

How should Parliament work?

Normally in these blogs I highlight areas where things have gone wrong or need improving. Today's blog begins with thanks to the Speaker and his staff for something that went right. He got a virtual Parliament up and running smoothly and quickly when some of us thought Parliament needed to be working. It was a time of big decisions on the extent of the lock down and management of the NHS response to the virus.

The virtual Parliament allowed MPs to ask questions and make speeches from home via the Zoom link, and reminded Ministers that their blizzard of decisions needed to be reported to MPs and subjected to questions and suggestions. There were remote divisions where an MP voted by computer once through the on line security. It was a big step forward and answered the question of how could Parliament function whilst observing social distancing?

It did however have some limitations. No MP was allowed to intervene on a Minister or other speaker, preventing challenge and proper debate. There were no easy informal exchanges between MPs as a debate or the government's business evolved. Everything had to be planned and timetabled in advance, so there could be no spontaneity.

The Leader of the House was keen that something more like the Commons was restored. Again the Speaker and his team responded well, giving us the Mark 2 Covid Commons. Now we have regained the right to intervene. Most MPs need to attend the Commons to speak and vote, and so there is more scope for suitably socially distanced conversations with other MPs as needed. Voting in the lobbies has been restored with orderly and segregated progress to and through the lobby to vote, speeded a bit by the presence of card readers to accept your vote.

The issue is how can it evolve further? There could still usefully be more spontaneity were some speaking slots to be available unallocated in advance, and if some questions were not previously allocated. The chamber with only 50 people in it at any one time does not have the atmosphere it normally has, with most debates heard in silence. Outside the chamber the social distancing advice does not always remain observed, as MPs want to talk to each other. Democratic politics is about the numbers that support a cause as much as it is about the justness of the cause. Daily life at Westminster is about running causes, building support and arguing for change.