other evidence session. It will be published on the Committee website as soon as it is supplied to us by *Hansard*. Is that okay?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is absolutely fine. I have something in the middle of my screen. Can somebody help me remove it? It is covering up your eyes. It is as if you have a mask on.

Chair: You may find that I am wearing a mask—who knows?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not want to press anything that disconnects the call.

Chair: Hopefully, as the questions are asked, it will resolve itself by magic. I know how these things work. There are often very clever and helpful people around who can help resolve things.

Shall we make a start? We will start with some questions from Suzanne Webb around the restrictions on the Chamber.

Q121 **Suzanne Webb:** The House of Commons Commission has basically suggested that the estate should still operate with 2-metre distancing. Were you satisfied with that advice from the House of Commons Commission?



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Mr Rees-Mogg: I am on the House of Commons Commission, and I think that the conclusion that was come to was the only one that was sensibly available to us, although I am not delighted that we are not able to go to a lower level of social distancing.

The Government's advice is six and a half feet, or three and a quarter feet with mitigations. The mitigations proposed for the Chamber were that we should make speeches sitting down, we should wear masks and we should have screens in front of us. Those present difficulties because, first, it is quite difficult to participate in a debate wearing a mask. It is perfectly possible to sit there listening to the debate, but if you wish to intervene and so on, that would have been a hindrance. Secondly, making speeches seated in the Chamber is occasionally allowed for people who cannot stand up, because they have had a hip operation or whatever, but as a routine procedure I think it would have been difficult, not least because the microphones are not in the right place for people who are sitting down.

On the advice we had from PHE, I think the Chamber, at three and a quarter feet, would have been a less effective Chamber than it is with the current social distancing rules. I cannot pretend that I am delighted about this, because I am keen that we should get back to normal, and I am keen that Parliament should lead the way as the rest of the country gets back to normal, but on the recommendations of PHE, I thought the lower distancing level was simply impractical. It is potentially available for Committees. In Select Committees, people are seated when making their points anyway. In Public Bill Committees, they stand. I think there is more flexibility within Committees to use the mitigations.

Q122 **Suzanne Webb:** Following on from that, in principle, going down to 1 metre wouldn't actually have enhanced the operation of the Chamber, the means of debate and so forth. I think you probably agree, based on what you said, that we should be leading the way on this, in terms of the 1-metre distancing—that is the guidance out there—and then the common sense around it.

I am a little surprised at the restrictions that have been suggested in order for us to operate in the Chamber, which suggest that any other business perhaps has to look towards that themselves when they are sitting in their offices and so forth. I do believe we should be leading the way on this. The guidance that we are offering everybody is that it goes down to 1 metre. In the past, in principle, we have been leading the way on how to social distance, and it has been out there in the public domain for all to see. Are there any comments on that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I entirely agree with you. When I read the list of mitigations that were proposed, I was surprised and thought that they were unduly onerous. The House can, of course, determine its own rules and procedures. We do not have to follow advice that is given to us, but we would have to be comfortable that a majority of the House shared that view, and I am not sure that would be right.



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There are Members who take the view that you and I take, but there are also Members who are more concerned about the operation of Parliament, and I think the Commission reflected that in feeling that it could not ignore the advice of PHE. Though I wish the advice were otherwise, that is probably the position I am in. Having been given that advice, I think it would have been very hard to carry the House as a whole in ignoring it.

Suzanne Webb: I think there is lots to be discussed around that, but I will be guided by the Chair, and the fact that we probably need to move on in this meeting.

Chair: I would like to ask the question that Suzanne has raised. We have a question here about what guidance is being given to other employers, and whether the restrictions and mitigations that were suggested for the Chamber are because of the kind of work we do, because of how long we spend in the Chamber, or because of the ventilation. It is important that we understand, because if we as MPs are going to be saying to our constituents, "This is the way you need to carry out your business," and yet we are not doing it ourselves, we need to know how we will explain that to people.

I see that Angela Eagle has a question. I wonder if she could put her question, and then perhaps you could come back on both points, Lord President.

Q123 **Ms Eagle:** Thank you, Chair. Given the nature of speechifying itself, when one is stood up and is speechifying, aerosols, which are the problem, and which cause the 2-metre length requirement—it has now gone down to 1 metre-plus—can be expelled and go across a wide range. I presume that is why the Commission are suggesting shields and things like that, as well as not standing up, to make it less likely that these aerosols are projected. The Chamber is not quite like a workplace: it has unique aspects when one is standing up and orating. Does the Leader accept that? Did the Commission also look at the view that, because MPs all go to their own areas—their communities—circulate among people there and come back, we are potentially a vector for transmission if the virus does get to circulating widely again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The droplets point is an important one. The issue is the spread of droplets, and if a Member is standing up and speaking, particularly in a loud voice, the projection of droplets is greater than it would be in most office environments. The Chamber of the House of Commons does have particular qualities, but there are other factors to counter that. By and large, Members are speaking forward, facing the back of people's heads for a significant distance to the other side of the aisle, so there are mitigations.

As for whether Members of Parliament are vectors of disease—I think that is how cricket balls have been described—no, that was not an issue for the Commission's discussion. If people are observing social distancing in their constituencies, which they should be, they will not be vectors of disease.



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Q124 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Can I ask the Leader whether there are documents relating to the decision? It is essentially a regulation. Normally, we would expect to have a regulatory impact assessment to look at the costs and benefits of a regulation. Is there any such document that we could look at to see whether we agree with the view of the Commission?

Mr Rees-Mogg: And, ultimately, with the view of PHE. It is a fair point to raise. The Commission obviously publishes its minutes, and the Commission spokesman is accountable in Parliament, in the House of Commons, at oral questions, periodically, for the decisions that are made, so the Commission can be held to account for this. Parliament is a sovereign body, with exclusive cognisance of its affairs. We are not bound by anybody's advice.

Q125 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Is there any way in which we could require PHE's advice to the Commission to be produced for us? PHE is now coming under a lot of detailed scrutiny and criticism from the Government. I am not surprised, because, for example, I asked a question relating to the advice that was given by the deputy medical officer on 20 March, to which I have not yet had a response, about why she was advising that we had a perfectly adequate supply of PPE. Despite the question being put down soon after that to the Department of Health and Social Care, I still have not had a reply, which makes me worried about the authenticity of the advice that is coming from PHE. Is there any way in which we, as a Committee, or the House of Commons, in its sovereign state, can look at the advice and make our own judgment on the facts?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I fear, Sir Christopher, that I would be teaching my grandmother to suck eggs if I were to advise you on the many procedures that you could use within the House of Commons to make your views known, the Procedure Committee being one of the them. There are ways to get the message across in the Chamber as well, however, which you know better than I do.

On the issue of non-answered questions, I will have to take that up specifically for you with the Department of Health and Social Care and see if we can get an answer for you.

Q126 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Thank you for that. On this issue, if we were able to get that evidence, miraculously, from PHE, are there any means by which we would be able to revisit the motion that you have put down on the Order Paper?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The motion on the Order Paper is more to do with the continuation of the ability for people to appear remotely and so on. The distancing rules are broadly at the discretion of Mr Speaker.

Chair: We have many questions about the answering of written questions, which have been raised with you previously, Lord President, and which we will continue to correspond with you about.



Q127 **James Sunderland:** Good morning, Leader. Can you hear me?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Loud and clear.

James Sunderland: In your view, is the Chamber functioning as well as it can under current restrictions? Are there any improvements to its functioning under the restrictions that you wish to see?

Mr Rees-Mogg: "As well as it can under the current circumstances" is, I suppose, the right caveat to be applying. It is far from perfect, but it is better than the fully hybrid system—if you can be fully hybrid—but it is not as good as the system that we are used to when Parliament is sitting normally without the restrictions in place.

I have spoken to a number of Members who are frustrated by the call system and the way that that works, and by the continued, more time-consuming nature of people appearing virtually. On the other hand, there are people appearing virtually who are concerned that they are at a disadvantage against those who are appearing physically, when they have good reasons for appearing virtually.

It is far from perfect, and I am sure that it could be improved at the margins, but it is as it is under the circumstances that we face. Crucially, scrutiny is taking place and the Government's legislation is getting through, so the legislative programme is working, but the proper function of MPs in holding the Government to account is also happening with a reasonable amount of rigour—the proper amount of rigour.

Q128 **James Sunderland:** Just a quick addendum, please, Leader. How far behind are we, in terms of legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In the Commons, we are now pretty much up to speed. The one thing we haven't done, which was going to happen just before the Easter recess and got knocked back, is the rating of public toilets, but that perhaps is not the most important Bill in history. We are behind on that, but otherwise we are pretty much up to speed.

Q129 **Anthony Mangnall:** Thank you, Lord President. I hope you can hear me. You raised the point about the call list. I think there is a significant issue here, not least in the way in which people are informed that they have been successful in ballots and then find themselves unsuccessful in the top 50. That is of enormous frustration. It is dangling the fruit in front of us, only for it to be snatched away at the last moment. I would like to ask that we address that, because there is a huge degree of frustration for people who are successful at the first stage but not at the second. It seems perverse to say to someone that they have been successful when they are not selected later.

Just to add to James Sunderland's points, the rather rigorous time schedules for having to submit your interest in either speaking in debates or putting your name forward for orals or urgent questions are a bit too restrictive, in terms of Members who want to get in. Many of us go back to our constituencies on Thursdays, and work all day on Friday in our



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constituencies, rather than focusing on parliamentary business. I wonder whether you could make your thoughts clear on how we can streamline the process.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The punishment of Tantalus comes to mind: every time you try to quench your thirst, the grapes are blown away or the water recedes. As it happens, I have been made aware of the issue of the long list and then the final list, and of the frustration that Members feel. I have taken that up with Mr Speaker. He is aware of Members' concerns. It is a question of trying to ensure that the lists are as full as possible, and working with a system that we have not previously had. It will be interesting, as this develops and we get back to normal, to know whether people like call lists in the end or not. That may be something that the Procedure Committee will want to consider.

You are absolutely right: the flexibility that you have when the House is sitting properly is simply so much greater. Urgent questions are notified the day before, which by their very nature means that they are not as urgent as when they are notified on the morning of the day in question. Likewise, with statements, Government business is sometimes dependent on other things happening that are not under the control of the Government, so you do not know whether there will need to be a statement until the morning of the statement.

These restrictions are a problem for the Government and Back Benchers. There is a huge administrative burden for the Speaker's Office. That is one of the reasons why the sooner we are back to normal operation, the better. I am particularly aware of the unfairness on people who expect or hope to be called and then find that they are not, and who have spent a lot of extra time hanging around to participate in proceedings. I hope a better solution can be found for that.

Chair: Of course, under this Speaker, we don't necessarily get everybody called, even on the old, traditional balloted list of questions on the Order Paper. Under the previous Speaker, Prime Minister's questions could last close to an hour at times, rather than the 30 to 35 minutes that this Speaker is very rigid in keeping.

Rob Roberts has a question, and he will also ask a question on behalf of Kirsty Blackman, who is listening but is unable to participate verbally.

Q130 **Rob Roberts:** Good morning, Lord President. Given that we are relatively up to speed with the legislative agenda, why the need to cut recess short? What are the plans for the October recess?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We are up to speed with the legislative programme, but a lot of that programme will come through for the autumn, and we will have to deal with Bills coming back from the House of Lords—the two Chambers interrelate. Although we are up to speed, the House of Lords has had greater problems, partly because of the demographic of peers and so on, and partly because it tends to take longer over its legislative programme anyway. Bills will be coming back from the Lords, which we will need to

deal with in the autumn, and on top of that there will be various things coming along in the autumn that were always planned for the autumn. There will be a full legislative programme at that point.

With regard to recess dates, I am afraid that recess dates will be announced in accordance with the progress of business. I am sorry to give you the standard answer, but with so much uncertainty having been hovering around, I do not want to give any steers that may turn out to be inaccurate.

Q131 Chair: May I ask you about the Government's contingency plan for what to do if someone in the Chamber is found to be infected with coronavirus? What would then happen to the people who were also in the Chamber and in the Division queue? We will come to further questions about Divisions, but I am curious to know what the Government's plan is for that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: In most respects, that is a matter for the House authorities, rather than for the Government. The issue for the Government is the guidelines that affect the country at large, and those are very well known. They would not apply to the House of Commons differently, and the House of Commons authorities would implement them to ensure that those people who had been in close contact were tracked and traced, and notified. Bear in mind that a lot of extra cleaning is taking place within the Commons anyway, to minimise these risks, hence the suspensions to allow for the cleaning of the Dispatch Boxes and so on before the next item of business proceeds. That is a matter for the House authorities, and they have been coping extremely well, implementing the general guidance that affects all businesses.

Q132 Chair: Sorry, perhaps I did not express myself well. What will the Government do about their legislative programme if there is a problem with the Chamber when a coronavirus infection is detected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Basically, what I said: if coronavirus is detected in any workplace or individual, the Government have laid out ways in which people can be notified, and they will then be expected to self-isolate for a certain period. That relates differently from the person who has the disease, who will be tested quickly, but it also relates to people who have been in close contact. That is part of the track-and-trace system. That will apply to the House of Commons in the same way as it applies to businesses across the country.

The implementation of the rules to keep the workplace safe are a matter for the House authorities, and I think that the House authorities have done exceptionally well in that regard, ensuring that everything is very clearly marked, that there is hand sanitiser everywhere, that the staff are being kept safe and that members of staff who want to wear face masks are allowed to do so. The House authorities have done an extremely good job in keeping the place as safe as possible. In the event that someone contracts the coronavirus, the requirement is that people self-isolate, so



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that would be put into place in accordance with the Government guidelines.

Q133 **Chair:** Thank you. I have one final question. What do we need to look out for in changes to the Government guidance that might mean that Parliament could go to a 1 metre or 1 metre-plus rule?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is the path that is the question, is it not? It is the mitigations that need to be added. Those are currently in place, and we are following the rules that are in place. The rules are kept under review, and the next deadline is this Saturday, which is when the new rules come in. We will only sit for about three weeks after that, and be back in September, so we will work with the rules in September as they then are.

It is worth saying that the Commission was conscious that the recess was not far away and that the onerous mitigations would have been implemented, potentially, for a relatively short period, would not have necessarily improved the quality of debate within the Chamber, and might, after the recess, all have been changed anyway, if Government guidelines are altered between then and September. I do not know that I should speculate about what might happen between now and September, because there are too many uncertainties.

Chair: Thank you. We will move on to questions about virtual participation in the Chamber, led by Owen Thompson.

Q134 **Owen Thompson:** Good morning, Lord President. I am possibly about to ask you to speculate. We have seen the motions. I certainly welcome the proposal to extend virtual participation through to September, so that we can know where we are at on the return from recess. Are you content with how the system of virtual participation has been operating so far?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First of all, thank you. The Government took the advice of the Procedure Committee, which suggested that we have the rules running through until after any recess, so that we did not need technical recall. That was helpful advice, so thank you for that.

This is a key question. The issue we face is not really whether the virtual hybrid Parliament is perfect, but whether it is the best we can currently do under the circumstances. It self-evidently is not perfect. There is great frustration for Members on the call lists, as we have discussed, and on the slowing down of interrogative procedures that has taken place. That is something that people are dissatisfied with and does not happen when we are meeting physically.

On the other hand, facing the limitations that we are and the requirements of shielding that we have, this seems to me the best way that we can currently proceed. When you ask whether I am happy with it, "happy" is not quite the right word. I am as content as I can be that it is as good a system as we are likely to get under the constraints that we currently face.



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Q135 **Owen Thompson:** As we move forward, there will be further reopening, for example of schools. What consideration have you given to the impact that could have on Members being unable, for covid-related reasons, to attend Westminster? We need only look to the local lockdown in Leicester to see the impact that could occur in specific areas.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This will be a collaborative effort between the Government and the Procedure Committee. I am sure that you will be looking at these issues. We will consider where we are in early September. The processes for people appearing virtually allow almost anybody who wishes to appear virtually to do so, including for childcare reasons. That will be a matter to revisit in September when the schools open, but I would not want to prejudge it now.

Q136 **Owen Thompson:** On this point I will ask you to speculate a bit. At what point will the Government review the decision on whether virtual participation ought to continue beyond September, and what conditions would have to be in place for the Government to decide not to continue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the House of Commons ought to be broadly where the rest of the country is, but we should lead rather than follow. We have a duty to our constituents, as leaders within our communities, to be the ones doing things first rather than last. We look forward to the Chamber getting back to normal when it is safe to do so, but I do not know when that date will be. It will not be before the end of July. Will it be before the beginning of September? I don't know. But we will have the rules in place so that we can have that discussion when we have the information we need to be able to make the determination.

Q137 **Owen Thompson:** Looking at how the Lords has operated its virtual proceeding, have the Government made any assessment of the effectiveness of the processes that the Lords has adopted?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Lords is a very different Chamber, for a number of reasons. It has a different demographic and a different approach to business. All voteable business in the House of Lords goes through the Chamber. Any business that goes through a Committee—it would usually be in the Moses Room, but that room is not being used at the moment—is only going through the Moses Room if it is not going to be divided upon. That means that the volume of business going through the Chamber is very different.

The Lords also has very different rules on programming, which basically means that any peer who wishes to speak will always get in on a debate. The time expands to meet the requirements of the desire of peers to speak. The differences mean that what the Lords is doing and what the Commons is doing are separate. I do not think it would be helpful for me to do a critique of the Lords—I had better leave that to the Leader of the House of Lords to discuss.



Q138 **Owen Thompson:** Finally, on 8 June you told us that you had no objection in principle to allowing virtual participation in debates on motions and legislation in the House, if you were persuaded that it could work. Is that something that has been given any more consideration?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought your Committee was thinking about it. The issues are the same as before: how do you make a debate flow, with interventions, when you have people participating remotely? How does the technology work, bearing in mind that it had to be reset every two hours, and Second Reading can be scheduled for six hours? Would you need to have those interruptions? How would the flow of business be affected? How effectively would Ministers be able to respond to interventions that were coming in remotely? It is a question of whether those points can be answered in order to ensure effective debate and proceeding with business, or not. My position remains the same: I have no in-principle objection to participation in the debates rather than in interrogative proceedings.

Q139 **Owen Thompson:** So ultimately if we could meet those conditions and essentially a proposal was made that met those conditions, it would be possible.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Assuming the technology is able to cope with it, yes.

Chair: Can I also welcome, on the record, the fact that the motion is until 2 September, which I think is a sensible move and means there is some certainty. We can make decisions in September based on the advice in September, rather than trying to speculate on what that advice might be. I also very much welcome the opportunity for the Procedure Committee to correspond with you again. We have the Clerk in this afternoon and we are going to ask him some questions about that.

I will bring in Kevan Jones, and I apologise—it may be a question on a previous topic but, proving once again that the tech is not perfect, my chat did not update in time.

Q140 **Mr Jones:** My question is about an issue with the call lists. I accept the frustration that everyone is feeling about this, but there have been a number of occasions when people on the call list fall out or do not participate. I wonder whether it could be a bit more flexible, to enable those who want to get in but are not on the call list to do so.

Just on legislation, I plead with you to bring forward, if you could, the long-awaited reform of the Mental Health Act, which I think is in the Government's programme. Certainly the mental health pressure groups want it brought forward quite quickly. Early sight of that, and movement on that, would be welcome.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very important point and is noted. I will take that up in the usual way within Government. As regards flexibility with the call list, essentially that is a matter for the Speaker—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: Rob, you need to mute.



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Mr Rees-Mogg: Basically, it is a matter for the Speaker, but I am sure that the Procedure Committee will pass on to him a desire for flexibility. I think it is a system that is evolving, but bear in mind that nobody expected the Chamber to operate like this before Easter.

Q141 **Mr Jones:** I appreciate that, but on a number of occasions last week quite a few people on the call list just dropped out at the last minute. I think if there were Members present who had not been successful on the call list it would have been an opportunity to get more Members into the debate, but thanks for your answer.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will pass that on to the Speaker.

Chair: We will move on to questions about Public Bill Committees. I welcome the fact that, as you have said, we are back broadly to where we would expect to be with the agenda for the House of Commons.

Q142 **Liz Twist:** We understand that the House service had capacity to run two Public Bill Committees a week under socially distanced conditions when the House returned from Easter recess on 21 April. You have explained that that would not work for the Government and have indicated that the Government required more Public Bill Committees to be able to meet each week to make progress on the legislative programme. Like the Chair, I am pleased to hear that we appear to have caught up. Why didn't the Government take the opportunity to put two of its Bills into Public Bill Committees meeting physically so that some progress could have been made?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are always keen to get Bills going forward into Bill Committees. The Government were exceptionally keen for that to happen but, as I explained before, there were a number of issues with getting physical General Committees—both Public Bill Committees and Delegated Legislation Committees—up and running after the Easter recess.

As you will know, the House authorities—rightly and with very considerable support from the Government—focused on getting the Chamber up and running. That was a very complex operation. They made it work extremely well and as seamlessly as possible, but that was where all the focus of attention was going. It was directed towards ensuring that the technology worked, that you could get the right number of Members in, that the reset of the technology could take place and the technology could match with the broadcasting equipment so our proceedings could be broadcast in the normal way.

These issues are technically complex, as you know, and as you see from today's Committee meeting. As the Chair quite rightly said, we are not being broadcast, and not because any of us wants to be in private but because of the limitation on facilities that ensure that Committees held virtually are broadcast while other Committees are appearing as well. So the constraints were there and they were real. The prioritisation, as I say,



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was on the Chamber, and the Government were enormously keen to get on with business, and the Government need to do that.

The Government do not have a right to win votes in Parliament, but they do have the right to put forward those Bills that come out of a manifesto, and that right comes directly from the British people. That was not going to be happening at sufficient pace, which was why we needed to bring Parliament back when we did. Now it is working, which is very good news.

Q143 Liz Twist: Can I ask again about virtual Public Bill Committees? Some of us on this call were involved in a dry run of a virtual Public Bill Committee. What consideration was given to using virtual facilities to run Public Bill Committees, to ensure that business could be buoyed up?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House authorities did give some initial consideration to virtual Committees, but the effort on virtual was really going towards the Chamber, as I have said, and physical Committees remained an option, once we could get Members back, to ensure we could get on with business at the proper pace. Virtual Committees were always likely to be constrained simply by the technical capacity. I say again, as we see this morning, there is not unlimited technical capacity for virtual Committees to meet and be broadcast, and you would have found competing interests between a variety of Committees to use the available virtual facilities. We want Parliament to be able to do as much as it possibly can.

This all really ties in with the advice coming from the Government centrally in relation to the behaviour that people needed to display during the various stages of the pandemic. The House came back at the point at which other things were coming back, and certain school years were returning. We were operating in line with the general guidance, opening up the Public Bill Committees and ensuring business could be brought through. That is both sides of business, ensuring that the scrutiny that Governments quite rightly face was being carried out on behalf of our constituents, and that the historic redress of grievance was being dealt with, but also that the legislative programme was being addressed. That proved to be possible, with the pace and scale that was needed, only once we returned physically.

Q144 Liz Twist: Do you accept that it was possible, both practically and procedurally, for Public Bill Committees to meet physically in April and May, during the period when the House was operating in its hybrid form?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think that is what I have been saying. I have been saying that the Government had a large legislative programme that they needed to get through and that required a number of Public Bill Committees. Considering the very substantial work that was being done in other areas, the resources of the House, the requirements of people who needed to work from home and all the other issues that were faced, the ability to proceed with business at the pace that was required was not there before we came back physically.



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Q145 **Liz Twist:** I guess the need to press on with Government business, which you have emphasised, is why I am a bit surprised that the option of a virtual Public Bill Committee was not pursued at an early stage. The trial certainly appeared to be quite successful.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It was looked at—that is absolutely true—and you participated in the trial. I reiterate my previous point: there were lots of calls upon the House authorities to provide technical facilities, and the absolute priority was the Chamber, which needed to work. It was most important that the remote proceedings and their broadcast did not at any point break down. We were therefore drawing doubly on the resources to try to make that happen in other areas.

The Bill Committees were inevitably not the priority. Unlike Select Committees, Bill Committees need debate. There interrogative proceedings work perfectly well for Select Committees—so long as the connection doesn't go down—but in Public Bill Committees you have the constant back-and-forth of debate, with the Minister answering questions and Committee members being able to speak a number of times. That is much harder to plan or schedule than even in the Chamber, where, except in Committee of the whole House, Members are allowed to speak only once. In Bill Committees, a Member can speak as many times as he or she chooses and, subject to the programme motion and the time available, the Minister regularly responds and interventions are regularly taken. To do that, the technology would have been extraordinarily strained and, as I say, the House authorities were prioritising the Chamber, which was a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

Q146 **Liz Twist:** That is an interesting comment because those of us on the trial found that it was possible to have that give and take. I realise that others have questions, so I will move on. When you came to us on 8 June, you talked about why it had not been possible to set up Committees. You referred us to the Government Chief Whip and the Opposition Chief Whip for evidence on your statement that we had not put forward names from the Opposition side. Will you undertake to review the statements made to the House by Ministers about the ability to hold Public Bill Committees in April and May, and arrange for the record to be corrected if at any point it appears that Ministers have inadvertently misled the House about that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very happy to explain that. As I have just been explaining, there was a wide number of issues that made it difficult to set up Public Bill Committees and they related to the method and the conduct of debate, the technology and the physical presence of Members. Lots of other things were going on at the time.

I reiterate that the Government were extremely keen to get Public Bill Committees up and running. I doubt that there has ever been any Government, at any stage, who have not wanted their business to be put forward in Public Bill Committees. That is what Governments do when they set out a full, ambitious legislative programme in the Queen's Speech, following on from the manifesto. Therefore, this isn't just nice-to-do stuff;



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it is stuff that had a fundamental democratic mandate, which the Government were exceptionally keen to get on with.

The crisis caused by the coronavirus and the limited ability of Parliament to sit meant that the legislative programme was coming under pressure; Bills were simply not getting advanced. It is worth understanding that there is a great sausage machine of legislation and that what we were doing was perhaps, with Second Readings, getting the meat of the sausage, but we needed the bread and the outer coating to be put together so that the machine could work smoothly and the string of sausages could be sent to the House of Lords for them to attend to and sell in their butcher's shop—or however you like to view their lordships. Whether you see them with blue-and-white-striped aprons on or not, I don't know, but to make the sausage machine work, you have to have every bit of it going, and one bit of it was not going. I am not particularly expert on sausage making, but it was the bit that puts the bread and the meat together—maybe it adds a bit of water, if they are certain types of sausages, just to bloat them out a bit. But that needs to be done in Bill Committees, and that bit wasn't—

Q147 Liz Twist: Okay. Looking back to your comments on 8 June, I am not sure whether you are suggesting that the members of the Bill Committee are the bread and the skin of the sausage, but I want to refer you specifically to the comments in which you indicated that it was your understanding that the Opposition had failed to bring forward their nominations to the Committee of Selection. Is that something that you would be prepared to correct, in the light of the evidence that we have from the Opposition Chief Whip?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't know what evidence you have had from the Opposition Chief Whip, but what I will say, as I have said before, is that getting Bill Committees up and running was an absolute priority for the Government, because we needed the sausage machine to be operational. No, I certainly wasn't saying that the members were the meat and the bread. The members are the creators of the sausages—the artistic creators of artisanal sausages with the freshest and best meat that Britain can provide.

Liz Twist: Thank you for that. I'm not quite sure that I got the assurance that I wanted, but I am sure we can let you have a copy of the Opposition Chief Whip's evidence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Excellent.

Q148 Chair: Lord President, you talk about the House coming back physically after Whitsun. Of course, this Committee was very keen to make sure that the House always had a physical presence. The Speaker was keen that Ministers should attend physically and be in the House between the Easter and Whitsun recesses. I think we have clarified that it was possible to run Public Bill Committees physically between the Easter and Whitsun recesses, so was it the Government being concerned about not being able to get enough Members who would be prepared to attend physical Public



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Bill Committees or was it the Government prioritising the Chamber over Public Bill Committees that led to the delay in nominating Members to Public Bill Committees?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government, as I have said, were extremely keen to get Public Bill Committees up and running in sufficient numbers to ensure that the Government's business could be moved forward.

Q149 **Chair:** But what about the time between Easter and Whitsun? There was a physical presence in the Chamber. I attended physically. I know you were here physically. We had debates physically. I still do not quite understand why the Government say that they could not do Public Bill Committees that could have been nominated physically before Whitsun, when the House did have a physical presence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you need to look at it the other way round, if I may say so. No Government would ever not want to get Public Bill Committees up and running and their business attended to. The Government were very keen that Public Bill Committees should be up and running.

Q150 **Chair:** That is why I am surprised that the opportunity was not taken and that Members were not put to the Committee of Selection prior to the Whitsun recess, when it was perfectly possible to do so and there was capacity for two Public Bill Committees, which has now been extended to four. It still doesn't seem to make sense why the Government did not take that opportunity.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The understanding we had from the House authorities was that there were capacity issues with facilitating numerous Committees physically with social distancing, and that what the House authorities were able to provide was not sufficient for the needs of the Government.

Q151 **Chair:** So unless you could have more than two, you were not prepared to have just two?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't think it is as simple as that. The Government were very keen to get Committees up and running. A number of obstacles were coming from a number of different directions. No Government in their right mind would not want their Bill Committees up and running, and this Government wanted their Bill Committees up and running. That did not prove possible, for reasons that were not within the Government's control.

Q152 **Chair:** Okay. That still does not clarify the point. I agree with you. I think this Committee was keen to assist you in ensuring that Bill Committees could meet. We were very keen to make sure that the legislative programme continued. As you have said, Governments bring forward legislation, the House scrutinises and Oppositions may oppose, but nobody is here to try and stop the Government from bringing their Bill Committees forward.

We, as a Procedure Committee, want to know. We do not want this to happen again. We do not want to be in a situation where we find that the



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Government cannot do their business because there is some impediment to them running Public Bill Committees. We want to help the Government find out what that impediment was, so that we can make sure it does not happen again.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The good news is that the sausage machine is now churning out sausages like the best Wall's meat factory. This is all now working well. We have had Report stages this week and we have another Report stage coming up next week. Other Bills are coming out of Committee. We have been running four Bill Committees simultaneously. There is capacity now to do more. Things are now working well; the problem has been solved. We should focus on the good news that things are now under way and thank the Procedure Committee for its support in ensuring that the sausage machine churns out sausages.

Q153 **Chair:** We are very happy to help the sausage machine churn out sausages, but we also have to deal with the fact that there are a number of colleagues who are very concerned that they felt they would have to come back physically when they did not want to. We know the debates that we had at the beginning of the term about whether there would still be virtual participation and voting opportunities.

We are also concerned about the recess. We are not all about having recess, but we know that we have House staff who have worked incredibly hard—harder than they have ever worked before. They have worked through the Easter recess and the Whitsun recess, and now discover that the summer recess is going to be shorter than anyone was ever expecting it to be. That would appear to be because we could not get those Public Bill Committees going. We do not want that to happen again. We are all willing and happy to help the Government get the business through, but what can we do? As a Procedure Committee, what can we suggest that will make sure this situation never arises again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On recesses, we are only adding one day to the point at which we are sitting in July. We are coming back slightly earlier and we will be sitting in the period when there is normally a conference recess. From the point of view of Members, most of them would have been busy with conferences anyway, so for Members the timing is not going to be that different.

In addition to the usual legislative programme—I said we were up to date with our legislative programme, but on top of that we have had a number of Bills that need to be brought forward. There are definitely backed up delays in the House of Lords, which are not under our control at all. The things coming back to us from the Lords are Bills that we have not yet considered—I am not talking about Lords amendments to Commons starters; I am talking about the full Commons consideration of Lords starters. Those are some very important Bills that will be coming to us, and that we will need to work through. Getting a little bit of extra time to make up for some of the time when we were not operating at full speed is perfectly reasonable.



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You asked what the Procedure Committee could do to help. We need to focus on the fact that things are now working. Inevitably, at the height of the crisis, things did not work as smoothly as you would expect them to do when there was no coronavirus crisis. This is just a consequence that we, and the whole of the rest of the country, are facing because this is—to use a much-overused word, but one that it is right to use in these circumstances—an unprecedented set of circumstances.

Chair: Kirsty Blackman has asked if we can make the point that the SNP conference does not happen during the conference recess anyway, so it would not make any difference to the SNP.

Rob Roberts has a question about the staffing of Bill Committees. I want to bring him in now and make sure he asks his question, because he has to go to the Chamber as well.

Rob Roberts: Thank you, Chair. I am virtually in the Chamber. I have it on my iPad while I am doing this.

Chair: You could be doing two at once—double-hatting.

Q154 **Rob Roberts:** Lord President, on 8 June I asked a question about the number of House staff that would be required to service the four Bill Committees that were running that week with 18 sittings. The answer that you gave was that the number of House staff needed to attend physically was about 100, which seemed like an improbably high number of staff just for the servicing of four Bill Committees. I wonder whether you misunderstood the question that I asked and whether we could take the opportunity to correct that answer and understand exactly how many staff would be needed for four Bill Committees with 18 sittings.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Sorry, the 100 was the overall increase in staff with us coming back physically.

Q155 **Rob Roberts:** Okay. The question was: in order to service four Bill Committees with 18 sittings, how many staff would be needed in the manner in which we are currently doing it, and was that a higher than normal number or a lower than normal number based on that number of sittings and that number of Committees?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad you have the Clerk coming before you later on today, because that is absolutely a question for him. He is in charge of the staffing of Committees. At any rate, the person who is in charge of the staffing of Committees reports directly to him and not to me.

Q156 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that. Can we go on to SIs and delegated legislation? There has been some frustration expressed that a number of sitting days in the House of Commons Chamber have been taken up with considering SIs that could have been taken upstairs, and the Government chose to take them on the Floor of the House because—I understand why—there are capacity issues in terms of the rooms that are available for full DL Committees, even though many of them are short and not contentious. Perhaps it was also because the sausage machine had not



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yet produced enough meat for the House of Commons Chamber to start its consideration on Report and Third Reading. One of the things that we are concerned about is to make sure that the remaining SIs that need to be done before 22 July can be done. Are the Government confident that there is capacity to complete those SIs before 22 July? Then we will come on to a discussion about the procedural changes that we could perhaps assist the Government with to help you with that process.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we are going to lay 25 affirmative or made affirmative SIs between now and the recess. That is the current expectation. Obviously, this goes to the heart of the issue of having Committees up and running, and the prioritisation of Committees and the number of Committees that you could have at any one time. Initially, Bill Committees were prioritised once we were back. Some of the issues have been of considerable importance and, therefore, I think the House wanted to have the opportunity to debate them.

It is also worth bearing in mind that, yes, there are sausage machine issues. If the sausage machine is going at full pelt, the time available for SIs on the Floor of the Chamber is limited, even if they are very important ones. When there is time and the SIs are important, I think it is right to bring them to the Floor of the House. We now have the resources that we need to get the SIs that we need through at the right pace.

Q157 **Chair:** One of the things that we could do, and we have talked about it in the Committee, is suggest a change to Standing Orders to allow for a temporary period—subject to agreement between the usual channels, as always—the minimum size of a Bill Committee to be reduced down from 16 to perhaps even as low as five for the non-contentious ones, thereby meaning that much smaller rooms could be used for those Committees. Is that something the Government would be interested in?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a matter for you if you want to look into that, but the flexibility is between 16 and 50. The quorum on a Committee of 17, which is the usual number, is only six. I think it is all manageable as it is with the rooms that we have available. From the Government's point of view, I do not feel that that is a priority change.

Q158 **Chair:** Although the quorum is only six, if a DL Committee has 17 Members, the House staff arrange for a room that is sufficient for 17 Members, which results in problems and restrictions. If we were to reduce it down to a lower number, that might mean that some of the smaller Committee Rooms are possible for DL Committees, particularly with the 1 metre-plus social distancing that you have suggested. That may assist the Government; it is an offer for the Government. We are here to assist.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you, and you may want to take up the issue of mitigations in Committee with the Clerk later on, because that was not excluded by the decision of the Commission on Monday. Indeed, mitigations for Committees were specifically left available.



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Q159 **Chair:** Of course, there is also the point that all Members can attend a DL Committee even if they are not nominated to it, and again there could be temporary measures. Again, it would be subject to agreement between the usual channels, but there are temporary mitigations that could be put in place, and we will of course discuss those with the Clerk.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you.

Chair: I am going to bring in Angela Eagle to talk about proxy voting, because I know that she needs to get to the Chamber. There are a couple more things about House business that we will come back to, but I will bring Angela in on the voting system.

Q160 **Ms Eagle:** Thank you very much, Chair, and good morning Leader. The first thing I want to ask about is the future for proxy voting. As you know, in January the extension of the pilot period for proxy voting for parental absence was facilitated by your good self to the end of July. Since then, of course, proxy voting has been extended in the coronavirus pandemic to handle those Members who either have to shield themselves or who have family reasons for doing so. As a Committee, we have to consider whether we wish to recommend that proxy voting is continued. First, regarding parental absence, what are your views on how the pilot has gone?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think it has gone well, I think it has been well-received, and I think it has worked. The Government are pleased with that and grateful for the work that the Procedure Committee has done to ensure that. I think there may be some improvements that you wish to make, and you may want to ask about that; I do not want to pre-empt any of your questions. I think the maternity and paternity leave proxies system has been well-received, it has been very clear, people have understood what is going on, and the numbers have been very manageable for the House authorities and indeed for the public, so that they can understand what is happening.

Q161 **Ms Eagle:** If the House agrees to your proposed recess dates this evening, it may rise for the summer recess before we have had a chance to consider the Committee's evaluation of the pilot. In those circumstances, would you be prepared to agree to a short extension of the pilot scheme to the end of September, to give the House time to evaluate the Committee's report and consider any motions that you might propose to make the scheme permanent?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, I am very open to that; I think that would be extremely helpful. Indeed, I think it would be preferable if the Committee were to ask for an extension rather than trying to rush things to meet the deadline and, yes, to look to make the scheme permanent in the next Session.



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Q162 **Ms Eagle:** That is certainly excellent news and thank you for that. Are there any changes to the operation of the scheme that you, as the representative of the Government, would like to see?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Personally, I think it is onerous to ask people who will benefit from this to produce medical evidence of the situation that they are in—onerous bordering on the impertinent.

Q163 **Ms Eagle:** Yes, it is usually fairly obvious if somebody is pregnant, but anyway—sorry, if a woman is pregnant.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes. I have six children and if the scheme had been up and running when I would have been eligible for it, I might have thought it was a bit much to ask my wife to produce a certificate so that I could prove that I was about to be a father. I think the Government would look sympathetically on the Procedure Committee recommending more of a self-certifying route.

Q164 **Ms Eagle:** That is very helpful, especially given that we have a self-certifying route for the temporary coronavirus proxy voting scheme. When do you expect to discontinue the temporary facility for that, or will you plead uncertainty? After all, we are in the middle of an uncertain pandemic, but presumably you are flexible about continuing that facility in future, if it is required for medical and practical reasons.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am going to plead uncertainty. It is too early to say. It is important that things that are done temporarily do not become permanent by accident, that the House has the right to consider them separately at a later stage and that we do not confuse maternity and paternity leave with emergency measures. It is unfair, in a way, on those who have different views about the system if you say to them, "Please let us introduce this because it's an emergency and we need consensus," and then you say to them a few months later, "Oh, bad luck; we've now decided it's permanent, and the fact that you agreed three months ago we're taking as carte blanche."

Very different issues arise in relation to illness from those that arise with pregnancy. People often want to keep illnesses confidential. The issue of definition becomes very difficult and sensitive—what level of illness would qualify? It is a much more complicated issue around proxies for illness than for maternity and paternity leave.

Q165 **Ms Eagle:** Okay. On the system of voting that we have ended up with, we spent a particularly interesting hour and a half waltzing around various bits of the building yesterday in the five votes that we had. Are you happy with the way that has worked?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The votes yesterday took about the same time as five votes would have taken in the normal way, so I think that is perfectly reasonable.

Ms Eagle: Well, it got my steps up, I can tell you that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is healthy for us as well. That is even better. I am glad you are so pleased—thank you.

Q166 **Ms Eagle:** But I am slightly worried, given that I have observed an interesting and very flexible view of six foot or two metres in those queues, and I have to say that not an awful lot of social distancing goes on in them. I am slightly worried about the potential for transmission, given the amount of time we spend in those queues and in those areas. Have Public Health England watched a vote yet and are they happy with it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: They were carefully consulted before the system was introduced. They are not naive about human behaviour; that is obviously part of their expertise. I think that people are pretty good at keeping a reasonable distance. I would not claim that they are perfect, but people are pretty good and the system works reasonably quickly. The card system seems to work reasonably well.

There is one important thing to say on the card system, which is that possession of an identity card is not the requirement for voting or being a Member of Parliament—that is the mandate we get from our voters, and the card is a convenience. Last week, I managed to leave my parliamentary pass in Somerset, but I was still able to vote and go through the Division Lobby and send a message to the Public Bill Office saying that I had been through. It is important that people do not think that the card is a condition of membership; it is not. We are Members by virtue of our constituents, not by virtue of a piece of plastic.

Q167 **Ms Eagle:** So Public Health England have not watched a vote to see how it actually works.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't know. That is a matter for the Speaker.

Q168 **Ms Eagle:** I will ask him. It has come to my attention while we have been in this hearing that there has been something on the news that demonstrates that there is now a list of 36 areas in the country that are quite close to having to lock down because of rising levels of coronavirus infections. Westminster is one of them. What would happen to our proceedings if Westminster were subject to a local lockdown?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Members of Parliament are key workers, and key workers have, throughout this pandemic, been able—indeed, required, in many cases—to go to their places of work.

Q169 **Ms Eagle:** So you do not think that local lockdowns or any such issues will have any bearing at all on how we may be able to do our jobs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you can take it functionally or you can take it constitutionally. Functionally—



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Ms Eagle: Could you give the functional answer, because I know the constitutional answer?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will answer both, because both are important. Functionally, we are key workers, and key workers have been required to carry on working. Constitutionally, we have an absolute right of attendance at Parliament, and we have duties to carry out for the country. The country needs to carry on being governed, even in the midst of a pandemic, and it cannot be governed without Parliament. It cannot be governed by an autocracy that is not challengeable or is not held to account, and therefore the function of Parliament is an essential constitutional function, with constitutional protections to ensure that we can carry it out. I think that the right of attendance at Parliament is a high-level constitutional right that would be defended by the courts. I saw the evidence that you had from a very senior Clerk, and I think he understated our constitutional right of attendance at Parliament.

Q170 **Ms Eagle:** So the only response, if Westminster were locked down, might be to have a closer look at the way we were doing things within Parliament itself?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That's right.

Ms Eagle: Say there was a spike—

Mr Rees-Mogg: Parliament must carry on. It is a constitutional requirement that the Government are held to account and that legislation is passed. It would be quite wrong not to have Parliament functioning at all.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am conscious of time. I know that Jack Brereton wants to ask a question, and then I will ask two more questions at the end, which will hopefully require quite short answers.

Q171 **Jack Brereton:** I particularly want to go back to the touchpad voting system that we now have in the Lobbies. I know many colleagues are concerned that that may become permanent. What is being done to make sure that that only continues for as long as the pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you raise a very important question. I reiterate the point I made on proxy voting: lots of things have been agreed on the basis that they are temporary, and it would be improper to make those permanent without restoring the status quo ante first, so we would need to go back to ordinary Division Lobbies. If, after that, the Procedure Committee looks into it and recommends that using cards is better, and if Members back that in a vote in the House, that is perfectly reasonable. However, I do not think it would be reasonable to present Members with a fait accompli.



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Q172 **Jack Brereton:** Do you think there is any danger that colleagues will very much get used to voting with cards, and that that could undermine any case for going back to where we were previously?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I don't know. It depends on how many Members periodically lose their cards—leave them at home, leave them in their office and then turn up to vote in a Division, and all those sorts of things—and find that being required to have a card is more inconvenient than presenting your name to a Clerk at the desk. As I am in the category of being quite capable of leaving my card not just in my office but 125 miles away in Somerset, I do not always find that the card is the most convenient thing.

Q173 **Jack Brereton:** Obviously, the main reason why many colleagues want to retain the historic usual system is the ability to speak to and influence Ministers. Do you think that the current system allows for that, or do you think, as I certainly do, that there are deficiencies and that it is not as easy to engage with Ministers and colleagues?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think you are absolutely right. It is harder to engage with Ministers or to catch another MP that you want to speak to, because if you are at the back of the queue and the person you want to speak to is at the front, you simply will not see each other. If you want to catch a Minister in ordinary circumstances, you have a choice: you either get through the Division Lobby very quickly and hover at the end to try to catch the person you want to talk to, or you wait in the Division Lobby until you see the person wander through. That simply cannot happen at the moment, so your point is absolutely right. It is a key reason why we vote physically and through Division Lobbies, although there are other reasons for Division Lobbies as well.

Q174 **Chair:** Thank you very much. If, for whatever reason, Public Health England said that it simply was no longer advisable to vote in the Division Lobbies or in any other way, would you consider bringing back remote voting to enable the Government to get its business through?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This way of voting has been approved by Public Health England, even at the six-and-a-half-foot level, let alone the mitigated level. They have been consulted all the way through, so I am very content with the system that we have, although I look forward to returning to the previous system.

Q175 **Chair:** I have a quick question from Kirsty Blackman, which I am asking on her behalf. We have raised with you before the desire to have more than one week's provisional business announced, so that people can make arrangements and ensure that they are available, particularly at this difficult time. Are you intending to do that at all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I did manage to bring it back, and then I am afraid it went again. I am very keen to bring it back, but we are not there yet. The change in business created by the pandemic, and the need to bring forward issues to the House that may relate to that, is still there. It is only right to bring forward two weeks' business when one is pretty certain that



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the second week will remain broadly intact; otherwise, instead of creating more certainty, you create more uncertainty.

Q176 **Chair:** Thank you. A final question from me—it is a practical one, which you might not be able to answer. In the event that Westminster was subject to a local lockdown, would MPs be able to return to their constituencies after they had attended Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I did ask this at the very beginning of the process, to make sure that I could return to my own family, because we all have this interest. The answer I was given at that time was that, yes, we will be entitled to return to our homes and families in the event of a lockdown. Nobody has talked of a lockdown where people who are key workers cannot return home. The thing to remember is that we are key workers, and key workers are allowed to return home.

Q177 **Chair:** Clearly, there may be a difference between you, as a Minister, and a common or garden Back-Bench MP. I think MPs would very much appreciate some clarity on that matter, so that if there was a local lockdown in this part of Westminster, they would not be concerned about getting back to their homes, and they could legitimately do so.

Mr Rees-Mogg: All key workers are allowed to return home. We only stay away from home so that we can carry out our job; the guidance is therefore the same for MPs as for all other key workers. They are allowed to return home. In almost all cases, that means to their constituencies. That would be true of other people coming into Westminster to work, who will be entitled to return home—some of whom may commute longish distances.

Chair: That is very helpful. Lord President, I am very conscious that we are at the point of Prime Minister's questions. We appreciate the time you have given us. As you know, this transcript will be prepared by *Hansard*, and we will publish it on our website. We very much appreciate your time and your answering our questions. Thank you.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you very much.