

Making Parliament work

I spoke in Parliament this week on a link from home, as MPs are encouraged to do. I am grateful to the Speaker and House authorities for their hard work in making sure Parliament can meet whilst obeying the social distancing rules. They responded to those of us who requested we meet.

We can only have a Parliament by limiting numbers strictly in the Chamber itself, where I would rather be. A Parliament working remotely is better than a Parliament not meeting at all, but there are losses from this temporary system. An MP cannot intervene on another to debate an issue or challenge an assertion. You cannot spontaneously ask a question or decide to make a contribution to a debate. You have to book a slot well in advance, with plenty of competition for such slots. Parliament is meeting for less time so opportunities are more limited.

Readers may be relieved to know there are still plenty of other meetings and communication underway between MPs, though we no longer benefit from those many informal conversations and rapidly convened meetings that characterise a usual Parliamentary day. Ministers are making themselves available by tele conference. Groups of MPs and committees meet through Zoom or Teams. There is intensified email traffic and phone calls. Many of us are trying to find substitutes for the many face to face meetings and conversations which help shape government policy and government responses to problems.