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## 'No consensus': some **Senators** urge return of hybrid option in Red Chamber

'People should be concerned about it ... we had one of our own pass on last term, and it's almost like people are not paying attention to how this COVID is dangerous,' says **Senator Mary Jane McCallum**.

Laura Ryckewaert

**Senate** group leaders say there's "no consensus" on restoring hybrid proceedings in the Red Chamber, in part citing the constraint on work that came as a result of shared support resources being stretched thin, but some **Senators** are eager to see the option returned.

"By not reinstating the hybrid proceedings, the **Senate** missed an opportunity to be better prepared, better responsive to the unknowns that COVID-19 will still bring in the weeks and months ahead, because we know that [in] all provinces, the rates are going back up," said non-affiliated Manitoba **Senator Mary Jane McCallum**. "While the **House of Commons** has been wise in extending their hybrid sittings through June of 2023, I'm surprised that the **Senate** didn't follow suit, and I had anticipated that they would."

McCallum noted that **Senators** are, on average, older than **MPs**, and now with no hybrid option to participate in proceedings, "it's regrettable that **Senators** will be penalized for missing time should they fall ill" or require medical appointments.

"People should be concerned about it, you know, and especially we had one of our own pass on last term, and it's almost like people are not paying attention to how this COVID is dangerous," said McCallum, referring to the late **Senator Josée Forest-Niesing**, who died in November 2021 shortly after a stint in the hospital with COVID-19.

"We should have the same ability as our counterparts in the **House of Commons** to be present and attend sittings and committees should we fall ill ... we should be proactive in how we approach the seriousness of this pandemic and not be reacting once again," she said.

The **Senate's** previous agreement to allow hybrid proceedings expired with the end of the spring sitting on June 30. Since then, no new motion to extend the option has been tabled in the Upper Chamber.

The **House of Commons**, meanwhile, has extended hybrid proceedings until June 2023. The motion to extend the arrangement in the Lower Chamber-which passed on division on the last day of the spring sitting-also instructed the **Procedure and House Affairs Committee** [to study](#) the possibility of making hybrid proceedings a permanent option.

"As **Government Representative in the Senate**, **Senator Gold** has consulted with leadership from all groups in the **Senate** to discuss the possibility of approving a hybrid model for **Senate** proceedings this fall. So far, there has been no agreement on moving forward," read an emailed statement from Quebec **Senator Marc Gold's** office.

**Conservative Senate** Leader **Don Plett** (Manitoba) declined an interview, but his office indicated there's been no discussion of hybrid sittings in a number of weeks.

Plett made clear his continued opposition to hybrid proceedings in the Red Chamber before the summer break.

"Hybrid **Parliament** was meant to be a temporary measure in response to unusual circumstances. Sadly, the government moved that our hybrid sittings carry on longer than anticipated. The resulting effects weren't minimal and meant that our capacities were reduced. Our **committee** meetings were reduced, which, regrettably, led to less **parliamentary** oversight and decreased accountability," said Plett on June 23.

Plett criticized **Liberal** and **NDP** support for hybrid proceedings in the House, suggesting it's popular in that Chamber for "the same reason that it is popular with many in this Chamber. One can sit at home, look into the camera for a few hours, read a couple of questions and pretend that one is a great servant of the public."

**Canadian Senators Group** Leader **Scott Tannas** (Alberta) and Progressive **Senate** Group Leader **Jane Cordy** (Nova Scotia) confirmed there's been no consensus to restore hybrid proceedings in talks between **Senate** group leaders, with both citing concerns over the effect on **Senate** work as a result of the strain hybrid put on support resources, including interpreters and broadcasting and multimedia services, all of which are shared with the **House of Commons**.

"It's not a closed door; it's something that we can reopen at any time, but at this time people are very happy to be back working in person," said Cordy. "Our main concern is that resources have been very strained and staff have gone above and beyond over the past few years ... I'm talking **Senate** staff, administration staff, certainly those translators [interpreters] have been probably hit harder than anybody else."

As leaders, the decision was made to put hybrid on hold, Cordy said, "but we've all agreed that if things worsen that we would certainly have another look."

"The hybrid session was born in an emergency; the emergency is, for the most part, over," said Tannas. "All of the tools and equipment, etc., is there for an emergency should one come again."

Tannas said he's not against the idea of allowing hybrid sittings, per se, but with **committee** meetings reduced due to limits on shared support resources, the **Senate's** work has been "diluted" during the pandemic, and "there was no evidence that we could function in a hybrid sitting to the extent we did prior to COVID."

"That was always the bar for me: show me how we can operate with as many meetings, all of the things that go with that ... nobody could demonstrate that. There's too many issues," said Tannas. "Our **committee** times were basically cut in half. That and the fact that **legislation** continued at a pace ... our committees and the **Senate**, frankly, became almost exclusively focused on the agenda of the government. And that's not what we're supposed to do-that's a big piece of what we do, but we missed for two years a huge piece of what the **Senate** normally does."

Tannas noted some issues that came to light during hybrid proceedings remain issues for in-person proceedings-namely, the dwindled capacity of the interpretation service.

Along with more staff interpreters working part time as a result of doctor's advice (as of April, some 250 incident reports had been filed by staff interpreters supporting hybrid proceedings), the number of freelancers on the **Translation Bureau's** roster has dropped 26 per cent since 2019-20, and new hires haven't kept up with attrition.

"They're working to address that," said Tannas. "But to me, without the emergency there, it would have been, I think, a disservice to **Senators** and to **Canadians**" to continue with hybrid.

Shared support resources have been strained by both the onset of hybrid proceedings and a steady increase in the volume of work being undertaken, with average sitting times and **committee** meeting hours on the rise in both the **House** and **Senate**.

As the **Senate** Internal Economy, **Budgets**, and Administration **Committee** heard last April, amid hybrid, **Senate** committees were reduced from 32 time slots per week to 22, largely as a result of the strain on the interpretation service.

Interpreters have reported increased rates of injuries as a result of the inferior sound quality associated with virtual participation, [injuries which have continued despite efforts](#) to improve equipment and to protect interpreters, including by reducing shift hours, disseminating better quality microphone headsets to **Parliamentarians** and witnesses, and installing new interpretation consoles across the Hill.

In an Oct. 21 press release, the **Canadian** Association of Professional Employees, which represents staff interpreters, called on the **Translation Bureau** to "immediately interrupt all **parliamentary** meetings deemed unsafe to interpreters" and conduct an "independent investigation" after a freelance interpreter was "transported to hospital by ambulance following exposure to dangerous levels of toxic sound during a meeting" on Oct. 20.

"This incident involved a witness who appeared remotely without wearing an approved headset, and yet, was allowed to participate, which may have led to the tragic accident," CAPE president Greg Phillips said in the release, expressing shock "that the meeting was allowed to continue despite the injury; the lack of care for the other interpreters exposed to the same risk is difficult to digest."

## 'I was not consulted,' says McCallum

McCallum said she cancelled a personal appointment to be in the **Senate** when it returned on Sept. 21, anticipating there would be discussion in the Chamber about renewing hybrid proceedings. There wasn't, and she said letters non-affiliated

**Senators** sent to the four **Senate** group leaders asking to be included in discussions, "didn't receive any acknowledgement."

"I was not consulted, included, or engaged on the latest decision surrounding whether or not to continue with hybrid sittings," she said.

Not allowing a hybrid option is "opting against accessibility," argued McCallum, and penalizes **Senators** who are unable to be in **Ottawa** due to medical appointments or because they're sick or presenting symptoms but are otherwise able to work, noting she had to miss **Senate** sittings last week to get an MRI. She also highlighted the **Senate** Advisory Working Group on **Environment** and Sustainability's [recent report](#), which, among other things, highlighted reduced travel as a means to lower the **Senate's** carbon footprint.

ISG **Senator Colin Deacon** (Nova Scotia), who served as chair of the **environment** working group, said he wants to see hybrid proceedings return as an option in the **Senate**, for now and for the future, and he's optimistic "that permanent hybrid in some form will be embraced by the **Senate**, because it just makes so much sense."

"We have to become more business oriented, we have to find ways to engage more effectively ... and make sure that we're being representative in ways that are not just tied to our history, but are tied to the modern reality of **Canadians**," said Deacon. "Having a controlled use [hybrid option] on an ongoing basis for business continuity reasons, **health**, travel, equity, the ability to represent better-there's a lot of opportunity there."

He noted "several **Senators**" missed the debate and vote on **Bill** C-30 last week due to travel disruptions, and echoed McCallum's concern about **Senators** missing work because of medical appointments or illness.

"I just, at this point, don't think that we've got agreement, but I'm quite optimistic that there can and will be agreement, that we'll find a way to merge the old-school belief that you must be in the Chamber, that's the only way you can do work ... and the reality that we have very productive alternatives that we can use to supplement being physically present," said Deacon.

Asked about concerns over strained resources and the toll on interpreters, Deacon said he thinks all of those constraints, including the poor sound quality experienced, "are manageable with technology when you make those proper investments."

"These are all manageable issues if we start to look at this as a permanent alternative," he said.

*[lryckewaert@hilltimes.com](mailto:lryckewaert@hilltimes.com)*

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