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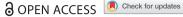
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ABSTRACT
What do 'dilemmas' reveal about elites' underlying beliefs, values and attitudes to parliaments and reform? In this article, I answer this question in two ways. First, I identify three parliamentary 'traditions' among elites regarding the UK Parliament and reform in British politics (specifically: conservative, liberal and reformist traditions). Second, I explore how these different traditions inform MPs when confronted with dilemmas about Parliament's role using two illustrative case studies: the vote to leave the European Union and the Covid-19 pandemic. In so doing, this article makes two original contributions: empirically, by establishing that MPs' actions were informed by one of three traditions, it offers a new explanation for how parliamentary actors respond to challenges; and, theoretically, through the use of the interpretive concept of 'dilemmas', the article demonstrates the added value of using interpretive approaches to explaining parliamentary politics and, specifically, opportunities for analysing institutional change and continuity.

Political elites and institutions in the UK have faced unprecedented challenges over the last two decades: scandals over the role of money, expenses and allowances have raised questions over the integrity of our political class; hung parliaments have put the UK's accustomed majoritarian style of governing under pressure; referendums in 2011 (over the electoral system), 2014 (over Scottish independence) and 2016 (over European Union membership) have strained the principle of representative democracy; and, a global health pandemic raised fundamental questions over democratic governance. These and other events not only test the foundations and

capacities of political systems but also – I argue in this article – open a revealing window into the underlying values and belief systems of political actors, and especially how those actors navigate 'dilemmas' about change and continuity. I explore these entanglements between beliefs and dilemmas in relation to two illustrative case studies in the UK Parliament: first, attempts to implement the referendum result on leaving the EU (i.e. Brexit); and, second, responses to the global health pandemic of Covid-19. Both cases have been subject to significant public and parliamentary debate, and in doing so raised essential challenges to the accepted notions of Parliament's role in political decision-making. I use these case studies to provoke a wider debate about the role of ideas in explaining parliamentary politics, and challenge non-interpretivist approaches by suggesting that we can better explain political outcomes (including themes of change and continuity) in parliaments by emphasising the importance of actors' beliefs and their entanglements with everyday practices and dilemmas.

To be sure, examining institutional change is not new (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Specifically regarding the UK Parliament, for example, there is a wealth of literature on: examining attempts at reforms (Flinders, 2007; Kelso, 2009; Power, 2007; Wright, 2004); circumstances of when reforms may (Norton, 2000) or may not (Kelso, 2003) take place; and/or making use of theoretical perspectives to explain reform, whether historical institutionalism (Armitage, 2012; Kelso, 2009), feminist institutionalism (Childs, 2022) or interpretive and constructivist approaches (Meakin & Geddes, 2022). What distinguishes this article from existing research is the focused attention on how *traditions* (i.e. underlying webs of ideas that inform actors' behaviour) relate to *dilemmas* (i.e. challenges to aforementioned webs of belief about their political worlds) in and beyond parliaments (see also Geddes, 2020; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018; Meakin & Geddes, 2022). In the first section, I outline the analytical background that guides this approach. In the second section, I identify three parliamentary traditions in the UK context – specifically: conservative, liberal and reformist – about Parliament's place in the British political system. To demonstrate the influence of these traditions, I explore two illustrative dilemmas regarding Brexit and Covid-19 in the third section. In examining these recent challenges, I argue that political actors draw on their underlying political values, ideas and interpretations about Parliament – i.e. traditions – to shape how they respond to dilemmas.

Taking an interpretive approach

I adopt an interpretive approach to the study of politics. It begins from the starting point that people's interpretations of social and political worlds do not arise in a vacuum; instead, realities are constructed through people's

experiences of and engagement with what they perceive of their worlds. This point, explored in more detail in the introduction of this special issue, has been articulated by a variety of scholars across philosophy (Taylor, 1976), the arts and humanities (Crewe, 2021), and social sciences (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). It has significant repercussions for the study of politics: we must take seriously individuals' interpretations to explain their behaviour, and the outcome of political phenomena (rather than ascribing or assuming particular motivations for behaviour, such as utility-maximisation as is common by rational choice theorists). This leads us to focus on 'the meanings that shape actions and institutions' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, p. 17). Those meanings, or *beliefs*, are the basic explanatory blocks of analysis but – because no single belief can be understood in isolation – must be analysed in conjunction with other beliefs, values and ideas. These are 'webs of belief', or what Mark Bevir (1999) calls *traditions*, through which actors make sense of their worlds. They are used by individuals in their daily lives – through everyday *practices*, behaviours, routines, actions, etc. – to shape their organising perspectives, to make cognitive shortcuts, to act as guides for interpreting events or to make decisions, and to engage with, resist or confront institutional rules and norms.

While traditions exert significant influence over actors, they are also not static, comprehensive, or totalising. That is to say, interpretive scholars maintain that actors have agency; the capacity to interpret traditions in unique ways and, in doing so, may amend or transform their ideational backgrounds (i.e. *situated agency*). In order to theorise ideational change, Mark Bevir and co-authors draw attention to *dilemmas* (Bevir, 1999, pp. 221–264; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, pp. 35–37). Dilemmas come about through tensions between two or more ideas, which political actors believe need to be resolved. In this way, a dilemma pits two or more beliefs against each other and prompts questions over an actor's wider web of beliefs. Dilemmas can cause individuals to discard or amend their existing beliefs, or to try to accommodate new beliefs within wider traditions. This process is influenced by, first, everyday practices (i.e. actors need to put their ideas into practice and, in doing so, may run into unforeseen problems, issues or challenges where things may not work out as planned) and, second, power relationships[1] between actors (i.e. actors use resources to push for, or resist, change).

In sum, I explain the behaviour of actors through a focus on *beliefs* (ideas, values, motivations), who draw on their wider webs of belief, or *traditions*. Actors put their ideas into *practice* but may need to confront *dilemmas* when their ideas or beliefs are challenged. For a summary of the main concepts, see Table 1, which I develop in this article in two ways: first, I summarise ideational *traditions* that encompass broad webs of belief around political elites' understandings of the proposed role of Parliament in British politics;

Table 1. The interpretive approach: concepts.

Concept	Definition
Beliefs	Beliefs are the basic unit of analysis, in that they are the interpretations of individuals of their world and their surroundings.
Traditions	Traditions are 'webs of belief', and form the background of ideas in which actors find themselves. Actors will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them.
Situated agency	Individuals are situated in wider webs of beliefs, or traditions, which largely shape their beliefs. Yet they keep a capacity for agency in that they respond to traditions, beliefs and dilemmas in novel ways.
Practices	A set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in everyday life.
Dilemmas	A dilemma is an idea that stands in contradiction to other beliefs, therefore posing a problem. Dilemmas are resolved by accommodating the new belief in the present web of beliefs or replacing old beliefs with new beliefs.

This table draws on previous work, especially Geddes and Rhodes (2018) and Geddes (2020). It outlines all key concepts, but note that the focus of this article is mostly on beliefs, traditions and dilemmas.

second, I examine how actors draw on traditions to respond to two *dilemmas* about Parliament's functioning.

My analysis is based on a 'bricolage' approach that enables me to synthesise data from a variety of sources. First, I offer a critical re-reading of existing research on political elites' beliefs and practices from an interpretive perspective. Second, my analysis is informed by two periods of ethnographic fieldwork (the first from the 2010 parliament (Geddes, 2020) and the second from a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship in 2021–22 (Geddes, 2023)). Combining both periods yields close to 100 interviews with MPs and officials, as well as countless informal conversations and direct observations. Neither period focused explicitly on traditions or dilemmas but, in both cases, issues relating to the role of Parliament were ever-present or mentioned in the margins. Third, I make use of parliamentary sources: speeches as cited in the Official Record (Hansard), reports by committees, newspaper accounts of events, etc.

Interpreting parliamentary traditions

Given the depth and breadth of British parliamentary history, let me preface this section by noting that I offer only starting points of three provisional traditions that seek to describe and explain the role of Parliament and their relationship to parliamentary reform: a conservative, liberal and reformist tradition.[2] This is not an exhaustive review but emerges from my data and are developed here on the basis of webs of belief that (i) accept parliamentary democracy in some sense, (ii) have considerable representation within Parliament and (iii) have developed beliefs about parliamentary reform.[3] The traditions do not map onto political parties neatly or straightforwardly (though there is considerable overlap). They all relate to the Westminster model (WM), which often includes characteristics such as appeals to the

Table 2. Parliamentary traditions compared.

	Conservative tradition	Liberal tradition	Reformist tradition
View of the WM	A prescriptive ideal, to be embraced	A description of the system, to be adapted	A description of the system, to be critiqued
Sovereignty	Must lie solely with Parliament, a reality	Lies with Parliament, but largely a fiction	Should be shared with other institutions
Representation	Focus on political representation	Political and descriptive representation	Emphasis on descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation
Exec-leg relations	A strong executive is desirable	A strong executive is a necessity	A strong executive is to be resisted
Accountability	Limited, explanatory accountability	Expansive, explanatory accountability	Expansive, outcomes-focused accountability
Practices and procedures	Each have their place, to be protected	To be adapted where required	Outdated at best and should be reformed

sovereignty and primacy of Parliament; the centrality of ministerial responsibility to the legislature; and the selection of a strong executive through a competitive and adversarial electoral system. Although its value for comparative analysis is contested (Russell & Serban, 2021, 2022), the WM offers a strong historical and organising perspective for actors in British politics who use it to understand the world around them, and to act as a guide for behaviour and to pursue particular outcomes (Flinders et al., 2022; Rhodes, 2011). Parliamentary traditions have developed against the background of the Westminster model, albeit in different ways that emphasise or challenge different elements of the WM. As such, for the purposes of this article, as summarised in Table 2, I sketch out parliamentary traditions with respect to: (i) the overarching place of Parliament and parliamentary processes;[4] (ii) common functions of legislatures (e.g. law-making, accountability, representation); and (iii) perceived needs for institutional change (particularly important given its links to dilemmas in the next section).

A conservative parliamentary tradition

As the Lord Norton of Louth, a Conservative Party peer and academic scholar put it, a conservative-minded parliamentary actor 'embraces the Westminster model as the epitome of British democracy' (Norton, 2012, p. 127). Parliament is at the heart of this conservative system of values. In the first instance, there is a strong attachment to the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, often regarded as the cornerstone of the British constitution with Parliament at its heart. This often suggests and spills into deference for the institution, with an assumption that existing procedures, processes and rules of Parliament 'work' and usually do not require reform (unless reforms preserve the status quo or reverse changes made by others).

Turning to specific functions of Parliament, a strong executive is not only accepted as reality, but seen positively in ensuring that democratic choices at

the ballot box can and will be implemented (Norton, 2012, 2019). This 'Whitehall view', as David Howarth (2021, p. 223) puts it, 'reconciles strong decisive government, unhampered by obstructionism, with democracy'. This notion has been shaped by wider conservative ideas of British democracy, notably regarding the concepts of 'representation' and 'responsibility' from scholars such as Anthony Birch, rooted in a Burkean notion of representation as trusteeship (i.e. MPs act according to their consciences rather than being bound by the views of their constituents) that focuses on national policy questions (Hall, 2011, pp. 20–22). Regarding accountability, Matthew Flinders (2002, pp. 26–27) has identified a 'Peelite' interpretation, which is closest to conservative views and defines ministerial responsibility as 'a way of limiting democratic control to ensure strong, coherent and stable government'.

Although the conservative tradition values Parliament as a foundational part of the political system, it also emphasises a limited role for the legislature in intervening in government business (see also Howarth, 2021). Within this tradition, then, it follows that proposals for reform to strengthen Parliament are frequently regarded as misguided because it would give the legislature undue influence in decision-making (for a discussion, see Flinders & Kelso, 2011; Norton, 2019). This principle applies to the systemic position of the legislature within the polity, as much as it does to everyday practices and processes. For instance, physical voting through the 'aye' and 'no' lobbies are valued because they are perceived to give MPs an opportunity to speak with ministers, shoulder-to-shoulder; hence reforms to introduce electronic voting are to be resisted (e.g. HC Deb 26 Oct 2017, cc.431–432).

A liberal parliamentary tradition

A liberal interpretation of Parliament has many debts to the Westminster model, and shares many features of the conservative tradition. For example, the sovereignty of Parliament is not fundamentally challenged, and the ideals of representative democracy are maintained (Judge, 1993, pp. 28–67; Bevir, 2010, pp. 122–146). However, unlike a conservative deference to the institution, the parliamentary system may require adaptation and change depending on circumstance. In other words, the liberal tradition pushes the limits of conservative ideas.

With respect to specific parliamentary functions, liberal-minded actors believe in a strong executive, but emphasise a stronger role for Parliament as counter-balance. As Flinders (2002, p. 27) summarises, this 'Whig' perspective of ministerial responsibility is to be used as 'a mechanism through which the House [of Commons] can control ministers in accordance with the will of the House and, if necessary, force them from office'. With respect to representation, liberal webs of belief build on the Burkean

notion of representation but argue that it is not only about the left-right political spectrum, but arguably emphasise that effective representation requires much closer descriptive representation of the country at large, such as with respect to gender or geography (often through voluntary means by political parties).

An example of a liberal approach to Parliament, especially with respect to institutional reform, can be seen through New Labour's governing approach between 1997 and 2010. Bevir (2010, pp. 122–146) suggests that New Labour was wedded to its longstanding liberal and Fabian party traditions, both of which are tied to representative democracy, a statist vision for redistribution, and the Westminster model. As a result, with respect to the House of Commons, New Labour's reform programme made significant changes, whilst maintaining the importance of a strong executive to implement manifesto pledges, including through the creation of a Modernisation Committee to act as an instrument of reform. This led to what Tony Wright (2004, p. 869) called 'efficiency' reforms of processing parliamentary business more proficiently and which, he concluded, were largely 'executive-minded'. This is not to say that New Labour's reforms were unimportant, nor that they did not have far-reaching consequences; rather, they were adopted through the prism of a particular tradition that did not seek to challenge the underlying logic of the parliamentary system. While Matt Beech (2012) goes so far as to suggest that New Labour's reforms were constitutionally conservative, I would argue that the approach taken by New Labour is indicative of a liberal approach to reform that emphasises the primacy of the executive but also acknowledges that Parliament needed *some* modernisation.

A reformist parliamentary tradition

A reformist perspective (see also Howarth's (2021) 'Westminster view') is more critical about the current relationships with and functions of Parliament. The Westminster model may describe the current system, but it is also a point for critique. Parliamentary sovereignty, for example, may be accepted as the basis for current decision-making in the UK, but should be reformed and 'shared' with other political institutions; similarly, the dominance of the executive is lamented (Hutton, 1996). Meanwhile, parliamentary procedures are seen as anachronistic and in need of reform.

Turning to representation, a reformist but nevertheless *parliamentary* tradition also works with the grain of Burke's notion of trusteeship. However, while liberal traditions call for greater representation and diversity, reformists draw more explicit attention to ways in which everyday practices, ways of working, and formal/informal rules are gendered, racialised and classed (Miller, 2021; Puwar, 2004). As a consequence, reformists focus more directly on notions to make Parliament more diversity-sensitive (e.g.

Childs, 2016), and argue that voluntary steps by political parties and parliamentary actors are not enough to redress structural imbalances.[5] That said, unlike radical re-thinking of democratic participation, the reformist tradition remains a parliamentary – i.e. representative – tradition.

With regard to other functions of Parliament, commentators and scholars argue that parliamentary business is dominated by government, and that Parliament should have much more control over its own business (Russell & Gover, 2021). A reformist tradition pushes the ideals of the 'Whig' interpretation of ministerial responsibility further: while conservatives and liberals have a more process-focused interpretation of accountability that leans on explanation (i.e. giving ministers opportunities to explain their actions), a reformist approach implies a stronger role that is output-focused towards ensuring that accountability leads to a different outcome (Bovens, 2010). Ultimately, reformists want to foster 'a logic of parliamentarism' (Russell, 2011, p. 631) as opposed to the dominance of the executive through political parties.

While this tradition is underpinned by a belief that the current system is ineffective and Parliament is thereby hampered in carrying out its role in the British political system, there is no agreement on the depth or breadth of reforms. Some may push for electoral reform to Parliament; others focus on ensuring that the executive is held to account more robustly. The diversity of views and approaches perhaps explains the lack of reforms *vis-à-vis* more singularly unified and historically embedded webs of beliefs associated with conservative and liberal parliamentary traditions, which are more circumspect about reform.

Parliamentary traditions in British politics

The traditions that I have outlined above offer different if overlapping (i) visions for the place of Parliament in British politics and (ii) attitudes to reform. Some may criticise these traditions as being insufficiently distinct from one another. But let us remember: they are *parliamentary* traditions, so none offer a radical re-writing of the foundations for parliamentary or representative politics. This explains, for example, shared interpretations of Burkean notions of representation. Nevertheless, there are nuances and emphases that are different, not to mention contradictions and tensions within them (such as reformers' wishes to strengthen Parliament which sits uneasily with the wish to share sovereignty with other institutions, or conservatives' belief in parliamentary sovereignty which is often a cloak for executive sovereignty). All of these, I argue, push or pull Parliament in different directions, particularly with respect to parliamentary reform and institutional change.

It is worth stressing three further points. First, the traditions intentionally do not map onto political parties (even if there is overlap): Labour

governments are not necessarily always reformist; Conservative ones may be willing to challenge the authority of Parliament. Second, these traditions are not definitive and incommensurable value systems. Following interpretive principles, traditions are not fixed, nor do actors exclusively draw only from one tradition; each actor's web of beliefs is unique. Third and most importantly, I have only sketched out *broad* outlines; much more depth could be added to these traditions through further research. Indeed, three traditions may not be exhaustive, with other possible ways to think about Parliament and reform. I leave this an open question. For now, I focus on the conservative, liberal and reformist traditions in order to see how elites perceive of the role of Parliament and how they navigate change and continuity.

Interpreting parliamentary dilemmas

I now focus on two illustrative case studies and undertake a narrative analysis (Bevir, 2006) on: (i) the impact of the EU referendum; and (ii) responses to Covid-19.

The dilemma of sovereignty and representation

As widely noted, the UK public's vote to leave the EU on 23 June 2016 exacerbated several constitutional tensions, most notably about the sovereignty of Parliament (Blick & Salter, 2021; Russell, 2021; White, 2022). Here, I offer a re-reading of events through an interpretive lens to argue that Brexit was a dilemma in two ways: first, for the conservative and liberal traditions, Brexit created a tension between the long-standing belief in parliamentary sovereignty over popular sovereignty, which was especially problematic given the disjuncture of opinion between the public and political elites; second, for the reformist tradition, the minority government between 2017 and 2019 served as a dilemma about the consequences of pushing Parliament into executive decision-making.[6]

For the conservative and liberal traditions, the role of Parliament is strongly associated with the belief in parliamentary sovereignty and representative democracy. For this reason alone, referendums have been historically rare (Atkinson et al., 2020) and sit uneasily with the sovereignty of Parliament. Indeed, such conservative notions over the role of Parliament were also reinforced in the period leading up the referendum, in which political elites argued that membership of the EU resulted in compromising or ceding parliamentary sovereignty. This was a key plank of the Vote Leave's slogan, 'Take Back Control'.[7] However, while the tension between representative and direct democracy is significant, it is not irreconcilable. Stuart White (2022), for example, suggests that it is conceivable for Parliament to

be considered the legal sovereign while the public are ultimate political sovereigns. Rather, the root of the dilemma is the combination of this tension with a direct decoupling of views between political elites in the UK Parliament, who overwhelmingly supported EU membership at the time of the vote, with the UK public. In short: the legal and political sovereigns were not aligned. To resolve this dilemma, key actors in Parliament and government relied on existing beliefs from the conservative parliamentary tradition, particularly the belief in a strong executive, to implement the outcome of the vote and defend parliamentary sovereignty – whether Parliament liked it or not.

The belief in a strong executive was most clearly on display regarding the triggering of Article 50 provisions in the Treaty of European Union (the formal notification procedure to begin the withdrawal process). The then-new prime minister, Theresa May, told her party conference that executive prerogative powers would be used to trigger Article 50 (BBC News, 2016). Following a legal challenge, the Supreme Court ruled in early 2017 that triggering Article 50 would require statutory approval and could not be done by the executive alone (Russell, 2021, p. 447). This had two consequences. First, it required the government to introduce legislation to leave the EU, which was achieved through the EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Act. Second, the process of passing this legislation required MPs to directly confront the tension between representative and direct democracy. In particular, the second reading debate on the bill was marked by frequent references about the relationship between MPs, the public and Parliament, including several direct references to Edmund Burke to both support or oppose the legislation (HC Deb 31 Jan cc.818–995 and 1 Feb 2017 cc.1030–1132; see also Russell and James (2023, pp. 88–91)).

A belief in a strong executive was, moreover, how Theresa May justified her call for an early general election in spring 2017, saying among other things:

> At this moment of enormous national significance there should be unity here in Westminster […] Our opponents believe because the government's majority is so small, that our resolve will weaken and that they can force us to change course. They are wrong. […] what they are doing jeopardises the work we must do to prepare for Brexit at home and it weakens the government's negotiating position in Europe. […] Division in Westminster will risk our ability to make a success of Brexit and it will cause damaging uncertainty and instability to the country. (cited in BBC News, 2017)

This framing went in line with conservative approaches to executive-legislative relationships but, contrary to expectations, the landslide majority for the Conservatives did not materialise (Cowley & Kavanagh, 2018). Instead, a hung Parliament led to a minority Conservative government supported by the Democratic Unionist Party. This only exacerbated problems. Meg

Russell (2021, p. 449) aptly points out: 'While minority governments are relatively common internationally, *their culture and the necessary strategies for governing* were […] unfamiliar in both Whitehall and Westminster' (emphasis added). This is a key point: a minority government was itself a dilemma for the conservative parliamentary tradition, which offered few ideas and guiding beliefs that a Conservative government could adopt. Theresa May's political style was also unhelpful in this regard. She was labelled a 'control freak' by David Cameron's advisers (Shipman, 2017, p. 549), and was 'renowned for intransigence' and 'tribalism' (Seldon & Newell, 2019, p. 601).

Without a clear set of beliefs that could weather the choppy waters of both a minority administration and a colossal public policy challenge, the Brexit dilemma would only grow to ever greater proportions. This constellation of events presented other actors, led by a reformist parliamentary tradition, with a perfect opportunity to use their resources to strengthen the voice of Parliament. The reformist Speaker, for example, reinterpreted business motions that had hitherto been regarded as unamendable, *as amendable*, to test the opinion of the House (Bercow, 2020, pp. 372–375); meanwhile, other actors sought to take direct control of parliamentary proceedings and remove the long-standing control of the executive over parliamentary business. As Russell (2021, pp. 452–456; see also Russell and James, 2023) has shown, the use of procedure became especially politicised. And while these battles were more about preventing a no-deal Brexit than they were about empowering Parliament, actors drew on the reformist tradition to strengthen the case for a stronger Parliament. Others resisted this, and anti-parliamentary rhetoric became commonplace by MPs themselves: Andrea Jenkyns noted that MPs were trying to 'overturn the democratic mandate', Robert Seeley denounced a 'filibustering of democracy'; and, John Redwood declared that Parliament is 'stealing democracy from the British people' (all cited in Alexandre-Collier, 2022, pp. 252–255). Both pro- and anti-parliamentary rhetoric were symptoms of the clash of beliefs for the role of Parliament following the referendum, to which parliamentary traditions had different approaches.

The ongoing dilemma provided continuous fuel for confrontations, particularly as MPs not only *instrumentally* plundered the rhetoric and ideas of different parliamentary traditions to suit their ideal Brexit outcomes, but also because, at the very same time, those MPs were trying to work out how to enact, enable and reconcile *genuinely-held* beliefs about Parliament's rightful place in British politics. This came to a head in mid-2019: on 28 August, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, announced a five-week prorogation to last from mid-September until mid-October.[8] This provoked historic scenes in the House of Commons not long after, where MPs attempted to prevent Black Rod from proroguing Parliament with shouts of 'No' and the

Speaker proclaiming the events as an act of 'executive fiat' (HC Deb 9 Sep 2019, c.646). Outrage led to a second Supreme Court case, which judged the events to be unlawful on the basis that Parliament must be given an opportunity to legislate and hold ministers to account (Davis, 2019). On the one hand, it reinforces the conservative and liberal traditions of parliamentary sovereignty; on the other hand, it emphasises reformers' views of the importance of Parliament in democratic governance (see also Howarth, 2021).

The dilemma seemed intractable, so how was it resolved? As a reminder, the issue for those that believed in the conservative tradition is the decoupling of views between the legislature and the electors, with the former perceived as delaying or unable to implement the wishes of the latter. Ultimately, the (short-term) solution to the dilemma for conservatives was quite simple: an election. Although Johnson and the Conservative Party framed the election as one of 'Parliament versus the people', the election would fuse a pro-Brexit public (based on the outcome of the referendum) with a pro-Brexit Parliament (by removing the number and influence of Remainers, if successful). This was achieved in December 2019, which also neutered the dilemma for reformers about how to both embolden Parliament and ensure efficient governance. And yet, even as the dust was settling, Parliament's Brexit dilemma was subsumed into a different one just a few months later.

The dilemma of a global health pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic presented significant new challenges to parliamentary practices, leading to a transformation of the daily lives of MPs, peers and officials. The dilemma was one about how to conduct parliamentary work when conventional 'in-person' methods were not available. I argue that the dilemma was refracted through the prism of the recently emboldened conservative parliamentary tradition following the 2019 general election. While everyday parliamentary practices were disrupted, the existing webs of belief in Parliament have – arguably – not fundamentally altered; new ideas and ways of doing things (supported by reformers) were resisted and ultimately rejected by those in positions of power (who held conservative views). This helps us to explain how Parliament reverted to pre-pandemic procedures and practices so quickly. There are two caveats to this argument. First, while dominant beliefs may not have changed, seeds of alternative ways of performing parliamentary functions have been planted, which may yet prompt new dilemmas in the future. In other words, we do not yet know what long-term consequences Covid-19 will bear on Parliament (if any). And second, my focus in this section is limited to the ways in which MPs have broadly sought to continue to enact their roles in the face of Covid-

19, specifically their participation in parliamentary proceedings and committee work. I use this focus to highlight some of the wider changes and challenges to everyday life in Parliament. This is necessarily partial, with Covid-19 raising many further challenges to which I cannot do justice here (for a more detailed early assessment see Evans et al., 2021).

By the end of February 2020, Covid-19 caused widespread concern across the globe and, importantly, created significant uncertainty about the nature of the virus and about the scope of the response. The government published its Coronavirus Bill (granting emergency powers to the government to deal with the pandemic) on 19 March, receiving royal assent six days later. The House of Commons also gave the Speaker powers to set up a system of virtual participation and subsequently adjourned, more than a week earlier than planned, for Easter recess (Natzler, 2021, pp. 5, 7).[9] The UK was entering its first lockdown, with everybody except key workers required to stay at home. Recess of Parliament was used to prepare for hybrid working arrangements on the parliamentary estate: signs for two-metre distancing became commonplace; giant TV screens were installed and tested; software was put in place to ensure remote participation; and temporary Standing Orders were written to facilitate the changes. On 21 April, MPs returned from Easter, in-person, to approve the changes that permitted remote participation (Natzler, 2021, pp. 7–8; Lee et al., 2021).

The transformation of conduct in the House of Commons meant some limitations, notably that the House sat for only three days a week and that only 50 MPs could attend in person at any one time. Nevertheless, former Clerk of the House of Commons, David Natzler (2021, p. 8), points out that a range of routine parliamentary activities did take place, from urgent questions to backbench rebellions and maiden speeches, which were facilitated by a new, well-functioning and praised system of electronic voting (Smith & Childs, 2021). However, the new practices were short-lived. On 2 June, less than six weeks since they had been introduced, the House voted to resume physical proceedings. For several days afterwards, there was confusion as the government re-introduced some hybrid measures for scrutiny proceedings and to allow for a system of proxy voting, due to pressure from MPs that were unable to participate at all (e.g. one shielding MP memorably declared that government is making MPs 'parliamentary eunuchs' (BBC News, 2020)).

Covid-19 and the precautionary measures introduced for social distancing raised the question of how MPs could still undertake their core functions of representing constituents, debate and vote on legislation, and scrutinise government decisions. This was the heart of the dilemma. And to respond to it, MPs from across political parties drew on their webs of belief associated with Parliament, which clashed over the subsequent months.

To begin with the conservative parliamentary tradition, Harriet Deane and Chloe Challender (2021) have suggested that MPs framed this to be about the qualities of 'good' and 'bad' parliamentarians, associating the former with physical and in-person proceedings and the latter with hybrid proceedings. The Leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg, would frequently draw on conservative web of beliefs to make this argument. For example, he argued that the function of Parliament can only be carried out effectively and adequately through meeting physically, and that MPs have 'all had the right of uninterrupted, unhindered access to Parliament since 1340', which is one of their 'most ancient and precious rights' (HC Deb 21 Apr 2020, c. 22).[10] His views were particularly important given his position as Leader of the House (and therefore control of the parliamentary timetable), but echoed by other MPs from across the political spectrum. For example, some MPs who arguably drew from liberal parliamentary webs of belief were also reluctant, with Karen Bradley, Chair of the Procedure Committee, characterising hybrid proceedings as 'sub-optimal' (cited in Deane & Challender, 2021, p. 141), though she ultimately accepted this way of working as necessary to ensure inclusivity of MPs that may otherwise be unable to take part in parliamentary proceedings.[11]

The conservative tradition did not go unchallenged. Conservative MP, Laura Trott, noted that hybrid proceedings could 'bring benefits for those who have caring responsibilities, health conditions and other access requirements' (Deane & Challender, 2021, p. 142), while other MPs criticised the idea that working from home or outside the main chamber were in some way working less hard. These viewpoints were framed in a language of fairness and equality. Furthermore, explicitly reform-minded actors identified opportunities from hybrid proceedings, particularly to enhance representation, such as the electronic voting system (Smith & Childs, 2021). Nevertheless, these counter-narratives were unsuccessful. Deane and Challender (2021, pp. 143–144) raise this as an important puzzle: why did these narratives remain 'secondary' and 'subordinate'? An interpretive approach can shed light here. Those with conservative webs of belief, in conjunction with the liberal parliamentary tradition, were able to frame the dilemma as one about how to be a 'good' MP that focused on (male, able-bodied) ideals of participation in Parliament, rather than on equal participation among a diversity of types MPs. These webs had been embedded in parliamentary practices for many years by both conservatives and liberals, and across not only the parliamentary estate but across society that clamoured for an end to disruption and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. MPs and other actors were able to draw on innumerable sets of ideational currents that saw a radical shift in working from home or doing things in a new and different way as a *threat* to representation rather than as an *opportunity* to enhance it. Furthermore, as Deane and Challender (2021, pp. 143–144)

highlight, opportunities for reform were constrained without 'an appropriate institutional vehicle' for alternative beliefs, practices and traditions to emerge. In short, the dilemma was adjudicated not only through ideas themselves, but through everyday practices and power relations that ensured the dominance of conservative (and, to a lesser extent, liberal) beliefs around Parliament's ways of working during the pandemic.[12]

What can dilemmas tell us?

Both dilemmas examined in this article have distinctive features. The 2016 referendum result prompted a significant challenge to representative democracy, with conflicting visions for Parliament's role. Meanwhile, the global health pandemic prompted significant pressures on existing parliamentary practices in carrying out democratic functions. While each dilemma is distinctive, there are both *empirical* and *theoretical* lessons and commonalities for understanding Parliament and parliamentary traditions.

First, both dilemmas – albeit in their own ways – demonstrate the dominance of conservative and liberal traditions in Parliament; there is little in terms of a 'logic of parliamentarism' (Russell, 2011, p. 631). We can see this most clearly in the way that Parliament gave away responsibility over triggering Article 50 to the government or the swift passing of Covid-19 legislation that empowered the executive and limited parliamentary scrutiny. The executive mentality, that reformists challenge, remains a dominant perspective for many parliamentarians. Neither the conservative nor the liberal traditions have been persuaded in giving Parliament a stronger role in the political system as envisioned by reformists (e.g. giving the House more control over its agenda). This goes a long way in explaining why parliamentary reform is so difficult to achieve. Dilemmas are viewed through the prism of ideational traditions, and this shapes the direction, extent and shape of reform. This does not mean that reform is impossible: under New Labour, reforms did take shape even if they were within a liberal tradition (as indicated above); meanwhile, the 2009 MPs' Expenses Scandal opened a dilemma about (mis)trust in Parliament that would be interpreted in such a way, not least through the reformist tradition, to allow for reforms to select committees in 2010.

Second, this article also contributes to our understanding more generally of institutions and institutional change through a focus on the relationship between beliefs and dilemmas. It has shown that ideas matter and that they are mediated by everyday practices and power relations through which ideas are enacted, framed, played out, resolved. Changes were sought, and then resisted, by actors in key positions of power, such as parliamentary whips or the Leader of the House; through the use of parliamentary procedures to advance or delay changes; or the lack of mechanisms for reform-minded MPs to ensure that hybrid proceedings continue. This

suggests that dilemmas must be analysed in conjunction with an analysis of everyday practices, power relations, and underlying webs of beliefs (Geddes, 2019). This offers a distinctive explanatory framework for institutions, and especially institutional continuity and change.

Concluding remarks

In this article, and drawing on an interpretive approach, I have focused on the UK Parliament to identify parliamentary traditions and their relationships to dilemmas caused by Brexit and Covid-19. My analysis highlights the way that traditions act as guidance points for political elites (specifically MPs), but also indicates the way that those webs of belief are enacted and tied to everyday practices and relationships of power. This opens opportunities for further study. In the case of the UK Parliament, there are many issues that could be the catalyst for further dilemmas, such as the integrity in public life after 'partygate' (BBC News, 2022), sexual misconduct and bullying allegations (Cox, 2018; Grierson, 2022), or the increasingly urgent need for restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster (Meakin, 2022). Furthermore, the concept of traditions could allow for a more nuanced understanding of the role of ideas in British politics.

To close, it is worth stressing that this article's arguments imply a yet more provocative conclusion. While the empirical focus has been on the UK Parliament, and specifically parliamentary traditions and their attitudes to reform, my argument is not limited to this long-standing, historical institution. In future, it would be interesting to explore or even compare traditions, beliefs, practices or dilemmas in other parliaments in order to shed light on how and to what extent ideas shape parliamentary politics.

Notes

1. An ever contested concept, I maintain – briefly, owing to limited space – a people-centred approach to power: it is the actions of people (through argumentation, rhetoric, persuasion, etc.) that others accept as valid which shapes the authority of particular rules, norms, institutions, etc. It is, of course, more complicated than this, and there is much more to say: on power and traditions, see Pike (2021); on power and dilemmas, see Geddes (2019).
2. There is some overlap between these traditions, and David Howarth's (2021) discussion of the 'Westminster' and 'Whitehall' views of the constitution.
3. Consequently, I have excluded (i) radical readings of Parliament (e.g. (post-)Marxism and radical democratic theory) because they offer a sweeping departure from parliamentary democracy as we know it, or (ii) those which are perhaps more nascent that lack widespread representation in Parliament (e.g. a feminist parliamentary tradition).
4. On different traditions regarding parliamentary procedures, specifically, see Evans (2017).

5. For now, I leave open whether feminist ideas should be theorised and discussed as part of a separate feminist parliamentary tradition or, as here, integrated within existing ones. See, for instance, Childs (2022), Celis and Childs (2020).

6. For a comprehensive discussion regarding the relationship of Brexit and Parliament, see Russell and James (2023).

7. Vote Leave website: http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/briefing_control. html. Accessed 18 April 2022.

8. As explained on the UK Parliament's website: '[Prorogation] is the formal name given to the period between the end of a session of Parliament and the State Opening of Parliament that begins the next session' (https://www.parliament. uk/about/how/occasions/prorogation/, accessed 26 January 2023). For an in-depth analysis, see Russell and James (2023): 245–282.

9. The passage of the legislation is a good example of an executive mentality: the bill was long and scrutiny provisions of pandemic measures would be limited (for a discussion, see Natzler, 2021).

10. These comments were made despite the fact that this position would in reality exclude some MPs from access to Parliament, which was even more ironic given his support for the unlawful prorogation of Parliament only a few months earlier.

11. Other examples (drawn from Deane and Challender (2021)) include Graham Stringer's comment about ensuring 'full-blooded' debate in-person (HC Deb 2 Jun 2020, c.749) or Andrew Griffith's suggestion that he finds it incomprehensible that opposition MPs want to continue with a 'Coke Zero' Parliament (HC Deb 2 Jun 2020, c.728).

12. While Covid-19 has reinforced conservative notions of representation, it has nevertheless opened the debate on doing things differently thanks to technological advances: homeworking for officials has become much more common, while MPs are making greater use of digital technologies for select committee oral evidence sessions. Over time, these may prompt new dilemmas in future.

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