

Virtual Parliamentary Sittings during the COVID-19 Pandemic

#ParlAmericasOPN #COVID19

This [Online Meeting on Virtual Parliamentary Sittings during the COVID-19 Pandemic for Presiding Officers and Clerks of English-Speaking Parliaments in the Americas and the Caribbean](#) organized by ParlAmericas and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) provided an opportunity for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to exchange knowledge and experiences on the use of digital tools to facilitate the continuation of parliamentary sittings and committee meetings while respecting social distancing guidelines.


 Access the recording of the session [here](#)

THEME
Innovation, Virtual Sessions,
Modernization of Parliamentary Processes

LOCATION
Virtual Meeting

DATE
May 1, 2020

PARTICIPANTS
More than 60 parliamentarians and
parliamentary staff from 17 countries and
overseas territories



This activity is aligned with SDG 16

Summary

The meeting was inaugurated by Ms. **Alisha Todd**, Director General of ParlAmericas and Mr. **Jarvis Matiya**, Acting Secretary-General of the CPA, who conveyed the disposition of both organizations to support member parliaments as they adapt their parliamentary practices to continue fulfilling their functions during this pandemic. The meeting was chaired by Senator **Ranard Henfield** (The Bahamas), Vice-President of the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network.

Participants were joined by three expert panelists: the Honourable **Juan Watterson**, Speaker of the House of Keys of Tynwald, Parliament of the Isle of Man; Mr. **Luiz Fernando Bandeira de Mello**, Secretary General of the Board of the Senate of Brazil; and Mr. **Matthew Hamlyn**, Strategic Director of the Chamber Business Team of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, who shared the experience of their respective parliaments in implementing virtual parliamentary sittings. A discussion followed where one representative from each parliament present in the meeting had the opportunity to intervene to share their experience going virtual or the considerations that are being debated in their parliaments to that respect, and submit questions to panelists.

Resources on COVID-19 for Parliaments

- ⇒ [COVID-19 and Delivering Parliamentary Democracy: A Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliaments](#)
- ⇒ [COVID-19 and the Parliament's role during a Pandemic](#)
- ⇒ [COVID-19: The challenge of adapting and strengthening the role of Parliaments](#)
- ⇒ [Report from online meeting for Clerks from Latin American Parliaments: Organizing Virtual Parliamentary Sessions during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- ⇒ [Infographic on Organizing Virtual Parliamentary Sittings](#)

To perform our constitutional duties to the nation, we as forward-thinking legislators and transformative national leaders must adapt our legislatures to keep the democratic system alive in the hearts and minds of our electorate, of our backbenchers and Senators, our media, our NGOs, academia and the private sector. The question... can be posed here today, “is your parliament seen by your electorate – and does it see itself – as the essential service it is”?

Senator **Ranard Henfield** (The Bahamas), Vice-President of the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network



Panelists

The Honourable **Juan Watterson**, Speaker of the House of Keys of Tynwald, Parliament of the Isle of Man described how the oldest continuous parliament in the world has successfully transitioned to virtual parliamentary sittings using the Microsoft Teams platform for audio and video streaming, which are connected to livestreaming and regular Hansard processes. This was possible as the parliament met the following pre-requisites: no legal requirements for sittings to take place physically (standing orders can be temporarily suspended); political will and ability of members to join virtually; exceptional broadband penetration; manageable numbers (House of Keys has 24 members); and a strong administration to support these proceedings.

It was very important to test the system with all Members before an actual sitting. This was achieved by asking all Members to log in 15-20 minutes early to allow for technical issues to be addressed. We still open roll call 20 minutes prior to starting the sitting. We also engineered a statement and questions and trialed email and 'chat box' voting... So far we have taken two emergency bills through to Royal assent, questions, statements and dozens of emergency regulations.



The Honourable **Juan Watterson**,
Speaker of the House of Keys of
Tynwald, Parliament of the Isle of
Man

Mr. **Luiz Fernando Bandeira de Mello**, Secretary General of the Board of the Senate of Brazil explained how the Senate has transitioned to 100% virtual sittings using the Zoom platform for audio and video streaming, which also allows users to join using a conventional toll free telephone number in cases when Internet access is not available. This is combined with a [Remote Deliberation System](#) (an application developed for the Senate) for voting, which can also be done verbally during the session should the senator not have Internet access. A set of operational guidelines provide the basis for integrating these solutions. Mr. Bandeira de Mello also noted the human resources requirements for supporting such a system, where roles should be clearly defined and 12 hours of session per week appears to be the operational limit for one team (more sessions could be feasible with other teams on rotation). Finally, he expressed the importance of providing ongoing support to Senators, including quick responses to provide and reset passwords, to facilitate their participation in virtual sittings.

Senate of Brazil: Technology Transfer Handbook

The Senate of Brazil has created this Handbook to transfer knowledge on its Remote Deliberation System with other parliaments. [Read it here.](#)



Panelists

Mr. **Matthew Hamlyn**, Strategic Director of the Chamber Business Team of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom described the temporary arrangements adopted to enable hybrid proceedings. Up to 50 Members of Parliament are permitted to be physically present in the Chamber while respecting social distancing guidelines, and others can participate virtually using the Zoom platform for audio and video conferencing. Parliamentary privilege applies on the same basis to all Members participating, regardless of whether they are contributing virtually or are present in the Chamber. Departmental and Prime Minister’s questions, urgent questions, ministerial statements, legislation, and other substantive proceedings can take place under these arrangements.



Mr. **Matthew Hamlyn**, Strategic Director of the Chamber Business Team of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom

Following a request from the Speaker and political agreement among all parties, to ensure a mechanism to scrutinize government and pass legislation during this time of crisis, the administration delivered the biggest change in operations of the House of Commons in 700 years. As of three weeks ago, all select committees have become virtual, meeting 15 to 20 times per week, supported by the broadcast team and committee staff. As of last week, the House of Commons has held four hybrid sittings following broad consultations on changes to the Standing Orders which were adopted.

The Senate Remote Deliberation System was designed to work in emergencies (like wars, natural disasters, pandemics), when on-site meetings are not possible. The rules set for operation of the system presuppose these conditions. Therefore, we recommend using it only to vote on matters related to the emergency or matters that cannot wait for the normalization of the situation. Although it is modern and sophisticated, it has the natural limitations imposed by physical distance. I am convinced that personal and direct contact between members of parliament is essential for good parliamentary debate.



Mr. **Luiz Fernando Bandeira de Mello**, Secretary General of the Board of the Senate of Brazil

House of Commons of the United Kingdom: COVID-19 Hybrid Proceedings

The House of Commons of the United Kingdom has published a web page describing the Hybrid Proceedings. [Read it here.](#)



Open Discussion

Following the presentations by expert panelists, a discussion took place where one representative from each parliament present in the meeting had the opportunity to intervene to share their experience going virtual or the considerations that are being debated in their parliaments to that respect, and submit questions to panelists. As interventions were being made, panelists and participants provided feedback and shared good practices in response to different questions through the Zoom chat function which has been archived and can be obtained [here](#).

We have recently held two sittings particularly to deal with the emergency regulations and legislative provisions which facilitated the lower house meeting virtually, the upper house met in person following social distancing practices. We do still have some concerns regarding constitutional and legislative provisions regarding symbols of authority during virtual sittings... and the psychological and emotional impact that working remotely may have on members and staff. We also face public calls on parliamentarians to lower or forego their salaries during this period while continuing to provide this essential service.

The Honourable **Alicia Williams-Grant** (Antigua and Barbuda),
President of the Senate



The Honourable **Arthur Holder** (Barbados), Speaker of the House of Assembly and ParlAmericas Board Member

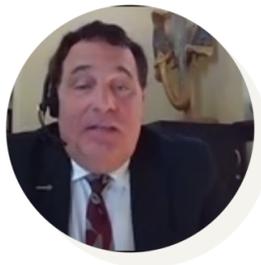
At the commencement of Parliament in Barbados, approval is sought and obtained from the Governor General for Parliament to sit at a specific location (in person). To move to a virtual sitting, one must first obtain some legal authority and I would like to ask how this is done for others. In our case, we are looking at this idea, and that would call for an amendment to our Standing Orders to allow virtual sittings for public interest during emergencies. We would also need approval from the Governor General. For example, our Parliament is currently meeting in a different locality, and this required such an approval.

On April 17 the House was asked to sit and it was decided that it would do so under a format that reflected what we were asking the community to do, so as to set the example. The set up to hold a virtual sitting was established in less than 48 hours... We used Cisco Webex Meetings which I think is more secure, and provides the functionalities needed for the Speaker to control the House as he would if the session was physically in the chamber. We integrated it with the live broadcast and Hansard. It was an around the clock exercise to get it set up and we did a try run the night before with members. The meeting was short as its purpose was to address a specific emergency measure. Next Friday will be our first full virtual session.



The Honourable **Dennis Lister**
(Bermuda), Speaker of the House
of Assembly

Member of Parliament **Marc Serré**
(Canada), ParIAmericas Board
Member



The Senate has set up three virtual committees, and similarly the House of Commons has set up six. The Procedures Committee is working closely with the House administration as they study the possibilities for the entire House to sit virtually. It is due to report back to the House by May 15... We've also held our first virtual sitting of the Special Committee on COVID-19, a committee of the whole, with close to 300 MPs attending via Zoom. It is also livestreamed for the public with closed captioning in French and English... An observation I've had is that headsets are very important, especially for interpretation... We are also looking at challenges caused by lack of access to Internet in some areas. The key question we are trying to answer is how can we ensure that all legislators can participate in democratic processes and exercise their rights.



The Honourable **Andy Daniel**
(Saint Lucia), Speaker of the
House of Assembly and
ParlAmericas Board Member

We have met five times since the start of the pandemic and we've declared a state of emergency that indicates that Parliament is an essential service, which has now been extended to the end of May. We have practiced social distancing fully in the Parliament and have limited the number of members present in the chamber to those meeting the quorum and rotated so that all members could have the opportunity to speak. In terms of virtual parliament, our constitution states that each session of Parliament shall be held at such place [defined by the rules of procedure], which can be amended by the Parliament.

We have been in recess since the beginning of April, but it has been interrupted to hold meetings to address issues related to COVID-19. During meetings, members abide by social distancing guidelines. Standing Orders do not allow us to have fully virtual meetings, but we have looked at it and what we have done is that when preparing some pieces of legislation, we have worked with our online office of IBM Connections to prepare everything almost totally and see if we agree on the proposed legislation and then have a shorter meeting in person and vote on the legislation. We have our normal online meeting rooms for committees and for the whole parliament, and we've worked with that.



The Honourable **Jennifer Simons**
(Suriname), Speaker of the
National Assembly and
ParlAmericas Board Member

Conclusions

The meeting concluded with remarks from the Honourable **Bridgid Annisette-George** (Trinidad and Tobago), Speaker of the House of Representatives, ParlAmericas Board Member and CPA International Executive Committee Member, who thanked expert panelists and participants for joining the meeting.

At a time when the power of the Executive is being used to distance governments from parliamentary oversight in many jurisdictions, the work of the CPA and networks like ParlAmericas' Open Parliament Network (OPN) are crucial in ensuring that parliaments maintain transparent practice and procedure. Providing access to public information, promoting the participation of citizens in legislative decision-making and ensuring a culture of ethical and accountable behaviour are activities that must be considered as the forefront of our efforts to maintain the function of parliament during this crisis.



The Honourable **Bridgid Annisette-George** (Trinidad and Tobago), Speaker of the House of Representatives, ParlAmericas Board Member and CPA International Executive Committee Member

Key considerations for holding virtual sittings

Establish functionalities that guarantee the security of digital applications or tools used during virtual sittings.

Support parliamentarians and their respective teams during remote sittings in the event that they have any problems or queries.

Train parliamentary officials and legislators in the use of technological tools.

Continue to computerize and digitize parliamentary processes, including internal communications and electronic signatures, to facilitate the transition process to virtual sittings.

Strengthen legislative openness to guarantee transparency, accountability, public participation, ethics, and integrity in the transition to virtual parliamentary processes.

Parliaments Represented



Anguila



Brazil



Saint Kitts and Nevis



Turks and Caicos



Antigua and Barbuda



Canada



Saint Lucia



United Kingdom



The Bahamas



Cayman Islands



Saint Vincent and the Grenadines



Barbados



Dominica



Suriname



Bermuda



Isle of Man



Trinidad and Tobago

Canada



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ParlAmericas Podcasts

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PARLAMERICAS



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ParlAmericas is composed of the **35 NATIONAL LEGISLATURES** from North, Central and South America and the Caribbean



ParlAmericas facilitates the exchange of parliamentary **BEST PRACTICES AND** promotes **COOPERATIVE POLITICAL DIALOGUE**



ParlAmericas mainstreams **GENDER EQUALITY** by advocating for women's political empowerment and the application of a gender lens in legislative



ParlAmericas fosters **OPEN PARLIMENTS** by advancing the principles of transparency, accountability, citizen participation, ethics and probity



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ParlAmericas works towards strengthening democracy and governance by accompanying **ELECTORAL PROCESSES**



ParlAmericas is headquartered in **OTTAWA, CANADA**

International Secretariat of ParlAmericas

703 - 155 Queen St., Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 6L1 Canada

Telephone: +1 (613) 947-8999

www.parlAmericas.org | info@parlAmericas.org

