

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Procedure under coronavirus restrictions, HC 300

Monday 5 October 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 October 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Jack Brereton; Angela Eagle; James Gray; Nigel Mills; Rob Roberts; Douglas Ross; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson; Liz Twist.

Questions 279 - 318

Witnesses

[I](#): Steve Brine MP and Hywel Williams MP.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Plaid Cymru](#)



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Steve Brine and Hywel Williams.

Q279 **Chair:** Thank you, Mr Brine. Can I call you Steve, perhaps? Would that be acceptable? You are very welcome to call me Karen as well. Thank you for coming to appear before us today. The Committee has decided that we need to look in short order at the way we are conducting business in the Chamber at the moment and how that enables and allows Members of Parliament to represent their constituents. You will know that the motions that allow for virtual participation and proxy voting need to be renewed by 3 November. Our intention is to provide a report, taking account of the views of Members across all parties and with different needs so that we can make recommendations on Standing Orders by that date.

I know you have some concerns about the way the Chamber is operating, so if I could kick off with a question that probably will not surprise you too much. Given that the Chamber has been restricted to just 50 people—and that has been the case since we first went into lockdown back in April; those of us who were participating physically in the period between Easter and Whitsun will remember that the number of seats has not changed in that period—do you think there is sufficient ability for Members to participate in the Chamber, including in questions, UQs and statements?

Steve Brine: Thank you for asking me. It is very kind of you to do so. Some things in our national life, like soft play and the cinema, are nice to have and fun to do, but they are not central to the Government of the nation at a critical moment. Most of our problems, but not all of them—and I will come on to them, I am sure—go to the limit on numbers in the Chamber and the impact thereof.

In direct answer to your question, that does not necessarily limit your ability to take part in UQs, statements and debates. What does is whether you are lucky enough in the random circle of ballot that puts you on a call list. I know why Public Health England have said what they have said about the way we are spaced out in the Chamber, but we talked a long time ago about putting people in the side seats, about even putting people up in the inside Galleries, so inside the glass. That has not happened. Many Members have said to me, “Why don’t we use the missing rows in between the seats?” The answer seems to be because, if we did that, Public Health England would have a canary and we would all have to wear masks.

That goes back to my point, which is that this is the Parliament that governs the nation and it makes a good Government when it operates well. I do not think it is operating well at the moment. Some of the sloppy decisions that we have seen from Government in recent months have been, in part, down to the fact that Parliament is not able to do the job that it is here to do.



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Q280 Ms Angela Eagle: What effect do you think these very limited numbers that we are able to get into the Chamber at the moment has had on your ability to participate in debates and motions on legislation? I found it incredibly frustrating because of the limited numbers. Have you found the same?

Steve Brine: Absolutely. If you are lucky enough, you get drawn to be in the Chamber—of course, you have to tag in and out to fit on the call list—but it has definitely limited our ability to do it. It makes you have to plan ahead 24, 48 hours in advance, and many people listening to this would think, “What is wrong with that? That is how we work our everyday life”, but of course Parliament does not work that way. I would often come in on a Monday, I would see the list of questions for that particular set of oral questions and see something that is coming up and think that is a great chance for me to come in and pick up on something that has happened in my constituency that weekend or something that has been on the news during that weekend. That has all gone. That has completely gone.

Ms Angela Eagle: There is currently no spontaneity.

Steve Brine: Exactly. It is the spontaneity that has gone. That has directly, unquestionably, impacted on all Members’ ability to take part in the running of the House. We are far poorer for it.

Q281 Ms Angela Eagle: I want to ask about something that the New Zealand Parliament did in terms of holding the Government to account and accountability, which is to have a completely different structure set up just for the coronavirus pandemic and the limitations that it has forced on us. They created a special body, which had a majority of Opposition MPs on it, led by the Leader of the Opposition but it was rotated, depending on which subjects were being looked at. It had special powers of subpoena and calling for papers. It could look specifically at what the Government in New Zealand were doing about the pandemic. They looked at things like health, police powers and the economy. Maybe we should be more radical about how we at least switch the way we do things for accountability purposes while we are in this period of not being able to cram into the Chamber.

Steve Brine: I heard you make that point in the Chamber last week and, with respect, I did not agree with it then and I do not now. As well as the Chamber, of course, we have the Select Committee Corridor upstairs. Being a member of a Select Committee—Culture, Media and Sport—we are quite restricted in what we can do due to broadcast time, due to sheer slots in time, because we have to juggle virtual with physical members in the room. We probably have about as many members in the room in our Committee as you have for this. That should be dramatically increased because, of course, it is very hard on the Floor of the House of Commons to ask detailed scrutiny questions of Professor Chris Whitty or Professor Vallance, but in the Science and Technology Committee there is a huge amount of detailed, very good scrutiny that goes on.



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I heard your suggestion—I do not know whether they have a Select Committee system in New Zealand—but we have a very good Select Committee system, and we should be expanding that before we look to set up new things.

Q282 Ms Angela Eagle: Are you basically saying that we should take more risks to get more people into the Chamber? That we need more people in so we should disregard Public Health England's advice and just take more risks and hope that nobody gets ill.

Steve Brine: This is a royal palace for a start, so we are not bound by their rules; we take their advice. On every single element of policy-making in Government, the scientists and the public health professionals give their advice and then the Ministers have to decide. In Parliament, because it is so important to how this country is being governed, yes, there is an element that we can do more without taking unnecessary risks in the Chamber. For instance, every other middle seat and the side Galleries that I have mentioned.

Q283 Ms Angela Eagle: You have said, and it is quite eyebrow-raising, that we are a royal palace so we do not have to take Public Health England's advice, but surely we should be setting an example to everybody else. There is an aspect of that, isn't there? If the people who make the laws and the people who hold the Government to account are obviously behaving like Donald Trump, for example, we cannot expect the rest of the country to take the advice, can we?

Steve Brine: I do not think anyone here is behaving like him, and it is a mere statement of fact that we are a royal palace. My point is that there is a balance between what we are doing here. If we filled the Chamber for PMQs, clearly that would be crazy and the public would be right to spot it as crazy. But I think we have the balance wrong at the moment, and that is leading to all sorts of issues around scrutiny of Ministers and proper efficient working of the House of Commons.

Q284 James Gray: You mentioned, quite correctly, using up more space, intermediate chairs or the sides. I believe that under Standing Orders at the moment you can speak from the side Gallery; that has never been abolished. I do not see why we should not use behind the glass as well. Someone with a roving mic could be up there going round.

More importantly, what you are saying is that we are in a fake Parliament at the moment, neither one thing nor t'other. It is all difficult, much too scary, let us therefore effectively close it down, as we did back in March, and have everything virtual, everything electronic or, as Angela correctly said a moment ago, we take more risk. Right now we are doing neither one thing nor t'other.

Steve Brine: Yes. We did not shut down in March, we just took Easter recess; that is the truth of it. That was already programmed and we just took Easter recess, then we came back and it was perfect timing because it gave the House authorities the perfect time, and they did all the things



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they had to do. They have done incredibly well to get us to a position where we can do what we do.

We seem to have got to a point where any criticism of how this House of Commons works, the oldest democratic institution in the world, seems to be taken as criticism of the staff who work in the House. We cannot have that situation. Of course we all think the staff who work in the House have done a brilliant job to get us to this safe position. The public might not spot it now, but I believe you can draw a line. I believe there is a thread that runs between some of the decisions that have been made in recent months and the way this Parliament is not working.

Q285 Liz Twist: How do you respond to the question of perception by the public? I know, and I am sure you do, that people are looking at us and commenting on social media. What about the issue of us being seen to stick to the same rules that we are asking the public to stick to?

Steve Brine: Yes, it is critical, but we are doing so. Nobody is suggesting that we pack the Chamber at PMQs. I am suggesting that we have the balance the wrong way at the moment, and that is killing the spontaneity of Parliament.

Q286 James Sunderland: The system of call lists has been introduced to manage attendance in the Chamber and to ensure that Members know when they are likely to be called in debate. I have a number of questions for you. I know you have strong views on it. How well do you think it is currently working, and what effect does it have on debate?

Steve Brine: It lessens debate. A number of the Committee, and certainly the Chair, have served in Government. I would have loved to have been a Minister in that environment because I know who is coming, I know what they are going to ask, and I know that nobody is able to pivot off the back of that. When I was Public Health Minister, I spent quite a lot of time in the House of Commons answering debates on everything you can possibly think of, and many you could not.

When it came to health questions, I had to be completely across my brief because there might have been a question on breast screening—critically important subject—and there may have been some back and forth on that subject with the person who was on the Order Paper. But there is absolutely nothing to say that in the old world, Mr Sunderland, you could not come in and say, “Further to that, can I press the Minister on the subject of breast screening and can I press him on the availability of Tamoxifen to my constituents in Bracknell?” What that made me do, knowing that you might do that, that anybody in the House could have done that, it made me be absolutely across my brief. It made me scrutinise every single bit of my brief. I would say to the civil servants beforehand, “I am not sure I know the answer if Tamoxifen comes up, because that is currently a big issue. Can you make sure I have a note on it?” If it came up afterwards, I would sure as hell make sure they got me the answer for next time.



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Because that has gone, because call lists are so predictable, it means Ministers only have to prepare for what they know is coming. Further to that, if you take Leader of the House questions to Jacob on a Thursday, whereas before anything could come, he knows who is on the call list. He might not know what they are going to ask, but MPs are fairly predictable creatures. A basic look at their social media will tell you what is the current bee in their bonnet. I can guarantee you that his office, because I know they are good and they are on their game, will be doing exactly that.

That takes away the spontaneity, and that takes away the stress-testing of Ministers in the House of Commons. My suggestion on call lists would be—and I can understand why they are necessary at the moment—that you take out some of the preordained name slots and you turn them into spontaneity slots and allow a little bit of back and forth across the Chamber in order to do that. That goes back to my first point about the numbers in the Chamber because, if the only people in the Chamber are the people on the call list, there is nobody to fill those spontaneity slots.

Q287 James Sunderland: One of the frustrations that I have felt personally, and many new Members have also felt, is that they are listed to speak in a debate but not called. How many times have you personally been listed to speak in a debate but not called?

Steve Brine: Since this temporary change of rules that has not happened to me. I have been fortunate to be high enough in the list. Maybe that is because I am a former Public Health Minister and a lot of the stuff I speak in is obviously on Covid right now. There is some weighting given, although that is a fairly mysterious process. There is some weighting given to Select Committee Chairs in that particular area or maybe to former Public Health Ministers, so that has not happened to me yet. I have seen it happen to many, many people, and they are incredibly frustrated by it.

Q288 James Sunderland: Would you support the introduction of call lists on a permanent basis?

Steve Brine: No, because this is not the House of Lords. The thing about call lists is that, for very obvious and understandable reasons—going back to restricted numbers in the Chamber—you know that if you are number 36 on the list, clearly you are not going to be able to sit in the Chamber for the whole time of the statement. That means you can come in and, unless you have been sitting by the television and watching all the rest of it before jumping into the Chamber, there is always going to be a lag between you doing that. You do not know what has been asked. You do not know the context of what has been answered. The spontaneity of being in throughout a whole urgent question or a whole statement is important.

I always say to new Members, and to the other Members around the table and online who may have been here longer than the newer Members, is always have a question and then always have a reserve.



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How many times have I sat in the Chamber and some very clever Member has asked my question just before me? You cannot just ask it again. I do not think we need call lists for the duration.

This goes to the heart of an MP's role. When I was first a Member of Parliament, Mr Gray, sitting over there, wrote a very interesting document called "What are MPs for?" Do you remember that, Mr Gray? You showed that to me, and it was basically talking about the role of an MP. We are not glorified local councillors. There is a clue in the name: we are Members of Parliament. If Members of Parliament think it is inconvenient and a bad use of time to have to sit through a debate before they take part in it, then I would suggest that they should maybe look to county hall instead of Westminster for their career choices.

Q289 James Sunderland: Last question, and perhaps an awkward one to answer. Like many other MPs, I have had letters from constituents saying to me that they voted in a democratic election to give their representative in Parliament an effective voice. Do you think the current arrangements are somehow complicit in the Government not being held to account?

Steve Brine: Unquestionably. That goes back to the spontaneity point I made about scrutinising Ministers' brief. Let me pull back the rug here. What happens is that you are told that MemberHub is open, and that is when you can submit your request to ask a question of Matt Hancock this afternoon in the Covid statement, and I have done that. If I am lucky, and I am in the top 50, I have a chance of asking my question. If I am not, it is game over. That rewards those who are quick-click. If you quick click and you are on MemberHub at the time—if you are on the train, you can forget it, as you will never get the connection—then happy days.

It rewards those who are quick-click and, instead of it being those who are in the Chamber wanting to be there, needing to be there and having a good constituency reason to be there, or a particular interest because they have former ministerial experience in that area, it rewards those who have been quick-click. What will happen is the PPSs will contact those who have been successful in the ballot and they will say, "Could you tell me what you are going to ask my Minister?" Often Members will say, "Oh, I put in, so I'm happy to have a suggestion." That means the quality of debate is around who has been quick to click, not who is meant to be in there. I do not think it is serving Parliament very well.

Q290 Owen Thompson: Are you aware of any encouragement from business managers to Members to apply to speak in debates or motions on legislation or, equally, not to apply to speak?

Steve Brine: No more than ever was the case. One thing that has not changed here is that the Government Whips and the Opposition Whips—I have been a Government Whip, so has the Chair—will encourage speakers to speak in debates. I do not think they discourage people from speaking in debates, but they do encourage people to speak in debates. I



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have been a PPS, a Government Whip and a Minister, and there is nothing wrong with that. No, I do not think that has changed.

- Q291 **Owen Thompson:** On your last point, do you not think there is still an element of randomness of who gets pulled out, regardless of when somebody clicks on MemberHub to take part in a statement during the window it is open? It is not necessarily the first to click.

Steve Brine: There is a random element in terms of who is pulled out—into the first 100, I think they go, and then they refine down into the 50s—but you still have to click in order to do that, and it is a relatively short window. If you are doing something else, especially on a Monday when MPs from all over the country are travelling down to Westminster, it is not necessarily easy.

If you think about this, and it is a good piece of desk research for somebody to do, how many times did you used to hear Ministers say, “I will write to the hon. Member on that point”? You do not hear that very often these days, and that tells you everything because they know what is coming and they have prepared the answer. You do not want to use that card too often as a Minister at the box, as you would look like a right berk, but you can certainly use it once a session. I regularly did when I was asked about something I could not even pronounce.

- Q292 **Chair:** We are going to move on to time limits for debates, but first, to be absolutely clear on your suggestion for the call list, we all accept there needs to be some form of call list for questions, otherwise it will be first come, first served, which is another way of discriminating. You have to have some way of doing this that is as indiscriminate as possible, but you would like to have some sort of spontaneity. Would you want some sort of bobbing opportunity after each substantive?

Steve Brine: Correct. There needs to be spontaneity slots. Of course, the other reason there has to be some form of call list at the moment is because increasingly, as the NHS app does what it is meant to do, Members are having to speak virtually. We all understand that is the current situation until we have a vaccine and people feel confident to come in. That is going to have to happen. There could be much more flexibility in the slots.

- Q293 **Chair:** If there was to be a spontaneity slot, how would you manage that for those participating virtually? I can see discrimination between those who are there physically and those who are not.

Steve Brine: There would be. There just would be. We would just have to accept that that would be one of the prices of increased spontaneity and, therefore, the increased stress-testing of Ministers and their policies.

- Q294 **Chair:** You would be looking to use the side Galleries for the spontaneity slots. Again, would that be first come, first served?

Steve Brine: Yes, but that does not just have to be the sides, because I am suggesting that we should use some of the middle rows as well to increase the numbers in the Chamber. A lot of it goes back to the



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numbers but, as James Gray said, there is nothing to stop you speaking from the side Galleries at the moment other than, I understand, just process stopping it.

Q295 **Chair:** I think it is the microphones and cameras, et cetera, for broadcast.

Steve Brine: Let's put some new microphones in.

Q296 **James Gray:** Is there not a way in which we could do it using Zoom where a little hand goes up? You would have a call list, as you do normally, for those asking a question and then someone from the other party is entitled to put a little hand up on the Zoom thing and be called by the Speaker to ask a question.

Steve Brine: That could be a new form of bobbing, a virtual bob. All of this is doable. My fear is that we have created a brave new world, which was difficult to create and unusual, and this place has been doing what it has been doing for 800 years unchanged pretty much. There is a danger of slipping into the comfort of the new normal and not challenging that new normal because it cannot just be as it is now until we go back to full Parliament again. I fear there are some who do not want it ever to go back to full Parliament, who love the idea of call lists and it being a very set process where people read speeches on to the record, which maybe takes you on to your next point, Chair.

Chair: I see that Hywel Williams has joined us. Welcome. I would suggest, just in the interest of time, that perhaps for the next set of questions if both of you would like to answer them it would save us asking twice.

Q297 **Jack Brereton:** How well do you think the current arrangement for time limits on speeches has been working?

Steve Brine: This is not a Covid issue, it has been the case for the 10 years that I have been in the House. There has to be some sort of time limit, and the way it always used to work is that, given the number of people who put in to speak in the debate, the Chair would basically do a simple calculation with the Clerks as to how long they had, how long they needed for wind-ups—how long they hoped the opening speech would be from the Minister—and then they would work out a time limit from that. That has always been the case.

I do not think you can just have it unlimited because, bless us, some of us do like to hear ourselves talk and there needs to be some sort of limit. A four or five-minute limit is perfectly reasonable. I have never written a speech for the House of Commons that is longer than five minutes because I know it will get cut. If you cannot say it in four minutes, I am not sure you can say it. In the same way, if you cannot do a meeting in an hour, I am not sure you can do the meeting.

When you get to the point where the Chair says "new limit"—which is usually just before you speak, Jack, or just before I speak—"new limit, one minute" or "new limit, two minutes," it is crazy. It is an insult to your



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constituents that you would do that. People end up with the extra two minutes, which drives Members on the list crazy.

Q298 **Chair:** Hywel, do you have any comments on that point? Thank you for joining us. Steve is going to have to leave shortly, but these questions are ones that we would be putting to you anyway, so it seems silly not to have you responding at the same time.

Hywel Williams: On time limits, I have to say that I have spoken for longer than four or five minutes—Ten-minute rule Bills spring to mind. We think that time limits are very useful things, but they should be applied a bit more formally in the present circumstances, and perhaps a bit earlier as well. Having a rush at the end of just perhaps a minute to speak is not very helpful, and I have seen my wonderfully crafted speeches essentially disappear on the floor in front of me as I pounce for the last paragraph, and that does not do any good for anyone.

We have call lists, which presumably would facilitate having more formal time limits. There is the question, which I am sure you are going to get on to, about what interventions do for time limits, but we would be in favour of more formal time limits, and earlier on as well.

Steve Brine: The thing about injury time in that you get an extra minute for the first intervention you take you, and then the second time you get an extra minute, and from there it is your time. I know it drives people crazy further down the list. I have heard Members, and I may have even done it myself, say to colleagues, "Can you intervene on me and give me an extra minute?" because the time limit has gone down so small. When it is two minutes, you cannot begin to formulate an argument. The point about injury time is that it is not just indulgence. This is meant to be a debating chamber, and taking interventions from the other side and listening to the speeches that have happened before you, and taking interventions from your own side, allows you to pivot and make your speech.

I remember when I first was elected, David Cameron's bit of advice to me, and a lot of new Members, was you could do a lot worse than spend the first few weeks just sitting in the Chamber and watching people speak; watching people like John Redwood. Whatever you think of John Redwood's politics, which are not necessarily mine, he is a master of the House of Commons. I do not think John Redwood has ever entered the House of Commons with a scripted prose speech. He has a set of bullet points, and that is how I try to do it. Of course sometimes I have read out bits that I want to get absolutely right from the Back Benches, but a series of bullet points that allows you to develop a speech, take an intervention and pivot off it, makes for a much more dynamic House of Commons. We are not a horseshoe Chamber in a ghastly glass building where people read speeches into the record, otherwise you could just e-mail them to *Hansard* and be done with it.

Q299 **Douglas Ross:** My point was going to be about how we use interventions to potentially elongate our own speeches. It kind of picks up on Steve's



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point, and would he therefore agree that, surely, all we are doing is not having a debate if we get down to three or four minutes and have to take interventions to get more time to finish our points? We are only having speeches read out and, therefore, if it gets down to a certain level, do we move the time? Do we move away from debating to just reading out prepared scripts?

Steve Brine: Yes, you can do, but if it goes down to two minutes, as Hywel just said, how many times have you seen Members in the Chamber furiously lining out parts of their speeches? It is quite hard to read out a prepared two-minute speech. It is very hard to do the speech at all, because it has been so butchered. What you are reading out is not really that coherent. I always remember, when we were in coalition, one of our Liberal Democrat colleagues wanting to stick exactly to the same speech, and basically he just read it out, but he read it out at the most incredible pace. I could not understand a word he was saying, and it did all get on the record. I felt for *Hansard*, who I hope were sent a copy. It is just crazy. I disagree that you cannot make a speech in four minutes. You can make three points, and then you have space to breath. Most good speeches are three key points.

Q300 **Douglas Ross:** Maybe Hywel could answer this as well. Do you think that is maybe the limit? We are still doing two-minute speeches and people are speaking for 90 seconds until the close of business, et cetera. Should we just say it will never go down to less than four minutes, because that is the minimum we could speak for to deliver a point in a debate, and if you are down to two minutes you are not doing that?

Hywel Williams: It is horses for courses. If we are discussing a substantial issue over four to five hours, I think six or seven-minute speech limits are fine enough. When it is only a couple of hours or less, Steve's point that you can always whittle your speech down to three points is perfectly reasonable, and I have done that in the past. There is the point that, speaking as a small party, we want to get our views on the record. There are only three Plaid MPs and, given that I am working from home, there are only two. In that sense, we are speaking for the party, as well as for our constituents and, dare I say it, for Wales in some ways, for what would be perceived to be the national interest. There is an imperative to get everything done. I agree with your point, Douglas.

By the way, I should say that it is not just David Cameron who has observed the workplace. I seem to remember hearing Dennis Skinner, about 20 years ago, saying that when he first went down the pit he spent the first few months just following the advice of his father, observing the workplace, I think he called it, and he said nothing at all. Then, of course, he was unstoppable once he had done that.

I have also been, as many people have, to Congress and watched the Congressmen, Representatives and Senators, just reading out prepared speeches, and it is dreadful. I remember being there once and the congressman did not have his speech to hand, so he waffled for about



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three or four minutes until an underling arrived with a prepared speech, which he then read out. It was dreadful; absolutely dreadful.

Steve Brine: I think we could be much tougher as well on Front Benchers. Dare I say it, sometimes I think Front Benchers quite enjoy going on in their opening speeches, because that limits the time Back Benchers can speak, maybe in criticism of what they have said. The Chair could be tougher on Front Benchers, and give them a much clearer steer as to what he does and does not expect from them, and tougher on people who intervene on Front Benchers who are then down on the call list. We have all done it; we have all said, "I have not planned to speak today, I am just going to intervene." You can still get your point on the record by just intervening, but you should not do that and expect to speak and have the same time as everybody else.

Front Benchers need to be a bit more disciplined sometimes, because the wind-up is often more important than the opening, because the wind-up responds to the debate. If the wind-up is merely just reading the wind-up speech that the civil servants have prepared for you, the wind-up speech should not be written until the debate is ongoing, because you should summarise what has happened in the debate. You and I have both done that in debates, Chair. That is how it works.

Hywel Williams: I agree with Steve. People who intervene on Back-Bench colleagues during their speech to get their point across should really hold their fire until the Minister is up, unless the Minister, of course, is just reading something that has been written for him, which is also dreadful. You are sitting there, you have prepared your speech, you have made your speech and you are listening to the Minister for a response to perhaps one key question, and he or she drones on for an hour without addressing the debate at all. Ministers should take care not to do that, and also have a predisposition for accepting interventions from people who have been involved in the debate, unless they have been talking too long themselves, of course.

Chair: Those are all points that have been considered in this Committee before.

Q301 **Jack Brereton:** Do you feel there is an increasing pressure on time in the current situation. Obviously, there are not as many things for colleagues to do at the moment, and there is more pressure to speak in the Chamber. Thankfully, we have Westminster Hall restarting today, but do the two witnesses believe there has been an increased pressure and use of time limits at the moment?

Steve Brine: I do not know, is the honest answer. We would have to look at the stats and see how many more Members have spoken during this period than would, on average, normally do so. I do not know what the stats show on that. I do not feel any greater pressure to speak in the Chamber now during the crisis than I did before. I try to speak in it quite a lot, as I know you do, and I enjoy doing that. I think that goes to the heart of my point: what is the job of an MP? We are Members of



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Parliament. The clue is in the name. You should want to speak in the Chamber. We seem to be in a position where some MPs think it is an inconvenience to be here and to be speaking in the Chamber, and that is not what we are meant to do. I genuinely do not know the answer to your question. Hywel, what do you think?

Hywel Williams: I cannot answer sensibly, as I have not taken part in a debate on the Floor of the House since February, having been working from home since then. I hope I will be asked about contributing to debates remotely, perhaps later on, which is what I would like to do. I cannot really answer sensibly, though I should say for the three of us that, as one small party, we try to speak in everything, perhaps to the dismay of other Members to some extent, I am sure. We try to do that, and we are, I think, very fortunate in the number of times we are called.

Q302 **Ms Angela Eagle:** Should we have a minimum upper time limit of, say, five minutes, and just explain to some people on the call list that they are not going to get into the debate? It used to be the case when I first came into the House 28 years ago that some of my best speeches were never made, because I dropped off the end of virtual call lists. Do you think that having two minutes to make a speech on the renewal of the Covid Act, with 60 people on the list for a 90-minute debate, makes any sense whatsoever?

Hywel Williams: Clearly not. As we all know, it gets very repetitive after a while. We should have a self-denying ordinance that we do not repeat too much of what has been said already. No, I think having such long lists is quite meaningless. If you do get to number 60, there is not much more to be said, but if you are number 41, and it gets to 39 or 40, you are inevitably disappointed, and perhaps some of the wonderful points you have do not get made.

Q303 **Ms Angela Eagle:** I remember when I made my maiden speech. I had to sit in there for seven hours, and I just scraped under before the wind-up started. Steve, do you have any views on being a bit more honest and saying, "Let us have a minimum of five minutes" and then say to some people, "You are not going to get in"?

Steve Brine: I agree, Angela. As I have already said, I think two minutes is crazy, but I think you should be able to say everything in four or five minutes. Less is more on the list. Clearly, the Chair needs to have more speakers than he has time for, just, because he needs to have some flexibility. He does not know how long opening speeches are going to go on for. They need to have that backup, but the reason they do not do it is because Members complain that they do not even have the chance to make their speech, as I understand it. But yes, I do think we should be a bit more honest with Members and say, "You are not going to get in today," and that would be a better use of their time.

Q304 **Ms Angela Eagle:** I always used to find that speeches I had written were useful at some stage, even if they were never given in the House of Commons. That is just an observation.



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Hywel Williams: I chaired in the House for 10 years, and I agree entirely with the point about having an excess of speakers. The last thing you want to see is the debate drying up and then the Minister waffling on for the extra five minutes just to fill the time until the vote so as not to inconvenience Back Benchers, who might be somewhere else. The other point is having a premium on quality rather than quantity, in having 20 rather than 40 on the call list. Speaking as a Member of a minority party, we would like to get in occasionally, and that is not always the case, of course.

Steve Brine: I think I referred to this earlier. In statements there is clearly a weighting process that goes on in the Speaker's Office, because Chairs of Select Committees are always at the top of that list. If you look at the general call lists further down, basically you could win the lottery two weeks in a row. It is unlikely, but you could, because your numbers could come out randomly two weeks in a row. In theory you could come out on the call list in the top 10 for every statement this week. There should be a weighting introduced, as there always used to be, around who has spoken most. You always knew that if you put in to speak, and you had not spoken for a week, that you had a better chance than if you spoke at length yesterday. That weighting seems to have changed, and I would seriously urge that your report, if I could be so bold, suggests reintroducing a level of weighting into the call lists, because the call lists are not dynamic enough at the moment.

Q305 **Liz Twist:** Picking up on something Hywel said on the subject of Ministers waffling on, could you both give us your views about opening statements and the length thereof, and the number of interventions? Do you think there are grounds for looking at a possible time limit on introductory statements?

Steve Brine: I do not think there will ever be a formal time limit on opening speeches to the Second Reading of a Bill. I just do not think that will happen, and there are probably good reasons that people who have been here far longer than I have would know, but I do think there needs to be a self-denying ordinance there. It is just about discipline. I have sat in Second Reading debates, as I am sure you have, where we have had over an hour and 20 minutes of opening speeches. This is not good. This is not respectful to the Back Benchers, who often want to speak in support of your Bill. I have been guilty of waffling on myself occasionally, and maybe I am doing so now. They will not be set formally, but they could self-regulate.

Hywel Williams: I agree. I have been in debates where the Minister has gone on and on and on. Shorter speeches from Ministers are more respectful to the fact that it is going to be a debate, that they can introduce their Bill, whatever it is, briefly, and then we can knock it about a bit. If you have done your homework and you know what the Bill is about, you do not need the Minister to go through it in any huge detail, especially if it is the Second Reading, when we are debating more about the principle anyway.



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Q306 **Liz Twist:** It sounds as if you are both saying it should be self-restraint.

Steve Brine: I believe so.

Hywel Williams: I think it has to be, depending on the size and importance of the Bill, as well. Can I just say one other thing for the record? The Mother and Father of the House should be able to speak as and when they please, for as long as they please.

Q307 **Chair:** Thank you. Steve, I know you have to leave. Thank you very much. I think we have kept you a little longer than we had originally intended, but it has been very helpful, and we certainly will take account of all those comments.

Steve Brine: Thank you for asking me.

Q308 **Chair:** Hywel, one of the things we are keen to find out for this report, this very short, sharp piece of work—I do not know if you were able to listen in to the very beginning of the evidence—is whether there are any recommendations we can make for changes to Standing Orders that might need to be made by 3 November, which is the date that the virtual participation and proxy voting motions need to be extended. We are looking for practical suggestions that we could make to help Members do their job. Obviously, you have experienced both participating virtually, but also being from a smaller party and, as you have said already, wanting to make sure that a Member of your party participates wherever possible. In terms of the impact on Plaid, what does the restriction on the numbers in the Chamber and the virtual participation mean for you?

Hywel Williams: First, either we have been very lucky, or the Speaker and the Clerks have been very kind to us, because at present we are quite satisfied with the way things have been going. I have applied—I did have a look—45 times to take part in statements, essentially, or to ask questions, and have come out on the list 25 times, and have nearly always got in as well. I have not fallen off the end of the list. At present, in practical terms, it all seems to be working. Perhaps it needs to be more formalised, for precisely the reasons you have mentioned, Chair, and I alluded to earlier. We have three Members, down to two in the Chamber, and there are 40 Members from Wales. I think I have been in debates in the past where I was the only Member from Wales who spoke, which is wonderful for me, for my press release the following day, but perhaps not very good for scrutiny.

I suppose there is a great deal to be said for more formal arrangements, so that smaller parties or particular national or regional groups are accepted, but that, of course, cuts across the fundamental principle that it is out of a hat and everybody gets a fair crack of the whip. I do not know about for Scottish questions, but certainly you might want to have a look at lists for Welsh questions, where there are times when the majority of the questioners are not from Wales. I do not know if it is seen as an easier gig, as it were; you can get in on Welsh questions. We do have people from Shropshire, Cheshire and other places bordering Wales who are quite legitimately asking questions about what is happening in



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Wales, but that also illustrates the point quite nicely. On Welsh questions, by the way, the leader of our group always gets in, but the other two or three, whatever it is, are sometimes frustrated, and we always bob, of course, to get in on supplementaries.

Chair: I am going to bring in Owen Thompson now, which I think will link to the point you have just made about representation from all nations and regions.

Q309 **Owen Thompson:** Thank you, Chair. Hywel, have you, or more so your colleagues, experienced any difficulties in finding a space in the Chamber when looking to take part in a debate. Is that something that has been raised in the group?

Hywel Williams: As I said, I have only been down for a fortnight in the last six months. We have discussed this as a group, as to our tactics thereof. It would have to be fairly informal, but it has occurred to me in the past that perhaps the Speaker or the Chair could indicate to people in the Chamber that there are others on the call list who are standing at the Bar of the House waiting to get in. That could be done very informally through the Doorkeepers. That could be one way. I would certainly not want to see people who are not on the list excluded from the debates, or any formal procedures like that, but if we could leave it to the good sense of the Speaker and Doorkeepers, working with people who are standing at the Bar of the House, and the courtesy of people who are sitting in the Chamber.

Q310 **Owen Thompson:** As far as you are aware, there have not been any issues to this point?

Hywel Williams: Not for us when we are on the list. I know that my colleague Ben Lake, from Ceredigion, wanted to make an intervention a little while ago and could not get in because there was no room. If I remember rightly, that was quite a high-profile debate and, unsurprisingly, no-one was keen to give up their seat.

Q311 **Nigel Mills:** Hywel, you have touched on call lists. Are you and your party fans of published call lists, or would you prefer the old system of not knowing unless the Speaker was being generous on the day?

Hywel Williams: We prefer call lists, on the whole. We have been in, not exactly a privileged position, but we get our fair whack of opportunities to speak, to say the least. For example, if there is a statement, under the old system I could be fairly sure to be called about halfway to two thirds of the way through the list, though that was not a formal call list. The person in the Chair would exercise his or her discretion, very wisely, of course. Under certain circumstances I think call lists are essential.

Q312 **Nigel Mills:** Do you think that is the same for debates? I know you are not here to speak in debates, but knowing roughly when you might speak, is that helpful?

Hywel Williams: Yes, I think it is. I know the previous Speaker used to get really annoyed when people would go up to him and say, "Can I go



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out for a cup of tea, please? I have been here for four hours and I am famished” or whatever. He would very grumpily make the point from the Chair. I know lists are kept but, rather than being informal, perhaps they should be formal. One always suspects that, when you are called for two minutes right at the end, you have been in some way demoted for being a naughty boy.

Q313 **Nigel Mills:** Heaven forbid. Do you not think having call lists damages spontaneity too much? Do you think that, on balance, knowing roughly when you might speak is a greater advantage than the act of surprise?

Hywel Williams: One can always use interventions. If you are bursting to say something you can get in, I think. The conventions about interventions are quite good. I like the cut and thrust although, to be honest, I think I use interventions less frequently than others. There is another particular position in which very small parties like mine find themselves, in that because we are so few what we say tends to stand for the party’s view as well. I am not claiming any status as a Front-Bench spokesman for the party, but it might be pored over a bit more, especially back home in Wales, than, say, the common or garden Back Bencher’s speech at 7 o’clock on a wet Tuesday, as it were.

Q314 **Rob Roberts:** Prynhawn da, Hywel. Picking up first on something you mentioned earlier, you are speaking on behalf of your constituents, and sometimes your party, and I thank you for coming and taking the time out from speaking on behalf of Wales. That must be a weighty responsibility indeed. I point to the flag on the wall behind me. We appreciate your time.

Does Plaid Cymru, as a party, co-ordinate applications to speak in debates so you can ensure that only one of your Members applies to speak in each one, in the thought that that might increase your chances of being selected?

Hywel Williams: I am glad this is on video. You might have noticed my tongue fairly firmly stuck in my cheek when I said, “speaking for the nation.” I should have stood up when I did it. Yes, we do. Obviously, we have to ration our time even more carefully than the other smaller parties, and the smaller parties from Wales. It is a matter of must, I am afraid.

I suppose there is an element of gaming the system there. Everybody does it, I suppose, to some extent, but it is more important for us that we do not expend all our energies. I do not think I have ever been in a debate in 20 years where two Plaid Cymru MPs have been called. That is, if I was called to put the Plaid Cymru point of view in a debate, I do not think my next-door neighbour has been called to put an alternative Plaid Cymru point of view. That might mean we are getting away with hiding our party splits, of course, though we do not have any at all in Plaid.

Q315 **Rob Roberts:** You would be more likely to have just one of you put in, thinking that would get priority, rather than having all three of you putting in?



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Hywel Williams: Yes, on the whole. There have been some times during the last six months where the two who are down have both put in. I am not quite sure, but possibly there have been. You are talking about very small margins, just one or two, rather than one or 350.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am very conscious that we only have you for a couple more moments, but I want to touch on the point that you have been participating virtually and, therefore, since Whitsun have not been able to take part in debates, although you can take part in questions, UQs, statements and Select Committees. Do you have anything you would like to put on the record about not being able to take part in debates and how that is impacting your role as a Member of Parliament?

James Gray: I would like to add to that. How do you feel about the fact that you used to be able to vote from home after a debate, but now you cannot vote at all, apart from by proxy?

Hywel Williams: The proxy point is not really a problem for me, to be honest. But not being able to participate in debates is very frustrating, I have to say. One of the functions of an MP is to make speeches and try to hold the Government to account, and I feel quite frustrated that I cannot do that. It would not be easy, I suppose, to have the cut and thrust of a normal debate on the Floor of the House if you have people joining from afar, but we need to try to find some way of including people like me. I am not sure how many people are now in the same position as I have been, where we have not been joining. I do not know if anybody knows that, but there must be a fair chunk of MPs who have not made a speech for a long time, and I certainly think that should be accommodated.

I think that is the view of my colleagues as well, by the way. We have discussed this quite a bit. To get back to the point Rob made earlier, obviously we discuss debates and votes beforehand, and in some ways we speak for each other, but that does not make up for the opportunity to take part myself.

Q316 **Chair:** Given that around 150 Members have proxies, and they, therefore, cannot be here in person, I would say that is about the number that have not been able to take part in debates. Perhaps when this was first decided back in June it felt like that would be acceptable for a short period of time. I am not quite so sure now that it has not been a short period of time. The House of Lords has clearly managed to allow for full participation in debate, so this is something we are reflecting on.

Hywel Williams: It is not a lucky dip, either. I have been an MP for 20 years, and I am somewhat older than some of the participants this afternoon. The people who are self-isolating tend to be at my end of the age spectrum, and they perhaps have a great deal of experience that might possibly be of some use to Parliament.

Q317 **Chair:** Is there anything you want to add before we let you go? Anything that you think the Committee needs to consider?



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Hywel Williams: Could you bear with me a moment? I want to make the point about participating virtually in substantive proceedings.

The one other thing I should tell you is that I have held a number of meetings, both locally and internationally—I did one the other day with participants from Sweden, Spain and the United States—and one of the things we managed to do was to have simultaneous translation, using one of those handy little boxes at the bottom of the screen. I was thinking for the Welsh Affairs Committee that could be accommodated and they could operate bi-lingually. I am not on the Welsh Affairs Committee. I do not know what their practice is at the moment, but maybe they could take advantage of the opportunity rather than being burdened by it.

Chair: Very helpful comments. Thank you very much.

Q318 **Ms Angela Eagle:** Hywel, have you noticed what the New Zealand Parliament did at the beginning of the Covid pandemic, where it set up what it called a Select Committee, but it was a special committee led by the Leader of the Opposition and with an opposition majority? It had special powers of subpoena and calling in individuals to give evidence, in order to work directly on making sure that the Government had its response right and holding it to account. Do you think we should be thinking of something like that as the pandemic goes on?

Hywel Williams: I did not know about that, but it sounds to me like a very useful and practical thing to do. There is so much going on with the pandemic in general anyway, and the limitations on scrutiny within the Chamber are such that, as a very first response, I think that sounds like a very good idea.

Chair: Thank you so much for your time and for your contributions. They will very much help us and inform our recommendations. If you think of anything else that you want to feed in following this, do please get in touch, and we will take that into account as well. Thank you very much for today.

Hywel Williams: Thank you, Chair.