

Performative prorogation: what Johnson, Cummings and Co are trying to teach the public



By proroguing Parliament, the government may be trying to teach the public that liberal democracy is a charade and that playing dirty is how politics must go, writes [Jonathan White](#). He explains how prorogation is a performance of ideas about authority and politics.

What do political leaders hope to achieve by breaking with constitutional rules and conventions? Much of the coverage of Johnson's moves to prorogue Parliament and of subsequent [provocations](#) has focused on the instrumental goals they may serve. Whether as part of a negotiating strategy intended to force the hands of EU partners by showing how little prevents a no-deal Brexit, or as a way to weaken domestic opposition and run down the clock, constitutional transgression can be read as a way to get things done.

But breaking with norms can also be an end in itself. Rather than about achieving specifics, it can be a performance of broader ideas – about the nature and authority of executive power, and about politics itself. In the name of getting a task done, leaders can seek a wider redefinition of themselves and the landscape around them.

Sometimes, political leaders play loose with the constitution as a way of cultivating their credentials as *technocrats*. Breaking with procedural norms can be a way of aligning with the demands of technical experts and showing willingness to adhere to their recommendations. Governments instituting austerity measures have been a familiar example in contemporary Europe. Picking a fight with parliaments can be a way for executives to show the depth of their commitment to a certain set of policy goals deemed responsible – a demonstration of fidelity, and thus a way to garner recognition from technocratic authorities like the ECB and IMF.

But the British situation is different. The kind of authority pursued by the Johnson government seems less technocratic than *charismatic*, based on a show of strength and resolve. Taking on Parliament becomes a way to show sovereign capacity, and ideally to show the impotence of one's adversaries. The word '[dictator](#)' has been used a lot in past days, and for good reason. Johnson's invokes a democratic rationale – challenging parliamentary sovereignty to uphold popular sovereignty – but there is something more arbitrary and voluntarist here too: taking aim at parliamentary procedure not just to champion some notion of the people's will but to foreground the leadership's *own* volition. After all, a change in the opinion polls would probably do little to shift the government's policy. Unconventional action here is about performing the independence of the executive and its willingness to act.

The response of others in Parliament can be conducive to the effect. Many have been understandably outraged, denouncing the subversion of democracy, but from the government's perspective this is probably not wholly unwelcome. It has the benefit of making all voices of opposition resemble each other. Differences of principle between parties are set aside, as they find themselves articulating one and the same procedural critique. The transgressive act, by turning opponents into one chorus of unanimous condemnation, makes them look alike. Moreover, it casts them as those wedded to rules and procedures – preoccupations that may also mark them apart from sizeable sections of the wider public.

These potential dividends of rule-breaking and the threat of it go beyond whatever practical goals it can enable. Even if the government's efforts to pull out all the stops to pursue a preferred form of Brexit are frustrated – even if moves to bypass parliament achieve little in negotiating terms, or indeed do not happen – they can benefit executive power nonetheless. (Indeed, such gestures may be all the more powerful if frustrated, since they are protected from a clash with reality.) One way or another, they can foster a form of charismatic authority useful in a General Election – one that may appeal to many would-be Brexit-Party voters in particular, for whom independence of action and will are arguably the very essence of authority.

Ultimately, these acts and threats of executive exceptionalism seem designed to convey a much wider point too, less about the government of the day than about how our political system functions. With each new affront to constitutional convention, the Tory leadership enacts a model of politics in which the struggle for power is all. It is as though Cummings and co. want to teach the public that liberal democracy is a charade: that notions of the separation of powers, checks on the executive, procedures and standards of conduct in public life are just so much fluff, that playing dirty is how it must go. Brexit becomes the opportunity to promote a disenchanted vision – a way of resetting the public's expectations, establishing a new normal, resigning and inuring people to things yet to come. With each new transgression, a new lesson is imparted of 'how things work', a new set of precedents established. This performative aspect explains why so much that is done seems gratuitous – including the denials of each transgression before its announcing.

The government claims to be engaged in very specific task – Britain's exit from the European Union. Everything it does has a kind of deniability – the suggestion it is just a temporary measure, a negotiating tactic, just an instrumental means to achieve a particular goal. But arguably Brexit is just the occasion, and the appeal of breaking with norms more intrinsic – a chance to reshape the identity of executive power, and with it our understanding of how politics works.

About the Author



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