



Pandemic international but shutting Parliament uniquely Australian

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Summary

- Australian Parliament suspended for 5 months until 11 August.
- Number of sitting days for 2020 cut by 21, which is almost a 30% reduction in the 72 scheduled sitting days for the House of Representatives originally planned for the year.
- Other democracies facing coronavirus have limited the impact on parliamentary sitting, losing 0-9 sitting days, and have put in place other accountability measures including NZ's Epidemic Response Committee.

Australian response to coronavirus unique in affecting democratic government

On Monday 23 March a reduced House of Representatives sat in Canberra ostensibly to pass a number of measures in the Coronavirus Economic Response Package Omnibus Bill 2020. Once this business was concluded, at 18.45, Attorney-General and Leader of the House Christian Porter presented a revised program of sittings for 2020 which effectively suspended federal parliament for almost five months until 11 August, with the federal budget delayed from May to 6 October.¹

In support of its decision to suspend parliament the government argued that "putting budgets together at this time, with the enormous uncertainty that exists in predicting, anticipating and estimating economic parameters, is not something that any Commonwealth or state government should be doing", and the risks attached to the operation of parliament "during what is anticipated to be the peak point in the transmission of the coronavirus".¹

Labor and the Greens responded in opposition to the government's proposition, with Manager of Opposition Business Tony Bourke saying "during this period, during a time of crisis, is when the Australian public needs us to sit". Bourke also noted that the government would need to make decisions of incredible importance in response to COVID-19, and "decisions of that magnitude being made without the parliament convening and without there being a question time and an opportunity for people representing the different corners of Australia to hold the government to account is an unwise course for us to take".¹

Australia is not alone among countries with similar types of democratic institutions in suspending parliamentary sittings, however Australia is an outlier for taking the most drastic action. The Australian federal government has reduced the number of sitting days for 2020 by 21, which is almost a 30% reduction in the 72 scheduled sitting days for the House of Representatives originally planned for the year.

Other countries with far many more confirmed cases of COVID-19 are suspending their parliaments for less time, and/or taking provisions to allow for proper and transparent governance to continue.

New Zealand, for example, has established an Epidemic Response Committee "to consider and report to the House on any matter relating to the Government's management of the COVID-19 epidemic", chaired by the Leader of the Opposition. In establishing the committee Leader of the House Chris Hipkins said he wanted to "acknowledge that scrutiny during this unprecedented time, when the Government is placed in the position of exercising such extraordinary powers, has never been more important".¹¹

In the United Kingdom, provisions were made so "Scrutiny of the government and its legislation will continue", with a working group created to investigate ways that members can use remote collaboration and videoconferencing.⁸

The following table compares the responses from different countries to COVID-19 in terms of the period of suspension of their parliaments, the actual number of scheduled sitting days lost, other particular arrangements made that will facilitate continued scrutiny of government decisions, and the severity of the pandemic in each country according to numbers of confirmed cases.

About The Centre for Public Integrity

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Table: Comparison of parliamentary sittings across Covid-affected democracies

Country	Total period of suspension (includes scheduled breaks)	Number of scheduled Sitting Days lost	Particular arrangements to continue	COVID-19 case numbers (as at 30 March) ¹⁰
Australia	139 days ¹	21 days ¹	- None in place	4,361
Canada	38 ²	Approximately 9 days (based on Senate calendar) ³	- Provision to be able to recall parliament for the consideration of measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic	7,398
Spain	14 days from 12 March ⁴	6 days ⁵	- Congress not officially closed and will continue to operate for any urgent matter - Plenary sessions can be held - Videoconference meetings or telematic voting to be used ⁸	87,956
NZ	34 days ⁶	5 days ⁷	- Opposition leader to chair a cross-party committee to scrutinise government's response to Covid-19 ²	589
United Kingdom	1 week (planned recess bought forward) ⁸	< 5 days	- For the first three weeks after returning to business, sitting days will be Tuesday to Thursday, with sittings beginning earlier than usual on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.	22,141

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scrutiny of the government and its legislation will continue. Each day will begin with questions to the government from members - Working group created to investigate ways that members can use remote collaboration and videoconferencing. - Physical distancing measures that have recently been put in place will continue.⁸ 	
USA	0	0	- Business as usual	161,807
France	0	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questions for the Government restricted to one day - Limited number of MPs attending the sitting⁹ 	44,550
Germany	0	0	- Business as usual	66,885

Sources

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