



Coronavirus legislative responses in the UK: regression to panic and disdain of constitutionalism

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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom has considerable prowess in handling emergencies, not just in counterterrorism but also in a wide range of other real or imagined disasters, including public health risks. Core legislation has been installed, including the all-encompassing Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004 and the more specialist Public Health (Control of Disease) Act (PHA) 1984. Despite these finely honed models, the UK state regressed to panic mode when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than turning to the laws already in place, Parliament fast-tracked the Coronavirus Act 2020, with scant debate of its shabbily drafted contents. In addition, the UK Government has relied heavily, with minimal scrutiny, on regulations under the PHA 1984. The article analyses the competing legal codes and how they have been deployed to deal with COVID-19. It then draws out the strengths and weaknesses of the choices in terms of the key themes of: the choice of sectoral versus general emergency legislation; levels of oversight and accountability; effectiveness; and the protection of individual rights. Following this survey, it will be suggested that the selection of legal instruments and the design of their contents has been ill-judged. In short, the emergency code that is the most suitably engineered for the purpose, the CCA 2004, has been the least used for reasons which should not be tolerated.

Key words: COVID-19; emergency legislation; pandemic; constitutionalism; Civil Contingencies Act 2004; Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984; Coronavirus Act 2020.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) has garnered considerable prowess in handling emergencies, as prominently illustrated by its encyclopaedic counterterrorism laws. Less widely appreciated are the extensive codes available to the UK Government covering other real or imagined disasters, ranging from floods to meteor strikes, including public health risks. Here, too, core legislation has been installed, such as the all-encompassing Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA 2004) and the sectoral Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 (PHA 1984).¹ Despite these finely honed models, the UK state regressed to panic mode when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than utilising the laws already in place to handle crises like the pandemic, Parliament fast-tracked the Coronavirus Act 2020 (CA 2020). This crucial statute was passed within seven days (19–25 March 2020),² having been subjected to brief and poorly attended debates, after which Parliament vanished into recess for four weeks. In addition, the UK Government has installed, with minimal scrutiny in any form, extensive regulations under the PHA 1984 which have become the chief instruments of policy.

This article reviews the contents and defects of the CA 2020, followed by an examination of the competing features of pre-existing laws: the PHA 1984 and CCA 2004. Thereafter, it argues that the selection of legal instruments and the design of their contents have been ill-judged. In short, the emergency code which is the most suitably engineered for the purpose, the CCA 2004, has been the least used for reasons which should not be tolerated, resulting in substantial damage to the constitutional fabric of the UK.³

CORONAVIRUS ACT 2020

The CA 2020 runs to over 342 pages, so this summary is necessarily selective.⁴ The Act's stated purpose is to implement the UK Government's *Coronavirus: Action Plan* of 3 March 2020,⁵ which seeks to 'Contain, Delay, Research, and Mitigate'. All aspects of that *Plan* are potentially covered, though little has since been heard of this *Plan*. Rather than refining it or assessing its success, plans moved onto

1 For surveys, see Clive Walker and James Broderick, *The Civil Contingencies Act 2004: Risk, Resilience and the Law in the United Kingdom* (Oxford University Press 2006); Clive Walker (ed), *Contingencies, Resilience and Legal Constitutionalism* (Routledge 2015).

2 See [Parliamentary Bills: Coronavirus Act 2020: stages](#).

3 For other jurisdictions, see [Comparative Covid Law](#); [COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker](#); [COVID-19 Government Measures Guide 2.0](#).

4 See also *CA 2020: Explanatory Notes*.

5 [Policy Paper: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Action Plan](#).

the subsequent phases, and included documents such as *Our Plan to Rebuild*,⁶ the *Winter Plan*,⁷ and now a stepped roadmap.⁸ While the most eye-catching and contentious measures concerned containing and delaying the spread of coronavirus via varying degrees of lockdown of the general populations, the bulk of the legislation is technical and specialised in nature.

The initial titles in the CA 2020 contend with health and social care. Provisions seek to boost available personnel through relaxing health registration requirements to temporarily allow for the registration of an extra intake of suitably experienced persons (such as recent graduates or retired personnel) as regulated healthcare professionals even if they lack some formalities of the normal registration requirements. The recruitment of emergency volunteers is also encouraged by establishing a new form of unpaid statutory leave and powers to compensate for some loss of earnings and expenses. The National Health Service (NHS) Volunteer Responders scheme⁹ recruited 750,000 people within days of its announcement, three times more than planned. Further encouragement to grow health system capacity is given by the conferment of individual indemnity for clinical negligence in some circumstances.¹⁰ Next, death certification and coronial interventions are short-circuited by enabling a doctor to certify the cause of death without referral to a coroner.¹¹ Inquests with juries are also curtailed.¹²

Second, physical and social security are reinforced by a power to require information about food supply chains¹³ with a view to potential state intervention. Statutory sick pay is also extended and subsidised.¹⁴

Third, personal liberties are gravely affected. The scale of these changes to fundamental legal processes is extraordinary and expansive. Various surveillance powers are widened in terms of authorising authorities for the taking and retention of personal data.¹⁵ Notably, no extra powers have yet been devised for compulsory population contact-tracing purposes, though the NHS COVID-19 app, which collected data centrally, was devised by the technological wing of the health

6 CP 239, 2020.

7 CP 324, 2020.

8 [COVID-19 Response](#) (Cabinet Office, 22 February 2021); Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps) (England) Regulations 2021, SI 2021/364.

9 [‘NHS volunteer responders: 250,000 target smashed with three quarters of a million committing to volunteer’](#) (NHS, 29 March 2020); NHS Volunteer Responders, [‘Volunteer now to support the COVID-19 vaccination programme’](#)

10 CA 2020, s 11.

11 Ibid s 18.

12 Ibid s 30.

13 Ibid s 25.

14 Ibid s 39.

15 Ibid ss 22–24.

service, NHSX, and, after abandonment of the initial version,¹⁶ was rolled out.¹⁷ Many questions raised by the Joint Committee on Human Rights about privacy safeguards and independent oversight remained unanswered.¹⁸ In March 2021, a scathing report by the Public Accounts Committee found that this NHS Test & Trace system, which cost an ‘unimaginable’ £37 billion, had failed to deliver discernible benefits to the UK’s pandemic response.¹⁹ More direct intrusions into civil liberties have included regulatory powers to direct the suspension of port operations,²⁰ which are intended to ensure border monitoring but could also be applied internally (such as to cruise ships).²¹ Next, public health officers and other officials can enforce quarantining under section 51.²² Section 52 allows for regulations to ban events, gatherings and the use of communal premises aimed at the apparently healthy general population. Rights of due process are affected under sections 53 to 57, by which various pre-trial hearings may take place by live video links. Democratic rights may have also been affected by powers under sections 59 to 70 and 84 to postpone (as in wartime) pending elections for local authorities, the London mayor, and even the General Synod of the Church of England. Local authority meetings can also be trimmed (section 78). Finally, there are winners and losers in terms of property rights: tenants in the private, social and business rented sectors have been protected from eviction for a specified time (sections 79 to 83).

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- 16 See Ian Levy, ‘[The security behind the NHS contact tracing app](#)’ (*National Cyber Security Centre*, 4 May 2020).
- 17 [NHSCOVID-19 App](#). For standards, see European Commission, Recommendation (EU) 2020/518 of 8 April 2020, *Common Union toolbox for the use of technology and data to combat and exit from the COVID-19 crisis, in particular concerning mobile applications and the use of anonymised mobility data*; eHealth Network, *Mobile applications to support contact tracing in the EU’s fight against COVID-19: Common EU Toolbox for Member States*; European Data Protection Board, *Guidelines 04/2020 on the use of location data and contact tracing tools in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak* (21 April 2020).
- 18 Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Human Rights and the Government’s Response to Covid-19: Digital Contact Tracing* (2019–21 HC 343/HL 59). See also Andy Phippen and Emma Bond, ‘COVID-19 and tech solutions – another politician’s fallacy?’ (2020) 31 *Entertainment Law Review* 191; Marion Oswald and Jamie Grace, ‘The COVID-19 tracing app in England and “experimental proportionality”’ [2021] *Public Law* 27.
- 19 House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, *Covid-19: Test, Track and Trace (Part 1)* (2019–2021 HC 932).
- 20 CA 2020, s 50.
- 21 See ‘[Covid Scotland: UK-only cruise ship MSC Virtuosa “barred from docking in Greenock”](#)’ (*The Scotsman*, 8 June 2021).
- 22 The UK Government cites *Kudla v Poland* App no 30210/96, 2000-XI and *Pretty v UK* App no 2346/02, 2002-III in its [Memorandum to the Joint Committee on Human Rights: The Coronavirus Bill 2020](#), para 24.

Scant oversight mechanisms have been applied to this sprawling legislative edifice. First, by section 97, the Secretary of State must prepare and publish a report every two months on the status of the provisions in the Act. In addition, the report must include a statement that the Secretary of State is satisfied that the status of those provisions is ‘appropriate’. No further explanation of this term is provided in the Act or wider guidance, indicating that this requirement is undemanding or even cosmetic. Second, by section 98, the House of Commons is enabled to debate and vote on the continuation of the Coronavirus Act 2020 every six months based on a motion ‘That the temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not yet expire.’²³ This review power is extraordinarily confined and has hindered subsequent much-needed meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of the Act.²⁴ The House of Lords is allowed no part to play, yet no reasons were given for its exclusion. The only obvious precedents for this treatment are the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, section 1 (relating to the annual Budget proposals), and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, section 13, by which the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship had to be approved by a resolution of the House of Commons (a ‘meaningful vote’) while the House of Lords was required by motion merely to take note by debate (a rather meaningless vote). These two precedents could arguably provide justification on the basis that the enhanced democratic credentials of the House of Commons might be peculiarly relevant in those specific contexts. But they cannot support the complete exclusion of the Lords from scrutiny and review of CA 2020 measures of such immense magnitude. The third precaution is that, by section 89, the Act is to expire after two years, but, even then, the ‘relevant national authority’ (basically, a minister of the Crown under section 90) can extend the life by regulation for six months at a stretch. Proposals to shorten this period, such as to one year, or even shorter, were rejected.²⁵ For the Scottish Parliament’s equivalent, the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020,²⁶ a final sunset of 30 September 2021 is specified by section 12. However, successor legislation can be installed, and so the Coronavirus (Extension and Expiry) (Scotland) Bill 2021 plans to extend the legislation (with some omissions) until 31 March 2022.²⁷

23 The initial draft set two years which was a point of criticism: House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Coronavirus Bill* (2019–21 HL 44) para 8.

24 For renewal on 25 March 2021, see HC Deb 25 March 2021, vol 691, col 1195; Fiona de Londras, ‘[Six monthly votes on the Coronavirus Act 2020: a meaningful mode of review?](#)’ (*UK Constitutional Law Blog*, 25 March 2021).

25 House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, *9th Report* (2019–21 HL 42) para 4; HL Deb 25 March 2020, vol 802, col 1771, Earl Howe.

26 Asp 7.

27 SP Bill 1. See *Coronavirus (Extension and Expiry) (Scotland) Bill*, 24 June 2021.

CHOICE OF LEGISLATIVE PLATFORMS

Appearances at the start of the pandemic emergency²⁸ seemed to suggest that the CA 2020 would offer the main legislative platform for a response to COVID-19, and so this instrument grabbed the attention of Parliament. But appearances turned out to be deceptive. As this part explains, the CA 2020 has been relatively silent compared to some alternative platforms.

CA 2020: firing duds

The CA 2020 was passed in great haste on grounds of national emergency, but its usage has been relatively modest, as demonstrated by two sample areas: the justice system and economic interventions.

For the struggling justice system,²⁹ a mixed picture has involved some restrictions to its usual functioning alongside some instances of governmental forbearance. Sentencing by the judges has taken account of the more severe lockdown conditions in prison,³⁰ while the Ministry of Justice introduced the End of Custody Temporary Release scheme for suitable prisoners, within two months of their release date, to be temporarily released from custody, though this action was taken under rule 9A of the Prison Rules 1999 and rule 5A of the Young Offender Institution Rules 2000.³¹ It was reckoned that up to 4000 prisoners would be released under this scheme, but, as of 3 July 2020, only 209 prisoners had been released,³² and the scheme seems to have been in abeyance since then with no plans to restart.³³ Thus, the CA 2020 was not used to ameliorate the conditions of offenders.

Another planned intervention also fizzled out. Criminal trials by jury in England and Wales were suspended for some months after 23 March 2020,³⁴ leading to huge backlogs of cases, though some

28 The situation was identified as a 'moment of national emergency': [Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 23 March 2020.

29 See *Impact of the Pandemic on the Criminal Justice System* (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate, 19 January 2021).

30 *R v Manning* [2020] EWCA Crim 592; *HM Advocate v Lindsay* 2020 HCJAC 26.

31 'End of Custody Temporary Release' (Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service 24 April 2021). See *R (Davis) v Secretary of State for Justice* [2020] EWHC 978.

32 House of Commons Justice Committee, *Coronavirus (Covid-19): The Impact on Prisons* (2019–21 HC 299) paras 52, 57; and see *Government Response* (2019–21 HC 1065). See further House of Commons Justice Committee, *Coronavirus (Covid-19): The Impact on the Probation System* (2019–21 HC 461).

33 *Government Response* (2019–21 HC 1065).

34 'Review of court arrangements due to COVID-19, message from the Lord Chief Justice'. The pause did not breach the right to trial by jury or cause a delay contrary to s 22(3) of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985: *R (McKenzie) v Crown Court at Leeds* [2020] EWHC 1867 (Admin).

recovery took place after May 2020 through the greater use of live links under section 51 and also the opening of 60 adapted ‘Nightingale’ courts.³⁵ The shift from physical to online hearings raised profound concerns about how to assist and assess the participants,³⁶ and also to ensure open justice.³⁷ In its review of the impact of the pandemic upon the court system, the House of Commons Constitution Committee has made various criticisms of the ‘crisis level’ backlogs in the criminal justice system, deeming them ‘neither acceptable, nor inevitable’.³⁸ More severe modifications to the right to jury trial entered into consideration as a potential reform under the CA 2020 in England and Wales³⁹ but have as yet come to nought. Elsewhere, drastic changes were opportunistically envisaged in Scotland by early drafts of the Scottish Parliament’s Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 which contained proposals to suspend trial by jury and to add exceptions to hearsay rules of evidence. This attempt to railroad through fundamental change was rebuffed by the vocal opposition of Scottish legal professions. Fresh proposals, *Covid-19 and Solemn Criminal Trials*,⁴⁰ were tabled, but the threat to jury trial again receded with greater attention to virtual hearings and elongated time limits as in England.⁴¹ The threat has not, however, vanished since the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will replace temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 relating to live video and audio court hearings in criminal courts, including live link directions relating to a jury.⁴² A variety of other criminal justice issues, such as impacts on custody time limits,⁴³ the extended retention

35 See Sally Lipscombe and Graeme Cowie, *Coronavirus Bill: Implications for the Courts and Tribunals* (House of Commons Library 08865, 2020); Ministry of Justice, ‘Speech: Lord Chancellor outlines his plans to recover the justice system from COVID-19’, 4 June 2021.

36 *Inclusive Justice: A System Designed for All: Interim Evidence Report: Video Hearings and their Impact on Effective Participation* (Equalities and Human Rights Commission 2020); *Explaining the Case for Virtual Jury Trials during the COVID-19 Crisis* (JUSTICE 2020); Hannah Quirk, ‘Covid 19 and juryless trials?’ [2020] *Criminal Law Review* 569.

37 *Sutter v Switzerland* App no 8209/78, (1984) 6 EHRR 272 [26]–[27]; *Pretto v Italy* App no 7984/77, (1984) 6 EHRR 182 [21].

38 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Covid-19 and the Courts* (2019–21 HL 257).

39 House of Commons Justice Committee, *Coronavirus (COVID-19): The Impact on Courts* (2019–21 HC 519) para 77.

40 ‘Criminal trials during COVID-19 outbreak’ (Scottish Government, 14 April 2020).

41 See Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020 (asp 10), sch 2.

42 (2021–22) HL no 40, cl 169 and sch 19.

43 Prosecution of Offences (Custody Time Limits) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/953, permitted pre-trial detention to increase from 182 to 238 days. See Luke Marsh, ‘The wrong vaccine’ (2021) *Legal Studies* 1–17.

of profile data⁴⁴ and domestic abuse remain to be fully assessed.⁴⁵ As for civil process, including coronial hearings, the facility of online and closed circuit links has again been promoted.⁴⁶ Wider impacts on the legal profession are still to be tackled.⁴⁷ On these issues, the CA 2020 has been silent.

The CA 2020 has had more impact on economic and social life than civil and political life. Various ambitious and ruinously expensive schemes of aid to businesses⁴⁸ and the furloughing of employees⁴⁹ have been implemented. In addition, restrictions on the treatment of tenants have also been applied to prevent evictions.⁵⁰ Further legislation (the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Temporary Relief) Act 2020) also reduced stamp duty from June 2020 until October 2021.

PHA 1984: the weapon of choice

The CA 2020 received Royal Assent on March 25. Yet, the very next day, additional measures were introduced via the PHA 1984. In short, part 2A of the PHA 1984 was inserted by the Health and Social Care Act 2008 following the UK's experience of SARS in 2003 and to give effect to the International Health Regulations 2005. It provides powers under sections 45C(1), (3)(c), (4)(d), 45F(2) and 45P which authorise the executive authorities to issue regulations to protect against infectious disease. Under these powers, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020⁵¹ were issued.

44 Coronavirus (Retention of Fingerprints and DNA Profiles in the Interests of National Security) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/391 and 973.

45 See House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): Domestic Abuse and Risks of Harm within the Home* (2019–21 HC 321) and *Government Reply* (2019–21 HC 661). Note also the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the background to which pre-dates COVID-19.

46 See *Chief Coroner's Guidance on COVID-19* (No 34, 29 March 2021); Rudi Fortson, 'Adjusting to Covid 19 under the English legal system' (2021) 2 *eucri* 116–122.

47 House of Commons Justice Committee, *Coronavirus (COVID-19): The Impact on the Legal Professions in England and Wales* (2019–21 HC 520) (covering practical difficulties arising from remote working and financial difficulties). For the limited uplift in legal aid funding, see 'Lord Chancellor outlines his plans to recover the justice system from COVID-19' (Ministry of Justice, 4 June 2021).

48 Business Support.

49 See 'Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and Job Retention Bonus' (HM Treasury, 2 October 2020). The schemes rely on the CA 2020, ss 71, 76.

50 See Coronavirus Act 2020 (Residential Tenancies: Protection from Eviction) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/914; Business Tenancies (Protection from Forfeiture: Relevant Period) (Coronavirus) (England) (No 2) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/994. See further 'Guidance for landlords and tenants' (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 21 June 2021).

51 SI 2020/350.

Corresponding instruments were issued for Wales,⁵² Scotland⁵³ and Northern Ireland,⁵⁴ albeit with many inexplicable variations. These regulations expanded upon an earlier regulatory order issued in February 2020⁵⁵ which had been, as might be expected for public health legislation, confined to the detention for screening or treatment of potentially infected individuals. Many later amendments, variants, and editions have followed ever since.⁵⁶

The PHA 1984 regulations go far beyond dealing with the sick. They impinge upon many activities of the general population and impose extraordinary restrictions on general liberty, often very similar to those allowed by the CA 2020. A major aim throughout has been to minimise social interactions, including by ‘lockdowns’, which prevailed in various forms and levels at least until 19 July 2021 when, in England, a lifting of most restrictions occurred.⁵⁷ The lockdown regulations have appeared mainly in the PHA 1984 and were not granted by the CA 2020, which could have been designed to afford greater clarity and accountability.⁵⁸ The PHA 1984 regulations have entailed the enforced closure of some businesses and restrictions on others (regulations 4 and 5), including entertainment and hospitality venues.⁵⁹ Most draconian of all, the initial lockdown under regulation 6 stated that ‘no

52 Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/353 (W80).

53 Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, SSI 2020/103. See Robert Shiels, ‘The instant law of coronavirus’ [2020] *Scottish Law Times* 153, 245; Paul Scott, ‘Responding to COVID 19 in Scots law’ (2020) 24 *Edinburgh Law Review* 421.

54 Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, NISR 2020/55. See *COVID 19 and the Law* (Committee on the Administration of Justice 2020); Daniel Holder, ‘From special powers to legislating the lockdown: the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020’ (2020) 71 *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* OA1.

55 Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/129.

56 See especially (No 2) SI 2020/684; (No 3) SI 2020/750; (No 4) SI 2020/1200.

57 ‘[Speech: PM statement at coronavirus press conference](#)’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 14 June 2021); Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps etc) (England) (Revocation and Amendment) Regulations 2021, SI 2021/848; Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Self-isolation) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, SI 2021/851. Scotland and Wales planned a more stepped reduction through to August 2021: ‘[More normality if progress continues](#)’ (Scottish Government, 22 June 2021); ‘[Next steps towards a future with fewer covid rules](#)’ – First Minister’ (Welsh Government, 14 July 2021).

58 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Covid-19 and the Use and Scrutiny of Emergency Powers* (2021–22 HL 15) paras 55, 56, 63.

59 Further enforcement powers were added by the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Local Authority Enforcement Powers and Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/1375.

person may leave the place where they are living without reasonable excuse' (which might include the need to obtain basic necessities and to travel to work where it was not reasonably possible to work at home). Under regulation 7, public gatherings of more than a specified (and variable over time and jurisdiction) number of people were forbidden. A person who contravened these requirements committed an offence, punishable by a fine, and the police were given powers to disperse individuals or gatherings and to issue fixed-penalty notices (regulations 8 to 10). Large gatherings (of more than 30 people) in breach of the regulations became subject to a fixed-penalty notice of £10,000 just before the August Bank Holiday 2020.⁶⁰

These key regulations, which grew through hundreds of amendments, have been critiqued by several eminent practitioners.⁶¹ They highlight multiple problems: divergences between the CA 2020 and the regulations; obscurities in the meaning of the regulations; confusing government and other guidance, especially police guidance, as compared to the primary regulatory texts;⁶² excessive or inconsistent police enforcement; and arguments that some elements are *ultra vires*. Some technical corrections have been made through amending regulations,⁶³ but many problems remained.

The resort to PHA 1984, immediately following the more compendious scheme of the CA 2020 (which covers many of the same issues and more besides), seems extraordinary. Part of the explanation may be familiarity. The PHA 1984 had already been invoked against COVID-19 in early 2020 and (as explained above) had been considered in previous threatened pandemics, and so the need for decisive action could most comfortably be met by resort to this established pathway. Yet, the same eminent lawyers mentioned above who cast doubt on the *vires* of the regulations were also sceptical as to whether legal validity or clarity could more securely be delivered under the CA 2020. However, familiarity may also breed constitutional contempt; the regulations could be, and were, made without any forewarning or

60 Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions on Holding of Gatherings and Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/907, r 2.

61 See Lord Sandhurst and Anthony Speaight, *Pardonable in the Heat of Crisis – But We Need Urgently to Return to the Rule of Law* and Benet Brandreth and Lord Sandhurst, *Pardonable in the Heat of Crisis – Building a Solid Foundation for Action* (Society of Conservative Lawyers 2020); Tom Hickman, *Eight Ways to Reinforce and Revise the Lockdown* (UK Constitutional Law Association 2020).

62 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution (n 58 above) paras 153–177; John Sorabji and Steven Vaughan, '“This is not a rule”: COVID-19 in England and Wales and Criminal Justice Governance via Guidance' (2021) 12 European Journal of Risk Regulation 143.

63 See especially Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/447.

public consultation under the emergency procedure set out in section 45R of the PHA 1984 – and without any draft having been laid and approved by parliamentary resolution. As a backstop, the regulations expire after six months (subject to reissuance).

CCA 2004: right weapon, wrong time

The CCA 2004 represents a legal landmark. It consolidated and expanded legal duties and powers to ensure that public authorities prepare for, and respond to, a wide variety of risks as set out in the *National Risk Register* (in which pandemic influenza tops the list).⁶⁴ While the CCA 2004 was impelled by domestic and global crises, it was not enacted in haste but benefited from a prolonged consultation period led by a special parliamentary Joint Select Committee.⁶⁵ The CCA 2004 systematically furnishes executive bodies with duties to plan and cooperate (part 1)⁶⁶ and with measured powers to respond to an ‘emergency’ (part 2), subject to vital legal and parliamentary oversight to avert improper responses. The widest range of risks is addressed: terrorist attacks, protests, environmental events – and human and animal disease pandemics. Consequently, the CCA 2004 was expressly designed to tackle circumstances such as COVID-19. Indeed, the Speaker’s Counsel, Daniel Greenberg, is reported to have confirmed ‘unequivocally that the powers under the Civil Contingencies Act ... are absolutely appropriate for the current emergency’.⁶⁷ Yet, the UK Government resorted to alternative legislation. Why?

As shall be noted later, part 1 of the CCA 2004, dealing with ‘civil protection’ through planning and resilience reinforcement, has been in play to some extent, but part 2, ‘Emergency Powers’, has remained unused even though it could cover much of the work of the PHA 1984. Section 19(1)(a) defines an ‘emergency’ as including ‘an event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare in the United Kingdom or in a Part or region’. Calamities such as pandemic influenza were expressly considered during debates. That occurrence qualifies as threatening ‘human welfare only if it involves, causes, or may cause’ one or more of a series of outcomes under section 19(2). At least three of the items set out in that list arise from COVID-19: ‘loss of human life’; ‘human illness or injury’; and ‘disruption of services relating to health’. Several other threats to ‘human welfare’ are also

64 The latest edition was published in 2017: *National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies* (Cabinet Office 2017).

65 See Joint Committee on the Draft Civil Contingencies Bill, *Draft Civil Contingencies Bill* (2002–03 HL 184/HC 1074).

66 Part 1 already requires what the National Audit Office has called for in terms of coordination and the development of ‘playbooks’: *Initial Learning from the Government’s Response to COVID 19* (2021–22 HC 66).

67 HC Deb 23 March 2020, vol 674, cols 118–119, David Davis.

relevant. In short, COVID-19 is a qualifying ‘emergency’. This finding underscores the point that appropriate legislation was already in place to address the COVID-19 crisis without resort to an entirely new and hastily enacted emergency framework such as the CA 2020.

Under section 20, ‘emergency regulations’ can be issued when the further conditions of section 21 are ‘satisfied’ in the mind of the executive officers, subject to a declaration of necessity, appropriateness, proportionality, and compliance with human rights. Section 21 reiterates that the issuance of regulations requires an emergency to be taking place, or to be about to occur, and that it is necessary ‘to make provision for the purposes of preventing, controlling or mitigating an aspect or effect of the emergency’. Existing legislation must be unsuitable or considered potentially ineffective. Section 23 repeats the criteria of appropriateness and proportionality, adds the need for geographical limitation, and specifies other specific curtailments: no forced military service, no banning of industrial strikes, no new indictable offences or changes to criminal procedures, and no amendments to the CCA 2004 or to the Human Rights Act 1998. Overall, the UK Government back in 2004 emphasised the notion of a ‘triple lock’ – that restraints will be imposed on emergency regulations by reference to seriousness, necessity and geographical proportionality.⁶⁸ These ‘locks’ are not adequately explained and have to be drawn together from sections 19 (seriousness) and sections 21 and 23 (necessity and geographic proportionality).⁶⁹ Thus, proportionality is explained just in geographical terms. The test is baldly stated when an emergency is declared (section 20(5(b))) and when the regulations are issued (section 23(1)(b)), but not when the regulations are applied.⁷⁰ Likewise, the condition of necessity is left unelaborated, save in section 21(5) and (6) where emergency regulations are not needed if the ‘same’ as existing legislation which can deal with crisis, such as terrorism legislation, unless the choice of existing legislation would result in serious delay or ineffectiveness. The House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution depicted section 21(5) as a ‘significant barrier’ to the use of the CCA 2004.⁷¹ However, this view underestimates the value of the ‘triple lock’ as a barrier to excessive reactions and fails to note that no minister has claimed that section 21(5) blocked the use of the CCA 2004. Arguably, amongst more pressing general problems,⁷² is that there is no express requirement of

68 See [Draft Civil Contingencies Bill Consultation Document](#) (Cabinet Office 2003) para 19.

69 For discussion, see Walker and Broderick (n 1 above) 5.02.

70 Compare: Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, ss 17 and 19; Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, ss 5, 22, 23, 28, 29, 32, 49, 51, 55 and 73–75.

71 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution (n 58 above) para 214.

72 Joint Committee on the Draft Civil Contingencies Bill (n 65 above) para 38.

objectivity in any of the tests – the minister is allowed to use powers on the basis of satisfaction without the qualification of reasonableness, a standard which is notorious for encouraging unfounded intrusions into liberties as illustrated by wartime detention powers.⁷³

Subject to these criteria and limits, section 22 provides that emergency regulations can ‘make provision of any kind that could be made by Act of Parliament or by the exercise of the Royal Prerogative’. The list of potential uses – which itself is not exhaustive – is sweeping. As a result, the potential coverage of the CCA 2004 is far broader than competing legislation and less susceptible to challenge than the CA 2020 or the PHA 1984. It could even grant powers to the military such as to override normal traffic management schemes in order to facilitate operations such as disease testing stations or deliveries of vaccinations.⁷⁴ The only possible obstacle to its operation in the circumstances of the COVID-19 emergency is that CCA 2004 regulations are not permitted to ‘alter procedure in relation to criminal proceedings’ (section 23(4)(d)), whereas the CA 2020 (section 53 and schedule 23) allows live video links in court proceedings, including in criminal cases. But this obstacle to the use of the CCA 2004 was never mentioned in the parliamentary debates and surely could have been overcome by simple primary legislation. Aside from this drawback, neither the declaration of emergency under the CCA 2004 nor the potential list of regulations necessarily demands the further, and politically distasteful, issuance of a derogation notice under article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or article 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Derogation is not inevitable⁷⁵ but depends on the impacts on human rights of invoked regulations. Unlike some other countries,⁷⁶ the UK Government has asserted that its COVID-19 legislation to date is compatible with human rights.⁷⁷ Bearing in mind the qualified nature of most human rights in this context, an assessment will be considered later in this article. But the CCA 2004 includes superior oversight safeguards (to be described

73 See *Liversidge v Anderson* [1942] AC 206.

74 A COVID Support Force was placed in readiness in March 2020, and by 13 November 2020, there were 2342 military personnel assisting with 42 open Military Aid to Civilian Authority requests: ‘COVID Support Force: the MOD’s continued contribution to the coronavirus response’ (Ministry of Defence, 21 May 2021). See House of Commons Defence Committee, *Manpower or Mindset: Defence’s Contribution to the UK’s Pandemic Response* (2019–21 HC 357).

75 See Council of Europe, *Respecting Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights in the Framework of the COVID-19 Sanitary Crisis: A Toolkit for Member States* (SG/Inf(2020)11, Strasbourg, 2020).

76 See Council of Europe, ‘[Notifications under Article 15 of the Convention in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)’.

77 See Memorandum to the Joint Committee on Human Rights (n 22 above).

next) and is thus better positioned than other legislative platforms to ensure it is invoked only ‘to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation’ as required by international law. Some authors have advocated derogation as a way of marking out the legislation as special and temporary so that it does not become ‘normalised’.⁷⁸ However, the history of derogation in Northern Ireland shows that derogation itself can too easily become normalised and entrenched as a parallel system without evident expiry date; furthermore, even if successfully challenged, the emergency contents will be quickly distilled into the ‘normal’ legal system.⁷⁹ So, better safeguards can be maintained by legislation which avoids the use of permissive derogations, works within boundaries which do not trigger derogation, and so sets careful limits to permissible boundaries of law even in an emergency. The CCA 2004 and, to a lesser extent, the Terrorism Act 2000 are fine exemplars of such an approach.

The CCA 2004 excels compared to its COVID-19 legislative rivals because it better avoids the disdain which they show for constitutionalism. By comparison, precautions in the CCA 2004 against excessive usage or a lingering life are far more extensive and effective. They include (section 26) that each emergency regulation remains in force for a maximum of 30 days (though a new regulation can then be issued). In debates on the CA 2020, the government minister dismissed that timeframe as too short,⁸⁰ but it is relatively short precisely to ensure unremitting public accountability which is proportionate to the extent and duration of the emergency powers being invoked.

Regulations under the CCA 2004 must be laid before Parliament ‘as soon as is reasonably practicable’ (section 27); if each House has not expressly approved a regulation within seven days, it falls, and Parliament can also later by resolution annul or amend a regulation. If Parliament is prorogued or the Commons or Lords adjourned when a regulation is issued and would be unable to consider it, the Monarch or the relevant Speakers, respectively, must reconvene the sitting (section 28). A less powerful, but still notable, prerequisite is that the UK Government must ‘consult’ with the devolved executives in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, unless obviated by pressing

78 Alan Greene, ‘Derogating from the European Convention on Human Rights in response to the coronavirus pandemic: if not now, when?’ [2020] *European Human Rights Law Review* 262; Kanstantsin Dzehtsiarou, ‘Article 15 derogations: are they really necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic?’ [2020] *European Human Rights Law Review* 359; Alan Greene, ‘On the value of derogations from the European Convention on Human Rights in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: a rejoinder’ [2020] *European Human Rights Law Review* 526; Alan Greene, *Emergency Powers in Time of Pandemic* (Bristol University Press 2021).

79 See Clive Walker, *Terrorism and the Law* (Oxford University Press 2011) ch 1.

80 HC Debs 23 March 2020, vol 674, col 132, Penny Mordaunt.

circumstances (section 29). This consultation is important since social, economic and even legal circumstances can differ from England. Emergency regulations are to be treated as ‘subordinate legislation’ under the Human Rights Act 1998, even if ‘they amend primary legislation’ (section 30). Thus, a court can annul a regulation if found incompatible with the ECHR, thereby going beyond a mere declaration of incompatibility.⁸¹ The present UK Government’s election manifesto 2019⁸² expressed distaste for the Human Rights Act and, beyond that, the powers of judges by way of judicial review.⁸³ This suggests that another reason for avoiding the CCA 2004 was to preclude more vigorous oversight via these mechanisms.

As well as parliamentary oversight mechanisms, the CCA 2004, section 24,⁸⁴ requires the appointment of ‘emergency coordinators’ for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and ‘regional nominated coordinators’ for each region of England. The objective is to facilitate coordination of activities under the emergency regulations. The officials are subject to directions and guidance by ministers but in turn can override local authorities. Their absence increases the risk of a national emergency response that prioritises some regions (such as London and the south-east) over others, political opposition (or opportunism) by devolved or local politicians and a lack of audit over whether emergency responses are being evenly or adequately undertaken across the land. One might argue that the disagreements between Westminster and local mayors over the terms of lockdown (especially in Manchester in October 2020)⁸⁵ might have been less contentious and more constructive if the more consistent approach provided for by the CCA 2004 had applied.

Are there any arguments or features in the CCA 2004 which have ruled out its use aside from the fears of political (in)convenience? Several arguments have been voiced by the UK Government.

First, the Leader of the House (Jacob Rees-Mogg) expressed the view that a known risk could not become an ‘emergency’:

Unfortunately, the Civil Contingencies Act would not have worked in these circumstances, because the problem was known about early

81 See Human Rights Act 1998, ss 3 and 4.

82 Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019, 48.

83 See ‘[Independent review of administrative law](#)’ (pending) (Ministry of Justice, 31 July 2020).

84 Note also the CCA 2004, s 25, provided for expert consultation regarding the setting-up of tribunals, but this mechanism was abolished as part of a more general ‘bonfire of the quangos’ by the Public Bodies (Abolition of Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council) Order 2013, SI 2013/2042.

85 Mike Kane MP argued that ‘Not since the Peterloo massacre of 1819 has the state displayed such coercive power over the people of Greater Manchester.’ HC Deb 21 October 2020, vol 682, col 1093.

enough for it not to qualify as an emergency under the terms of that Act. The legal experts say that if we can introduce emergency legislation, we should do so rather than using the Civil Contingencies Act, because if we have time to introduce emergency legislation, we obviously knew about it long enough in advance for the Act not to apply. That is why that Act could not be used.⁸⁶

This assertion appears to be mistaken because it automatically rules out the CCA 2004's application to any pandemic or other emergency where the danger emerges and grows. There is no rule in the CCA 2004 against the foreseeability of a crisis. If the causes of emergency can only be wholly unpredictable, then why would the CCA 2004 encourage so much time and money to be spent on planning and resilience in part 1?

A second reason for the UK Government's marginalisation of the CCA 2004 is its 'triple lock' feature, as acknowledged by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 2 November 2020:

As for the legal basis, the Civil Contingencies Act has a strict test known as the triple lock that must be met before emergency regulations under the Act can be made. One of these tests is that there must not be existing powers elsewhere, and the Public Health Act 1984 offers clear powers to impose restrictions on public health grounds. That is why ... the Public Health Act is the more appropriate route.⁸⁷

In response, it might be again noted that the CCA 2004 does not have a binary set of tests under the triple lock, and section 21(5) and (6) in particular ask whether other powers would be 'sufficiently effective' within the test of necessity (as discussed previously). So, without wishing to deny the role of the triple lock as a mechanism which encourages restraint and preference for sectoral legislation,⁸⁸ it should not be seen as automatically demanding or justifying a shift to any alternative legislation (such as the PHA 1984). That legislation can cover some of the same ground but patently contains shortcomings which could have been avoided or minimised through use of the CCA 2004. The key advantages of the CCA 2004 remain: clear and comprehensive powers; uniformity of application; and enhanced restraints and accountability. No other legal source can match these attributes – certainly not the PHA 1984.

A third argument against the CCA 2004 was offered in response to the Joint Committee on Human Rights' report, *The Government's Response to Covid-19: Human Rights Responses* (discussed further later in this article).⁸⁹ Once again, the CCA 2004 is depicted as 'a last resort, where it is not possible to take conventional or accelerated primary legislation through Parliament, and thereby to allow

86 HC Deb 19 March 2020, vol 673, col 1188.

87 HC Deb 2 November 2020, vol 683, col 45.

88 Joint Committee on the Draft Civil Contingencies Bill (n 65 above) app 9, q 1.

89 (2019–21 HC 265/HL 125); *Government Response* (CP 335, 2020).

Parliamentary scrutiny before measures pass into law'. As argued above, the CCA 2004 should not be understood as a binary choice or as a complete 'panacea',⁹⁰ but that Act does allow more involvement by Parliament, especially at the start of the emergency when panic often lowers the parliamentary guard. Conversely, the implication that the PHA 1984 regulations are 'conventional' and allow superior scrutiny should be rejected.

The CCA 2004 is designed to cope with disruptions to constitutional order and everyday life beyond the capabilities of its rivals, thereby avoiding further primary legislation and legal challenges. Overall, the CCA 2004 represents a carefully debated and designed legislative code which has stood the test of time. A Civil Contingencies Act Enhancement Programme review was commenced in 2011,⁹¹ but the conclusion of the *Report of the Post Implementation Review of the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) (Contingency Planning) Regulations 2005* in 2017 was that no major change was required.⁹² Part 1 of the legislation has prompted considerable and much improved planning and resilience efforts, and the fact that part 2 had never been invoked was a reflection of the success of part 1 as well as of the effective safeguards written into part 2. Perhaps the only doubts about part 2 relate to the absence of express powers to detain without trial⁹³ or to force relocation.⁹⁴ In practice, these uncertainties (and one cannot be sure that section 22 forbids the grant of such powers) can be overcome by the grant of powers of direction backed by arrest and a summary offence.

Now that a truly severe and widespread emergency has undoubtedly arisen, the UK Government has shirked from the appropriate invocation of part 2. This failure may relate to a lack of capacity or prioritisation in the Cabinet Office, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat of which should provide the central hub of emergency management but has

90 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution (n 58 above) para 40.

91 See *Policy Paper: Civil Contingencies Act Enhancement Programme – Programme Initiation Document* (Cabinet Office 2011).

92 See *Report of the Post Implementation Review of the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) (Contingency Planning) Regulations 2005*. Note that the defunct Health Protection Agency was replaced as a First Responder by the Secretary of State for Health: Health and Social Care Act 2012, s 306(4), sch 7, para 16.

93 The Bill's sponsors refused to rule out detention without trial: Walker and Broderick (n 1 above) para 5.26.

94 The lack of a clear power was noted in connection with the Toddbrook Reservoir (Whaley Bridge) incident in 2019: David Balmforth, *Toddbrook Reservoir Independent Review Report* (DEFRA 2020). The Floods and Water Management Act 2010, s 33 and sch 4, provides for reservoir owners to prepare flood plans.

been missing in action in terms of clear coordination and messaging.⁹⁵ Perhaps there has been some hollowing out of its authority both downwards through devolution and sideways by the growth of the powerful Environment Agency which has 10,000 staff compared to just under 100 within the Cabinet Office's Civil Contingencies Secretariat.⁹⁶ These administrative and legislative failures in central government were arguably compounded by the political desire to avoid more stringent oversight and accountability by the resort to more malleable powers under the PHA 1984 and the CA 2020.

CONSEQUENCES OF CHOICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM

The choice between the CA 2020, the PHA 1984 and the CCA 2004 is not merely a decision about the formal, legislative basis of COVID-response measures. This part of the article analyses the legislative options according to substantive criteria in order to draw out their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Sectoral versus general emergency legislation

The contention that constitutional safeguards have been neglected might be mitigated if the PHA 1984 or CA 2020 could be depicted as specialist 'sectoral' legislation rather than 'emergency' legislation. This line of argument was made by the New Zealand Law Commission in its *First Report on Emergencies* of 1990 and *Final Report on Emergencies* in 1991.⁹⁷ The Commission recommended that emergency powers should, whenever possible, be conferred by 'sectoral legislation' – legislation deliberated upon and designed in advance of the emergency and tailored to the specific needs of each kind of emergency.

If a 'sectoral' approach can be properly adopted, then the full majesty of the CCA 2004 would not be required, and well-tailored public health legislation could instead apply. Indeed, more targeted legislation could meet more precisely the public health needs of society and avoid disproportionality and the tainting of other spheres. However, the

95 See [Guidance: Preparation and Planning for Emergencies](#) (Cabinet Office, 20 February 2013). Note also the disbandment of the Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingency Committee: '[Boris Johnson scrapped Cabinet Pandemic Committee six months before coronavirus hit UK](#)' (*Telegraph Online*, 13 June 2020). For institutional reforms, see Aidan Shilson-Thomas et al, *A State of Preparedness* (Reform UK, 2021).

96 Hansard (House of Commons) UIN 207215, 17 January 2019.

97 *Report No 12: First Report on Emergencies* (New Zealand Law Commission 1990) 11. See also *Report No 22: Final Report on Emergencies* (New Zealand Law Commission 1991).

PHA 1984 and the CA 2020 cannot truly be categorised as ‘sectoral legislation’, and certainly not well-tailored sectoral legislation, because they lack at least four essential features.

First, sectoral legislation should be limited to a ‘sector’. The advantage is that the relevant sector stakeholders and even the public can be engaged in the shaping and running of the legislation. There is no legal definition of a ‘sector’, but some idea of the meaning can be derived from the definition of ‘critical national infrastructure(s)’ which picks out 13 ‘sectors’.⁹⁸ The CA 2020 covers multiple sectors and embodies no mechanisms to engage with affected sectors.

The second beneficial feature of sectoral legislation is time to consider, debate and consult. Following on from the last point, sectoral legislation can be properly considered in advance in debates and subsequently in implementation. It follows the usual public and parliamentary timetable for debate (not a fast-track) and can utilise the usual structures for implementation (consultative and advisory bodies, draft proposals). For their part, the CA 2020 and the PHA 1984 regulations afforded almost no time to consider, debate and consult.

The third feature of sectoral legislation might be termed ‘WYSIWYG’: ‘What you see is what you get.’ The details of what is to be achieved in law are set out largely on the face of the sectoral legislation and do not await implementation by regulations which are even less amenable to scrutiny. In this aspect, the CA 2020 sets out ample details in its hundreds of pages but still embodies some very broad regulation-making powers, especially section 50 (power to suspend port operations), section 51 (powers relating to potentially infectious persons), section 52 (powers to issue directions relating to events, gatherings and premises), section 61 (power to postpone certain other elections and referendums) and section 62 (recalls), section 88 (power to suspend and revive provisions of this Act) and section 90 (power to alter expiry date). Much modern legislation contains broad regulation-making powers, but the collection here is not confined to one sector, and many expansive powers affect the general public rather than one sector.

The fourth feature which sectoral legislation should reflect is oversight. Post-legislative oversight in the context of a given sector is likely to be superior to omnibus legislation as it can be specialist and targeted. Yet, the PHA 1984 and CA 2020 both fail since they embody weak mechanisms, even compared to the comprehensive CCA 2004.

98 Chemicals, civil nuclear communications, defence, emergency services, energy, finance, food, government, health, space, transport, and water: ‘Critical National Infrastructure’ (Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure, 20 April 2021).

Levels of oversight and accountability

Sectoral legislation should take advantage of its narrower focus by enhancing scrutiny in making, usage and duration. However, the precautions in the CA 2020 and PHA 1984 are much weaker than those specified for the CCA 2004.⁹⁹ The results are reflected in poor quality legislation, confusion between guidance and law, lack of consultation and debate, and an absence of criteria for making assessments. The inability of ministers to answer ‘basic questions’ has been condemned as ‘lamentable and unacceptable’ by the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.¹⁰⁰

These defects were exacerbated by the failure of Parliament to adapt, especially in the early months, to the circumstances of crisis.¹⁰¹ Though the House of Commons Committee on Procedure has now considered various issues around adapting to the pandemic, especially remote participation by members,¹⁰² it took several months after March 2020 for numbers to return to the Commons Chamber and for the Select Committee to get to grips with the emergency. Certainly, the level of parliamentary attendance during passage of the CA 2020 and the main PHA 1984 regulations and in the early months of the pandemic was abysmal.¹⁰³ In May 2020, the House of Lords established the COVID-19 Committee to consider the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of the UK in a way which can cut across the departmental-based structure of the

99 See Ronan Cormacain, *Rule of Law Monitoring of Legislation – Coronavirus Bill* (Bingham Centre 2020); Sandhurst and Speaight (n 61 above); and Brandreth and Sandhurst (n 61 above).

100 See *Government Transparency and Accountability during COVID-19* (2019–21 HC 803) para 143.

101 See *Parliaments and the Pandemic* (Study of Parliament Group 2021).

102 See *Procedure under Coronavirus Restrictions: Proposals for Remote Participation* (2019–21 HC 300); *Procedure under Coronavirus Restrictions: Remote Voting in Divisions* (2019–21 HC 335); *Procedure under Coronavirus Restrictions: The Government’s Proposal to Discontinue Remote Participation* (2019–21 HC 392); *Government Responses* (2019–21 HC 565).

103 The House of Commons Commission (*Decision of 16 April 2020*) paved the way for remote attendance but did not change the rules as to quorum. The rules were implemented at HC Deb 21 April 2020, vol 675, col 2, and remained in place until 30 March 2021: [House of Commons Chamber proceedings during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). For the rules in wartime, see Jennifer Tanfield, *In Parliament 1939–50* (House of Commons Library 20, 1991). For foreign legislatures, see Elizabeth Bloomer (ed), *Continuity of Legislative Activities during Emergency Situations* (Library of Congress 2020).

House of Commons.¹⁰⁴ However, Parliament has still not seen fit to insist upon other augmented oversight, unlike, say, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation.¹⁰⁵

The performance of Parliament on scrutinising the detail of the COVID-19 secondary legislation also leaves much to be desired.¹⁰⁶ It has been estimated that, as at 16 November 2020, 294 pandemic-related regulations had been made: 205 were subject to the ‘negative’ procedure; 75 were subject to the ‘affirmative’ procedure (but 67 were made using the urgent power under the PHA 1984, so making them more akin to a negative type); 13 were subject to the ‘draft affirmative’ procedure; and one was simply ‘laid’; 41 came into effect before they were laid before Parliament.¹⁰⁷ Most regulations are made under the PHA 1984, part 2A, under the negative procedure; just 17 fall under the Coronavirus Act 2020. It almost goes without saying that consultation exercises with the general public and expert authorities about regulatory designs have been virtually non-existent. A challenge on these grounds to the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2020, which amended protection systems around timescales, contacts and visits in social care, prevailed on appeal in *R (Article 39) v Secretary of State for Education*.¹⁰⁸ The Secretary of State had acted unlawfully by failing to consult the Children’s Commissioner and other bodies representing the rights of children in care before introducing the regulations having regard to the vulnerability of children in care and the expertise of the Children’s Commissioner (which surpassed the local authorities which were consulted).

Parliament has been slow to address its abnegation of responsibility. Eventually, at the six-month renewal debate, the Speaker, Lindsey Hoyle, made clear his dissatisfaction:

The way in which the Government have exercised their powers to make secondary legislation during this crisis has been totally unsatisfactory. All too often, important statutory instruments have been published a matter of hours before they come into force, and some explanations why important measures have come into effect before they can be laid before this House have been unconvincing; this shows a total disregard for the House.

104 [House of Lords Select Committee on COVID-19](#): the Committee published its first report in April 2021, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World* (2019–21 HL 263). See also Scottish Parliament COVID-19 Committee, *Legacy Report* (SP 1010, 2021).

105 See Nina Malik, *Leaving Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on Civil Liberties and National Security in the UK and US* (Henry Jackson Society 2020) 13.

106 See also Keith Ewing, ‘Covid-19: government by Decree’ (2020) 31 *Kings Law Journal* 1.

107 See Hansard Society, [Coronavirus Statutory Instruments Dashboard](#).

108 [2020] EWCA Civ 1577.

The Government must make greater efforts to prepare measures more quickly, so that this House can debate and decide upon the most significant measures at the earliest possible point.¹⁰⁹

In response, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care promised in September 2020, with manifest loopholes, that

... for significant national measures with effect in the whole of England or UK-wide, we will consult Parliament; wherever possible, we will hold votes before such regulations come into force. But of course, responding to the virus means that the Government must act with speed when required, and we cannot hold up urgent regulations that are needed to control the virus and save lives. I am sure that no Member of this House would want to limit the Government's ability to take emergency action in the national interest, as we did in March.¹¹⁰

Next, some institutional formations have emerged during the pandemic, with the potential for imposing independent scrutiny, but their roles and designs have not been the subject of debate or legislation in Parliament. One prominent example comprises experts appointed to advise the UK Government who form the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) (plus various sub-groups) which feeds into the Cabinet Office emergency planning structures.¹¹¹ SAGE was activated to provide scientific advice on the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic in 2009 and has been revived on seven occasions before COVID-19. Criticisms have related to the selection of members and also other attendees, transparency (which has improved over time through the disclosure of members and minutes) and the nature of subsequent relationships between collective scientific advice and ministerial decisions.¹¹² Another important structure has been the Joint Biosecurity Centre which was announced in May 2020 to provide a threat assessment: 'A new UK-wide joint biosecurity centre will measure our progress with a five stage COVID alert system.'¹¹³ The idea derived from the

109 HC Deb 30 September 2020, vol 681, col 331.

110 Ibid cols 388–389, Matthew Hancock.

111 *Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies*. See *Enhanced SAGE Guidance: A Strategic Framework for the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)* (Cabinet Office 2012); Lawrence Freedman, 'Scientific advice at a time of emergency: SAGE and Covid-19' (2020) 91 *Political Quarterly* 514.

112 See House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Scientific Advice and Evidence in Emergencies* (2010–11 HC 498); Cabinet Office (n 111 above); Nyasha Weinberg and Claudia Pagliari, 'Covid-19 reveals the need to review the transparency and independence of scientific advice' (*UK Constitutional Law Blog*, 15 June 2020).

113 HC Deb 11 May 2020, vol 676, col 24, Boris Johnson. For geographical alert levels applied through regulations, see Health Protection (Coronavirus, Local COVID-19 Alert Level) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2021/1103 (Medium), 1104 (High), 1105 (Very High).

Joint Terrorism Assessment Centre which sets alert levels in regard to terrorism and draws strength from being multidisciplinary and independent. Whether the new centre can attain similar advantages and can produce unassailable advice free from political influences cannot yet be gauged.¹¹⁴

By contrast, some institutions under part 1 of the CCA 2004 have been put into operation and function under clear rules. Thus, Local Resilience Forums have remained in force to handle implementation and coordination, and there are Strategic Coordinating Groups and Tactical Coordination Groups at this level.¹¹⁵ However, without prime reliance on the CCA 2004, there arise overlapping responsibilities and powers, with other structures (such as local mayors and enterprising Members of Parliament) becoming much more prominent. Furthermore, some of the expected planning and state of readiness within the Cabinet Office, on which the CCA 2004 vitally depends, has been far from evident or satisfactory.¹¹⁶ Devolved administrations have also complained about the lack of coordination including through Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) meetings.¹¹⁷

The periodic reviews of the legislation have also been perfunctory. The two-monthly reports have been largely confined to plotting the issuance and usage of powers without evaluation.¹¹⁸ Renewal of the CA 2020 in September 2020 involved the publication of a slightly fuller ‘analysis’ document (which was in reality factual rather than evaluative)¹¹⁹ and a 90-minute debate.¹²⁰ Another substantial, mainly factual review was issued in February 2021.¹²¹ The Scottish reviews likewise involve the laying of a report every two months and full renewal after six months under sections 12 and 15 of the Scottish

114 Any system must also overcome the considerable amount of disinformation published about COVID: House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic* (2019–21 HC 234).

115 See *Emergency Response Structures during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Local Government Association 2020).

116 See House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, *Whole of Government Response to COVID-19* (2019–21 HC 404).

117 See House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, *Coronavirus and Scotland: Interim Report on Intergovernmental Working* (2019–21 HC 314).

118 See *Two Monthly Report on the Status on the Non-devolved Provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020* (CP 243, May 2020; CP 282, July 2020; CP 298, September 2020; CP 334 December 2020).

119 *The Coronavirus Act Analysis* (CP 295 2020).

120 HC Deb 30 September 2020, vol 681, col 388.

121 HM Government, *Covid-19 Response* (CP 398, 2021).

Act, but the relevant reports have conveyed markedly more detail and evaluation.¹²²

A comprehensive independent review was announced by the Prime Minister in May 2021.¹²³ It will take place under the Inquiries Act 2005, but its work will not even commence until spring 2022, by which time one might predict that over 130,000 deaths will have occurred and around £450 billion in public funds will have been expended.

Effectiveness

As suggested by the Hansard Society,¹²⁴ problems ensuing from an inadequate legislative superstructure include: rapid amendment, repeat amendment and revocation arising from poor quality of drafting and misconceptions, technical errors and omissions. Unclear powers also increase the risk of arbitrary or inconsistent application and are more susceptible to legal challenge.

One illustration is the powers relating to lockdowns with restraints on physical movement outside one's place of abode. Controversially, the restraints have been applied to the whole population under the PHA 1984 regulations rather than just applying to those who are infected or suspected to be infected or even more at risk ('Clinically Extremely Vulnerable').¹²⁵ The extent of these legal powers, and their variance from accompanying guidance,¹²⁶ has caused confusion, the vacating of convictions, and the need to revise and reissue regulations.¹²⁷ Thus, according to the Crown Prosecution Service in May 2020: 'All 44 cases under the Act were found to have been incorrectly charged because there was no evidence they covered potentially infectious people, which

122 Scottish Government, *The Coronavirus Acts: Two-Monthly Report to Scottish Parliament* (SG/2020/92; SG/2020/130; SG/2020/186; SG/2020/248; SG/2021/13; SG/2021/52; SG/2021/114). For evaluation, see Pablo G Hidalgo, Fiona de Londras and Daniella Lock, 'Parliamentary scrutiny of extending emergency measures in the two Scottish Coronavirus Acts' (*UK Constitutional Law Blog*, 21 June 2021).

123 HC Deb 12 May 2021, vol, 695, col 137.

124 See Hansard Society (n 107 above). See also Ronan Cormacain and Ittai Bar-Siman-Tov, 'Legislatures in the time of Covid-19' (2020) 8(1–2) *Theory and Practice of Legislation* 3–9.

125 Compare 'Can we be forced to stay at home?' (David Anderson QC, 2020); Jeff King, 'The lockdown is lawful' (*UK Constitutional Law Association*, 1 April 2020); National Audit Office, *Protecting and Supporting the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable during Lockdown* (2019–21 HC 1131).

126 See House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): Policing* (2019–21 HC 232) para 7.

127 See the case of Marie Dinou: Jennifer Brown, *Coronavirus: The Lockdown Laws* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 8875, 2020) 8: 28 editions have been issued between March and June 2021, reflecting frequent changes in regulations.

is what this law is intended for.’¹²⁸ Resulting problems for the police have been mitigated by the sensible compliance of the public and the calming down of police approaches.¹²⁹ The latter, as represented by the College of Policing, have sensibly engaged in a policy of the relegation of coercion to the last step in line with the mantra, ‘Engage, Explain, Encourage, Enforce’.¹³⁰ Thus, just 24,933 notices were issued between 27 March and 16 November 2020 compared to ‘hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 related incidents’,¹³¹ though the £10,000 fixed penalty notice for large gathering has proven controversial because of frequent successful challenges.¹³²

Unity and consistency of purpose in dealing with a universal pandemic is better tackled by national legislation which avoids or at least minimises jurisdictional confusion and special local pleading. For instance, the rules as to multiple tiers of restraint and the catalogue of measures within them have varied between different jurisdictions of the UK for reasons which have nothing to do with Scottish, Welsh or Irish mutations in the virus, other factual differences, or even distinct legal systems but are attributable to variant policy choices.¹³³ These localised versions tended to get worse rather than better after around May 2020.¹³⁴ For example, Scottish legislation was passed in autumn 2020 to add restrictions on leaving or entering Scotland, and these were then imposed to restrict travel to areas of north-west England, even though they were largely unenforceable and even though parts of

128 ‘CPS announces review findings for first 200 cases under coronavirus laws’ (Crown Prosecution Service, 15 May 2020). The failure rate has continued to be very high: ‘February’s coronavirus review findings’ (Crown Prosecution Service, 22 March 2021).

129 The Chief Constable of Northamptonshire had threatened to set up roadblocks and search shopping trolleys for ‘non-essentials’: John Simpson et al, ‘Coronavirus: police chief forced to back down after threat to search shopping’ *The Times* (London, 10 April 2020).

130 COVID-19 Policing Brief in Response to Health Protection Regulations (College of Policing 2020). The document has been replaced by ‘Understanding the law’.

131 *Policing the Pandemic* (National Police Chiefs’ Council 2020) and ‘Fixed penalty notices issued under COVID-19 emergency health regulations by police forces in England and Wales’ (National Police Chiefs’ Council, 30 November 2020).

132 See Jennifer Brown, *Coronavirus: Enforcing Restrictions* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 9024, 2020) 13.

133 Compare: Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/1374; Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, SSI 2020/344. Wales and Northern Ireland currently operate unitary restrictions: Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions and Functions of Local Authorities) (Amendment) (Wales) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/1409; Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and Amendment Nos 15 and 17, NISR 2020/150, 256 and 287.

134 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution (n 58 above) paras 98, 117.

Scotland had worse infection rates.¹³⁵ In addition, localised inputs and controls can tempt local politicians into decisions or behaviour which appears to show partiality, such as the attendance by Northern Ireland ministers at the funeral of Bobby Storey on 30 June 2020 in potential breach of regulations about large gatherings,¹³⁶ though allegations of favouritism have also arisen at a national level in connection with the award of contracts for the supply of goods and services¹³⁷ or the non-prosecution of government adviser Dominic Cummings.¹³⁸ The assertion of the primacy of devolved administrations in public health affairs only makes sense if one views the COVID-19 pandemic as a localised emergency and as a public health emergency. In reality, neither boundary is accurate or makes sense. The pandemic is international and, while arising from health causes, has impacts well beyond that sector, with major impacts on individual liberties and social and economic life.

Arising out of the jurisdictional confusion created by a sectoral public health approach, which then draws in devolved administrations, many of the first 200 convictions under the PHA 1984 had to be set aside: 'Errors usually involved Welsh regulations being applied in England or vice versa.'¹³⁹ Even the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee has expressed concern about jurisdictional divergence when dealing with exactly the same problems and wonders how Scottish interests might fit alongside institutions such as Cabinet Office structures like the COBR and the Joint Biosecurity Centre.¹⁴⁰

The problems of approaching a global pandemic through devolved administrations can be further illustrated through the performance of federal constitutions. An instructive case-study might be the United

135 See Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, SSI 2020/344, sch 7A, as amended by SSI 2020/389, SSI 2021/193, 211, 242 and 262; Alex Massie and Claire Elliot, 'Scots' maladies laid bare in Dundee, the Covid capital of Europe' *Sunday Times* (London, 11 July 2021) 19.

136 *An Inspection into the Police Service of Northern Ireland's handling of the Bobby Storey funeral on 30 June 2020* (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, 17 May 2021); 'PPS upholds decisions not to prosecute any individual in connection with Storey funeral' (Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland, 10 June 2021).

137 See *R (Good Law Project) v Secretary of State for Health and Social Care* [2021] EWHC 346 (Admin); *Good Law Project v Minister for the Cabinet Office* [2021] EWHC 1569 (TCC).

138 *Redston v DPP* [2020] EWHC 2962 (Admin).

139 Crown Prosecution Service (n 128 above).

140 Scottish Affairs Committee (n 117 above). See Gareth Evans, 'Devolution and COVID-19' [2021] Public Law 19.

States (US),¹⁴¹ where the policy under President Trump during 2020 was to treat the COVID-19 crisis as a matter mainly for state responsibility, whereas President Biden in 2021 has adopted much stronger centralised federal direction through his National Strategy of January 2021 and a raft of Executive Orders.¹⁴² As in many aspects of this transition, controversy abounds as to which President has been more successful, and the invention of vaccines has been a transformative intervening event. In addition, many US states are powerful polities and able to fend for themselves. However, a national approach seems to have brought advantages, including scaling counter-measures to fit the emergency, which is national and requires comprehensive mobilisation, reducing the possibility of conflicting and competing disparate approaches, better ensuring equality of treatment, and gaining efficiency of operations through scale.

Protecting individual rights

Emergencies have the tendency to interfere with protected rights, but at least the CCA 2004 foresaw that danger and put in place explicit and effective limits. By contrast, the CA 2020 pays little special heed to the protection of rights. Its impacts, such as on the rights to run businesses and to travel abroad,¹⁴³ have stirred much opposition. As already described, based mainly on powers in the PHA 1984, part 2A, a variety of intrusions into individual rights have been imposed. Those relating to the justice system have already been considered. Some rights in other contexts will be examined here.

First and foremost, the initial lockdown measures made it an offence to leave one's residence without 'reasonable excuse'.¹⁴⁴ According to the ECHR, article 5(1)(e), no one can be deprived of liberty, though preventing the spread of infectious disease is a specified exception.¹⁴⁵

141 See John F Witt, *American Contagions* (Yale University Press 2020); Elizabeth Goiten, 'Emergency powers, real and imagined: how President Trump used and failed to use presidential authority in the COVID-19 crisis' (2020) 11 *Journal of National Security Law and Policy* 27; Emily Berman, 'The roles of the state and federal governments in a pandemic' (2020) 11 *Journal of National Security Law and Policy* 61; James G Hodge Jr, 'Nationalizing public health emergency legal responses' (2021) 49 *Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics* 315.

142 President of the United States, *National Strategy for the COVID 19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness* (2021) followed by Executive Order 13987 and many others.

143 The restrictions on travel abroad emerged in June 2020 when track and trace systems were considered more effective to monitor the restrictions. See Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/568, and 2021, SI 2021/582; House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, *37th Report* (2019–21 HL 189).

144 Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/350, r 2(4)(a), 6.

145 See *Enhorn v Sweden* App no 56529/00, [2005] 19 BHRC 222 [43].

Much initial academic debate concerned whether lockdown measures actually amounted to a potential restriction on liberty or a lesser restriction on freedom of movement (which is not ratified by the UK).¹⁴⁶ Though the courts confirmed the latter stance,¹⁴⁷ it is clear that liberty in a general or colloquial sense is at stake. The article 8 privacy right has also been affected in numerous ways, such as by prohibiting individuals from different households from physically meeting,¹⁴⁸ and infringed ‘family life’ and wider relationships, both of which are protected by article 8.¹⁴⁹ The lockdown also entailed closing buildings for religious worship,¹⁵⁰ impacting upon the right to freedom of religion covered by article 9. The article 11 right to peaceful assembly and association was also restricted by initial lockdown measures that prohibited gatherings of more than two people¹⁵¹ and provided police with enforcement powers to break up prohibited gatherings and issue fines.¹⁵² Yet, such restrictions did not prevent the emergence of all protests across the political spectrum from those directly opposing lockdown measures to those advocating ‘Black Lives Matter’.¹⁵³ Indeed, article 5, 8, 9 and 11 violations have been argued (albeit unsuccessfully) in the English legal challenges to date, along with the protocol 1 rights to property and education, which have been impacted by business restrictions¹⁵⁴ and school closures¹⁵⁵ respectively.

Second, the need to protect human life has been frequently relied upon by the UK Government when justifying its lockdown measures. Yet, the state has a positive obligation to uphold article 2.¹⁵⁶ In the health context,

146 See Dominic Keene, ‘[Leviathan challenged – the lockdown is compliant with human rights law \(part two\)](#)’ (*UK Human Rights Blog*, 11 May 2020).

147 *R (Dolan) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care* [2020] EWCA Civ 1605 [92]–[94]. See also *Terkeş v Romania* App no 49933/20, 20 May 2021.

148 Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/350, r 7.

149 *Mostaquin v Belgium* App no 12313/86, (1991) 13 EHRR 802 [36], [45]–[46]; *Marckx v Belgium* App no 6833/74, (1979) 2 EHRR 330 [45]; *Bensaid v UK* App no 44599/98, (2001) 33 EHRR 205 [47]; *Niemietz v Germany* App no 13710/88, (1992) 16 EHRR 97 [29].

150 Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/350, rr 5(5), 6(1), 7.

151 *Ibid* r 7.

152 *Ibid* rr 7, 8, 10.

153 ‘[Coronavirus: inside the UK’s biggest anti-lockdown protest](#)’ (*Independent Online*, 16 May 2020); ‘[Black Lives Matter protests held across England](#)’ (*BBC Online*, 20 June 2020).

154 Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/350, rr 4, 5, 9.

155 See House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, *COVID-19: Support for Children’s Education* (2021–22 HC 240).

156 *Osman v United Kingdom* App no 23452/94, (1998) 29 EHRR 245 [115]–[116].

the systemic failure to secure the proper organisation and functioning of the public hospital service, or its health protection system, amounted to a violation of article 2 when patients had died in cases involving Turkey¹⁵⁷ and Portugal,¹⁵⁸ and this doctrine has been recognised, albeit narrowly, by the English courts.¹⁵⁹ With COVID-19, attention turned to, for example, the shortages in personal protective equipment (PPE) for key NHS and care home workers¹⁶⁰ and the absence of safeguarding procedures governing the transfer of patients from hospitals to care homes.¹⁶¹ Academic commentators have suggested that such controversial failures might invite article 2-based challenges.¹⁶² Finally, the article 14 right to protection from discrimination could arise from the same areas of inadequate health practices and systems because of the widely reported differential impact of COVID-19 responses upon certain groups, particularly women, black and minority ethnic and disabled people.¹⁶³ In January 2021, the parliamentary Women and Equalities Select Committee concluded that governmental economic support schemes had ‘overlooked labour market and caring inequalities faced by women’ and that the Government’s priorities for recovery are ‘heavily gendered in nature’.¹⁶⁴

As this brief account demonstrates, such is the range of fundamental rights affected by the UK’s lockdown that it is perhaps simpler to catalogue *unaffected* rights. This breadth of engaged rights is merely a legal reflection of the obvious fact that COVID-19 responses have radically changed our lives and world, for the time-being at least. With such extraordinary and pervasive impacts, the imperative to ensure

157 *Asiye Genç v Turkey* App no 24109/07, 27 January 2015; *Aydoğdu v Turkey* App no 40448/06, 30 August 2016. See also *Mehmet Şentürk and Bekir Şentürk v Turkey* App no 13423/09, 9 April 2013; *Center of Legal Resources on behalf of Valentin Câmpeanu v Romania* App no 47848/08, 17 July 2014.

158 *Fernandes v Portugal*, App no 56080/13, 19 December 2017.

159 *R (Parkinson) v HM Coroner for Kent* [2018] EWHC 1501 (Admin); *R (Maguire) v HM Senior Coroner for Blackpool* [2020] EWCA Civ 738.

160 House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, *NHS Capital Expenditure and Financial Management* (2019–21 HC 344).

161 The National Audit Office confirmed that 25,000 patients were discharged into care homes without testing: *Readying the NHS and Adult Social Care in England for COVID-19* (2019–2021 HC 367) paras 3.19–3.20. See *As If Expendable* (Amnesty International 2020).

162 Ed Bates, ‘Article 2 ECHR’s positive obligations – how can human rights law inform the protection of health care personnel and vulnerable patients in the Covid-19 pandemic?’ (*OpinioJuris*, 1 April 2020); Conall Mallory, ‘The right to life and personal protective equipment’ (*UK Constitutional Law Association*, 21 April 2020); Shaheen Rahman, ‘Article 2 and the provision of healthcare’ (*UK Human Rights Blog*, 19 November 2020).

163 ‘COVID-19: understanding the impact on BAME communities’ (Public Health England, 16 June 2020).

164 *Unequal Impact? Coronavirus and the Gendered Economic Impact* (2019–21 HC 385).

high-quality policy and decision-making, even in such challenging circumstances, is vital. Therefore, close attention should be paid to the overall performance of Parliament and the courts.

As for Parliament, a critical assessment has already been offered in this article, and, for most of the time since March 2020, the performance of Parliament has been sorely wanting. There is, however, an important postscript in the field of human rights since the Joint Committee on Human Rights released in November 2020 an important report, *The Government's Response to Covid-19: Human Rights Responses*.¹⁶⁵ Many of the issues covered in this article were rehearsed.¹⁶⁶ Overall, the Committee bemoaned the decision not to invest greater reliance on the CCA 2004 which has better safeguards for rights.¹⁶⁷

As for the courts, most challenges have failed. Even when an objection is sustained, such as the arguments in the *Good Law Project* cases against the processes adopted for the award of PPE and communications research contracts, no mandatory order was granted and criticism was expressed about the joining of claimants for political purposes.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, a narrow interpretative approach avoided a breach of the absolute right to liberty under article 5 in *R (Francis) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care*.¹⁶⁹ On the one hand, the High Court found that the legal powers under the PHA 1984, section 45G, could impose self-isolation for a specified period after a positive test (including of close contacts). On the other hand, it was an equally crucial finding that this imposition of confinement did not amount to detention (which would require an order from a justice of the peace under section 45D followed by clinical management), but was restraint on movement not amounting to quarantine. In this way, an Englishman's home is not necessarily his prison hospital, but only because the court defined the boundaries of detention as not including a home curfew if unaccompanied by other restraints.¹⁷⁰

Most other rights affected by COVID-19 legislation are qualified not absolute, and so account must be taken of the variable intensity of the standard of proportionality¹⁷¹ and the margin of appreciation which

165 2019–21 HC 265/HL 125; see also Government Response (CP 335, 2020).

166 2019–21 HC 265/HL 125 paras 203–216.

167 Ibid para 222.

168 *R (Good Law Project) v Secretary of State for Health and Social Care* [2021] EWHC 346 (Admin); *Good Law Project v Minister for the Cabinet Office* [2021] EWHC 1569 (TCC).

169 [2020] EWHC 3287 (Admin). See Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Self Isolation) (England) Regulations 2020, SI 2020/1045.

170 Ibid [64]. Compare: *Secretary of State for the Home Department v JJ* [2007] UKSC 45.

171 See *R (Daly) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2001] UKHL 26; *Bank Mellat v HM Treasury (No 2)* [2013] UKSC 39.

the ECHR affords to national authorities.¹⁷² Domestically, two factors determine the intensity of proportionality review. First, democratic legitimacy is commonly cited by reviewing judges as a reason to afford greater latitude to executives, especially where measures entail complex or sensitive political judgments.¹⁷³ The polycentricity of the problem can be a further warning signal against judicial intervention,¹⁷⁴ perhaps more so nowadays than the political interest in the topic.¹⁷⁵ A second crucial factor determining the intensity of judicial scrutiny is expertise,¹⁷⁶ whereby judicial deference is justified because the decision-maker enjoys specific expertise and responsibility.¹⁷⁷ Such ‘epistemic deference’ is adopted by the courts where an issue is beset with empirical uncertainty, and it covers both the underlying scientific or similar evidence used by government and, crucially, how government chooses to use such data to inform policy.¹⁷⁸

The implications of COVID-19 restrictions have been considered in the context of qualified rights in two key English cases:¹⁷⁹ *R (Dolan) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care*¹⁸⁰ and *R (Hussein) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care*.¹⁸¹ The deferential approach in both of these English cases can be contrasted with that of the later Scottish decision in *Reverend William Philip & Others*.¹⁸²

172 *Handyside v United Kingdom* App no 5493/72 (1979) 1 EHRR 737, [48]–[49].

173 *Secretary of State for the Home Department v Rehman* [2001] UKHL 47; *R (Gentle) v Prime Minister* [2008] UKHL 20. See Rebecca Moosavian, ‘Judges and high prerogative: the enduring influence of expertise and legal purity’ [2012] Public Law 724.

174 *R (Mott) v Environment Agency* [2016] EWCA Civ 564.

175 *Miller v Prime Minister* [2019] UKSC 41 [39].

176 *R (Huang) v Home Secretary* [2007] UKHL 11 [16].

177 Alan Brady, *Proportionality and Deference under the Human Rights Act* (Cambridge University Press 2012) 113, 117, 67–69.

178 *Ibid.*

179 For leading jurisprudence elsewhere, see: (Australia) *Palmer v Western Australia* [2021] HCA 5; (France) *Association Civitas, Conseil d’Etat* 446930, 29 November 2020, *Syndicat Jeunes Médecins, Conseil d’Etat* 439674, 22 March 2020; (Germany) *T* (1 BvR 828/20) (15 April 2020); *M* (1 BvQ 37/20) (17 April 2020), *F* (1BBQ 44/20) (29 April 2020); (Ireland) *O’Doherty & Waters v Minister for Health, Ireland* [2020] IECA 59; (Israel) *Ben Meir v Prime Minister* (2020) HCJ 2109/20, *Loewenthal v Prime Minister* (2020) HCJ 2435/20; (Netherlands) *Stichting Viruswaarheid.nl* ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2021:285; (New Zealand) *Borrowdale v Director-General of Health* [2020] NZHC 2090; (South Africa) *De Beer v Minister of Co-operative Government & Traditional Affairs* (2020) High Court of South Africa 21542/2020; (USA) *South Bay Pentecostal Church v Newsom* 592 US ____ (2021), *Tandon v Newson* 593 US ____ (2021).

180 [2020] EWHC 1786 and [2020] EWCA Civ 1605.

181 [2020] EWHC 1392.

182 *Reverend Dr William Philip for Judicial Review of the Closure of Places of Worship in Scotland* [2021] CSOH 32.

Democratic legitimacy was referred to in *Dolan*, an application for judicial review of the lockdown measures on grounds including their alleged violation of a wide range of human rights. At first instance, Lewis J claimed that the appropriateness of the lockdown measures was a political issue more suitable for public debate than judges:

The role of the court in judicial review is concerned with resolving questions of law. The court is not responsible for making political, social, or economic choices. The court is not responsible for determining how best to respond to the risks to public health posed by the emergence of a novel coronavirus. Those decisions, and those choices, are ones that Parliament has entrusted to ministers and other public bodies.¹⁸³

Lewis J also alluded to polycentricity by mentioning the mix of political, social and economic factors that inform public health policy choices. The exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 were viewed as a factor complicating the public health aims of the lockdown regulations, arguably making them more unsuitable for judicial determination:

Against that background, it is simply unarguable that the decision [to impose restrictions via the Regulations] ... was in any way disproportionate to the aim of combatting the threat to public health posed.¹⁸⁴

Yet, this categorical claim should be treated with circumspection, not least because it problematically suggests that proportionality review is potentially rendered weakest when the human rights stakes are highest, as in the coronavirus situation. Such deference to government amounts to *de facto* immunity for all but the most extreme policies, resulting in identical outcomes to the blanket immunity for high policy areas associated with prerogative powers that courts have long abandoned.¹⁸⁵

The *Dolan* challenge expressly questioned the scientific evidence used by the UK Government to justify lockdown measures, especially the data from Professor Neil Ferguson, including lack of peer review, modelling assumptions and the author's incorrect predictions in previous pandemics.¹⁸⁶ Yet, Lewis J did not refer to these arguments in his judgment and paid limited attention to the Government's evidential base for lockdown measures because:

183 *R (Dolan) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care* [2020] EWHC 1786 [7], [5].

184 *Ibid* [61].

185 Moosavian (n 173 above) 745–746.

186 'Statement of Facts and Grounds and Written Submissions of the Claimant' [89], [123]. A flavour of these allegations was considered in the later appeal: *R (Dolan) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care* [2020] EWCA Civ 1605 [82].

The courts recognise the legitimacy of according a degree of discretion to a minister ‘under the urgent pressure of events, to take decisions which call for the evaluation of scientific evidence and advice as to the public health risks’.¹⁸⁷

This attitude prevailed in the circumstances of gaps or shortcomings in the current science:

... the context ... was one of a pandemic where a highly infectious disease capable of causing death was spreading. ... The scientific understanding of this novel coronavirus was limited.¹⁸⁸

The Court of Appeal in *Dolan* was markedly even less indulgent towards the expansive agenda of the claimants and indeed criticised the practice of ‘rolling’ and ‘evolving’ judicial review by which new issues or arguments were added as the case went along.¹⁸⁹ The court engaged in detail only with the first ground of appeal (*ultra vires*) and viewed the remaining two (breach of public law principles and breach of human rights) as being out of time.¹⁹⁰ The Court of Appeal found that the PHA 1984 powers allowed for responses to pandemics to impose restrictions on the whole population.¹⁹¹ Many of the deferential signals voiced in the High Court were echoed here, encapsulated as follows: ‘This was quintessentially a matter of political judgement for the Government, which is accountable to Parliament, and is not suited to determination by the courts.’¹⁹²

The severe risk and time pressures of the COVID-19 situation were also noted in the earlier case of *Hussein*. Here, the claimant sought an interim order prohibiting enforcement of the regulations on the basis they represented a disproportionate interference with the article 9 right to religion by preventing Friday prayer at mosques during Ramadan. Swift J claimed the virus represented ‘a genuine and present danger’ and noted the ‘truly exceptional circumstances, the like of which has not been experienced in the UK for more than half a century’.¹⁹³

Proportionality was raised in *Hussein*, wherein the claimant argued that the Health Secretary could have taken less intrusive lockdown

187 *R (Dolan) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care* [2020] EWHC 1786 [59].

188 *Ibid* [95].

189 *R (Dolan) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care* [2020] EWCA Civ 1605 [118].

190 *Ibid* [42].

191 *Ibid* [65], [68], [71], [78].

192 *Ibid* [90]. *Dolan* was also cited in the more specific circumstances of a plan to hold a vigil for murder victim Sarah Everard: *Leigh v Commissioner of the Metropolis* [2021] EWHC 661 (Admin).

193 *R (Hussein) v Secretary of State for Health & Social Care* [2020] EWHC 1392 [19].

measures so as to enable mosque attendance with appropriate social-distancing measures still in place.¹⁹⁴ Dismissing this argument in brief terms, Swift J claimed that the minister must be allowed a 'suitable margin of appreciation to decide the order in which steps are to be taken to reduce the reach and impact of the restrictions in the 2020 Regulations'. This leeway regarding the means by which public health could be maintained was necessary due to the complex (polycentric) political, social and economic assessments involved. It was thus deemed a matter for political debate rather than judicial 'second-guessing'.¹⁹⁵

Swift J also noted that 'consideration of scientific advice' was part of the complex mix of political and other elements that informed what steps the minister would take.¹⁹⁶ He found that the regulations were rationally connected to the legitimate aim of protecting public health by reducing opportunities for people to gather and mix; they '[rest] on scientific advice ... that the COVID-19 virus is highly contagious and particularly easily spread in gatherings of people indoors'.¹⁹⁷ However, Swift J did not undertake sustained scrutiny of the Health Secretary's justifications. He noted that the minister's submissions regarding this application were 'generic', but nevertheless deemed them 'likely to be sufficient' and confirmed they amounted to a 'valid response'.¹⁹⁸

By way of comment, though a degree of deference to central government is defensible in the context of a health crisis,¹⁹⁹ there are two problems with the approach adopted in these cases. First, it creates an uneven playing field, making it almost impossible for claimants to challenge government in certain areas (such as public health emergencies) even where they can point to credible evidence to support their arguments. *De facto* non-justiciability is no more desirable than the *de jure* non-justiciability which has been curtailed in recent times. Second, refusal to undertake a full, intensive human rights proportionality review represented a missed opportunity to require the Government to provide more detailed reasons and evidence to justify its regulations and its scientific claims.

The approach of Lord Braid in the Scottish case of *Reverend William Philip and Others* – a similar article 9-based challenge to that in *Hussein* – represents an illuminating alternative approach.

194 Ibid [20]

195 Ibid [21]

196 Ibid [21]

197 Ibid [19]

198 Ibid [26].

199 There may be less deference to local government, shown in *Hertfordshire County Council v Secretary of State for Housing* [2021] EWHC 1093 (Admin), whereby online council meetings were not permitted after the expiration of regulations. Company meetings may be remote under the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020, s 37 and sch 14.

Philip demonstrates that courts do have the capacity to take a more robust level of review, even during a pandemic when considerations of expertise and democratic legitimacy are pertinent. Rather than relying on such factors to restrain inquiries, Lord Braid undertook a detailed and carefully reasoned application of the four-stage proportionality test. He closely examined the surface logic of the Scottish Government's justifications and statistics (without questioning the scientific evidence *per se*). Issues such as the severity of the public health threat and the political nature of the Government's decision were incorporated into the proportionality test as weighted factors rather than brick walls. Braid also afforded countervailing weight to the petitioners' arguments, including the particular importance of the article 9 right, the inadequacy of alternative online worship and the availability of low-risk alternatives to a blanket closure of Scottish places of worship.²⁰⁰ As a result, the court concluded that this closure in the January 2021 lockdown was a disproportionate and unlawful violation of the petitioners' article 9 rights.²⁰¹

Especially in the light of this outlier decision, the leeway afforded by proportionality enables a range of rights-compliant COVID-19 restrictive measures to be devised and applied. Future and ongoing constraints may also be anticipated, especially around the compulsory application of vaccines²⁰² or proof of COVID immunity as a condition of services or employment.²⁰³ Though the response to the pandemic will inevitably severely limit human rights, it should by no means make them redundant. The English COVID-19 cases demonstrate that the judges are clearly not keen to usurp the functions of Parliament and so place the onus of scrutiny on others. The woeful performance of Parliament to date is therefore a particular disappointment. If reliance is to be placed on the political limbs of the state for fair and effective policy, Parliament must become more active in interrogating policy and upholding individual rights.

200 *Reverend Dr William Philip for Judicial Review of the Closure of Places of Worship in Scotland* [2021] CSOH 32 [101]–[126].

201 For more detailed discussion, see Rebecca Moosavian, Clive Walker and Andrew Blick, 'Proportionality in a pandemic: the limitations of human rights' (forthcoming).

202 Compulsory vaccination of children was upheld in *Vavricka v Czech Republic* App no 47621/13, 4 April 2021.

203 See Department of Health and Social Care, *COVID Status Certification Review* (Cabinet Office, 29 March 2021).

CONCLUSION

A severe and prolonged public health emergency has arisen because of COVID-19, such as to shake the foundations of international²⁰⁴ and national lives. Legislative responses should be comprehensive and even unpalatable. But whether the PHA 1984 and the CA 2020 offer the best medicine can be disputed. These models of emergency legislation contradict the wishes of Parliament's better self, as represented by the CCA 2004, and contradict the considered warnings of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution in its report, *Fast-Track Legislation: Constitutional Implications and Safeguards*.²⁰⁵ Like special legislation against terrorism,²⁰⁶ it has proven an uphill struggle to control the coronavirus state. The advent of effective vaccines from the beginning of 2021 onwards²⁰⁷ has given governments the opportunity to curtail the COVID restrictions, but the mechanisms to ensure proportionality in the path to recovery remain weak.

The CCA 2004 should have been selected to play a central role in the national crisis, especially at its commencement, in preference to the more rushed, less certain and less accountable alternatives.²⁰⁸ Thereafter, more permanent sectoral laws should be designed for the lengthier recovery stages.²⁰⁹ Otherwise, the current legislative models stand testament to official panic and form part of the problem rather than the solution. As the UK Government's COVID-response to date has demonstrated, disregard of constitutionalism increases the risks of pursuing untested and flawed policies, diminishing democracy and weakening fundamental human rights. Such consequences should not be added to COVID-19's already catastrophic legacy.

204 UNSCR 2532 (1 July 2020) called for the cessation of all hostilities (with exceptions). See Maurizio Acari, 'Some thoughts in the aftermath of Security Council Resolution 2532 (2020) on Covid-19' (2020) 70 Questions of International Law 59. For other international law obligations, see Antonio Coco, 'Prevent, respond, cooperate states' due diligence duties vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic' (2020) 11 Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies 218; Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, *COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic* (World Health Organization 2021).

205 See House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Fast-Track Legislation: Constitutional Implications and Safeguards* (2008–09 HL 116).

206 Clive Walker, *The Anti-Terrorism Legislation* (3rd edn, Oxford University Press 2014) ch 1.

207 This programme is national: 'Coronavirus vaccinations' (NHS Digital); 'COVID-19 vaccination programme' (Public Health England, 14 July 2021).

208 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution (n 58 above) paras 41, 48.

209 A model has been devised by Liberty, *The Coronavirus (Rights and Support) Bill 2021*.