

Values for a Virtual Parliament

15 April 2020

The Samara Centre was pleased to learn that Government House Leader Pablo Rodriguez has asked House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota to examine the possibility of a virtual Parliament. We were also encouraged that Members decided at the extraordinary House of Commons sitting on April 11 to task the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs with examining how members can fulfill their duties while the House is adjourned.

A time of supreme national danger and public anxiety, when the government must hastily launch massive health and economic support measures, is a time for Parliament to be a venue for open debate and discussion. If Canadians are to trust that their concerns are being represented, then scrutiny of the government's actions must come from their elected representatives, not just the media.

But not since the "Spanish flu" pandemic, when Parliament didn't meet from May 1918 until February 1919, has there been such a physical risk to parliamentarians gathering. Fortunately, this Parliament has technological tools available to it that the 1918 Parliament did not. We therefore encourage Parliament do what so many other workplaces are doing: innovate in a hurry.

On March 24/25th and again on April 11, Parliament adapted to the pandemic by holding in-person sessions with a skeleton crew of MPs and Senators that lasted just the few hours necessary to pass emergency legislation. The sessions accomplished what they needed to, while meeting public health requirements—no small feat. But they nevertheless illustrated some of the intrinsic challenges of physically convening Parliament at this time. Participation was limited to a small number of senior MPs, some parliamentarians complained of not having enough time to read the draft legislation, and entire regions of the country went unrepresented. Meeting only to legislate also rules out ongoing scrutiny. And while a number of committees are now meeting via teleconference, the majority of MPs are not involved in their activities. In the short-term, a virtual Parliament should be a better alternative to more ad hoc, day-long emergency sessions.

The virtual committees are showing that there are technical issues, like simultaneous translation and privacy, for a virtual Parliament to figure out. But these are challenges of ingenuity that can be overcome to support the important values that Parliament expresses. Indeed we have seen [other legislatures](#) launched online already.

Equally important, however, is to ensure that a virtual Parliament avoids some of the challenges seen in the emergency session (or indeed in the House on a pre-pandemic day). The Samara Centre therefore proposes the following value principles for the virtual Parliament, if it comes to pass. Our virtual Parliament should be:

- ***Open and Inclusive—All Members can participate***

The emergency sittings of Parliament so far each consisted of just three dozen MPs, hand-picked by their leaders. MPs from some parties reported that they were instructed to stay home. Some virtual Parliaments have applied the same principle—in Wales, for example, where they realized that moving parliamentary debates onto Zoom required limiting the participants. Although making some practical sense, in our context it would also further accelerate [the disempowerment of individual MPs](#). If a ceiling on the number of participants is contemplated, Members must have a mechanism to participate without being chosen by their leaders. For example, along with those selected by the parties, additional spaces could be reserved which MPs could petition the Speaker to occupy.

- ***Informed and Supported – Members see items for debate far enough in advance to read and analyse them, and are supported by Parliamentary staff***

Members' absence from Ottawa has disrupted the usual flows of information. Parliament has also had to pass measures on incredibly tight time frames. If votable measures come before the virtual Parliament, Members simply must see what's proposed with enough time to develop informed opinions—and consult with constituents and experts. This is doubly true if participation is limited, with Members requiring lead time to ensure their spot in the debate. Moreover, MPs and Senators would presumably have only limited access to their usual supports—like clerks or Library of Parliament researchers—from their living rooms. Those organs of Parliament must be resourced to ensure they can meet Parliamentarians' needs directly and on time, despite the physical distance. Time and help are essential if the virtual Parliament is going to provide high-quality scrutiny.

- ***Responsive – The virtual Parliament will debate the issues that matter to Canadians.***

It's unlikely that the virtual Parliament will see much legislation, and almost nothing that isn't integrally connected to the pandemic. We imagine its primary role would be ongoing scrutiny of the pandemic response, creating opportunities to creatively incorporate public input into the Parliamentary agenda. We should see more “take note” debates (where MPs give their views on a topic, but don't take binding votes) on aspects of the pandemic response—or indeed, on anything that Canadians think ought to be discussed. Parliament already has an electronic petitions system; with minor changes, Parliamentarians could be required to publicly debate petitions that collect enough signatures. These changes make sense in normal circumstances, but could be particularly useful to give Canadians a simple measure of control in this time.

- ***Transparent and Participatory – Invite the public into Parliament in unique ways.***

The miracle of technology means that virtual Parliament could actually seem closer and more accessible to Canadians than the physical Parliament does. Of course, the proceedings should be made public and streamable, but we could go further. Members should also be looking to deepen and widen their constituent engagement using new digital tools. MPs owe huge service to their constituents right now—broadcasting credible information, monitoring the pandemic's effects in their communities, raising their constituents' concerns, and helping sustain their communities through this isolating moment. To do those things effectively, they

will need help from the institution—which, if well resourced, can equip Members with tools and expertise in digital public engagement.

When Centre Block burned to the ground in 1916, the House of Commons reconvened at a nearby museum [*the following afternoon*](#). We can move fast if we have to. A virtual Parliament won't be perfect, but it can replace some essential facets of scrutiny and representation. Samara Centre researchers encourage the House and the Speakers to think big, and keep the values of our representative democracy top of mind.