



**LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS
THE RT. HON. JACOB REES-MOGG M.P.**



Sir Bernard Jenkin Esq. M.P.,
Chairman, Liaison Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

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Thank you for your recent correspondence regarding debates in government time and hybrid proceedings in the House of Commons.

Debates in government time

In your correspondence of 15 October, you said that the Liaison Committee working group was of the view that two subjects for debate could be accommodated better in government time. As you allude to in your letter, I have recently announced two general debates on coronavirus. I recognise the desire to debate the pandemic from across the House. Whilst I am not averse to government time being found for general debates, I hope you will appreciate that there is a full legislative programme of primary legislation and I am also responding to requests from across the House to consider secondary legislation on the floor. It is, therefore, not possible for me to find time easily for general debates.

In my view, scheduling a government general debate on coronavirus allows members to raise any and all matters relating to the pandemic, which becomes more difficult when the government instead schedules more narrow debates that limit what members can raise. I would also note that last week's opposition day debate was on the subject of the covid-19 economic support package, providing another recent opportunity for the matters proposed by the Treasury Committee to be debated. You also ask for a debate on the integrated review of defence, foreign policy, security and international development. It is my view that this debate would be a strong contender for a backbench debate, should members wish to bid for it.

Hybrid proceedings

In your letter of 16 October, you said that a number of members of the Liaison Committee had asked you to write regarding the possibility of a return to hybrid proceedings. I am grateful that you recognise the quandary that I and the House more widely currently face. The important work of the House is not simply limited to what happens in the Chamber. It encompasses the many meetings of select committees, public bill committees, delegated legislation committees, proceedings in Westminster Hall and more informal meetings in and around the Parliamentary estate. Just as hospitals and schools provide essential services in health and education, Parliament performs an essential constitutional role, making and changing legislation, debating key issues and scrutinising the broader work of Government. At a time when the nation is dealing with the widespread impacts of coronavirus, this work could not be more important. The continuing need to legislate in order for our country to be ready for the end of the Transition Period is also of vital importance. It is my strong view that we best serve our constituents when we are here in Westminster, carrying out these essential functions, as we have been throughout the pandemic.

A return to hybrid proceedings would mean that we would necessarily need to make difficult decisions to limit what the House of Commons can do, a point you recognise when you say that “hybrid proceedings have their own limitations.” You then go on to request that, should hybrid proceedings return, the government should not use this as an opportunity to prioritise government business. I am afraid that I cannot accept this point. It is a key principle that the Government, as elected by the UK public, is able to bring forward its business, including its manifesto commitments. Standing Order No. 14 recognises this need for Government business to have precedence. In addition to delivering on manifesto commitments the Government is also bringing forward substantial business relating to the pandemic itself, which I am sure you would accept cannot be deprioritised.

Neither a return to hybrid proceedings nor deprioritising government business offer viable solutions to the problem before us. The House authorities have done extraordinary work over recent months but limitations to resourcing and the need to maintain the resilience of staff mean that a shift to hybrid would almost certainly lead to the end or curtailment of many items of business. The chamber and legislative committees would need to be prioritised. A decision would therefore have to be taken as to whether we should again close Westminster Hall, whether we should limit opportunities for backbenchers to raise important issues with Ministers or even whether Select Committees would need to accept limitations to how often or when they meet.

I am sympathetic to the point you make about members, including some select committee chairs, being unable to participate in some aspects of our proceedings. The participation of members is essential to how the House of Commons works. We have therefore taken significant mitigating actions, including a wide scale roll out of proxy voting and providing for remote participation in scrutiny proceedings, including select committees. I hope that you will understand that when I rule out a full roll out of hybrid proceedings, I do so because it would almost certainly mean ending some elements of our business entirely - something that I think you yourself accept would be the consequence when you ask that government business is not prioritised. The cut and thrust of debate and ability for members to test ministers, is also missing from debates under the hybrid proceedings. Whilst I will always keep this under review, I do not accept that now is the time to go back to hybrid proceedings across the board.

With every good wish,

Yours a.,

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