



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Hybrid working can become the “new normal” for parliaments

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The Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) [Centre for Innovation in Parliament](#) hosted a [virtual event](#) as part of the launch of the [World e-Parliament Report 2022](#). The event, which was attended by more than 230 people including MPs and senior parliamentary staff, presented an overview of the new report and discussed the implications, impact and challenges of the hybrid parliament.

The discussion highlighted how far parliaments have come since 2020. It also looked to the future, with participants seeing hybrid parliaments as the norm, offering benefits for diversity, inclusion, participation and parliamentary efficiency. The conclusion of the webinar was that hybrid working is now a valid option for parliaments that wish to use it, and that it can form a key part of their resilience strategy.

Key points

- The hybrid parliament is part of the future for parliaments, which need to innovate like other institutions and businesses.
- Hybrid sittings create an opportunity for more diverse participation in parliaments: they support a better work-life balance, closer ties with constituencies, and enable more women, older members and people with disabilities to participate in a more flexible way.
- Parliaments need to look at the institution-wide benefits and efficiencies that can be gained from more flexible working and digital methods.
- Attention must be paid to digital literacy training for members to ensure that they are able to participate effectively.
- For the future, the applications and infrastructure for virtual sittings will need to be improved in many parliaments.
- Participants supported the report's recommendations, especially the proposal for parliaments to hold an inquiry to learn from their experiences during the pandemic and to ensure that they can function in any circumstances, even during emergencies.

Meeting report

IPU Secretary General Mr. Martin Chungong opened the meeting with a discussion about the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and how parliaments had quickly innovated to adopt new ways of working. Parliaments must be ready to respond to future crises, he said, and now is a time to reflect on what has been learned and to take stock.

This message was reinforced by the report's author, Dr. Andy Williamson, from the IPU's Centre for Innovation in Parliament. He described how parliaments have been changed – becoming more innovative and resilient – and how members are now more trusting of technology as a result of their experiences.

The new report highlights many benefits for parliaments that choose to innovate with virtual tools and makes a number of recommendations for parliaments:

1. Carry out a formal inquiry to learn lessons from the pandemic and to prepare for the future.

2. Ensure that the legal framework is reviewed, with a focus on building parliament's resilience to future emergencies.
3. Undertake a digital capability assessment and a review of business continuity planning.
4. Review and update parliament's digital strategy/strategic plan.
5. Delegate senior staff to participate in parliamentary knowledge exchanges.

Benefits of hybrid working

The first part of the webinar was a panel discussion looking at parliamentary experiences of hybrid working and discussing the potential benefits as well as the challenges. The panel, made up of MPs from Chile, Latvia and Tanzania, and [Professor Sarah Childs](#) from the University of Edinburgh, explored what hybrid working means in practice.

Prof. Childs stressed that it is important to understand the institutional benefits of hybrid working, and not just to focus on individual members. Mr. Armands Krauze, a member of the [Parliament of Latvia](#), explained that, in his country, the virtual parliament has been retained for committees, but that it is up to each chair and committee to decide whether to use it. He also expanded on some of the challenges of working from home versus being present in the chamber. Mr. Leonardo Soto, a member of the [Chamber of Deputies of Chile](#), explained how, from an operational perspective, the chamber could keep working in an almost normal way because of the virtual proceedings. He reported that their work was the same online as in person and the time things took did not change, only the way of working was different. Mr. Rodolfo Vaz, from the [Chamber of Deputies of Brazil](#) and the moderator of the panel discussion, added that remote working in a country as geographically large as Brazil creates opportunities for MPs to reduce the time spent travelling between the capital and their constituencies.

Ms. Neema Lugangira, a member of the [National Assembly of Tanzania](#), said she felt that hybrid was an important option for parliaments, but that its use it must go hand in hand with building digital literacy and managing increasing cybersecurity risks. She emphasized that parliaments must be aware of online abuse and, in particular, online violence against women parliamentarians, as this is making their participation more challenging and restricted. Prof. Childs agreed, stating that we must learn from and hold on to the lessons of the pandemic, and that strong democracy needs innovative parliaments.

Benefits of a parliamentary inquiry

An interview with Mr. Ryan Turnbull, a member of the [House of Commons of Canada](#), discussed the benefits of a parliamentary inquiry. Mr. Turnbull explained how the inquiry by the Procedure and House Affairs Committee had provided an opportunity to better understand what had been done and how the arrangements were used, as well as to hear a lot of different perspectives about how hybrid working can make parliaments more open and accessible – for both members and the public. He noted that there are those who disagree with hybrid parliaments, but these were in the minority in the Canadian inquiry, and that fears over parliament's chamber being empty appear unfounded. Rather, the evidence to the inquiry suggests that a hybrid parliament creates an opportunity for more flexible attendance, allowing members to balance family life, urgent life events and time spent in their constituencies.

The hybrid parliament, Mr. Turnbull asserted, was a natural innovation for parliaments – just as it has been in other sectors of society – but it was important to fully understand what this means in order to build this new model from the top down with the support of members.

Summary

In the closing part of the webinar, Mr. Masibulele Xaso, Secretary to the [National Assembly of South Africa](#), summarized what he had heard. He observed that, although some members have reservations and despite some drawbacks, hybrid will become the “new normal” for parliaments. He noted how hybrid

sittings in South Africa had allowed parliament to continue to work in the aftermath of a fire that damaged the parliament building, with high levels of attendance by members.

According to Mr. Xaso, having the option of hybrid sittings has made parliaments more efficient and can be a way of improving equitable access to parliament for women, older members and people with disabilities. However, if this is the new normal, then there is work to do on the infrastructure, and both access and the systems currently in use leave room for improvement. Voting, in particular, is a challenge for parliaments.

Mr. Xaso emphasized that we must hold on to the progress made during the pandemic and not lose these innovations. He noted that parliaments must improve their regulatory frameworks to fully incorporate the new requirements of the virtual environment. Agreeing with the [report's recommendation](#) on the importance of holding an inquiry, Mr. Xaso said that parliaments need to understand the impact of the pandemic but they must also be ready for the future.

Dr. Williamson concluded the webinar by saying that the pandemic had taught us that it was possible for parliaments to do things differently. He invited parliaments to act on what they had heard in the webinar and read in the [World e-Parliament Report 2022](#). Dr. Williamson emphasized that now is the time for parliaments to build on the experiences of the pandemic by focusing on innovation, growth and modernization, adding that, to do this more effectively, they should collaborate with others through the IPU's [Centre for Innovation in Parliament](#).

Contact and information

For further information, please write to: innovation@ipu.org.

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