

Points of Order [14 JUNE 2021]

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you received notice from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that he intends to make a statement on the covid-19 regulations earlier than advertised? I ask this because it is a long-standing principle of this House that major changes in Government policy are to be announced to Parliament first, and I can think of no more important policy announcement than changes to regulations that restrict the freedom of the British people. It appears that the Government are planning to hold a major news conference on the covid regulations at 6 pm, but the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is not making his statement to the House until 8.30 pm. That is not only a clear breach of parliamentary convention; it is also a breach of the ministerial code. The code states:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament.”

What makes the matter even more concerning is that about 30 minutes ago the media were given an embargoed copy of the statement. So the media have the statement in advance, there will be a public press conference at 6 pm, and then the last people to know about the changes to the regulations will be Members of Parliament. That is clearly very disrespectful to Parliament, and probably a contempt of Parliament.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)

Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you heard from the Prime Minister this afternoon, because I am astonished that he is not coming to the House to make this statement? I entirely join my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) in what he has said. It would have been perfectly possible for the Prime Minister to come to this Chamber at 3.30 and inform Parliament of what is going on. I quite understand that it is much easier for the Prime Minister to have a few patsy questions from Laura Kuenssberg and her colleagues than to sit here for a whole hour and be grilled by MPs, but are we a presidential system or are we the House of Commons? Who runs this country? Is it the media or is it the House of Commons? I repeat what my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said: in future, we must make it clear that if there are any Government announcements, they are made here first, to the elected representatives of the people.

Mr Speaker

First, may I say that I am grateful to both gentlemen for giving notice of the point of order? I have repeatedly made it clear how important it is that announcements should be made in this Chamber first. As you are both aware, the Secretary of State will be making a statement at 8.30 pm on covid. That will give Members of the House an opportunity to question him on the Government's policy. However, it is not what I would have expected, which is a statement to the House before an announcement to the press. It is not acceptable. The Government determine when Ministers make statements, but in doing so they must show respect to this House.

May I just say that we were not going to get a statement until I got involved with Downing Street? The fact is that this has been forced— to actually get a statement today; it was going to be left till tomorrow, which would have been totally unacceptable. The fact is that I understand that the Prime Minister, at the moment, is at NATO—there is a big conference going on—and he is not here.

That is why I insisted that somebody come to make this statement. The timing of it is 8.30 pm. I thought that was better than waiting for the Prime Minister to make a statement tomorrow.

This House needs to know; it needs to know first. I find it totally unacceptable that, once again, we see Downing Street running roughshod over Members of Parliament. We are not accepting it, and I am at the stage where I am beginning to look for other avenues if they are not going to treat this House seriously. What I would say is that I think it is time for me to have a meeting with the Prime Minister to put on the record—here and now, but with him—that this House matters.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)

Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Just in case there was any lack of clarity from your statement, may I ask whether it is at all feasible that, should the Government now have recognised the power and force of your statement and of the objections of the House, they could come to you and say that they are prepared to bring their statement forward to 6 o'clock? Would the House be able to find time for that?

Mr Speaker

If somebody is willing to do that from Downing Street, I will always ensure that this House will hear it. I was told that no decisions had been taken. That is why I am more shocked to know that there is an embargoed copy of what is going to happen to this country, without this House knowing. I was told no decisions had been taken—that no decisions will be taken until the Cabinet meets. The fact is I am being misled—this House is being misled. It is not acceptable, and I would welcome them coming here before they make the press statement, as the press have already got an embargoed copy. I am sure that the Whip is now texting the Chief Whip to let him know exactly what is being said, because this is disappointing to all of us.

I am now suspending the House for a few minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

3.37 pm

Sitting suspended.