



## Virtual Parliaments: Principles and Practices The Asia Foundation and Global Partners Governance

The global Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in measures to control the spread of the virus in almost every country in the world, including the closure of many workplaces and limitations on gatherings. As a key governance institution whose primary law-making functions feature lively discussion and debate, parliaments have been presented with a challenge – how can they continue their crucial work, at a time when scrutiny of government actions to tackle the crisis is vital, and demands from citizens are rising, while respecting the new limitations, safeguarding MPs and staff, and acting as a visible public role model?

Many parliaments have chosen to continue their important work by establishing a ‘virtual’ or semi-virtual presence. This has taken a variety of forms in different countries, some of which are highlighted in this paper as it considers emerging practice. The purpose of this paper is to act as a practical guide to the opportunities, considerations, and challenges involved in any decision to operate a virtual parliament. Reviewing the diverse ways in which different institutions have responded to the challenge of transforming their processes and procedures in a very short space of time provides some clear insight for parliaments around the world to consider as they make their own plans and adjustments.

Taking stock of these experiences, the paper outlines the key principles parliaments should consider when deciding how to function virtually. Parliaments are highly social workplaces, and the ability to continue to function effectively when the opportunity to meet in person is limited or restricted represents a fundamental barrier to their normal way of working.

Parliaments have had to innovate. In some cases, they have built upon existing infrastructure or accelerated digital transformation initiatives that were already in progress. In others, new solutions have been found. While some innovations will be intended as temporary measures to face the current crisis, others may prove viable for the longer term, either because they represent popular improvements to the way in which parliaments work, are extensions of existing initiatives, or are preserved for use in future crisis situations.

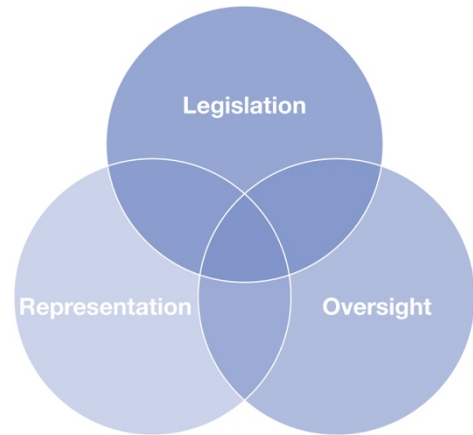
The key questions covered in this paper are:

- How can a parliament’s most critical functions be identified and maintained?
- How inclusive are virtual parliaments?
- How can virtual parliaments communicate their work effectively?
- What are the logistical and resource impacts for virtual parliaments?
- How will the experience of a virtual parliament shape the future?

## 1. How can a parliament's most critical functions be identified and maintained?

In a democratic society, parliaments are the chief forum for debate, discussion and scrutiny of executive actions, for bringing to light the main issues affecting citizens, and for drafting, debating, and enacting laws that advance the public good. Their role becomes even more important during a crisis, when governments are often proposing and implementing emergency legislation to deal with economic and social consequences, and citizens may be suffering disproportionately from the effects of the crisis. At these times, parliaments act as a vital check on potential executive overreach, protecting the fundamental rights of citizens.

Parliaments perform a range of functions, from consideration and enactment of legislation, through oversight and scrutiny of government performance, to representing their constituencies in national policy discussions. Some of these may be more straightforward than others to fulfil remotely, for example where debate is of a general nature and does not require a decision to be taken by vote. Others may be affected by technical limitations. While online services may open up new opportunities to connect with some voters who may not have been willing or able to engage with parliament previously, other voters may question the value of a parliament which is only able to sit virtually.



Shifting to a virtual mode of work is challenging, and many parliaments are beginning remote operations with only what they consider the most critical aspects of parliamentary business. Each parliament's response to the crisis will be different, determined by existing resources and capabilities, and local political priorities, but will take account of the three key functions of **Representation**, **Legislation**, and **Oversight**.

### *Parliamentary Response to Crisis*

Parliaments attempting to operate virtually will face procedural, practical and political challenges, which are all interlinked. If they are unable to meet these challenges, they risk leaving a legislative and oversight vacuum at a vital time. Equally, they may face increasing public dissatisfaction with an institution that is often perceived to struggle to adapt to the modern age. While individual parliaments will have different priorities, there are some common principles relating to parliamentary work which will need to be preserved in a virtual institution.

#### **Key Principles for Virtual Parliaments**

**Accountability:** Identifying and instituting effective means to hold the Executive and other public bodies to account during the crisis.

**Relevance:** Enabling parliament to continue to play a central role in public discourse.

**Fairness:** Ensuring balanced representation in virtual arrangements for smaller parties, and those disproportionately affected by the crisis, such as women, elderly or rural MPs.

**Transparency:** Allowing citizens meaningful engagement with their representatives and the institution as a whole, both individually and collectively.

**Efficiency:** Devising procedures and practices which offer the maximum output for the effort expended.

Some parliaments have established entirely virtual platforms to continue their work. Others have chosen a semi-remote or 'hybrid' option, preserving some physical presence in the parliament building.

#### *Emerging Practice: Wholly Virtual or 'Hybrid' Proceedings?*

Some parliaments have completely transferred their sittings to remote platforms. The **Brazilian** parliament, for example, has operated entirely remote plenary sessions for both of its Chambers, accommodating 500 participants using its own bespoke system. Smaller parliaments such as the **Maldives** and the **Welsh Parliament** have also operated entirely remotely by video conferencing, using commercially available platforms.

Others, such as **Mongolia**, have chosen a 'hybrid' option which enables members physically attending in several different Chambers within the parliament building to communicate through the internal television system. In **Latvia**, the parliament has operated remotely with each parliamentary faction in a separate room, joining as a group while keeping a distance from other factions and each other. In **Poland** a hybrid system combines the Speaker and a small number of MPs, delegated by their parties, attending in the Chamber with those joining virtually displayed on video screens.

In its hybrid system, the **United Kingdom** parliament has prioritised maintaining scrutiny of Government by means of questions to Ministers and statements before implementing proceedings on legislation and voting arrangements at a later stage. In **Canada**, virtual meetings facilitate the questioning of Ministers and general debate, but legislative review, debate, and other formalities continue to take place in person.

As a first step, many parliaments including **Germany, Lithuania, and Norway**, rapidly implemented arrangements for **committees** to keep working remotely via video conferencing, often using well-known commercial technology, including Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex, and Skype.

#### *Questions to consider:*

- How will parliamentarians decide **collectively** what crucial activities are to be maintained during the crisis, and how will the decision be authorised?
- Will parliament operate **entirely virtually**, or in **hybrid** form maintaining some physical presence?
- Will **legal or constitutional changes** be needed to authorise virtual proceedings?
- Is a **transitional time** needed, when parliament is operating partially, but not fully, as people get used to new procedures and ways of working virtually?
- Who will be responsible for **recording experiences** for the purposes of drawing out **lessons learned and review**?

### *Virtual Parliamentary Procedure*

Parliaments will encounter immediate procedural questions when planning their first virtual sittings. Some countries have **legal or constitutional requirements** for their parliament to meet in a certain place or for a certain number of members to 'be present' in order for decisions to be taken which have legal force. Equally, changes to the accepted arrangements for debates or committees will normally need to be authorised either by the Speaker, the parliamentary commission, or the Executive Bureau, or by a resolution passed by the parliament.

In practice, doing things virtually may have advantages, but it will not be seen as the same or a substitute for face-to-face meetings, largely for human and cultural rather than technological reasons. This means that virtual parliaments need to be different, and procedures and practices need to be adapted. There may be an argument to slow down proceedings where possible, introduce clear ordering of processes, and limit simultaneous activities to a minimum, either for an initial period or in the longer term.

#### **Key Principles for Virtual Parliamentary Procedure**

**Identify critical functions:** It will be impossible to immediately replicate all the functions of a physical parliament virtually. A decision needs to be taken on how to deliver the most important functions, which can later be extended if the crisis continues.

**Build on existing resources:** An audit of existing capacities will provide a good foundation to begin adapting services and will highlight any shortcomings that may cause problems.

**Provide support and advice:** Not all staff and MPs will be ready to use new technology, so training and support will be critical. Clear new protocols for online debates and meetings will need to be identified, shared and continuously embedded into habits and behaviours.

**Anticipate problems:** New processes always present challenges, and any problems during virtual sittings could be very visible. Be prepared with contingency plans and back-up options.

Parliamentary work is not all about procedure. Political decisions often happen away from the Chamber through **informal negotiation** and exchange within and between blocs and parties. Physical plenary sessions allow members to speak to each other informally, seek advice from the Speaker or staff, and reach political agreements in the sidelines of a session. These aspects of parliamentary work will be much more difficult virtually. Similarly, direct advice from senior staff to MPs is highly valued – including advice to the Chair, committee chairs, legal advice, and specialist research. It is also frequently needed at short notice. This can be much easier and more effective when done face-to-face; and when the individuals already know each other.

Equally, **constituency work** will raise different issues from plenary sittings – Members may wish to replace the community meetings or office meetings with constituents which they have held previously with remote options. It is likely that the constituency workload will increase during the crisis as citizens are concerned about health issues and the economic effects of the lockdown.

### *Emerging Practice: Virtual Voting*

Remote voting has proven a particular challenge for parliaments, given the need to ensure identification of the member voting, security checks to prevent interference, accuracy of results, and voting transparency. Where parliamentary business requires a formal decision there is the possibility that the results might be open to challenge if any remote voting system is not perceived to be robust and secure, particularly if the result is close, when those on the losing side may seek to criticise the use of remote systems to undermine the decisions taken.

While many parliaments already have **electronic voting systems**, these are usually operated by pushing a button physically located in the chamber, rather than virtually. Some parliaments already allow **proxy voting**, either in cases where the Speaker certifies a need for it in individual cases (**United Kingdom**) or in general to allow political parties to cast votes on behalf of members of their group who are absent (**Australia**).

There has been rapid global innovation in virtual voting. **Spain** extended its existing provisions which allow remote voting in special circumstances, like maternity leave, to all members. In **Poland** online voting was made available to quarantined MPs via a new app-based voting system, but MPs initially complained that it was not recording their votes correctly, so the system had to be taken offline. The **European Parliament** opted to use voting by email by sending voting forms to MEPs' secure accounts. This was seen as a relatively low-tech and slow option, which required several hours to produce results, but offered a more secure and verifiable solution.

Preserving voting transparency is vital. Most parliaments publish the full results of votes, allowing MPs and the public to check how they voted and identify any errors. While errors may reflect poorly on the parliament, it means that problems with the system are likely to be picked up and ideally resolved very quickly.

### *Questions to consider:*

- What procedures are the **most important** to adapt immediately – legislation, scrutiny, questions to Ministers, constituency work?
- Will these require a mechanism for formal **decision making**, such as online voting?
- What processes will there be to deal with **failure** and to acknowledge that experimentation is needed to find good solutions – which may mean that systems do not always work perfectly the first time?
- What can be done to maintain the **personal and social aspects** of parliament? Will there be a virtual space where MPs and staff can meet **informally and socially** for mutual support, or to seek **confidential advice**?
- What **guidance** will be issued to explain new procedures, including not only **technical** issues, but also matters of **protocol** when operating online?

## Lessons Learned

Start by identifying the most **critical services** to continue and what can be temporarily suspended. Moving to virtual working will be a challenge and is likely to require a transitional period where **core services** are prioritised. The initial emphasis may be to **keep things simple** by building on existing capabilities and focusing on the most visible aspects of parliamentary work, such as plenary sessions and committee work. Virtual sittings need to be adapted to the **virtual environment**, rather than trying to reproduce exactly what previously happened face-to-face, and clear guidance on new procedures for participants must be developed and shared.

## 2. How inclusive are virtual parliaments?

For obvious practical reasons, it is easier to manage parliamentary sessions with a smaller number of participants, both technologically and logistically. In a large parliament, using video conferencing will impact on the nature of the debate, making it more difficult to deal with spontaneous interventions and situations in which many members wish to speak at the same time. Different parliaments already have different rules and conventions for managing speaking order during debates. These have been extended in some virtual parliaments, for example, by delegating questions to party or bloc representatives and introducing speaker lists to manage the order of contributions in a virtual or hybrid chamber.

Some parliaments have taken the decision to delegate powers to a smaller number of members during the crisis, to ensure that parliamentary scrutiny can continue, but in a more streamlined and manageable form. In some cases, parties or blocs have nominated a representative for their group to attend sittings on their behalf; in others a dedicated committee has been established to continue the parliament's work. If there is delegation to a smaller group, it is important to specify the criteria to select this group, ensuring for example that the rights of minorities, gender balance, and other factors relating to inclusion and representation are respected.

In hybrid systems that combine party representatives physically present with other speakers who are virtually connected, ensuring equal treatment among them will be important to avoid a 'two-tier' situation in which some members effectively have more rights and wield greater influence than others.

Operating remotely involves new online behaviours. Issuing parliamentary guidance on protocols for meeting virtually, which are likely to differ from in-person sessions, will be particularly useful for **Presiding Officers** and **Chairs** who will wish to moderate debates and committee meetings in a way that enables virtual participants to participate fairly and equally.

### *Emerging Practice: Delegating Powers to a Smaller Group*

The option of establishing ad hoc committees has been taken up by parliaments intending to maintain scrutiny during the lockdown period, but with a smaller number of members. Changes relating to virtual meetings of committees or to sessions where decisions are not being taken were authorised by the Speaker in consultation with the political parties in **New Zealand**, without the need for a formal resolution. The parliament formally created an **Epidemic Response Committee** of eleven members to carry on scrutinising the government's response to the pandemic, and the parliament as a whole is not sitting, except for short sessions to pass emergency legislation. The Committee is chaired by the Leader of the Opposition and consists of senior MPs appointed according to party balance.

The Committee's responsibility is to consider matters relating to the Government's management of Covid-19, and to report to the House on these matters. It has summoned senior officials to examine the legal basis for the extraordinary measures put in place by the Government during the pandemic and its virtual meetings are broadcasted through livestreams and videos.

In **South Africa**, the parliamentary leadership decided not to create an additional committee and instead called on MPs to conduct oversight in their own constituencies and communities and to use other avenues provided for in the Constitution to undertake their roles. The parliament's existing committees have been permitted to meet remotely to continue their work. Establishing another committee alongside these ongoing activities might cause confusion and duplication of roles and responsibilities.

In **Canada**, a procedure was used to establish a committee of which all MPs are members, which can meet virtually for scrutiny but not legislation. There are twice-weekly virtual sessions, on Tuesday and Thursdays, and in person sessions with a reduced number of MPs on Wednesdays, during which emergency legislation can be considered. Although some MPs joining remotely initially encountered technical issues with their internet connection or microphone and there were interruptions to the bilingual interpretation service, attendance at virtual sessions has been high including participation from 90% of MPs, whereas physical attendance in the Chamber is limited strictly to MPs present in the Ottawa capital region.

In parliaments which have established hybrid procedures, it will be important to monitor the effects on participation across political blocs, as well as demographic categories. For example, many MPs may find it difficult to attend in-person sessions due to the long travel distances and transport restrictions or the need to self-isolate. If virtual systems do not allow for participation on an equal basis with those present in person, this may disproportionately affect representation of rural areas or those at distance from the capital. Older MPs, or those with predisposing health conditions, may also be unable to attend in-person sittings due to the infection risks involved.

The arrangements put in place for virtual sittings may also affect **gender equity**. Women are overwhelmingly a minority in parliaments around the world, but inclusive policymaking requires the participation of both men and women. This is particularly the case when evidence suggests that women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of the pandemic, economically, socially, through an increase in childcare responsibilities, and by a rise in cases of gender-based violence.

The reduction in capacity that may be experienced by virtual parliaments should not mean a reduction in the representation of women within the adapted parliamentary structures. Fair representation should be a consideration in all virtual parliamentary mechanisms, including deliberation, committee membership, and witness testimony, and gender equality issues should be included in the mandate of any new special parliamentary committees set up to scrutinise the government's response to the crisis.

#### *Questions to consider:*

- Should virtual parliaments aim to accommodate all members, or **delegate powers** to a smaller group?
- Who will choose the representatives of any smaller group? The Speaker? The Executive Bureau? Party Leaders? And how can that process **consult** and obtain the consent of minorities inside the parliament?
- How will remote groups maintain an **equal voice** in new arrangements?
- Are both **women and men** participating in new or adapted parliamentary mechanisms?
- What internal or external processes will there be to gather **data** about levels of representation?

#### **Lessons Learned**

Emerging evidence suggests that **women** and other **vulnerable groups** have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Virtual parliaments need to ensure that **equality and diversity** is not adversely affected by speedy decisions concerning the modification of processes and procedures. Systematic **data collection** about levels of participation will help ensure that inclusion can be monitored and avoid data gaps when reviewing the experience.

### **3. How can virtual parliaments communicate their work effectively?**

Virtual sittings may in some cases offer greater public engagement opportunities, but also present potential pitfalls. A virtual parliament potentially offers more **transparency** where citizens are regularly online and using social media; however, it has the potential to reinforce **inequality of access** where certain sections of the population (such as rural communities or the elderly) have disproportionately less access to the internet or ability to use online platforms. If parliaments are only operating limited or scaled down services, this also needs to be clearly communicated and expectations managed accordingly.

Virtual parliaments will attract public attention and can use this as an opportunity to explain parliament's scrutiny and legislative roles, and that MPs are still working, despite the lack of physical plenary sittings. For example, they may wish to highlight an increase in constituency casework because people are contacting their MP for help with the economic, social and health impacts of the crisis, in addition to any emergency legislation or questioning of Ministers on measures to combat the pandemic at national level.

One danger with a virtual parliament is that there may be several activities happening in different areas and by different routes (Zoom meetings, physical meetings, voting by email, and other contexts). These all need to be made clear and visible to the wider public, staff, Members, government officials, and others, ensuring continuity of contact. With **political parties** or blocs



likely to move online in parallel to parliament, it may be difficult to distinguish between ‘official’ parliamentary business and other political activity.

Virtual meetings where MPs join remotely from their homes may also appear less formal and project a different image of parliament. There may be public and media comment on the way in which MPs present themselves when joining remotely (both positive and negative), and parliaments should consider what advice or requirements to put in place – for example in maintaining formal dress codes and avoiding background interruptions. The widespread experience of working from home may equally mean that there is greater public empathy with MPs who are in the same situation.

To communicate formal parliamentary activity during the crisis, the **parliamentary website** will be a key channel of communication. At the same time, greater engagement may come by integrating with channels that people already use (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as television and radio) in addition to more sophisticated conferencing facilities for those engaging directly with parliament, for example through committees.

Most parliaments closed their buildings to public entry at an early stage of the pandemic. In many countries, **broadcasting** of parliamentary proceedings enables the public to continue viewing parliamentary business as it happens. Virtual sittings will need to consider whether and how they continue to offer this level of transparency and immediacy.

#### *Emerging Practice: Virtual Access to Parliament*

Some parliaments already offer resources such as virtual tours of parliament on their websites. In the **Czech Republic**, the parliament’s Department of Communication and Education has launched a new educational portal including livestreams, tours, online classes, workshop materials, and a virtual tour, to replace in-person educational activities which cannot take place during the crisis. The idea came from the national television station organising a special education programme for students who were learning at home during the pandemic. Using the low cost and widely accessible Google platform, the website was set up and launched within a week.

Integrating with channels that people already use, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, has increased the audience for parliamentary activities. For example, **Vanuatu** is livestreaming parliamentary sessions on Facebook and YouTube, and in **Israel**, 600,000 people viewed a Facebook live ‘online demonstration’ organised by one of the political parties.

Online sessions may allow some people to watch proceedings more easily, but will differ from other forms of engagement. If parliament is broadcasting on social media, it may need to monitor the public comments that this coverage attracts. There is clear evidence that social media channels present particular challenges for some groups. For example, women politicians have often been subject to sexist comments, or targeted discrimination and harassment, as detailed in the [IPU’s paper](#) on *Violence against Women in Parliament*. There have also been incidents of ‘fake news’ or disinformation rapidly circulating on social media relating to the pandemic, sometimes using footage which has been edited to create a misleading or false impression.

MPs’ individual relations with the **media** may also be affected – for example, journalists will be more likely to rely on social media for news rather than real-life conversations with politicians.

MPs and staff may need greater support on how to use social media effectively and how to deal with abuse or disinformation, particularly if they are moving online for the first time.

Initially, there is likely to be considerable media interest in innovative virtual sittings, with the business of parliament receiving increased coverage. The behaviour of MPs may also be seen as a public example and a role model for adjustments and standards to be adopted and observed during the pandemic to mitigate the risks of infection.

*Emerging Practice: What happens when things go wrong?*

Mistakes in virtual parliaments are highly likely when dealing with new and unfamiliar processes and technologies. They will also be highly visible at a time when media attention is focused on innovative remote sittings. Technical problems might include equipment or connection failure, either in the parliament or from remote locations, or security breaches. But human error is just as likely to cause problems in the change to new ways of working.

Many of the new virtual parliaments have experienced small disruptions due to connectivity or interruptions by children at home (for example during Ministerial question time in the **Scottish Parliament**). These have generally been treated as minor and understandable effects of dealing with an unexpected situation. A number of **UK** parliamentarians have been caught making offensive remarks when they believed their microphones were muted and some have accidentally voted the wrong way using the new online voting system.

In other cases, where there have been systematic technical issues as in the case of the **Polish** e-voting system, there has been more extensive negative coverage in the media. In **New Zealand**, the wrong version of a law was passed during a very short, emergency legislative session. The error was quickly identified and rectified.

In the **United States** and **South Africa** so-called 'Zoom-bombing' has disrupted some online meetings. Unauthorised users were able to join virtual sittings and disrupt them, including by displaying offensive materials. Virtual parliaments are now more aware of the potential security features of different online conferencing options and how to ensure their meetings are secure.

To avoid mistakes becoming subject to public comment, some parliaments have opted for time delayed broadcasts where editing can take place, rather than instant access. While this ensures that any interruptions to proceedings can be removed, it could raise questions about criteria for editing of content, and the nature of the material that has been deleted.

To avoid the potential for embarrassing incidents, virtual parliaments need to provide clear guidance to parliamentarians on how to operate virtually. People instinctively know what is expected with face-to-face interaction and can use visual and behavioural cues. This can be lost in virtual settings. Instructions need to be given to staff and Members about how activities and procedures will be implemented, in addition to regular information for the public and media on the parliament's website and via social media channels.

The parliamentary communications team need to be included in planning for virtual parliaments to maximise opportunities and mitigate or react to risks. If parliaments are only operating

limited or scaled-down services, this needs to be clearly communicated and expectations managed accordingly. A co-ordinated **internal communications plan** will enable parliamentarians to keep up to date with activities and communicate the progress that has been made.

*Questions to consider:*

- How will the change to virtual operation be **communicated**?
- Will **broadcasting** of proceedings continue? If so, will it be live or time-delayed?
- What **social media** and other channels will parliament use to connect with people who are increasingly familiar with technology?
- How will the **parliamentary communications team** be included in planning for virtual sessions to maximise opportunities and reduce risks?
- How will new technologies and procedures be **integrated** with processes used by other bodies such as the government, political parties and media organisations?
- Who will **defend** the parliament if things go wrong?

### Lessons Learned

Virtual parliaments face a complex communications task and require a clear **communications strategy**. If parliament does not use technology in some way to continue its work, it risks being seen as old-fashioned or out of date; on the other hand, virtual sittings are limiting; they may not project the same image as formal physical sittings; and things can go wrong when using unfamiliar technology. Both the value and limitations of virtual sittings need to be communicated.

#### 4. What are the logistical and resource impacts for virtual parliaments?

As parliaments make the shift online, **technology** and digital resources may be the immediate priority. However, **human resources** are likely to be just as important to enabling a virtual parliament to function effectively. Working effectively is not only a question of providing a new technological platform, but of ensuring that the new platform can be used to deliver the business intended when people are physically separated.

Effective use of technology has been a consideration for all parliaments for some time, given wider technological and digital trends across the world. Covid-19 has increased the pace of change, but parliaments will need to distinguish between short-term 'fixes' and longer-term work which may contribute to an ongoing digital strategy. Parliaments will need to be aware of their **existing capabilities** with respect to equipment, systems, licensing, infrastructure, user profiles (competence/location/numbers), training and support capacity and capability, and financial limits. They will also want to consider national infrastructure (mobile, internet, wifi, electricity, public access) and any international issues (for example, cloud computing systems often store data outside the country of origin, which may raise sensitivities). Bilingual or multilingual parliaments will need to ensure that simultaneous interpretation/translation are integrated into technical solutions.

Technological familiarity and online capacity are likely to vary considerably, but most MPs and their staff may need new types of **equipment, training and advice**. Additional staff resources may be required, particularly to deal with technical issues arising during sittings which need an

immediate response. In addition to operating the IT tools effectively, new protocols for managing meetings will need to be defined and communicated clearly and consistently. These are likely to differ significantly from in-person sessions where verbal and physical cues are much easier to follow. A slower pace will be needed, at least initially, and Chairs and presiding officers may need specific guidance on how to ensure that meetings run according to plan.

Significant attention should be devoted to the **security** of any new IT system, including how vulnerable the system is to intrusion or malicious acts, as well as its reliability and resilience, and therefore its levels of availability. System requirements will be linked to the importance of the decisions being taken – for example, short interruptions of committee meetings may be much less significant than a whole system collapsing during a crucial vote – and there is a clear need for contingency arrangements to be in place with clear rules on what to do in the case of technological failure.

The initial emphasis could be to **keep things simple by building on existing capabilities**. This may involve adding more robust processes for authentication/identification and voting, as well as integration with broadcasting channels (e.g. social media and TV). It may also focus on the most visible aspects of parliamentary work, such as the plenary and committees. In the longer term, parliaments can leverage technical opportunities, building on the knowledge and experience of other parliaments and the learning from Covid-19. This can reflect citizens' desires for greater engagement and enhance inclusion, as part of parliament's core business rather than crisis-driven virtual measures.

#### *Emerging Practice: The Cost of a Virtual Parliament*

Costs of virtual parliaments may include equipping MPs and staff with necessary technology in their homes, hiring new staff to manage the virtual parliament, and training existing staff. The cost of technological solutions will vary on the options chosen, whether a bespoke or commercial platform is used and how they have been specified and developed.

To some extent, these costs might be offset by reductions in the cost of transport, catering, security, and accommodation if the physical parliament is not sitting, but there may be additional costs in equipping a hybrid parliament to operate safely through a period of infection-control measures. For example, **Switzerland, Cyprus, and Singapore** have all moved parliamentary sittings to larger premises such as conference centres, to implement distancing measures.

Communication of cost implications of virtual sittings will be important, at a time when many citizens will be experiencing economic hardship. In the **United Kingdom** an allowance of up to £10,000 (\$12,000) per MP was made available for equipment required by staff to operate remotely. This sparked extensive negative media comment and was incorrectly portrayed as a direct payment to MPs. Total estimated running costs for the UK virtual parliament are estimated at £370,000 (\$450,000) per month, but the parliament may sit in virtual form for only two months. In parliaments where members are paid an attendance allowance, will this continue for 'virtual' attendance?

If virtual parliaments will be used again in future, at least in some aspects, resources used now can be seen as an investment for the future. If not, after the crisis has subsided, it could appear as a costly overreaction.

If the virtual parliament is operating a scaled-down service in the first instance, it will be important to clearly communicate what services MPs and their staff can expect to receive, how they can access them, and why the decisions have been made. Parliaments will also need to consider the extent to which they are dependent on physical infrastructure (e.g., paper records) and how quickly these could be digitised.

Effective virtual or partially virtual parliaments are likely to be most successful where there is a strong institutional culture, both for staff and parliamentarians. It will be important to ensure that collaboration and good information flows are preserved, so that service delivery can be maintained to a high standard. Staff working remotely may find it harder to distinguish between on duty/off duty time or may feel isolated. Efforts taken to preserve **a sense of community** will help maintain institutional culture during a challenging time. This will be as important for effective working as providing technical solutions.

Staying in touch will be particularly important for the parliamentary staff and those supporting MPs, from party factions or individually. As people become isolated and work individually from their homes, structure for work patterns becomes more important, so that there is a clear purpose to meeting and routine tasks continue. It will be important to consider how the parliamentary staff's work is structured, and to ensure there are times when staff meet online for purposes other than formal work.

#### *Questions to consider:*

- Do Members and staff have the necessary equipment to **work from home**?
- Will anyone need access to **physical resources** which are only available on the parliamentary site?
- Has any **new technology** been evaluated for factors including ease of use, cost, familiarity and security?
- What **training** will be needed – not only in technical aspects, but also in new remote procedures and online protocols?
- How will the parliament preserve a **sense of community** and maintain informal spaces for parliamentarians and staff to continue to engage with one another, despite physical isolation?

#### **Lessons Learned**

Unsuccessful virtual activities have often been those that utilise sophisticated technology, which is inaccessible to most people without specialist knowledge. At a time when things have to be changed quickly and for a very large group of people, **simplicity is key**, to make sure more people are comfortable with their work. There is a balance between how many features are needed, and how feasible it is for people from a wide range of groups to use the relevant tools. **International exchanges** are invaluable, not only to learn from technological innovation in different countries, but also in relation to managing the practicalities and the politics of change.

## 5. How will the experience of a virtual parliament shape the future?

As in the wider world, the shift to remote working is likely to have **cultural and behavioural effects** which long outlast the immediate crisis of the pandemic. Some of these will challenge accepted ways of working and conventional wisdom. For example, once remote working is accepted and the infrastructure to support it is improved, there are likely to be renewed calls for it to be used more widely, including from those who have already been vocal supporters of increasingly flexible modes of working.

Digital transformation is normally intended to optimise processes and enhance user experience. Whilst technological changes to enable a virtual parliament might be initially be perceived as disruptive, once they become familiar, they may be seen as having longer-term benefits. If virtual parliaments are a success, this may result in calls to reduce recess or constituency time; allow virtual recall to debate emergency issues; or to hold parliamentary sittings which move around the country. Greater use of remote voting, which has often been dismissed on technical grounds, has been successfully installed in a number of parliaments and may prove popular. Both citizens and members may conclude that there is more procedural flexibility than they previously thought possible, and might want to retain and build on it, despite the extra governance complexity that could be required.

Virtual parliaments potentially offer many advantages and new opportunities, but these are likely to be additional to physical sittings, rather than an exact substitute or replica. The option of remote working, once adopted, will be welcomed by some, particularly if more time can be spent with constituents and long journeys can be avoided. On the other hand, many members will want to be close to the seat of government and to one another. Effective scrutiny and oversight of government is also much easier in person, in the back-and-forth of debate, when Ministers can be pressed on the details of their plans and held to account in person.

### *Emerging Practice: Remote Committee Consultations*

Virtual practices bring many challenges, but they also bring with them opportunities to consult groups who may not be able usually to engage with parliament, and to reach more diverse groups. In most countries, committees were the first elements of a virtual parliament. Transferring committees to online working through commercially available video-conferencing software has proven relatively straightforward, due to their smaller size and the fact that staff and members normally already know each other and have existing working relationships.

Virtual committees have been welcomed by many – remote sittings allow them to consult people from around the country or even internationally, where it would be difficult or costly to appear in person. Some parliaments had already empowered committees to hold consultations by video-link. While it seems unlikely to entirely replace physical sittings, the experience of the pandemic may well accelerate the use of digital technology by committees to engage with hard to reach groups.

In cases where parliaments decide to sit virtually, they are setting a precedent that future generations may look back on if they encounter similar situations. Emergency measures, passed at speed, should be reviewed once the immediate crisis has passed to properly assess their proportionality and impact. It may therefore be helpful to consider whether any virtual sitting is

specifically framed as a time-limited measure, whether any criteria are attached to the decision to work virtually, and whether decisions made virtually need to be reconfirmed in a 'normal' session at a later stage.

#### *Emerging Practice: Time-limiting Virtual Arrangements*

There is a risk that 'emergency' procedures adopted to deal with the immediate crisis may become normalised, even though they may have negative effects. For example, some countries such as **Hungary** and **Australia** decided to temporarily suspend parliamentary sittings and scheduled elections were postponed in **South Africa, Chile, India, Spain** and the **United Kingdom**. Several countries have considered proposals to abandon jury trials. In the longer term, these measures would be highly anti-democratic.

It has been suggested that formal decisions taken using remote systems could expire through a 'sunset clause', unless they are later confirmed at an in-person session. In **New Zealand**, the parliamentary Epidemic Response Committee is conducting a legal review of government emergency measures to deal with the crisis and their effects on civil liberties.

Parliaments themselves are also explicitly limiting their virtual sittings. **Brazil's** virtual parliament resolution specifies that face-to-face deliberations must be resumed as soon as sessions can be organized that are compatible with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health. In the **United Kingdom**, the temporary rules of procedure to establish virtual procedures automatically lapse unless they are regularly renewed.

Following the crisis, parliaments will want to review what worked and what did not with any virtual procedures adopted during the current pandemic. This should include hearing **public feedback** on their experience of the remote parliament and the effects on transparency and accessibility, as well as assessing internal processes such as staff capacities, resources and record keeping.

Using the valuable experience obtained during the current crisis, the concept of a virtual or pared-down parliament should become part of business continuity planning or a formal alternative set of flexible procedures for future emergency situations. These might range from very temporary arrangements when parliaments need to vacate their physical buildings (perhaps due to fire, flood or the need for building works) to what should be rarer but longer-term disruptions like the Covid-19 pandemic. They may also be of use on other occasions when an urgent decision is needed but MPs may find it difficult to be physically present at short notice. By ensuring that a minimal virtual solution exists as a contingency option, and that a core group of staff and members are trained and familiar with how to operate it, parliaments can avoid a long adjournment or inability to continue their work at a time of crisis when their role in scrutinising emergency measures, representing constituents and debating future actions is more important than ever.

### Questions to consider:

- Will virtual sittings be **temporary arrangements** that lapse or need to be renewed?
- Will **emergency legislation** passed during the crisis be subject to a sunset clause, or requirements for renewal/review?
- What aspects of virtual parliamentary procedure have **increased public engagement with parliament**? How can they be preserved?
- How will parliaments consider requests to continue **remote working** after the crisis has ended?
- How will lessons learned and new processes developed in the experience of the pandemic be retained to prepare for **future crises**?

### Additional Resources

- [Parliaments in a time of Pandemic](#) is a website by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) collecting experiences of different parliaments and providing useful resources.
- [Parliaments in Crisis: Challenges and Innovations](#), produced by the International IDEA and EU INTER PARES project, looks at how parliaments play a crucial role in making good decisions and protecting citizens' rights during a crisis.
- The IPU Guidance note for Parliaments on [Gender and Covid-19](#) includes advice on how to take into account gendered dimensions of the pandemic in parliamentary work.
- The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has produced a [Toolkit](#) for Parliaments on delivering parliamentary democracy during the Coronavirus pandemic.
- [Justice for Women Amidst Covid-19](#) by UN Women outlines the gender differential impacts of the pandemic and identifies ways to address them.

### Further Information

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