



# L&RS

## Note

### How parliaments are working during the Covid- 19 pandemic

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#### Abstract

This Note describes how twelve parliaments/assemblies have adapted their procedures and practices to adhere to the restrictions on physical meetings imposed due to Covid-19. Parliaments are continuing to meet with less sittings, dealing with limited business and with fewer members in their chambers. While most parliaments are precluded from holding full virtual plenary sessions, several have introduced some elements of remote working, most commonly virtual committee meetings. Remote voting is rarely feasible, for legal/procedural rather than technical reasons.



29 April 2020

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## Introduction

This L&RS Note seeks to inform Members of the Oireachtas about how parliaments around the world are adapting their parliamentary procedures and practices in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Parliaments face procedural, technical and logistical challenges in finding appropriate ways of working to ensure that they can fulfil their key functions of passing legislation, allocating resources and scrutinising government actions, while also protecting the health of members as well as parliamentary and political staff. There is also the challenge to ensure that members can represent their constituents appropriately.

The Note focuses on how plenary and committee sittings are being organised and the arrangements for voting in parliaments/assemblies. Many parliaments have met to pass emergency legislation, but this paper does not look at that legislation or how parliament can scrutinise measures introduced in this way.

This Note describes how twelve parliaments/assemblies (parliaments) have adapted their procedures and practices to adhere to the restrictions on physical meetings imposed due to Covid-19. The twelve parliaments selected are composed of two groups:

- a) Five parliaments broadly in the Westminster tradition and the three devolved assemblies in the UK:

Australia, Canada, Israel, New Zealand UK, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

- b) Four parliaments in European countries:

Three parliaments with populations similar in size to Ireland and long-established democratic institutions: Austria, Denmark and Finland, and Germany which is often used as a benchmark parliament for the Oireachtas.

As the situation regarding parliamentary practices continues to evolve it is important to note that this paper is based on information available on 29 April 2020. It uses the following sources: Interparliamentary Union (IPU) webpage [Parliaments in a time of pandemic](#), information provided by parliaments to the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), U.S. Library of Congress report [Continuity of Legislative Activities during Emergency Situations](#), individual parliamentary websites, media reports and the author's personal contacts in parliaments under consideration.

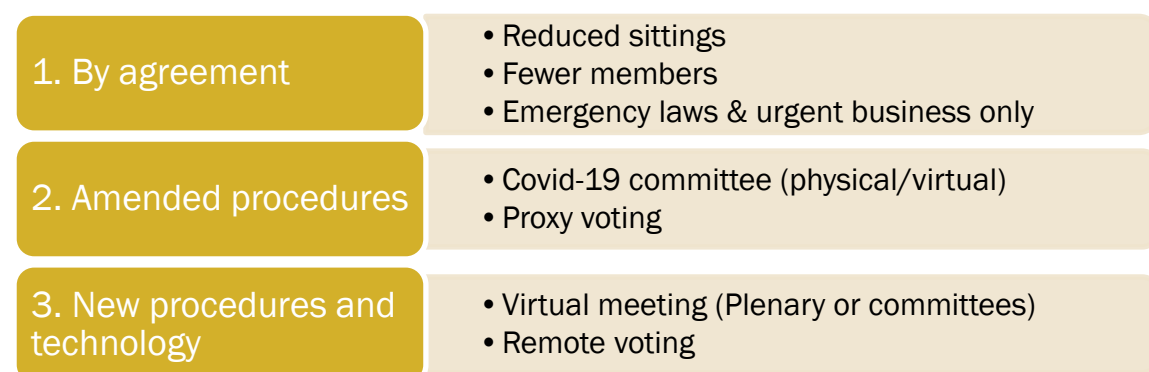
The Note begins with an overview of how the twelve parliaments are working during the pandemic. Next, it describes how these parliaments are organising physical meetings. It then sets out the procedures and practices for remote meetings and voting. It follows with details of the technology being used by the parliaments. Finally, an appendix provides a brief description of how each of the comparator parliaments is operating, followed by a summary table.

## Key points

- Most parliaments are continuing to meet - with restrictions in place to adhere to health measures introduced to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The restrictions typically include fewer sittings, limiting parliamentary business to Covid-19 related matters and other urgent business, and fewer members in attendance to facilitate social distancing.
- The constitutional and legal frameworks in most European parliaments do not provide for holding remote plenary sessions or remote voting.
- Several parliaments have introduced special Covid-19 committees to scrutinise the government response to the pandemic.
- In most parliaments the committees, including Covid-19 committees, are meeting virtually.
- Some parliaments have introduced virtual question-time where members can scrutinise government activities in relation to Covid-19.
- Decisions (votes) are taken at physical sessions in the parliamentary chambers, except in Wales.
- Internationally, only two national parliaments are holding full virtual plenary sittings – Wales and Brazil.

Parliaments are developing their Covid-19 practices incrementally and with specific time limits as the measures are temporary: starting with changes agreed by political parties and business committees, moving to changes that require amendments to rules of procedure or Standing Orders, and finally to changes that involve the introduction of new rules and technological solutions. See Diagram 1.

**Diagram 1. How parliaments responded to Covid-19 restrictions**



## Parliamentary plenary meetings – physical meetings

Several parliaments reported to ECPRD and IPU that they are precluded from the organisation of remote/virtual sessions of plenary, including seven of the parliaments assessed in detail for this paper - Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel and UK. In Canada, Germany and Finland the rules of procedure do not permit virtual sittings.<sup>1</sup> In Austria, the constitution requires members to be physically present.<sup>2</sup> In Israel, legislative change would be required for remote sessions of plenary or committees to take place.<sup>3</sup>

Most parliaments examined are holding fewer plenary sittings than usual, with fewer members in the chamber at any time, and restricting themselves to Covid-19 and other urgent business only.

Parliaments are dealing with social distancing requirements in their chambers in different ways, some examples:

- In Germany, the quota of members required to attend the Bundestag has been reduced from one half to one quarter. There are 709 members of the Bundestag.
- In Denmark, electronic voting in plenary is not currently in use as it would require members to vote from their assigned seats. Instead, walk through votes are organised with party tellers and a queuing system to maintain social distancing.
- In Israel all members can be accommodated in the chamber from 30 April by using the public and press galleries as well as the plenary floor. Previously only 18 of the 120 members of the Knesset were permitted in the chamber at a time and members had to sign up in advance to participate in debates and were called in to the chamber to speak.
- In the UK House of Commons seats are marked to indicate where members can/cannot sit.

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<sup>1</sup> Responses to ECPRD surveys – not publicly available.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence with official of Austrian Parliament; [Austrian Constitution](#).

<sup>3</sup> Responses to ECPRD surveys and correspondence with official at the Knesset (Israeli parliament) Regarding the plenary, according to section 26 of the Basic Law: the Knesset:

"The meetings of the Knesset shall be held at its place of sitting, provided that in special circumstances the Knesset Speaker may, in consultation with the Deputy Speakers, convene the Knesset elsewhere..."

Regarding the committees, according to section 111 of the Knesset Rules of Procedure:

"The meetings of the Knesset Committees shall take place in the Knesset building. A committee is entitled, with the prior approval of the Knesset Speaker, and in special cases, to hold meetings outside the Knesset building."

## Remote meetings and remote voting - procedures

There is a trend towards hybrid parliamentary sessions either in terms of how members attend (some physically and some virtually), or how business is taken (some business items taken virtually and other items with members in the chamber). Among the twelve comparator parliaments ten are holding virtual committee meetings and three parliaments have introduced virtual questions/statements in plenary sessions.

Only the National Assembly of Wales is holding full virtual plenary sessions, i.e. questions, debates and votes. There is limited capacity for members to participate - 28 of the 60 members participated in the last session on 8 April. Party groups decide which party members attend and all non-party members can attend.<sup>4</sup>

See Table 1 for a summary of remote activities in the twelve comparator parliaments.

**Virtual questions** have been introduced in Scotland and the UK. The Scottish Parliament has held virtual question time and is exploring options for other scrutiny arrangements. Other business is carried out at meetings once a week in the chamber.<sup>5</sup> The UK Houses of Commons and Lords have each passed a motion to introduce virtual questions and statements for a period each morning.<sup>6</sup> In the House of Commons about 50 MPs are physically in the chamber for question time while 120 others can participate at a time remotely (with a total membership of 650 this means that up to 26% of members can participate at the same time). All other business is conducted at physical meetings with a reduced number of members in the chamber.

**Virtual committee meetings** are more common than virtual plenary meetings, including special Covid-19 committees. Ten of the comparator parliaments are holding virtual committee meetings (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Israel, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and UK). In Denmark, the chairman, clerk and a technician are physically in the meeting room with other members participating by videoconference. In the Finnish Parliament, evidence can be taken by video-link but members are physically present. The Austrian Parliament is testing remote committees. The Australian Parliamentary rules already provided for virtual committees with parliamentary privilege in the proceedings prior to Covid-19 pandemic. In the other parliaments the rules had to be amended to allow virtual committees.

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<sup>4</sup> National Assembly for Wales website (7 April 2020) [Plenary meetings continue, but Senedd buildings will stay closed until June](#) [Accessed 9 April 2020]

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Parliament (14 April 2020) [Scottish Parliament announces new scrutiny plans in response to Covid-19](#) [Accessed 20 April 2020]; Scottish Parliament [Official Report 21 April](#) [Accessed 29 April 2020]

<sup>6</sup> UK House of Commons (21 April 2020) [MPs approve historic motion to allow remote participation in key Commons proceedings](#) [Accessed 22 April 2020]; UK House of Commons (21 April 2020) [EXPLANATORY NOTE FOR THE MOTIONS ON PROCEEDINGS DURING THE PANDEMIC AND HYBRID SCRUTINY PROCEEDINGS](#) [Accessed 27 April 2020]; UK House of Lords (17 April 2020) [Lords business resumes on 21 April](#) [Accessed 21 April 2020]

In Israel, only members who are unable to attend physical committees due to Covid-19 can participate remotely, and a party substitute can attend to vote in their place as remote voting is not possible.

Special Covid-19 committees, meeting virtually, were established in Canada and New Zealand while the plenaries were adjourned:

- As noted above, in Canada, the rules of procedure preclude remote plenary sessions of the House of Commons, so the House has adjourned until 25 May and a special committee of all members, called Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic, has been established to scrutinise government activities.
- The New Zealand Parliament established the Epidemic Response Committee with eleven members before it adjourned until 28 April, while the country was at a National Level 4 Alert. The cross-party committee chaired by the Leader of the Opposition meets three times per week, by videoconference, to scrutinise the Government's response to Covid-19.<sup>7</sup> Select committees also met by videoconference during the adjournment. The NZ Parliament has now resumed sittings in the chamber and the committees continue to meet by videoconference.

There are also special Covid-19 committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly (all members),<sup>8</sup> Israel (14 members)<sup>9</sup> and Scotland (9 members)<sup>10</sup>. In each case the special committees are meeting alongside plenary (physical meetings) and other committee meetings (virtual meetings).

**Remote voting**, particularly in plenary sessions, would seem to be the most challenging and controversial parliamentary procedure to be introduced. None of the parliaments in the group of twelve comparator parliaments are using remote electronic voting tools, like apps, SMS (e.g. text message) or email.<sup>11</sup>

The guidance to the UK House of Lords makes clear that virtual proceedings are not a sitting of the House, as the Mace is not present<sup>12</sup>, and decisions can only be taken at a physical sitting.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> New Zealand Parliament website [COVID-19: What is the Epidemic Response Committee?](#) [Accessed 20 April 2020]

<sup>8</sup> [Northern Ireland Assembly website](#)

<sup>9</sup> Knesset [Press Release 7 April](#)

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Parliament [Covid-19 committee webpage](#) [Accessed 29 April 2020]

<sup>11</sup> The **Brazilian Parliament** has developed an app which is an extension of the voting system in the plenary to enable members vote remotely [Technology Transfer Handbook Remote Deliberation System of the Brazilian Federal Senate](#) [Accessed 21 April 2020]. **European Parliament** is using an email voting system [Q&A on extraordinary remote participation procedure](#) [Accessed 21 April 2020]. The **Croatian Parliament** introduced voting via email or SMS. Croatian Parliament website [News 6 April 2020](#), [News 24 March 2020](#) [Accessed 9 April 2020]

<sup>12</sup> The mace in Parliament is the symbol of royal authority and without it neither House can meet or pass laws. See [UK Parliament Glossary](#)

The UK House of Commons has approved a motion to introduce remote voting and a system is being developed, however it will not be introduced until the Procedure Committee determines that the scheme proposed is workable.<sup>14</sup>

The National Assembly of Wales is meeting by videoconference with decisions/votes taken by 'weighted voting by roll call', the representative of each group in the videoconference votes on behalf of all members of the group.

Proxy or substitute voting is available in three parliaments. Proxy voting has been extended in New Zealand and introduced in Northern Ireland to facilitate the members who cannot attend the plenary chambers. In Israel, substitute voting is normal practice when a member cannot attend committee meetings, another member of their party can attend and vote.

In Europe, prior to Covid-19, it appears that only Spain had provisions in Standing Orders permitting remote electronic voting prior to Covid-19.<sup>15</sup> This was limited to specific circumstances -pregnancy, maternity and paternity leave, and serious illness, and then only if the member could not exercise his/her parliamentary functions and the Bureau (parliamentary governing body) considered it sufficiently justified. The provisions were extended to all Senators and Deputies unable to attend parliament in Madrid due to Covid-19. The issue of remote voting by members of parliament is more commonly considered in the context of facilitating women to participate in parliamentary politics. The UK<sup>16</sup> and New Zealand<sup>17</sup> parliaments also have arrangements in place to allow pregnant people or new parents to use proxy voting.

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<sup>13</sup> UK House of Lords (16 April 2020) [Procedure Committee issues guidance on virtual proceedings](#) [Accessed 20 April 2020]

<sup>14</sup> UK House of Commons (24 April 2020) [Virtual House of Commons: End of week one](#)[Accessed 27 April 2020]

<sup>15</sup> Spain Congress of Deputies Section 82.2 of the Standing Orders: *"In the event of pregnancy, maternity, paternity or serious sickness preventing a Member of Parliament from carrying out his or her functions and considered sufficiently justified taking into account the special circumstances, the Bureau may authorize in a motivated document the Member to cast his or her vote through the **telematic procedure** with identity verification, in plenary sessions, in a voting, that cannot be subject to fragmentation or modification, and which will be foreseeable in respect to the manner and moment when it will take place".*

<sup>16</sup> UK House of Commons Library (2020) [Proxy voting in divisions in the House](#)

<sup>17</sup> New Zealand Parliament website [Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand- Chapter 17 Voting](#) [Accessed 7 April 2020]



**Table 1. Summary of remote business and voting in comparator parliaments – 29 April 2020**

<b>Virtual Plenary Business</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wales – Plenary</li> <li>• Scotland – Question time</li> <li>• UK Commons &amp; Lords – Questions and Statements</li> </ul>	
<b>Virtual committees</b> Normal practice, Temporary practice, Under consideration	Normal practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australia</li> <li>• New Zealand - including Covid-19 committee</li> <li>• Finland – informal evidence meetings only</li> </ul>
	Temporary practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canada - Covid-19 Committee</li> <li>• Denmark</li> <li>• Germany</li> <li>• Israel - including Covid-19 committee</li> <li>• Northern Ireland - including Covid-19 committee</li> <li>• Scotland – including Covid-19 committee</li> <li>• UK</li> <li>• Wales</li> </ul>
	<i>Under consideration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Austria – testing remote committees</i></li> </ul>
<b>Remote voting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NZ – individual voice vote (Committees only)</li> <li>• Wales – weighted vote by roll call</li> </ul>	
<b>Proxy/Substitute voting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northern Ireland – introduced proxy voting in plenary</li> <li>• NZ – limits removed for proxy voting in plenary</li> <li>• Israel – substitute voting permanent feature (committees only)</li> </ul>	
<b><i>Under consideration</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>UK Commons – remote voting</i></li> <li>○ <i>Scotland – further virtual business with more members</i></li> </ul>	

## Technology for virtual meetings

Parliaments are testing and evaluating technical solutions for virtual meetings, often starting with platforms already in use and familiar to both MPs and staff. There is extensive knowledge-sharing within the parliamentary community about how videoconferencing platforms are being implemented. This includes how they are being integrated with document management and broadcasting systems and how they incorporate participant authentication and sign-in, as well as voting systems.

The video and web-conferencing software, Zoom, is the most common platform currently being used or considered in the parliaments examined for this paper. Both the National Assembly of Wales and the Canadian Parliament stated that interpretation and broadcasting requirements influenced their choice of Zoom. The New Zealand committees meeting virtually are also using Zoom. The Israeli Knesset is using Zoom for those members unable

to attend committee meetings due to Covid-19 and to link members attending a committee meeting across two rooms, with ten members in each room. In Westminster, the House of Commons is using Zoom while the House of Lords is using Microsoft Teams software. In the House of Lords live broadcasting has been suspended for the virtual sittings in April but Hansard is being published. It is expected that more sophisticated technology will be in place and live broadcasting of proceedings in the House of Lords will resume after May 5.<sup>18</sup>

As noted above none of the parliaments examined for this paper are using apps, SMS (e.g. text message) or email for voting, however, it is worth noting how email and SMS are being used by other parliaments. The Croatian Parliament introduced measures to enable parliamentary committees to hold remote meetings and vote via email or SMS.<sup>19</sup> The European Parliament (EP) has put in place measures for members to participate in Plenary and Committee debate and vote remotely until 31 July.<sup>20</sup> Remote voting was facilitated by emailing ballots to MEPs' official email addresses, and ballots were completed and signed and returned to the plenary service by email.

## Conclusion

In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and public health restrictions, each of the twelve parliaments examined in this Note has adapted its practices and procedures. They have done so in line with the legal frameworks within which they operate. The adaptations are time-limited and can be amended as necessary. In most cases they have resulted in fewer sittings, with fewer members in the chamber concentrating on Covid-19 and urgent business only. However, as time passes, parliaments will need to hold more sittings to deal with more business – budgets, legislation etc.

The adaptations are being undertaken incrementally to allow procedural and technical developments to be considered, tested and approved. Across Europe, most parliaments are precluded from holding virtual plenary sessions and physical arrangements within chambers have been modified in terms of seating and how voting in the chamber is carried out. Virtual participation in committees, including special Covid-19 committees, has been introduced/extended in many of the parliaments. Where virtual plenary sessions are being held, they are generally for questions and statements only and cannot accommodate all members. Remote voting is the most challenging aspect of parliamentary sittings, constrained by existing legal frameworks to ensure the integrity of voting in parliament.

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<sup>18</sup> UK House of Lords (16 April 2020) [Procedure Committee issues guidance on virtual proceedings](#) [Accessed 20 April 2020] Guardian Newspaper (21 April 2020) [Virtual House of Lords sitting will not be broadcast live](#)

<sup>19</sup> IPU ( April 2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#) [Accessed 14 April 2020]

<sup>20</sup> European Parliament. [EP Plenary Newsletter 26 March 2020](#) ; European Parliament (March 2020) [Remote voting in the European Parliament and national parliaments](#)

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1. European Parliament (April 2020) [Parliaments in emergency mode. How Member States' parliaments are continuing with business during the pandemic](#) [Accessed 27 April 2020]
2. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) [Parliaments in a time of pandemic](#) [Accessed 28 April 2020]
3. Library of Congress. Law Library (March 2020) [Continuity of Legislative Activities during Emergency Situations in Selected Countries](#) [Accessed 8 April 2020]

## Appendix - How each comparator parliament is operating

### Australia

The Australian Parliament has adjourned until August 11, postponing the normal budget sittings in May/June until October. Both Houses could be recalled with the agreement of the Government and the Opposition, 'in a manner and form not otherwise provided' in their respective Standing Orders. The committees are still meeting, in venues around the country. The Standing Orders allow for virtual committee meetings with parliamentary privilege in the proceedings and some are meeting via teleconference.

Australian state legislatures have also been adjourned until August/September or a date to be set by the Speaker.

### Canada

The Canadian constitution does not require members to be present to vote, nor does it set out the place of Parliament. The privilege of freedom of speech is regarded as being limited to "proceedings in Parliament." Standing Orders for the House of Commons state that a quorum of 20 members, including the Speaker, is necessary to constitute a meeting for the exercise of its powers.

The rules of procedure preclude remote plenary sessions of the House of Commons so the House has adjourned until 25 May and a special committee of all members has been established which will meet three times per week to "consider ministerial announcements, allow members to present petitions and question ministers of the Crown, including the prime minister". On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the committee will meet for 90 minutes by videoconference and on Wednesdays it will meet physically in the chamber. The special committee, called *Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, is not a sitting of the House of Commons, even when it meets physically, it is a committee meeting focused on one topic and does not include every component of a sitting day or week. Committees of the Canadian Parliament had previously only taken evidence by video-link now members are participating virtually.

In March, the House passed a motion to allow two named committees (Finance and Health) to meet by videoconference.

### New Zealand

The New Zealand Parliament resumed meeting after a four-week adjournment (25 March-28 April) while the Covid-19 national alert level was at level 4; it is now at level 3. There are 33 out of 120 members in the chamber at any time to permit social distancing. The sittings will be shorter and deal mainly with Covid-19 bills. Proxy voting has been extended to all

members of political parties where previously there was a limit of 25% of a party's membership using proxy votes at any time.<sup>21</sup>

Before the adjournment a special committee was established, the *Epidemic Response Committee*, to consider and report to the House on matters relating to the Government's management of the Covid-19 epidemic. The *Epidemic Response Committee* and select committees met during the four weeks by videoconference and votes were taken by individual "voice votes"<sup>22</sup> - where each member says 'aye' or 'nay' in response to a question put by the chairperson. Zoom is the videoconferencing platform in use with the in-house document management software *SharePoint* and *Objective* meaning that documents are managed and held on internal servers.

The New Zealand Constitution empowers the Governor General to say where and when Parliament will meet, and further states that the place for Parliament to meet can be changed if that place is unsafe or uninhabitable.<sup>23</sup> New Zealand has legislation that gives the Government special powers during emergencies, (e.g. the *Epidemic Preparedness Act 2006*) so that it can keep making decisions even if Parliament cannot meet.

## UK

The House of Commons initially took an extended Easter recess (25 March – 21 April) after voting through emergency measures. Prior to the recess, there were fewer MPs in attendance and votes were staggered through the lobbies. Select committees continued to work remotely during recess and will do so until 30 June. There is capacity for 20 virtual committees per week.

The recess was used to consider options for remote working and on 21 April virtual question time was approved for the first two hours of each sitting. For two hours in each sitting day there is a maximum of 50 MPs with the Speaker in the chamber and 120 MPs participating virtually at a time. The Zoom videoconferencing platform is being used and there are screens in the chamber to allow the Speaker and those present to see virtual colleagues. The virtual sessions are broadcast live.

The UK House of Commons has approved a motion to introduce remote voting and a system is being developed, however it will not be introduced until the Procedure Committee determines that the scheme proposed is workable.

The House of Lords also took an extended recess until 21 April when a motion to allow for virtual questions, statements and non-legislative debates "until further notice" was approved. The guidance to Lords makes clear that virtual proceedings are not a sitting of the House (Mace is not present) and that decisions can only be taken at a physical sitting. Live broadcasting is suspended for virtual meetings. The guidance further states that the virtual

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<sup>21</sup> New Zealand Parliament [website](#) [Accessed 28 April 2020]; New Zealand Parliament [FAQ: Parliament during COVID-19 alert level three](#) [Accessed 29 April 2020]

<sup>22</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) [Parliaments in a time of pandemic](#) [Accessed 29 April 2020]

<sup>23</sup> [New Zealand Constitution Act 1986](#) [Accessed 17 April 2020]

proceedings will attract privilege as they are established by a resolution of the House like a Grand or Select Committee.

### **Wales**

The *Government of Wales Act* sets out that the Assembly proceedings are regulated by standing orders. Following amendments to standing orders the Assembly has met twice using the video- conferencing platform Zoom and voted remotely. Business is restricted to corona virus related matters and other business with specific time constraints. Not all 60 Senedd members have been included in these virtual sessions; the first session which dealt with statements only had 16 members (representative of groups), and the second sessions had 28 members and there were votes taken – using weighted voting by roll call where a representative of each party group cast votes on behalf of all members of the group. The sessions were also broadcast on parliamentary TV.

Committees are also meeting virtually since 27 April to scrutinise the government's response to Covid-19.

### **Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA)**

On 31 March the NIA established an Ad Hoc Committee on Covid-19 for twelve months. It is comprised of all members and chaired by the Speaker or his deputy. Temporary Standing Orders were approved to provide for: a) the Ad Hoc Committee on Covid-19 and other committees to meet virtually, b) suspension of live broadcast, and c) introduction of proxy voting in plenary and an arrangement where a member is in the buildings but unable to go through the lobby their party whip can include their name to the votes recorded. The requirements for proxy votes include informing the Speaker about who will vote on behalf of a member and for how long. The temporary Standing Orders will apply until 30 September 2020.

### **Scotland**

The Scottish Parliament has amended Standing Orders to permit virtual question time and virtual committee meetings until 26 June. A Covid-19 committee has been established, it and other committees are meeting virtually.

The first virtual members' Question Time was held on 17 April, with 19 members questioning the four Ministers most involved in the response to Covid-19. All other plenary business is carried out in the chamber, with meetings once a week.<sup>24</sup> The Scottish Parliament is exploring new technologies and extending virtual scrutiny arrangements to include more members and different formats. BlueJeans is the platform being used and the sessions are broadcast live.

The Standing Orders permit the Scottish Parliament to meet in a place other than the Debating Chamber of the Parliament.

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<sup>24</sup> Scottish Parliament [News 21 April 2020](#)

## **Israel**

The Basic Laws, considered to be the constitution of Israel, provide for the Knesset to sit in Jerusalem and determine its rules in line with legislation and parliamentary custom and practice. The Knesset's Rules of Procedure do not allow for remote sessions of plenary or committees or for remote voting. Legislative change to the Basic Law on the Knesset would be required and is being considered.

Members must be physically present in the Knesset. At the end of March only 18 members were permitted in the chamber at a time and members had to be called in to vote or speak. From 30 April all 120 members will be accommodated in the chamber by using the press and public galleries, in addition to the plenary floor. The electronic voting system in the chamber has been extended so that each member can sit and vote from an assigned seat. Following recent elections, there are marathon debates anticipated on legislation to enable the formation of a rotation government and all members must be able to participate.

For committee meetings members break into two rooms, with ten members in each room and a video-link between the rooms. There is a Special Committee dealing with the coronavirus. Knesset members unable to attend committee meetings due to Covid-19 may participate remotely and substitute voting by another party member is possible – substitution is a normal Knesset procedure.

## **Austria**

In the bi-cameral Austrian Parliament, the constitution precludes either Chamber meeting remotely. There are reduced sittings and reduced numbers of members in attendance. Remote committee sittings are to be tested.

## **Denmark**

In Denmark, plenary meetings are continuing for essential parliamentary business only - with members required to attend physically. Electronic voting is not in use now, votes are organised with party tellers and a queueing system has been devised for voting to maintain social distancing (like division lobbies).

There are fewer committee meetings. In committee meetings, the Chairman, Committee Clerk and Committee Assistant/Technician are required to be physically present with committee members participating remotely via Microsoft Teams software. The Clerk must be present to advise the Chairman.

Party groups can meet in some of the largest meeting rooms to respect social distancing.

## **Finland**

The Rules of Procedure in the Finnish Parliament preclude the organisation of virtual plenary sessions or committee meetings and remote voting is not possible. However, seating and voting arrangements have been developed to facilitate social distancing. The parliamentary groups have agreed that 52 MPs participate in voting in the plenary sessions (out of a total of 200).

Committees already have the capacity to meet informally to receive the submissions of experts by video-link.

### **Germany**

The Bundestag is continuing to meet physically to deal with essential business only. The Rules of Procedure preclude meetings by videoconference. The quorum for meetings of plenary and committees has been reduced from 50% to 25%. There are 709 members of the Bundestag.

Temporary amendments to the Rules of Procedures allow members to participate remotely in parliamentary committees until 30 September. Committees also have an option to work using written procedures, thereby avoiding the need for some meetings.



**Table 2. Summary of how twelve comparator parliaments are operating during Covid-19 pandemic, April 29 2020**

Country	Rules	Plenary	Committees
<b>Australia</b>	Standing Orders allow for virtual committee meetings with parliamentary privilege in the proceedings.	Adjourned until 11 August Budget postponed	Virtual committees, including Senate Covid-19 committee.
<b>Canada</b>	Constitution does not require members to be present to vote, nor does it set out the place of Parliament. The privilege of freedom of speech is regarded as being limited to “proceedings in Parliament”.	Adjourned until 25 May	Special Committee on the Covid-19 pandemic (all members) and two other committees (Health & Finance) are meeting virtually. Special Covid-19 Committee meets physically in the chamber 1 day per week.
<b>New Zealand</b>	Constitution empowers the Governor General to say where and when Parliament will meet, and that the place can be changed if that place is unsafe or uninhabitable.	Sitting with 33/100 members in chamber. Proxy voting extended to all members.	Epidemic Response Committee & Select committees meeting virtually. ‘Voice votes’ allowed.
<b>Israel</b>	Remote sessions would require an amendment of primary legislation (The Basic Law: the Knesset).	Sitting – all members in plenary hall at appropriate distance.	Covid-19 and other committees meeting physically. MPs who cannot attend due to Covid-19 can participate remotely – but not vote. Substitute voting allowed.
<b>UK</b>	Houses can approve changes to procedures. House of Commons - Motion approved to introduce remote voting and a system is being developed.	Virtual question time. All other business in the chamber. Up to 50 MPs in chamber and 120 virtually at a time.	Committees meeting virtually and have previously done so.
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	Temp Standing Orders for committees to meet virtually, suspend of live broadcasting and proxy voting in plenary.	Sitting with proxy voting.	Ad Hoc Committee on Covid-19 (of all members) and other committees meeting virtually.

<b>Scotland</b>	Standing Orders permit Parliament to meet elsewhere.	Virtual questions. All other business in the chamber.	Virtual committees, including Senate Covid-19 committee
<b>Wales</b>	Assembly proceedings regulated by Standing Orders (Government of Wales Act 2006).	Virtual plenary- all business and votes. 28/60 members participating.	Virtual committees.
<b>Austria</b>	Constitution precludes either Chamber meeting remotely.	Reduced numbers and sittings.	Testing remote committees.
<b>Denmark</b>	Physical plenary sessions are required.	Reduced number of members and urgent matters only.	Virtual participation by members in committees with Chair, Clerk and Technician physically present.
<b>Finland</b>	Rules of Procedure preclude virtual plenary or committee meetings and remote voting is not possible.	52/200 members in chamber.	Physical meetings. Can take expert evidence via video link.
<b>Germany</b>	Rules of Procedure preclude virtual plenary. Temporary change for committees.	Members in person. Quorum reduced to 177/709. Essential business only.	Members can participate virtually, or committee can use written procedure.



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