

Procedure Committee Inquiry into Procedure under coronavirus restrictions

This is a short note to give my view on the hybrid procedure under which the House of Commons has operated during the lockdown period.

Clearly, the procedure is far from ideal and this reflects its status as an emergency and temporary measure. In particular, only a restricted number of Members get to participate in questions, urgent questions and statements and having no interventions makes for stilted debate.

That said it has been working well within its limitations. The technology has generally functioned thanks in large part to the considerable efforts of staff and technicians. The core functions of the House in terms of scrutiny and legislation have continued.

In some respects, it is an improvement on usual practice: meetings eg of select committees are more efficiently conducted and less time wasted; set pieces like PMQs are less subject to irrelevant disruption and distraction. Some useful lessons can be learned from the experiment.

Clearly, we wish to get back to normal operations and schedule as soon as possible but ending the hybrid process now in an arbitrary way makes no sense.

Firstly, what is to be gained while the currently lockdown regulations continue? There will simply be a lot more people at Westminster but no more will be able to participate in the Chamber at any one time. This looks like tokenism and creating the illusion of business as usual. As MPs can work from home they should continue to do so, with the ability to attend in person, if absolutely necessary.

Secondly, no regard appears to have been given to the risks to those who do return to Westminster. Before the hybrid procedure was introduced social distancing was not being observed and I fear the nature of the premises will make it difficult to achieve now, especially during divisions. The proposal for divisions is farcical, neither safe nor effective. This puts at risk Members and those who come into contact with them, especially if they are vulnerable.

Some Members may be in the shielded category or have family members living with them who are. Others will be less vulnerable but will still have pre-existing conditions or chronic respiratory illnesses which would be exacerbated by Covid-19 infection.

It is easy to see the risks of ending the hybrid procedure now and these outweigh the gains

Andy Slaughter MP