

The remotely representative House: why the Commons should continue on a hybrid basis after COVID-19



Parliament during the pandemic allowed MPs who couldn't be physically present – due to caring responsibilities, travel restrictions, shielding – to carry on representing their constituents from home in many, but not all, parliamentary activities. [Jessica C. Smith](#) explains why this hybrid basis should continue post-pandemic, so that the House functions both as a place of democracy and of work.

Consider these two images: in the pre-pandemic Parliament, MP Tulip Siddiq was wheeled through the voting lobby in the House of Commons having delayed giving birth in order to vote in person on a critical Brexit vote; in the Hybrid Parliament, Jonathan Gullis MP was seen cradling his new-born baby whilst participating virtually in a Select Committee session. The contrasting images highlight the opportunities offered by virtual participation to allow for more modern ways of working for MPs. The picture of Ms Siddiq resonated, and accelerated the implementation of a system of baby leave proxy voting for new parent MPs. Yet, the questions of how many Parliament procedures remain exclusionary endure; [debates continue](#) for instance on how to accommodate the 'parent MP' as formal maternity or paternity leave is unavailable to Members.

In 2020-21, the House has undergone huge changes. Like all Parliaments, it adapted in the face of the pandemic. At an impressive speed, procedures described as 'world leading' by many were implemented to create a hybrid Parliament with a mix of physical and online or virtual participation in various procedures. In a new report, *The Remotely Representative House*, commissioned by The Centenary Action Group, we set out to ask what lessons have been learnt from the hybrid Parliament.

Working within the traditions of Parliament, [The Remotely Representative House](#) makes 21 recommendations for a 21st century Parliament. It advocates the House of Commons continue on a hybrid basis post-pandemic, which will bring benefits to a place which must function both as one of democracy and one of work.

Lesson learning from necessity

With vaccines offering hope in 2021, Parliament reaches a critical moment as it begins to envision what a post-Covid House looks like. There will be those who advocate for an immediate return to 'business as usual', removing all elements of the hybrid Parliament to return to a pre-pandemic Westminster. We caution against this closing of the 'window of opportunity' for [progressive reform](#). As we have these conversations about returning to normal and what that normal looks like we must not ignore questions of inclusiveness and diversity. If the House fails to take this opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to greater diversity through the adoption of modern working practices, it would fall far short of the international standard of best parliamentary practice.

The hybrid Parliament has shown it is possible to accommodate MPs' need for more modern ways of working. Not only does this have continued benefits post-pandemic for current MPs – consider again that image of Gullis holding his newborn baby whilst participating remotely in a Select Committee session – but has the potential to open up the Commons to a more diverse slate of candidates in the future. The images seen of MPs participating remotely, sitting at their kitchen tables in front of their microwaves, may work to demystify and normalize the job of an MP. If we combine this with a knowledge that, if needed, one would be able to participate remotely, this could transform who considers themselves able to fulfil the job of an MP. In particular, benefits will be seen for those with caring responsibilities, who live far from Westminster, who have long-term or fluctuating health conditions, or are bereaved.

House to decide

It is well established that there are large [democratic gains](#) to be made by having more diverse political institutions. But good parliaments do not just happen – we need political and institutional leaders to act to bring them about. *The Remotely Representative House* makes 21 recommendations, including on the continuation of remote participation in select committees, virtual participation in Chamber debates and reconsidering the case for remote voting. Each recommendation is made the responsibility of a particular individual or group within the House of Commons. At its core, we are proposing the House of Commons should continue on a hybrid basis, post-pandemic. It would make the House of Commons a world leading, modern institution.

Guiding principles

The Remotely Representative House overarching principle is that where there is no meaningful detriment to the overall effectiveness of the Commons, Members should be free and entitled to decide how they participate, whether in person or remotely.

This is a bold and not uncontentious claim, yet it is also rather modest. In a future House of Commons, virtual participation should be just another way of doing the job of being an MP. There might be those MPs who always participate in person, and those whose preference, or need, is for virtual participation much, if not all, of the time. As is now, the electorate will decide whether they are well-represented by their particular MP's way of working.

In the report, we propose measures that work within the traditions of Parliament and stress the importance of evidence-based approaches to reforms and any opposition to reforms. Together our recommendations would see an effective virtual Commons that compliments rather than detracts from the physical one. We do not think there is no merit in physical presence; indeed we think physical presence holds great importance for the effective operation of a Parliament. However, hybridity has benefitted both individual members and the House of Commons as an institution.

Were this report's recommendations adopted, they would establish a more inclusive and effective House of Commons than its predecessors. They would help Parliament to meet the international standards of a diverse and gender sensitive parliament: one that looks like those it represents, is hospitable to all, including those with caring responsibilities, illness or identify as having a disability, and is responsive to the needs and interests of the public.

Note: the above summarises recommendations made in [The Remotely Representative House](#) written by Dr Jessica C. Smith, with Professor Sarah Childs. The report was commissioned by The Centenary Action Group.

About the Author



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