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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 21 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting on the study of parliamentary duties and the COVID-19 pandemic. Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on May 26, the committee may continue to sit virtually until Monday, September 21, to consider matters related to COVID-19 and other matters. Certain limitations on virtual committee meetings held until now are now removed. As just mentioned, the committee is now able to consider other matters, and in addition to receiving evidence, the committee may also consider motions as we normally do.

As stipulated in the latest order of reference from the House, all motions shall be decided by way of a recorded vote. Finally, the House has also authorized our committee to conduct some of our proceedings in camera, specifically for the purpose of considering draft reports or the selection of witnesses. On this point, the Clerk of the House has informed the whips that, until the House administration finalizes a process to switch between public and in camera proceedings within the same meeting, all virtual meetings that begin in public must remain in public until the end, and all virtual meetings that begin in camera must remain in camera until the end.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. We are in public. So that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee as you see it in gallery view on your screen.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French.

As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will need to also switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

As a reminder, all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If the member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "Raise Hand" function in the "Participants" toolbar. This will signal to the chair your interest to speak. In order to do so, you should click on "Participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, next to your name there's a "Raise Hand" function.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. Headsets are strongly encouraged.

Should any technical challenges arise, as I mentioned before, please bring them up with the chair immediately and the technical team can help you resolve those issues so that all members can participate fully.

During this meeting we will follow the same rules that usually apply to opening statements and the questioning of witnesses. The witnesses will have seven minutes for their opening statements.

Just as we usually would in a regular committee meeting, we will suspend in between panels in order to allow the first group of witnesses to depart and for the next panel to join the meeting.

Before we get started, I would ask everyone to click on the top right-hand corner of their screen and ensure they are in gallery view. With this view you should be able to view all the participants in a grid format so all the participants can see one another.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

We have from the House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Right Honourable Karen Bradley, who is also the chair of the procedure committee. We're glad you were able to join us, Ms. Bradley. We were getting a little worried and wondering whether we'd be able to have you here today. I'm glad you were able to make it.

Next we have Mr. Simon Burton from the House of Lords of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He is the assistant clerk.

From the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we have Matt Stutely, director of software engineering, parliamentary digital service.

Welcome to all of you. We will start with the Right Honourable Karen Bradley for a seven-minute statement, please.

• (1110)

Right Hon. Karen Bradley (Chair, Procedure Committee, House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Thank you very much. I've managed to unmute myself, I hope.

The Chair: Yes, you absolutely have.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Good. The technology works all the way from London.

You will have my opening statement, so I wasn't proposing to read it out to you, but just to pick out the key points.

First of all, thank you very much, Madam Chair and all members of the committee, for the invitation. It has been very useful for us in the U.K. to look at what other parliaments are doing, and I'm sure you will also find it useful to hear about our experiences.

In terms of our committee, the procedure committee of the House of Commons is not exactly aligned to the committee that you have in Canada. Our committee is dealing with the procedures that affect public business, so we—

The Chair: Madam Bradley, I'm so very sorry to interrupt you, but I think this might be relevant to your statement. I wanted to let you to know that the statements you've provided have not been distributed to the members, just so you know that they don't have them and may not know about some of the things you're referencing.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Okay.

The Chair: We were not able to distribute them because they were not translated, and we were not able to translate them because they were not received in enough time. We're not allowed to distribute documents to the members unless they're in both English and French—

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: No, of course.

The Chair: —so please be mindful that this is the first time we're hearing your statement. Thank you.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: In that case, I will read it out. It's probably easier if I read it rather than try to summarize it.

First, let me give you a word about the committee I chair. I was elected to chair the committee in a contested election, which involves all members of the House of Commons. It's not a party political thing. This is a House committee, and the chair is elected by all members. The election in this Parliament happened in January this year. Although the election was then, we weren't able to formally constitute the committee until Monday, March 2. I then took up my position and all members of the committee were appointed. Our first meeting was on March 4 this year. It was clear to us at that point that the COVID situation would require some substantial amendments to House practice.

The procedure committee is a committee of backbench MPs. We do not have members of the executive as part of our committee. We have no executive role. Our remit is “to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations”. We do not have a remit to consider House

administration alongside House procedure, as your committee does. My colleague Sir Charles Walker, with whom I think you've also been in contact, chairs a separate committee, the administration committee, which oversees the services provided to members. Then we have the House of Commons Commission, which is a statutory body chaired by the Speaker. That sets the strategic direction for the House service. It is often the forum in which high-level political agreement on certain issues will be found.

My committee can consider issues proposed by committee members, other members of the House, members of the public, the Speaker and even ministers. We are not constrained in the recommendations we make, except in the means of their implementation. That's where changes to House procedure and practice are typically made by the House itself, but the motions on which the House decides are brought forward by the government, by the leader of the House of Commons. He is the minister with responsibilities in the House of Commons, most similar, I think, to those of the leader of the government in yours. The reality is that if we make recommendations about changes to House procedure, they have to be supported by the government before they can be implemented.

In terms of the pandemic, there have been a number of changes, very significant changes, to the way in which House business has been conducted over the last few months. The changes have fallen into three phases.

The first phase involved ad hoc adaptations. Before we rose for the Easter recess, the period from the beginning of March to around March 23 or 24, we made ad hoc adaptations. We didn't make large-scale procedural changes. Instead, we reached agreement between the parties. For example, we didn't have any physical divisions at the House of Commons in that period to avoid the fact that, due to the way in which divisions took place, members would have to be very close together, and we managed to do significant items of business. For example, our budget resolutions were passed on the nod, effectively, with no division happening. We also moved in to having social distancing within the chamber. Although we didn't have any formal blocking out of seats, we had to limit the number of members to 50 for showpiece events like Prime Minister's questions, which I'm sure you're all aware of.

After we came back from the Easter recess, we moved into what we called fully hybrid proceedings with parity, which meant that we allowed virtual participation. We developed a system of remote voting. We have no differentiation between members who were there physically in person and members who attended virtually. I can go into more details about hybrid proceedings later; I'm conscious of the time.

Since our return from the Whitsun recess, which was only last week, we moved to a different form of proceedings, which we're calling limited virtual participation, for a much more active chamber. Although there are still only 50 people allowed in the chamber, we do allow virtual participation for questions—questions during statements and urgent questions—but not for substantive legislative business, such as second reading debates and other debates.

• (1115)

We also have just announced that we will extend the proxy voting system that we've only previously used for paternity leave to those members who are unable to attend the House due to shielding on the government advice, or because they cannot attend the House due to the restrictions that the coronavirus has imposed.

The new provisions we have in place will last until July 7.

Hopefully that gives you a brief update on where we are.

The Chair: Absolutely. Thank you very much for that.

Next up we have Clerk Assistant Simon Burton, please.

Mr. Simon Burton (Clerk Assistant, House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Thank you very much indeed, Madam Chair, and to the committee for this invitation. I am delighted to be here representing the House of Lords, on behalf of our Clerk, and for the invitation from your Clerk, Charles Robert, who is a great friend and a colleague we all admire across the world, particularly in his relationships with other senior colleagues.

I'll start with a couple of small facts about the House of Lords because they are relevant to how we have responded to this pandemic.

The House is large. We have 789 members. There is also no government majority; only 244 of those 789 are on the government benches.

The House is self-regulating. The power of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker is traditionally very limited, and indeed there are limited tools the government controls, like programming motions, etc. As Ms. Bradley said, it's important that the decision-making processes behind the scenes are linked into that concept of self-regulation. In the Lords our procedure committee and our commission—the procedure committee oversees procedure; the commission oversees the administration at a strategic level—both include the leaders of all the main parties in the Lords, as well as the Speaker, the Lord Speaker and the Deputy Speaker, so there are two decision-making bodies that bring people together.

Another factor that is very relevant in the current circumstances is the demographic profile of the House of Lords, with 54% of our members over 70 years of age, which in the U.K. is a threshold for particular attention to people's health and their vulnerability.

Also importantly, unlike some other bicameral parliaments, we're very fortunate to share our building with our friends and colleagues in the Commons. Not only the building, but many services are also jointly shared and run and administered, including the digital service, which our colleague Matt works with colleagues there. These

shared bicameral services are an important feature of what we've managed to achieve in the last few weeks.

You are interested in the modifications the Lords have made to accommodate public health measures. As soon as the Prime Minister's announcement was made in March, in the Commons as Ms. Bradley has said, some physical measures were introduced immediately with some social distancing, and we've built on that in the last weeks and months. Now the whole Palace of Westminster, the chamber of the Lords, all the rooms around the Lords, all the corridors, the lifts, the staircases, everything is now controlled in a way to maximize social distancing and to minimize exposure.

Also, from the beginning the House has encouraged its members to participate remotely. As in the Commons, members come from across the U.K., as is the case in Canada. Remote participation has been important, particularly for the elderly members for whom transport isn't necessarily particularly straightforward.

Both Houses also restricted access for visitors very early on.

In the Lords the decision to move to virtual proceedings was taken in March, but we had our Easter recess and we returned on April 21. We spent two weeks with the House sitting in a purely virtual form using Microsoft Teams and then we moved to Zoom, the platform that we're using today, and the House met in Zoom. It was only yesterday the House moved to the hybrid format with some members present in the chamber, but the overwhelming majority continue to participate via Zoom.

Every Parliament is different. The infrastructure and the technology we use is different, but in our case Zoom is the platform that works best for public broadcasting, and the Lords is very keen that their contributions continue to be accountable and open to the public.

In terms of procedural changes, first the House passed a resolution to allow our procedure committee to issue guidance, which has the same force as guidance approved by the procedure committee through a resolution of the House. This is an important development because in the fast-moving circumstances of a pandemic, having the ability to adapt procedures and guidance in this way has been very helpful.

Second, the House has agreed to a much more structured management of debates with more time limits on debates and on individual speeches.

Third, the House asserted very early on that parliamentary privilege applies to remote proceedings as it does to proceedings in the chamber, although we have advised members that if they are participating remotely in a different jurisdiction, obviously the jurisdiction of that country or that state or that nation may have a view of that, but certainly privilege applies to remote proceedings as they do to physical.

Virtual proceedings do not have the power to decide matters. Only a sitting of the House can decide things. When we were meeting in our virtual format, we did also have small, short physical sittings, but decisions were taken so far without a vote. The hybrid sitting, as we had as of yesterday, not only can debate, but also it can decide things.

• (1120)

There are a few other features of the hybrid House. The chair has absolute power to adjourn the House if it becomes overcrowded. There is no sign of this so far, but the size of our chamber means that to respect social distancing—people staying two metres apart—we cannot accommodate more than 30 members in our chamber. Were that number to be exceeded and were members not able to leave, the chair does have the power to suspend the sitting until it is sorted out.

We also have electronic voting which we are introducing. Matt is leading us on that. Thank you very much, Matt, for your work on that. That is coming in on Monday of next week.

I have a couple of quick insights to round off.

First, after observing the last few weeks, I would say that communication has been key. Our Lord Speaker, our Senior Deputy Speaker and the Clerk of the Parliaments have communicated with members and staff to make sure that everyone knows what's going on.

Second, we've used Teams. While Zoom has been the platform of choice in the hybrid House, we continue to use Teams for conversations and chats between officials and members, and that has been absolutely vital.

I would observe that this isn't quite within the customs of the House, but proceedings have had to become much more structured and managed than they are traditionally in order to cope with a hybrid setting.

The House has also agreed that there should be parity of treatment. Members should be treated the same, whether participating virtually or in person, in the hybrid sitting. That's very important.

There are a couple of practical points to end on. First, cybersecurity has been very much in our minds as we've developed our systems, and many different staff across many teams have worked together and, indeed, have done much new work in order to deliver.

As we look ahead to the future, much of what we've learned in the last few weeks will help us on the journey to restoring and renewing the Palace of Westminster in due course, but that is perhaps for another day.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up we have Matt Stutely, director of software engineering, Parliamentary Digital Service.

Mr. Matt Stutely (Director of Software Engineering, Parliamentary Digital Service, Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for inviting me to attend. This is the first-ever committee I have attended formally, certainly outside of the U.K. I spoke with our procedure committee, which wasn't as formal as this, so I hope you will all be gentle with me.

I just want to apologize in advance to the interpreters, because I wasn't able to give speaking notes like my two colleagues. I've only been able to send you a few bullet points, so I will try to talk as slowly as I can to make your lives as easy as possible.

• (1125)

The Chair: Regarding the interpreters, remember that we have simultaneous interpretation happening.

Mr. Matt Stutely: Exactly. I do apologize to them for that.

Thank you very much for indulging me and not making me send you notes.

I'm going to talk about five specific points around the remote voting solution we built for the Commons and are now putting in place for the Lords. At the end, I guess you can ask me questions, as you wish.

The first area is the rationale for the approach we took. Obviously, there are a lot of solutions out there in the marketplace that deliver voting for various different mechanisms. However, we decided to build it in-house as a bespoke development for two reasons. One was around building on software that we already had. Our voting solution in both Houses is already electronic, to the point where it's recorded on tablet devices and collated at the end of the division. The results are published to our website and in Hansard and other such places. We wanted to make sure we built on top of what we already had.

We also wanted to make sure that what we were delivering was familiar to House staff. Obviously, they have a lot of change, a huge amount of change, going on. It's a completely new world for them. Trying to keep some familiarity for them was important.

Equally as important was some familiarity for members. On the Commons site, we have a system for members, called "Member-Hub", which members have had for about three years now. It is used for tabling oral and written questions and for signing motions. Again, it was logical to us that at a time of immense change, when members were working in a completely different way and were obviously under a lot of pressure, we would keep something familiar for them as well.

That's why we didn't go off and try to buy a completely different product off the shelf and customize it. We wanted to build on top of what we had now so that we knew it would work. The integrations would work and take minimal effort for those who have to look after them. As well, members wouldn't be asked to learn another set of log-ins, or have to log in to a different system that worked or behaved in a slightly different way from other things that they were used to. That was the reason we went down that path.

Next, for those who are interested, everything is built on a Microsoft technology stack. It's Microsoft .NET with SQL server databases behind it. Everything communicates over straightforward Internet protocols, but everything is secure. It's all https—the thing with a little padlock, for those of you who are familiar with using a web browser—but everything is secure and sent over the Internet and then web traffic so we can control the pipeline we're operating the system over.

We built the system, which took us about four weeks from beginning to end. We were asked by the Clerk of the House to put together a solution on April 6, and I think the first vote was pretty much five weeks after that. We rolled it out for live testing pretty much four weeks to the day from the day we were asked to start building it. We were asked to start building it before it had been formally agreed, obviously, by the procedure committee, because we wouldn't have wanted to wait until the House was ready. They'd have asked us for a solution, to which we'd have said we needed another four weeks to build it. We wanted the House to be able to use it once they decided they wanted it.

We went through the build process. Whilst we were building it, we were running it and testing it internally first, with our own staff pretending to be members. Then we did a number of demonstrations to various members across various committees. Ms. Bradley and her committee had a demonstration. Some members of the administration committee had a demonstration, as did the leader of the House and the chief whip. So a number of the sort of... I'll say the wrong thing now and say the “key stakeholders”, but the sort of key stakeholders have been making recommendations about how this should go forward. We're all taking them through the system so that they understand it.

As part of that, we took on board quite a lot of feedback as well. There were ideas which at the beginning sounded very sensible, but it was logical to ask the technical people who were building it about, for example, the ability to let members change their vote during the division. Within a 15-minute window for a division that took place, if a member made a mistake, they could go back and correct it. Having run through this process and received feedback from those who administer this and would have to work with it, we were asked to take that away and instead move to a process of double confirmation, i.e., “Please cast your vote. Are you sure this is the vote you wish to cast?” After that, the vote is locked in. Obviously, that's in line with how it works in the real world. There were lots of little pieces of feedback like that.

The main information that came back—I'm sure you want to ask about this yourselves—was around security. I didn't talk about it too much at the beginning. We have a single sign-on process for members to log in to their parliamentary accounts, to log in to their emails and to log in to their laptops, always with the same pass-

word. We built a system with that in mind, so we have the same password, and we have a multifactorial authentication process to double-check that they are who they say they are.

• (1130)

From the point of view of security, it's pretty much the same as you would use for online banking. It's the same concept as that. You have to have your password and a device with a number that you type into the system to confirm it's you.

Once we'd finished the testing, we had to roll the system out. We had two systems in place already, as I say, one for recording the votes and one for the members to interact with. That was rolled out onto those two platforms, and then we ran a second test. This time members took part in pretend divisions on key and interesting questions like, “Does one put tea in the cup before the milk?” and such vital questions of the day, just to engage people. We kept it very non-political because we didn't want to bring anything political around the voting system. That's a completely separate thing, so we wanted to keep it very stand-alone.

Those tests highlighted some issues, as I'm sure we'd expect them to. There were two issues we came up with. The first one was around the performance of the system. A lot of the feedback we had then was, “Well, I can't believe that with 650 MPs you could have a performance problem in your system.”

Because of the way the House works, however, and the many rules and processes around divisions, what's actually going on behind the scenes are a lot of checks to make sure the division is active, that it hasn't been stopped and that the member hasn't voted on another device. There are lots of things going on behind the scenes to ensure the security of the vote taking place. A lot is going on actually when 600 people are logging in. The first time we tried it, the system slowed down quite a lot, so we did a lot of work to improve that.

The second issue we had was around security. We had over-secured our network, and members who were using their parliamentary devices supplied by the digital service were able to vote in our test divisions without any problems, but those who were using their personal devices were being blocked. Basically, our network was responding with, “We don't recognize this device. Go away.”

Again, the reason for doing all that testing up front was to learn all of that and correct all of that before the first live division happened. Once that was all done, we rolled out live divisions, and then the House voted, I think, 10 or 11 times in the first couple of weeks of using it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stutely. That was extremely interesting, and I'm sure the members are going to have lots of questions for you.

We're going to have our first round of six-minute questions, and I will start with Mr. Duncan, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and good afternoon to our witnesses. Thank you for joining us.

Ms. Bradley, I appreciate your being here. In your role as the chair of a committee, I think you bring a unique perspective. You started in opposition and were in a coalition government, a minority government and a majority government, so I think you've seen it all in your role there. I want to focus my first few questions on the report that you did in early May. We actually studied that and used that as part of our first study, going through the same challenges as you were in the United Kingdom.

The electronic system that was adopted was obviously meant to be temporary and was meant to be used for the most acute part of the pandemic, when there were the most challenges and the most lockdowns, and then there was meant to be an easing in to the process of more in-person voting. Would that be a fair statement, looking back on what you've done in the U.K.?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Yes, I think that would be a fair way to put it.

We always said that we shouldn't introduce any procedural change during the pandemic. Yes, it will help build an evidence base for future changes we might want to make to procedure, but we shouldn't introduce something that then becomes the de facto procedure of the House of Commons.

The House of Commons in normal times needs to look at its procedures and make decisions around them, but decisions around procedure during the pandemic should be very time-limited, strictly temporary and particularly to deal with the specifics of this pandemic. For example, one of the problems we had with the voting was the two-metre distance rule. If we'd had a different kind of pandemic where you didn't need to have a two-metre distance rule, then it may have been possible to continue with the way we normally vote in divisions.

Would it be helpful for me to give you a brief rundown of how our normal divisions work?

• (1135)

Mr. Eric Duncan: Even to that point, actually, one of the big differences is how you vote. We usually do standing roll calls of all 338 MPs. You do it a bit differently, having 650 MPs. I wouldn't have the patience to do multiple votes as 650 of my colleagues went through.

Could you speak about what you did in terms of that voting, specifically regular voting, and then what was changed to accommodate that?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Yes, of course. The normal way we vote is we have two rooms on either side of the chamber that you can't see, but they are behind the chamber. One is behind where the Prime Minister and the government MPs sit, and the other is behind where the opposition MPs sit. They are called the division lobbies. The aye lobby is on the government side. The no lobby is on the opposition side.

When a division is called, members of Parliament have eight minutes to get into one of those two rooms. The bell rings. It's like

an old-fashioned school bell. Members then have eight minutes to get into either the aye lobby or the no lobby. You can imagine, with the size of Parliament, the size of our building, that can be quite time pressuring for people, but on the whole, members are very good at being able to get into the right division lobby at the right time.

Then what we do is congregate within that lobby. We go to three desks at the end of the lobby by our surnames. There's one A to F, I think it is, and G to L or whatever, and you have your name crossed off by the clerk. There's a clerk at each desk who then records that you voted, but the vote is the voice when we shout aye or no. The actual count happens as you leave the lobby.

The problem with our system is that the doors of the division lobby are reduced in size so only one person can get out at any one time. I would be delighted to give you a demonstration if you could ever get to the United Kingdom when we're allowed to do this. Then there are two people who stand on either side of the door, the tellers, and they count you.

Quite clearly the problem you have is that with only one person coming through at one time and two people standing right next to them, you cannot maintain social distancing between the tellers who do the counting, between members and the clerks who are crossing the names off and between the members themselves, because you get a bottleneck as people try to get through these lobbies. Bear in mind that for a division, you would probably have over 300 members in one lobby and around 250 to 260 in the other lobby. That would be the normal sorts of figures.

You can imagine that in eight minutes you congregate with everybody in a room that is the length of the chamber, but not as wide, and you are squashed in there. It's quite unpleasant in the summer, but it's a very good opportunity to see your colleagues. It is your chance to meet ministers. It is your chance to doorstep those people you need to speak to about matters, so it's very valued by colleagues. Members do not want to give up voting in the division lobby because of the access it gives them to colleagues. Clearly, in this pandemic with this situation, that kind of voting is simply not possible.

We looked at having staggered voting times, where perhaps we would have 10 minutes for each set of surnames to go through each lobby. We looked at other ways to do it, but it simply wasn't possible, and the public health advice was that this was congregating, and getting through this tiny gap to come out was the bit that causes a problem, so we then had to look at other ways to do it.

Of course, the original proposals made were that we would have remote electronic voting, which Matt and his team developed so fantastically. If you have seen the report my committee made on April 8, we said we didn't believe it was possible to have any form of remote electronic voting in place within four weeks. Not only did we have it but we were carrying out live divisions.

We still, of course, have a problem because we have now given up on the remote voting, and we are now having to vote in person. You will probably see the queues that have caused some of the problems with that.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Yes. In a different room it seems to have worked, I think. You have more space now. You have the space to do that, and it's good to see that you have been able to maintain it.

The Chair: That's all the time we have now.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you.

The Chair: Next up we have Madam Petitpas Taylor, please.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our guests for joining us today.

As you are all aware, the committee also has been tasked to look at potentially modifying some standing orders for the duration of the pandemic and look at ways we can make hybrid sittings of the House work and also look at enacting remote voting. We are really looking at how we can make this happen.

I think one thing that all parliamentarians can certainly agree on is that being here in person is really our preference when we can get to Ottawa, but during a pandemic, we certainly know that changes have to be made, and sometimes we have to look at things differently.

I think also, when we look at this situation, protecting the health and safety of our MPs and also our staff is a paramount priority. We need to look at that, but I also truly believe that all members of Parliament also want to make sure that we can protect the fundamental rights of members of Parliament in ensuring that we can continue to do our work either remotely or in person, and our constituents certainly expect that of us.

My first question is directed to Mr. Stutely.

Do you feel the measures that have been put in place right now allow you to securely practise hybrid sittings and also remote or electronic voting?

• (1140)

Mr. Matt Stutely: I can only really talk about the voting, because that's the piece that I've been involved in.

The way we built it, we know it is secure. Mr. Burton mentioned this a bit beforehand. We worked quite closely with our own cybersecurity team, but we also had the system verified by the National Cyber Security Centre. We had them look over the architecture of the system and point out any concerns they had for us to address. Their concerns, in the end, didn't turn out; the system architecture wasn't a concern for them at all. They were more worried about other things.

I'll give one example. We send out an SMS message to members telling them a division is taking place. When we started the process, we'd send out a URL link to the member hub system, saying, "A division has begun. Please cast your vote and click on this link." They didn't like that because it encourages people to click on links in text, which is how bad cyber-actors get you to start clicking on things you shouldn't and start stealing your details. They asked us to change that, but it was the only really substantial thing they wanted evolved.

We had them review the system and write up a report, which was sent to our manager and director of the clerks of the House. Obviously no cyber-team is going to say a system is perfect, but they said they were not concerned about the risk of tampering with a vote or members' being spoofed or anything like that. We got that reassurance from a central government body, basically.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: You spoke briefly in your remarks about authentication and ensuring that was secure. What steps were taken to ensure that you had system authentication?

Mr. Matt Stutely: The system we use to authenticate is the same one that members use for logging on to everything else. We have a single sign-on process, which is powered by the Microsoft Azure Active Directory service. We didn't try to build something of our own; we wanted to go off the back of the industry leader for this kind of thing. That's the most logical thing for us to do. It's the same thing that is used by members now. Email is the most obvious one, as they are all familiar with it.

The security we get is being run by Microsoft. We don't run and maintain anything ourselves. It's a well-known industry standard provider.

Members are given passwords, and the secondary level is a kind of multifactor authentication, much like you might get with online banking. You get a code that lasts for 30 seconds. We can send the code out by a text or through an app to your mobile device that tells you your code is "123456". That lasts for 10 more seconds, and when time runs out it won't work anymore and you have to use a different one.

When members first log in to the system, they will be asked to type in their username and password. Then they will be asked them for their multifactor code. They have to type all that in to access the system. Then we keep them logged in for a period of time before they will be asked them again. If they don't do anything for about an hour, it will make them then re-enter that data. If they left the machine and wandered away and came back without pressing any buttons, they would have to enter it again before they could carry on.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I have one final question for you, Mr. Stutely. With the work that you've done on remote voting, which was the area you worked on, do you feel satisfied that the proper security measures are in place to effectively and safely do this type of voting?

Mr. Matt Stutely: The short answer is yes. As for the longer answer, obviously we have a lot of monitoring in place as well to keep an eye on anything. We have a dedicated cyber-team that are watching our network all the time, and they have all kinds of alerts and processes in place to look for unexpected traffic on the network. We have lots of proactive systems in place to look for anything that looks like it wouldn't be normal. We know what normal looks like and we can see if something normal isn't happening, and then we react.

Specifically as to voting, we believe it to be very secure.

• (1145)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to reaction time, if there were some type of a breach, how quickly can that occur?

Mr. Matt Stutely: I can give you an example, although not about voting.

We have OneDrive, which we use to keep all of our files in. Everyone has OneDrive so they can get their phone numbers and documents wherever they are. Last week I was deleting a huge pile of files that I didn't need anymore, and in about 10 seconds a cyber-person had contacted me, asking, "Are you doing something on your OneDrive?" It's almost instantaneous.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Next up we have Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Good morning. Thanks to all the witnesses for being with us. It's great to have such excellent witnesses with us today. We're very lucky.

I'd like to ask a few questions about how the voting software was selected. If I make a mistake, please correct me.

As I understand it, when the report was written, the possibility of electronic voting was so remote that you didn't select voting software. Afterward, steps were taken and software was chosen. The choice was based mostly on the fact that staff were already familiar with the software. If I understand correctly, the procedural rules were not changed to determine that this software would be the one we'd be using.

I'd like to know how this was agreed to with MPs' involvement. What happened? As I understand it, this choice was not made because of recommendations in a report or procedural amendments.

[*English*]

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Shall I take that one?

There were actually changes to the procedure in the House of Commons and a temporary motion was laid by the government on April 22 that enabled there to be remote electronic voting.

Now if I would have a criticism of that motion, it would be that it only allowed for remote electronic voting and it didn't allow us to test any other systems. I think that perhaps having not had the ability to test, for example, extending proxy voting, which is what we are now doing, we are trying to do some things without having been through the proper processes, which I think we should do to gather the evidence and make sure members are happy.

You're quite right to say that when that motion was tabled, there was no division in the House. It was agreed by the chief whips of the main parties and what we call the usual channels, which is our terminology for it, so that it went through without there being the need for division. There was a temporary change in procedure that expired by default on May 12, I think it was, and then was renewed to expire on May 20. When we came back on June 2, that motion was no longer there and we were back to only being able to vote physically in the chamber, which is where we've created these problems for ourselves.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

My question is a follow-up to what you just said.

You used a temporary amendment to implement an electronic voting system. Would it make sense for you to adopt a permanent set of alternative procedural rules? Would that enable you to switch to them quickly if another event were to occur? Are you looking at criteria for a permanent amendment?

[*English*]

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: I think the House of Commons wouldn't accept a permanent amendment to the way we do this. They've been willing to accept as a House to do things for the period of the pandemic.

My committee will look, inevitably when we're through this, at whether the changes need to be made for what we would call normal times, but it will be a matter for the House of Commons to decide whether it actually wants to implement those changes.

I do understand the point that there may be some benefit to having a motion that allows the change without the need for further motions. However, I don't believe the House of Commons would accept that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I want to make sure you understood my question.

I'm talking about having permanent rules that set out what would trigger their application in an emergency situation, not a permanent switch to an electronic voting system.

Is that something you've considered?

• (1150)

[*English*]

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: We haven't, and it goes back to the point of what we've introduced in terms of temporary procedures are specific to this pandemic, so the social distancing and the other measures have meant that we've had to change certain procedures.

While I can see there might be some logic to having a sort of civil contingency type of motion in our procedures that would mean if something happened in the future we could very quickly change, actually we can change our procedures very quickly anyway. It's not a difficult thing to do. I think it would depend on what the specifics were at the time of the crisis as to what changes needed to be made. I think it would be very difficult to persuade the House of Commons to introduce something today that was discretionary, yes, but an opportunity for changes to be made in the future that MPs today may not be happy with.

I hope that answers the question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I believe my time is up, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: My timer didn't go off. Thank you for keeping track of the time.

Next up we have Ms. Blaney, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Hello everybody. Thank you so much for being here with us today. I have several questions.

First I want to say that these are challenging times for all of us and it's interesting as we figure out different ways to do business. Canada has the uniqueness of being a very large country, with connectivity challenges. I live on the west coast. The island that I live on has not had any new COVID-19 cases for almost three weeks, so we're doing very well. Of course, for me to travel across the country—right now the amount of time for me to travel would be at least two days—it's very concerning to think about bringing anything back home.

One of the things, Mr. Stutely, that I found very interesting about your testimony was that you talked about providing demonstrations to multiple committees and different groups. Something I definitely want to see happen more, as we move forward, are those demonstrations as we develop new practices.

I'm just wondering if you could speak to us a bit about how people or committees or groups were decided and what kind of feedback you got from them.

Mr. Matt Stutely: I suppose the obvious point is that the decisions were made primarily by other people. The clerks—we don't have any Commons clerks, unfortunately, on this call—who kind of run the division business know who the key stakeholder members are. The most obvious people were those on the Procedure Committee, because they are responsible for making recommendations to the House about what they should do. So the Procedure Committee was the first and most obvious group to show it to.

What we did first was to pick a couple of members—the chair and a couple of others—from that committee, just to have a little look to see where things were, to get kind of an initial view, I suppose both to take away the fear of what is possible and have some reassurance that something was being done and that it was moving forward, and also to get their initial feedback. It was kind of leaning on—perhaps not the right term—a number of clerks to say to us, “And these are the other people..”.

The thing that's kind of missed, as I said earlier, and that was really key to the success of this project, was our partnership with the senior clerks on the Commons side who are responsible for running divisions. There were a couple of them who were heavily involved in this. It was a real, proper, full-on partnership of the procedural side and the technical side coming together to come up with a solution that would work for members. The clerks' involvement was really key to our getting the right people involved.

As well as the Procedure Committee, as I said, we talked to the Administration Committee. We talked to the chief whip and the leader of the House. We also spoke to a number of government ministers.

The other part of this was speaking to some government ministers, whose job it is to get legislation through Parliament. That was a view that we hadn't understood in detail. Say I'm a minister and I'm trying to move this bill through the House, what would I be doing? Because in this virtual world, my whip isn't here saying, right, these people are going to be here at this time.... It was understanding from them what they might need, what are they to understand...because they know how to get their business through.

I guess the answer to the question is that it was reaching out to as many people as possible to give them relatively small personal demos, and giving a more detailed demo at least once to the Procedure Committee. Then we ran drop-in sessions, for want of a better word, on Microsoft Teams, much like a Zoom call. We opened up the invitation to all members to drop in between the hours of 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. We would take their details, call them back and give them a one-to-one demonstration.

So taking it through the key stakeholders, we gave all members the opportunity, if they wanted, to call up and have somebody take them through the system and show them how it worked. It was to build that familiarization, because even though it's familiar, it's challenging and different.

● (1155)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That's really perfect.

One of the other challenges we've heard from members is around predictability if we do any kind of voting virtually. We have people working from home who have commitments, maybe home-schooling their children, maybe other challenges. The other reality is that we are in a country with multiple time zones, and that can be a consideration. What we've asked for is predictability, so people know when they're going to have to vote. This is very important.

Right now, of course, we have a bells system and it lets us know...but if you're in a remote part of your riding, you may not have that connectivity.

I'm just wondering if there were any concerns—and it's open anyone to answer—around predictability of times when there would be virtual voting.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: I'm happy to say from the point of view of the Commons, there were absolutely concerns about this. I'm sure you've been in the same situation in that, from a constituency point of view, none of us have been busier than we have been, dealing with COVID casework. Everyone was in a mindset of being in their constituency offices. Whether they were at home or wherever they are based, they were basically focused on their constituencies. To try and then get people to move into thinking of the sitting hours of the House of Commons, which are not the same as working hours, and to think that votes may be coming at 10 o'clock at night, five o'clock in the evening or seven o'clock was quite something. The whips have to work very hard with each other.

The other thing is that when members are physically in the chamber, the whips can manage the timing of the business because they can get people in to speak. We can do interventions to keep people speaking. The whips, as you say, can make sure that people are physically in the room. That's not as easy if you're relying on people making contributions down the line. You're relying on the tech to work, you're relying on people using the full amount of their time so that you can then calculate when a vote comes.

I can tell you that when we did the remote voting from our constituencies, we spent an awful lot of time receiving text messages, SMS messages throughout the day from the whips warning us about the likely time of votes and making sure we were alert to it. I know it was a significant change in mindset for people.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Bradley.

Next up for five minutes of questioning we have Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you so much to the presenters today for answering our questions. It's interesting, to say the least, to hear what our mother house is doing.

I have a question for Ms. Bradley about deferred on-division voting. We talked about the lobbies, and I was lucky enough to be over in London to tour the very historic and very interesting building.

I'd like you to talk a little about the deferred on-division voting. You wouldn't go back into the lobbies, if I understand you right, but there would be other spaces where you could safely cast votes that may have been bunched together, so that you could do a week's worth of voting. Could you elaborate on how that's worked or hasn't worked or how we could utilize that during a pandemic when we need to be separated?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: We have deferred divisions. We have certain orders where the vote cannot be taken as a live vote, it has to be taken as a deferred vote. We generally do those votes on a Wednesday between 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. One of the division lobbies is set aside for members to go and vote using a piece of paper with "ayes" and "noes" on it. We cross one out, sign the piece of paper and hand it in.

We haven't actually had any deferred divisions since the pandemic started. My committee has made the point on a number of occasions that we would need to change our Standing Orders, and there would be some real benefit to changing Standing Orders. This evening, for example, we are debating the counterterrorism bill. If there is a vote on that business, it will be a live vote at 7 p.m. My view and the committee's view is that there is some benefit in turning that into a deferred vote. It doesn't matter, nothing is going to change if the vote happens tomorrow over the course of a couple of hours in the "no" lobby. It would mean that we would not be keeping people in the building.

The point was made earlier about staff. We have the minimum number of staff in the building, but we're still all acutely aware that is more staff than we would need to have if the House were not sitting physically. Every time we have any kind of need to bring more members in for divisions, we require more staff to be there. We're really trying to look at how we might be able to manage voting. As you say, we do a block of voting, lots of different votes—

• (1200)

Mr. Corey Tochor: Quickly, how do proxies work on deferred divisions?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Very simply, a proxy vote is one where another member is able to cast the vote for that person. A member can fill in a pink slip for the other person, sign it on their behalf and hand it in, because that's been allowed by the Speaker.

One thing that has changed is that deferred divisions have a longer period to vote with.

Mr. Corey Tochor: You do the proxy vote during a deferred division.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Yes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: You get up votes for a week or two weeks and call in the members in a safe way. Within your Standing Orders, you can actually do your duty to vote.

I'd like to pivot a bit. Were there any national parties that had a stance during the last election that they would like to go to electronic voting or a virtual Parliament?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Yes. The Scottish National Party have the very policy that they would like to move to electronic voting, full stop. They don't want to have the division lobby.

I suspect there's quite a number of members who are keen on the idea of having more electronic voting, because voting does take time. It's 15 minutes for every vote, and we can have four votes in quick succession. We spend an hour of our day when we can't do meetings. We can't be part of committees like this. We are in the division lobby. Also, at the moment, our votes are taking closer to half an hour because of social distancing. That's a significant part of our day that we're losing to being in a division lobby—or queuing to be a division lobby, as things stand.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I would like to quickly ask how you will come out of some of the changes that you've introduced.

In Canada, as I've stated, we were able to dine at restaurants last night here in Saskatoon. We've heard about how B.C. has done a fabulous job of protecting its citizens. We're getting back to normal. We have mass gatherings across Canada, which is showing that we can safely get back to some kind of normalcy here.

How do you roll back those changes? Is it a straight majority of members who decide to go back to the previous standing orders?

The Chair: You're over time. I was trying to allow you to finish your statement. Maybe that response can be combined with a response to something else later.

Mr. Turnbull, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to all of the witnesses for being here today. I find your testimony really informative for us.

I want to start with you, Ms. Bradley. Again, thank you for being here. In the last study of this committee, I clung to a piece of writing, a letter that you sent to your House Speaker on May 5, 2020. In that letter, you wrote that, “The Committee is satisfied with the assurances it has been given about the security of the system.” I think this was in reference to a virtual parliament. Given Mr. Stutely’s testimony today as well, which likened that to our banking system as being fairly rigorous, would you stand by that statement in your letter?

• (1205)

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Yes, absolutely. What was proved was that the system was very robust. It was very secure. We tested it, and we had a number of concerns that we raised. For example, one of the things that we had in the original trial vote was the possibility of changing our vote. We felt that it wasn’t an appropriate thing and that it created risks.

Just to answer to the point about how procedures will change, the motions that are in place at the moment to allow for any kind of virtual participation all lapse on July 7. Unless they are extended by the government and the government puts motions down, the House will go back to its old way of doing things.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: You mentioned testing. I understand that you went through some pretty rigorous testing. Those details were in that letter as well. I found that very impressive. Because we’re studying how to implement virtual voting, would you recommend to this committee that we do rigorous testing and demonstrations?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Absolutely, and I think that for any change to any voting system, if it’s a lesson that we had from last week, in the headlines that you will have seen, it was that the new form of voting was not tested before a live division. I would recommend that for any changes to any voting systems there are trials and tests, and that members are allowed to feel comfortable and confident with the proposal.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you. I’m going to go to Mr. Stutely now.

Mr. Stutely, you’re a software developer. It sounds like you have a lot of experience. Is it not true that in software development it generally follows that you design a minimally viable product, you then beta test and test over and over again, and then redevelop gradually? It’s inherently gradual and iterative, is it not, in terms of process?

Mr. Matt Stutely: Yes, definitely—well, by and large, yes, that is how we would build the products.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. Great.

I want to ask a general question about behavioural change. It seems to me that you mentioned familiarity with the current platform numerous times, and in speaking about why you designed your remote voting system on the MemberHub platform, you said a lot of it had to do with familiarity. Ms. Bradley, you just said as well that it’s important for people to feel comfortable and accustomed.

In some of the procedural committee remarks, or the remarks that Ms. Bradley made, I noticed that there was reference to a vast number of volunteers having to walk people through how to log in

and use the MemberHub platform. Although it’s been there for three years, people weren’t used to using it, or that’s what I read between the lines.

Would you say that’s true, Mr. Stutely?

Mr. Matt Stutely: What we knew from our general statistics was that about two-thirds of members were tabling questions through the MemberHub. The procedure allows members to delegate certain tasks to their staff to do on their behalf, and tabling an oral question is one of them.

What we found once we dug into a bit more detail was that of that two-thirds, it was pretty much fifty-fifty between members who were doing it themselves and members who were letting their staff do it for them. We focused on that group of members who perhaps weren’t using it actively themselves a lot of the time, and the one-third who just weren’t using it at all, to make sure they were familiar.

The key thing to point out is that front-bench government ministers, and probably front-bench opposition, don’t table questions. Ministers certainly can’t table oral questions, because they answer them, and the opposition front benches don’t tend to table very many questions in that way.

There is quite a good chunk of the House that just doesn’t have cause to use it. We had a former prime minister who never used it before.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Yes, I’ve got it: There are a considerable number of people who don’t adopt this technology right away.

What I’m getting at is that it seems that the vast majority of user adoption for these new tools has to do with behavioural change, not whether we can actually do it or not. The technology exists, and we’ve conquered the security issues.

Would you say that’s correct, Ms. Bradley?

The Chair: Could you give a brief answer?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Yes, I think that’s fair. I think we found one member who had never even actually used a mobile phone, but they now can vote, so yes.

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Brassard for five minutes, please.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is for Ms. Bradley.

With respect to electronic voting, you mentioned one party advocating it in its previous platform. I’m just asking for clarification. Were they advocating for the electronic voting so that the members of Parliament would not sit in the seat of Parliament, or was it to be remote voting without any sittings of Parliament, or was it to be in person?

• (1210)

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: I think there would be various reasons they might cite, but they are the Scottish National Party, which advocates Scottish independence. They have, in the Scottish Parliament, where the Scottish National Party runs the government, a form of electronic voting for which you need to be physically present, but you actually vote by pressing a button rather than by walking through a division lobby.

Mr. John Brassard: Right, so in other words you couldn't be sitting in Glasgow and voting on something, just to be clear. Okay. Thank you.

I have another question for you. Is there a consensus at Westminster that any procedural changes to respond to the pandemic must be limited in scope or duration?

I think you touched earlier on the need to look at changes to the Standing Orders under normal times, and that the height of a pandemic and all that is going on with that is not the time to be dealing with any procedural changes.

I wonder if you can expand on those two points.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: I think my committee would not have recommended any changes at all unless we could be confident that they would be strictly time-limited and temporary.

We're very aware that the House of Commons has developed its procedures over 700 years. The biggest changes to our proceedings in 700 years have happened in the last few weeks. They should not automatically become changes to procedure for normal times. It is quite right that we review our procedures, and we do so on a regular basis, and that is one of the things my committee does, but it shouldn't be that changes made as a result of the pandemic become the norm for normal times.

Mr. John Brassard: If any parties had called for permanent electronic or remote voting, for example, how concerned would you or your colleagues have been if that had been the case?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: First of all, you would need the government to actually put the motion forward on the Order Paper, and the government does not support electronic remote voting for normal times.

I think it would be fair to say that, at the moment, there is not a majority in the House of Commons who would want to move to remote or electronic voting for long-term voting. It was willing to accept it for the very short term of the pandemic but has wanted to get out of it quite quickly. We did have a vote on that matter last week and there was a majority for moving back to fully physical voting.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Ms. Bradley.

I have a final question. You mentioned earlier about the current situation of Parliament lapsing on July 7. One of the challenges we have as a committee is here we are on June 9, Parliament is not scheduled to resume until September 21, yet four months ahead of Parliament resuming we are to preclude perhaps what's happening with the pandemic.

What will be the basis of the decision to perhaps expand under the current format of the British House of Commons as opposed to returning to a normal Parliament?

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: We're very much driven and governed by the government's advice to the general public. One of the things that has been key to what we've done is that we follow the advice that is given to everybody. We all have to follow the Public Health England advice or the public health advice that's given in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We all have to comply with that, and that includes in Parliament.

If changes are made to the recommendations and guidelines that the government has, we expect the next potential changes, the large-scale changes, around July 4. That's why July 7 has been picked as a date that will be after we've had the next large-scale changes that are expected to the advice from the public health authorities.

Mr. John Brassard: In other words, government is making the decision to open up, from the economy to public gatherings, and so on, and that would be the basis by which the decision would be made. It's a very similar situation to what is going on here in Canada as provincial authorities start opening up our economy and public gatherings, correct?

• (1215)

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: Absolutely. The reason we came back physically last week is very much in line with the fact that schools are reopening, that we have more businesses reopening, and it was important that Parliament was seen to have a change in the way it operated.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you.

The Chair: Next up is Dr. Duncan.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses. We appreciate your time and your thoughtful answers.

Mr. Stutely, could you take us exactly through the voting procedure? What do the MPs receive on their device? Take us exactly through what they would experience, please.

Mr. Matt Stutely: Basically, what happens is that members will receive a text message when the division begins. The division is kicked off, they receive a text message and they get an email as well. They can choose to receive that email in a second mailbox. They get one sent to their parliamentary account and they can choose to send an email to another account. As I'm sure is the same with all of you, members can get huge amounts of constituency and parliamentary business and things going into their main mailbox, and they might miss something. So members can choose to send it to a personal or a staff mailbox, just so that they know a division is happening.

Once that is received, it tells them to log on to the system to cast their vote. If I could share my screen with you, I could show you what that looks like. It's very straightforward. In the MemberHub system, a big banner appears along the top of the screen that tells a member that a division is in progress and they have x minutes to vote. A little countdown tells them how long they have.

When you as a member press the button to cast your vote, basically a pop-up appears: "This is division 1 on such-and-such bill, amendment 2." Then you cast your vote. There are two big boxes. One says aye and one says no. You click aye: "You're going to vote aye. Press next." You press next: "You're about to vote aye. Once you have cast your vote for aye, you cannot change it. Are you sure?"

If you hadn't meant to vote aye, you can press "back" and change your vote to no: "You are going to vote no. Are you sure?" Then it takes you to the final page: "You're going to vote no." Once you say that's correct, you are told, "Right. We've received your vote. Thank you very much."

At that point, to reassure the member and to reinforce the fact that the House has received their vote, we send the member a text and an email: "We are in receipt of your aye vote. It was received at 2:18 p.m. Thank you very much." That kind of finishes it.

With virtual proceedings, not all members are watching it live at the time it's happening, so when the division is finished and the Speaker has read out the result in the House, every member who voted will receive a text: "The vote for this division was ayes 201, noes 100. The ayes have it."

So they also get the results, and are fully engaged in the process all the way through.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much, Mr. Stutely.

Could you, and then Ms. Bradley, please, tell me the response from the MPs about this system?

Mr. Matt Stutely: Sorry; when you say "response", what do you mean?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Did they feel it was user friendly? Did they feel it was secure? Did you have any notes from MPs?

Mr. Matt Stutely: I would say that almost without exception, the members we spoke to, or the members we received feedback from, regardless of their political view, as Ms. Bradley said, around whether they believe remote voting is the right or wrong thing, were hugely appreciative of the work and felt it was easy for them to use.

We know that we had 610 members vote out of a maximum possible.... I'm going to get this one wrong, but I think about 637 is the maximum feasibly possible to vote, and that just doesn't happen. We had 610 in one of the votes that took place.

I'll let Ms. Bradley take over at this point.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

Ms. Bradley.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: I would concur with what Matt said. Even the most doubtful of my colleagues, the most opposed to

remote voting, the most traditionalist of all, could not complain. The system that was introduced was quick, efficient and secure. It worked. Whilst there was a lot of noise before it was introduced, and worry about what the implications might be for the future, once it was in people seemed to find it very easy to use—not so easy to whip, I think it would be safe to say, but very easy to use.

• (1220)

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

Mr. Burton, I know that you'll be doing this in the House of Lords, and you have people who are over 70. How comfortable will they be with remote voting, please?

The Chair: Please be very quick.

Mr. Simon Burton: The answer is that the response has been very positive. We sent a survey out to members when we first announced the remote voting. We very quickly got back 700 responses. We haven't analyzed the details of what they said, but they're all engaging positively with it.

I have just one tiny thing to add. The wording of the question that goes out on the vote will be very important. If you say "amendment 12", you may need to be a bit clearer so that members can see easily on the system what the amendment is about. We need to think that through.

Certainly, though, the response has been very positive from the members of the House.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Burton.

Next up we have Madam Normandin, please, for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

As members of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, we were tasked with studying the possibility of a virtual Parliament, and our report was about holding virtual meetings of Parliament. Right now, what we're looking at more specifically is virtual voting, so a remote or hybrid system.

Ms. Bradley, I was reading some of the comments you made during a BBC interview in which you were talking about how important it is for people who can't be physically present in the House to be able to participate in debates and vote. This is a matter of parliamentary privilege and ensuring MPs can represent their constituents.

If we were to conclude that we need to create a hybrid Parliament, would it make sense to develop a hybrid voting system? Do the two go hand in hand? Are they inextricably linked?

My question is for Mr. Burton too.

[English]

Mr. Simon Burton: In the House of Lords, the agreement is that it should be a purely virtual vote. Members will be casting their votes on their smart phones, their tablets and their iPads, even if they're in the chamber, for the same reasons as Ms. Bradley said: the division lobbies in the Lords are not suitable for voting under current Public Health England guidance, so they will be shut. The members will be able to vote anywhere, including in the chamber, but they will have to use the system. There will be very few exceptions for people with accessibility issues who just cannot use the system. Two or three people, maybe, will have to have special arrangements made, but everybody will vote using the app, wherever they are.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: The same thing happened in the House of Commons when we did have remote voting. Nobody voted in person. Everybody voted using the online system and that, as I say, was very quick and efficient and did seem to work.

When we came back to fully physical voting, the original proposal had been that the whips would manage those who couldn't be there by what's called pairing: so as long as you have one from each party who is absent, you can keep your majority figures the same. The problem with that in this particular pandemic is that it would disenfranchise so many of our members. So many great parliamentarians would be totally disenfranchised. The government did then concede that we needed to continue some virtual participation. It's not as it was when we had the hybrid Parliament, but we are able to participate virtually. They've now conceded that there needs to be a vote for those people, but they're doing it through the proxy physical system rather than the remote system.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: One of the questions I have is about the reality that we're hearing from many health professionals across the planet, which is that a second wave could happen and it's predicted that it might be happening during the fall.

I'm just wondering—and I'll ask you first, Ms. Bradley—with the methods you've used for virtual voting, whether there is any sort of agreement between the parties about when you would be able to pull those out again in practice if you are in the situation of a second wave.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: I'm not aware of there being agreement between the usual channels. I think that would have to be a conversation at that time as to whether there was a need to return to a remote voting system rather than using the physical system with the increased numbers of proxies that we're going to have from this week onwards.

• (1225)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: On the proxy voting, I understand that it is a way to make sure that people's voices are heard during the voting process, but I'm trying to get clarity. I've talked about where I live, the really good work we've done there and the very big fear of having anything come back. In my riding, we had one of the worst community cases in Canada. It was a very scary time for that very small community. Even for me to travel around my riding, there's a lot of hesitancy. Constituents say, "We'd love to see you, but we

don't actually want you to come and visit." I think that's really important for people in relating to their constituents, but I want to make sure that the voice of my constituents in this unique area that I live in is heard.

I understand the voting process by proxy, but how do you make sure that those voices are heard if they cannot come to the House? What about members who have people in their family who have an autoimmune disease or issues like that, or who have child care issues? Schools in B.C. are not open. High school students have half a day one day a week. For elementary students, it's half a day a few times a week. Parents don't necessarily have the capacity to travel across the country and be away from their families right now. I'm just wondering how you make room for those voices so that MPs can speak for their constituents.

Right Hon. Karen Bradley: That's one of our concerns and that's one of the debates we've been having over the last week or so, that the proposals for physical Parliament and the use of the type of virtual participation the government has now allowed us to have and the use of proxies perhaps doesn't allow for people as you describe to be able to fully represent their constituents. It's something that as a committee we're still pushing for, because I think we need to recognize that this is a unique situation and the usual rules do not apply.

For example, even if your children can go to school, and as key workers, as MPs, our children are allowed to go to school, if your children go to school in your constituency and that is several hundred of miles from London you can't physically get them to school and pick them up from school, and there is no child care in the way that there has been previously.

Therefore, there are some real issues and we're still working to get those recognized. I can't tell you that we have an answer for that at the moment.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bradley.

That concludes our questioning segment and this panel. Thank you to all the witnesses, Mr. Burton, Mr. Stutely and Ms. Bradley, for being here today. It was very enlightening to see how you've tackled the current pandemic challenges in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

We've learned a lot from it. Thank you so much.

Let's take 10 minutes while we switch to the next panel.

• (1225) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1235)

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone.

Could everyone please click on the top right-hand corner of their screen to ensure that you are on gallery view. With this view you should be able to see all of the participants in the committee meeting in a grid format.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses before us.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone to activate your mike. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like it does in a regular committee meeting. You will have a choice at the bottom of your screen of French, English or the floor. Please select the language that you will be speaking in. If at any point you are alternating between languages, please be sure to switch your language preference at the bottom of the screen to the language you are speaking, and try to pause briefly in between. That should help things go smoothly. Please speak slowly and clearly. You should make sure that your mike is on mute when you are not speaking. Headsets are of course strongly encouraged.

In the case of Ms. Cuevas, I did hear that she doesn't have a mike. I recommend that you speak as clearly and as slowly as possible, and our interpreters will try to do their best.

Welcome to all of the witnesses. This is the second panel of meeting number 21 of the procedure and House affairs committee. We are studying having a virtual Parliament in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before us right now we have Global Partners Governance, with Greg Power and Sue Griffiths. Then we have the president of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Ms. Cuevas.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today. Could we please have seven minutes of opening remarks from Global Partners Governance, with Mr. Greg Power.

Mr. Greg Power (Founder and Board Chair, Global Partners Governance): Thank you for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be with you. I'll try to be as brief as possible. If I can, I'll do it under seven minutes.

By way of a very brief introduction, as you mentioned, my name is Greg Power. I'm the founder and the board chair of an organization called Global Partners Governance, which I set up in 2005. We work with parliaments, political parties and ministers in various parts of the world.

My own background is in British politics, having worked on parliamentary reform in the think tank and civil society world during the 1990s. I was then a special adviser to the leader of the House of Commons in the British Parliament, Robin Cook and then Peter Hain, where I had to try to implement a lot of the reforms that I was writing about from the think tank world. What looked very obvious, easy and straightforward from the luxury of the think tank world

suddenly became much more complex when you're in government and trying to mediate between government and Parliament.

That's part of the theme of what I was going to say in relation to these comments. I'll make five broad comments about the transition to trying to implement virtual parliaments. A lot of this is based on a paper that my colleague Sue Griffiths, director of GPG, wrote that was specifically commissioned by the Mongolian Parliament as part of some work for the Asia Foundation, but we've looked at parliaments around the world in relation to this challenge.

These are the five broad points.

The first point is that in all parliaments, the obvious priority is the technological challenge. How do you do this? We've seen lots of parliaments all around the world trying to understand the practical implications of bringing this technology into parliamentary chambers that perhaps aren't that suited to the use of technology. Also, what does this do to parliamentary business? Most parliaments have had to prioritize. You can't get through the same amount of business that you were able to when the Parliament was sitting in physical form. How do you choose those priorities? Who gets to decide those questions? Who decides which business takes priority? That's the first set of challenges.

The second point is the political implications of this. The fact that you suddenly have to do your business in a slightly different way, and that you will not be able to get through as much business, will have subtle changes on the balance of power.

I think there are three things worth mentioning in relation to that.

Number one, as many parliaments have found, if you're going to do hybrid sittings, which combine both virtual and physical presence of parliamentarians, who gets to decide who's in the chamber and who's Zooming in virtually?

Number two is the way in which this changes the dynamics. We've seen this most obviously, certainly from our point of view, in the British Parliament. I'm slightly disappointed we didn't get to hear what the representatives of the Houses of Parliament in the U.K. said to you. The dynamics of the debates in the British Parliament have changed fundamentally. The ability to manage a very rowdy floor full of politicians is a political skill, which has both made and broken ministerial careers in the U.K. You see it most obviously in our own Prime Minister's questions when the Prime Minister clearly benefits from having an audience for his style of speaking to Parliament, whereas the Leader of the Opposition perhaps has a more austere, forensic style, which is more suited to not having an audience, or at least he certainly doesn't need it as much as the Prime Minister does to get his points across. It changes the dynamic, and you can see that in a whole range of debates in Parliament.

Number three is what the lack of physical presence does for the organization of politics, and the ability to whip a party is very different when you're not physically in the same space.

The third point has to do with public communication. What does the move to a virtual parliament do to the ability of the public to access parliamentary proceedings? If they had been physically able to get into the building, how do they access knowledge, information on what Parliament is doing and who decides what sort of information they get.

• (1240)

The fourth point is logistics and resources. Again, looking at the U.K. as an example, one of the big issues that hit the news was the fact that Parliament had to provide all MPs with enough resources to be able to work virtually, including the provision of laptops. This became a news story because, in a time when the economy is not moving, why on earth should MPs get all this extra money when everybody else is suffering. That was the way it was portrayed in the news, but there is an issue there around making sure that politicians and staff have the ability and the skills to participate remotely.

The final point, then, is just about what the lasting impact of moving to virtual proceedings is. The short answer is none of us know. There will be a lasting impact. I think we've all gotten used to this sort of meeting, and it's likely to provide a feature of parliamentary proceedings in all business for some time into the future.

In other parliaments you have seen the use of emergency powers during this period, and the insertion of sunset clauses through a lot of the hybrid and the virtual Parliament rules that have come in.

Just by way of conclusion, I think the issue here is that this has changed politics, both practically and politically in the way that it's done. I think there has been a lot of focus on countries like Hungary, where Prime Minister Orbán has used the pandemic as an excuse to extend the powers of the government.

I think the real risk for most parliaments is not that head-on assault to democracy, but a slow erosion and a subtle shift in the balance of power that we don't actually notice at the time, but that does change the ability of a parliament to hold government to account.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Power.

Next up, we have the president of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. You're allowed a seven-minute introductory remark. You can take less, of course. We're happy to have you here, and look forward to learning what countries around the world that belong to the Inter-Parliamentary Union are doing in this case.

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron (President, Inter-Parliamentary Union): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you to all of my parliamentary colleagues.

At the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we are collecting the parliamentary responses to COVID-19, and how parliaments are adapting to these new and highly unfortunate circumstances.

There are different practices. Allow me to start with a terrible number: Almost two billion people in the world have had suspended or reduced parliaments. As we know the importance of our responsibilities, we also know that when it happens, when parliaments are suspended or reduced, our capacity to promote legislation, for example, emergency legislation, to adopt budgets or even

to exercise our responsibility of overseeing the government is also reduced. It is affected, and that also affects democracy.

I would like to review a little of what IPU has been receiving from the national parliaments. First are the remote working methods in parliament. The current pandemic has caused significant disruption to parliaments around the world, but with it has come a wave of unexpected innovation. Committee meetings, just like yours, have proven to be more adaptable and, perhaps, better suited to the digital tools available. Forty per cent of parliaments report using a remote model for their committees and only 6% report holding no committee meetings.

Ten per cent of parliaments have opted for a technology-based solution in their plenaries, using digital tools to operate a remote parliament or a hybrid chamber. In the hybrid model, a number of members and officials are present in the chamber, and others are able to participate remotely via video conferencing tools. Twenty per cent of parliaments had held no meetings of their plenary, and two-fifths were holding face-to-face plenaries but with reduced numbers and special conditions applying.

I would like to recall what Greg was saying. In this case, it's not only about having meetings. In most of the cases, the rules of the parliament are not allowing these virtual meetings to be a mandatory decision for the parliament. That's the case in my own country of Mexico. We have committee meetings, but we are going to vote everything hopefully in September, when we can go back to the parliament.

We know this is creating the opportunity to accelerate parliamentary innovation and to develop new working methods. Surely, we are going to need to adapt our roles as soon as possible, and I think this will happen around the world.

In terms of procedure, before parliaments can operate in a remote or hybrid manner, they must identify, as I was just explaining, the legal and procedural barriers to doing so. It has proven to be the case that many parliamentary systems have been legally or procedurally defined in such a way that it is either explicit or implicit that they must meet in person and that decisions are ratified by a vote of those members present. For example, we have a quorum rule for most of our parliaments, or even for parliamentary organizations. Many parliaments have reviewed their legislative framework and brought forward amendments. Spain, Brazil, Finland and Latvia are such examples. The U.K. House of Commons and the New Zealand House of Representatives have formally amended parliamentary Standing Orders to allow for remote sittings.

• (1250)

There is also the issue of the availability of staff and members. Of course, if we are asking people for social distancing and to work from home, this applies to the secretariat, the staff, the people who are helping us in our parliaments, and this also translates to the national parliaments. For example, the European Parliament expects its IT team to be working remotely until at least September. Remote working requires secure access to the systems used in parliament, and it is clear that parliaments that have invested in remote access and cloud-based solutions prior to the pandemic are at an advantage here. Another example is the parliament of the Maldives, which is an excellent example of how prior investment in strategic planning and IT has made it easier for them to respond to the current circumstances.

We also have different working modalities. Greg was mentioning some of them, so I will go very quickly. When a parliament operates virtually, not only the formal procedure but also the practical process changes. Members need to have access to a sufficiently reliable—we are experiencing that—and high-speed Internet connection. That can be very difficult in remote or rural areas. For example, for the Inter-Parliamentary Union, when we're trying to convene a long, important, big meeting of the IPU, there is also a need to adapt to the different time zones. That's not easy. We also need to be open and to adapt to these circumstances. For example, Angola has used regional public buildings, where an MP can attend if their home-based connection is not sufficient. Again, we have different examples.

When it comes to technology, there are two clear favourites in terms of video conferencing. Zoom and Microsoft Teams are the two solutions being chosen by most parliaments for plenaries, committees and internal meetings. Other options include Cisco Webex, Google, Jitsi and Kudo, which is particularly suited to multilingual parliaments.

We also mentioned the physical distancing in parliament. We have a lot of different experiences. Perhaps I can go further during the questions and answers.

I think we are also going to get very important lessons, in a very positive way, out of this highly unfortunate situation. In terms of using technology, yes, we are going to need more tools for more inclusive and dynamic work in parliaments. We also need more IT people in our parliaments and also in other parliamentary organizations. That's a lesson for the Inter-Parliamentary Union, for example. This could also be a great opportunity for greater transparency, more open parliament practices, communication with society and inclusion.

Perhaps I am optimistic here, but I believe that, in the end, parliaments are going to need these very positive lessons in order to survive in society. We are facing very important criticisms from our constituencies and these kinds of tools, I am sure, are going to become very popular tools to get closer to our constituencies.

Thank you very much again, Madam Chair.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Richards, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you.

Let me start with you, Mr. Power.

You wrote a blog post back in April in which you said, “The COVID-19 crisis has been seized upon by several governments to extend their reach and sideline parliament”. I'm wondering if that's something that remains a concern to you and is something that you've seen problems with, and if you can elaborate on that a bit.

Mr. Greg Power: Yes, I think there were two main examples in my mind at the time. One was Hungary and the other was Serbia.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán essentially declared a state of emergency powers quite quickly. He generated an awful lot of publicity. In Serbia, it was slightly different. I think the fear was that the powers that had been taken over were more ambiguous, but there were suggestions in the early part of the emergency powers that the elections due for June were going to be delayed.

Now, in both cases, they have worked out in slightly different ways. For Hungary, we are now being told that a state of emergency is going to stop I think in about a week's time or two weeks' time or something like that. In Serbia, it happened more quickly. What has happened there is that the approval ratings for President Vucic have actually increased quite dramatically as a result of this, because he has looked like he has controlled the outbreak of COVID very well.

Those are the two examples I had in mind. It was more to do with the emergency powers than it was specifically to do with how parliament has adapted, but parliaments were being sidelined as a result of that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes. Obviously your concern there is that of governments using emergency situations to do things that wouldn't be considered acceptable at any other time. I think that's really what we're hearing from you, correct? Yes.

For example, if a government were to propose legislation that would give itself complete authority to make all taxation and expenditure decisions without the need to consult the legislature for two years, would that be the type of concern that you would have had?

Mr. Greg Power: Yes. That was what I was alluding to. If I remember rightly what I wrote—it was a couple of months ago—I think the point I made was that headlong assault. That's what generates the headlines. I think the bigger risk for most parliaments is the stuff you're not seeing, the stuff of who is deciding who gets to be in the chamber and ask questions. If you're having to reduce the amount of business that a parliament can get through, who is determining what takes priority and what doesn't? What then suddenly goes into statutory instruments as opposed to coming onto the floor for debate? I think that's the bigger risk for most parliaments.

• (1300)

Mr. Blake Richards: Right, so another example might be, say, if a government were to use the pandemic as an excuse to close down the legislature completely and then replace it with a committee type of structure that would meet for eight hours a week or less. Would that be something you would see as a concern as well?

Mr. Greg Power: This is an issue that has come up in a number of parliaments. I might hand it over to my colleague Sue, who may be able to clarify some of this, but certainly in a number of parliaments that decision has been taken, so the decisions of the entire parliament have been delegated to a smaller committee. The extent to which that works or doesn't varies, according to the parliament and its provisions for having a steering committee or a bureau. In South Africa, I think, if I'm right—I'm looking at Sue—they rejected this idea for exactly these sorts of reasons.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

What about the idea of a government using the pandemic to prevent up to two-thirds of the standing committees of a legislature from being able to meet even virtually and limiting the powers of the committees that are able to meet? Would that be something that you would think would be of concern?

Mr. Greg Power: Yes. All of these things are of a concern, yes, absolutely.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

On the idea of a government using this type of situation to prevent opposition politicians from being able to advance motions or to advance debates on topics they have concerns about, or even from being able to use a written question system to get some detailed accountability, would those things be of concern?

Mr. Greg Power: I think they're all altering the nature of the way in which parliaments are used to operating and limiting the ability of certain parliamentarians to contribute.

Mr. Blake Richards: To go another route with it, if a government were to use the pandemic situation to pass something through what we call an order in council, or something that would be considered a cabinet decree or something of that nature, to be able to render illegal the possession of billions of dollars of property owned by private citizens, would that also be the type of concern that—

Mr. Greg Power: I get a sense you're alluding to stuff that is beyond my knowledge and very specific cases.

Mr. Blake Richards: Very well.

Mr. Greg Power: I think everything you're referring to, anything that limits what had been the previous rights of parliamentarians to introduce certain things, are, obviously, issues of concern.

Mr. Blake Richards: Absolutely, okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blake Richards: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] permanent, you're saying as well.

Mr. Greg Power: I think that's the risk, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next up we have Mr. Turnbull, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to the panellists for being here today. It's really great to hear from you.

Ms. Cuevas, I'm going to ask you some questions. Our committee is tasked with looking at how to do remote and virtual voting. I think we all recognize that many members, due to travel restric-

tions, can't fully exercise their rights and privileges as members of Parliament right now due to this pandemic. We want to get on with business and participate fully in the legislative process, and we're not able to do so. As you mentioned, many other parliaments were suspended; I think you said it affected two billion people.

Can you give us some examples of how other parliaments have conquered this and what remote voting solutions they have considered and/or implemented? I know it's a big question.

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: There are very different examples, a huge variety. If you allow me, I would like to link your question, Mr. Turnbull, to the previous discussion.

This pandemic is forcing all of us to improve technologies, connectivity and also our rules and practices. We have some successful examples. For example, the Senate of Paraguay has been able to conduct plenaries virtually.

For example, just yesterday, I think it was—I'm sorry. I'm not sure what day I am living now, and seeing your faces I think I am not the only one—they changed their directive board and elected a new president of the Senate completely virtually, so there are some parliaments that are very good examples.

Some others are selecting some members from each party to make up a mini-plenary, but I am not a strong advocate of those practices. I don't like that kind of practice because I believe that independent voices are being left aside. If the head of the party or the Speaker is entitled to choose those members, they are going to select the most loyal. I don't like that because I do believe that each voice is important.

Some other countries are using very interesting measures by cleaning everything and adopting the basic recommendations that we are hearing. For example, when it comes to physical distancing in parliaments, some parliaments are meeting either with physical distancing, virtually, or a mix of both. This includes Argentina, Brazil, Bhutan, Croatia, France and New Zealand, among others. As virtual meetings become the new normal, there are several other parliaments that are meeting in person as well while applying social distancing and sanitation guidelines.

I think some of them, because they are also big territories—not as big as Canada, but they are also big—need some kind of transportation.

In Azerbaijan, MPs and staff members are using masks, gloves and hand sanitizers. Members of the Milli Majlis age 65 and above are not attending sessions. Similar sanitation measures have been adopted in Croatia, Italy, Paraguay and Cambodia. Also, in the Parliament of Cambodia, staff and visitors are required to wear masks, and their temperatures are checked at the entrance to the building, as they are in DRC, Malaysia and Serbia.

The Serbian constitution or its rules and procedures do not allow for remote meetings, so they adopted practices to comply with hygiene and safety recommendations, but if I am not mistaken, they also reduced the number of parliamentarians.

• (1305)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Ms. Cuevas, thank you for that really great answer.

I'm a little short on time and I want to just ask you a couple of other questions.

Do you know how many of the IPU members are undertaking some form of electronic or remote voting?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: We don't have the statistics. I can ask, but I don't have them now.

I am waiting for IPU reports. We sent a questionnaire to parliaments, and we are waiting for their answers.

I think that the common practice is going to be to meet again, but with all these measures—face masks, gloves, and everything.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Would you say it's a promising practice on that spectrum of ensuring that all individual members can participate fully? Is having a solution for remote and electronic voting a promising, or maybe, best practice for parliaments?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: I would say not now, but eventually. I think we are learning the lessons; we are improving, and we are learning every day.

Allow me to use my own parliament as an example. We have 500 members in the Mexican Parliament and 128 senators. That makes it almost impossible to have speaking rights and business as usual, if we go virtual. I think that eventually we are going to develop those technologies, but also the rules to allow us to make whatever efforts we are making become the real mandate, for example, for voting or something.

I believe that's a new trend and we must learn about that. We also need to learn the lesson in terms of using technology until we get closer to our constituencies.

The Chair: Thank you so much. That's all the time we have.

Next is Madame Normandin.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I'd like to ask Mr. Power some questions. I just want to point out that we all agree we'd rather not be dealing with a pandemic right now and that we'd like Parliament to be doing its usual legislative work with all 338 members here, but that's not possible.

So let's operate on the assumption that we can't function as though the pandemic weren't happening.

You said that, because of the pandemic, we probably won't accomplish as much as usual or follow the legislative agenda as closely or question the government as much. I'd like to know if the possibility of a hybrid parliament is to blame for that or if it's the fault of the government, which might use the pandemic as a justification and an excuse.

Whose fault would it be? Is it because of the virtual way of doing things or just because of the crisis?

• (1310)

[English]

Mr. Greg Power: What I might do is ask Sue, my colleague, to come in on part of this as well, if that's okay.

My sense is that it is quite simply a product of the fact that you cannot get through as much business. The sittings have been shortened, for practical reasons as much as anything else. However, there are obviously political implications to those practical problems.

I think the issue for most parliaments is how you resolve those practical problems in a way that doesn't alter the politics.

I don't believe it's necessarily as easy as saying it's just down to the government. There are all sorts of issues that have been caused by the pandemic, which have changed the way that politics is done. One of those is the move to a sort of virtual hybrid parliament, which has necessitated reducing the amount of business that politicians can get through.

Sue, I don't know if you want to add to that.

Ms. Sue Griffiths (Executive Director, Global Partners Governance): I would just add that I think that in all spheres of life, in business or in social life, we're not doing the same number of things that we were doing prior to the crisis, and that's inevitable really.

What we found when we were looking at the different parliamentary responses was that initially most parliaments did have a scaled-down version of what it was they were doing before. They did start off perhaps not with the mechanism to vote, but with just sitting on fewer days or with fewer members.

The decision of how you scale that down is a political decision. In the end, what should you keep? What are the most important things out of all the various things that parliaments do? I think we must not forget as well that members are very busy in their constituencies at the moment and there's a big demand there.

How much time do you require them to be attending meetings virtually or physically compared to that?

As the crisis goes on, more and more services are being added back in. I think that's why a lot of parliaments are now coming to this online voting as a big issue, because a parliament can only go on for so long without voting before it really needs to have that ability.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Ms. Griffiths.

I'd like to take that even further. Right now, there are no opposition days, we can't debate bills, and we can't move motions. Would it be unfair to blame the creation of a virtual Parliament? Does it have more to do with politics? Is it actually the government's fault for using the crisis as an excuse?

We're discussing how we can establish a virtual parliament and set up a virtual voting mechanism. I'm afraid people may try to kill the idea of virtual voting on false pretenses, and I'd like to hear your views on that.

[English]

Mr. Greg Power: Again, I'll sort of answer the second half of this question, and hopefully I won't take up too much time.

I think this was the blog that was mentioned earlier, which has characterized an awful lot of our work internationally and my previous role in the British government and the British Parliament. It's very rare that a government will make life more difficult for itself.

My experience is of being in the British government and also in the odd position of being an adviser to the leader of the House of Commons. That minister was simultaneously in the cabinet and was the minister for Parliament, while also being Parliament's representative in government with a desire to reform Parliament.

The challenge is that if there is an opportunity for governments to make their life easier, they generally take it. This is not necessarily a deliberate attempt to undermine Parliament, but if the opportunity is there, if you have to reduce business anyway, people will say, "Well, let's get rid of this bit." An opposition day doesn't look like a priority in the middle of a pandemic anyway. I think that's the challenge.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Unfortunately, I don't have much time left, Mr. Power.

Wouldn't this be a great opportunity to come up with rules for the future and create a hybrid virtual Parliament with a good system of checks and balances, thereby ensuring that the government can't take advantage of the situation?

• (1315)

[English]

Ms. Sue Griffiths: Somebody once said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." I think there are a lot of innovations and experiments that previously people would have said were too difficult or impossible, but it has been proven that, suddenly, they're actually not so difficult and can be done. I do think that will change the attitudes of people in the future, but how that happens in different parliaments is not really for me to say.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Ms. Griffiths.

[English]

The Chair: Next up we have Madam Blaney, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I thank all of you for being here with us today. I appreciate the thoughtfulness of the testimony.

I think all parliaments across this planet have to be very considered in thinking about this process and what the outcomes could be in the long term.

I'm from the western part of British Columbia, and there are aspects that I really miss about being in the House. One of the things that I've found very helpful during this period, when I'm not seeing people that I work with as often, are the relationships that I've built with members across parties. I think that one of the parts that would be missing in a virtual Parliament is the inability to build those relationships, to get to know one another.

When I speak in the House, I know that if there are other parliamentarians who experience the same thing in their riding or hear similar stories from their constituents, it leads to conversations that could mean collaboration and working on issues together. I think that is fundamental to democracy and a big challenge in a virtual setting.

Maybe I could start with Ms. Griffiths on this. I'm just wondering how other parliaments are addressing these issues. I know there was a discussion about having sunset clauses—and I think an incremental approach makes sense—and also the ability of all recognized parties to have a voice in what change has happened, so that we can see a balance of power.

Ms. Sue Griffiths: Well, I think that this has been a very interesting piece of work that we've done in looking at the different responses from other parliaments. I would say as well that the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU, is an excellent resource, which they are constantly updating, to see what the different parliaments are doing. It is a moving picture, and there are new innovations all the time.

In one way, you can see complete diversity, but in another way, you can see certain trends emerging. Parliaments generally are starting with what they have already and the processes that they have already, and then building from there. For example, with block voting, where the leader of your party might vote on all the members' behalf, certain parliaments think that is the normal way of proceeding, and therefore it's not strange for them to use that mechanism when there's a crisis. Other parliaments, I think, perhaps Westminster included, would find that quite unconventional, or it wouldn't be part of the culture and the way that they work. It's important that each member be able to record their vote individually in ways that they would like to.

Greg mentioned earlier this concept of delegating powers to a committee, a bureau or a smaller set of members. There's been some interesting evidence emerging about levels of representation when that happens, particularly in terms of gender: Are women the ones who miss out when people are nominated to smaller committees? It's not quite clear yet, but more and more evidence is coming in as more and more parliaments experiment with those kinds of procedures.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

Ms. Cuevas, I am curious. You're obviously doing amazing work, watching what other parliaments are doing. I think you're right; a lot of innovation will come out of this for further discussion.

Could you tell us about how different parties within parliaments are keeping a balance of power? One of the concerns is that the governing body will say this is the way it's going to be, and then there is frustration and concern.

Do you have any examples of other parliaments that are keeping that level of accountability high during this time?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: Thank you very much, Ms. Blaney.

I will be absolutely honest, transparent and politically incorrect.

We receive the reports that the national parliaments want us to receive. We receive beautiful news from most parliaments.

The IPU study has a bias, to be honest. If I review the notes I have received, some very authoritarian countries are saying they have lovely parliaments, and we all know that is not true.

First, the measures that governments are taking must be based on their constitution.

Second, those measures must be proportional to the emergency because emergencies are not the same in all countries.

The measures must be temporary. We cannot think that this state of emergency is going to be there forever and some parliaments are facing that authoritarian temptation.

For example, there seems to be another challenge that I think we must legislate urgently because authoritarian regimes are never going to legislate [*Editor—Inaudible*], but democratic governments are apparently afraid of legislating about technology.

Let me go to an example. There was a very good article by Yuval Noah Harari of the Financial Times about two months ago when he was explaining how technology and the technology about COVID monitoring can also be used for monitoring our feelings when we are listening to, for example, a politician's speech.

For authoritarian regimes, it's going to be very easy to use our cellphones to see if we love or hate the politicians when they make their speeches.

We need to prevent those situations. Canada has a very strong democracy. I am not saying this because of Canada, but clearly there are countries that are using the people's fears to restrict liberties and freedoms, and of course restricting parliaments.

Again, I can tell you about a lot of different experiences, but those cases are the reports we receive from the same actors. We don't have an independent study at the IPU.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cuevas.

Next we have Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I have a comment to Mr. Power.

A lot of the examples Mr. Richards gave you—and he cited five or six—are examples from Canada and some of the things the current government has tried to impose or implement during this crisis. I'll remind you we're in a Westminster parliamentary system, similar to Great Britain, and we are in a minority situation.

Perhaps a suggestion, Mr. Power, is that Canada would be a great case study for your next blog on how governments try to impose their will on a parliamentary democracy.

My question to you pivots to the issue of Standing Orders. One of the things we heard in the last panel, including the chair of the British PROC system, is the changes to the Standing Orders, and the fact that now at the height of a pandemic is not the time to look

at any permanent changes with respect to the COVID-19 crisis as it relates to changing the Standing Orders in Parliament. Perhaps under normal circumstances that would be the time.

Would that be your assessment, Mr. Power?

Mr. Greg Power: I had worked out as the questions went on that this was an allusion to what was going on in Canada.

In response to Mr. Richards' questions, I'd make the same point again, which is that I think any change to standing orders that takes place now has to be regarded carefully because of the long-term implications of this. As I was saying, the risk for most parliaments—and I include the British Parliament and indeed the vast majority of democratic parliaments in this—is the slow erosion of parliamentary accountability, because each time the rules change, whether it's temporary or permanent, politicians will learn how to interpret the rules.

We work a lot with parliaments right around the world, mostly parliaments in the early stages of their formation. There is a process that all political institutions or parliaments go through. The first phase is agreeing what the rules are and trying to establish the basis from which you can run the institution. The second phase, which is an ongoing phase that takes decades if not centuries, is working out what the rules actually mean.

It's one thing to establish the rules of the game; it's another to establish the games within the rules, how politics actually functions. I think the risk here is that those games within the rules shift as well and change the balance of power in the process. Sorry, it's a long answer to a short question. By making changes to the Standing Orders in a period now, which are permanent, I think there is inevitably a risk to this.

• (1325)

Mr. John Brassard: All right. Thank you for that response. It was a good response.

Ms. Cuevas Barron, does the IPU have a particular definition or standard it uses to consider whether a parliament's remote participation and voting are models to follow?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: No. I think that the IPU has also been learning day by day in terms of parliamentary practices, in terms of sharing and understanding those just practices and in terms of trying to apply them to our own organization. For example, we had to cancel our assembly in Geneva in April, which was of course not what we wanted. We also share most of your concerns that it's better to meet person to person. I think that we also need to update our best practices in terms of how a parliament must be working in times of emergency. We cannot afford to have another two billion people living in suspended or reduced parliaments again.

Mr. John Brassard: Right. I have a follow-up question that relates more to bidirectional interpretation. One of the unique challenges here in Canada, as you're understanding today, is the issue of bidirectional interpretation. We have two official languages, English and French. How many other parliamentary examples can you cite? Have there been any difficulties with respect to that?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: I don't have a note on that, but I know how they are working. For example, the European Parliament has a huge experience when it comes to interpretation services and the use of languages. Some other parliaments have more diversity, even more than Canada. I know Canada very well, but there are some other countries that are having this challenge.

For example, what comes now to my mind is that some of the European parliaments are using that practice. Let's remember that in Africa and in some other countries, the tribal languages are also official. Some of them are using this practice. I can take a look. If you or the committee staff send me your email, I can update you with the information. That's something that I think is improving.

For example, when the pandemic started, I remember that Zoom did not have interpretation available, and now it's—

The Chair: Thank you. As we're using it today, we see that the platforms are updating. I think the clerk is writing this down. If you have more information, you can definitely send it to the committee.

Next up, we have Mr. Gerretsen for five minutes please.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Power, the entire discussion that you were having with Mr. Richards, notwithstanding Mr. Brassard's suggestion that you use Canada as an example for your next blog post, was based on your observations of Hungary and Serbia.

According to the democracy index put out by The Economist on an annual basis, in 2019 Canada ranked seventh in terms of our democracy, a score that we tied with Denmark at a 9.2 out of 10, which puts us in the category of full democracy.

Hungary scored 55, and Serbia scored 66, both of which put them in the category of flawed democracy.

Is it safe to say that you have more confidence in Canada's ability to proceed with something like this as opposed to the two examples of Hungary and Serbia?

Mr. Greg Power: I think I can answer that question quite quickly by saying that I wouldn't put Canada in the same category as Serbia or Hungary.

• (1330)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

You talked about Parliament and shifting the balance of power over time. I understand, even through a discussion you had with Mr. Brassard a few moments ago.... You were talking about whether or not it might be the precedent that might be set over time.

If we're doing this study just in the context of COVID-19 and the parameters are set very specifically, that this is to be used just during this time, and that if any future times were to be deemed neces-

sary that would require further study and implementation by Parliament, would that put you more at ease?

Mr. Greg Power: I might hand it over to Sue again to talk about some of the sunset clauses that have been introduced.

I think that in exceptional circumstances, you need to do exceptional things, but it shouldn't be inevitable... I think there is a risk to doing something now that then has a permanent impact on the ability of a parliament to hold government to account. That is why most parliaments—and again, I'll let Sue in at this point—introduce these measures as temporary, with sunset clauses attached to them.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I have to jump over to Ms. Cuevas because I'm limited on my time.

When you were talking about connectivity and the need for different members of Parliament to be able to connect through the various networks, in your observations, have you seen other members or other representatives talking about it in the context of using it as an excuse or reason not to do it, or do they identify it as a challenge that needs to be overcome?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: That's a reality. I think that reality can be used...accepting it and improving the circumstances.

However, also there are some countries and parliaments that are using a crisis for their own benefit. They are profiting from people's fears.

I think that—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: With the risk of asking you to be partisan here, I'm going to ask the question anyway. If you don't want to answer it, you don't have to.

Do you think that Canada is using the crisis as an opportunity?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: Honestly, I don't think so.

I am not sure if I have a comprehensive perception, but I don't think so. Canada—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt. I have one more question for you.

In the other areas you've been witnessing, and in the data you've been collecting, either anecdotally or otherwise, do you know if opposition parties have, generally speaking, been embracing the opportunity to continue to work through virtual settings and hybrid settings?

Is it something that both sides seem to be adapting, or is it something that the governments and certain sides of representation have to push through?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: I think we are all doing our best. We got awful lemons for 2020 and we're trying to make the best lemonade.

That doesn't mean that we want to accept these circumstances. I haven't heard a single parliamentarian in the world saying that they are okay with the circumstances.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I'm having a bit of technical difficulty here.

I believe I was listening to Dr. Griffiths. I'd like to hear a little more about the concern about the legitimacy of virtual parliament and not having parliamentarians attend, with full function of their parliament, while we are forcing other essential workers to report to duty to carry on the important work that they do.

Ms. Sue Griffiths: There are a lot of issues in that question, I think. I'll try to be brief.

One of the initial questions about legitimacy I think has been covered earlier by saying, "What is your legal basis for having a virtual parliament at all?" That will vary from country to country, whether there needs to be some kind of resolution or legal change to enable that to happen, but once it does, I think a big concern in a lot of parliaments has been that fair representation among different MPs should be achieved. We're talking about whether you have a hybrid system, where certain people are there in person and others are there virtually.

I know that this has been a big issue in the U.K., which was covered in your earlier session. How do you ensure that both of those types of members can have an equal input, which in theory they should have, if they are both full members of Parliament? Then, are you disproportionately disadvantaging certain sectors, such as older people or people with health conditions? Because they are probably the ones who can't come in person.

On the second part of your question about the kind of public image, if you like, of parliaments, it's gone in different ways in different countries. Some countries have seen parliaments meeting virtually as a kind of public example of "don't come into work, this is not what we should be doing now, we should be staying at home, we should be making sure that we're not leaving the house". Others, particularly as the situation has kind of eased a bit in most countries, do take the view that now we should be back at work and everyone should be seen to be coming in, and in solidarity, if you like, with normal people who are doing normal jobs. I think it varies a lot depending on the context.

• (1335)

Mr. Corey Tochor: I'm not sure who would like to take this up, but in studies of other countries that may have may unification issues or parts of their country that are feeling neglected or abused by other parts of the country or other regions of that democracy... We're feeling that in western Canada, where many people out here feel that we're not getting the representation in Ottawa because we're not there and we're not actually asking those tough questions or utilizing all the tools at our disposal. Are there any other countries that have issues with unification, where there are remote locations that are maybe singled out to exploit those feelings of neglect?

Ms. Sue Griffiths: It's a very interesting question, and I'm sure there must be examples around the world. The only one that comes to me immediately is my own country, in the U.K., where there have been particular worries about Scottish MPs who physically cannot get to Westminster because there are no transport links, some of them from remote islands. There's not the scale of distance that there is in Canada and I'm sure in many other countries, but it

does go back into the whole question of whether you are disadvantaging certain sectors more than others.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Would any of the other guests like to talk about any other examples they have witnessed out there that are similar to that?

Mr. Greg Power: I'm afraid I can't really add much more to what Sue said, because Scotland was the first thing that came into my head as well.

I think part of the reason why South Africa rejected the idea of delegating the management of business to a smaller committee was a reflection of some of the internal divisions within the country and the perhaps under-representation of certain parts of the country in that smaller committee. It is not a direct parallel, but I think those sorts of issues are going on in a number of different parliaments. Unfortunately, off the top of my head, I couldn't give you another specific example, I'm afraid.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We have Mr. Alhabra.

Hon. Omar Alhabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

My comments and questions are for Mr. Power and Ms. Griffiths. What we're having here in the Canadian Parliament is an ongoing tension or a debate between one group of MPs who are saying that we need to accommodate public health advice and make adjustments to how Parliament works, obviously on an interim basis just during this pandemic because it's an exceptional circumstance, and another group of MPs who are saying that if we make these short-term changes, is this going to make permanent changes and affect how we do our work forever, and are therefore resisting any type of short-term adjustment.

As a member of Parliament from the governing party, I can tell you that I hear your calls that governments need to make sure that Parliament plays its role to hold government to account and that Parliament plays an important role that holds government accountable. However, what would you say to MPs who are refusing the idea of introducing short-term measures to accommodate the pandemic we have so that Parliament can function and ensure that MPs represent their constituents?

• (1340)

Mr. Greg Power: I think Sue's leaving me to answer that one. Is Canada the same as Serbia and Hungary? I can't give you a quick answer to this question, in that I think it's just the nature of parliamentary politics.

If you're in government, inevitably you see that the pressure's on governing and the need to get stuff done, and get stuff done quickly, because if you do not you will be held to account by the public for your failure to deal with these problems. If you're in the opposition, you will inevitably treat any changes to Standing Orders with suspicion, whether they are permanent or temporary, because of the sense of what you might lose by accident by giving away certain powers to the government.

I think there is inevitably a tension, and that's the nature of parliamentary democracy, which sounds like a very pat answer. It's not a great answer, but....

Ms. Sue Griffiths: If I could perhaps give one example, standing orders are only permanent until they're not, once it's not written into tablets of stone that standing orders can never change.

I think of a previous experience of a completely different crisis, for example the expenses crisis that we had a few years ago in Westminster. A lot of things were changed as a result of that crisis. Some of those, I think, perhaps were regretted afterwards, but others were not.

Short-term changes can be short term, can be limited, but they will still stick in people's minds as a memory of the thing that happened that was good or bad or indifferent. It will alter people's views of how Parliament should work, having had it work in a slightly different way for a while.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Both of you, I think, agree that both government and opposition MPs have a responsibility to address the pandemic. We can't, on the one hand, say we respect the pandemic but at the same time ask for all not to change anything in how we do our roles.

Ms. Sue Griffiths: I think it's quite striking that pretty much all the parliaments we looked at have managed to keep functioning in one way or another during the pandemic, even the ones that initially just went into a long recess or suspended for a while. Pretty much all of them have decided to do something. I think we could say doing nothing is not an option.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you.

The Chair: Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Cuevas Barron, I'd like to ask you a few questions.

You mentioned that several legislative assemblies have suspended operations, assemblies that represent some two billion people.

Have you noticed a correlation between parliaments in countries with healthy democracies that hold virtual parliamentary sittings and those with a less healthy democracy that don't?

[*English*]

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: I don't see a correlation between authoritarian regimes and having or not having virtual meetings. I will give a few examples.

The Spanish Parliament stopped working completely, with a huge complaint from the opposition parties. In my own country, the parliamentarians and senators stopped working about three months ago. We have a permanent committee that is always working—that's in our constitution. That's the way we work here during the moments when Parliament is not sitting. That's a different case. A couple of weeks ago, the Parliament of China was having a plenary session. There's a huge variety.

I don't see a correlation between the kind of regime and the work of Parliament.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Based on the reports you've received, have you noticed whether several opposition members and opposition parties have been asking for virtual sittings of Parliament, or have those requests been coming only from the party in power?

[*English*]

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: I think that, in general, it comes from the majority party. Regardless if that is coming from the ruling party or not, for parliamentary systems it's very obvious that a majority is a ruling party. For presidential systems, we can have what we call a divided government, where the president comes from a political party but the majority is represented by a different one, like the opposition. Usually it comes from the majority, but there are a lot of complaints.

I think we all want to go back to our duties. I would like to recall that some of you were mentioning that essential workers are making a huge effort, and perhaps we should be doing the same. I note that, for example in Mexico, like Canada, to come to Mexico City you need to take at least one flight. At the same time, we need to respond to an emergency with budgets, with emergency legislation. I think there's a huge paradox we need to resolve.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cuevas Barron.

Ms. Blaney, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think one of the biggest challenges we hear, and especially today in committee, is that the decisions we make today could have influence on how Parliament works tomorrow. There's a lot of concern around that. I think it's an important concern.

This question is for all three witnesses. Do you have any recommendations, or do you have other examples to demonstrate the ability to have the checks and balances in place? I don't know if I'm making it very clear, but for me, the real point is this: What do we need to put in place so that when we come back to Parliament, we're not fundamentally changing how we do things without a thoughtful process during the time that is not in a middle of a pandemic?

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: I will be super brief and say that I think we need to set the rules—rules that are built by the majority and the opposition and rules that will satisfy all of us with regard to, for example, opposition days. We need not only the rules but also the technology solutions. It is not only for health emergencies. What happens in other emergencies?

We are about to face an economic emergency, and I really hope that parliaments will be prepared to respond to this crisis in terms of jobs and salaries. We are starting an economic crisis. Regardless of technology, parliaments must be there. We need to be prepared.

Ms. Sue Griffiths: I would add sunset clauses or temporary standing orders that lapse unless they're renewed; all of those kinds of things can provide a safeguard. I'm sure that after the crisis there will be a number of reviews of the different ways and the different aspects of the experience.

I think particularly parliamentary committees like this one will probably play a very crucial role in that and in taking a measured view of what happened and whether there are things that worked better or that wouldn't be appropriate to carry on or that should be preserved for crisis situations. I think that's very appropriate for the role of a parliamentary committee.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I have only a few seconds left, but one thing we've heard from parliamentarians around any type of virtual voting is predictability. I'm wondering if anybody has an example. If you don't have time to answer, perhaps you could table that with the committee.

I think my time is up. Thank you.

The Chair: You're looking for examples of virtual voting—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes, examples of virtual voting.

The Chair: —and of the predictability needed for virtual voting. Okay.

As well, Ms. Cuevas Barron, on virtual voting in general, I believe you were going to take a look at that for us. You can submit that to the committee. You can email the clerk to provide that information.

That's the end of our second panel for today. Thank you so much to all of the witnesses. This was a spunky and enjoyable panel. It was fun. We learned a lot from the lessons of the world, and also how to be respectful of our democratic institutions and to be careful and mindful when making some of these changes. Thank you for the very valuable information.

To all of the regular members on the committee, we'll now move into committee business. Please remain connected as we say good-bye to our witnesses.

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, colleagues.

Mr. Greg Power: Thank you for the invitation. It was a pleasure.

Ms. Sue Griffiths: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Just as we did last time, we do have a little bit of time. We may have 15 minutes of leeway, so let's see how much of the work plan we can get through today. If not, I have some backup plans for us. I know there were some issues that were being raised last time.

Committee, we've been agreeing on our witnesses day by day. On our next panel, which will be on Thursday, we will have our security witnesses. I know that all of the parties were very interested from a security aspect in making sure that we have witnesses to speak to that. I'm wondering if everyone is okay with the way Thursday's meeting is laid out at this time.

If you are okay with Thursday's meeting, the only other issue we have about witnesses is with the interpreters. We have not been able

to slot them in anywhere. There are some international witnesses as well who said they wished to appear before us. We had them on our witness list, but due to conflicts in scheduling we weren't able to have them on today's panel. That's why there weren't as many witnesses as we originally thought there'd be for today's meeting.

I just want some feedback from the committee as to whether you still would like to see the interpreters in a future meeting, whether you think there is a need. We did hear from them in our last study, but it is up to you. Do you think there's a need for any more of the international witnesses in another meeting, or are you good with what the schedule looks like? That would just leave Thursday for the IT and security witnesses.

Madam Normandin.

● (1350)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have a question for members who want interpreters to appear as witnesses. Maybe I missed something.

All we need to do is choose our stance on virtual voting. I'd like to know why people are talking about having interpreters appear and what they have to do with virtual voting. Maybe I missed something, so I'd like someone to fill me in. I'm having a hard time seeing why these people should appear.

That is time we could be spending on the report, rather than having to do what we did last time, which was spend eight hours straight writing the report.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Normandin.

Maybe the Conservatives can help answer this question. They were asked by the Conservative members to appear.

Are there any comments as to why they appeared on the witness list? Was there anything in particular that pertained to this study that maybe was not elicited in the last? We can still refer back to any testimony they gave us in the previous study. Andre can add that into this study and refer to it.

Are there still, to any of the members of the Conservative Party, maybe...?

Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I can probably provide some help.

I don't have it in front of me, but I don't believe the motion was strictly limited to dealing with virtual voting. We were to look at all aspects of the virtual hybrid sittings. That is my understanding.

Obviously, we heard some significant concerns from the interpreters in our previous study. I felt, as others did obviously, that it would probably be pretty wise of us to get an update from them to see how things are going. Are there new challenges that have arisen? Are there challenges that they've been able to mitigate? That was the idea behind it.

The Chair: Justin, is there a way that we could get the answer to that question and maybe just have them submit something? That's only if that would be okay with the committee members. Would it be possible to get an update as to how things are going?

• (1355)

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Madam Chair, to answer your question, yes, the committee could ask the three witnesses we've invited merely to submit a brief.

That covers some of the elements that were mentioned by Mr. Richards, if that is the will of the committee.

The Chair: We have started a speakers list. It's Mr. Gerretsen, Mr. Turnbull, Mr. Richards and then Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Chair, I concur with Ms. Normandin's comments with respect to the need. I think that all the information—and I think it's extremely valuable information—we received in our last study would probably benefit this study. In particular, as we look at the Standing Orders, which is the other component of this study other than just virtual voting, we should consider that testimony as it relates to the technical requirements for members using the technology to be in the best of circumstances or the best types of technology for the interpretation team.

I suggest we ask them for an update, as you had indicated, but then also take that testimony we had in the previous study and adopt it into this one, so we can use it in setting the necessary requirements for the technology as it relates to the Standing Orders.

I think this would suffice in what we require.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Chair, I wanted to make a brief comment about the question you posed to the committee. For me, given the fact that it seems the original motion directs us to look at the Standing Orders and how to enact remote voting—I've read it over and over again and those are the two elements of this study that I think we're undertaking—it would be beneficial to have a couple more of those international examples.

I feel we focused a lot today on the U.K., which is important and yielded some good information, but it would be great to have a couple more examples specific to national parliaments with international examples that are implementing some form of remote or electronic voting. We really haven't heard... I know we had the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Ms. Cuevas today but I didn't feel we had enough time with her to get into details about specific examples. I think we could use a bit more time to do that next.

The Chair: Perhaps we can ask the clerk who has shown interest and whom we potentially would be able to accommodate.

The Clerk: Hello, Mr. Turnbull and Madam Chair.

Some of the international witnesses we approached indicated a scheduling conflict, as the chair indicated a little earlier. Among them was one of the other ones from the United Kingdom, Charles Walker, who was the chair of the House of Commons administration committee. We can endeavour to get back to him to see if he is available. However, the problem right now is that the committee

has not yet identified a meeting slot as to when we can invite these witnesses to come back.

There are some others. For example, Lord McFall, the chair of the procedure committee in the House of Lords, declined.

With Ms. Harriet Harman it was also a scheduling conflict, although she did indicate a willingness to return. However, as we know, she is also from the British Parliament.

As for the president of the European Parliament, many attempts were made to contact them to elicit their interest in appearing. Right now we have zero response from them, so obviously that remains a question mark.

Finally, the president of the Congress of People's Deputies of the Kingdom of Spain has also indicated a conflict.

Obviously, depending on what meeting we could schedule them for and, again, depending on the availability, they may be open to appear.

• (1400)

The Chair: That doesn't give us a whole lot of...other than the EU Parliament. They haven't responded, so we don't know if they're interested. Other than the U.K., only Spain has been interested. That's one other perspective.

I don't know what you think but most of our panellists today were from the U.K., and we've got quite a lot of understanding from that area. Others would be interesting, but we can check back with Spain if we want to set up another meeting for witnesses. Maybe the clerk and I can try to schedule a time for Friday, if it's possible.

Mr. Richards, do you have your hand up to provide feedback on this?

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm still trying to understand what the rush is. Obviously, there's been an indication here that there are witnesses who can't be slotted in, and it sounds to me like it's mostly just because we're trying to rush this. Parliament isn't scheduled to sit again until mid-September or whatever the date is.

There's obviously going to be a huge potential change in where things are by that point. I'm just struggling to understand the rush here, based on that. If there's time needed to study this further, why wouldn't we do that, or why wouldn't we have the ability to have the knowledge of what happens over the course of the next little while as well, as provinces are starting to relaunch and things like that?

I would hope that someone on the government side could give us some indication as to what the big rush is. I'd love to hear feedback from the other opposition parties as well, as to what their thoughts are on this. I know there is a requirement to report back by June 23, I believe it is. There's nothing that would prevent us from writing a report today that simply says we think that this should be given more time. That could be done as an interim report. It could be done in 10 seconds. It would fulfill that requirement. Then we would have the benefit of the time that's needed to properly look at this and see how things play out as we get closer to the time that Parliament would be scheduled to return.

As we all know, things are incredibly different now from what they were a couple of months ago. In the middle of March, things were incredibly different from what they had been a couple of weeks prior to that. They can change quite considerably over the next few months as well. I'm just struggling to understand what the rush is and why we don't look at doing that. Then we have the time to properly study and hear from those we need to hear from.

We'd love to hear comments from the government members as to why the rush, and we'd love to hear some thoughts from the other opposition parties on what they think on this point.

The Chair: Perfect.

Next up we have Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: One of the questions that I do have is around the extra dates. Maybe I missed that; I was pulled away from my desk a few moments ago. However, we did discuss having a few extra dates to do some of this work.

I agree that I want to get as much work done as possible. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm certainly being invited out to a lot more constituency events. Things are changing here in B.C. Some of the events are virtual, but some of them are in person, although there is a lot of amazing work being done by community organizations around appropriate distancing and whatnot. I want to make sure that I have all the time I can have for my constituents during this very important time in our country.

I certainly do not want to do another eight-hour session. I thought that was very disruptive. The other thing that I will say is that I would like time with the report when I'm writing whatever I'm writing to add to that. This last cycle that we went through, of course, was very fast. We were writing reports and were not even able to look at the finished products, which I did have some serious concerns about.

I think we need to continue this, but for me, one of the questions is this: Do we have the space for those extra meeting times? I know that the House will be shutting down between June 24 and July 3 to do some important technological work that has to be put in place, so that's something we need to be mindful of.

I think the other part is this: I appreciate what Mr. Richards is saying about not rushing, but what I'm not getting clarity on is how long we are thinking this study should go. Is there any guidance on that? It's sort of wide open.

One of the things that I'm definitely looking forward to watching is what happens in the B.C. legislature when it starts to open toward

the end of the month. It might be best to have a recommendation that encourages us to come back maybe right before Parliament starts again to look at the work that has been done and review it with our committee. However, I don't know that we should be going through the whole summer doing this study.

I would like some clarity on those two issues.

Thank you.

• (1405)

The Chair: Those are fair and good questions.

Next is Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I wanted to share some thoughts related to this. I don't think there's a rush. I think the intention is maybe not to delay.

I know that members on this committee have expressed concerns about wanting to test, demonstrate and adequately develop a solution very carefully, cautiously and incrementally. That's part of the motion. I think that in order to implement this, the committee sticks to its original timelines, and that leaves July and August for the House administration to actually work out the kinks in a system and take all of the rounds of feedback that would be necessary in order to have a gradual implementation of an electronic voting solution.

To my mind, that just seems smart, given that I think there's going to be a push to move forward with a legislative agenda in September. In my mind, that makes a lot of sense, given that parliaments generally take a bit of a hiatus in the summertime, even though we're all still dealing with an unprecedented amount of constituency work at this time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alhabra.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Madam Chair, I do want to say that I am sympathetic to what Ms. Blaney said.

First, I think we should, in good faith, try to meet the deadline. If we realize that we need an extra week or two because of the report writing or witnesses that couldn't accommodate our schedule, we can discuss that. My concern with what Mr. Richards is proposing is exactly what Ms. Blaney has mentioned. I don't know what he's suggesting the timeline would be. As Mr. Turnbull has said, first of all, the House mandated us by a motion passed by the House to meet the deadline.

Second, I think the administration wants to hear from us so they can start preparing the technical infrastructure for what direction we take. From my point of view, I don't know if the Conservatives are hoping that maybe by September when the House resumes we won't need any of this and that we'll go back to normal, so why risk putting out some recommendations if they're not going to be implemented. I would love nothing better than that. I would love to know that by September we're going to go back to normal and we won't need any of these restrictions. However, we would be irresponsible if we did not prepare a plan in case that's not the case. If that does not happen, if by September the House of Commons still cannot fully function with 338 MPs on site, what is the House going to do?

I agree with the Conservatives that we want the House of Commons to be fully functional. We need to give the administration the tools and the advice they're asking us for so they can prepare the work for that. If September comes along and public health lifts their advisory and says that there are no more restrictions because COVID is under control, then we don't need to use any of these measures, and we don't need to pass any of those tools. But it's important that we do our homework and do our due diligence and that we be thoughtful and responsible in doing so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Turnbull and Mr. Alghabra have said a lot of what I was going to say.

The only other thing I would add is that Mr. Richards said he'd like to hear from the government members and the opposition members as to what they thought about all of this. The government members do not come from a government that has a majority in Parliament. For some reason, it's only the Conservatives who haven't figured out how to play nice with other parties, in my opinion. What's important to recognize is that a motion was brought forward to the House and it passed with government members and two opposition party members. The only party that voted against it was the Conservative Party. All parties have agreed to this deadline of June 23.

I would agree with what Mr. Alghabra said, which is that we need to try to meet that date. Then, if we just don't have enough time, we can indicate in our report that we need another couple of weeks. I think that we aim for it, and if we don't make it, then we deal with that at that time. I don't think there's a rush. I'd just like to get through this just as much as everybody else would.

• (1410)

The Chair: Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Madam Chair, most of the comments have been said. I can appreciate that Mr. Richards certainly doesn't want to rush through this study. I don't think anyone does, but I'm just going to use my example here in New Brunswick. I really hope, as do most of you, that in September we can all meet back in Ottawa because I certainly miss seeing all of you personally.

I am looking at New Brunswick right now, and two weeks ago the House started physically sitting in the province of New Brunswick for a few days, and because we had a provincial outbreak, they have all been sent back home. Now they are struggling to see what the plan is going to be.

I think, just to be safe and to be responsible, we need to make sure we have a plan in place, and that's what this study is all about. Let's hope that we don't have to use that plan, but let's be leaders and make sure that all of our i's are dotted and our t's are crossed and that whatever infrastructure is going to be needed is in place.

I have to say, at this point in time with our study, I feel we have a lot of really good information on how to proceed. I'm even struggling a bit sometimes to ask questions because I feel we are hearing the same feedback over and over again.

I'm very comfortable that we truly have enough time to proceed with making some solid recommendations. Let's hope we don't have to use this, but if we do, we'll have a plan in place.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Madam Chair, I have to say to my friend Mr. Gerretsen working nights with others.... I had to chuckle at what the common denominators in some of the yelling matches have been, but anyway, I digress.

I will just say on the timeline and in good faith that we have heard from witnesses. I agree with what Ms. Petitpas Taylor said on the witness perspective. What we're hearing this week and next week will give us a good idea and a foundation.

On the point of not rushing it, one of things a couple of us alluded to today is that we're making recommendations based on what the situation will be in September. We're hearing from the witnesses. Hearing the background is good now. I'm in favour of having a report back to Parliament and wrapping this up as a committee. Perhaps we could look at something where we hear from the witnesses, then come back later in the summer. We would not meet all summer. I think we would all not favour meeting in the summer, and we wouldn't favour another eight-hour meeting to go over everything again. We could look at what the lay of the land may be, say, in mid-August and see what the situation is and give a report back in a reasonable time so that when we come back on September 21 we have the most recent lay of the land.

I also think one of the things that is important with this—and I say this as a new member—is that our committee is a great committee, but we are a limited number of 338 members. I think the caucus consultation going back and forth.... I just know some of my colleagues, and I think all parties, would want to see what the situation is like in September when we get a bit closer to September.

I would propose continuing hearing from some witnesses for maybe a couple of weeks. We could wrap up with a meeting at a high level of where we're all at, but come back in a good amount of time, say mid-August, have a few weeks to finish the report and then give the House administration, whatever the decision may be, a few weeks to figure things out. That could be a fair compromise. Make sure we get something, and make sure that we can accurately see what the lay of the land is for recommendations.

Thanks for the chance to speak.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll hear from Madam Normandin, and then we can try to end for today. I'll give you some options from the different things I am hearing.

Mr. Alghabra, you have your hand up.

We will hear briefly from the two of you, then we're going to have to start clearing the room.

I could schedule another committee business meeting. I'll talk about that in the conclusion.

• (1415)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I think we need to strike a balance between the time we have to write the report and the time the House should get to implement the recommendations. We are planning to hear from other witnesses on Thursday. We may have about a week to write the report and make recommendations. I think that's a bit rushed. It would give the House two and a half months to act on our recommendations.

I wouldn't want to take any more time to write the report than we actually need, but I think we will have to extend the deadline past June 23. That way, we can put those dates in our planners if we already know we'll be meeting to draft the report.

I don't think we'd need until the end of August, but I think a week to write the report, which is all we'll have left, isn't enough. I'm not worried about the contents of the report. I actually think we've heard from all the witnesses we needed to hear from. However, since it took us almost three meetings last time in addition to the meetings we had beforehand to draft the report, I think we might run into the same problem this time.

That's why I think we need to give ourselves a little time. We may not need a month, but I'm pretty sure we're going to need longer than June 23.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Alghabra.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Madam Chair, I think I may have a proposal for Mr. Duncan that he might agree with.

Let's finish the report, and if we need an extra week—to Ms. Normandin's point—let's do so, but submit a report by the end of June. If we choose to come back in late August to review the situation at the time and then add more recommendations to the previously written report, I see no problem with that. However, let's not delay the recommendations that we can submit today, and let's leave a contingency there to say that we can meet again in late August to re-examine or review what we've done.

The Chair: Thank you for that proposal.

I think we're getting somewhere. We do have the option, the clerk has informed me, of having a one-hour committee business meeting tomorrow if you would like to hash this out further, but I do think we've made some progress.

It seems that we want to have more time. Many have raised that, but then the concerns with that are that people still want to see an end date to that time, not an unlimited amount of time.

Some proposals have come forward about perhaps the end of June, which Mr. Alghabra has just said.

Right now, I guess the first question that I should have, because we can schedule more committee business meetings, is this: Would you like me to schedule another committee business meeting for tomorrow, or do you think we can move forward with Thursday's witnesses and agree today as to when you would like that end date to be?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Madam Chair, if we can find a compromise quickly, we may not need the hour tomorrow.

The Chair: I'm hopeful.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Let's defer this question to see how the next few minutes go with the agreement—if we reach an agreement.

The Chair: Is there a deadline that would be agreeable to the members, a possible deadline of an extension of one week or two weeks? Those both have come up.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think it's important to clarify that the House will not be able to do committees between June 24 and July 3. If it's an extension, it would have to be the beginning of July.

The Chair: Thank you for bringing that up before, Ms. Blaney, and thanks for reminding me of that, too. I think that is what has caused this deadline to be where it is. That's another challenge that we have.

Justin, would you like to chime in as to what challenges that might pose? Is it correct that we won't be able to have any sittings during that time?

The Clerk: Yes, Madam Chair. It's my understanding that the system will be down for IT maintenance during that week, which would make it impossible for any virtual proceedings of our committee, any other committees and the House.

Any deadline, of course, related to when the committee needs to report back, per the House instruction of May 26, would need to be.... We need to take that maintenance week into consideration, therefore, maybe pushing a deadline back by whatever the committee ultimately thinks would be appropriate, but knowing that during that maintenance week the committee would not be able to meet virtually in order to transact any business.

• (1420)

The Chair: That week starts on June 24 and goes until July 3. Is that correct?

The Clerk: Until July 3.

The Chair: That's a week and a half. That would set us out, if we want an extra week, perhaps to July 10, or if we want an extra two weeks, to July 17.

The Chair: Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Clerk, I thought you had indicated to us previously that we're required to return a report on June 23, and if that report was that we couldn't complete the work on time and that we request more time, that we have to do that.

Does that still stand?

The Clerk: Mr. Gerretsen, you're correct.

The House instruction from May 26 does ask the committee to report back by June 23. There's no direction as to what the content of that report has to be. For example, if the committee did choose to adopt a motion seeking an extension of that deadline, it could bring that back to the House.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That could be the report.

The Clerk: That's right.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Given that information, I don't think we have to decide right now, Madam Chair, if we need exactly one week or two weeks. I think we can just continue to proceed. There might be an opportunity to conclude by the 23rd, or at least at that point we'll know exactly what we're asking for as to whether it's one week or two weeks or... We'll have a better understanding. I think it's premature to make the decision now as to how much time we actually need. I think it's just better if we hold off until we get to that point. I did like Mr. Alghabra's suggestion.

The last thing I'll say is that I do see a sense of urgency. Perhaps this goes back to Mr. Richards' original question as to what is the urgency. If, for example, we want to task our own people or hire a third party to make a system similar to what the U.K. did, then we might need time to do that. If we needed time to do that by the second week of September, for example, they need to build that software to be able to accommodate the request. In the interests of making sure that we give it as much time... Depending on what we recommend, we need to make sure that we're giving enough runway to whoever needs to develop or put together the infrastructure that we might require as a result of this study.

The Chair: We need to clear the room now.

Would you like me to schedule a committee business meeting for tomorrow—at 11 o'clock, Justin?—or do you want me to just move forward with Thursday's meeting for now?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Why don't we move forward with Thursday's meeting and then discuss this again at the end of Thursday's meeting? We might have a better sense as to where we are by that point.

The Clerk: Madam Chair, if I could, I'll very briefly break in here. If that is what the committee does want to do, the committee has indicated possibly getting back to the witnesses on the simultaneous interpretation and asking for a written response. Is that in fact

what the committee wants to do, as opposed to inviting them to appear as witnesses?

The Chair: Okay.

The Clerk: I'm taking nodding as yes.

Obviously, for internationally, I know there was some expression of interest in that. There would potentially be a slot available to the committee for only one hour—60 minutes—on Friday. There would not be the possibility of inviting many people. We would also have to determine if any of those potential witnesses I mentioned earlier are in fact available on Friday for a one-hour slot.

The Chair: Those witnesses were the president of the European Parliament, and there was no response from them, while Harriet Harman did indicate that she's happy to appear but there was a conflict, and Spain's Parliament had a conflict. They both would like to appear. Really, at this point, we're looking at two witnesses that have said yes.

The Clerk: Possibly, and then there's Charles Walker, the chair of the administration committee.

• (1425)

The Chair: Yes, that's right. There's Charles Walker.

The Clerk: We can inquire to see if they are available. If any of them are, we could organize a meeting. If none of them are, there would be no real point in having a meeting.

The Chair: Okay.

To me, it seems that for now we have some agreement to just move forward with Thursday's meeting. We'll try to squeeze in some committee business again at the end of that meeting, and then we will move forward with a one-hour meeting on Friday if any of the witnesses whom we've already been in communication with are able to fit that into their schedule.

Otherwise, you'll see no notice of meeting for Friday, and our next meeting will therefore be on Tuesday. We can discuss that at Thursday's meeting.

Take care and thank you.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: What time on Friday, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Go ahead, Justin.

The Clerk: It would be at 11 if there is such a meeting, from 11 to 12.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Have a good day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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