

Collaborative notes: TICTeC Seminar 2 - Digitising parliaments: it took a pandemic, 20 Oct 2020

- Avinash Bikha, Project Officer - Centre for Innovation in Parliament, Inter-Parliamentary Union
- Julia Keutgen, Senior Transparency Advisor, Westminster Foundation for Democracy
- Lord Purvis of Tweed, Member of the International Relations and Defence Committee, House of Lords
- Moderator: Dr. Rebecca Rumbul, Head of Research, mySociety

Good or novel examples?

Julia - Look at the Moroccan parliament in specific - article 96 of rules of procedures - all committee meetings are held behind closed doors. Hard for public to see. One exception: if there is an urgent topic to be highlighted (something that is of interest to national public opinion) this can lift the restrictions. With covid, immediately as of march the first committee session was broadcast around the creation of a special fund. More have been broadcast, not just linked to covid-19, has also been broadcasts around discussion of law around anti-corruption. Also some broadcasted by the social sector committee. Once a broadcast, but quite an interesting first step for that particular parliament for people to see what the committee is discussing and how it is discussing it.

Avinash - what we have been seeing from the IPU's point of view, looking at the ICT function within parliament, how is the parliament able to promote innovation. The pandemic has really become an accelerator of innovation, on the one hand there's a disruption in parliament businesses, on the other hand the it people in parliament receive more attention. Parliaments are seeing other parliaments working in a remote way, appearance of demands trying to

figure out how to maintain parliamentary business. Parliaments have been exchanging experiences in a small time frame, have a whatsapp group with the IT directors of different parliaments. Looking at the early adopters (Brazilian chamber of deputies, Chile) they have reached within a few months a level of maturity and starting to be able to build a business case, we have the zoom meetings, committee meetings, have developed the remote voting apps, now the question is this going to stay or will it go away after the pandemic? They're saying we are starting to see the benefits, members don't have to travel as much able to spend more time in the constituents. Very small parliaments like the Maldives, and for them it's also a matter of reduction of travel costs because it's not very cheap to travel within islands.

Lord Purvis - it has been interesting to hear examples from two parliaments i was visiting last year, and it makes miss travel, can digital and virtual interactions ever replace physical interactions between politicians? All interactions between politicians have been affected, including the wider social interaction, the parliamentary business is only one part of this. Have changed view slightly on the idea that technology opening up is inherently good, if executive wants to use more power, it is not the most conducive environment when new measures are rolled out while executive also using emergency power.

Just getting an adjustment for members to use some of the technology [older members], but wider problem was procedures of chamber meant there was a lack of preparedness to move to virtual processes.

Role of MPs is different in different places, constituency MPs are going to be exhausted with the work coming through, but if well supported by staff processes can switch. If less support, harder to switch processes.

[how does this compare to how devolved parliament in scotland is working]

You can divide down the parliaments broadly based on a westminster model with quite strict standing orders, even if more open to moving towards fully

virtual or hybrid, that's similar to Scotland and Wales in my experience. Still need standing orders to be reviewed, still need procedures committee to sit and decide, lot of security questions still remain, understand that cyber attacks on parliament have increased.

Our committee meetings still have exactly the same standards that existed before, clerks need to book onto calls as well, infrastructure needed to maintain functions in new ways.

Avinash - Most of the ICT advance of parliaments around the world, come from [wealthier] countries, have the budget, resources, business continuity planning. What was interesting to hear from ICT directors, the continuity planning for different plans (earthquakes, fires). Model of Spain, Spanish congress started to adapt around 2015, introducing the concept of the remote vote to enable to vote in case they need to be outside of parliament for medical reasons, maternity/paternity leave. Spain in this sense had the infrastructure and rules in place for MPs to vote from their home.

[digital in parliaments, where it's going, what it's for]

Julia - doing some research with mysociety that should come out in a month or so. Digitalisation is a long term endeavour, what we see in a lot of countries it is addresses a quick fix here and there, not co-ordinated at all with the executive. Lots of different things happening. A lot of options available, the question is more how to design a good process. Attitude around digitisation has changed through covid. Things like remote voting have become more widespread, more looking at it. Benefits around the speed of conducting and publishing the voting records. MPs with disabilities are more able to participate in parliamentary life - but challenge of all members being equal. Difficulty around older (or less digital) members having equal access through the system.

Some of the major barriers is the price of digital, it's a long term endeavour. Means opening up information, needs to go with whole culture of

parliamentary openness. Skills deficit is an issue - two things related: compete with private sector for staff.

Lord Purvis - if parliaments themselves had considered before the crisis areas they wanted to develop and they wanted to improve, and they wanted to improve. Looking at how the technology could be more open, that is something where hopefully some of the experiences can stick. In house of lords, a lot of money was spent on outsourcing to a broadcasting company broadcasting of proceedings - this isn't necessarily something that can be learned from lower-resourced countries. A lot of focus on continuity, yes remote voting works well, have had 35 division, 16,000 people voting on that on sometimes significant pieces of legislation. On any parliament that has people who do not usually participate, [more potential voters without taking part in discussion]. Julia's point about working with executive - think it's important not to share platform. Don't want to be an extended part of the executive. Some government briefings are not briefings and are more presentations. Think it is best if the institution has identified the areas in which it had wished to change, would worry it's going to make things harder to look at how public can scrutinise activities of MPs. In countries with big party lists, one of the big challenges had been to find out what the MP had been doing, so potentially can undermine accountability if not thinking a lot about the purpose of the technology. Rather than just saying we're moving to a virtual parliament and that's good because we're in the 21st century.

Avinash - very often what we see in developing countries are the parliaments are largely are very dependent on the executive. If you go to the parliament IT department, and you ask what's the budget that you have to upgrade or improve information management within parliament. They are in a paper based way of working, which they can do very efficiently. Gap in electronic records management. Depends if the key personnel have the interest, skillset, understanding of what this information management can do for them. Many

times there's an older generation that thinks they don't understand the new technology, and so don't have a vision for the application of technology. At the same time we see where there is a speaker who is engaged with technology, then there is also resources. Parliaments are able to mobilise the funding, to put in place the projects and programmes that are going to elevate the information management. Really depends on the leadership of parliament, if they want to engage. Pandemic required leadership of parliaments to get up to speed very quickly.

Julia - you need to distinguish digitalisation for internal processes and link that to digital for external processes, connecting with citizens and so on. With that external part, it does create a divide in society, especially in some of the countries where we work, where the internet doesn't work in the same way in the capital as outside. Can create asymmetry of information and reinforces existing divides. Worry about digital colonialism, big tech firms are outside the country, get the hardware and software, and very difficult when you don't have the tech skills to have targeted solutions based on open source software.

[in informal mechanisms]

Lord Purvis - everything is digital, means i have to triage much more. Not on party whatsapp group, the fact that a lot of informal space used to build relationships and coalitions, and a general whatsapp group of all the members of that group drives me crazy. Don't want to be completely moaning, want to passionate on getting the positives for it, some of our colleagues have created some other zoom chats, but it can't be the same as a coffee or drink with someone. Some methods have created friction which I haven't inspected. Interacting with constituents is the same, no longer able to do advice surgeries. Emails and technology is a harder, colder interface when politicians deal with human to human relations. Lot of the work has been a consideration of how do we make our procedures work, the people who have been in charge of this are the institutional powers, some procedures for

independent members less ported across. Our committees have been able to be much more open and receive more diverse voices. I know that last year we'd probably have many experts from london think tanks, and now that's rare, we're talking to people in Kabul, in new York, able to bring in many more people, which may not have been the default.

Avinash - Enjoyed seeing the perspective of a member of parliament, as well as usually talking to the administration. Need to factor in the challenges if we promote innovation.

Julia - We see there are benefits to digitslation and the model of representative democracy is really changing. Citizens assemblies can (when it's well done) get citizens back into the institutional processes as well. Think that this movement has started, offers a tremendous amount of opportunities in terms of engagement.

Chat Messages

-  **Christoph Warrack**35:50
- Hello everyone, Christoph here from B Foundry / COPx, in the South Downs
-  **Gemma Moulder**35:52
- Hello everyone, welcome! Thanks for joining :)
- **Delib Ltd Dem**  o36:19
- Hi! Meg here from Delib :)
-  **Christoph Warrack**36:36
- What are are you all up to (while we wait)?
-  **Jo Carter**36:41
- Hi, Jo here from Service Works in Cardiff
-  **Catherine Brown**36:56
- greetings all, Catherine here from wales

-  **Jonathan Flowers**36:59
- Hi - I'm Jonathan Flowers, I'm a trustee of mySociety, and I'm into hyperlocal government (amongst other things)
-  **Jess Reeves - Sands**37:39
- Hi everyone, I'm Jess from Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity
-  **Agustina De Luca**38:07
- hello all, this is Agustina from Argentina's Chamber of Deputies
-  **Jonathan Flowers**38:09
- Need a "very poorly" option please Bec
-  **Charlotte Eisenhart**38:58
- Hi everyone, I'm Charlotte and I work for the national membership body for town and parish councils (the very local part of the English local government structures)
-  **Myfanwy Nixon**39:30
- Who are the 'well's?! Can we all move there...
-  **Christoph Warrack**39:54
- Hi @Charlotte what's your umbrella body's name?
-  **Mark Cridge**40:04
- As Bec says - ask any questions here in the chat and we'll take note of them for the Q&A at the end
-  **Charlotte Eisenhart**40:53
- Christoph - it is the National Association of Local Councils or NALC
-  **Christoph Warrack**41:55
- Great, thanks. All power to those sails!
-  **Alex Parsons**42:36
- I am taking collaborative notes in this doc
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iLE4MPTPYwcorZPJ1Wmp0H1sqUYgaSv-qdJKBITMq-w/edit>

-  **Gemma Moulder**43:09
- Hello :) This is a public chat. Please feel free to ask questions here, and share your thoughts and comments throughout the discussion - be aware they will be visible to all other participants. Do feel free to tweet anything interesting using the hashtag #tictec. Live note taking for this session can be viewed on this open Google doc:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iLE4MPTPYwcorZPJ1Wmp0H1sqUYgaSv-qdJKBITMq-w/edit#> Feel free to help take notes!
-  **Christoph Warrack**49:44
- <https://www.climateassembly.uk/report/>
-  **Christoph Warrack**49:55
- For non-UK colleagues, this report from the first national climate citizens assembly, is worth a read - though we all know 2050 is too slow. At B Foundry we are building something called COPx to enable any community to host a climate citizens assembly, and to engage in the COP, and to distribute revenue-generating climate innovation in an App Store for civtech. We are piloting in three UK regions in early 2021 and then hoping to enable ground-up community climate innovation to be the coolest thing at the COP!
-  **Christoph Warrack**50:16
- bfoundry@icloud.com
-  **Gemma Moulder**01:01:07
- For newcomers: If you have any questions for the panel, please feel free to ask them here - be aware they will be visible to all other participants. Do feel free to tweet anything interesting using the hashtag #tictec. Live note taking for this session can be viewed on this open Google doc:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iLE4MPTPYwcorZPJ1Wmp0H1sqUYgaSv-qdJKBITMq-w/edit#> Feel free to help take notes!
-  **Charlotte Eisenhart**01:04:23
- I would be interested to hear the panels view on why local government (in England at least) has embraced virtual working/meetings (including seeing rising public engagement in those meetings) when parliament has not to the same degree

-  **Sarah Prag**01:07:37
- This may be covered in a bit, but if not, I have a question about political barriers/resistance to this (in addition to the tech or security barriers). In the UK members of parliament were summoned back to vote in person when many lockdown restrictions were still in place, and while some of them were shielding (either themselves or members of their households). At the time it seemed this was being driven by the Whips and the Leader of the House and was more about political party discipline rather than what was safe or practical. To what extent is the uptake of all of this being shaped by power-plays rather than by what's actually possible?
-  **Mark Cridge**01:12:18
- Please post any questions you have for the panel here in the chat and we'll be sure to ask in the Q&A
-  **Robert Sprigge**01:19:49
- Very good question Sarah Prag.
-  **Robert Sprigge**01:22:30
- @Sarah Prag I had wondered why Scottish MP Margaret Ferrier felt the need to travel by train to London despite having Covid symptoms.
-  **Zoe Watts WFD**01:23:26
- Hi, great comments from speakers, thank you. Q: Various speakers have touched on effects of virtual voting etc in terms of parliamentary culture. We often refer to the importance of informal spaces (not just the Members' Tearoom but also private rooms before a committee meeting etc) in creating opportunities for cooperation/ bipartisan approaches. Members have Whatsapp groups of course but they are not as visible to others in the same way. Tech is clearly solving a lot of problems, at the moment, but what is the likely effect of digitalization on some of the positive existing parts of collaborative parliamentary culture? Can tech provide informal space?
-  **Sarah Prag**01:32:24
- What about the potential of digital to help bring greater diversity to parliaments? Pre-Covid being an MP in the UK meant being able to travel to central London, with sessions sitting into the evenings (although less than they used to) - it's

challenging for those with consistencies far from London, or trying to balance family life.

-  **Sarah Prag**01:32:38
- (Lord Purvis just answered this!!)
-  **Robert Sprigge**01:34:38
- Might be interesting to compare how business uses this technology to manage.