



Petitions Committee

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Rt Hon Jacob Rees Mogg MP
Leader of the House of Commons
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

20 May 2020

Dear Jacob,

In light of the decision of the Government not to bring forward any extension to the hybrid proceedings in the House of Commons, I am writing regarding the arrangements for debates scheduled by the Petitions Committee.

Since the House agreed not to undertake business in Westminster Hall on 19th March, it has not been possible for petitions that have each received more than 100,000 signatures to be debated by MPs. There are currently 22 petitions, that have yet to be debated, which combined have received many millions of signatures.

In the two months since debates were suspended, my Committee has been able to work remotely effectively, by conducting online evidence sessions with petitioners, experts and Ministers, and undertaking a range of digital public engagement, receiving the views of tens of thousands of people. However, the people who have started and signed these petitions did so with the expectation of these being debated and their issues put directly to Ministers. When bringing forward proposals to close Westminster Hall, you indicated to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and I that Backbench Business debates would be a way to continue to debate petitions business. However, backbench business was then excluded from the provisions brought forward by the Government to facilitate our hybrid proceedings.

In taking the decision not to bring forward an extension to either the scope or the duration of the hybrid scrutiny proceedings, and therefore denying Members an opportunity to vote on them, you have sought to justify this by saying we must be in Westminster to conduct effective scrutiny. Yesterday you told the House that the House of Commons should “work thoroughly, properly, and effectively”. It is therefore vital that any return to Westminster is not done solely for the Government to push its legislative programme through Parliament, but instead to enable thorough, proper scrutiny, including allowing

petitioners and backbench MPs to once again hold the Government to account on their terms.

If we are expected to be in Westminster, then it is only right that millions of petitioners should be able to see us debating the issues that matter to them. I am therefore asking that you urgently bring forward the necessary motions to enable Westminster Hall or another forum to be opened for petitions debates, in a safe, social-distanced way.

I am writing in similar terms to Mr Speaker.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee