



April 8, 2020

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez, P.C., M.P.  
Honoré–Mercier  
House of Commons  
Suite 485, Confederation Building  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. Rodriguez:

Thank you for your correspondence of April 5, in which you seek advice on the ability of the House of Commons Administration to support and facilitate virtual sittings of the House during these unprecedented times.

In anticipation of such a request, the Administration has been investigating possible technological solutions and procedural options. As per the terms of the motion adopted by the House on March 24, the Administration has already begun to support teleconferences, and will soon be supporting videoconferences for virtual meetings of the Standing Committee on Health and the Standing Committee on Finance.

Following the most recent adjournment of the House of Commons, the first priority of the Administration has been to identify critical products, services and operations required to support Members and for the Administration to maintain essential services to Members, even while many of its employees are working remotely. The Administration has done so by closely following and consulting with other parliaments on this issue, given that many are facing the same reality. In addition, the Administration continues to consult with national and international security partners, as well as to work with technology allies and leaders in the field of virtual collaboration.

So far, these extensive consultations have confirmed that other legislatures are taking a secure, considered and incremental approach to implementing solutions allowing for virtual meetings and sittings. For the most part, their approach is to first enable meetings of their committees, and then to look at ways to adopt and expand these solutions to support virtual sittings.

I understand that at this time, in addition to supporting the work of committees, the House of Commons Administration and its partners continue to support other events, including press conferences, caucus meetings, Cabinet committees, emergency sittings of the House of Commons, as well as other activities that have been deemed essential.

While the pandemic creates new challenges, I know that the Administration will continue to do everything it can to support the needs of the House and its Members. Going forward, I have mandated Digital Services and Real Property, working in partnership with Procedural Services, to collaborate with leading public- and private-sector partners with the goal of allowing the possibility for the House to hold virtual sittings within the next four weeks. Other parliaments, such as the UK House of Commons, are working with a similar timeline. To be sure, there are many challenges inherent to holding virtual meetings with such a large number of participants, not to mention the inevitable adjustments to well-established procedures and practices. Any changes made to enable new ways to assist Members in participating in the sittings of the House must take legal requirements into consideration. They must also take into account proceedings that lend themselves more easily to this virtual environment, along with the possibility of maintaining a limited physical presence in the Chamber, where this makes sense.

Finally, you will find attached information regarding the current context and related considerations provided to me by the House Administration.

Please be assured that the Administration—and I as Speaker—understand the essential and fundamental role that the House of Commons and its Members play both in advancing the legislative prerogatives of the government and in having it held accountable to Canadians, even during these difficult circumstances. The House of Commons Administration is committed to supporting Members of Parliament in any way it can.

Sincerely,

Hon. Anthony Rota, M.P.

c.c.: Hon. Candice Bergen, P.C., M.P.  
Mr. Alain Therrien, M.P.  
Mr. Peter Julian, M.P.

Encl.

# INFORMATION NOTE TO THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

**SUBJECT:**

**Virtual HoC Committee and Chamber Meetings in  
Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

## **BACKGROUND**

The House of Commons Administration continues to support Members of Parliament during the current pandemic. This information note contains context and considerations that should be included as part of the Speaker's response to Mr. Rodriguez.

Leveraging our strategic investments in infrastructure and services, we were able to quickly respond to client requirements for remote and secure work. Over the last three weeks, our first priorities were to identify critical products, services and operations that would support the deployment of leading-edge solutions to Members and the Administration to ensure that required personnel are equipped with the right tools to work remotely. The actions taken include:

- Ensuring secure connectivity solutions to the HoC, enabling personnel to access files and resources on our network. This allowed for a seamless transition from on-site activities to teleworking;
- Adding networking and communication capability, boosting capacity for more users;
- Implementing new productivity and monitoring tools to ensure we are proactively addressing issues;
- Ensuring protection from new and evolving security threats;
- Increasing capacity of tele/videoconferencing systems;
- Researching, testing and implementing new collaboration tools to support virtual meetings;
- Configuring and deploying hundreds of Surface devices and laptops with full security and teleworking capabilities to employees;
- Purchasing additional inventory and enabling a ship-to-home option to streamline and expedite delivery on new computers; and
- Allowing for the use of personal printing devices (working with MCM on making concessions for the reimbursement of consumables).

We have now turned our focus to our next priorities, which are to reinstate service levels for certain day-to-day activities and to continue delivering functionality to support the teleworking needs of clients. This includes:

- The mass provisioning of portable devices to enable the next phase of telework;
- The conversion of constituency offices to a managed-computing solution through the MCC project; and
- The evaluation, testing and deployment of new videoconferencing solutions for large-scale remote meetings or sittings (e.g. Zoom, MS Teams, MS Skype, Cisco WebEx).

## **VIRTUAL COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

A motion was adopted by the House of Commons on March 24, 2020, authorizing, during the period the House stands adjourned, the Chair of the Standing Committee on Health (HESA) and the Chair of the Standing Committee on Finance (FINA) to convene meetings via videoconferencing or teleconferencing.

In response to that motion, Digital Services and Real Property (DSRP) established a multidisciplinary team to support these committees and deliver a solution that would allow Members to participate from remote locations.

To date, multiple technology solutions with the capability to enable virtual committee meetings have been assessed. The work done so far to support virtual committees provides essential lessons, and together with existing collaboration technologies adopted by the HoC Administration, offers viable and robust technology solutions.

To date, we have consulted widely with our colleagues in other legislatures, including those in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Taiwan and Brazil. We are also consulting with our national and international security partners and continue to work with technology industry allies and leaders in the field of virtual collaboration.

Furthermore, we can confirm that other legislatures are adopting a secure, considered, and gradual approach. For the most part, they are also starting by enabling the work of their committees, and from there, looking at ways to expand on the same set of technologies to support virtual sittings of their legislature and events.

### **Key considerations**

- a) We are leveraging the same physical spaces, technological infrastructure and human resources used to support physical meetings on Parliament Hill to support virtual committee meetings. This allows the following requirements to be met:
  - Real-time and on-site interpretation services that enable all Members to speak and be heard in both official languages—most legislatures conduct their business in one

language, and for them, interpretation services are used only to facilitate access for foreign dignitaries, witnesses, and visitors;

- Accessible services, with closed captioning in French and English;
  - Secure meetings that meet Members' expectations of privacy;
  - On-site operational support:
    - custodial and facility support staff (HoC, Parliamentary Precinct Operations),
    - procedural clerks (HoC, Procedural Services),
    - technical staff to stage virtual committee meetings, including both pre- and post-meeting support (HoC, Digital Services and Real Property),
    - research staff (Library of Parliament);
- b) As Canada's Chief Public Health Officer continues to ask Canadians to think about the actions they take to stay healthy and prevent the spread of COVID-19, the House of Commons Administration remains committed to ensuring the health and safety of its employees. Virtual committee meetings are made possible with the support of a multidisciplinary team of resources detailed in the previous section. However, given the current pandemic, the House of Commons Administration is operating without its full work force;
- c) In addition to supporting the work of committees, the House of Commons Administration and its partners simultaneously support other events, including press conferences, caucus meetings, Cabinet committees, emergency sittings of the House of Commons, Senate committees, and other activities considered essential.

### **Next steps: virtual committees**

HoC committees will soon be supported with teleconferencing and videoconferencing services. Teleconferencing services are currently being provided to the Board of Internal Economy (BOIE).

Effective the week of April 13, the House of Commons Administration proposes to scale up its service as follows:

- a) Provide tele/videoconferencing services for up to three committee meetings per day, with the ability to stage two of those meetings concurrently (including any scheduled meetings of HESA and FINA, national caucuses and the BOIE); and
- b) Ensure availability of these services during any eight-hour period from Monday to Thursday.

Looking forward, we propose maintaining the four-day, Monday-to-Thursday meeting schedule for eight hours per day, with a maximum of two concurrent meetings. Depending on the approach taken for virtual meetings, (including for example, the number of participating

organizations, witnesses, and spokespersons; the number of concurrent tele/videoconferences; and any forward planning and pre-arrangement of meeting schedules will need to be taken into consideration when assessing additional capacity and capability to support Members working together in committees.

These commitments may be impacted by any activities required to support virtual sittings of the House of Commons.

## **VIRTUAL HOUSE OF COMMONS SITTINGS**

In his April 5, 2020 letter to the Speaker, Government House Leader Pablo Rodriguez sought advice on the ability of the House of Commons Administration to support and facilitate virtual sittings of the House during these unprecedented times.

### **Key considerations**

Our consultations with other legislatures and security and industry experts support the following assumptions:

- A solution that meets our current business processes and proceedings of the House does not exist;
- Adapting our processes to existing technology seems to be a more direct route to achieving our goals;
- Solutions must be configured to meet the House of Commons security management protocols and must be developed following consultation with our national and international security partners;
- The availability of standardized technologies and training for Members in their remote locations is essential. This ensures a positive virtual experience for Members and viewers, and quality service performance outcomes;
- All participating Members must be provided with IT and virtual experience support before, during and after meetings;
- A solution that is attentive to the image of the House of Commons (HoC brand) and the Members is essential, as meeting proceedings are broadcast and made public;
- Any solution must allow for multiple moderators, depending on the number of participants;
- Contingency plans must be in place to support Members who are unable to participate due to connectivity and/or technology issues;
- Proceedings that lend themselves more easily to remote facilitation and participation should be undertaken first. From there, and when Members have gained confidence and

have the ability to participate, it will then be possible to broaden the approach to include additional House proceedings; and

- Integration will need to be performed by HoC Administration personnel to meet all House sitting requirements, including real-time interpretation in both official languages as well as the live and on-demand broadcast of proceedings for all Canadians, made available through ParLVU and ourcommons.ca, with access to French, English, and floor (spoken) channels, and distribution to CPAC for cable and satellite distribution throughout Canada and to other media organizations for rebroadcast.

### **Next steps: virtual House of Commons sittings**

Our next step is to establish a multidisciplinary team to identify solutions that would allow Members to participate from remote locations.

The House of Commons will continue to adopt a secure, considered and gradual approach, and expand the same set of technologies used to support virtual committee meetings and other virtual meetings, sittings and events of a similar nature.