



**Submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC)  
by Equal Voice**

For the Committee's Study of Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Modernizing Parliament – Considerations Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Equal Voice (EV) ([www.equalvoice.ca](http://www.equalvoice.ca)) is pleased to see the government and opposition parties looking at ways to hold virtual meetings of Parliament to continue serving Canadians, while also protecting the health and safety of MPs, their families, and their communities.

There are situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic we are living through now, where everyone is impacted to varying degrees by extraordinary circumstances. But we can't forget the very real situations beyond this pandemic where politicians are forced to make the difficult decision between their own health and well-being, as well as their family's, and going into their workplace. We hope the solutions the Committee recommends for the current crisis will be adapted for the future.

As part of EV's [Systemic Change initiative](#), we have been calling for political parties to work together to modernize our Parliament, to make it more accessible as a workplace for women. One of the most common reasons women give for not running for elected office is the time away from family, including care-giving/childcare responsibilities, and today women in politics face prejudices regarding their social role as primary caretakers. This is particularly true for those with young children or who are hoping to start a family. Care-related duties and the social expectations of these responsibilities remain a barrier for women's political participation.

Offering legislators more flexible options to participate in legislative activities, from voting to debate to committee meetings, where circumstances may require it, is an important step towards creating a gender-sensitive Parliament. Allowing for remote participation, electronic voting, and other reasonable measures for those who shouldn't, or can't, make the trip to Ottawa would be a concrete step towards making the House of Commons more accessible, and arguably more attractive as a career path for both women and men.

Equal Voice recommends the following measures be considered for the current circumstances arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and remain in place for extraordinary personal circumstances after this pandemic:

- **Permitting remote participation for chamber discussions and committee meetings.**

Most legislatures in Canada stream legislative proceedings, including discussions in the chamber and in committee, and allow the public to watch or listen in real time. In many cases, committees call on witnesses to testify via teleconferencing services.



Canada's vastness also means weekly travel to and from the riding to Ottawa can take hours, or even days, which poses a significant challenge for some members, especially those dealing with personal or family health challenges. The opportunity to video conference, for example, may enable a sitting Member in the late stages of pregnancy to continue to work when they are unable to fly.

Other jurisdictions are already implementing virtual options for those who may not be able to travel. The Legislative Assembly of Alberta's Standing Orders state "A Member may participate in a meeting of a committee of the Assembly by means of telephone or other communication facilities that permit all Members participating in the meeting to hear each other if all the members of the committee consent, and a Member participating in a meeting by those means is deemed for all purposes to be present at that meeting."

The legislatures of British Columbia, Alberta, Yukon and the Northwest Territories allow Members to participate in Committee meetings using technology. Some legislatures encourage committees to meet electronically during constituency weeks, which can in some cases replace in-person meetings, where discussions are time-sensitive and cannot be held until a sitting week. This eliminates unnecessary travel, and the time delays that result from it.

- **Allowing proxies to cast votes for absent legislators who are not able to vote in person.**

Proxy votes represent one way to also facilitate pregnancy, maternity, or parental leave without upsetting the party balance and a Member's ability to cast votes of importance to Canadians and their constituents. It is important to have explicit guidelines on what motions are appropriate and what are not appropriate for proxy voting, where applicable.

Some motions may require legislators to have participated in the debate and discussion, prior to casting their vote on the motion. Legislators should also appoint a colleague who they trust and hold similar views to be their proxy. The absent member and the proxy-designate should have a discussion about how they wish to vote in the upcoming proceedings.

In Australia, during parental leave, a Member may not vote, but can be granted a 'pair', which is an unofficial arrangement organized by party whips where a Member of the opposing party also does not vote. Australia has also allowed nursing mothers to vote by proxy since 2008, limited only in the case of third readings on bills that propose a change to the Constitution.

In New Zealand, proxy votes are more flexible and used more frequently. Most votes are party votes, where party votes are cast as a block and up to 25% of the party can be absent. Members are able to 'give' their vote to another Member for particular legislative business or for a particular period of time. The Standing Orders indicate that Members must be at Parliament, away for business related to Committees, or be granted leave by the Speaker. Reasons to be granted leave include illness or "other family cause of a personal nature".

In the UK, an MP delayed her C-section in order to be physically present to vote, precipitating a decision that MPs who have had a baby or adopted a child should for a period of time be entitled, but not required, to vote by proxy.



Parliaments function just as well in these countries as in Canada, and we recommend that the Canadian Parliament allow proxy voting in defined circumstances.

- **Proxy votes OR votes cast by electronic means should be recorded in official records, and should be pre-arranged.**

Members should provide the dates of their absence, so that the legislature and legislators are informed of the arrangement. Other than the absent member and proxy designate, party whip(s) and the Speaker should be participating in the proxy voting arrangement. The assembly should be informed of the arrangement to promote transparency and good faith between legislators.

Legislatures and legislators need to be held accountable to the public, keeping records of proxy voting arrangements. These records can be used to collect data on proxy voting and how to improve the policy to suit the legislature's needs

## Conclusion

Parliament, provincial and territorial legislatures, and other formal political institutions are workplaces that should be responsive to the needs of those who work there. While virtual meetings are not intended to replace in-person sittings when circumstances allow for it, having the option available is critical to the health of our democracy, and for increasing women's representation in our political institutions. Allowing MPs to work and vote remotely when personal or collective circumstances require it, and the much-needed modernization of our legislatures, can only make our democracy better.

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## About Equal Voice

Equal Voice is a national, bilingual, multi-partisan organization dedicated to electing more women to all levels of political office in Canada. Equal Voice is the only not-for-profit in North America that works with and engages directly with all political parties to elect more women to all levels of government. Equal Voice works within existing systems to determine how all players are affected - while also considering the partisan positions, and finding common ground between them.

Equal Voice has recently concluded a three-year project funded by the Department for Women and Gender Equality, which worked toward achieving gender-sensitive parliaments and a culture conducive to retaining more women in politics. The report includes research findings, lessons learned, and policy recommendations for legislatures in Canada. While each jurisdiction is unique in its governance, parliamentary rules, and culture, the goal of the Systemic Change initiative is to identify and address some of the key systemic barriers within Canadian legislative assemblies that contribute to the under-representation of women.

A key recommendation of the report is modernization of Parliament. The report can be found at [https://www.equalvoice.ca/systemic\\_change](https://www.equalvoice.ca/systemic_change)



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