

# Speaker recalls MPs to the UK Parliament

**The Speaker has written to MPs to explain why he has accepted the Government's request to recall Parliament.**

The letter, reproduced below, sets out Sir Lindsay Hoyle's plans for MPs to reconvene in London.

Last week all opposition parties united against the proposal to shut down virtual participation at Westminster. The Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, Greens and Alliance Party as well as the SNP all signed a letter to the Leader of the Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg and to the Speaker demanding the plans should be abandoned and that the move would increase the rate of infection.

SNP Westminster Leader Ian Blackford MP said: "Opposition parties are clear that full virtual participation in Parliament must remain in place – so all MPs can continue to represent our constituents and hold the UK government to account.

"Tory plans to shut down virtual participation would disrespect Scotland's clear public health guidance, increase the risk of infection in our communities, and disenfranchise Scotland by effectively locking our MPs out of Parliament.

"The clear message in Scotland is 'stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives'. It's unacceptable that the Tory government is trying to force MPs to go against the advice, and put our constituents at risk, by travelling hundreds of miles back and forth to Westminster.

“Polls show the overwhelming majority of the public oppose the moves. The Tories are showing a lack of respect to Scotland, and the other devolved nations, by putting forward reckless proposals that ignore our ‘stay at home’ approach.

“It is time for Westminster to step into the 21st century. Virtual participation works and must remain in place as we tackle this public health emergency.”

The Electoral Reform Society opposes the move.

Darren Hughes, Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society, said: “What are ministers afraid of? Shutting down the virtual Parliament to get more MPs cheering the PM on is blinkered and partisan.

“Opposition parties are right to ask the government to think again before guillotining these virtual proceedings. Over the past month, MPs have shown that they can work from home, while the ability to attend remains there for those who can.

“In fact, it can be even more effective than working from Parliament in some ways – voting times have been cut down from up to an hour with social distancing measures, to just 15 minutes.

“We have to keep learning from these innovations as we come out of the pandemic, so we can build a stronger, more effective parliament that reflects the diversity of the whole UK.

“It would be a travesty if ministers shut down a good thing – simply because they were afraid it was working too well.”

## **LETTER FROM SIR LINDSAY HOYLE to MPs**

Dear Colleague

The Government has requested that the House be recalled for an earlier sitting on Tuesday 2 June 2020, to sit from 11.30am.

The main purpose of the Government's proposed recall is to bring forward a motion so that the House can take a decision on the form divisions should take – now that the temporary Standing Orders on hybrid proceedings have lapsed.

Apologies for the long letter but I would like to set out why I have decided, after careful consideration and on balance, that the public interest test has been satisfied and therefore I agree to this request.

This is the situation the House finds itself in:

- the temporary orders for remote divisions have lapsed;
- the previous and established method of voting using the division lobbies has been condemned as not meeting social distancing standards by Public Health England;
- although I made a statement on 23 March about a method of carrying out divisions in the lobbies, that was based on the advice provided then by Public Health England. The new advice is very different. There is currently no other method for divisions sanctioned by the House.

Based on the latest professional advice from Public Health England, it is clear to me that the House simply cannot conduct divisions safely via the lobbies. There are pinch points in the lobbies where MPs are recorded by Clerks and counted by Tellers where it would be difficult to maintain social distancing, even though Perspex booths were prepared for two of the division desks. Nor can we follow the strict letter of Standing Order No. 38 which forms part of the House's normal practice for the conduct of divisions and sets out particular requirements about timings. That is my view and that of the Clerk of the House as Corporate Officer, who has a duty to ensure, so far as possible, the safety of all of those on the Parliamentary Estate. As safety is my paramount consideration for MPs and staff – alongside the need for constituents to be properly represented through voting – we

need to consider practical alternative arrangements.

Now that I have agreed to a recall on Tuesday, it is for the Government to decide what proposal for voting it wishes to put forward. I have been clear to the Government and to Opposition parties that I would prefer cross-party agreement to be reached about the way in which the House should conduct its proceedings when the House returns – including on how divisions should take place. I have given the Government until Monday morning to table its motion, to maximise the time available for such an agreement to be reached and to provide an opportunity for it to take account of the views of the Procedure Committee.

If agreement cannot be reached, I will want to ensure that Opposition parties and backbenchers have a chance to table amendments to the motion on Monday. I will also write to you setting out temporary arrangements under my own authority for the sole purpose of enabling the House to come to a decision on future arrangements.

It is not good enough for the House to meet as planned on Tuesday, 2 June and be unable to come to decisions on contested matters of any kind. It is in the public interest that the House should have its say and determine at the earliest convenient moment how it wishes to come to formal decisions for the immediate future. That is why I have agreed to the recall.

It may be that the motion tabled by the Government will also say something about arrangements to ensure appropriate physical distancing within the Chamber, and compliance with public health requirements more generally. However, I wish to restate that I remain willing, under my own authority, to take the steps I think are essential in that regard. In particular, I repeat my view that the limit of around 50 Members present in the Chamber must not be exceeded.

I will write to colleagues again on Monday when the Government has tabled its motion about the shape of Monday's proceedings. I understand that the recall will mean that Justice questions will not take place on Tuesday, but the opportunities for urgent questions and statements are unaffected. It is for the Government to set out its proposals for the remaining business of the day. Further guidance will be available as soon as the House reaches its decision on Tuesday.

Warm wishes

Sir Lindsay Hoyle

Speaker of the House of Commons