



DEMOCRACY DURING A PANDEMIC

A PARLIAMENT STREET BRIEFING NOTE

MATT SNAPE | 20TH MARCH 2020

INTRODUCTION

On Monday, **Parliament Street's** Chief Executive, Patrick Sullivan published an important research paper, [*State of Emergency*](#), on how the British government should deal with the unprecedented challenges presented by the deadly coronavirus.

As that paper was produced in understandable haste, given the fierce urgency of the crisis the country is faced with, Mr. Sullivan was only able to touch on some important matters with great brevity. One of those matters was just how our democracy would function in a time of a pandemic.

Mr. Sullivan wrote that:

Legislation needs to be passed forthwith establishing a "Virtual Parliament" for the duration of this crisis to ensure that the government and Whitehall do not use the Civil Contingencies Act as a de facto Enabling Act.

Parliamentary debates can be conducted by video technology like Skype and votes can be cast remotely. Just because Parliament cannot physically sit does not mean that in the second decade of the twenty-first century that it should not sit. Much of what happens in Parliament can be done anywhere, including online.

I happen to agree with my colleague's suggestions on both the necessity of a "Virtual Parliament" and the need to be cautious of government or bureaucratic overreach stripping Britons of their hard-won freedoms in order to combat the coronavirus.

In January 1775, Benjamin Franklin [famously said](#):

'They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.'

We should keep Governor Franklin's words at the front of mind if we are to hope to emerge from this crisis, which is the moral equivalent of war, with our liberty intact

Just two months after Benjamin Franklin warned against giving up essential liberty to obtain a little safety; another of America's founding fathers, Patrick Henry, made a speech to the Second Virginia Convention, where he declared:

"Give me liberty, or give me death!"

It is because the British people should not be made to choose between liberty, or death, as Governor Henry thought he might have had to, that I have written this briefing note expanding upon what Mr. Sullivan wrote about this pertinent issue in his research paper.

Hopefully, this briefing note will succeed in that objective of, in Mr. Sullivan's own words, "*adding some meat to the bone*" of the recommendations made by **Parliament Street**, earlier in the week.

A 'VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT' IS THE ONLY WAY TO PRESERVE DEMOCRACY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The coronavirus outbreak has raised the question as to how far governments across the globe should go in clamping down on individual liberties at the expense of combatting this virus. For example, in France they have gone as far as fining people who dare go out for unnecessary reasons, even though many French citizens gathered in parks and food markets last Sunday. Italy is also experiencing similar circumstances.

In Britain, the Government has not reached that stage yet. Compared to other nations, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's approach has been more relaxed. Individuals are being encouraged to stay at home and many of them are being supported financially as they decide to self-isolate to stop the virus from spreading further. Yet pubs, cafes and restaurants have not closed, which is why many of them are being offered support from the Government.

Ultimately, the best solution for politicians during this time is to practice what they preach and dissolve Parliament. Health Minister Nadine Dorries was infected with the coronavirus, but she immediately placed herself in self-isolation and so far, no other politician has been infected with Covid-19. Politicians still need to carry out their duties, but if it gets to a point where all 650 MPs must self-isolate to prevent the spread of the epidemic, how can Parliament still be held accountable during this time?

RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO INVOKE THE CIVIL CONTINGENCIES ACT

According to the [Sustainable Development Unit](#), 'The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA) establishes a clear set of roles and responsibilities for those involved in emergency preparation and response at the local level. It requires organisations in the health system (emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies) to prepare for adverse events and incidents.

'Organisations must demonstrate they have undertaken risk assessments, and that Carbon Reduction Delivery Plans are in place in accordance with emergency preparedness and civil contingency requirements.

'The NHS Statement on Internal Control is an annual reporting requirement for NHS organisations and will help them meet their CCA obligations. It provides assurance that resources are being appropriately managed. It includes mandatory disclosures on climate change adaptation and mitigation ensuring that risk assessments have been undertaken and plans are in place to comply not only with the Climate Change Act but also with the Civil Contingencies Act.'

This legislation is essentially the equivalent of an Enabling Act that establishes a dictatorship in the UK. The Government would be free to behave in any way it wants without HM's Opposition holding them to account.

The Government is making decisions based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of England, Chris Whitty, which is why they are responding day-by-day to Covid-19, and the UK has experienced the lowest number of global cases so far out of 11 countries that have been affected the most by the coronavirus, [according to Pharmaceutical Technology](#). This shows that they are doing something right and that there is no need to resort to a lockdown, and the Government certainly does not need to use the Civil Contingencies Act.

WHAT IS A 'VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT'?

Publications like The Spectator have criticised Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for 'playing politics' during this time, and arguably he may have tried to use this situation to gain some political capital, but as Leader of the Opposition, it is still his job to hold the Government to account. If Parliament is out of action, it will be impossible for him to do that.

That is why a virtual Parliament would be a good idea. A petition from [Change.org](#) would have resulted in Indian MPs being able to produce bills, vote, hold discussions and more online and through social media. The idea behind it is that 'lazy' MPs who only turn up to India's Houses of Parliament just to claim their salary would be held to account and taxpayers would be getting 'value for money'.

If Parliament must dissolve, this could be a satisfactory short-term solution to ensure that democracy still functions during this time. The idea can also be applied to councils and elected assemblies throughout the country. If there is one good thing that can come out of this pandemic, then it could be that our democracy becomes more digitalised and transparent in the future.

CONCLUSION

Whilst we are living through challenging times, this is not an excuse to suspend democracy. In an age of information technology, there is no reason why Parliament cannot carry out its functionality and there is no need for a total lockdown that infringes upon people's freedom

either. A virtual Parliament is a modern solution to the coronavirus that can ensure democracy is preserved during this time and it could be a beneficial long-term solution that ensures MPs are not wasting taxpayers' money by arriving at Parliament and doing nothing.

NOTE OF PERSONAL PRIVILEGE

As we face these unprecedented times, I would like to express my gratitude to you, the reader, for taking the time to read this briefing note. I am all too aware that you must have a million-and-one demands on your time right now.

I would also like to send my best wishes to all those who have supported **Parliament Street** over the years. This think tank would not have so quickly become recognized as one of Britain's finest without the support and contributions of so many unsung heroes.

So, to you all, please take care of yourselves, your families and your loved ones.

Although there will certainly be difficult, and sad, days ahead the bulldog spirit of the Great British people will see us through to a better tomorrow.

Until we meet again

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