



# This week's big news



Most MPs are working from home.

## What have the UK's other parliaments done?



Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have their own local parliaments, or assemblies, that make some laws affecting their nations. The Northern Irish Assembly, known as Stormont, has suspended all non-essential business. Both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly have already held virtual meetings, with members of the public able to watch online. The number of debates and meetings had already been reduced in order to help politicians follow social distancing rules.

# MPs meet for the first time in virtual Parliament

On 21 April, the House of Commons held virtual debates for the first time in its 700-year history. Members of Parliament (MPs) usually meet in person inside Parliament, but because of the coronavirus outbreak, they are meeting online instead.

## What is the House of Commons?

The House of Commons is one of two parts of the UK Parliament. It is made up of 650 MPs, who are elected by the public. The MPs put forward new laws and challenge and debate the Government's plans. The other part of Parliament is called the House of Lords. Most members of this chamber are appointed by the Queen. They can suggest changes to laws being made in the Commons. Parliament has been on Easter recess (a break) since 25 March, which means that MPs haven't been able to meet in the Commons to ask the Government about how it is managing the coronavirus outbreak.

## Why are MPs meeting virtually?

Officials have said that the virtual Parliament will allow MPs to work safely. Up to 50 MPs will be allowed to come into Parliament. There will be fewer people inside, which means that those who do come in will be able to stay two metres apart.

This is the distance people have been asked to keep between themselves and others during the coronavirus outbreak. Screens will be placed around the chamber to show MPs who are not there in person. Only 120 MPs will be able to attend the virtual Parliament at any one time using the software, called Zoom, because that is the maximum number of people allowed to join a call.

## What else has been happening in the UK?

On 19 April, the Government's education minister, Gavin Williamson, said it was impossible to confirm when pupils would return to schools. He also said there were no plans for schools to open during the summer holidays. Since 20 March, most students

have been studying at home. Williamson directed some comments directly to pupils across the country. "I wanted to say to you how sorry I am that you've had your education disrupted in this way. I want you to know that you are such an important part of this fight too, and I cannot thank you enough for all that you are doing," he said.

## Are schools still shut in other countries?

Although schools in most countries are still closed, some are beginning to reopen. Denmark became the first country in Europe to reopen schools on 15 April, because it has had fewer infections than other nations. Some restrictions remain, including a ban on parents entering schools, but most pupils said they were happy to be back together again.

## What's happening elsewhere in the world?

Several other countries have lifted some restrictions because of a drop in infections. Shops have reopened in Italy, which was once at the centre of the outbreak. In Australia and New Zealand, people have been allowed to exercise on some beaches, as long as they stay a safe distance apart from each other. Schools there will start up again in the coming weeks.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
MPs held debates outside the House of Commons chamber during much of the Second World War (1939–1945), and for several years afterwards, because of bomb damage.

## Topical Tuesdays!

# MPs meet for the first time in virtual Parliament

Once you have read the article, try any of the following activities...

## Investigate

Who is your local MP? Write a fact file about her or him, including details such as their political party, when they were first elected to Parliament, the size of their majority, any ministerial positions they have held and any jobs they have done apart from being a politician.

## Writing challenge!

Choose one of the following writing warm-ups.

**1** Write a list of rules for school lessons that are carried out over the internet. You can make them as serious or funny as you like.

or

**2** Write a poem about an on-line school day. Write at least eight lines, with alternate lines rhyming (sometimes written as ABABCD CD etc).

## Hold a debate with your family

People are beginning to say that normal life might change a great deal when the threat of the virus has passed. Now that we are proving many jobs can be done over the internet, should we make it a permanent change? Should that include teaching? Would you like to do all your learning at home over the internet? Would you learn better without the distractions of having your classmates in the same room? Or is it important to be together? Are there benefits to working and playing in the presence of others? What do you think?

