

Punctuation and rhetoric: the difference between the “the people’s parliament” and “the peoples’ parliament”



How Boris Johnson’s government refers to parliament may come to reveal how deep a commitment it has to constructing a pluralistic claim of a collective UK state interest, rather than a singular populist claim, writes [David Judge](#).

Immediately after the general election, Boris Johnson greeted the newly convened parliament with the triumphalist [words](#), ‘[this] is one of the best Parliaments that this country has ever produced’, and pledged that ‘this new democratic parliament – this people’s parliament [will] get on with delivering the priorities of the British people’. Repeatedly the PM enthused that this was to be ‘a Parliament that [works for the people](#)’ and a parliament that had ‘delivered a [people’s government](#) dedicated to serving you’.

The PM’s repetitions seemingly pointed to a singular vision of ‘the people’ sharing common priorities, and with their elected representatives capable of sustaining a ‘people’s government’ dedicated to serving ‘one nation’. Yet, on closer inspection, they also pointed implicitly to the existence of ‘peoples’ – in the plural – who were to be represented, and of institutions – in the plural – made manifest in the differentiatedness of ‘parliament’ and ‘government’ within Westminster.

According to the PM two features of the new parliament made it a ‘[vast improvement on its predecessor](#)’. First, it was more representationally descriptive of the UK population; and second, and more importantly for the PM, it was ‘going to get Brexit done’.

Peoples in the plural

If ‘bestness’ is measured by the extent of descriptive representation, then the new parliament was indeed ‘better’ than its predecessor. The idea of [descriptive representation](#) denotes ‘shared experiences’ between represented and representatives – which allow the latter to be ‘in some sense typical of the larger class of persons whom they represent’. And, if within-group intersectional differences are inserted into this relationship, further complexity and contingency come to characterise the practice of parliamentary representation. [Intersectionality](#) recognises that there are no uniform identities within descriptively defined groups.

The new parliament returned record numbers of: women MPs (220); Black and Minority Ethnic MPs (65), Muslim MPs (18); and openly gay, lesbian or bisexual MPs (45). Yet while descriptively ‘better’ than its predecessors, this parliament is far from being the best it could be. Women and BAME groups remained proportionately under-represented when compared to their population size, while other visible and invisible minorities remained notable by their absence. While 22% of the UK population are [recognised as having a disability](#), only a handful of [self-declared disabled](#) MPs are present in the new parliament. A cursory examination of the CVs of MPs also reveals that few had direct prior experience of unemployment or of grinding poverty. The significance of this descriptive representational deficit is that [comparative empirical studies](#) of policy preferences in legislatures reveal that ‘differential representation [of income groups] is always in disfavour of the poor’.

A simple listing of the group characteristics deemed to be of descriptive importance, immediately reveals, therefore, the innate plurality of ‘peoples’ in a representative parliament. Indeed, even Boris Johnson’s baseline definition of representational ‘bestness’ – in terms of ‘[more](#) female Members than ever before and more black and minority ethnic Members than ever before’ – still managed to undercut the very idea of a singular people represented in a ‘people’s parliament’ – no matter the powerful, propagandist, populist appeal of this rhetorical device.

Institutions in the plural

The PM’s main criterion for assessing the ‘bestness’ of the new parliament, however, was simply that it wasn’t its predecessor. The 2017-2019 parliament stood accused of using ‘[every trick in the book](#)’ to thwart ‘the will of the electorate’. In contrast, the new parliament would ‘[not waste](#) the nation’s time in deadlock, division and delay’; instead ‘this people’s parliament ... [is] going to get Brexit done’.

If the meaning of Brexit had long been a conundrum – encapsulated in Theresa May’s mantra of ‘Brexit means Brexit’ – the new ‘people’s government’ now claims, on the back of its electoral victory, the licence to determine what Brexit means. Indeed, the Johnson government has every right to define Brexit in whatever way it sees fit, and equally it has a right to claim, as the PM did in his contribution to the debate on the [Queen’s Speech](#), that it will legislate in the name of all the people. In fact, the PM’s invocation of ‘all the people’ is but the latest iteration of a constructed claim made by all UK governments to represent the collectivity of the state and its peoples (whether couched in terms of the common interest, national interest or the people’s interest).

Central to the notion of representative democracy, however, is that these claims of a collective interest are subject to what [Manin](#) calls ‘argumentative scrutiny’ and ‘the trial of discussion’ where ‘everything has to be justified in debate’ in the legislature. This notion of justification is epitomised in the institutionalised processes of deliberation, scrutiny, and accountability – with their associated elaborate procedures, rituals, and symbols – embedded in the contributions made by parliaments to state decision-making processes. Governments thus have the right to make claims to act, and legislate, in the collective interest; but, equally, parliaments have the right to subject those claims to ‘argumentative scrutiny’ and to ask executives to account for their actions.

Significantly in this respect, the Leader of the House, Jacob Rees-Mogg [proclaimed](#) that 2020 would be a year ‘in which this House, this great institution of our democracy, will work for the people, delivering the Prime Minister’s ambitious legislative agenda while conducting its work of scrutiny and accountability in the proper way’. Earlier, upon his appointment as Leader of the House, he had [expressed](#) ‘perhaps a somewhat romantic view of the House of Commons’, in his belief that it was the job of MPs ‘to hold the Government to account and not simply facilitate whatever the Government will want to do’.

Whether this romantic view prevails in the face of a government majority of 80 is an open question. The portents are unfavourable, however: generally, all governments tend to be gripped by ‘an executive mentality’ which predisposes them to undervalue the requirements of parliamentary scrutiny and accountability when formulating and implementing their policies. Specifically, since the Brexit referendum, successive Conservative governments have sought to evade parliamentary judgment of their Brexit strategy through procedural deceptions and corrosive anti-parliament narratives. In the intervening period, the Supreme Court has been called upon twice to remind the executive of its foundational constitutional responsibilities to subject itself to the authority of parliament. In the same period, government ministers, leading Conservative MPs, and even Prime Ministers themselves, have peddled populist narratives of being on the [side of the people](#) against parliament, of parliament [setting itself against the people](#), and of [parliament versus the people](#).

More specifically still, and possibly symptomatic of Johnson’s mindset towards parliamentary scrutiny and accountability, has been the appointment of Dominic Cummings as the PM’s chief special adviser. Cummings had earlier been [admonished](#) by the House of Commons Privileges Committee for contempt of parliament, with the Committee deeming that Cummings’ attitude ‘did not to serve the interests of civilised debate’.

When punctuation matters

If civilised debate is the hallmark of parliamentary government, then Boris Johnson and his closest ministerial confidants and political advisers have ‘previous’ in their disregard for scrutiny and accountability. There is every prospect, therefore, that the institutional divide between the ‘people’s government’ and the ‘people’s parliament’ will be brought into stark relief as the realities of representing the diverse experiences of multiple peoples throughout the UK become apparent in a ‘post-Brexit’ UK after 31 January 2020.

In these circumstances, punctuation may yet come to matter. Where the apostrophe is placed – “the people’s parliament” or “the peoples’ parliament” – may come to reveal just how deep a commitment the Johnsonian ‘people’s government’ has, first, to constructing a plausible pluralistic claim of a collective UK state interest, rather than a singular populist claim; and, second, how prepared it is to justify its claim before a parliament representing the interests, opinions, and expectations of multiple peoples.

About the Author



David Judge is Professor Emeritus of Politics at the University of Strathclyde.

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