

**Tuesday
21 April 2020**

**Volume 675
No. 48**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 21 April 2020

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SIXTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 675

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Tuesday 21 April 2020

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: The House is meeting today in exceptional and unprecedented circumstances. I expect today's proceedings to be short and limited to what is necessary to enable wider participation in the proceedings of the House from tomorrow onwards and the House to be given information about the business for future days. I ask all hon. Members who are present in the Chamber to observe the guidance that has been issued about social distancing not only in relation to each other, but in relation to staff of the House who are in the Chamber and, indeed, myself. Questions to the Secretary of State for Justice will now take place next Monday.

I am exceptionally allowing the Leader of the House to move two motions without formal notice, based on the same criteria I set out on 19 December 2019. I am allowing the motions to be moved because informal notice was given last night, albeit later than I would I have wished. I know that the motions arise from decisions of the House of Commons Commission and have broad support across the House; they allow for wider participation in the business of the House and scrutiny of the Executive, which is crucial at this time. I also note that the Procedure Committee, in its report, which has been prepared at remarkable speed to assist the debate today, supports the principle of the motions being taken without notice.

Proceedings during the Pandemic and Hybrid Scrutiny Proceedings

[Relevant document: First Report from the Procedure Committee, Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: proposals for remote participation, HC 300.]

Mr Speaker: The motions on proceedings during the pandemic and on hybrid scrutiny proceedings will be debated together. I call the Leader of the House to move the first motion.

2.35 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That this House is committed to taking all steps necessary to balance its responsibilities for continuing scrutiny of the executive, legislating and representation of the interests of constituents with adherence to the guidance issued by Public Health England and the restrictions placed upon all citizens of the United Kingdom, and is further committed, in pursuit of that aim, to allowing virtual participation in the House's proceedings, to extending the digital capacity of those proceedings to ensure the participation of all Members, and to ensuring that its rules and procedures are adapted to permit as far as possible parity of treatment between Members participating virtually and Members participating in person.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the following orders be made and have effect until 12 May:

A. Scrutiny proceedings

1) The House shall meet at 2.30 pm on Mondays, and at 11.30 am on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and will first proceed with questions and statements under the orders [Hybrid scrutiny proceedings] of today.

2) Scrutiny proceedings shall conclude not later than two hours after their commencement, save that the Speaker shall have discretion to extend the proceedings for a short additional period if it seems to him appropriate to do so.

3) Following the conclusion of scrutiny proceedings, the House shall proceed with business set down to be taken at the commencement of public business and then with the main business.

4) Scrutiny proceedings comprise

- a) questions to ministers;
- b) urgent questions;
- c) ministerial statements.

5) No question of which notice has been given under SO No. 22(5) shall be taken more than one hour after the House sits, and scrutiny proceedings shall otherwise be taken in the order determined by the Speaker who shall announce that order not later than the start of the sitting to which it relates.

6) Members may participate in scrutiny proceedings virtually, by electronic means approved by the Speaker, or by attending in the Chamber. The Speaker may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any one time.

7) For the purposes of proceedings under this order, Members shall give notice by electronic means designated by the Speaker.

8) Notice periods in respect of all scrutiny proceedings shall be set by the Speaker, provided that the latest date and time specified by the Speaker for questions to ministers shall be such as to enable notices to be circulated at least two days (excluding Friday, Saturday and Sunday) before the question is to be answered.

B. Urgent questions

1) In respect of any day to which order (A. Scrutiny proceedings) applies, a Member may apply to the Speaker for leave to ask an urgent question under this order.

2) An urgent question is one which, in the Speaker's opinion, is of an urgent character and relates to a matter of public importance.

C. Supplementary provisions

1) No unopposed business, save motions for unopposed returns of which notice has been given, may be taken at the commencement of scrutiny proceedings.

2) Notices of private business may be set down to be taken at the commencement of public business after scrutiny proceedings, but, if opposed, shall not be proceeded with but shall be deferred to such time, other than a Friday, as the Chairman of Ways and Means shall appoint.

3) Standing Order Nos. 7, 8, and 21 shall not have effect and the Speaker shall be required under paragraph (5) of Standing Order No 22 to take account of the party balance while these orders are in force.

4) In any case where the Speaker has ordered the withdrawal of a Member, or of several Members, under Standing Order No 43 and is required to direct the Serjeant at Arms to give effect to the order, the Member or Members shall be suspended from the service of the House for the following sitting day.

5) No motion to sit in private may be made during scrutiny proceedings.

6) The Speaker may amend any provision of these orders, if he determines it is necessary to do so in order to ensure that the conduct of business is consistent with the Resolution of the House (Proceedings during the pandemic) of 21 April.

7) Before exercising his power under paragraph (6), the Speaker shall satisfy himself that he has the agreement of the Leader of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I rise to speak to the motion on proceedings during the pandemic and, as you have explained, Mr Speaker, I will also speak to the motion on hybrid scrutiny proceedings.

Mr Speaker, may I start by thanking you and the House staff for the incredible work that has taken place during the Easter recess to allow me to move these motions today? It is worth noting that our Clerks and staff often work very long hours when the House is sitting and expect to be compensated for that in recess periods. On this occasion, we have asked them to work during the recess period too, placing a double burden upon them. I am also grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for

allowing these motions to be moved without formal notice, and to House staff for arranging the publication yesterday of these motions and the accompanying explanatory note.

From tomorrow, if the House agrees these motions, we will resume oral questions, statements and urgent questions virtually. While the new digital Parliament may not be perfect—Members may launch forth into fine perorations only to be muted or snatched away altogether by an intermittent internet connection—we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The parliamentary authorities have done a superb job to get this up and running at short notice. Should the House agree these motions today, I would expect to bring forward further motions shortly so that we can extend our virtual ways of working for a longer period and to more substantive business, including legislation.

Before turning to the motions, I want to set out my gratitude to the Procedure Committee for its rapid work. These are difficult and challenging times, and these necessary changes are happening at a pace that would not be ideal in more normal times. The Procedure Committee has an essential role in advising this House on reform. I am grateful to the Committee and to its Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), for its report published today, and I commit to continuing to work closely with it. We will all want to keep under review how the procedures work. I know that the Committee has particular concerns about moving to electronic voting, and I would certainly want to work closely with the Committee on the options for that. I hope it will reassure the Committee if I say that, once we have moved to considering substantive business as well, I will be looking to make certain that we initially schedule business that is unlikely to be divided on.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way at this early stage. Could he confirm that it is his intention tomorrow to bring forward a motion on remote voting?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we must wait till tomorrow for tomorrow's business, but I do expect further motions to be brought forward on how this House will operate and move forward to substantive business. Those motions will be laid in the normal way before the rise of the House, so that we do not have to have the extraordinary situation of bringing forward motions without notice, but there will be further motions.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I obviously understand the extreme circumstances under which we are working, and I commend the Government and the Officers of the House for what they have done. In his comments, the Leader of the House has indicated that nothing controversial that would lead to a vote will be brought before the House. In those circumstances, is he guaranteeing that nothing to do with the extending of abortion in Northern Ireland will be brought to the House during this crisis period?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was referring to the period of next week, when we expect the business to be business that will be agreed without a Division. We are looking to having remote voting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) mentioned, and motions will come forward—or have to come forward—to cover that.

The point at which that is in place will be the point at which controversial business will be taken that is unlikely to go through without a Division. We are not looking to Divisions next week.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for giving way and for giving us a chance to ask a question. He will know that on every occasion we have considered any controversial issues to do with abortion, Ministers and right hon. and hon. Members from all the different parties in the Chamber have said that on no occasion would any decisions be made on abortion when the Northern Ireland Assembly was working. I am conscious that the Northern Ireland Assembly is up and working, and it is working well.

Is it not important that no such legislative change should be brought to this House when the Northern Ireland Assembly could make the decision? I need an assurance on the record from the Leader of the House that under no circumstances will any Member of this House be disenfranchised and prevented from voting against abortion. There are many people not just in my party but in other parties across the House who are opposed to the change on abortion, and certainly opposed to any change that affects Northern Ireland when we have a working Assembly to take those decisions.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Votes on abortion have always been free votes. It would be astonishing if that were to change, and I would not be in favour of that. Such motions come from an Act of Parliament passed by this House last year and the Government must follow the law of the land. However, I give the assurance—I will announce next week's business in the business statement—that next week we will bring forward business on which it is not expected there will be Divisions, because it is business that has been broadly agreed on.

I ought to turn now to the motions, and I am grateful to the House of Commons Commission and other parties for agreement to these measures. It may help the House if I briefly set out the approach taken; I draw attention to the detailed explanatory memorandum published for the convenience of Members.

The first motion commits the House to taking all steps necessary to balance its responsibility for continuing scrutiny of the Executive, legislating and representing the interests of constituents with adherence to the guidance issued by Public Health England and the restrictions placed upon all citizens of the United Kingdom. On today of all days—the 94th anniversary of the birth of Her Majesty—I feel that I should refer not to citizens of the United Kingdom but to subjects of our gracious sovereign and take the opportunity, in the absence of gun salutes, to wish Her Majesty very many happy returns of the day. We must, as her subjects, be an exemplar in the processes that we adopt to allow virtual working, and that is underpinned by the motion.

As the explanatory memorandum sets out, the main motion provides for the first two hours of each sitting on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays to be devoted to scrutiny proceedings, defined as questions to Ministers, urgent questions and ministerial statements, during which it will be possible for Members to participate electronically in a form approved by you, Mr Speaker. The motion also enables the Speaker to restrict the number of Members physically present in the Chamber and to

ensure that social distancing requirements are met. As I look around the Chamber today, I see that we have succeeded in doing that.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I join the Leader of the House in thanking everyone who has worked so hard to bring forward these arrangements. I would like to raise the subject of Adjournment debates. I declare an interest, because Mr Speaker has been kind enough to give me an Adjournment debate on the Order Paper for this week. Adjournment debates tend to be rather sparsely attended at the best of times, so I urge my right hon. Friend and the House of Commons Commission to find a way as quickly as possible for us to have Adjournment debates so that we Back Benchers can represent our constituents.

Mr Rees-Mogg: If I may, I will answer the question in two ways. We are looking to expand the digital offering so that we can carry out more business, hence legislation next week. It depends on for how long this situation goes on. The other part of the answer is that, for Members who cannot come to the Chamber and so that no Member is disadvantaged, what we are not doing virtually we will not do at all—beyond today and some motions that may have to be laid tomorrow. I was coming on to make that point, but it is only right that everything we do should be available to all Members in a virtual format as well as to the small numbers who will want to attend in person. In that process, I am sorry to say, Adjournment debates will be at the end rather than at the beginning, because we need scrutiny and legislation to be further up the list.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): For the past few weeks, hundreds, if not thousands, of workers around my constituency, in paint factories and in manufacturing, have had to continue to go to work despite not being able to maintain the 6 feet or 2 metre distance while doing their jobs. They have been told repeatedly that that is in line with the guidance, and that the guidance is clear that that rule should be followed where possible. If we cannot do our jobs properly—Members are to be limited in their contributions and unable to ask supplementary questions in the usual way—will we be applying the same rules in this House as have been applied to those working in paint and kitchen factories in my constituency, who have to go to work regardless of the social distancing advice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The same rules apply to us as they do to everyone else. That is the whole point of what we are trying to do—facilitating working remotely but trying to ensure social distancing in this House.

As we began prayers and Mr Speaker walked in front of me, about a foot away, I noticed that someone said, "That's not social distancing." There will be occasions, even in this House, when social distancing is not kept to absolutely perfectly but is in the spirit of the rules—as long as we are making our best effort to ensure social distancing, hence the tape that has been put on the floor and the novel style of prayer card on the Benches to ensure that we are in the right places. That is completely in line with the guidance given to the rest of the country.

We have a twofold duty of leadership as Members of this House: one is to show that we are following the rules that apply to everyone else; and the other is to lead

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

by example in showing that we are getting on with our essential work. With the proposals brought forward, we do both.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On the subject of leading by example on the rules that we have imposed on everyone else, I point out to the Leader of the House that we have never debated those rules. Those rules were implemented under legislation passed—presciently, as far as Orwell was concerned—in 1984, and we have never debated and explored them. Is that itself not shocking?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We had an opportunity to debate the emergency legislation. What we are doing today is ensuring the opportunity for debate, discussion and the Government's being held to account. I am providing for my right hon. Friend what he is asking for before he even asked for it. I do not claim the capability of second sight and of knowing what he was going to ask for, but I am delighted that, thanks to your good offices, Mr Speaker, we are delivering for my right hon. Friend.

As I was saying, the motion will enable the Speaker to restrict the number of Members physically present in the Chamber to ensure that social distancing is met, and the motion will remain in force until 12 May. It is likely that arrangements may be modified following the motion tomorrow on a wider set of proceedings. These arrangements are temporary—that is part of the point—and for while the crisis lasts.

I have specific points on which I wish to provide reassurance. Paragraph 3 of section A of the motion reads:

“Following the conclusion of scrutiny proceedings, the House shall proceed with business set down to be taken at the commencement of public business and then with the main business.”

I alluded to this earlier: I wish to make it clear that such provision allows us to bring forward further motions this week that are procedural and necessary, including a motion to allow for substantive business. It is not the Government's current intention to meet physically to debate legislation or other substantive matters; rather, we intend to wait until the House has agreed a way in which that business may be debated remotely.

Turning to section C, paragraphs 6 and 7, the motion gives the Speaker the power to vary the orders, having agreed that with the Leader of the House, which is me. That might seem a sweeping power, but it is entirely to ensure that Mr Speaker can react to any teething problems with the new procedures, so I hope that Members will consider it a sensible inclusion. It is not so that you and I, Mr Speaker, can set up some form of railroading of parliamentary procedures, and it has to be within the requirements of the motion agreed.

To conclude, Parliament has always evolved to make sure that it can work efficiently. Parliamentary procedure is not an end in itself but a means to allow the institution to function successfully. Any changes now will be temporary, for the period of the lockdown, because like many things, the Chamber works best when Members can meet in person. I hope the whole House can support these motions, so that the House can undertake its essential scrutiny, and we can then move to considering other vital business, including legislation.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): The Leader of the House rightly says that these measures are only temporary, which I think we all welcome. Does he agree that the real spirit of this has to be that, as the restrictions on the country are lifted over the coming weeks, we should respond in kind, moving at least in step with the increasing freedom of citizens to go about their business and showing leadership in that respect too?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As a general rule, it is wise to agree with the chairman of the 1922 Committee, and I am happy to say that on this occasion, I do agree with my hon. Friend. As the rest of the country sees its ability to do more become apparent, so we must go along with that. He kindly leads me perfectly to the point at which I want to end.

What we do in this House is not something that it is nice to do—a frippery or a bauble on the British constitution. It is the British constitution. It is the essence of how our governmental and constitutional system works. The ability to hold the Government to account, to seek redress of grievance and to take up those matters brought to us by our constituents so that they may be put right are best done when this House sits. In 1349, when the black death affected this country, Parliament could not and did not sit; the Session was cancelled. Thanks to modern technology, even I have moved on from 1349, and I am glad to say that we can sit to carry out these fundamental constitutional functions. I am enormously grateful to many who are just as traditionalist as I am but who have accepted these constraints. Mr Speaker, I sometimes think that you compete with me to be a traditionalist, but you have been at the forefront of getting this to happen, because Parliament—the House of Commons—is essential to how we are governed.

2.51 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for opening the debate. These are extraordinary times, and today we are debating a process that has shown how the House can move with these changing times. I, too, want to pay tribute to all those involved. It has been an incredible feat by the Clerk of the House and the staff, the Digital Service, the parliamentary broadcasting team and all those involved in both the technical side and in drafting, refining and redrafting the paper that came to the Commission, which led to this motion. I also want to thank the Procedure Committee, which met virtually and made an important contribution to the discussion we had at the Commission.

The Opposition want to engage with the Government at this extraordinary time, and we consider that the ultimate aim is to move to a virtual Parliament, in keeping with Government and Public Health England advice, subject to any technical limitations. Mr Speaker, you chaired the Commission where we discussed and agreed a way forward, which is in the motion before us. We are effectively agreeing to hybrid proceedings, which combine the physical participation of up to 50 Members here and the virtual participation of up to 120 Members. Members will be treated equally, whether they are in the Chamber or virtually present. There will be a shuffle, and parity will be given to all the parties. There will be no bobbing or supplementary points and certainly no

points of order. Those arrangements are laid out in what looks like the eight commandments—“Thou shalt not do this,” and, “Thou shalt not do that.”

I want to touch on section A, paragraph (2), which states:

“Scrutiny proceedings shall conclude not later than two hours after their commencement”.

I know that the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, think that that is mainly for technical reasons, rather than a prescriptive limit, but it looks to be very prescriptive about how proceedings end. I appreciate that, in terms of parliamentary broadcasting, there may be technical difficulties in the House sitting beyond two hours, but if the Leader of the House could give us an undertaking that that is not as prescriptive as laid out in the motion, that would be helpful. That is literally what will happen—there will be people managing the time, because we have to understand that Clerks at the Table and anyone else have to limit their time here.

We note the consequent Standing Order changes that apply to prayer cards and to the social distancing here in the Chamber, as we can see. On giving notice of questions, I agree with the Leader of the House that the explanatory memorandum is really helpful in setting out what Members should do to apply for their questions. The period runs from Monday to Monday—apart from next week because we are meeting today—so Members have until Thursday to list their questions for the following week.

I know that the staff of the House and everyone else involved are working on how we deal with the debates on legislation. I look forward to the motion that is coming forward on that.

Secure voting is extremely important. We have to make sure that any voting process is secure. We have already seen that there are some rogue emails about, apparently from the Department of Health suggesting that it wants herd immunity, so we have to be very careful about how we vote.

This is going to be an incredible time, Mr Speaker. There is going to be additional oversight from your office, the Table Office, and the Whips Offices on both sides of the House. They are all going to be working incredibly hard to make sure that we can come into Parliament to hold the Government to account and to uphold the democratic process. As the Leader of the House says, these measures will be effective only until 12 May.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am not sure whether I heard this correctly, but I thought my right hon. Friend said that there cannot be points of order. I know that points of order can sometimes be badly used, but sometimes they can point out an injustice or a procedural problem that needs addressing. How can we ensure that this House does have the ability to shout alarm if necessary?

Valerie Vaz: It is a matter for Mr Speaker to take points of order. That is part of the wide discretion that he has under other parts of the motion. The key thing—this is what came out of our discussions—is that we cannot interrupt proceedings where Members are up on screens virtually. It would be impossible to interrupt them with a point of order as they are speaking. There will be a

way of working on that. It may well happen, but it is entirely at Mr Speaker’s discretion. Hopefully he will deal with injustices that may occur in the Chamber.

I think you suggested, Mr Speaker, that there might be a dress code for the House. Certainly there is the issue of what goes on behind Members in terms of animals, children, wallpaper and all that, as we have seen. Clearly the dress code will apply only to the Member’s top half—unless, of course, it is the Leader of the House. I know that he sometimes likes to be horizontal, so for him the dress code will in fact apply to the top half and the bottom half.

I thank everyone for getting us to this position. Subject to certain undertakings, Her Majesty’s Opposition support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I might be able to help Members with some of these points. This is a starting point. We want to have the resilience to build up from this point. This is not the end; it is only the beginning of moving forward. Quite rightly, people have mentioned the digital broadcasting staff. We cannot thank them enough. We have had 700 years of this House doing things one way and then we suddenly completely turn everything over and start in a new way. I can only thank them.

I assure the shadow Leader of the House that we will be looking to increase the number of hours and to ensure that we can grow the virtual Parliament. She is absolutely right that we cannot do points of order at that stage, but give us time and we will develop and increase the capabilities. I want to reassure the House that this is ongoing and that discussions will continue to take place. She is also absolutely right about voting. No decision has been taken. We want to check that voting is secure. That is the key. Every Member is worried about ensuring that when someone votes they are who they say they are. We must look at that very seriously. It will be completely checked before we do something that would not be secure.

2.59 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I welcome your comments about this being an iterative and evolving process. We would all agree that there is no substitute for Members being in the Chamber and able to hold the Executive to account. Over the last few weeks, during this national emergency, we will all have seen, as constituency MPs, an incredible volume and complexity of casework, the like of which none of us will have ever seen. I know how much easier it would have been at times to have been in this place, not just in the Chamber, questioning Ministers and getting answers on the record, but seeing colleagues in the corridors, meeting them in the Tea Room or outside our offices while making a cup of tea—or whatever it is we are doing. That is the best way that parliamentarians, elected by their constituents to represent them in Westminster, can deliver. The next few days, weeks, and possibly months, will be a substitute for that, but it will in no way compensate for the lack of spontaneity or ability to feed off each other.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) *rose*—

Karen Bradley: Of course, I will give way to my deputy Chair on the Procedure Committee.

Chris Elmore: On the right hon. Lady's point about this being temporary, it is fair to say that in the Procedure's Committee's various meetings for several weeks now there has been agreement across the Committee that these measures must be temporary, short term—or any other description we might wish to give it—and that we hope to return to a fully functioning House as soon as the health advice allows.

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with my deputy Chair. He is completely right. It has been very clear during all the Committee's meetings, which have all been conducted virtually over the last few weeks, that all Members feel strongly that these measures must be strictly time limited. They reflect the situation the country finds itself in today.

We have developed our procedures and ways of doing business over 700 years, since we were last unable to meet, because of the black death, as the Leader of the House mentioned. The situation is evolving. He is right to say that this procedure is the means to the end, not the end in itself, but those means will enable the way we do business to be efficient and effective and ensure that we can speak up for our constituents and make sure their voices are heard in this place

I want to thank and give credit to everybody who has been involved in getting us to this point. It was no mean feat. At the Committee's first meeting—the Committee was constituted on 2 March—we said we needed to look at the procedures that might be required to deal with the coronavirus, and when it was first suggested that we may have to block out seats in the Chamber, Members were outraged. "How", people asked, "could we possibly function if we weren't able to come into the Chamber, contribute and be part of this?" It is incredible to see the work that has been done in just a few short few weeks, and I agree with the Leader of the House that our teams—the Clerks, our parliamentary staff—expect during recess to have a little free time, to reflect how hard they will have worked during sitting periods. That has not been the case up till now.

I also want to thank you, Mr Speaker, for the pragmatic approach you have taken. As Speaker, you are the custodian of this House and how we operate. To endorse a change to our procedures as radical as that in the motion we will be voting on—I hope it will pass on the voices—took great leadership from you, so thank you.

This will not be perfect; there will be glitches and problems. We have all had our internet go down. I have particular problems whenever a PlayStation is cranked up in the next-door room, which makes hearing what is going on in meetings I am conducting not quite as easy as one would hope. The inability to ask supplementary questions or to come back in—that lack of spontaneity; the ability to come in on a question only if we have been drawn out of a shuffle applied for possibly days before—means we will not be able to represent our constituents in the way we would ideally want. But this is better than nothing and as the Leader of the House rightly said, we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We must understand that there will be glitches and that this will evolve. Over time, we will develop a way of working that gives us the best ability to represent our constituents. However, I repeat that it will never be a substitute for the ability to be here fully, and for being fully part of the democratic process.

I want to make the point to the Leader of the House that scrutiny of the emergency measures is vital. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made the point that we have not had the chance to scrutinise the measures that the Government introduced. There is a sunset clause, but they need to be scrutinised. I urge the Leader of the House to ensure that they have appropriate scrutiny at the earliest opportunity.

The Procedure Committee in its report that was issued this morning endorses the changes that have been put forward, particularly equality of treatment. It is vital that all Members can represent their constituents equally, whether they can get to the Chamber and choose to be here or not. We want to emphasise the temporary nature of the changes. They must be temporary and time limited.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con) rose—

Karen Bradley: I will give way to my predecessor.

Sir Charles Walker: I thank my right hon. Friend for all her work. I also thank her Committee and its most excellent Clerk—one of the most talented Clerks in the House of Commons.

My right hon. Friend is right in what she said earlier. The best way that I—and, I am sure, she—can represent constituents to the Chancellor, the Financial Secretary and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is in person. The quicker we are back here in person, being able to talk to the Chancellor and other Cabinet Ministers, the better it will be.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know the depth of his knowledge of this subject from his extensive time leading the Procedure Committee. Although I want to give credit to Ministers for their accessibility to us as Members of Parliament through WhatsApp groups, telephone calls or other messages—the amount of contact that Members have been able to have remotely is unprecedented—that is no substitute for being here and able to ask a question in public that constituents can see us asking and hear the answer to, so that they know what the Government intend to do with their questions and concerns.

I am grateful for your comments on points of order, Mr Speaker. My Committee was concerned about whether there would be a way of ensuring that our proceedings were orderly. I am grateful that you are looking at that.

I want to deal with concerns about voting. Yesterday, my Committee approved a report that was issued this morning on the basis that we were not looking at reforms to the way in which this place conducts votes. I well understand that there will need to be changes to the voting procedures for next week to ensure that business is not lost. We must ensure that, in the event of some sort of misunderstanding or something not quite working, the Government do not lose the important business that they wish to bring forward next week. However, I say to the Leader of the House that tabling motions tomorrow on further changes to voting will give rise to concern for my Committee. My Committee has not looked thoroughly at what is proposed for remote voting. Some of us have taken part in the trial run, and we cannot say it was absolutely brilliant. A lot more work needs to be done. I know how hard the teams are working on that—this is

no criticism of anybody—but I ask the Leader of the House to consider whether there can be a staged process of tabling motions on remote voting, because he needs to take the House with him. The House is here today to support him, because we want all our colleagues to be part of the debate and to be able to contribute, but he needs to take the House with him on this.

On that basis, the Procedure Committee endorses the motions and urges the House to approve them without the need for a Division.

3.8 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I echo the point that the Chair of the Procedure Committee made that the measures are not desirable, but are absolutely necessary. They are sub-optimal. We often use phrases that we all understand, but we should put them in a way the public would understand. We talk about holding the Government to account and about scrutiny. Basically, that means asking questions. It means asking the questions that occur to us from our knowledge and experience and that of our constituents. We have been getting a considerable number of questions during the crisis—I will come on to a few of them later. Those questions need answering, and they need answering in this Chamber, which, as the Leader of the House said, has to be the epicentre of the democratic system in this country. Otherwise, what is the point of Parliament?

In answering those questions, I do not expect Departments or Ministers to get everything right. I absolutely expect mistakes to be made. In fact, if mistakes were not being made, I would be really alarmed, because if things did not sometimes go wrong, that would mean that decisions were not being taken. Some decisions will go wrong. The test of a Government, of a Minister or even of a business is how quickly those problems are identified and how quickly they are remedied.

Many of those questions should be being asked inside the Government and, looking at how things are panning out, I am concerned that they are sometimes not being asked, either within Departments or between Departments. There seems to be a degree of dysfunctionality. I do not think press conferences are really getting to the heart of the issues, either. I fully understand the constraints that you and the House are operating under, Mr Speaker, but supplementary questions should be part of the evolution of this. Quite frankly, sometimes Ministers—as we see in press conferences—are talking in repetitive clichés. We need answers. Even if a Minister says, “I don’t know”, or “We are looking at that again, because we are not sure it worked out properly,” that is how we will make progress and be able to assess where there are failings and put the pressure on.

Last month, for example, we had both the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister here. I am pleased to say that I was able to ask both of them, on successive days, about the serious situation of very large numbers of our people stranded in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. I am still concerned about the long delay in getting them back, compared with the work of many other countries, particularly Germany, which has managed to bring back tens of thousands of people. We were able to put some pressure on the system and get some reaction through that direct confrontation. It is not the same as writing a letter or asking questions in a slightly sterile Chamber, although this is an improvement.

Many Members of Parliament are receiving complaints from hospitals and care homes, and from manufacturers and distributors, about personal protective equipment. It is not matching up in the system. How the two sides can be pulled together does not seem to be getting through. Some pressure here would add energy to that system.

Those of us who have been Ministers know that when a Minister has a hard time here in the Chamber—I see nods from those who have been Ministers—when they get to the Department, they say, “Why did you leave me out there in open country? I want some answers and I want them by this afternoon.”

Sir Charles Walker: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that perhaps the usual order of departmental questions should be changed, so that we could get more chances to ask questions of the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care—the two Departments absolutely in the frontline of this crisis?

John Spellar: I hope that suggestion may have been taken on board by those who are dealing with these issues. Perhaps for certain Departments there could be an extended period of questions, rather than greater frequency, or there could be a more open system in which written questions could be answered in real time, in order to get a response. We have to be flexible on that, but we have to be able to put our points and get a response.

Chris Elmore: If it would help my right hon. Friend, it is fair to say that in the Procedure Committee we looked at written questions and named-day questions, and we will review that issue. We agreed to that just yesterday. I reassure him that that point is very much in the Committee’s prism of work.

John Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend, the ranking minority member of the Procedure Committee, for that reassurance.

There are many other issues that will be familiar to colleagues from all parts of the Chamber. They include nursery education, both in terms of providers and parents, and lorry drivers and their ability to get a hot meal on the motorway. Why is the Department for Transport not insisting that franchisees on the motorway open up for lorry drivers to make sure that they are fed when performing the vital service of keeping this country going? We have already talked about the problems of flights, furlough arrangements and companies’ access to support. Those are all issues that have to be resolved here. We therefore need to make sure that, as far as possible, we can replicate the usual arrangements so that Ministers have to be up there answering. I hope that Ministers will be coming to the Chamber to do that, so that we can make progress and improve things.

Finally, the Leader of the House says that he hopes and intends for the measures to be temporary, but in the end, of course, it may suit some for them not to be temporary. We have already had a Scottish National party Member of Parliament saying, “Anyway, why do people have to come down here to one point from all four parts of the country in order to participate in the business of the House?” Many in the civil service and Government would be quite happy if Parliament was less effective in holding them to account. Some Members,

[John Spellar]

I would say, perhaps get the balance wrong between working for their constituents, which is a hugely important and essential part of the job, and running the country and actually asking questions here in Parliament.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman is making some powerful points. May I also make the point that scrutiny in this place gives Ministers a chance to explain things? It gives them a chance to set out what they are doing. They should not run away from it or be scared of it, because it is their chance to set out the good news and the good work that the Government are doing. We need to have scrutiny here, so that we can have that full explanation from Government Ministers—holding them to account when they do get things wrong, but hearing from them when they get things right.

John Spellar: I thank the Chair of the Procedure Committee, and I genuinely congratulate her on the work she is doing already in that position. She is absolutely right, and she reminds me of what Warren Buffett said about financial crises: “When the tide goes out, you can see who has been bathing without trunks.” Reputations get made and lost quickly in crises.

The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. Ministers who are doing a good job, have a robust defence and can even say, “Well, we tried that. We did it on reasonable grounds, but it did not work out. This is what we are doing”, are the ones whose reputations will thrive. For those who try to run away from scrutiny and from decisions, their reputations will sink. However, we also need not necessarily a timetable, but certainly a statement of the necessary conditions for returning to normality.

I recognise and am pleased to see that there is a date in the motion, but that will presumably—it is understandable, and I am not criticising this—also be subject to renewal. We need a clearer idea of the necessary conditions that will enable us to come out of these measures, because otherwise there will always be a tendency for some of the groups I have described to find reasons for just continuing with the status quo, rather than getting this House back to its position at the heart of the debate and political life of this nation.

3.18 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The problem is paragraph 6, Mr Speaker, which enables your own office to exclude Members from the Chamber when we are too many. That might make you very popular with those who are allowed in, but very unpopular with those of us who might be excluded. It is very unpleasant to put you, Mr Speaker, in that very difficult position.

I know that the provision only applies to periods of scrutiny, but I am looking for reassurance from the Leader of the House when it comes to debate and how we take forward legislation, because it is about the precedent we are now setting. It would be outrageous if Members elected to this House were unable to come and bring their concerns to this Chamber because there were already a sufficient number of Members within it when we come to debate, which I hope we shall, the extraordinary regulations that have been imposed on our citizens, and all the anomalies—and, indeed, absurdities—that are in them, let alone when we get to debate the question of when we lift those regulations. Just let us

come to the debate on the actual imposition of those regulations; I am looking for some reassurance that when we come to consider the procedures that will apply as we take forward these matters, we will not have Members—properly elected by their constituents—being excluded from this Chamber.

3.21 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): At the outset, I commend you, Mr Speaker, for your leadership at this time. I also commend your staff, the Clerks of the House, the business leaders and those on the Procedure Committee, who have worked very hard under very difficult circumstances to allow our Parliament to function and to ensure that it is able to. For that, sir, you should be commended and praised.

As Members across the House have rightly said, it is important that we emphasise that this is a temporary measure. I remember when there were temporary powers in Northern Ireland; they lasted for over 20 years. I think we would all agree that it would be a disgrace if that were to happen. As other Members have rightly emphasised, we must ensure the temporary nature—hopefully for a matter of weeks, and weeks only—of this position. It would be rank hypocrisy if we were to expect our constituents to go to work and we ourselves decided to protect ourselves. We have a duty to be here and a responsibility to hold the Government to account, and we must do that.

We must also ensure that we give our people and our country a vision: that we will get out of this dark tunnel, that there is light at the end of the tunnel, that—although it will probably be a different normality—things will return, and that we will get our country functioning and working again, and moving in the right direction. If ever something has brought our country together, it has been this crisis and not previous ones. This situation has made sure that we are doing what is best, putting our best foot forward and ensuring that the right leadership is seen.

I started my comments by congratulating you, Mr Speaker, on your leadership. It is important that Members demonstrate leadership in the community, and that the Government demonstrate leadership by providing that vision. That includes, as the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, providing us with a timetable. It does not need to be set in stone—just a timeline outlining when we can expect to see movement, as other countries have put in place. The Republic of Ireland has indicated when it intends to move. France has indicated when it intends to move. Germany has indicated its intention. And, of course, the United States has indicated its intentions. We should be in a position at least to give people some signposts as to when progress will happen and when there will be better days ahead for our entire community.

It would be remiss of me not to express for a few moments our sadness at the great number of bereaved across our entire nation. This crisis has affected practically every community and household, drawing us closer to the reality that our time here is just temporary. The shock of what has happened is palpable for all to see, and has probably led to the very good and strong behaviour by the vast majority of our citizens, who are following the guidance, and relying on the expert advice and the messages put out by the Government; it has also ensured that we are not being party political about

what has happened. We need to commend those people, but our thoughts and prayers are, of course, with the bereaved—those who have had to bury their loved ones alone, those who have not been able to say goodbye, and those who are deeply hurt and saddened by what has happened.

I am glad that some of the original numbers have not been exceeded. We initially had an expectation of seeing 15,000 people in Northern Ireland succumb to this. Thankfully, it is now less than a few hundred. We hope that that will remain the case, but we are by no means out of the woods. We have to ensure that we see progress, and encourage our great academics, scientists and chemists to come up with something that will help us get out of this situation.

When I was a child, I had to learn the “Shorter Catechism”. Its first question is:

“What is the chief end of man?”

The answer is

“to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

If there were a catechism for Members of Parliament, the answer would be to hold the Government to account. Our chief end as Members of this House is to ensure that we are a voice for our voiceless communities and that we get the opportunity to say in this House the things that need to be said by the people who sent us here to be their voice. It is essential that no Member is penalised by a lack of technical skill or a lack of broadband in their constituency and prevented from making a contribution in this House on behalf of the citizens they represent. It is essential that we have that role.

These measures fall well short of holding the Government to account. I think everyone recognises that. They are prepared, I think, to give the Government a bye ball because of the temporary nature of what is happening, but it is crucial that we recognise that we must get out of this emergency procedure as quickly as possible.

There are many issues on which we need to hold the Government to account; Members have rhymed some of them off. There are issues with dentists in my constituency and across this nation. There are issues with the production of food and the ability of our farming community to get to markets and make their product available to the general public. There is the issue of our NHS staff and their access, or lack thereof, to personal protective equipment. There are people who fall between the measures that our Chancellor has introduced. It causes us great concern that they are left out; they will have nothing in all this and be left hopeless. Of course, we also need to scrutinise what the banks have been doing. They have been given a responsibility to do certain things, and some of them have not come up to the mark. We have not had the opportunity to hold them to account. We have a responsibility to do that.

I recognise the importance of these measures. We accept that we are in very difficult times, but we give our people hope that there will be better times ahead. We will get out of this, and we will be a stronger and better place for having done so. However, we must ensure that these measures are short and temporary.

3.26 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I associate myself with many of the comments made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I shall not

repeat them, but let me say this. The nature of the public health emergency that has made it necessary to introduce these changes is the very reason why we must have maximal accountability and flexibility in an ever-changing picture. As elected Members of Parliament, we must have the ability to raise emerging issues and emergency issues.

We all know from experience that the gap between tabling a question and having it answered can mean that the question is out of date by the time the Minister gets to their feet. Let us be frank: those who have been Ministers know that there is no fear whatsoever for a Minister at the Dispatch Box in the prepared question that has already been tabled; the only thing that brings any fear to Ministers is the unknown supplementary, which will be a genuinely probing question that seeks information that is not set out in the civil service-written reply that most Ministers have. Therefore, the ability to ask some sort of supplementary is the key probing element of questions to Departments.

In the current situation, where there will be a great desire to probe Treasury Ministers, for economic reasons, and Health Ministers, we do not need changes to questions; we require the Government to be willing to come forward with regular statements on those issues so the House can use that alternative mechanism, which is inherently more flexible than the written parliamentary question system. We also require responsible use of urgent questions so they are not flippant and time consuming. I know that you would not allow that, Mr Speaker, but we must exercise particular personal responsibility in how we address the issues and in how we use what will be limited time in the House.

That applies to the Government too. We need minimal legislation. Some of us think we should have minimal legislation anyway, and that the less time we spend making more laws for our country the better, but certainly at this time, the Government should bring forward minimal legislation—only that which is essential to the conduct of government—to the House for however long these restrictions exist.

Echoing what others have said, the continuity of this Parliament in as normal a form as possible, given all the restrictions, is essential. As Members of this House, we have a leadership role in our country to behave as normally as we can in the circumstances. It is important not just that we give an example to people in our own country about the exercise of democracy, but that we in this country, who pride ourselves on our democratic tradition, show that democracy will be resilient in whatever circumstances, particularly to those parts of the world that do not benefit from representative parliamentary democracy as we do. We should always be willing, as a Parliament, to fly the flag for that democratic principle.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much love the ritual, tradition and history of the House, as many others do. I may not always adhere to the ritual in the way that Mr Speaker or others would like me to, but I do my best to follow the rules and regulations. I love that tradition, history and ritual, so what we have in front of us is, for me, a bit alien to the process of the House and how we have done business, in my case and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), for the last approximately 10 years here.

[Jim Shannon]

The Leader of the House referred to being a traditionalist. I am a traditionalist as well, although I am not against change. Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House referred to you as a traditionalist. I cannot say if you are or not—you will make that decision—but I perceive that you are, as are many others in the House. The need for the ritual is important.

I want to ask the Leader of the House, as I did earlier, about the potential abortion legislation that may come here. I understand that the legislation, as proposed, would come before a Delegated Legislation Committee. How can we, as Members of the House who may not be on that Delegated Legislation Committee, participate in the Committee, whenever the potential legislation can be brought before the House?

I understand that the procedure at the moment is that we can attend the Delegated Legislation Committee and ask for permission to address that Committee, although we cannot ever be part of the voting process. I want to check, procedurally, how we can do that and whether we can continue to do that.

I underline the point—I say this with all humbleness, Mr Speaker—that I am not technically minded. I learned how to text about two years ago. [Interruption.] I am being honest, because I want to ensure that I and perhaps others in the House, who may not have the opportunity to express themselves in the way that I have today, can participate in that voting process. I have asked the Leader of the House about that. He and I share a certain belief, which is deeply heartfelt, about moral and religious issues. I want to make sure of that for those of us who are perhaps not sure how the IT works or how the system works. I have staff, but I am conscious that they are working from their own homes. A staff member can perhaps set it up and there may be some help from IT to do that as well.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is probably the most assiduous Member of the House and he attends the Chamber every day, so I wonder if he shares my disquiet about this big decision to downgrade the importance of being physically present as part of our proceedings being discussed in a pretty brief debate that has not had notice. I recognise the importance of making such changes, but does he agree that it is vital that they are temporary and do not become permanent without much more thought and much more extensive debate?

Jim Shannon: I do share those concerns. For me, as the right hon. Lady outlined, the process involves being in the House, participating in debates and putting forward views on behalf of my constituents from Strangford—and, indeed, on behalf of people throughout the whole United Kingdom, because we make decisions here for the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, not for Northern Ireland alone.

Scrutiny in the House is really important, because when we look forward to the future we have to have an exit strategy. Not for one second am I saying that Ministers, the Government and the Prime Minister do not have an exit strategy in mind, but it is so important that people have some idea of the vision for where we are going, and of the timescale, provided that everything

goes according to plan. Let us hope we can look into how shops can open again. For instance, hardware shops can open but garden centres cannot. Some people, and I am one of them, might say that if hardware stores can operate with the self-distancing measures that are used back home—people phone up the place and make their order, drive down but stay in their car, somebody comes out with their order but then leaves, and they pick it up, put it in their car and take it away—why can garden centres not use the same process? We should have the opportunity to scrutinise issues like that.

We understand the sadness for people in relation to funerals. A couple of my constituents have passed away, and I am very conscious that at both those funerals only 10 people could attend, meaning that some family members were precluded from attending. I understand the process and I am not being critical of how it was done; I am just asking, in our process of scrutiny, whether it is not possible that the self-distancing process could have meant that more people could have attended the funerals. Norman McBride from my church died, but only 10 people could attend the funeral. That was immensely frustrating for many people who wished to express themselves, but the opportunity to do that will come again.

I want to ensure that we have the opportunity to ask questions in this House, or through the new virtual Parliament process, and that we can enable our constituents to have a voice in this Chamber, whatever the process might be, ever mindful that, as the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, it is only for a short time, which is why I understand the need for it. Who would ever have thought that we would be in the position we are in today? Nobody—particularly not me—would have predicted that things would be as they are.

We need to scrutinise and have opportunities to ask questions. I have already emailed and written to the Minister responsible for agriculture at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—I know that I am going to say exactly what you are thinking, Mr Speaker—about the fact that the price of beef cattle is down £195 a beast, lambs are down £40 each, and milk has dropped from 28.5p per litre down to 23.5p per litre, with the possibility of it falling to 18p. Those are crucial issues for us in this House to scrutinise. As the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, we cannot have the answers to these questions in three weeks' time; we need the answers today. That is the point when it comes to scrutiny in this House and how we move forward.

We also need to have contact. I know it is already happening, but it is really important that all four regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland work together, so that when we move forward on the questions and issues that come up regionally, we have a strategy and can move forward. We all know about Captain Tom Moore and have much enjoyed his raising some £25.5 million through social giving. He said that tomorrow will be a better day; let us hope for that.

3.38 pm

Mr Rees-Mogg: With the leave of the House, I shall try to respond to some of the points that were made in the debate.

The shadow Leader of the House asked whether the time limit can be expanded. We are currently working with what we think is the maximum that can be done with the technology, but the hope is very much that it can be expanded. You responded to the point on secure voting, Mr Speaker; any remote voting must be secure. We do not want people other than Members to be voting.

Chris Elmore: I agree with the Leader of the House that voting obviously needs to be secure, but can he provide some reassurance that when testing for voting is carried out, there is enough capacity to allow all 650 Members to vote remotely? My understanding is that the testing yesterday did not go terribly well—that is how it was described to me.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that any system needs to work, to be robust and to ensure that votes are properly registered. On points of order, as raised by both the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), I believe those can be sent to you, Mr Speaker, in written form, so it is not as if there will not be any ability to raise points; it simply will not be possible to interrupt a television screen, because that would not actually work.

I reiterate my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), Chairman of the Procedure Committee. Like her, I think all MPs have seen an enormous explosion in casework, and therefore the ability to hold Ministers to account and to get answers for one's constituents is very important. My right hon. Friend, like other Members, including my right hon. Friends the Members for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), emphasised the importance of this situation being temporary. I would not have put my name to these motions if it were not going to be temporary. I want Parliament to be back operating properly in its normal way.

However, as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) pointed out, this is actually about people dying, and what we are doing is part of trying to save lives, along with the rest of the country. Yes, it is second best, and yes, it is imperfect that we should meet with these screens and with the Chamber losing its normal decoration, but we are doing our best in difficult circumstances to maintain as much as we can. The motion has effect until 12 May, and although it may have to be renewed at that point, it is temporary and will remain temporary.

I agree with the right hon. Friend the Member for Warley that this is much better than press conferences. Holding the Government to account makes for better government. This may not be a common view expressed at the Dispatch Box, but it was not that long ago that I was a Back Bencher, and Back Benchers see week in, week out, year in, year out, better decisions taken because the Government are held to account. Wise Governments—I inevitably think that this Government are wise—actually have the sense to recognise that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made the extraordinarily important, fundamental constitutional point that a Member

who wishes to represent his or her constituents must be able to do so, and that is part of what we are trying to do. How that is managed, with a maximum of 50 Members in the Chamber, is a matter for Mr Speaker, but the purpose of that is to maintain safe social distancing. However, if a Member needs to get in and is on the list to be called to speak, if I am in the Chamber, I will leave to make way for that Member to come in and speak. I will go and watch it in my room on the television if I am answering the debate, so that the Member may come in and make the point.

We will have to work with each other to maintain our ancient constitutional rights. I should point out, Mr Speaker—you know it is one of my favourite points—that we have all had a right of uninterrupted, unhindered access to Parliament since 1340. It is one of our most ancient and precious rights. I assure my right hon. Friend that I would not want to be Leader of the House when that right is taken away, but it may operate differently, to ensure that it works with safeguarding.

I am grateful for the widespread support for these motions. We are all trying to do our best in difficult circumstances, which I think the House appreciates. I am very grateful, I ought to add, to the Opposition Chief Whip, who has worked closely with the Government Chief Whip and, indeed, representatives of the SNP to ensure that these proposals could be agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That this House is committed to taking all steps necessary to balance its responsibilities for continuing scrutiny of the executive, legislating and representation of the interests of constituents with adherence to the guidance issued by Public Health England and the restrictions placed upon all citizens of the United Kingdom, and is further committed, in pursuit of that aim, to allowing virtual participation in the House's proceedings, to extending the digital capacity of those proceedings to ensure the participation of all Members, and to ensuring that its rules and procedures are adapted to permit as far as possible parity of treatment between Members participating virtually and Members participating in person.

HYBRID SCRUTINY PROCEEDINGS

Ordered,

That the following orders be made and have effect until 12 May:

A. Scrutiny proceedings

1) The House shall meet at 2.30 pm on Mondays, and at 11.30 am on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and will first proceed with questions and statements under the orders [Hybrid scrutiny proceedings] of today.

2) Scrutiny proceedings shall conclude not later than two hours after their commencement, save that the Speaker shall have discretion to extend the proceedings for a short additional period if it seems to him appropriate to do so.

3) Following the conclusion of scrutiny proceedings, the House shall proceed with business set down to be taken at the commencement of public business and then with the main business.

4) Scrutiny proceedings comprise

- a) questions to ministers;
- b) urgent questions;
- c) ministerial statements.

5) No question of which notice has been given under SO No. 22(5) shall be taken more than one hour after the House sits, and scrutiny proceedings shall otherwise be taken in the order determined by the Speaker who shall announce that order not later than the start of the sitting to which it relates.

6) Members may participate in scrutiny proceedings virtually, by electronic means approved by the Speaker, or by attending in the Chamber. The Speaker may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any one time.

7) For the purposes of proceedings under this order, Members shall give notice by electronic means designated by the Speaker.

8) Notice periods in respect of all scrutiny proceedings shall be set by the Speaker, provided that the latest date and time specified by the Speaker for questions to ministers shall be such as to enable notices to be circulated at least two days (excluding Friday, Saturday and Sunday) before the question is to be answered.

B. Urgent questions

1) In respect of any day to which order (A. Scrutiny proceedings) applies, a Member may apply to the Speaker for leave to ask an urgent question under this order.

2) An urgent question is one which, in the Speaker's opinion, is of an urgent character and relates to a matter of public importance.

C. Supplementary provisions

1) No unopposed business, save motions for unopposed returns of which notice has been given, may be taken at the commencement of scrutiny proceedings.

2) Notices of private business may be set down to be taken at the commencement of public business after scrutiny proceedings, but, if opposed, shall not be proceeded with but shall be deferred to such time, other than a Friday, as the Chairman of Ways and Means shall appoint.

3) Standing Order Nos. 7, 8, and 21 shall not have effect and the Speaker shall be required under paragraph (5) of Standing Order No 22 to take account of the party balance while these orders are in force.

4) In any case where the Speaker has ordered the withdrawal of a Member, or of several Members, under Standing Order No 43 and is required to direct the Serjeant at Arms to give effect to the order, the Member or Members shall be suspended from the service of the House for the following sitting day.

5) No motion to sit in private may be made during scrutiny proceedings.

6) The Speaker may amend any provision of these orders, if he determines it is necessary to do so in order to ensure that the conduct of business is consistent with the Resolution of the House (Proceedings during the pandemic) of 21 April.

7) Before exercising his power under paragraph (6), the Speaker shall satisfy himself that he has the agreement of the Leader of the House.—(*Mr Rees-Mogg.*)

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the House for the manner in which it has conducted this debate, to all those who have worked so hard to establish the arrangements, which will apply from tomorrow, and to the Procedure Committee for its high-speed report. Guidance for Members on the arrangements is now available online, and in hard copy from the Vote Office. I should also alert Members that the deadline for urgent questions to be taken on Tuesdays and Wednesdays will be 1 pm, not 2 pm as stated in the explanatory memorandum.

I have received a letter from the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), resigning as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I have also received a letter from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) announcing her intention to resign as Chair of the Committee on Standards when her successor has been elected. I wish to pay tribute to the commitment and dedication with which both of them have chaired their respective Committees both in the present Parliament and in the last. I will make an announcement about the arrangements for elections tomorrow.

I understand that the ten-minute rule motion will not be moved.

Business of the House

3.45 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I should like to make a business statement, Mr Speaker. You have announced new arrangements for oral questions, urgent questions and statements in this House during the coming weeks. With this in mind, and with the agreement of other parties, it is the Government's intention to prioritise their legislative requirements to allow for minimum attendance in this Chamber.

I can confirm today that the House will not proceed with the Second Reading of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill. Tomorrow—Wednesday 22 April—the House will for the first time be able to question Ministers remotely. Prime Minister's questions and any urgent questions or statements will be followed by procedural motions. On Monday 27 April, this House will return for the Second Reading of the Finance Bill. On Tuesday 28 April the House will consider the Second Reading of the Domestic Abuse Bill, and on Wednesday 29 April the House will consider the Second Reading of the Fire Safety Bill.

We are living in uncertain times, and, as a consequence of the situation that we are in, the business that I have announced will be subject to continuous review and possible change. I will of course update the House as required.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Where shall I start? I call William Wragg—*[Interruption.]* I apologise—I call the shadow Leader of the House.

3.46 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I am still here, virtually and physically. I thank the Leader of the House for the emergency business statement. I start, because we have not had the opportunity before now, by remembering the dead, and the grieving families whose lives are utterly changed and will never be the same again. I also want to mention, because we live in extraordinary times, that we have had a Prime Minister who has been in intensive care and that other Members of this House have been extremely ill. I want to wish them all a speedy recovery and remember them.

I also thank all the front-line staff, the NHS and all those involved in public service, and everyone from the House authorities for getting us to this point. The Leader of the House did say that we would return on 21 April, and, despite this extraordinary circumstance, we are here debating in the House of Commons Chamber on 21 April. We have returned to do the democratic process and to hold the Government to account, which of course we want to do.

The Opposition have come out of lockdown. There was red smoke and I am pleased to congratulate the new Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). We have a new Front-Bench team, who are working incredibly hard, and we want to work in a constructive way to protect people and the economy.

It is right that we learn from other countries and that we start looking at an exit strategy to plan in advance, so that options can be explored and strategies tested for when we come out on the other side and make sure that all our folks do not suffer. I appreciate that this is not static—it is going to change. I also pay tribute to my Chief Whip and the Government Chief Whip, because I know how hard they have worked in ensuring that we get to this place. We know that the usual channels will have to work continually to ensure that business comes before this House. Things will not be static and I had understood, although the Leader of the House has not announced this, that there will be a statement on coronavirus tomorrow. I hope he can confirm that. We are looking for answers—proper answers. Just as we get the graphs at the press conferences, we want to know how many ventilators there are and whether there is personal protective equipment. We already know that there has been difficulty in pinning down when exactly the PPE is coming from Turkey, and that should not be the case. We need to know that it is going to arrive and when the shipment will be here.

We want to work in a constructive way. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, some of our constituents who were stranded tell us that Heathrow airport is acting in a completely different way from other airports: there are no checks, no hand sanitisers, no masks—nothing—and people just walk straight through, so it is right that we raise these issues and we will continue to raise them.

I want to place on record my thanks to the acting high commissioner in India, Jan Thompson, who has been absolutely fantastic in getting our constituents back.

The Leader of the House knows I am going to raise our British citizens—Nazanin, Anousheh and Kylie—whom we want to be responsible for. They need to be back home at this difficult time.

With another death of a BAME consultant, Manjeet Singh Riyat, who was 52 years old and who died in his own hospital, may I ask the Leader of the House to provide a written statement on the terms of reference of the inquiry that the Government have announced into the over-representation of deaths—not only of health care professionals, but ordinary citizens—among the BAME community?

Finally, I want to wish our gracious sovereign a very happy birthday.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady is so right to mention, at the beginning of her statement, the dead and the grieving. We must pray for the souls of the dead, for the comfort of those who grieve, and for those who are suffering in the hope that they recover. I think all of us have known people who have been very seriously ill. The recovery of those who have been ill is worth praying for.

May I join the right hon. Lady in congratulating the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on his election? I am one of those people who always think that an effective Opposition lead to better Government, so, in a roundabout way, I wish him extraordinarily well, because I think it is in the interests of the country to have an effective Opposition. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

(Angela Rayner) on winning the deputy leadership. I am particularly pleased, if I may say so, Mr Speaker, that the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) remained in her place in the reshuffle. I hope that we can carry on debating as we have been. I am grateful for her support in this difficult time, and for the support of the Opposition in being very constructive in most of its suggestions.

I, too, believe there will be a statement by the Health Secretary tomorrow—the first virtual statement. I am sure he will, as always, give proper answers. I do not think that the right hon. Lady need worry about his answers being anything other than proper and complete. It is right that issues are raised in the House in that way.

As always, the right hon. Lady raises the issue of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who, as she knows, has been temporarily released. The Government hope that that release will be made permanent and will continue to make the case for British citizens who are detained improperly.

I note the right hon. Lady's request for the terms of reference for the inquiry into the disproportionate number of deaths among the BAME community. I will take that up for her and give her a written answer.

I got in first to wish Her Majesty a happy birthday, but I am always happy to do it. Is it not wonderful that we can carry on singing the national anthem while washing our hands? We will do that today with a special spring in our step.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): May I begin by expressing my condolences to the families of constituents who have sadly lost their lives to covid-19? I pay particular tribute to the nurses and doctors at Stepping Hill Hospital, and those working in social care throughout my constituency, for their extraordinary efforts. In that light, may I ask the Leader of the House if he could convey the message that it may be appropriate for the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to make a statement tomorrow on PPE procurement processes? I am sure that we are all finding, in our own ways with inquiries from businesses and healthcare settings, that there is certainly a blockage in the system. Mr Speaker, I would have tabled an urgent question on the matter today, but it would have been an invidious decision for you to have had to make, given that many Members have not been present and our new proceedings have not yet been adopted. However, its urgency is absolutely vital.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On the question of a statement tomorrow, I have already mentioned that I believe it will be the Health Secretary who will be making a statement. The issue of PPE is important. It is worth bearing in mind that over 1 billion pieces of PPE have been distributed. Yes, of course there is more that needs to be done, but I am sure that will be covered by the Health Secretary tomorrow.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We are ever mindful of the business that we had before the coronavirus outbreak. The Westminster Hall business and the business in this Chamber that was lined up for this Thursday will probably not take place. Will it resume exactly when coronavirus comes to an end? Other Members have mentioned this, but I am conscious that there is lots of business that individual Members wish to bring forward for consideration by this House when normality resumes.

I wish to seek the Leader of the House's guidance that that will happen whenever normality returns, as, God willing, it will.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The motions being put down for tomorrow allow for an extension of the list of things that may be debated, and that will depend on how long we are in this situation; the longer we are in it for, the more items will be able to be taken. However, the hope must be that we come out of this and can then resume normal practice. At that point, what is brought forward will be a matter for the Backbench Business Committee and for Mr Speaker, and for the other processes that lead to business being decided.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us a debate on how and when we come out of the lockdown? I understand Ministers' caution about talking about this issue, but this country is committed to saving lives by staying at home—it is committed to the lockdown—and that commitment will be unshaken by a transparent debate on how the lockdown is gradually brought to an end. We need hope—we need hope for businesses on the edge—and we will get hope if we have a debate on how and when the lockdown will come to an end.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is right to raise this, and it is part of bringing this House back into a functioning state and having a virtual Parliament. It will allow, tomorrow, for the First Secretary of State to be questioned, and I am sure he will be questioned on these issues, as, likewise, will the Health Secretary. Next week, with questions and statements, this process will be able to continue. It is right that these questions should be raised in this Chamber.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House indicate when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will be able to take questions and make a statement on the impact of covid-19 in Northern Ireland? When can we have a debate that will allow us to address the issues that have had a specific impact on our Province? In line with other questions that have been asked, may I ask him to say that no attempt will be made to usurp the powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly, now that devolution is up and running again, on any matter, including, most importantly, those to do with the life of the unborn child? Finally, we know how people in Northern Ireland love to march and to celebrate, so will he consider having, at the end of all this, a march for our health workers across the United Kingdom? May we have a "march for health", to encourage and thank them in a very public way, more than just what the round of applause has done every Thursday night? May we have something that will tell them how grateful we are for the great work our doctors, nurses and careworkers have given to our entire community?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, on the easy question to answer, Northern Ireland questions will next be held on Wednesday 13 May, and that will be an opportunity to raise with the Secretary of State the hon. Gentleman's second question, about how the relationship between the Secretary of State, this Parliament and the Assembly will work, which is a matter for him. As for marches, what a wonderful idea. I know that in Northern Ireland there is a great affection for marches, although they are sometimes controversial.

Speaking as a Catholic, I always think it is worth remembering that the Holy Father in 1690 had a Te Deum sung in honour of the victory of King William at the Battle of the Boyne because he was not getting on very well with Louis XIV at the time.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Let me again thank you, Mr Speaker, and your team for enabling us to return to raise this wide range of issues on which we will want to question Ministers. May I also put on record my thanks to the team from the Treasury Committee, who enabled us to meet quite a few times during the recess so that we could probe on the economic issues? My question is a parochial one, but it is none the less important to my constituents. Just over two months ago, the town of Tenbury Wells was badly flooded—it was the top story in the news at the time. Will the Leader of the House give an indication as to when the Adjournment debate that I have on the subject, which has now been postponed twice, will be able to be held?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to praise those running Select Committees. Before we rose for Easter it was thought extremely difficult to allow Select Committees to meet regularly, and now by the time we have got back we can have a regular range of Select Committees meeting. It has been a hugely impressive effort by the parliamentary staff. As for Adjournment debates, as I mentioned earlier, it depends slightly on how long this procedure lasts. We will seek to extend it to cover more and more business the longer it lasts, but my hope is that we will be back to normal before that level of extension has been reached, in which case matters of Adjournment debates will be in Mr Speaker's hands—and I have a feeling he will be sympathetic to requests to reinstate Adjournment debates where Members have been generous enough to allow them to not be taken.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for bringing us back here today; you have put a huge amount of effort into that, and I really do thank you for it.

May I also thank those hundreds, if not thousands, of my constituents who go to work every day to make my life and the lives of my neighbours and those I represent a little easier? These people are doing a truly terrific thing and they deserve all of our congratulations wherever they are doing it.

May I ask the Leader of the House, as he is a Cabinet Minister, whether we can look at the retail, hospitality and leisure sector grant and its scope? A number of businesses are excluded from it. I am thinking particularly of those in the exhibition industry who have seen their entire business evaporate; they will be the first into this recession and, I suspect, the last out.

May we also look at the small business grant? A number of businesses are excluded from this grant because their rates are bundled up with their rent and paid to their landlord. Many of these are concessions or very small cafes or businesses and they are missing out on the £10,000. I hope the Leader of the House can convey that to the Chancellor.

Mr Rees-Mogg: All of us who are constituency MPs as well as Ministers are aware of these issues being raised by our constituents. My hon. Friend's point about rates rolled up in rents is an obvious and important one.

Treasury questions are not taking place until 18 May, but of course there is the Prime Minister, and Prime Minister's questions are to the First Lord of the Treasury. I am sure that the First Secretary of State will be able to answer my hon. Friend's questions on these matters. In the meantime I will take them up with the Chancellor on his behalf.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I wish to place on record my thanks to the healthcare professionals—the doctor, nurses and particularly our social care workers—across West Dorset. Will the Leader of the House make provision for a statement from the Environment Secretary on the state of farming and our food supply industry, which I am greatly concerned about at this time? We have had a number of conference calls with the National Farmers Union and others, and it is very clear that the dairy and beef industries in particular are under great stress and I greatly fear for the future of the food supply chain.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a matter of the greatest importance and I will pass on my hon. Friend's concerns to the Secretary of State. Questions to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are not immediate; they are relatively late in the schedule, on 19 May, so we will see if this can be taken up more directly and swiftly.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for his responses this afternoon. On the point about business rates, my constituency has had a lot of business rates relief and, in certain cases, the small business grant has been exploited by owners of second homes. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Chancellor and his team to review how business rate reviews are dealt with, how the relief is granted and how the small business grants that are there for businesses at this time of need are issued, because they are being exploited?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I understand it, it is only available if second homes are genuinely used for businesses; if they are used for business purposes, the grant is available. That is fair and reasonable as long as they are being used for business purposes.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I go back to a subject that I raised with the Leader of the House in my earlier contribution about those large number of constituents who are still stranded in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh? Many of them are elderly. The temperature there is rising enormously and conditions are becoming unbearable. There has been an improvement in the number of flights, but we are still well behind many other countries, particularly Germany. We need urgent additional flights to get these people home.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have made enormous efforts to bring people back. The numbers involved are very large: 200,000 people have come back from Spain; 13,000 from Egypt; 6,000 from Pakistan; and 1,000 from New Zealand. It has been a big effort by the Government, and particularly difficult when the number of aeroplanes flying has been reduced. May I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman raises this matter with the Foreign Secretary, the First Secretary of State, when he is answering Prime Minister's questions tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: I understand that the ten-minute rule motion will not be moved.

**IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL SECURITY
CO-ORDINATION (EU WITHDRAWAL) BILL**

Bill to be read a Second time tomorrow.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(Tom Pursglove.)

4.6 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 21 April 2020

EDUCATION

Schools: Capital Funding

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today, I am confirming £2.2 billion of capital funding to maintain and improve the condition of the school estate and to create new school places. Funding allocations were published on 15 April 2020. This investment will support the Government's priority to ensure that every child has the opportunity of a place at a good school, whatever their background.

As part of our investment of £23 billion in the school estate by 2021, we have now announced over £1.4 billion of condition funding for the financial year 2020-21. This package includes:

£800 million for local authorities, large multi-academy trusts and academy sponsors, and dioceses, and other large voluntary aided school groups, to invest in maintaining and improving the condition of their schools.

Over £400 million available through the condition improvement fund for essential maintenance projects at small and stand-alone academy trusts, voluntary aided schools and sixth-form colleges.

Over £200 million of devolved formula capital allocated directly for schools to spend on capital projects to meet their own priorities.

In addition, we have announced nearly £750 million of new funding to create new school places needed for September 2022. This funding, which is over and above our commitment to invest £23 billion in the school estate by 2021, will allow local authorities to plan ahead with confidence, and to invest strategically to ensure they deliver good school places for every child who needs one.

This funding was announced on 15 April 2020. Full details have been published on the Department for Education section on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS191]

Support for Education Settings and Providers

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I am writing to inform the House of further steps this Government are taking to support the education system and children and young people manage the consequences of covid-19.

Attendance in schools

Schools have been closed to all but the children of critical workers and vulnerable children since Monday 23 March. They will remain closed until further notice, except for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, who are encouraged to attend where it is appropriate for them to do so.

Today we have published the numbers of children of critical workers and vulnerable children in attendance at schools since 23 March and up to 17 April. The figures are available on gov.uk. Attendance statistics

will now be published on a weekly basis, looking back at the previous school week. Further data will be available next Tuesday, covering the period up to 24 April.

Key findings are as follows –

Figures show the attendance rate amongst pupils in educational establishments was 0.9% during the week commencing 6 April, which would have been the first week of the Easter holidays, having originally been above 3% in the first week of schools being closed except for children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

24,000 of the children in attendance on Friday 17 April were classed as vulnerable; 62,000 of the children in attendance on Friday 17 April were children of critical workers.

Statistics also show that the number of teachers attending school has been falling, which suggests that schools are adapting to lower numbers of pupils and the latest advice on social distancing.

These figures illustrate the incredible effort families all over the country are making as we fight the coronavirus, with well over 90% of children staying home.

Supporting attendance of vulnerable children and young people

Our first priority has always been protecting the wellbeing of children and young people, but particularly those vulnerable young people with special educational needs or a social worker.

Schools remain open for them, as they also do for children of critical workers, and we encourage vulnerable children and young people to attend educational settings unless they have underlying health conditions that put them at severe risk.

We have refreshed our guidance in relation to this group to set out our expectations of how educational settings and local authorities should encourage and support vulnerable children and young people at this time and how non-attendance should be followed up. This can be found on gov.uk.

Free school meals

We thank schools for continuing to support those children that are eligible for free school meals, including during the Easter break. We know that support is being provided through their existing schools food suppliers or through the national voucher scheme Government have put in place. Today I can confirm that Aldi will be added to the list of supermarkets where vouchers will be redeemable. That is in addition to Sainsbury's, Tesco's, Waitrose, M&S, Asda and Morrison's.

New support for remote education and access to social services

Most children are not attending schools, and we are extremely grateful for how schools and colleges have adapted so rapidly to new ways of working by moving resources online, working remotely and changing the way they support their students and each other.

We have already published an initial list of high quality online educational resources including how to support physical and mental wellbeing and materials for teaching children with special educational needs and disabilities. Many commercial providers have also offered high quality educational resources at discounts or for free.

In addition, to support the hard work of schools in delivering remote education, the Oak National Academy was launched on Monday 20 April. This brand-new

enterprise has been created by 40 teachers from some of the leading schools across England, backed by Government grant funding. It will provide 180 video lessons each week, across a broad range of subjects from maths to art to languages, for every year group from reception through to year 10.

The BBC has also launched its own education package across TV and online, featuring celebrities and some of the best teachers—helping to keep children learning and supporting parents.

This is alongside new guidance we published on 19 April for parents on how best to support their child's education and development at home. This can be found on gov.uk.

To ensure that as many children as possible can access online learning, we have ordered laptops to help disadvantaged young people who would otherwise not have access and are preparing for exams (in year 10).

We will also provide laptops or tablets for care leavers and children with social workers (including families with pre-school age children) to help them stay in touch with the services they need, keeping them safe as well as supporting home learning.

And if disadvantaged children in year 10, care leavers and children with a social worker at secondary school cannot access the internet, we will provide free 4G routers to get them connected while schools are closed. We are also working with some of the major telecommunications providers to exempt certain educational resource sites from data charges.

For 16 to 19-year-olds, colleges, schools or other providers can support those without access to devices or connections through their flexible bursary funding. Where additional funding is needed to provide this support, providers can apply to have their bursary funds topped up to ensure those who need it have access.

NSPCC helpline

To further protect children from harm, we are continuing to support NSPCC's Childline and are working with them to expand the adult helpline by providing them with £1.6 million. This means children have someone to call, and more adults will be able to raise concerns and seek advice about the safety and wellbeing of any child they are worried about.

Care leavers

We recognise that young people who have left care or are just about to, whether that is from a foster family or residential care, are especially vulnerable right now.

I am asking local authorities to ensure no one has to leave care during this period, by looking very carefully at whether it is safe for those young people who would have been due to move out of their care to do so and to give care leavers extra support.

The £1.6 billion of additional funding announced by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on Saturday will help local authorities give care leavers, and other vulnerable groups, the support that they need at this difficult time.

Flexibility to use early years entitlement funding to secure childcare for critical workers and vulnerable children

It is vital that we secure sufficient childcare for critical workers and vulnerable children through the covid-19 pandemic, and ensure the sector is able to function and allow parents to return to work afterwards. I want to

thank the local authorities, childminders, nurseries and schools that are working together to ensure sufficient childcare in their areas. To help them do this, we are providing a range of financial support.

As most early years providers have mixed private and public incomes, we have published guidance setting out how providers can access the coronavirus job retention scheme (CJRS) while still receiving early entitlement funding. This confirmed that providers can access the CJRS to cover up to the proportion of its pay bill which could be considered to have been paid for from that provider's private income.

We will also be publishing guidance to support local authorities to use their free entitlement funding differently, redistributing it—in exceptional cases and in a clearly focused and targeted way—in order to secure childcare for the children of critical workers and for vulnerable children, where their usual arrangements are no longer possible.

This ability to redistribute will enable local authorities to ensure that critical workers, including NHS staff, are able to access childcare where they need it. Any setting which sees their early entitlement funding reduced in order to fund childcare places elsewhere will be able to increase the proportion of their salary bill eligible for the coronavirus job retention scheme in line with the department's guidance on access to the scheme.

This statement has also been made in the House of Lords.

[HCWS193]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Delivery of Critical Services: Government Action

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Coronavirus presents unprecedented challenges to the businesses we rely on to provide essential services which keep people safe—including food supply, water and waste.

Many businesses in these sectors have benefited from Government schemes to support all businesses, including the coronavirus job retention scheme, coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, and the small business grant scheme and support for the self-employed.

Beyond this, the Government have taken specific action to support the food, farming, water and waste sectors in the delivery of critical services.

Fisheries

The fishing sector has seen considerable impacts because of the closure of restaurants both here and in Europe and severe market disruption. Last week we announced a new £10 million support scheme to help the catching and aquaculture sector in England and boost local supply chains. Vessel owners and aquaculture businesses will receive payments to help cover their fixed costs. On Monday we began to contact eligible vessel owners. The MMO has published the details of the scheme on gov.uk.

Dairy

In particular, the dairy sector has felt a significant impact as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Between 5% and 10% of total milk production goes to the food service trade and there is therefore a small proportion

of milk production that currently has no home. The vast majority of Britain's 10,000 dairy farmers continue to supply their contracts at the usual price and larger processors have been largely unaffected by the market disruption because of their scale and diversified nature. In order to support the affected farmers, on Friday we announced that we will set aside some elements of competition law to make it easier for processors to come together and voluntarily work out how to ease production down in order to create the space in the market for that milk that currently has no home and to support a recovery in the spot price. We have asked the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, which supports the interests of dairy farmers and the wider farming industry, and Dairy UK, which represents the processors, to co-ordinate a proposal and discussions are already under way.

Livestock

There has been a drop in demand in various cuts, for example steaks, leading to carcass balance problems in the beef, poultry meat and pig meat sectors. We have encouraged supermarkets to put steaks on promotion and, while the price of beef cattle has reduced in recent weeks, retailers are also reporting an increase in meat sales. Although the price of beef cattle, poultry and pigs has dropped, it still remains higher than in previous years. Quite a lot of beef, poultry meat and pig meat has gone into storage so we continue to monitor this market closely.

Waste

The waste sector has been impacted by social distancing, staff shortages and an increase in waste produced by households compared to a decrease in demand for commercial collections. DEFRA has published guidance to local authorities to help them prioritise their waste streams to keep important services like black bin bag collections moving, and worked with the waste sector to develop an online platform called WasteSupport which facilitates the sharing of resources between local authorities and commercial operators. This was launched by the sector at the end of last week. We are looking at how we can keep other services operating such as household waste recycling centres, and are aware of reports of increases in fly-tipping.

Supermarkets

Following a significant spike in consumer demand, we have now seen stock levels in supermarkets improve and panic buying has stopped. To support the food sector, the Government temporarily relaxed competition law and regulations relating to driver hours and delivery times so that the sector could work together to keep putting food on the shelves.

Ornamental horticulture

The closure of garden centres has had an impact on some specialist plant producers in the ornamental horticultural sector. Online sales have been able to continue and the Government are keeping the situation

under review but concluded last week that it was too early to ease any restrictions on such retail environments. The First Secretary set out the five tests on which the Government would base any assessment of easing the current measure. We must all continue to stay at home, in order to protect the NHS and save lives.

The Government will continue to support these essential services; I want to thank all those who have rallied in an extraordinary way to respond to this unprecedented challenge.

[HCWS192]

JUSTICE

Whiplash Reform Programme: Implementation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I would like to provide an update on next steps for the whiplash reform programme.

The Government remain firmly committed to implementing these measures which are intended to control the number and cost of whiplash claims. Under the programme, we will increase the small claims track limit for road traffic accident related personal injury claims to £5,000; as well as introduce a fixed tariff of damages for pain, suffering and loss of amenity for whiplash injuries, and a ban on the making or accepting of offers to settle a whiplash claim without a medical report.

The Government indicated on 27 February 2020 that after careful consideration they had decided to implement the whiplash reforms in August 2020. However, it is apparent that the current covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the medical, legal and insurance sectors. While the whiplash reform measures remain important, the Government are committed to acting to ease the disruption and pressures caused by the covid-19 outbreak where it can.

As a result, the Government have considered representations from key stakeholder groups and agrees that now is not the time to press ahead with significant transformational change to the personal injury sector.

We have therefore decided to delay the implementation of the whiplash reform programme to April 2021. This will enable key sectors of this country's business to focus their energies on delivering their response to covid-19, and will allow the Government to focus on delivering key services in the justice area during this difficult time.

The Government will continue to monitor developments in relation to the current pandemic and will, if necessary, make further announcements in regard to the implementation of these important reforms.

[HCWS194]

Petitions

Tuesday 21 April 2020

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Falkirk's Forgotten Villages campaign

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that concerns about the Thermal Flow Wet Electric Heating System that was installed in homes 2010/11 have reached an unacceptable level; notes that the unaffordability of the tie-in tariff has added food poverty and serious physical and mental health implications to fuel poverty suffered by those affected; also notes the resistance of Scottish Power, Neat Heat and Falkirk Council to address the problem; and further notes the wider implications of excessive UK energy costs.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to liaise with Scottish Power to resolve this long-standing issue in any way possible; enforce accountability and recompense to those adversely affected; and consider legislation to energy prices.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 27 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 642.]

[P002553]

Observations from the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng):

The Department recognises the distress that these issues may have caused to the residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk, and it is right they be resolved as quickly as possible. To that end, the Department has engaged with Scottish Power, and they state that they have taken a series of steps to address these issues.

We have been advised that once senior management at Scottish Power became aware of the issue (November 2019), the CEO initiated engagement with the Community Group leaders via telephone as well as attending a meeting at Falkirk Municipal Hall.

Scottish Power have confirmed that they then took the followings actions to support customers in reducing their electricity consumption and bills:

They introduced a new fixed price tariff for credit meter customers on the Domestic & Economy 2000 meter type (further detail below).

They provided winter credits for prepayment customers on the Domestic & Economy 2000 meter type in the Falkirk area (further detail below).

They produced and sent out an information leaflet to help customers use their heating system more efficiently—thus helping them reduce their electricity usage and bills.

Customer Liaison Officers (CLOs) have been visiting numerous customers' homes with these heating systems in and around the Falkirk area. To date over 150 homes have been visited, and more visits will be undertaken when and where it is safe to do so, given current circumstances with covid-19. At these visits, CLOs have reviewed the property/heating system and provided more personalised advice for customers on the measures that may be available to them to help reduce their energy use and/or bills.

They continue to work with Falkirk Council to build a sustainable and meaningful partnership which will incorporate all potential funding routes available from Scottish Power, Falkirk Council, the Scottish Government's Warmer Homes Scotland programme and other funding sources. Scottish Power has made a £1 Amillion fund available for energy efficiency and insulation measures can help customers reduce their overall energy costs.

Scottish Power has also introduced a dedicated telephone number for customers who have specific queries such as wanting to move tariff or arrangements for a CLO visit.

We have been advised that Scottish Power has also taken additional steps in addressing high electricity usage and price tariff design.

Scottish Power confirmed that a large proportion of householders in Falkirk have what Scottish Power consider very high electricity consumption levels—up to three times the level that Ofgem would class as a “high user” for Economy 7; where the current Ofgem definition of “high user” for Economy 7 (Profile Class 2) = 7,100kWh per annum.

They also confirmed that the new fixed price tariff is designed with higher electricity users in mind, offering a lower price on the control/heating price which is fundamentally where the high usage stems from.

Further to this, Scottish Power has implemented winter credits for prepayment customers to provide support through periods that heating consumption is highest. The level of credit is tailored to the householders' electricity usage. The calculated saving that each customer would be forecast to achieve on the direct debit equivalent version of the new fixed price tariff over the winter period (December to February inclusive) versus their current prepayment prices.

Scottish Power aimed to ensure the first credits were issued prior to Christmas, recognising the cash pressures that customers may have faced over the Christmas and new year period, and credit payments were made to customers during December and January.

Additionally, recognising the recent severe weather further credit payments of £50 per customer were awarded to each of the same prepayment customers.

Scottish Power suggest that they have received queries from consumers regarding single rate electricity meters, which could find cheaper tariffs elsewhere; however, Scottish Power noted that against a single rate tariff (where the customer does not actually require a meter change as all suppliers are obligated to be able to support their existing meter types with a single rate tariff variant), the new fixed price tariff is well-priced for these higher electricity users, who are using most of their electricity consumption on heating.

The Department recognises that although domestic energy suppliers offer a range of tariffs to multi-rate meter customers, the period of peak and off-peak times offered and the unit rate charged may vary for each tariff. In some cases, multi-rate meter consumers' electricity supply for heating and hot water systems will be hard wired to the meter and charged at a cheaper electricity rate. While electricity used for lighting and cooking etc, is charged at a separate higher rate. Some suppliers' billing and accounting systems have found it difficult to support this type of metering arrangement and/or to match the terms of individual multi-rate tariffs. Smart meters will help to eradicate these problems.

In 2014, the Competition Market Authority (CMA) looked at the restrictions some multi-rate meter customers faced as part of its in depth investigation into the energy market. In September 2017 the CMA ordered all energy suppliers with more than 50,000 customers to offer their single-rate tariffs to customers with a restricted multi-rate meter. The provision would enable these customers to switch supplier while keeping their existing meter until a smart meter could be installed. Suppliers were also ordered to provide regular information of their single-rate tariffs to the Citizens Advice Service, to enable the charity to provide a unique advisory service to help multi-rate meter customers calculate which type of tariff best meets their energy demands, their existing multi-rate or a single-rate tariff.

We will continue to monitor the action that has been taken in relation to the issue. More generally, at the current time, we are also working with energy suppliers to ensure that vulnerable customers who are finding it difficult to manage their energy bills during the disruption caused by covid-19 are supported.

TRANSPORT

Red diesel

The petition of Jamie Smart,

Declares that urgent action is required to address the ongoing problems farmers are experiencing with blocked filters in their machinery due to the use of bio-fuel; also notes the UK Government needs to work with the devolved administrations, the British Standards Institution, fuel companies and the National Farming Unions to resolve this issue; and further notes that financial assistance must be urgently provided to enable immediate action that mitigates further losses and compensates affected farmers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reallocate funding to the British Standards Institution to facilitate the

establishment of a group to investigate the issue of bio-fuel in machinery; also that the specifications of bio-fuel levels in red diesel is urgently reviewed; and that known and potential issues with biodiesel fuels are considered at the earliest opportunity.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 10 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 249.]

[P002564]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean):

The Department for Transport has pressed for urgent action to determine the full extent of this fuel problem, including the causes and potential long-term solutions. That work is now led by a British Standards Institute (BSI)-led taskforce. The National Farmers' Union and National Farmers' Union Scotland are involved in the taskforce, and the Scottish Government has been informed of its work. The taskforce also includes fuel industry experts and is well placed to review fuel standards, including testing protocols and specifications where necessary. Identifying an appropriate solution is complex, as it is difficult to identify an obvious cause.

The Department has made clear that it stands ready to support the BSI and others to ensure that lessons learnt are cascaded. Should the taskforce request it, this includes exploring potential financial support for further research. Ultimately the fuel industry is responsible for ensuring that fuel is fit for purpose, not only through applying industry agreed standards but also carrying out appropriate testing and housekeeping procedures. The blending of biodiesel, at the levels supplied in Scotland, is included within those standards. The Department would encourage any farmers affected to continue to raise their concerns with their fuel suppliers and provide evidence to the taskforce through the National Farmers' Unions. This will help the work of the taskforce which is carrying on at pace.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 21 April 2020

TREASURY

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Treasury Topical Questions on 24 March 2020.

Joy Morrissey: The start-up loan programme has been hugely successful in getting thousands of new businesses off the ground, particularly in my constituency of Beaconsfield. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the announcement that the programme will be extended is hugely welcome news for entrepreneurs right across the country?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is a champion for entrepreneurship in her constituency, and rightly so. The start-up loan programme is an excellent programme, providing grants of £25,000 for budding entrepreneurs.

It has been operational for some years now and has provided almost 70,000 loans, putting to work more than half a billion pounds. It is absolutely right that, as we think about our future coming through the coronavirus, it will be the entrepreneurs of tomorrow who will help to create new jobs and drive the prosperity that we will all want to see.

[Official Report, 24 March 2020, Vol. 674, c. 199.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Exchequer:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey).

The correct response should have been:

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is a champion for entrepreneurship in her constituency, and rightly so. The start-up loan programme is an excellent programme, providing **loans of up to** £25,000 for budding entrepreneurs. It has been operational for some years now and has provided almost 70,000 loans, putting to work more than half a billion pounds. It is absolutely right that, as we think about our future coming through the coronavirus, it will be the entrepreneurs of tomorrow who will help to create new jobs and drive the prosperity that we will all want to see.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 21 April 2020

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Tuesday 21 April 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL	<i>Col. No.</i>	TRANSPORT	<i>Col. No.</i>
STRATEGY	1P	Red diesel.....	3P
Falkirk's Forgotten Villages campaign	1P		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 21 April 2020

TREASURY	<i>Col. No.</i> 1MC
Topical Questions	1MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Tuesday 28 April 2020**

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Ministerial Correction [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
