Our Executive Director, Sabreena Delhon, was invited to be a witness for the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC) on October 20, 2022. She provided recommendations to further a review of virtual hybrid House and committee proceedings.

PROC studies and reports on the rules and practices of the House and its committees, electoral matters, questions of privilege, MP conflicts of interest, internal administration of the House, and services and facilities for MPs.

Thank you Madam Chair. It’s a pleasure to speak with the committee today.

My name is Sabreena Delhon, and I am the Executive Director of the Samara Centre for Democracy which is a nonpartisan registered charity dedicated to making Canada's democratic culture more accessible, responsive and inclusive. We have been studying the lived experience of elected officials for 15 years.

Our recommendation is that the House of Commons maintain hybrid proceedings for both the House and its committees. This recommendation is informed by our MP Exit Interview project which entails conducting in-depth, rigorous interviews with former Members of Parliament. Our view is also informed by recent research on hybrid workplaces within the future of work discourse. We advise on maintaining hybridity for three reasons. It offers the opportunity for Parliament:

- To be more inclusive and representative
- To function as a flexible and contemporary workplace that can attract and retain top talent
- To increase efficiency by saving money and travel time

Our conclusion is shaped by the underrepresentation of various groups in the House including women, along with those in the LGBTQ+, Indigenous and visible minority communities. Our interviews with former MPs over the years have underscored that the grinding schedule of weekly travel to and from Ottawa, particularly from regions situated far from Ontario, can create a barrier for women with families, particularly for women who lack abundant resources to put towards child care.

This aligns with the findings of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which currently ranks Canada 61st in terms of gender representation amongst national Parliaments. They recommend that gender-sensitive parliaments allow teleworking as a strategy to increase equity. While there was initial concern that gender representation would be compromised with limited in-person convening, innovations in the functioning of hybrid parliament have made it possible for virtual work to increase democratic representation across genders.
Our research also indicates that MPs from underrepresented groups often feel alienated in Ottawa. We believe that if representatives have more opportunity to work from and within their communities, it will reduce the sense of alienation they may experience in the House, and have the longer term effect of encouraging MPs from underrepresented groups to not only enter into politics but also to stay. The retention of MPs from underrepresented groups is worth noting. If the House wants to attract and retain high quality individuals with varied training and innovative problem solving abilities, it will need to be responsive to larger changes happening in Canada's new world of work.

Hybrid work options are an indicator of a modern employer, and workplaces across sectors are institutionalizing this option. Research shows that people who have worked in a hybrid environment over the past two years strongly wish to retain the option going forward. This is particularly true for those with disabilities, women of colour and LGBTQ+ employees. Institutionalizing hybrid proceedings for the House and its committees is a key way to demonstrate that Parliament is a responsive, contemporary work environment that is committed to attracting, retaining and supporting top talent.

The Samara Centre has long held the position that the House should work to foster a workplace culture that facilitates collegiality and informal relationship-building. We believe that this can be accomplished through a combination of virtual and in-person interactions. Our survey of MPs in 2020 found strong support for a hybrid model of Parliament. This is readily within reach to set as a standard practice now that our use of virtual technologies has evolved and become commonplace, adaptable, effective and user-friendly.

Beyond equity, hybrid proceedings offer incredible efficiencies. The transit time recovered each week for MPs that live in ridings located far from Ottawa is significant. Our research has consistently revealed the mental and physical toll that constant travel can take on Members of Parliament. Making hybrid proceedings permanent opens up considerably more time for constituency work while protecting the health and wellbeing of MPs. In addition, the savings on travel means considerably less expense to the public purse.

We must consider what the removal of virtual engagement as an option for MPs would signal to both acting Parliamentarians and the electorate, and what it would convey about the responsiveness of our democracy. Parliament Hill is not a static institution; in the past the House has adapted to the changing needs of the country as well as technological innovation. Before the second world war, sessions in Ottawa were short, and lasted for a few winter months, with the rest of the year spent in ridings. In response to both the war, and subsequent innovations in air travel, the expectations for sitting periods changed. The House now has the option to similarly adapt to changes made during a crisis, by instituting hybrid working
structures that enable equitable, effective and efficient representation in the House.

With perhaps the exception of select circumstances, we recommend remote participation be available for all MPs at any time. This will mitigate the liabilities of in-group versus out-group dynamics developing. We encourage the creation of an inclusive hybrid workspace that is agile and responsive, which requires getting regular feedback from Parliamentarians about what is and is not working. Finally we advise on bringing intentional approaches to in-person interactions in the House. Making these opportunities meaningful and productive will ensure the hybrid culture not only functions but thrives.

We are willing to partner to support a hybrid approach that advances a representative, effective and collegial workplace for Members of Parliament should the Committee see a role for us. Thank you very much for your attention and I’m pleased to answer any questions you may have.