



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

THE SPEAKER
LE PRÉSIDENT

OTTAWA, CANADA
K1A 0A6

May 11, 2020

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez, P.C., M.P.
Honoré—Mercier
House of Commons
Room 485, Confederation Building
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister:

Further to my letter of April 8, 2020, in response to your request for information on the House of Commons Administration's ability to support and facilitate virtual sittings of the House of Commons, you will recall that I had tasked Digital Services and Real Property, in conjunction with Procedural Services, to work with public- and private-sector leaders to prepare for holding virtual sittings of the House of Commons within four weeks.

On Friday, as per my instructions, the Administration presented me with a report confirming the ability to grant your request, in terms of both the technical and procedural issues that should be considered with respect to holding fully or partially virtual sittings. Clearly, the Administration is well positioned to take note of any recommendations that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs may make. Tomorrow, I will take part in a simulation so I can see for myself the Administration's state of readiness, particularly with respect to compliance with the six guiding principles I presented when I appeared before the committee. I am committed to providing you with additional information based on tomorrow's simulation.

.../2

You will find attached the report provided to me by the Administration, which I am also taking the liberty of forwarding to the Chair of the House's Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, as the committee is studying the matter, as well as to your counterparts from the opposition parties. The House Administration remains committed to doing everything in its power to support the Members.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by a horizontal line and a loop.

Hon. Anthony Rota, M.P.

c.c.: Hon. Candice Bergen, P.C., M.P.

Mr. Alain Therrien, M.P.

Mr. Peter Julian, M.P.

Ms. Ruby Sahota, Chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Encl.



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

VIRTUAL CHAMBER

A Report in Response to the Statement of the
Speaker of the House on April 8, 2020

~~Confidential and not for distribution~~

May 7, 2020

Version 2.0



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Executive Summary

Technologically ready. Procedurally poised.

The House of Commons Administration is positioned to enable fully virtual sittings of the Chamber, as well as hybrid sittings (where some Members are physically present and others participate remotely), as of May 11, 2020. The secure, supported and scalable solution that the Administration proposes to use, should the House decide to enable remote participation in its proceedings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is outlined in the following pages and in a short video.

Readers will observe that the solution fulfills the six requirements the Speaker of the House of Commons set forward as guiding principles during his April 21, 2020 appearance before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

A purpose-built solution for Canadian parliamentarians

Following four weeks of intensive collaboration with other parliaments, extensive consultation with industry leaders and national and international security partners, and comprehensive internal development followed by simulations and technical tests, the Administration proposes a user-friendly solution that:

- is accessible to all Members on all House-supported devices;
- continues to make proceedings available to the Canadian public;
- supports the production of a high-quality, closed-captioned and professional broadcast;
- delivers simultaneous interpretation in English, French, as well as additional languages, and addresses the issues that some participants encountered in initial virtual meetings of House committees;
- limits the changes to the rules and practices of the House to what is required for its implementation; and
- integrates training for Members, the Chair and parliamentary staff, as well as real-time support for participants before, during and after each sitting.

The Members' experience

For Members present in the Chamber during a hybrid sitting, the experience will be entirely consistent with that of a conventional sitting. Maintaining the option to use their simultaneous interpretation earpieces, they will hear their colleagues participating remotely through the in-Chamber audio system, and will see them speak by virtue of two large screens installed on either side of the Speaker's Chair.

Meanwhile, Members who are not in the Chamber can access virtual (or hybrid) sittings simply by logging on to an easy-to-use, cloud-based videoconferencing platform, which has been integrated into the House's existing systems and infrastructure. On-screen, Members can see the video from inside the Chamber of people as they speak, as well as the video feeds of fellow remote participants. These Members will also have access to simultaneous interpretation, and will be able to address the House for any interventions or to raise a point of order.

The Administration's preparedness

Simulations of the solution have underscored the need to resource four new roles to support virtual and hybrid (virtual and in-person) sittings, in addition to engaging the same parliamentary employees who support conventional sittings of the Chamber.

Some of these employees can perform their tasks remotely. A limited number of personnel (including some custodial and facility support staff, table officers, procedural clerks, and technologists and technical support workers) must be on site. However, the solution proposed is designed such that social and physical distancing requirements may be respected for participants and support personnel alike.

Training is ongoing to ensure that operational staff understand the solution's tools and processes, and are equipped to mitigate risks and ensure a seamless broadcast. Training for the Speaker (and other Chair occupants) will be scheduled when a preferred approach is identified.

Primed to respond to the will of the House

At present, the solution proposed is tooled to support the House's function as a deliberative assembly engaged in debate. As it relates to parliamentary business pertaining to decision making, the Administration could propose technological solutions, at the will of the House, leveraging our existing portfolio of systems.

From a procedural standpoint, it may be sufficient to add a general provision to the Standing Orders to allow the Speaker to alter the application of any standing order or practice to permit virtual participation (in the same manner as Standing Order 1.1 allows for the participation of members with disabilities). If the House were to do so, the Speaker could make a statement outlining how he intends to use this provision.

Ultimately, it is for the Members to decide whether—and for what—they wish to apply the solution and enable virtual participation. The Administration is ready, as ever, to meet the technological and procedural requirements of the House as they emerge and evolve.



Background and Introduction

A mandate to make virtual sittings possible

On April 8, 2020, the Speaker of the House of Commons directed the Administration to enable the possibility for the House to hold virtual sittings as early as mid-May. This report details the House of Commons' proposed solution—a solution that hybridizes in-Chamber deliberations with virtual videoconferences.

More specifically, the following pages articulate how, in response to social distancing measures required by the COVID-19 pandemic, the House could support Chamber proceedings during which the Speaker, procedural officials and some Members of Parliament would be physically present in the West Block Chamber, while other Members would participate remotely by video and sound links. Included are renderings of the Chamber with the proposed equipment installed; a diagram depicting interactions among roles, both new and existing; and an illustration of the complete technological solution.

A solution born of consultation and collaboration

Notably, Canada's House of Commons is not alone in its consideration of solutions that could enable virtual (or a hybrid of in-person and virtual) sittings of elected representatives. Many parliaments around the world, facing similar challenges, are exploring ways to support their respective members.

The Administration consulted more than 30 parliaments and collaborated closely with several who share similar requirements, co-testing solutions and sharing operational strategies, experiences and results daily. The Administration also conducted extensive, independent market research and liaised with industry leaders and international and national security partners. All findings are reflected in the proposed solution, which has been designed specifically to meet the needs of the House of Commons.

A plan to ensure a professional presentation of Parliament

Any public presentation must convey an image of the House of Commons and its Members befitting the stature of the institution. To help ensure that the broadcast production of a sitting is seamless, that public coverage continues to be of professional quality, and that any opportunity for adverse publicity is minimized, the implementation of the proposed solution will require:

- a complex arrangement of remote contributors,
- recognition across the Administration that a remote working model represents a significant change for Members and their staff.

With respect to the latter, the Administration anticipates (based on recent experiences hosting virtual committee meetings) that Members will need support with their device, camera, microphone, lighting and network connectivity to sound clear and look their best.

Objectives and assumptions

The proposal reflects the Administration's understanding that any viable solution must:

- **Enable Chamber proceedings wherein Members participate in person and remotely.**

The solution put forward requires that the Speaker or Chair occupant, Clerk, Table Officers, interpreters, and other critical support staff be physically present in West Block.

- **Minimize the impact on the Chamber.**

The solution has been designed such that the Chamber may be used for fully in-person proceedings, as well as mixed in-person/virtual proceedings, with no downtime between types of sittings. Initial interventions are to be implemented in a manner that facilitates easy removal and minimal—if any—repair work to existing finishings.

- **Present the House of Commons of Canada professionally to the public.**

The House has taken measures to minimize potential issues that could result from the use of inherently variable videoconference services. Among these is the inclusion of security monitoring that introduces a 10-second broadcast delay prior to public distribution to further mitigate any possible cybersecurity disruptions. Sound and video for Chamber participants will continue to be transmitted in real time.

- **Outline operational working arrangements that respect social distancing requirements.**

Some custodial and facility support staff, Table Officers, procedural clerks, and technologists and technical support staff will be required to be on site for any sittings of the Chamber. The House therefore proposes work arrangements that adhere to the Administration's commitment to implement the recommendations of Canada's Chief Public Health Officer and protect the health and safety of persons present on site. The design of the multidisciplinary team of resources also accounts for the reality that the House is currently operating without its full workforce.

- **Be secure and tested.**

In addition to heightened cybersecurity monitoring and other activities, the House has established numerous controls to ensure the security of the solution. These include, but are not limited to:

- a virtual waiting room, through which all participants must be cleared,
- the requirement that attendees use House-managed devices,
- the authentication of participants' identity through House of Commons accounts and authorization servers,
- the use of Canadian data centres, and
- geofencing.

The House has also conducted several simulations and performed numerous technical tests of various system components. Service performance will be monitored closely, with technical adjustments made as necessary.

- **Minimize the changes needed to the rules and practices of the House, to the extent possible.**

Following an initial analysis, the Administration has determined that minimal adjustments to existing rules and practices would be required to conduct the deliberative aspects of proceedings virtually. Further analysis will be required should the House choose to enable virtual participation in its decision-making functions.

- **Include familiarization sessions for the Members, Speaker, Table Officers, and House Administration employees enabling virtual meetings.**

The Speaker (or Chair occupant) will receive specialized training to support them in their unique roles with regard to the adaptations they will need to make for a hybrid or fully virtual sitting. The House also recognizes that it is essential that training and in-meeting technical support be available to all Members to deliver a quality service and ensure a positive virtual experience for participants and viewers. Training for parliamentary staff is already underway to ensure a state of operational readiness.

- **Enable Members and the House of Commons to evolve the processes over time.**

The solution is designed such that adjustments can be made at the will of the House and as virtual requirements become better understood.

Planned resumption of conventional Chamber sittings

It is assumed that the progression of COVID-19 is unlikely to allow for a quick end to social distancing requirements and a rapid transition back to Chamber sittings where all Members attend. The House of Commons proposal therefore allows for a gradual return of Members to the Chamber without requiring any changes to technology or rigging. It also enables fully virtual and hybrid (virtual and in-person) proceedings to be easily reintroduced in the future, should this be required by COVID-19 control measures.

Proposed Solution

Integration of a videoconferencing platform with existing on-premise technologies

Members who wish to participate remotely will connect using a videoconferencing platform integrated into existing on-premise technologies. For a hybrid sitting, this solution is amenable to having any number of Members physically present in the Chamber (subject to social and physical distancing guidelines), with all remaining Members (excluding the Chair occupants) able to join online. All Members (whether participating remotely or in the Chamber, in the case of a hybrid sitting) will continue to have access to simultaneous interpretation in English and French, as well as in additional languages, as required.

Importantly, the Administration will actively seek feedback from Members, should the solution be adopted, to enable continuous improvement of the service and ensure that the needs of all participants are met.

In-Chamber displays

As an initial step, two large screens relaying video from the Members participating remotely will be installed neatly and carefully at the south end of the Chamber, on either side of the Chair. This will provide a common point of contact between remote participants and those in the Chamber. When remote participants are not engaged, a slide with the House of Commons emblem will be projected onto floor screens.

Image 1: Illustration of the West Block Chamber with 98” displays mounted at the south end

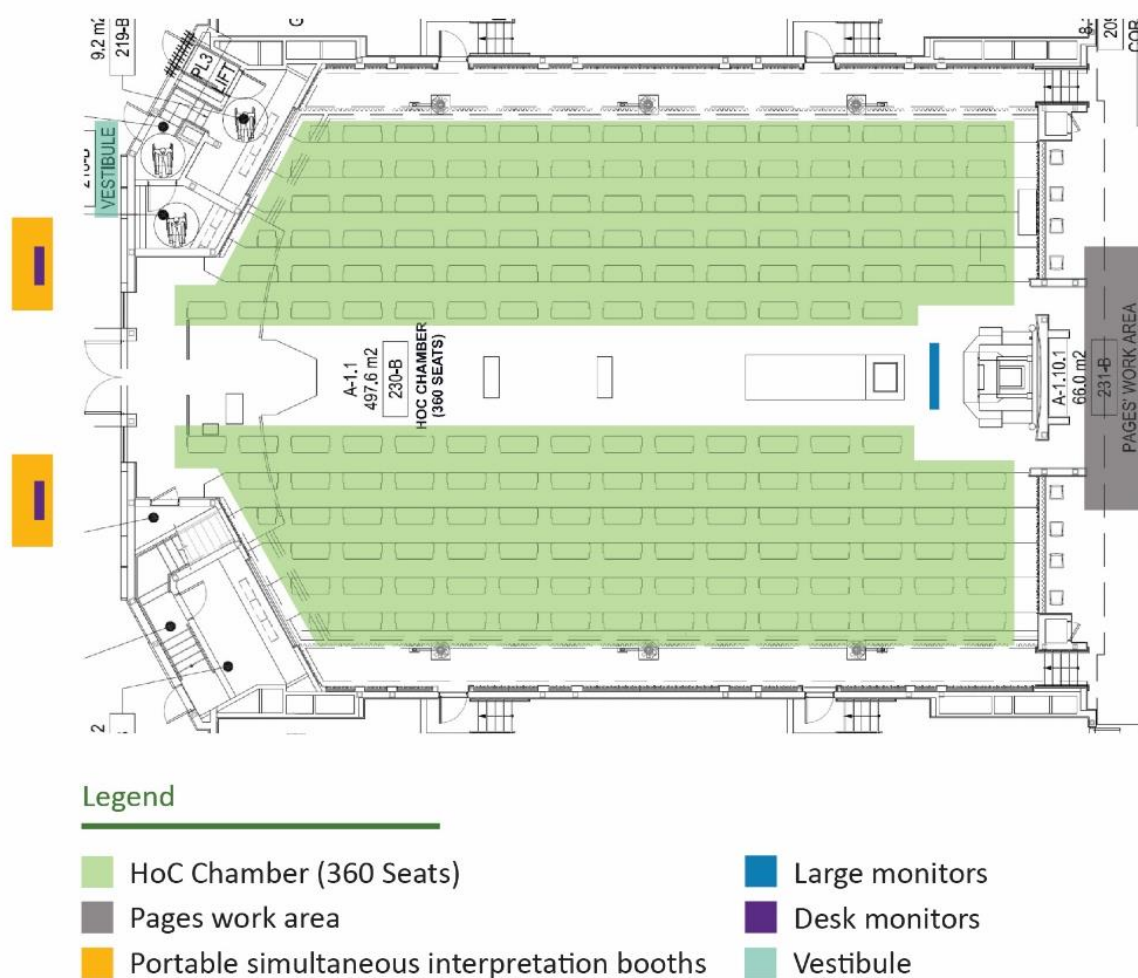


Through simulation feedback and lessons learned, the installation of other screens may be pursued. It is further proposed that floor displays, desk monitors and portable simultaneous interpretation (SI) booths be positioned as indicated below, in Image 3.

The portable SI booths will be located in the antechamber, as required to ensure adherence to social and physical distancing requirements. Monitors will be installed in the portable and permanent SI booths to enable interpreters to see participants when they speak.

Wireless headsets will be provided for a Table Officer to communicate with the videoconference team, and a monitor of approximately 40 inches will be added for the Chair. Additional floor monitors may be installed, if needed.

Image 2: Illustration of the West Block Chamber from above with the proposed locations of floor displays, desk monitors and portable simultaneous interpretation booths



Remote-participant view

Through the videoconferencing platform, Members will see the video feeds of fellow remote participants and, in the case of hybrid sittings, real-time video from inside the Chamber. When a Member speaks, his or her video feed is given prominence in the videoconference tool.

Image 3: A screenshot of the videoconferencing platform Members will use to access virtual or hybrid sittings remotely

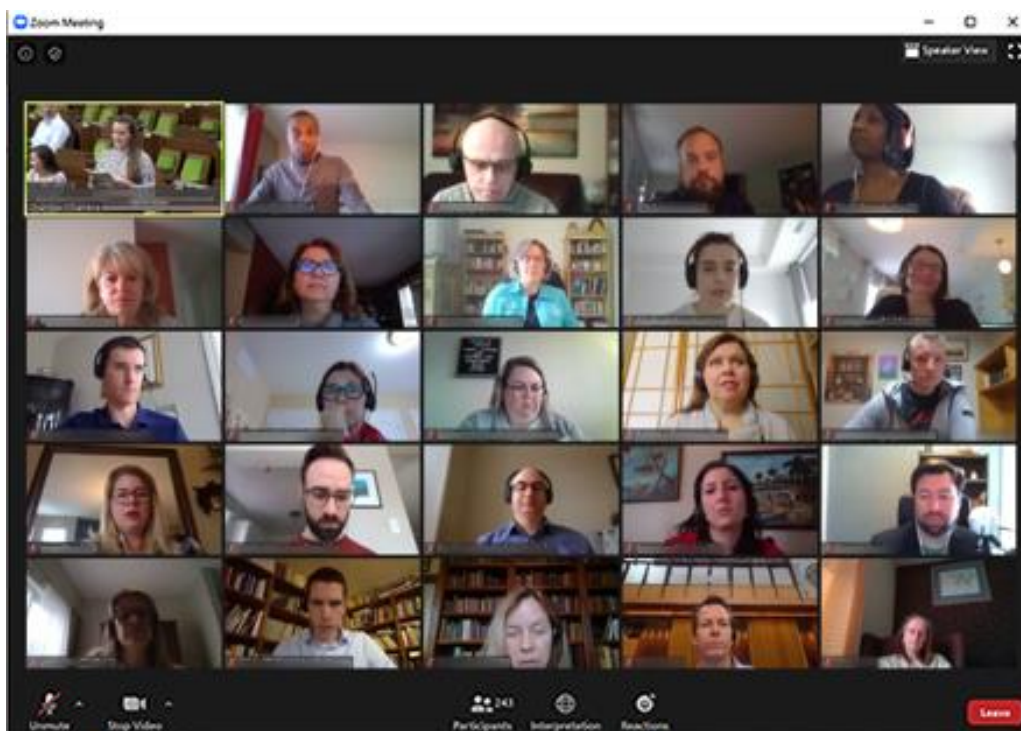


Image 4: Screenshot of a (simulated) Member speaking in the Chamber as seen on the screen of a Member participating remotely



Changes to roles and responsibilities

From an administrative perspective, quality service performance requires resourcing new roles (as revealed in simulations carried out with clerks and other key parliamentary staff). These roles include: event hosts, virtual procedural clerks, videoconference operators and a dedicated cybersecurity, multimedia and IT support team.

Event hosts

Event hosts are required to support the remote experience. Their principal responsibilities are to:

- welcome participants as they join the meeting remotely and visually confirm their identity;
- validate that participants know how to use their microphone and that they can be heard clearly (i.e. the audio level is appropriate and there is no background noise);
- provide guidance to participants, as required, before and during the meeting to improve the virtual experience, including advice to
 - position the microphone optimally (e.g. not rubbing on clothing),
 - speak slowly but naturally (especially when not using a headset), and
 - improve camera positioning or distance from camera (e.g. ensure head is not cut off and no windows are behind the participant);
- remind participants how to access and intervene using simultaneous interpretation; and
- refer those who require further technical assistance to an IT ambassador.

Table Officers assisting the Chair

Key responsibilities are to:

- follow the rotation list during regular debate and monitor the availability of the next Member to speak (if participating remotely);
- help monitor remote Members who wish to speak during the Questions and Comments, and communicate to the other Table Officers, the television director and the videoconference and microphone operators, as time permits, the participants' desire to address the House;
- confirm the identity of the Member who raises a point of order when participating remotely;
- notify the Chair when a participant is disconnected;
- relay relevant information to other Table Officers;
- communicate with Members participating virtually, if required;
- rename attendees when they join the meeting, as per naming conventions, if required; and
- monitor the waiting room and allow Members and authorized House Administration employees to access the sitting before and during the event.

Videoconference operators

Videoconference operators are required to:

- validate that the microphones and cameras of all participants are functional;
- ensure that all microphones are muted (with the exception of those of interpretators and the Chair occupant);
- monitor the rotation list to identify when a Member participating remotely is set to speak next;
- ensure that active microphones are muted after interventions;
- monitor the Chair occupant and mute participant microphones if he or she takes the floor; and
- mute all remote microphones at the request of the Chair occupant or in case of critical sound issues.

Cybersecurity, multimedia and IT support team

Virtual or hybrid sittings of the Chamber will rely on heightened monitoring of the parliamentary network, as well as the continued implementation and evolution of security measures to safeguard against known and emerging threats.

At the same time, several multimedia resources are needed to monitor and control audio and video, and ensure quality audio and video feeds for participants and broadcast feeds. Among their responsibilities, these resources route and mix contribution signals, adjust audio and vision levels, colour-correct and reframe video sources, and coordinate external broadcast feeds.

Finally, a team of IT support personnel is needed to ensure that, before a virtual or hybrid sitting of the Chamber, Members who plan to participate remotely are comfortable with the videoconference platform, are equipped with devices and headsets, and have appropriate connectivity in the location from which they plan to participate. Before, during and after a sitting, these parliamentary employees will also need to be online and on the phone to address any technical questions or challenges Members may face.

Continued media access to all proceedings

Members of the media can follow the deliberations of the House by:

- connecting remotely and listening via a real-time audio feed, or
- viewing the proceedings live on ParlVU or CPAC.

In the case of hybrid sittings of the Chamber, members of the Press Gallery may also continue to attend proceedings in the West Block Chamber.

Additionally, virtual and hybrid (virtual and in-person) sittings will be available live and on demand through the House of Commons website (ParlVU) and disseminated to media organizations and CPAC for rebroadcast in exactly the same manner as conventional sittings.

Key procedural issues

The key procedural issues related to implementing a virtual House can be grouped into four categories: 1) presence of members (quorum); 2) tabling of documents, reports and returns; 3) participation in proceedings; and 4) decision making.

Presence of members (quorum)

Both the Constitution (s. 48) and the Standing Orders (SO 29(1)) state that the “presence” of at least 20 members, including the Chair, for quorum is necessary to constitute a meeting of the House for the exercise of its powers:

- Since the House has the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs, it should be able to define what “presence” means. See the remarks of the Clerk and of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel of the House in PROC (Evidence, April 21, 2020, pp. [13-16](#));
 - An amendment to Standing Order 29(1) could clarify that members participating virtually count for quorum purposes.

Tabling of documents, reports and returns

House practices currently require that tabled documents, reports and returns be signed originals. Reports from committees and interparliamentary delegations, as well as petitions, must also be submitted to the House with an original signature.

- An email-based electronic tabling system could be introduced for tabling papers with both the Table Officers and the Clerk of the House. This electronic tabling system could be accessible both to private members and to the government.
- The practice could also be expanded so that all documents, reports and returns, regardless of type, could be tabled with the Clerk of the House and that reports of committees and interparliamentary delegations, as well as petitions, could be tabled electronically.

Participation in proceedings

The Chair must be able to manage the business of the House by maximizing opportunities for participation, while preserving order, decorum and parliamentary privilege:

- “Normal” speaking: The business of the House is generally predictable and orderly. The Chair relies on rotation lists submitted by the parties to recognize members and this can be maintained;
- “Impromptu” speaking: Members may raise impromptu points of order, questions of privilege (SO 48(1)), present petitions and ask questions and make comments after a speech;
 - As with standing committees, the Chair should proceed slowly and cautiously to ensure that members wishing to participate in the proceedings are recognized. The use of features built into the videoconferencing system (e.g., “raising your hand” in Zoom) or

closer cooperation with the whips of the various parties could help manage these types of interventions.

- The moving of motions (substantive, dilatory, in amendment): The practice is to sign and submit in writing (SO 65) any motion that is moved to make it available to the Table Officers and the Chair to judge its admissibility;
 - An email address could be used to allow members to submit the text of their motions and amendments to the Table in advance.
- Preserving order and decorum: Members will be in physical locations that are vastly different from one another. The Chair must be able to maintain decorum.
 - The Chair can intervene on any matter of decorum on its own initiative or on a point of order raised by a member. In a virtual environment the Chair should be allowed to mute the microphone and exclude members from the sitting in cases of serious misconduct;
 - Guidelines could be put in place with respect to background visuals to ensure that the decorum and dignity of the House are preserved.

Decision making

The Chair must be able to put questions and allow the House to make decision by unanimous consent, voice votes and recorded divisions:

- Specifically, for requests of unanimous consent, the Chair must be able to know whether there are members opposing such a request. This could be done by, for example, only asking members attending virtually and who oppose the motion to unmute and say no.
 - The Chair will, in all cases, need to proceed slowly and cautiously to ensure that the will of all members participating in the sitting are understood.
- The Chair must also be able to count the five members required for a recorded division to be taken (SO 45(1)); and to count the 10, 15, 20 or 25 members objecting to a particular question when the question on a motion is put (SO 53(4) and 56.2(2), 26(2), 98(3)(a), and 56.1(3) respectively).
 - Members participating remotely will use the “Raise Hand” feature to ensure we have the needed number of members requesting a recorded division or opposing a motion.
- Electronic remote voting could be introduced to allow the taking of virtual recorded divisions:
 - An adjustment to the customs of recorded divisions will be needed. This will include the time allowed for ringing bells (SO 45), being present to hear the question and the method for participating in a vote and, if necessary, correcting it.

Proposed amendment to the Standing Orders

As the House considers the use of virtual sittings as a temporary measure, a general amendment to the Standing Orders could give the Chair the power to adjust the practices and rules of the House to allow for virtual participation by members. This would avoid amending the Standing Orders in an overly focused manner, which would prevent the House from conducting itself effectively.

A second amendment could give standing, legislative and special committees the authority to meet virtually, as some have done in recent weeks.

The application of these provisions could be narrowed to apply only in emergency situations:

“That — the Standing Orders be amended by adding the following standing orders:

‘1.2. Remote participation by members.

In an emergency, after consultation with the House Leaders of the recognized parties, the Speaker may modify the application of any provision of the Standing Orders or any special order or practice of the House to authorize the remote participation of members in the proceedings of the House and its committees.’

‘115(6) Virtual meetings.

In an emergency pursuant to Standing Order 1.2, standing, special and legislative committees are authorized to hold virtual meetings where members and witnesses participate remotely by video or teleconference.’”

Conclusion

The House of Commons has designed the solution outlined in the pages above to make the experience of a potential virtual or hybrid sitting of the Chamber as much like that of a conventional sitting as possible. Significantly, however, many of the technological components and processes that would enable delivery of the service are new to the House of Commons and its Members.

The Administration has learned from the experiences of the few parliaments around the world who have conducted virtual and hybrid sittings to date, and proposes a pioneering solution tailored to the needs of the House of Commons. Should the House choose to use this solution to enable remote participation in its sittings, it will be the first parliament in the world to conduct fully accessible, live-broadcast virtual (or partially virtual) proceedings conducted in two or more languages, with simultaneous interpretation available to all participants and closed captioning available to the public.

The Administration is confident it can deliver.

Even as several determinants of success remain outside its control (such as participants' use of headsets, appropriate connectivity), the Administration has conducted several virtual meetings of House of Commons committees over the last weeks, including three meetings of the Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic with more than 300 participants in attendance. Each has provided an opportunity for the Administration to take cognizance of the needs of participants, the preferences of Members and ways to make the proposed solution for virtual sittings that much more robust.

The Administration appreciates the patience Members have demonstrated during these unprecedented times. Our commitment is to continue to engage with Members actively to ensure not only that they have the best possible experience with any solution adopted, but also that we may continue to learn how the Administration can best support them during this challenging period and beyond, however they may choose to participate in proceedings and conduct their parliamentary business.