



John Brassard | Member of Parliament

Barrie – Innisfil

Opposition House Leader

May 31, 2022

The Honourable Mark Holland, P.C., M.P.
Leader of the Government in the House of Commons
Room 217-S, West Block
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister:

With the current hybrid arrangements in the House of Commons scheduled to expire on June 23, I am writing to propose a path forward for parliamentary proceedings as we exit the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parliamentarians, and all Canadians alike, have endured many changes to our ways of life and our ways of doing business, ranging from unfamiliar to intolerable, as a consequence of this long pandemic. The current state of public health measures behooves us to embrace hope that we have finally moved past the worst of the pandemic; the possibility of future variants obliges us to be prudent in our thinking, not to go about stirring up fears of the worst imaginable scenarios.

It will come as no surprise to you that Conservatives want to see a full-fledged return to traditional, in-person sittings of the House with participation open to all duly elected Members of Parliament. Similarly, committee meetings should resume being predominantly in-person events with only a limited number of distantly-located witnesses appearing by videoconference, consistent with the pre-pandemic practice.

Beyond wanting to move into a post-pandemic posture, the strain which hybrid proceedings has imposed on the simultaneous interpreters is, frankly, unsustainable. According to one association representing some of our interpreters, the onset of hybrid proceedings has led to a nine-fold increase in workplace injuries. Staff interpreters employed by the government's Translation Bureau have lodged an unsafe workplace complaint under the *Canada Labour Code*. The number of freelance interpreters retained by the Bureau has gone into freefall since 2019.

In a word, the hybrid arrangements for our interpreters are like quicksand. While some might urge we go and retain additional outside interpreters, who may or may not meet the Translation Bureau "gold standard" upon which we rely, we would still be inviting them to enter the technological mire our dwindling supply of interpreters have endured for years.

Our bilingual Parliament is an accomplishment reflecting the cumulative policy initiatives of successive Conservative governments. I will not stand idly by, watching our bilingual Parliament roll back to a state where Canadians' elected representatives are unintelligible to one another.

The biggest single step we can take to improve the situation faced by our parliamentary interpreters is to end hybrid sittings, reverting to in-person proceedings.

However, recognizing the prudence I referred to earlier, concerning potential future COVID-19 variants, I acknowledge that this is simply not a matter of allowing the current hybrid arrangement to lapse on June 23 and consider ourselves done with the matter. Furthermore, as we have discussed, compassionate circumstances will, on occasion, require an open mind and generous spirit.

Therefore, I propose the following arrangements be put in place to succeed the current ones:

- Members shall participate in debates or other proceedings in the House of Commons in person, in the House Chamber.
- Members shall participate in House committees in person, in committee rooms.
 - The pre-pandemic practice for witness appearances would be resumed whereby most witnesses will appear in-person while a limited number of witnesses located at some distance from Ottawa could appear by videoconferencing. Ministers and senior officials would always be expected to appear in person.
- No Member of the House of Commons will be denied access to the sittings of the House and the meetings of its committees.
- Our age-old pairing practices can and should be vigorously embraced to support Members with compassionate circumstances to ensure they, and their parties, are not disadvantaged by an unavoidable absence from the House.
 - Since, and well before, Confederation, politicians have contracted serious illnesses, suffered critical injuries, welcomed new children into their families, said tearful farewells to loved ones, among other significant life events. In short, "life" happens to Members of Parliament just like all other Canadians. For the first 153 years of Confederation, we ably managed to square our personal circumstances with our professional lives even if it might not always have been ideal. As unprecedented as some aspects of the pandemic were, the demands on us to balance our personal and parliamentary responsibilities are not. We can easily revert to the tried and true practices which we know work.

- While pairing has been largely based on a series of customs and practices, with only a tangential appearance in our rules via Standing Order 44.1, we would be open to considering proposals to strengthen these arrangements, to render them more transparent, or to empower further individual Members. If you have ideas on this front, I would be happy to entertain them; otherwise, we could ask the Procedure and House Affairs Committee to consider the matter and make their own recommendations this autumn.
- Conservatives will be open-minded about meeting and supporting the pairing needs of our Liberal colleagues, and we hope that we can rely on that generosity being reciprocated.
- The current hybrid arrangements (with minor modifications) could be re-activated, in the event of a serious reversal of the current trajectory of public health guidance concerning COVID-19, upon the agreement of the recognized parties' House leaders for a period of time they agree upon.
- These arrangements would take effect upon the current arrangements expiring and be in place for one year. As you noted to reporters in November, ahead of your proposal of Government Motion No. 1, "I don't want to be back in a situation in January or February where we're having to renegotiate how the House is operating." I agree; having predictability is key.
- The House Administration would be instructed to acquire an adequate supply of N95 face masks to allay the concerns some of our colleagues may have going forward.
- The Procedure and House Affairs Committee would be instructed to study these arrangements with a view to producing a report by next May, ahead of the scheduled expiry of these proposed arrangements.

A draft motion to achieve these ends is attached for your consideration.

This is, I believe, a strong basis for a reasonable and responsible path forward for the House and its business, acknowledging public health circumstances as well as mitigating against the ongoing democratic decline which is undermining our democratic institutions.

Conservatives have long asserted that procedural changes—especially long-term reforms—ought to be the product of a consensus. Between the two of us, our parties represent about five of every six MPs. If the Bloc Québécois were to join in this arrangement, for example, that figure becomes about 11 of every 12 MPs. That's light-years ahead of the 54% of the House which your party and your associates in the New Democratic Party together represent.

I urge you to build the largest possible majority for the next phase of our procedural arrangements, rather than casting about for the slimmest possible majority you can cobble together. Though 54% may be enough to win votes in the House, time after time, you must appreciate the residual, caustic effect it has on the institution itself when the rules are continually being changed on the basis of a slender majority acting with partisan motivations.

Shortly after being elevated to your position, you pledged to Joan Bryden, formerly of the Canadian Press, that you would be “irrationally reasonable and logical” and that your “job is to find areas of common ground and to build bridges”. I look forward to you making good on your promises and engaging constructively with me in negotiating on the basis of this balanced and responsible proposal.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Brassard', written in a cursive style.

John Brassard, M.P.
House Leader of the Official Opposition

c.c. Hon. Anthony Rota, Speaker of the House of Commons
Alain Therrien, M.P., Bloc Québécois House Leader
Peter Julian, M.P., New Democratic Party House Leader

Draft Motion for House Arrangements (June 2022 to June 2023)

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order, Special Order or usual practice of the House, commencing on Friday, June 24, 2022, and concluding on Friday, June 23, 2023,

(a) information to be entered in the Register of Paired Members, pursuant to Standing Order 44.1(1), may be filed electronically with the Clerk of the House;

(b) when a recorded division is to be held, the bells to call in the Members shall be sounded for not more than 30 minutes, except recorded divisions deferred to the conclusion of Oral Questions, when the bells shall be sounded for not more than 15 minutes;

(c) the provisions of paragraphs (a) to (m) and (o) to (r) of the Order adopted Thursday, November 25, 2021, shall apply, upon the agreement of the House leaders of all recognized parties, for the period of time they agree upon, which the Speaker shall announce to the House, provided that

(i) paragraph (a) shall be read without reference to any of the words after the word “videoconference”,

(ii) the reference to “Wednesday, December 8, 2021”, in paragraph (o), shall be read as “the tenth sitting day after the House leaders of all recognized parties agreed hybrid proceedings would resume”,

(iii) the reference to “Thursday, December 9, 2021”, in paragraph (q), shall be read as “the 11th sitting day after the House leaders of all recognized parties agreed hybrid proceedings would resume”,

(iv) the portion of paragraph (r) before subparagraph (i) shall be read without reference to any of the words between the word “videoconference” and the words “provided that priority use”,

(v) paragraph (r), as modified by subparagraph (iv), shall also extend to any special joint committees then in existence, and

(vi) witnesses, other than senators, Members and departmental or parliamentary officials, appearing before any standing, standing joint, special, special joint or legislative committee may, at their discretion, do so either in person or by videoconference;

(d) the House of Commons Administration shall take steps to ensure that N95 respirator masks are available among the masks it distributes on Parliament Hill for Members and staff; and

(e) the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs shall be instructed to consider the matters referred to in paragraphs (a) to (c), together with the Order adopted Thursday, November 25, 2021, and the procedures and practice of pairing Members, including Standing Order 44.1, and to report back to the House no later than Friday, May 12, 2023, provided that it shall present an interim report on pairing no later than Friday, December 9, 2022; and

That a Message be sent to the Senate to acquaint their Honours accordingly with paragraph (c) insofar as it concerns standing joint and special joint committees.