

# Ending of virtual parliament 'could be contempt'

## 'UK Government in contempt of Parliament as virtual participation removed'

Owen Thompson MP for Midlothian accused the UK Government of being in contempt of parliament by taking action to end remote participation during the Covid-19 outbreak. This meant all MPs were recalled to Westminster yesterday to vote.

In a lengthy and 'shambolic' voting process which involved a conga-like chain of 427 MPs queuing for over half a mile out of the chamber, the UK Government's whipped majority was enough to remove the right for MPs to participate in hybrid proceedings – disenfranchising all those who continue to be unable to attend physically in London for public health reasons, including MPs in Scotland following Scottish Government advice on non-essential travel and those shielding, unwell or with caring responsibilities.

The Tory government's move comes despite cross-party consensus between SNP, Labour, Lib Dem, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, Green, Alliance Party, and some Tory MPs that remote participation must continue. On Saturday, a report from the Procedure Committee recommended virtual participation remains "for as long as the pandemic continues."

Owen Thompson has written to the Speaker questioning whether the UK Government were in contempt of the parliament by removing the ability of MPs to participate without impediment.



Owen Thompson MP

Mr Thompson said:-"The ludicrous farce of the votes today saw

Conservative MPs, led by that great reformer Jacob Rees-Mogg, take us out of the 21st century and back into the dark ages.

“Removing the ability to vote remotely placed the Speaker and House Authorities in an impossible position forcing this embarrassing, inefficient spectacle. More importantly it has locked many MPs out of parliamentary proceedings, cutting off the voices of millions of people in the UK. By deliberately impeding our right to do our jobs this may well stand in contempt of the parliament and I have asked for the Speaker to look at this.

“Pressing ahead with a physical-only parliament now, in a chamber that can only accommodate 50 people, does not get us back to work it stops many of us doing our jobs. The Government can no longer be considered to be taking all steps necessary to protect the parity of treatment of MPs. It goes against the advice of Public Health England, the Scottish Government, the Parliament’s own Procedure Committee, even the UK Government’s advice to continue to work from home where you can do so.

“With the First Minister’s approval, a small number of SNP MPs went to London to argue the case for continued hybrid proceedings but most of us continue to work safely from home. Cutting us off, along with many others from across the UK, is indefensible at this time. The physical voting process with social distancing was shambolic – wasting hours of time which could be far better spent tackling serious issues for constituents.

“The UK Government claimed getting MPs physically to the parliament again was about showing leadership – but what we saw tonight was a laughing stock. We show leadership by taking public health guidance seriously, following guidelines to keep people safe and modernising the parliament by using the remote voting system which was working well.”









Some MPs refused to return to Westminster, and some who are shielding or who have caring responsibilities chose not to. It is estimated that around 250 MPs did not turn up in London.

The queue of MPs waiting to vote on whether or not to scrap remote voting stretched for about 1 kilometre through the Palace of Westminster, and eventually the government motion to cease the virtual parliament was passed by 261 votes to 163.

There is a possibility that any MPs who are unable to attend Westminster due to health reasons may be able to take part in debates remotely.

*Parliament's official photographer was in the House of Commons to capture images of today's division on proceedings during the pandemic* □ *Contact us for the full set* □ [pic.twitter.com/tuyjokVAMR](https://pic.twitter.com/tuyjokVAMR)

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