

'Parliamentary Eunuchs' in a Time of Coronavirus, by Hasan Pandor and Dr Rob Faure Walker (2nd June 2020)

Online voting must be reinstated immediately: Parliament's and the nation's health and wellbeing depend upon it. Currently, MPs who cannot travel to London are unable to vote for their constituents, and have become, in the words of Conservative MP Robert Halfon, 'parliamentary eunuchs'. **Those that can and do travel to Parliament risk contracting the virus themselves, and returning to their constituencies carrying the virus, and spreading it.**

With the lapsing of temporary orders for remote divisions, the online system to debate and vote has been switched off. Whilst the moderately effective hybrid system has ceased and Parliament recalled, the limit of 50 MPs in the Chamber remains. As such, to maintain social distancing, a 'bizarre airport style queue system around parliamentary estate [sic]' has been put in place (Jeff Smith MP), and each vote takes 30 minutes. However, there are MPs who have been medically advised to stay at home, who are shielding, or who are caring for children and vulnerable people. For others, attending Parliament is highly impractical due to reduced transport options. The result, in Dr Rosena Allin-Khan MP's words is: **'democracy for the elite'. The return of Parliament means that many MPs and their millions of constituents are left disenfranchised, and without control.**

Moreover, London is 'the Covid hotspot of Europe' (Angus MacNeil MP). As such, for MPs to travel hundreds of miles across the country to London and back to their constituencies risks exacerbating the pandemic. It will also compel MPs to stay in second homes, which are often mixed households. Possible consequent increased cases would further strain the NHS, and risk even more lives. Additionally, as former minister Margaret Hodge posited, informal legal advice taken suggests that the government 'would break three different types of legislation regarding health and safety, equalities and human rights'. She adds: **'It beggars belief that we think we can be above the laws we make'. Given the national anger and pain around the Prime Minister's special adviser's travel during the lockdown, this is a situation that the Government must not make even worse.** The Equalities and Human Rights Commission has also condemned the Government's discriminatory plan.

The Government's failure to ensure that MPs can participate in Parliament is the opposite of what a government in a parliamentary democracy should be doing. This is especially important as they enact unprecedented legislation in relation to EU withdrawal and the coronavirus pandemic. **Legislation in both areas will irrevocably change the constitutional landscape for 67 million British citizens and their children and grandchildren. It is unthinkable that the Government would deny MPs the right to vote on matters that will change the United Kingdom for generations to come.**

Whilst we live under restrictions, **the Government's commitment must be to extending online participation for all MPs.** Rather than preventing access to Parliament at this critical time, the Government must explore ways to make the virtual arrangements more robust so as to strengthen parliamentary scrutiny. The country needs to see the Government leading the way in online working and **this is something that could strengthen regional representation.** For a Government elected on a promise to provide representation for those outside of the 'out of touch' 'metropolitan bubble', this is not just a failure of government, but a broken promise. **All MPs, and in particular those newly elected on the promise that a Conservative Government would better represent their region, must demand better and insist that the online system is maintained and improved.**

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