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Rushing Digital Democracy Places MPs Out of Touch

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Rushing Digital Democracy Places MPs Out of Touch

Nikhil Pandeya, Alec Mazurek

September 23 marked Canada's first ever electronic House of Commons vote which suffered from many [technical difficulties](#). Taking over two hours to complete, the process surely proved tiresome for the few dozen Members of Parliament who were present, and the remainder who joined by video conference. Beyond the boredom caused, these hitches are certainly representative of the larger issue at play – an issue that manifested itself the week prior when Parliament returned after prorogation to widespread criticism: rushing digital democracy places MPs further out of touch with the views of their colleagues.

Parliament's response to COVID-19 has evolved since the winter. In mid-March, the House of Commons [suspended](#) its in-person operations following the introduction of physical distancing and stay-at-home protocols. After a few emergency sessions, Parliament began temporarily convening in a [hybrid model](#) in May, featuring some MPs at their desks and others appearing via video chat. Gone was the heavy foot traffic on Parliament Hill, the rush from the Chamber to committee meetings, and the chance to debrief face-to-face with colleagues on the issues of the day.

Fast-forward to September 23, the Speech from the Throne was delivered over one month after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced he would [prorogue](#) Parliament. During the speech, plans to continue the hybrid model of Parliament into the fall, including temporary remote voting protocols, were announced. This plan was among many aspects of the speech that became controversial.

Opposition MPs had already been [critical](#) of the Trudeau government's plans to shift to a remote Parliament in general. Former opposition leader Andrew Scheer [worried](#) about a lack of parliamentary scrutiny caused by remote operations well before the summer once the pandemic began. Over the summer, then-Conservative House Leader Candice Bergen expressed frustration regarding the Liberal government's decision to suspend parliamentary proceedings until September 21. The Conservatives, however, had their fears and suspicions confirmed in the aftermath of the [WE Charity Scandal](#).

New Conservative leader Erin O'Toole [continues to argue](#) that the Trudeau government is avoiding parliamentary scrutiny by prorogation, and that the WE Charity Scandal is an example of why parliamentary oversight is important for the proper functioning of our democracy. However, the Conservatives have been reluctant towards the makings of a digital Parliament, preferring a socially distant in-person [model](#). It reiterated this position after the first [disastrous](#) vote once Parliament resumed. While this position is consistent, and the Conservatives are rightfully worried about their inability to perform oversight, they do not provide a feasible alternative to the operation of Parliament.

A further subject of controversy from the Throne speech was the [proposal](#) of the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, which would expand emergency spending powers available to cabinet, permitting spending on pandemic-related measures without parliamentary approval. Conservative MPs raised concerns about this measure undermining their role as the opposition.

The Trudeau government previously walked back a similar [proposal](#) in March after receiving widespread criticism. Further, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney [expressed](#) extreme disappointment with the speech for its failure to address the province's declining energy sector that was hit by the pandemic in spite of discussing economic recovery.

This spending bill is [expected](#) to be approved with NDP support following Trudeau's CERB extension and implementation of a new sick leave benefit per leader Jagmeet Singh's request. The expansion of spending powers without seeking parliamentary approval remains [opposed](#) by Conservative MPs.

At no point before had the fate of Trudeau's government been this uncertain. Following this government's [third](#) ethics scandal, the beginning of a new parliamentary session being met with criticism on partisan, regional, and parliamentary-operational lines does not indicate positive progress. Rather, it indicates that the current government still has the same problem: it remains out of touch, and digital democracy could be behind the persisting problem. The loss of casual, in-person communication in Parliament does not provide an environment where politicians can easily be familiar with the current opinions of other MPs, and would certainly explain why the current government, after aiming to return and instill confidence, has instead attracted this widespread criticism.

This is not to say that digital democracy cannot be [done well](#)— an avenue that the opposition might explore. The issue is that there has been a loss of the personal atmosphere of Parliament in which it is easy to be in tune to the current views of fellow MPs. In a parliamentary democracy, where MPs are accustomed to conducting business in person with other members of their party and the opposition, working remotely – or in a physically distanced manner in person – is far from the norm. Only time will tell how long this arrangement will last, and with what lasting consequences, but it remains clear that this iteration digital democracy is placing MPs out of touch.