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## Lords Diary: Ros Altmann



**Baroness Altmann**

[@rosaltmann](#)

4 min read | 23 April

After all the excitement of Parliament's digital turn, Baroness Altmann turned her focus to the major policy decisions facing the country as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

We have been living through unprecedented times and the past few days have witnessed ground-breaking experiences for parliamentarians too.

Against the backdrop of the national lockdown and Government instructions for people to work from home to protect the NHS and save

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lives, Parliament has moved with the times and migrated – at least partly – online.

In the space of one short recess, Westminster life has been transformed, as parliamentarians, officials and IT experts have enabled proceedings to take place remotely. It has been an impressive operation, not without its teething troubles, but overall quite a success.

There were some painful first attempts, such as a pre-arranged online Covid-19 briefing which collapsed because too many peers tried to connect at once and the medical expert lined up to brief us was locked out by the system.

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We had a 'dress rehearsal' for the first virtual House of Lords session on Tuesday morning (more like an 'undress' rehearsal as colleagues appeared in casual attire rather than shirts and ties) in which many were unable to

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unmute or hear the proceedings. Some peers had gone to impressive lengths to ensure interesting virtual backgrounds, with the star prize going to the Baroness who managed to display a virtual House of Lords Chamber behind her. Sadly, she was asked to remove this, as we are not meant to be 'pretending' to be in Westminster.

By the afternoon, most of the problems had been ironed out and the Lord Speaker hosted the historic, ground-breaking session, immediately after we had opened the proceedings with prayers – as is our wonderful tradition.

This time, we were all smartly dressed and got through the proceedings pretty successfully. The support staff have done a marvellous job in hand-holding everyone patiently through the process, even managing to find a way for those without adequate broadband to dial-in.

So much for the practicalities of how lockdown is affecting Parliament; what about the wider policy arena. It was a relief to see the prime minister released from hospital and starting to recover. His praise for the NHS was fulsome and fully deserved.

Policy has focused on protecting the NHS, regardless of the consequences. The chancellor's bold measures to support the economy were breathtaking, the speed with which the new Nightingale Hospital was constructed was astonishing and the daily press briefings have been compulsive viewing. Of course, watching journalists holding Government to account, rather than parliamentarians doing so, has been quite strange.

I am pleased that Westminster is up and running again, even if the virtual activity and depleted physical presence mean ministerial challenges are not quite as robust as normal.



**I was disturbed to see ministerial insistence that they will not extend the transition period**

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But the big issue that has at last risen up the policy agenda is social care, which has been a big focus of Lords questions and debates this week. The media in recent days have highlighted rising infection rates and fatalities for staff and elderly citizens and I was delighted that Government promised more PPE and testing for the wonderful staff caring for so many of our most vulnerable groups. Improvement in parity of esteem between health and social care and better integration could hopefully be a positive outcome of this national crisis.

The other significant issue is the economy. It will take monumental efforts to overcome the damage wreaked on our lives and livelihoods. Support for workers and employers is starting to get through, with the DWP working flat out to meet new universal credit claims, furlough payments and business loans being arranged.

But a particular concern is the fear of a no deal Brexit looming large in coming months. We must not inflict another blow on businesses as they struggle to recover from the coronavirus impacts. I was disturbed to see ministerial insistence that they will not extend the transition period. We will need time to recover from this virus, the likelihood of agreeing detailed, complex new trade arrangements with the EU is vanishingly small, and I am sure Parliament will keep challenging ministers robustly on this.