

August 2020 Update

## **Chapter 6 – The royal prerogative and constitutional conventions**

### **6.3.3 The Privy Council**

Meetings of the Privy Council take place in the Monarch's presence. Clearly, in the context of COVID-19 this poses a problem. Consequently, the Privy Council meeting of 3rd April 2020 was the first in its history to take place online. The Queen took part from Windsor Castle, with the Privy Counsellors taking part from a meeting room in Whitehall. Further meetings have since been held remotely.

Previously, if the monarch was away from Buckingham Palace, and if a Privy Council meeting was required, ministers could be required to travel considerable distances for Privy Council meetings. For example, in August 2019, when the government decided (as it turned out, unlawfully) to prorogue Parliament for an extended period in the run up to Brexit,<sup>1</sup> the Privy Counsellors attending the Privy Council meeting where the decision was approved had to travel 500 miles from London to Balmoral Castle in Aberdeenshire.

Some ministers have questioned whether this is the best use of their time, especially when meetings are very short, and all business is entirely formal. Now the Privy Council has met online, it seems harder to justify ministerial time being spent on such travel.

### **6.12 The broader constitutional role of the monarch**

As part of the monarch's broader role as Head of Nation, the Queen can make an address to the nation. Usually, the Queen makes two such addresses each year, on Christmas Day, and on Commonwealth Day. Until 2020, the Queen has made four special addresses during her reign. These were in relation to the Gulf War, the deaths of Princess Diana and the Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, and most recently in 2012 in response to the celebrations held to mark her Diamond Jubilee.

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<sup>1</sup> See 6.7.2.

The unique circumstances of COVID-19 have led to the Queen making three addresses to the nation in quick succession. The Queen's address on Palm Sunday was the most notable, as she addressed the crisis head on, connecting the difficulties faced in the present crisis to those the country faced during the Second World War. In the views of many, the message served to bolster the response to the crisis and showed how the Queen can serve to embody and act as a focus for national identity to an extent that a politician simply cannot. The second message followed a week later and was the Queen's first Easter message. This was followed by her address to mark the 75th Anniversary of VE Day, as a partial replacement for the events that were cancelled due to COVID-19.