

Report on the Panel Discussion: “Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times”



FOUNTAINHEAD OF EXCELLENCE

Partners:

**Live Event on Zoom/MMA Facebook/
Live IBC/YouTube**

Panel Discussion on the theme

**Parliamentary Democracy
in Covid Times**

Panellists:

Mr N K Premachandran

Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha (Kollam
Constituency, Kerala)

Mr Naresh Gujral

Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha

Prof G Ramesh

Professor - Public Policy, IIM Bangalore

Moderator:

Mr M R Madhavan

Co-Founder, & President, PRS Legislative Research

held on **Tuesday, 23 June 2020 at 6.00 pm**

Partners:

Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times

Tuesday, 23 June 2020

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You are cordially invited to Watch Live on
Zoom/MMA Facebook/Live IBC/Youtube
Panel Discussion on the theme

Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times

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Mr N K Premachandran

Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha (Kollam Constituency)

Mr Naresh Gujral

Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha

Prof G Ramesh

Professor - Public Policy, IIM Bangalore

Moderator:

Mr M R Madhavan

Co-Founder, & President, PRS Legislative Research

at **6.00 pm Tuesday, 23 June 2020**

Event Partners:



The Context

The Covid-centric lockdown, social-distancing, travel-ban and other protocols have come in the way of functioning of India's parliamentary democracy. After a postponement, the Election Commission has decided to hold the biennial Rajya Sabha polls. However, there is no clarity about holding regular sessions of Parliament and also state legislatures.

There is no word yet about holding of parliamentary/legislative committee meetings. Before the next session becomes due, there are suggestions for online sessions. How feasible and possible are they, considering that other nations have followed different models during the Covid interregnum? Do our legislative rules permit them, or is an amendment to the Rules of Business of individual Houses needed and is such an amendment plausible? In this context, MMA organised a panel discussion through webinar with prominent politicians and thinkers to discuss the below Key issues:

1. What is the importance of Parliamentary Committee Meetings?
2. Many ordinances not related to the pandemic are passed now. Why should they not wait for Parliamentary discussions?
3. Should there be a law on the minimum number of working days for Parliament?
4. How do other democracies across the world function during Covid?
5. If we manage functioning of Parliament using technology, will it be more effective? What will be the challenges?
6. Will virtual meetings be a handicap to some of the not-so-tech-savvy politicians? Will poor connectivity be an issue?
7. How can social distancing be ensured and threat of virus spread be minimised if Parliament were to be convened?
8. Is change of venue for conducting Parliamentary meetings and having online meetings allowed under Rule Book?
9. Why does the Government shy away from facing the Parliament?

Programme Overview

Madras Management Association (MMA) in collaboration with the India Office of the **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung** (KAS) presented a panel discussion on the theme, “**Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times**” through webinar at 6 pm on Tuesday, **23 June 2020**. ORF and NGPL were the event partners. The panellists were:

1. **Mr N K Premachandran** – Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha (From Kerala)
2. **Mr Naresh Gujral** – Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha
3. **Prof G Ramesh** – Professor – Public Policy, IIM Bangalore

Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd), Executive Director, MMA initiated the online meet, welcomed the panellists and viewers and introduced all the speakers. **Mr Peter Rimmele**, Resident Representative to India of KAS delivered the introductory remarks. **Mr M R Madhavan** – Co-Founder & President, PRS Legislative Research moderated the panel discussion.

A Q & A session was scheduled where viewers could send in their questions through SMS/WhatsApp/Zoom. This was moderated by Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd), ED, MMA and the panellists answered the questions during the programme. At the end of the Q&A session, Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd) proposed the Vote of Thanks and the event concluded at 7.30 PM.

In view of the social distancing restrictions due to COVID – 19 and keeping in view the safety and well-being of our members, the event was conducted live on ZOOM and also livestreamed on MMA Webcast, YouTube and Facebook. The proceedings were watched live by 1,214 viewers.

Profile of the Speakers

N K Premachandran



N K Premachandran did his B.Sc. from Fatima Mata National College, Kollam and LLB from Government Law College, Thiruvanthapuram. He is a gold medallist in LLB. He is the author of 'Oh Iraq,' a Malayalam book.

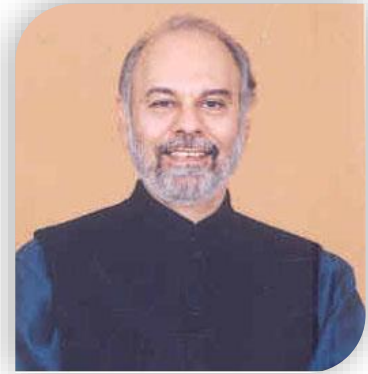
He is a four-time Member of Parliament (MP). He was first elected in 1996 to the 11th Lok Sabha. He is a Member of the current Lok Sabha, elected from Kollam constituency.

From 2006 to 2011, he was a member of Kerala Legislative Assembly and Water Resources Minister in the Government of Kerala.

He has been a member of many standing committees in Parliament. He is now Member, General Purposes Committee, Lok Sabha and Member, Consultative Committee, Ministry of Home Affairs.

He started his political career from student movement. He was first elected in 1987 to Gram Panchayat, District Council in 1991 and Zilla Panchayat in 1995. He was a Member of the Central Secretariat of R.S.P and office bearer of several trade unions.

During his term as Cabinet Minister for Water Resources in the Government of Kerala, he was awarded the "Best Minister" by Asianet Television Channel. The reforms initiated by him in the water sector and his handling of interstate water disputes like the Mullaperiyar issue were widely appreciated.



Naresh Gujral

Naresh Gujral (born 19 May 1948) is a politician from Shiromani Akali Dal party and a member of Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Parliament of India representing Punjab. He has been a member of many Parliamentary committees.

He is the son of Inder Kumar Gujral, former Prime Minister of India. He graduated from the University of Delhi. He started a clothing company "SPAN."

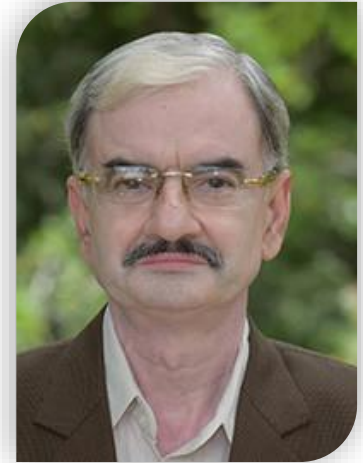
Prof G Ramesh

Professor – Public Policy, IIM Bangalore

Fellow in Management from IIM Ahmedabad, India

MA (Economics), Madras University, India

BA (Economics), Vivekananda College, Chennai, India



Professor Ramesh's teaching interests include Public Policy, Public Management, Performance Management, Financing and Regulation of Infrastructure and Utilities. He specializes in the sectors of urban infrastructure and urban local bodies, public administration, utilities, and hospitals and health insurance.

He has conducted several training programmes for senior officers from various civil services. He has undertaken consulting assignments in the areas of Project Management, Programme Evaluations, Policy areas, etc. These were in the sectors of Healthcare, Urban Management, Public Transport, Solid Waste Management, Public Grievances Management, Power, etc.

Prior to joining academics, he was with a financial consulting company, a dotcom and a software firm. He has adopted a constituency – Jayanagar in Bangalore – and has been working on it for the last four years. He has been working closely with the elected representative and volunteers in this constituency to understand the last mile problems and to bridge them. He is also engaged actively in the area of solid waste management.

He was managing an NGO which provided marketing and capacity building support to the voluntary sector.

M R Madhavan



Madhavan co-founded PRS Legislative Reserach and is currently its President.

Prior to starting PRS, Madhavan was based in Singapore covering currency and interest rate markets as Principal and Senior Strategist for the Asia region for Bank of America.

He started his career with ICICI Securities in Mumbai in the equity research group and later headed interest rates research. He is a Fellow (doctorate) from IIM Calcutta, MBA from IIM Calcutta and holds a B. Tech degree from IIT Madras. In 2010, Madhavan was selected as a Chevening Gurukul Scholar at the London School of Economics.

Peter Rimmele

Peter Rimmele is currently the Resident Representative to India of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

He has a First Law Degree from Freiburg University, as well as a Second Law Degree from the Ministry of Justice Baden-Württemberg, Germany and a M.A. in Geography.



After working as, a jurist, judge and lecturer, he took public office as Ministerialrat, Head of Division at the State Ministry of the Interior in Saxony, Germany, from November 1991 on until 2000. There he first served in the Police and Security and later in the Local Government Department. On behalf of the German Foreign Ministry he served in East Timor as Registrar General, Head of Civil Registry and Notary Services (UNTAET), and became later the principal Advisor for Governance Reform for GIZ (German International Cooperation) to the Ministry of Administrative Reform and the Anti-Corruption-Commission of the Republic of Indonesia, where he served for 7 years. He then moved to Rwanda, also as Principal Advisor Good Governance/Justice Program. Earlier he was Resident Representative Lebanon, Director of Rule of Law Program Middle East North Africa, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Report on the Panel Discussion on “Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times”

Key Statements



- Parliamentarians are the beating heart of democracy, in Germany as much as in India. But this is not self-evident. It is a privilege that must be earned again and again from voters- **Peter Rimmel**, KAS



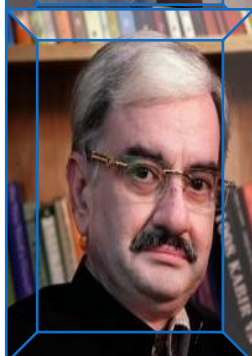
- Considering the Covid situation, Parliament should have been convened by now; even the parliamentary committees have not met. This is very unfortunate. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures - **M R Madhavan**, President PRS Legislative Research



- Most of the governments do not want to have frequent meetings of the Parliament, as they do not want to face uncomfortable questions. It was different when Nehru and Vajpayee were Prime Ministers - **N K Premachandran**, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha)



- This parliament has four more years of life. If there is no vaccine in the next four years, will we go on like this, without meetings? Then the government will have no accountability - **Naresh Gujral**, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha)



- Virtual meetings can be more productive than the normal face-to-face meetings and they may even be preferred in future, thanks to the pandemic experience - **Prof G Ramesh**, IIM Bangalore

Key Takeaways

From Mr Peter Rimmel's Address:

- ♣ The federal government, not parliament, is perceived to be calling the shots in German democracy. But in reality, Parliamentarians are the beating heart of democracy in Germany as much as in India.
- ♣ In both Germany and India, civil society is extremely sensitive to executive power.
- ♣ In a parliamentary system, critics opine that laws are being made in the ministries and the national assembly only acts as a rubber stamp. It can never be truly independent of the executive and fails to hold it to account.
- ♣ During the Corona-crisis, emergency legislation and quick government decisions were taken as proof that the Bundestag was being circumvented.
- ♣ In times of need, the government must act quickly. But that does not mean that the Bundestag will eschew its responsibility and not check on government decisions later on. The Bundestag still pulls the strings of the federal purse.
- ♣ The leading politicians have publicly vowed that they would not waver to rescind emergency powers once the crisis has abated.
- ♣ The thought of the powerless legislature has been so deeply engrained into nearly all democratic societies. It is a conceptual problem with parliamentarism and sets a dangerous precedent.
- ♣ The traditional model of presidential system is much easier to comprehend. Under parliamentarism, the relationship is not so much antagonistic as it is based on harmony and compromise.
- ♣ The United States and Brazil - both are examples of presidential systems, but the antagonistic relationship between executive and legislature has empowered authoritarian leaning presidents to blame the legislature for everything bad.
- ♣ In Germany, the Bundestag is the centre of all decision making, both in theory and in practice.
- ♣ The executive receives its mandate from the MPs. It is beholden to them and through them to its voters. There can be no confrontation between the executive and the legislature in this configuration.

From Mr M R Madhavan's Address:

- ♣ The three main functions of Parliament are: Enactment of all laws; checking the actions of the government on a daily basis and Responsibility towards the financial aspects of the government.
- ♣ India is fortunate to have a multi-party democracy; each party has its own views and these can be discussed and debated in the parliament.
- ♣ In the normal course, Parliament's monsoon session should commence in 3rd or 4th week of July but nothing has been scheduled yet.
- ♣ Currently, the nation faces three major crises: Health crisis from Covid-19, Economic crisis as fallout of Covid-19 and the Border crisis with China.
- ♣ Considering the extraordinary ground situation, Parliament should have been convened by now. Even parliamentary committees have not met.
- ♣ Parliament have met either through online or offline or hybrid models in many countries like UK, Canada, France, Italy, Japan and South Korea. We can learn from them.

From Mr N K Premachandran's Address:

- ♣ Parliament has not met since 27 March 2020. It is a big gap in view of various highly critical issues that came up due to the pandemic.
- ♣ Article 123 has been invoked and many unilateral decisions have been taken by the government under the ordinance route.
- ♣ It is essential that parliament must meet, more so in these challenging times. Various options like video conferences and meeting of parliament on alternate days with 50% attendance on each day to ensure social distancing can be thought of.
- ♣ On convening parliament in a place other than the Parliament House, the speaker has powers to do so and he has to notify the change of place.
- ♣ The present rules do not provide for online / digital meetings, so the rules need to be amended. The speaker has a lot of authority and he can invoke inherent powers to ensure that parliament meets.
- ♣ There will be connectivity issues in online meetings but they can be managed.

- ♣ Virtual meetings will not be as good as meeting in the Parliament House which gives a totally different ambience.
- ♣ The trend of present day governments showing reluctance to face the parliament and to extend its working days is unfortunate. It requires political will to face the parliament.
- ♣ Without parliament sessions and parliamentary committee meetings, the government would become autocratic.

From Mr Naresh Gujral's Address:

- ♣ Conducting an interactive, online meeting for 540 members may be challenging. An air-conditioned indoor stadium like the Talkatora stadium in Delhi can be used for Lok Sabha meetings; The Central Hall of Parliament can be used for Rajya Sabha meetings with social distancing.
- ♣ Parliamentary Committee meetings can happen in offline mode as the maximum members in each committee are 30 or less. If members are reluctant to travel, these can happen through virtual meetings.
- ♣ The standing committee meetings are very important as lot of debates take place and members rise above their political affiliations to safeguard national interests.
- ♣ On an average, about 60 to 70% of the bills go through the parliamentary committees now. Most of the discussions in the committees are in public domain.
- ♣ Even if parliament meets for a short period, members can work for extended hours during such period and make up for the time lost.

From Prof G Ramesh's Address

- ♣ Virtual meetings of Parliament can be successful in India.
- ♣ If members in rural areas encounter connectivity issues, they can go to the district collector's office where the infrastructure is better.
- ♣ If we go ahead with conventional meetings, then we should take care of elderly politicians who are above 60 years of age.
- ♣ When parliament works, all government departments work in a frenzied way. It has to be seen how the support staff can be mobilised in these Covid times.
- ♣ If the venue were to be shifted to a new place, there are certain risk factors; we need to ensure security to the parliamentarians.
- ♣ Technology and connectivity should not be major issues as we now do many mission critical jobs online.
- ♣ Parliamentary committee meetings should have commenced online by now. Similarly, state assemblies can also meet.
- ♣ If members do a brainstorming and come up with ideas, there can be a consensus and way forward.
- ♣ We should learn from the experience of other countries where parliaments have met in recent times.

Welcome Address

Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd), VSM, Executive Director, MMA



Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd), VSM, ED, MMA initiated the online panel discussion organised through Zoom webinar and livestreamed on MMA website, YouTube and Facebook. He listed out the series of MMA activities planned over the next few days to keep the members intellectually engaged and provide the policy makers with inputs for decision making.

He extended a hearty welcome to the panel members **Mr N K Premachandran** – Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha (From Kollam Constituency, Kerala), **Mr Naresh Gujral** – Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha and **Prof G Ramesh** – Professor – Public Policy, IIM Bangalore. He welcomed the moderator **Mr M R Madhavan**, President, PRS Legislative Research, **Mr Peter Rimmele**, who is the current resident representative to India of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and **Mr Pankaj Madan** of KAS.

He welcomed members of KAS, ORF and NGPL and all the online viewers. He introduced the moderator and all the panel members. He also introduced **Mr Peter Rimmele**, Resident Representative to India of KAS and requested him to deliver the introductory remarks.

Introductory Remarks

Mr. Peter Rimmele, Resident Representative to India of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)



Mr Peter Rimmele began his address referring to a claim made in a leading German magazine that Covid-19 is the hour of the executive. He highlighted the reading in the minds of the people that the government is more powerful than the parliament and that the latter is a sort of rubber

stamp that ratifies the executive decisions. This, he said, is a wrong premise and that in Germany, as much as in India, the parliamentarians are the beating hearts of democracy.

He said that in Covid times, critics fear, that the German parliament, the Bundestag, would yield its powers to an overbearing executive under the pretence of a national emergency. “In times of need, the government obviously must act quickly. But that does not mean that the Bundestag will eschew its responsibility. Also, whatever decision the cabinet made can only stand as long as the national parliament grants its finance,” he clarified.

He added that the lawmakers acted quickly and across most major parties to enact rules to allow a quick resumption of plenary and committee sessions and that the leading politicians of the governing factions have publicly vowed that they would not waver to rescind emergency provisions once the crisis abates.

He lamented the fact that nearly in all democratic societies, the thought of the powerless legislature is so deeply ingrained and warned that this belief sets a dangerous precedent. He juxtaposed Parliamentary system with Presidential system and pointed out that there are enough checks and balances in the parliamentary system. In the Presidential system, he said, the interchange of personnel between the executive and legislature is rare and often prohibited, unlike in a parliamentary system, where it is actively encouraged.

He cited the examples of United States and Brazil which have presidential systems and where the antagonistic relationship between executive and legislature did not help the latter – rather, it empowered authoritarian leaning presidents to blame the legislature for everything bad. “In a confrontation between one charismatic leader and hundreds of largely anonymous MPs, the legislature is much more at a loss than it could ever be under a more harmonious parliamentary system,” he said.

He concluded his address with a strong endorsement of parliamentarism and said that both India and Germany are shining examples where Parliamentary democracy thrives strongly and that this is a privilege bestowed upon the nation by its voters.

Opening & Closing Remarks by the Moderator

M R MADHAVAN, Co-Founder, & President, PRS Legislative Research



Mr M R Madhavan – Co-Founder & President, PRS Legislative Research moderated the panel discussion. He highlighted the three main functions of Parliament as:

- ♣ Enactment of all laws
- ♣ Checking the actions of the government on a daily basis
- ♣ Responsibility towards the financial aspects of the government

He said, “Parliament has to function for the legislature to be accountable to the people and to provide legitimacy to the functioning of the government. As India is fortunate to have a multi-party democracy, each party has its own views and these can be discussed and debated in the parliament. In the normal course, Parliament’s monsoon session should commence in 3rd or 4th week of July but nothing has been scheduled yet. Currently, he pointed out, the nation faces three major crises as below:

- ♣ Health crisis arising out of Covid-19
- ♣ Economic crisis as a fallout of Covid-19
- ♣ Border crisis with China.

Considering the extraordinary ground situation as stated above, Parliament should have been convened by now, he pointed out and noted that even parliamentary committees have not met. “Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures,” he stressed. He listed out many countries where Parliaments have met in the current Covid situation and details of which are available in the inter-parliamentary union’s

portal ipu.org. He regretted that India's name does not figure in the list because Indian Parliament has not met during the current crisis.

He cited the examples of UK, Canada, France, Italy, Japan and South Korea where the parliamentarians have met in some form or another and he elaborated on the same: In UK, they follow a hybrid model of having offline mode for parliament meeting with social distancing in place and each representative provided with a large TV and secured cameras and online mode for committee meetings; Canada has Covid committees in which all MPs find a place and these committees meet regularly through remote in digital mode; In France, they conduct limited meetings in which they take up 10 questions a day; Italy conducts remote meetings in spite of their nation suffering very heavily due to Covid-19; Japan and South Korea have offline meetings with social distancing.

He acknowledged that in UK, most of the MPs can drive down to Parliament as they are located within 20 km travelling distance from the Parliament, while in India, because of the geographic dispersion, the parliamentarians cannot travel to and from Delhi, in the light of travel restrictions in place. He elicited from the panellists their views on how we can go about in ensuring that parliament and its various committees can meet either in offline or online modes.

In his concluding remarks, Mr Madhavan highlighted that all the panellists were very positive in their approach and they all agreed on the following:

- ♣ Parliamentary standing committees should be convened without further delay; this can be done digitally and if possible, through offline meetings. Our Parliament is already technology enabled.
- ♣ Parliament must be convened; the government has to deliberate on how it can be done and should decide.
- ♣ We can learn from how other Parliaments around the world function, their outcome and challenges.

We have never seen a pandemic of this magnitude since independence. So we need to pool in our thoughts and find a way out to see that Parliament functions and democracy in India is alive. Where there is a will, there is a way.

Extract of the Panel Discussion

N K PREMACHANDRAN, Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha



Mr N K Premachandran pointed out that there has been no meeting of Parliament since 27 March 2020. It is a big gap, he reckoned, in view of the various highly critical issues that came up since- the pandemic management; NRIs stranded abroad and who want to return home; Indo-China and Indo-Nepal border issues; financial package announcement, etc.

He observed that article 123 has been invoked and many unilateral decisions have been taken and important legislations made by the government under the ordinance route and which ought to be discussed in the parliament-for instance, changes made in the essential commodities act and the announcement of Covid relief package of Rs 20 lakh crores.

He stressed that it is highly essential that parliament must meet, more so in these challenging times and suggested various options like trying out video conferences and meeting of parliament on alternate days with 50% attendance on each day to ensure social distancing.

When the moderator Mr Madhavan pointed out that Mr Premachandran is considered an authority on Parliamentary rules and procedures and sought his opinion on the provisions in the Rule Book on convening parliament in a place other than the Parliament house, Mr Premachandran said that the speaker has powers to do so and he has to notify the change of place.

However, the present rules do not provide for online / digital meetings over internet but he added that the rules need to be amended. The speaker has a lot of authority and he can invoke inherent powers to ensure that parliament meets, he pointed out.

Mr Premachandran felt that there will be connectivity issues in online meetings but he stated that they can be somehow managed. He said that virtual meetings will not be as good as meeting in the Parliament House which gives a totally different ambience.

He resented the trend of present day governments showing reluctance to face the parliament and to extend its working days. He contrasted this scenario to that of earlier days when Prime Ministers like Nehru and Vajpayee would be keen to take part in, watch and comment on the parliamentary proceedings. "It requires political will to face the parliament," he said.

In his concluding remarks, he observed that running the government without parliament sessions and parliamentary committee meetings does not bode well for our democracy. He warned that the government would become autocratic as 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Whether the rules permit or not, online meetings as an option has to be tried out on experimental basis at least for six months, he pleaded and said: where there is a will, there will be a way out.

NARESH GUJRAL, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha



Mr Naresh Gujral was very particular that parliament should meet for minimum 100 days in a year for democracy to be effective in India. He said that he moved a Private Member's bill in 2017 to this effect, as many days are lost in disruptions. Unfortunately, the bill was not passed, he regretted. He stated that if sizeable number of members want the parliament to be convened, then it should be possible to convene it.

In the present Covid crisis, we should explore various options to ensure that the parliament and the parliamentary committees meet, he said. He felt conducting an interactive, online meeting for 540 members may not be practically feasible. He suggested that an air-conditioned indoor stadium like the Talkatora stadium in Delhi can be used for meeting of the Lok Sabha and Central Hall of Parliament house for Rajya Sabha meetings, to implement social distancing.

He felt that Parliamentary Committee meetings can very well happen in offline mode with social distancing, as the maximum members in each committee are 30 or less. However, if members are reluctant to travel, these can happen through virtual meetings, he suggested. He stressed the extreme importance of the standing committees where lot of debates take place and members rise above their political affiliations to safeguard national interests and it is expected that every bill has to go through the respective committees. On an average, about 60 to 70% of the bills go through the committees now, he pointed out.

On the objection being raised in some quarters that if the committee meetings happen in online mode, then secrecy will be lost, Mr Naresh Gujral countered with

his view that there is nothing secret about the discussions, most of which are available in the public domain.

He dismissed objections that some of the parliamentarians may not be tech-savvy in embracing online meetings and said that they can take the help of their private secretaries to familiarise with technology. Citing that there is no immediate end to the Covid crisis, he raised a pertinent question that if there is going to be no meeting of parliamentarians, then, of what use will their numerical strength be? Therefore, he pleaded, that instead of looking for excuses, we can have healthy debates on how, when and where the MPs should meet but most importantly, they should meet without further delay. He said that even if they meet for a short period, they can work for extended hours during such period and make up for the time lost.

In his concluding remarks, Mr Naresh Gujral made a fervent pitch to convene the parliament and its various committees at the earliest. For democracy to survive, this is of utmost importance, he pleaded and suggested that our Prime Minister, Speaker, Chairman of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and even the Chief Justice of India can team up, put their heads down, debate and suggest a way out. Since Independence, we have not come across such a major crisis, he noted and said that with so many burning issues, it is paramount that we arrive at some feasible options and keep our democracy alive and kicking.

PROF G RAMESH, Professor - Public Policy, IIM Bangalore



Prof G Ramesh pointed out that the first virtual meeting in the history of the Canada Parliament, held in the month of April 2020 saw 280 members out of 338 participate, hinting that virtual meetings can be successful. If some of the members in rural areas encounter connectivity issues, they can go to the district collector's office where the infrastructure is better and participate in the meetings.

If we go ahead with conventional meetings, then we should take care of elderly politicians who are above 60 years of age, he said. He also observed that when parliament works, all government departments work in a frenzied way. It has to be seen how the support staff can be mobilised in these Covid times.

Prof Ramesh cautioned that if the venue were to be shifted to a new place other than the present Parliament House, there are certain risk factors, which must be evaluated and we need to provide flawless security to the parliamentarians.

He was firm in saying that technology and connectivity should not be a major issue as we now do many mission critical jobs including online banking, online stock exchange operations and conducting competitive examinations in a secured manner. Virtual meetings can be more productive than the normal face-to-face meetings and they may even be preferred in future, he said and predicted that some of the activities now done offline may shift to online mode in future, thanks to the pandemic experience.

He was firm in his conviction that parliamentary committee meetings should have commenced online by now. Similarly, state assemblies can also meet, he said.

In his concluding remarks, Prof Ramesh said that the parliamentary committees should meet immediately; if members do a brainstorming and come up with ideas, there can be a consensus and way forward. He also suggested that we should learn from the experience of other countries where parliaments have met in recent times.

Q & A : Answers by Parliamentarians

Q: Will not lack of technology literacy deny some of the parliamentarians, the chance to participate in the discussions?

A (Naresh Gujral): The parliamentarians have their private secretaries who are all tech-savvy. So that should not be a problem. To me, the main issue is technology. Do we have the technology to conduct meetings with 540 members? Nobody could think of this calamity. If the cabinet approaches the President, he can intervene and take some action for the meeting to take place. All said and done, the Parliament must meet.

Q: Is our technology ready for online meetings of parliament? Are there chances that members may say they did not vote because of connectivity issue?

A (Naresh Gujral): We must realise that Covid has no end date. So the technology available now may not be the best but it has to be tried out. Of course, there will be challenges, not only in India but anywhere in the world. This parliament has four more years of life. If there is no vaccine in the next four years, will we go on like this, without meetings? Then the government will have no accountability. They can keep on passing ordinance after ordinance. Where is our democracy? What is the way forward?

A (N K Premachandran): The Kerala Government decided to start classes through a television channel for all the classes –from 1st to 12th. We found out that 2,62,000 students did not have TV in their houses. Politicians, student organisations, and social organisations ran a big campaign and now almost all these 2,62,000 students have a TV in their homes. TV broadcast can be easily managed but net connectivity is a very big problem, even in the national capital of Delhi. Kerala which is such a populous state does not have 4G network. We must use this pandemic experience to upgrade our technology.

Q: Will meetings through webinars improve the productivity of the parliament, as walkouts can be avoided?

A (N K Premachandran): I think webinars will not be as good as the conventional meetings. In Parliament House, the emotions of the members, the interventions and various other factors create a completely different ambience while technology has many limitations. Walkouts may still be possible in virtual mode also! The member can protest, press a button and still leave the meeting!

A (Naresh Gujral): Why should we think of only protest in the parliament? Healthy debates too happen.

Q: We lose many hours of parliament due to disruptions. Will meetings through webinar bring out the time lost in offline / physical meetings?

A (Naresh Gujral): Definitely, with virtual parliament, there will be less of disruptions. But the issue is whether we have the technology to run a virtual parliament and how quickly we can marshal this. If technology is in place, then it all depends on the government of the day to make use of it.

A (N K Premachandran): Webinars may help in increasing the number of effective days. But in the conventional setting, the number of days the parliament functions depends absolutely on the political will of the government. Most of the governments do not want to have frequent meetings of the parliament as they do not want to face uncomfortable questions. It was different when Nehru and Vajpayee were Prime Ministers and they took keen interest in the proceedings. I have seen Vajpayee walk into the House when it was in session. He would watch the discussions, make a humorous comment and enliven the proceedings.



Question by Mr Peter Rimmele, KAS

Q: Where there is a will, there is a way. Technology is today available, to have 540 members on a virtual platform and it can be organised. Therefore, don't you think that the willpower seems to be weak? Is it up to the government to decide on parliament meetings and not the other way around?

A (Naresh Gujral): Now the government decides on parliament meetings. My Private Member's bill was to empower the parliamentarians, rather than the government. If majority of the members wanted the parliament to be convened, then that should prevail over the government decision. Had it been passed, the situation today would have been different.

A (N K Premachandran): In India, the Government enjoys the majority of the Parliament and therefore, they decide on the number of days the parliament should function. If the government shows political will, they can organise for even 120 days of parliament in session.

Vote of Thanks

Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd), VSM, Executive Director, MMA



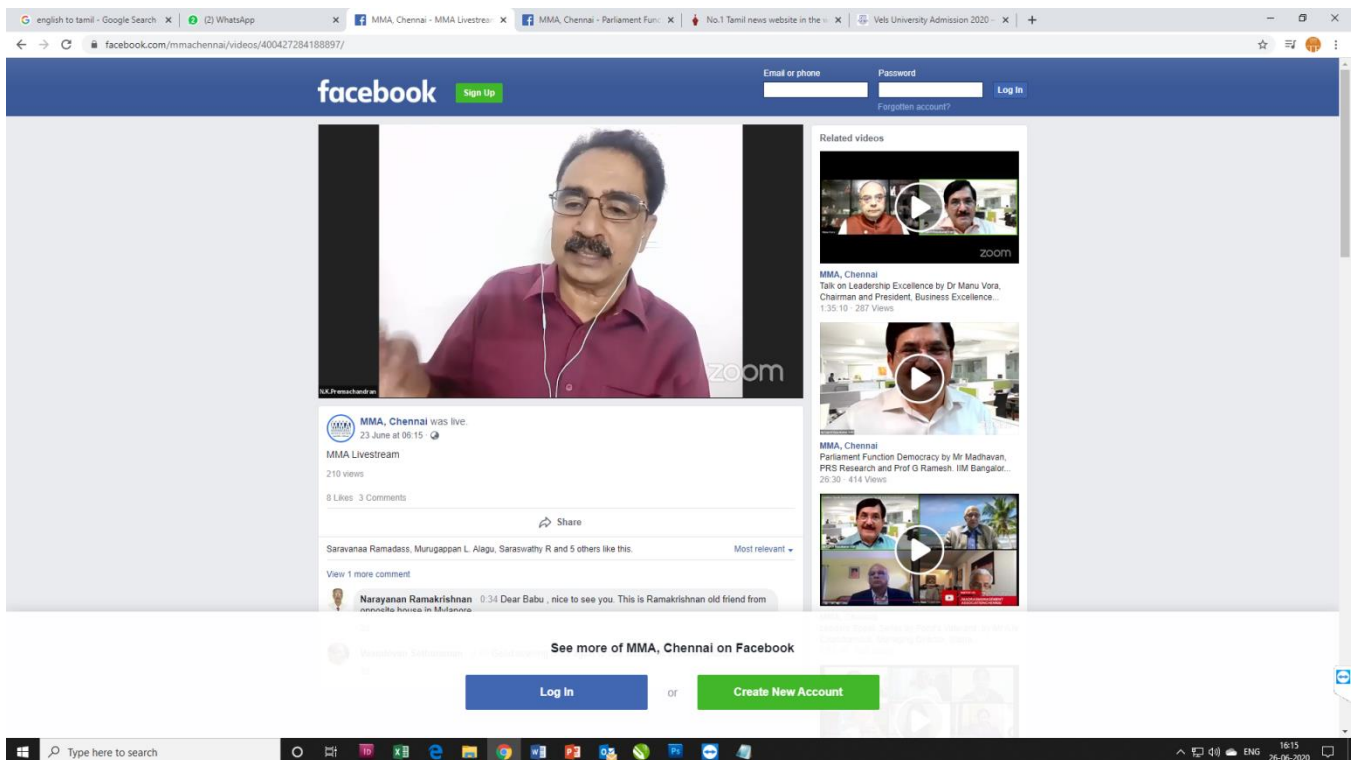
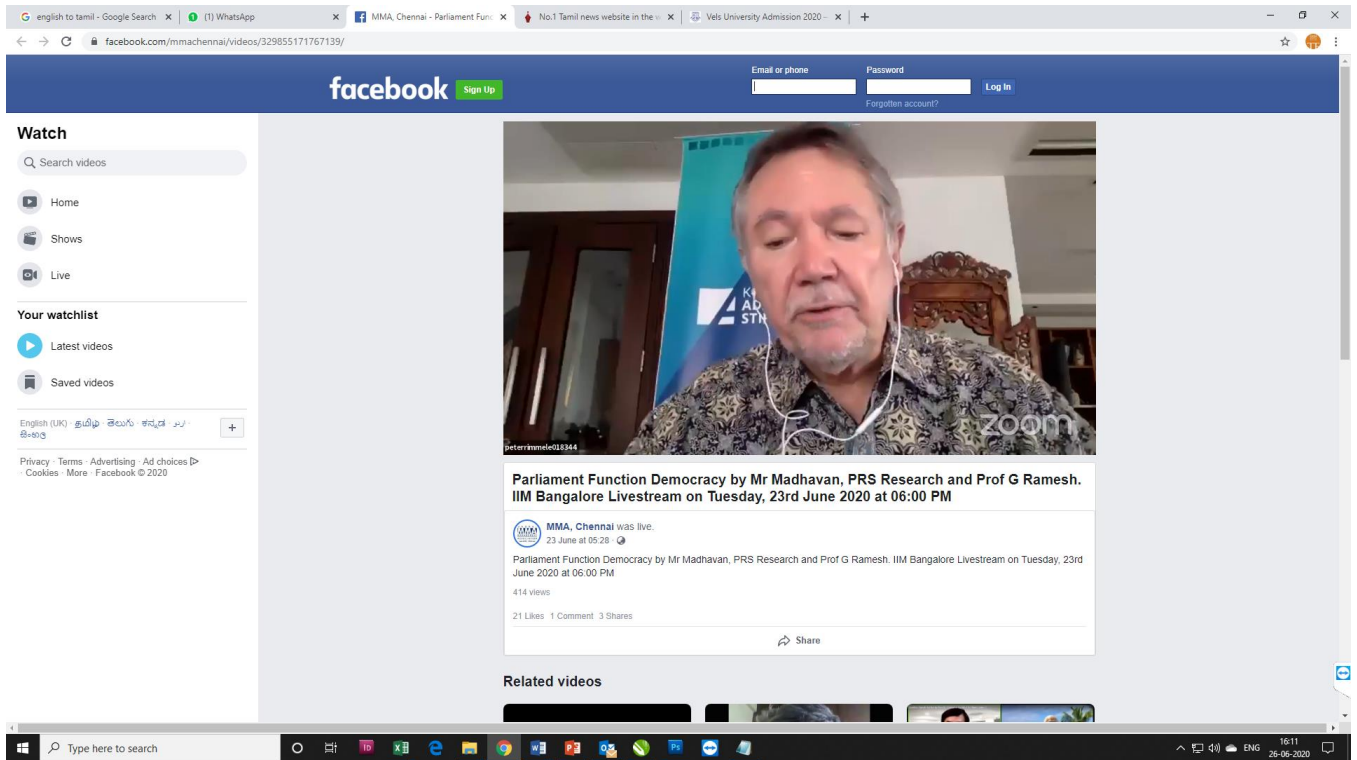
Group Captain R Vijayakumar (Retd) thanked the panellists for their active participation and sharing their views that reflected their unflinching commitment to Parliamentary Democracy. He thanked the moderator **Mr M R Madhavan** for anchoring the panel discussion in a stimulating manner.

He thanked **Mr Peter Rimmele**, Resident Representative to India of KAS for his introductory remarks and the great support extended to MMA. He thanked **Mr Pankaj Madan** of KAS, members of MMA, ORF and NGPL and all the online viewers before signing off.

The event concluded at 7.30 PM.

Photos

Photographs taken during the Live Panel Discussion on the theme: "Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times"



Browser tabs: (1) WhatsApp | Parliament Function Demo | +

Address bar: youtube.com/watch?v=49O2avTnaqk&feature=youtu.be

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- RAO CHANDRASEKHAR: Youtube streaming lost at 49 minute
- trichy jayaraman: no connection
- Dr.Pradeep Jain: good evening everyone

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Neha aneja	Sruti Chintala R...	Sumiya (S.A.E.C)	Shryansh Jain	Shivani D
Mohan MMA	Lakshmanan	Sundar MMA	mk muthuvelu	ashish gupta
S Nagarajan	Rajaram	Josana Emilin	Vasanth A	karthick
Vasanthi Ranga...	Hithaeishini	Raghu Sankar G	K.V.Ganesan	Tathastu Parashar

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Links for the Recording

Parliamentary Democracy in Covid Times

We are pleased to share that the recording of the event is available for viewing through the links indicated below:

Website:

www.liveibc.com/mma/

YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/49O2avTnaqk>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/mmachennai/videos/329855171767139/>

<https://www.facebook.com/mmachennai/videos/400427284188897/>

←→
The response to the event was excellent and a larger number of viewers logged in live through Zoom, MMA Live webinar, YouTube and Facebook.

Total Number of Participants:

Zoom: 90

YouTube: 150

Facebook: 624

MMA Webinar: 350

Total number of participants at the event – 1214

The Partners

About Madras Management Association (MMA)

Madras Management Association (MMA) was established in 1956 with the prime objective of promoting management education, training and development activities in this part of the country. The vision of MMA is “To be the Fountainhead of World class Management Excellence in India”.

Over the past six decades, MMA has striven for development and nurturing management expertise, combining Indian ethos with International Management thoughts and practices. MMA has contributed immensely to the enhancement of management capability in this part of the country, and in particular Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. MMA has over 7000 corporate houses, industries, professionals, academics and executives on its rolls as members. MMA annually organizes about 725 executive development activities, including seminars for top management with a total participation of fifty nine thousand executives and entrepreneurs.

MMA is the largest affiliate association of All India Management Association (AIMA) in the country and has been adjudged as the Best Management Association in India by AIMA for ten times in a row including the “National Excellence Award” for the year 2017-18.

The activities of MMA are planned to achieve managerial excellence in the functioning of industries and professional managers in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. In this direction, MMA chapters have been established at various towns in Tamil Nadu mainly to cater to the needs of SMEs. Nine such MMA Local Chapters at Ambur, Attur, Erode, Hosur, Namakkal, Salem, Sri City, Trichy and Puducherry are functioning effectively.

Apart from corporate leaders, MMA has, in its Managing Committee, the Vice Chancellors of Madras University & Anna University, the Directors of IIT Madras and IFMR and the Chief Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu, as members.

OUR VISION

To be the Fountainhead of World Class Management Excellence in India

OUR MISSION

- Synthesise Indian Ethos with international management thought
- Be a reservoir of expertise in management
- Inspire individuals to actualise their potential
- Nurture creativity and originality

About Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation, with a strong presence throughout Germany and all over the world. Freedom, justice and solidarity are the basic underlying principles of the work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

With more than 100 offices abroad and projects in over 120 countries, it makes a unique contribution to the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and social market economy. To foster peace and freedom KAS encourages a continuous dialogue at the national and international levels.

Human beings in their distinctive dignity and with their rights and responsibilities are at the heart of its work. KAS is guided by the conviction that human beings are the starting point in the effort to bring about social justice and democratic freedom while promoting sustainable economic activity. By bringing people together who embrace their responsibilities in society, KAS develops active networks in the political and economic spheres as well as in society itself. The guidance it provides on the basis of political know-how and knowledge helps to shape the globalisation process along more socially equitable, ecologically sustainable and economically efficient lines.

KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organizations building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, we seek to intensify political cooperation at the national and international levels on the foundations of our objectives and values. Together with our partners we contribute to the creation of an international order that enables every country to develop in freedom and under its own responsibility.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has organised its program priorities in India into the following working areas:

1. Foreign and Security Policy
2. Economic and Energy Policy
3. Rule of Law and local Self-Government
4. Social and Political Training and Development
5. Indo-German Parliamentary Dialogue programmes

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's India office takes great pride in its cooperation with Indian partner organisations who implement jointly curated projects and programmes.

About Observer Research Foundation (ORF)

The Beginning

ORF began its journey in 1990 at the juncture of ideation tempered by pragmatism. During the period of India's transition to a new engagement with the international economic order, several challenges emerged, evoking a need for an independent forum that could critically examine the problems facing the country and help develop coherent policy responses. ORF was thus formed, and brought together, for the first time, leading Indian economists and policymakers to present the agenda for India's economic reforms.

What We Are Today

Propelled by the process of reforms initiated in the 1990s, ORF, over the past 30 years of its existence, has effectively narrated and participated in India's story as the country has acquired an unmistakable global footprint. From primarily looking inward and engaging with domestic reforms, to gradually forging global partnerships, ORF today plays a seminal role in building political and policy consensus that enables India to interact with the world.

As new powers re-emerge onto the global stage, existing systems face challenges of agreeing on a new set of rules to control and regulate the new frontiers of space, the oceans, the internet and the human mind. The world continues, also, to navigate persisting concerns related to security and strategy, economy and development, energy and resources. As India begins to play a larger role in the 21st century, ORF continues to push normative boundaries, bring new ideas into the policy discourse and provide a platform to a new generation of thinkers. It is supported in its mission by leading intellectuals, academicians, policymakers, business leaders, institutions and civil society actors.

ORF's aim is to encourage voices from all quarters, geographies and gender, both those that fall in and those that question dominant narratives. It is this plurality of thought and voice — in a country of over a billion individuals — that ORF seeks to carry abroad, while simultaneously bringing contemporary global debates to India.

The Mandate

ORF seeks to lead and aid policy thinking towards building a strong and prosperous India in a fair and equitable world. It sees India as a country poised to play a leading role in the knowledge age — a role in which it shall be increasingly called upon to proactively ideate in order to shape global conversations, even as it sets course along its own trajectory of long-term sustainable growth.

ORF helps discover and inform India's choices. It carries Indian voices and ideas to forums shaping global debates. It provides non-partisan, independent, well-researched analyses and inputs to diverse decision-makers in governments, business communities, and academia and to civil society around the world.

Our mandate is to conduct in-depth research, provide inclusive platforms and invest in tomorrow's thought leaders today.
