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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): We'll get started.

As Ms. May pointed out, we have only an hour, which is not our usual timing. We usually have three hours for these meetings, of course, with more witnesses. This is not our regularly scheduled time.

We had invited a list of witnesses. Some of them had graciously accepted our offer. The Right Honourable Harriet Harman, one of those witnesses, unfortunately could not make it during the regularly scheduled time. However, we had an hour that the committee could take up on this day and we decided to use it. We'll try to use some of the time today for committee business as well.

I will not run through all of my regular reminders. I will try to keep it short.

I'll call to order meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting on its study of parliamentary duties and the COVID-19 pandemic. Today's meeting is taking place via video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so you're aware, the webcast will show the speaker only and not the entirety of the committee.

In order to make sure the interpreters can provide their services, please see, at the bottom of your screen, an interpretation toolbar. Select the language that you wish to speak in or that you wish to hear interpretation in. If you choose to switch to French, please make sure you also switch your toolbar to the French icon and allow for a bit of a pause there.

Before speaking, wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, make sure you click the microphone icon to activate the mike. When you're not speaking, please remember to keep your mike on mute. Speak slowly and clearly. If you do have a headset, try to wear it. These headsets were tested, as we know, and apparently they are the best mikes and provide the best sound quality. If you do have this type of headset provided by the House of Commons, please try to wear it.

Should any technical issues arise, as some have in the past, please try to inform me that you're having a technical issue so that, if needed, we can pause the meeting. If it seems like a minor problem, we might carry forward and the technical team will try to help you out so that you can be back with us as soon as possible. Please let us know so that we know what we're dealing with.

Before I welcome our witness today, I mentioned at the start that we need some time for committee business at the end. I want to propose a slight modification to the question time. You can let me know if you want to go with the regular question time, of course, but if we do, it may not leave us very much time at the end.

This is what I would propose. For the first round, I was thinking that we'd go through the normal six-minute round. The Conservatives, Liberals, Bloc and NDP would get six minutes each. In the second round, we usually have two slots for the Conservatives and two slots for the Liberals, both at five minutes each, and then two and a half minutes for the Bloc and two and a half minutes for the NDP. I am proposing that we shave off 10 minutes there, with perhaps only one slot for the Conservatives and one slot for the Liberals of five minutes each.

Would that be agreeable to everybody? That would help us save some time.

Okay. Perfect.

Without further ado, I'd like to welcome the Right Honourable Harriet Harman, MP and Mother of the House of Commons from the U.K.

Welcome. Thank you for being here again. This is in a more formal setting, and a virtual setting, of course, which is a bit different from your last visit, when you informally met with the procedure and House affairs committee. I want to thank you for making the time that day and of course taking the time today as well to talk about this important issue.

I believe you have some opening remarks. I'm wondering if you could try to keep them within five minutes so that we can get to the question round.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman (MP and Mother of the House of Commons, House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Thank you very much for inviting me to contribute to these proceedings. When we met in February seems like many lifetimes ago. I wish you and all the members of Parliament well. As you know, we've had more than 40,000 lives lost in this COVID crisis. Thank you for asking me to give evidence to you.

The starting point is to recognize that Parliament is of increased importance in the COVID crisis. Sometimes people thought it was all about government, that the government had to do things and Parliament was irrelevant. But when government decisions are literally a matter of life and death, when millions of jobs are at stake, when people's lives are affected, from the schooling of children right through to the care of the elderly, accountability is really essential.

There's also a hugely increased level of government activity. Decisions are being made across every sector of public, private and commercial life. Decisions are being made in all sorts of areas that government would not have previously been engaged with.

You have to have intense scrutiny, because decisions made at speed and behind closed doors can go wrong. Accountability is absolutely crucial in this COVID crisis.

Also, members of Parliament are the eyes and ears of government to tell them what is going on, on the ground. You can be locked in the room with your civil servants, your scientific and other experts, and interest groups, but as government, you need the MPs to be saying what is going on in their ridings.

Parliament obviously can't do business as usual because of travel restrictions, meeting restrictions and because our buildings are unsuitable for social distancing, so big changes have been necessary.

At the outset, government committed itself to continuous parliamentary scrutiny. Some people said Parliament needed to close down and get out of the way of government, but government committed itself to continuous parliamentary scrutiny, albeit in a different form. It proceeded to work with the key actors here, with the leader of the House, the other opposition parties, the procedure committee and the Speaker. Who knew what a centre of activity and importance the procedure committee was to become. It had become a real focus of interest, and no doubt I'm sure it is with your Parliament. There was an attempt to work by consensus, and rightly so.

Right from the outset, select committees began to meet remotely. Even though Parliament went into recess for Easter, select committees were working all the way through, meeting remotely and scrutinizing government, calling ministers to give evidence. That was all online.

After Easter, the House returned, and we all voted online. If you had a smart phone, you had an online voting system. Having been a member of the House of Commons since 1982, I thought there was no way we were going to be able to get everybody to vote online—everything would go wrong; people wouldn't get to vote or they'd vote the wrong way—but it was amazing how quickly the procedures were up and running, and they worked flawlessly.

Speaking was done remotely except for the front benches who were in the chamber. Everybody else was on the TV screen. The difference was that there was no yahoo in the chamber, obviously, because there was hardly anybody in the chamber. There was none of the usual rowdiness and interruption, and everything happened, so it felt very different.

It lent itself to more forensic questioning and more forensic answers. I feel MPs asked clearer and more lucid questions, as there was no interruption, jeering and jostling and people trying to cut across them or cheer them on. I think people felt more empowered doing it from their own riding. They had the whole TV screen; they could ask their question.

Also, the whole country saw MPs in their own homes in their ridings, as I've just seen the members of your committee. It brings to life how Parliament is not just one institution in the capital but the coming together of 650 constituencies. I think that's been very important.

● (1110)

It also changed the balance between the backbenches and front benches in favour of the backbenchers, because when Parliament is televised, in normal circumstances the person standing at the front bench is the biggest one in the picture. When it comes to the backbench asking the question, they are a microdot, an anonymous person up in the shadows of the fifth row of the backbenches and they are marginalized by virtue of that position. Actually, when you have the front bench in Parliament and you have the backbencher with a whole TV screen, they are more salient and look less junior and deferential. It has really changed the balance of power. You get your own full picture on the TV screen and you're not just a microdot somewhere on the backbenches.

Also, MPs had less time in the Westminster bubble. We've all become remote from the Westminster bubble and it has made us more grounded.

At the start of June, when the government was pushing for schools to come back and wanted more vocal backbench support for the Prime Minister at the Prime Minister's question time, the government broke with the consensus approach and announced without prior consultation that Parliament would return to business as usual. This caused a big row. Public Health England said that it was just not going to be possible. You can't use our division lobbies. The chamber is too small for all MPs to attend and stay two metres apart, so consensus broke down, which is very disappointing.

There were particular objections from MPs over 70 years of age or those with underlying health conditions who were saying, "I can't come back to Parliament, so the people living in my riding are being disenfranchised," so the government had to agree to amend the procedures.

We now have a hybrid parliament, so that Parliament is back but no more than 50 MPs out of 650 are allowed in the chamber at any one time. Speakers and questions have to be decided by the Speaker in advance. There's no more catching the Speaker's eye or just deciding that you're going to get into a debate because you heard something said and you want to join the speeches. Basically, it doesn't have any spontaneity. You have to book your slot in advance.

Votes are not in the division lobbies but in a long queue. It takes about 30 minutes. You might have seen the pictures. It looks like the fences they have in cattle markets. In fact, they have all those fences snaking around the parliamentary estate with MPs at two metres' distance waiting for them to be able to file past. At the moment, you can pair, that is, not vote, and you're balanced off with a member of another party.

If you need to be shielded, which is somebody who is over 70 or with an underlying health condition, you can apply to have a proxy vote, which means another MP votes for you. Fortunately, we already had that system, because we'd just introduced proxy voting for pregnant members of Parliament, members of Parliament who've just had a baby, and new fathers. If you have a proxy vote, you can speak remotely.

In terms of lessons learned, on the downside, in a hybrid remote Parliament it is more stilted. There are no interventions or interactions, and there's less atmosphere during speeches. It's less spontaneous. There's no ability to gauge the feeling across the chamber and no informal mingling in the tea room.

On the upside, there's no braying and shouting. Ministers have to answer the questions.

I'll stop there.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harman.

We will start the questioning round with Mr. Eric Duncan, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to Ms. Harman for being here. It's good to see you again, albeit virtually. I appreciated our conversation earlier this year, which feels like a very long time ago, with the chair to talk about some of your experiences.

On a personal note, I appreciated your giving me a copy of the Equality Act, which you had helped shepherd through, a personal piece to me. Thank you for giving me your copy and spending your Friday evening with us with the time change in London.

I want to build on the comments and some of the questions that our committee had asked the Right Honourable Karen Bradley earlier in our study about the timeliness of when some of these measures were used.

My understanding of the remote voting system and the way it has been done is that it was not meant for the duration of the entire campaign, but the electronic or remote voting that was used originally was more for the acute phase of the pandemic.

In reading some of the comments in the Hansard from the chamber between the House leadership, there was a desire to bring Parliament back to some form, try to get to an in-person presence and get Parliament running again. Would that be a fair statement on where things were?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: As you say, originally everybody was doing remote voting, even those members who were actually on the front bench and in the chamber. Then we moved to a hybrid system and now we have a very mixed system.

I think we ought to keep the facility to do remote voting. Proxy voting is fine, but actually having another member vote for you... If you can vote on your smart phone but you can't be in the chamber because you've just had a baby, you have a disability preventing you from travelling or an illness, why not keep that facility of remote voting?

One of the things Parliament has discovered during this crisis is that we can do remote voting and it can work. We shouldn't lose the benefits of that and we should look to integrate remote voting, perhaps having the main vote in person or by proxy and then subsidiary votes by remote voting. I think that we shouldn't lose it. Having discovered remote voting and discovered it works very well, we shouldn't lose it and simply turn back the clock.

• (1120)

Mr. Eric Duncan: Are you suggesting this just for the pandemic or are you advocating for it post-pandemic? Part of what we've heard and talked about as well with our members is that you could lose that in-person collegiality or those relationship things that happen in and around the chamber in and around voting.

I'd like to have you clarify. Are you looking at post-pandemic or just throughout the pandemic?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I'm looking at post-pandemic as well.

Quite a lot of the collegiality has moved away from the bar and the tea room into the WhatsApp sphere, so quite a lot of that collegiality is happening online anyway. I think there is a benefit to members being more in their constituencies, or their ridings, as you call them, and less in the capital. The downside is there is less hanging around in the tea room. The upside is they are more available to those who live in their ridings.

Also, it's important for climate change. With all the travelling everybody is doing, particularly in a country like yours where there are such big distances, what sort of example are we setting if we are all going to meet in person when we really want people to be meeting remotely where they can?

I would like us to keep a measure of the electronic voting, but it often takes quite a few decades for Parliament to get its head around things. We've managed technologically to do this because of the crisis. I think it would be a shame if we just lost that knowledge that has worked well for us.

Mr. Eric Duncan: One of the key differences I've noticed between our Westminster systems is that you have Parliament back; the chamber, the House of Commons is sitting. We are frankly stuck in a COVID committee of sorts.

You mentioned as well select committees that have continued operating. Are all committees or a vast majority of them operating?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: All the select committees are operating. Half the members of the committee that I chair are members of the House of Commons and half are members of the House of Lords, a number of whom are in their eighties. I thought they would never be able to Zoom in to be discussing human rights in the COVID crisis, but if people really want to do it, they can.

We have had all the select committees working really well, and we have had people giving evidence remotely. We've been able to hear from people who are really affected by the COVID crisis without having to make them travel to Westminster. When they give evidence in their own home, they are stronger about it because they're on home turf.

Mr. Eric Duncan: You mentioned Parliament sitting. That aspect is working. You mentioned the hybrid system to include those who are there. That seems to be working. You mentioned the cattle lines or whatever it may be for voting. That is working, though, and that has been done safely. Is that correct? I think the vast majority of members are voting in person. Is that correct?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: No, at the moment we've had 56 register for proxy voting and a great many are paired. I haven't looked at the latest figures, but I would say it's not necessarily the majority who are voting in person.

Actually, if you look at the last Prime Minister's questions, after the Prime Minister had finished questions, he walked away from the dispatch box and immediately a colleague went to speak to him and was much closer than two metres. I don't necessarily blame the Prime Minister for that; it was probably the other colleague who went shuffling up to him. If you see the Prime Minister, how can you resist rushing up in order to give him the benefit of your absolute untold wisdom?

That was a breach of social distancing right there on screen. It is quite difficult to add any more people into the mix, because by nature we all huddle together, don't we? You do it; we do it. We all huddle together. We can as easily huddle together on WhatsApp, and then if the bar is not serving drinks, that's all for the better anyway.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harman.

Next we have Mr. Turnbull please.

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

Ms. Harman, it's so great to have you here. I think having you here is a really suitable way to end the testimony for this study. I

read about your history, and I really admire all of the work that you've done for many years and the wisdom that you bring to this conversation.

I want to ask you a question regarding something I've been wondering about for a while. I followed U.K. closely in our first study, and the fact that the House and the administration seemed to be responding so quickly and developed a remote voting solution that seemed to really work. They tested it numerous times. They started using it, and then it was abandoned fairly early on.

I'm wondering if you can enlighten me as to why you think that happened given the fact that the way you have told the story here, there are actually many benefits that seem to far outweigh the drawbacks, especially during the time of a pandemic. Can you enlighten us on that?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Thank you very much for your kind comments.

I think the reason there was an abandonment of the remote voting when it was working so well, and the reason it came as part of an abandonment of working by consensus, which is incredibly important with the Speaker, the leader of the House, the procedure committee and all parties, was that the government was very keen to send children back to school, and there was a lot of protest. I think the government felt that if they could say that Parliament is back, people should have the confidence to send their children back to school. We also needed more people going to work because the economy had come to a complete halt. You might have seen today that our economy has fallen by 20%.

The danger with the way parliaments work is that if you do things for a political reason then it doesn't work so well in parliament. Of course it has become a shambles. It was a shame because, actually, there was agreement, and it was working and now we have a rather less satisfactory system.

I put it down to the fact that some people regard electronic voting as anathema because they regard the digital age as anathema, but that's where we are, and that's the future. They also wanted to make a political point out of it, so I was very disappointed with the leader of the House. He should really have been for the House rather than for the government.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: It certainly seems like a one kilometre queue is a little less efficient than online voting, especially once they had invested so much time and energy in developing a solution that was really secure. I'm with you on that.

In terms of behavioural change, we've heard a lot about this with respect to online voting specifically. It's not the same as a general election. We're talking about parliamentary voting, which is a matter of public record. We heard two professors yesterday from reputable universities in Canada really stress the need for MP training. I got the sense that a lot of this is really about the adoption of technology, and maybe there's some fear or just some unfamiliarity with some of this technology.

Can you speak to that? I know you've been an advocate for parliamentary reform throughout your career. I wonder if you could speak to that behavioural change and how important it is. If you have any advice for us, I would really appreciate it.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: The first point to make is that public opinion has been very much in favour of the remote Parliament and was against Parliament coming back by about 90%. I was surprised. I thought people would say, "They're just sitting on their backsides. They should get back to work," but people understood that we were working harder than ever; we were just working remotely.

Those professors who were advising you that all MPs need training probably were hoping to give you the training themselves. I didn't notice that you needed any training at all when I was over there. You're representing the people in your ridings. You know how to do it.

As far as technology is concerned, I would not have regarded us as to be one of the most advanced digital parliaments in the world, far from it, and yet, because it was decided we would do it, it happened, and it happened absolutely flawlessly.

There was a bit of a kerfuffle because somebody said, "What if an MP's wife got their phone and did the vote?" whereupon all the women MPs obviously kicked up about that. Anyway, the point is, if you're so irresponsible that you let somebody else vote for you, that would then come out, and then you'd be kicked out at the next election just as if you voted wrongly in person.

It's for the good. I'm not against people voting in person. That's really important as well, but let's have a hybrid situation. Let's tip-toe towards the future.

● (1130)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's great. Thank you so much for that.

In her letter to the Speaker, I saw that the Right Honourable Karen Bradley, who spoke to this committee as well, outlined the need for essentially focusing on personal responsibility and that MPs would be held accountable for how they vote. If they misuse the tools that were given to them in this time of pandemic, they would be held accountable for that. I think that's completely rational and seems to be consistent with how we generally function anyway. MPs have a high degree of responsibility.

I'm not sure, Madam Chair, if I have any more time.

The Chair: No. Next is Madam Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

Ms. Harman, I'm very disappointed that I didn't sit on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs earlier and have the privilege of meeting with you sooner. This is the first time I've met you, and it's a pleasure to listen to you.

What do you think about a possible return to a fully virtual Parliament...

[*English*]

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I'm afraid I'm not getting the interpretation. I'm really sorry. My French is not quite good enough to understand what you're saying. I do beg your pardon.

The Chair: Let's pause for a moment.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Madam Chair, I'm checking with the technical staff to see if they can address the problem.

They have suggested that we do consecutive interpretation. We would have one of the interpreters be part of the meeting. The member would speak in French and then we would pause while the interpreter interpreted in English for the witness and when the witness responded, the interpreter would provide the response in French. That might be the quickest way to deal with this; otherwise, we may not be able to get the English feed to London.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Chair, if everyone agrees, I could try to speak in English.

The Clerk: That would be an option, Madam Chair. If the committee gave unanimous consent for that suggestion.

● (1135)

The Chair: That's very kind of you, Madam Normandin.

I feel in a bit of a difficult situation with this. We will extend your time period to account for that.

Is the committee okay with proceeding in this manner?

Okay.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'll try in English. Please bear with me if I stumble on words at times. I'll try my best. I understand these are very special circumstances; otherwise I would have made a point of having interpretation. We have such a lovely guest with us and I don't want to lose some of the time we have.

What I was mentioning earlier on is that since I'm new to the procedure committee, it's the first time I have met you. I'm really disappointed that I didn't have such an opportunity last time because it's very agreeable to have you with us.

I would like to hear from you on the hybrid parliament. I understand that when you first started, Parliament was only virtual and now it is hybrid. I would like to hear from you on the pros and cons of maybe going back to a solely virtual parliament, because I guess there's maybe a bit of a fight among MPs who want to be physically in Parliament, but there's a limit. We see that in our own party. We fight to be on the Hill because we like that proximity with people.

On the other hand, you mentioned there are also problems with the physical presence since an MP went very close to the Prime Minister. I would like to hear what you think and what you think other MPs might think if you were to eventually go back to a fully virtual parliament.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Thank you very much indeed for being prepared to speak English. I'm sorry I've been the cause of it.

The point that you raise is a very interesting one because there are two principles, really. One is the importance of accountability, and the other is equality of representation for all the different people in all the different ridings. It very much goes against the grain for us as members of Parliament that somehow something about us gives us more or less ability to represent those we are elected by. Therefore, the principle of equality of ability to have your say is a very important one.

I think that, when there are restrictions and limits, and it's decided by the whips and decided by the Speaker, there is a danger that there becomes an "in crowd" who are in the building and able to be part of the machinations, and there are those who are connecting remotely in their constituencies. I think that's not as bad as I thought it might be because so much is done on WhatsApp anyway. We have a situation where often people are in meetings in the same room, and there are two conversations going on, one face to face, but then people, under their desks, are texting each other on WhatsApp saying, "I don't know why he said that, it's rubbish".

There are different conversations going on, but I think in a way, perhaps after the immediate nature of the crisis is over, it's all right to do it like that if it's by virtue of choice. I think if people choose to be a more remote MP, and there's flexibility where basically you could choose at some point to vote remotely, and then you could choose to go in, it would be your choice.

I think that this is a really important role for procedure committees now, not only to be helping work through the COVID processes, but to look at it as a moment for the opportunity for change. People do complain in the U.K. that we spend too much time in Westminster all cliquing together and losing our sense of connection with those who represent us, that we do too much wasting of time travelling and that we're burning up fossil fuels as we go from one end of the country to the other. Also, I think that for those people who have a disability or for women who have young children... We do want to hear in Parliament from people with disabilities, so if travelling down to London is an inhibition to doing that, then you widen access to Parliament.

I think we've got to have as wide access as possible. We've got to have equality as part of our principles. I think if we lose some of the collegiality, it's not a good thing. Some of it harbours a quite toxic culture, and having been a woman MP who was one of a tiny minority, I was never part of that clubbiness anyway. We don't real-

ly want that sort of clubbiness. We want a much more transparent way of doing things.

I think it's really important for procedure committees in our Westminster-style parliaments to not let it all turn the clock back but see how you can make accountability better. It's a great committee for you to be on at this point because it's going to be very important for our democracy.

We can ask people what they want. We can ask the public. Why do we have to decide it all ourselves? They might quite like the idea that their MP is based where they live and that their children go to school there because they don't move to London. There's a sort of populist uprising against people all moving to the capital. It might well be that this would be assisted by this.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harman.

Next, we have Ms. Blaney, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Ms. Harman. I always enjoy listening to your feedback.

One of the things you said was that this process has really allowed for the perception of the coming together of constituencies. As a member of Parliament in Canada who has one of the longer trips to make across the country, one thing I've been fighting for the whole time is to make sure the voices of every corner of this country are heard. The uniqueness of every riding is very important, especially in such a large country as Canada.

A concern I have as well is with regard to people or their loved ones who have health challenges. It's really not fair to ask them to risk their health and the well-being of their family by travelling across the country during this time with COVID. One of the things we've seen, as you talked about earlier, is the sudden change when the government made a decision to call everybody back. I know there have been some health ramifications, not necessarily around COVID, but there have been some. Can you speak to the importance of those voices being heard and how the U.K. is adjusting to having people? I really appreciated your telling the story of people in their own houses and people being able to look right in and see where they are, so there's that sense of collaboration.

One of the biggest fears for some of our members is that we won't go back, that we're going to stay in this new realm. I also think that after this is done, it will be time to study and reflect on that. Right now, the decisions we have to make should be just specifically for this time frame. I don't want to set a precedent for something to go on into the future, so it's very important for me as we do the study that everything be limited to this time, and then we can come back and have those conversations. I don't feel this is the time to make long-term decisions, but it may be a time of reflection.

If you could speak to that, I would appreciate it.

• (1145)

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I completely agree with you that for the moment, the health issues must be a priority. Nobody should take a risk with their life in representing those who elected them or take a risk with the lives of those with whom they share their home.

You're also absolutely right that we have one set of imperatives for now, and then there should be real deliberation and consultation. That's why I think, in a way, that there needs to be public consultation as well. I know that in the past our procedure committee has been more or less inward-facing into Parliament, but I think it's a time for procedure committees to ask the public.

In this country there has been quite a lot of alienation from Parliament. It's been quite easy for people to whip up hostility to MPs. That was part of the spirit of the Brexit decision, actually: The experts in the House of Commons didn't know we wanted a referendum and wanted to say something different. There has been alienation, a sense that London is different, a sense that when anybody is in London, they don't have a sense of what is going on in the rest of the country.

One of the things the Scottish National Party did earlier was to have its First Minister give press conferences not from the grand apartments of the Office of the First Minister, but in different parts of Scotland. He would be standing in front of some amazing cliffs and forests. There would be a small croft in the background, and you'd think that he was there, and that's where the people live and that's what it's about. We don't have any crofters in Camberwell and Peckham, but he would be speaking for that constituency. We have a really big issue of people feeling alienated from their elected representatives and their institutions, and this surely is a moment to find out whether changing the relationship between the MP and the centre is an opportunity to make some sort of change and adjustment and to make Parliament more inclusive.

However, you're absolutely right that it has to be done in a deliberative and more open way, and it has to be done by consensus. I hope our procedure committee will be able to work closely with you, because nobody should reinvent the wheel. We can all learn from each other.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I couldn't agree more.

One of the things you talked about was the loss of consensus. One of the things I heard at the beginning of COVID was that people were feeling reassured by the growth of collaboration among parties. Of course, that is hard to maintain, for sure.

Could speak to that feeling of concern that you've perhaps heard from your constituents around the need for politicians to work more collaboratively?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I think that whilst people want a choice and know there are different views and want those different views represented and want to see Parliament challenged, they often do like to see parliamentarians working together. I think that when it comes to how Parliament is working, it should never be a political football. The Leader of the House of Commons should really be the champion of Parliament in government, not just some-

one sent from government to kick Parliament's backside and tell us how it's going to be done.

I think the key relationship is that of the opposition parties, the whips, the Leader of the House of Commons, the Speaker, and the procedure committee. I think that if all of those can work together to face outwards and say that very little is going to be the same after this COVID outbreak—that everything is challenged, everything is changed, and we just have to make the future better than the pre-COVID past—

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harman.

Next up we have Mr. Tochor, please.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you so much.

This has been a very interesting debate and presentation. I thank you so much for appearing.

You talked about not letting this become a political football, hopefully, and said that as long as we as parliamentarians are working for the betterment for our country, perhaps good things can come as a result.

It sounds like the opposition and the government party have had a pretty good relationship, but have there been times when the government tried to potentially jam the opposition, such as, by any chance, eliminating written questions?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Well, before we came to the situation of the government wanting Parliament to come back as part of schools coming back, I would say that there was a really high degree of co-operation, with ministers briefing their opposite numbers, the shadow front benches, and making information available to them. That's the way it should be when there is a national emergency. Even if there is not a government of national unity, structurally there really needs to be a unified approach. It did break down somewhat and seems to be really deteriorating, but it did start that way.

Can I just say that it gives me a sense of where you are that I can see you in your kitchen? It gives the sense of place so much. If you were on your front doorstep and I could see your whole house, it would be even better.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you very much.

With regard to some of the tools that your opposition parties have, were there any restrictions on questions asked in your Parliament?

This is the difference between how our mother Parliament has approached things versus Canada's Parliament. In your words, this is the time for accountability and “eyes and ears”, but as opposition parties we have seemingly been put in the position of not being allowed to use the tools that are usually at our disposal. Have you had such far-reaching restrictions put on opposition parties from the government?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I think it's a question of the government benches and the accountability to the backbenchers from their own party as well as opposition parties. I think that although it's more clunky when it's done remotely, and it's less spontaneous because you have to apply in advance and because there has been less sitting time, and therefore not so many people have been able to contribute to debates, I don't feel the government has been trying to evade accountability. I think that's just part of the problem of—

Mr. Corey Tochor: We have limited time here. They haven't limited the scope of questions you can ask ministers?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: No.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Would that be part of the partnership of parliamentarians that you seemingly enjoy, maybe at different degrees, as this pandemic goes on? At the start, though, there wasn't partisanship from the government, so there's that trust that we can hopefully find a solution that works for everybody.

Your experience in Westminster is that the government hasn't restricted access to questions and tools that you usually have. Would that be fair?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: In the normal way of doing things, the government is not able to restrict questions, because that is a matter for the Speaker. They therefore didn't seek to try to change that and try to rule questions out of order or restrict them. Obviously it was restricted time-wise, but no, they haven't done that.

I think it's always important for governments to recognize that while sometimes it feels it would be much better without Parliament and you could just get on with the business of running the country—

Mr. Corey Tochor: That's what we're experiencing right now.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Parliamentary accountability—and I say this as somebody who's been in government—means that sometimes you can be heading towards a mistake, and it's Parliament rather than your civil servants or the experts who will tell you that you're heading for a mistake. You'll suddenly find your arguments deteriorating in front of your own eyes when you have to make them in public in Parliament, so it's important in time of crisis to have Parliament even stronger than ever, because the decisions the government is making are so huge.

• (1155)

Mr. Corey Tochor: It is massive. We're looking at some of the expenditures and what our society is going to look like after this, and we need more scrutiny, not less scrutiny, of our government. Would you agree?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Yes, although I'm a big fan of Trudeau, I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Corey Tochor: We'll put that in the report.

The Chair: Dr. Duncan is next.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Ms. Harman. It's wonderful to have you back again.

I could not agree more that Parliament is so important during this crisis and that accountability is so important at this time and always.

I'm going to start with a few yes-or-no questions, if I may.

Was the remote system secure, yes or no, please?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Yes, as far as we know.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Was the remote voting system robust?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Yes.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Was the remote voting system tested?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Yes. We had three tests, and there was a whole load of mistakes in the first, and fewer mistakes in the second. By the time we did it for real, it was sorted.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you. That's very helpful.

Did the remote voting system feel familiar to MPs?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Once we started doing it, there was a bit of a moment of terror when you think, "Am I going to press the right button? Am I going to vote the wrong way?" You know, we're all used to trotting through the division lobbies. There's this unfamiliarity, big time, but once we did it once, we then thought, "We can do this; it's easy", and we all took to it like ducks to water.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: You talked about having discovered that remote voting worked well and it happened flawlessly. Could you elaborate on that, please?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: We don't have a great record on technology in Westminster. You can't get a mobile phone signal properly in my office, so my expectations were on the floor.

Somehow they rose to the occasion. This ancient Parliament leapt hundreds of years forward, and the technology worked well. Nobody has complained about the technology. The remote voting's falling foul of the government's determination that we should look like we're back at work, albeit the government's public health advice is that you should work from home if you can. A lot of people have pointed out that we've proved we can work from home and that therefore we should.

It's a shame that there is a row going on about it, but the remote voting worked for everybody. It worked flawlessly, and there have been no scandals. The Chancellor voted the wrong way by mistake on the first one, but I'm pretty sure a lot of other people did as well, possibly.

What happens is you get the whips' suggestions of how you vote at the same time as the vote, so you look at what the whip says, you look at the voting aye or no, you press it, and then that's it.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Before I turn this over to my colleague, could you give me a short answer on the MPs' response to this system? You talked about it being amazing and working "flawlessly".

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I think there was panic and apprehension that we would all suddenly shame ourselves by showing that we couldn't operate very basic technology, and a lack of confidence in the centre to deliver it properly. We all discovered that we were better at technology than we thought we were and that the centre had done a good job. Everybody felt quite empowered by it.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

With that, I'll turn the floor over to my colleague Mr. Alghabra.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Dr. Duncan.

How much time do I have, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Okay. I'll ask just one question, then.

Thank you very much, Ms. Harman, for being here with us again, especially since it's Friday night for you.

You're saying now that you're operating in a hybrid model. Do you think you could operate in a hybrid model without the option of remote voting?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Yes, we could, but there would be no justification for that. We already have proxy voting and in-person voting. I think it makes sense to have in-person voting and proxy voting, but also remote voting and remote speaking as well. It's not just about voting; it's about speaking in the chamber, in debates, and asking questions.

• (1200)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Perhaps you could summarize the answer to my next question: What is your advice to us?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: I think my advice is to do what was suggested by your colleague Ms. Blaney, which is to do what's necessary in the emergency now. I would definitely say to have remote voting, but afterwards have a real and deliberative process in which you work out what lessons you can learn to bring about better accountability for the future and deliver what the public wants.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Normandin is next.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you so much.

I'd like to linger a bit on what Mr. Tochor asked.

We have constraints now with logistics. We cannot hold all of the standing committee meetings together right now, just because of the logistics. However, there are things that could be done in a virtual Parliament that were chosen not to be done. For example, we don't really have take-note debates and we don't have opposition days, but it has been said that it could be done technologically.

I'm wondering if you consider one of the keys to the success of your collaboration to be the fact that in the virtual Parliament, you really tried to imitate what was done in the real Parliament.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: We did. We had all the select committees operating. As soon as we had standing committees in legislation, they were all operating. We had questions, we had urgent questions, we had debates on legislation. We had the whole structure, but it was unrecognizably changed in procedures. We still have all the basic elements, such as early day motions and all the sorts of things that help us express our views and express the views of our constituents. They're all there, but they're all done rather differently.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you so much. That was my only question.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney is next.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Ms. Harman. I really appreciate your quoting me there. That was fantastic. We always enjoy that. I'm sure, just as for Mr. Brassard, it won't show up in the report, unfortunately, but I appreciate it.

With regard to remote voting, we've heard from several members about issues of predictability. I'm wondering how that was addressed.

Right now, of course, if we were all back in Ottawa, we would have 15- or 30-minute bells and we would all run to our seats and do our vote. One of the challenges right now is that people are at home. They may have different child care challenges because their children aren't able to go to school. They may have other commitments. They may have a connectivity challenge. Several of our members live in regions where connectivity could be a significant challenge for them. They may need to get somewhere to actually do their vote.

I'm wondering if there was anything around the predictability of voting. How did you address some of the multitude of issues that arose and that are not necessarily the same issues you face when you're all in one place in your Parliament?

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: It honestly wasn't a problem. We have MPs with brand new babies and we have MPs with serious illnesses, and basically we wouldn't know when the vote would be, because they're not necessarily time scheduled, but we didn't have a problem. We would just have to have our smart phones with us.

Also, sometimes the whips would warn us in a text that they were expecting the votes to start at 2:30 and that they might go on to 3:30. We would get general warnings from our whips, and then we would just have our phones with us. It's before my time, but people can do everything now with a smart phone in their hands, and they do, and that's all they have to do.

I wouldn't worry about those technical difficulties or predictability. It's often easier than actually running from a committee room to get through the division lobby before the doors slam shut. That hasn't been a problem at all.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay. That's good to know, although in my riding, if I drove 20 minutes in one direction I would have no cell reception at all.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That is one of the things we would have to deal with. If I were called away to a community for an emergency, I might not even know there was a vote. I think again of a young man in our riding who was lost and stuck in a vehicle for seven days because there was no connectivity. His cell phone was dead and people kept trying to call. It was just by grace that somebody walked by and saw him stuck in his vehicle in a ditch.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Oh, yes.

• (1205)

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: That's why if you have a hybrid system, you can have a proxy vote. You can choose to have either a remote vote or a proxy vote. Depending on what you're doing that week, you could do either.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

That's my time. I appreciate your testimony today very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

That wraps up the formal portion of today's meeting.

Thank you, Ms. Harman. We really appreciate your being before the committee today. You have given us a lot to think about, and you have so much experience and a wealth of knowledge to share. I actually did purchase your book after your last appearance, and I learned a lot.

Right Hon. Harriet Harman: Thank you very much, and all the best for your absolutely wonderful country at this difficult time.

The Chair: Thank you, and we wish you the best as well.

Okay. Unfortunately, as a result of the technical difficulties, we don't have a lot of time, but we can start off with committee business on Tuesday as well.

The one issue is that technically we have to work toward the deadline of June 23 at this point unless the committee decides to ask for another deadline instead. In order to do that, we would have to get agreement from the House leaders. Even if we do propose another deadline, it is by no means guaranteed, until we hear back, that we're going to get it.

That's why I was a little eager in the last meeting to try to see if there was agreement on another deadline instead of the one we have right now. Unless we agree that I can report back to ask for another deadline, we're going to be working toward the June 23 deadline in the meantime.

We do have maybe five minutes if you do want to discuss this situation today. If you want to leave it until Tuesday, we can start off with committee business, but my fear is that we are getting closer and closer without knowing whether we have an extension.

Go ahead, Mr. Alhabra.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Madam Chair, do we still have the motion tabled by Mr. Gerretsen on the table? Can we vote on it?

The Chair: Yes, we do have that motion before us. I do have language from the clerk with which we could propose a more formal motion and insert that date.

Is there agreement to vote on the motion? I believe the proposed date was June 10.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: It was July 10.

The Chair: It was July 10. Sorry.

Justin, can we have a vote on that motion?

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Madam Chair, first of all, maybe it would be good to have a refresh on what the motion was. I also recall that I and others still wanted to speak to it.

The Chair: I don't have a running list from before, Mr. Richards, but you are on that list now. If anyone raises a hand, I can create a running list, and we can start with that list on Tuesday as well. I'll make a note of who wishes to speak.

The last time I think we left off with you, Mr. Richards. I don't know if there was anyone after that.

Mr. Blake Richards: I feel that perhaps Mr. Duncan may have been, but I can't recall.

Can we start by being refreshed on the motion?

The Chair: Basically the motion that Mr. Gerretsen raised was to ask for an extension of the report deadline to July 10.

The Clerk: Madam Chair, I do have some wording that I can read to the committee with the date that was moved by Mr. Gerretsen.

The motion reads as follows:

That notwithstanding the reporting deadline of June 23, 2020, stipulated by the House instructions of May 26, 2020, the committee recommends that it be given an extension until Friday, July 10, 2020, to present a report in relation to its current study on parliamentary duties and the COVID-19 pandemic; and that this recommendation be reported to the House.

• (1210)

Mr. Blake Richards: Can I ask our clerk a question?

I understand the effect of that motion. Having said that, I'm hearing that we would have to get some agreement from House leaders, and things like that.

Would not a simpler way to deal with this be for the committee to present an interim report indicating that our report will not be completed by June 23 and that we will have one for whenever that date is, July 10, or whenever we decide it is? Would that not have the same effect without having to get agreement? We're just simply reporting back that we don't have anything but we will have it at a later date. Would that not work?

The Chair: Maybe I'll have Justin answer that.

The Clerk: Thank you.

Yes, I can confirm that this would be another approach, and in fact somewhat of a parallel approach to this one. What I just read to the committee would ultimately be packaged up as “the report” that PROC would be depositing with the Clerk of the House. The recommendation suggesting a new date would become a recommendation that the House could concur in on its own, or the four House leaders acting in unison could give effect to essentially formalizing a new deadline.

Another approach could be exactly the approach that Mr. Richards has just suggested. It would be an additional recommendation as part of a broader report that may contain other recommendations as well.

I can confirm this approach could be used by the committee, as outlined by Mr. Richards just now.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, thanks. That helps to confirm what I was thinking—

The Clerk: Mr. Richards, there is one last point, and this might be the most critical point of all. A report is required to be submitted to the Clerk of the House by the deadline of June 23, the issue being that if the committee goes beyond that date without having provided a report to the Clerk of the House, the committee's authority to report back would have the effect of expiring, essentially meaning that PROC would lose its ability to present a report to the House by way of the Clerk's office.

Mr. Blake Richards: Understood. I don't think anyone would suggest we do that, but I thought it might be simpler and cleaner just to report back that we require more time. That's fine.

The other part, if you'll indulge this, Madam Chair, is that I still have some comments and thoughts on the way we would proceed if we're choosing to extend our time, which seems as though it may be necessary.

Before we do that, I'd like to get some sense as to what others think. I know I've raised this point, and I believe Mr. Duncan may have been the other person who suggested this as well, and I think also Ms. Blaney. I don't want to put words into either one of their mouths, but that's how I recall it. We were all thinking that it might be wise for us to produce this report, whether it's July 10 or 23, as an interim report and revisit it, I suppose for lack of a better way of putting it, at the end of August or the first part of September. We can determine then whether our recommendations are still appropriate and whether we want to revise, add to or delete from those recommendations, based on what would be the current situation.

There hasn't really been an opportunity to get the thoughts of others on this idea. Personally, I would feel more comfortable knowing other members' thoughts before we proceed with making a decision, because I think that's a fairly critical part of all this. I don't know if we are allowed to hear from others on what their thoughts are on that type of—

The Chair: Justin, do we have any leeway today to hear about thoughts on that, or should we just move it to Tuesday?

The Clerk: If there is any leeway, it's literally a matter of minutes, so I'm not sure if that type of discussion could be conducted and concluded in such a brief period of time. It may be something that the committee may want to consider doing at its next meeting.

The Chair: Yes, the technical team that's in the room today has to be elsewhere shortly, so we have a minute, and I don't see us being able to discuss this in a minute.

Go ahead, Mr. Brassard.

• (1215)

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Madam Chair, the longer we go, the more pressure we put on ourselves as we get close to that June 23 deadline, so I just want to make everybody aware. The last thing I want is another eight-hour marathon session to try to complete a report. If we are going to discuss this on Tuesday, let's make it at the beginning of the meeting, because the deadline is looming again. I think it would be prudent on our part to do that.

The Chair: Yes. It will be at the beginning of the meeting.

The Clerk: May I just remind the committee that we could do that at the beginning of the meeting? In the meantime, we will also send out the draft committee report, or the portion available, so that the committee can move to the draft committee report after they conduct their committee business at the beginning of the meeting on Tuesday. It will be a three-hour meeting, so there would be additional time left for that as well.

The Chair: Yes. The report will be sent to all of the members at some point on Monday.

Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Just to clarify, I think you said this before, but I just want to be sure. Without agreement on an extension, our deadline reverts to June 23. Is that right?

The Chair: That is my understanding, unless we report otherwise back to the House.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: The likelihood of that eight-hour session or 10-hour session—who knows how long it might take?—gets greater the less agreement we have on an extension, right?

The Chair: I guess the clerk is trying to also say that we will have the draft report before us on Monday. Once committee business is over, we would be carrying on into looking at that draft report. That's what those next two meetings are set for: consideration of the draft report. As we have it right now, the motion that we're working under requires us to report back for June 23.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Alhabra.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: I'll make this quick, but I want to take a moment to thank Ms. Normandin for her flexibility during this committee. As somebody who's working on my French, I know how important it is to have interpretation, but she showed class and tolerance, and I want to thank her for being patient.

The Chair: Absolutely. I echo that as well. I felt that it was a very challenging moment. We shouldn't have had to do that, so we'll try to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Thank you for that, though.

We will adjourn today's meeting and reconvene on Tuesday, with committee business at the start of the meeting. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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