



PROCEDURE AND PRIVILEGES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held via Microsoft Teams on Wednesday 24 June 2020

Present:

L. Ashton of Hyde	L. Newby
L.Eames	B. Smith of Basildon
B Evans of Bowes Park	L. Stoneham of Droxford
L. Foulkes of Cumnock	B. Thomas of Winchester
L. Geddes	V. Ullswater
B. Harris of Richmond	B. Warwick of Undercliffe
L Judge	
L. McAvoy	
L.McFall of Alcluith (Chair)	
L. Mancroft	

with the Clerk of the Parliaments.

Apologies were received from Lord Bew, Lord Fowler and Lord Morris of Aberavon.

I. Review of hybrid House and remote voting

The Chair introduced the paper (PC/19-21/34).

Baroness Thomas of Winchester asked for members to be able to record their abstention on a division within the Remote Voting System. In discussion a couple of members agreed with this proposition whilst others said that a remote abstention could not be considered participation and that it was difficult to justify a member being paid the attendance allowance when not aiding the House coming to a decision.

It was agreed that it was up to the Commission to consider whether an abstention would make a member eligible to receive the attendance allowance. If the Commission thought abstentions should attract allowances then the Committee would consider how to allow abstentions procedurally

The Committee agreed that ministers and other members should be reminded not to take up the House's time thanking other members for their contributions. Members on the Woolsack should also be asked to simply call the members name.

There was a discussion around the drawbacks of the hybrid House with a number of members commenting that it lacked the spontaneity of the physical House. It was agreed that the Committee would revisit this issue after the summer.



The Committee considered the number of answers to QWAs, especially topical QWAs, which were overdue. The Chief Whip explained that there had been a huge upsurge in the number of QWAs tabled at the same time that many civil servants had been redeployed to respond to Covid-19. Some members asked over 600 QWAs in a year. The Usual Channels would discuss this and would bring proposals to the Committee if necessary.

The Committee discussed whether the Chamber capacity could be increased from 6 July in the light of the Government announcement about a change in social distancing rules. The Chairman informed the Committee that the House authorities were reviewing the capacity of the Chamber and options for mitigating risks and would inform members in due course.

The Committee agreed to make it explicit in the guidance that the Deputy Leaders should always be allowed to enter the Chamber when not on the Speakers List if capacity allows. It was proposed that the rules on access to the Chamber should be relaxed so that if there was space to enter without going over safe capacity then members could enter even if not on the Speakers List. The Committee discussed how this would be policed and agreed it would be important for each Party to have whips available in the Chamber to make sure once their benches were full no more members of their Party would enter the Chamber. The Committee agreed that ultimately the Woolsack would adjourn the House if capacity was exceeded. The Committee agreed this.

The Committee considered the rules of attendance at debate and their application to the hybrid House. The Committee agreed to remove the general flexibility from the guidance. The Committee also agreed to emphasise to members that:

- the usual rules of attendance at debate applied to virtual participation in exactly the same way as they did to physical participation and therefore those participating virtually must join the call before the item of business begins; and
- those members who are participating physically should be physically present in the Chamber for at least the opening speeches, the winding-up speeches and the speeches immediately before and after their own.

The Chief Whip informed the Committee that some members of the House were disobeying the Committee's guidance by applying to participate in more than one Oral Question on a sitting day. For now the GWO was attempting to contact them to ascertain which one they would prefer to take part in. But in future the GWO might ask the Committee to allow them to disregard the name of any member disregarding the rules in this way.

The Leader of the Opposition said that a number of members felt that a small number of unaffiliated members were being given far more than their fair share of participation opportunities. It was agreed that the Usual Channels would discuss this.

It was also agreed that the Government whip would announce at the start of each debate what the time limit was for speeches. This was thought to be useful to those watching proceedings.



2. Any Other Business

The Chair told the Committee that it would need to meet again in mid-July when further proposals for change are ready, specifically for hybrid grand committees.

The Chairman also informed the Committee that in his answer to an oral question the previous day he had undertaken that the Committee would look at various issues around the size of the House. These would be added to the future timetable.

The Committee agreed to meet again in mid July using MS Teams.

Chloe Mawson
Clerk of the Procedure Committee