

2020

Hybrid Parliament: European Union Liaison Offices in the Canadian Context

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Citation of this paper:

Mazurek, Alec and Glasier, Gabrielle, "Hybrid Parliament: European Union Liaison Offices in the Canadian Context" (2020). *All Reports*. 7.
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/all_reports/7

Hybrid Parliament: European Union Liaison Offices in the Canadian Context

Alec Mazurek, Gabrielle Glasier

As the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic continues in Canada, cases [continue to rise](#) and affect communities across Canada. In Ontario, daily cases as of November 11th 2020 have surpassed [1,400](#) and continues to bring doubt on whether it would be responsible for Parliament to meet in-person. As Parliament continues to meet in a hybrid capacity, there are still concerns with the way that this hybrid Parliament has been functioning.

The government of Canada's transition to a digital democracy has been marred by a [disastrous first vote](#) in the House of Commons and has been met with [skepticism](#) by the Opposition because of the diminished presence of Members of Parliament who could hold the current Liberal government accountable. While there have been discussions about advancing technological capabilities to improve accountability, more remote MPs have greater difficulties accessing [reliable, high-speed internet](#). As it stands, many academic solutions are looking towards a hybrid Parliament or developing the infrastructure for a digital Parliament. However, there is another hybrid model element that the European Union has incorporated that should be considered by Canadian policymakers: liaison offices.

The European Union is a vast supranational unit that represents diverse groups with different interests. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union has swiftly instituted the makings of a digital parliament. The transition was facilitated since [some of its member states](#) have already adopted remote voting capabilities. The European Union continues to operate remotely, but it has used one of its institutional strengths to its advantage, which is repurposing liaison offices in large capitals within its member states to allow for Members of European Parliament to meet virtually while also engaging in informal consultations with local MEPs. This type of arrangement has not been explored in the context of Canada, but should be seriously considered and addressed.

This type of model within Canada could help to address many of the issues surrounding a digital democracy. The issue of unequal access, for example, would be greatly diminished if there are offices near home for MPs. In addition, this would permit for more targeted investments in the development of Internet infrastructure that can be expedited to ensure the proper functioning of Parliament. An added benefit is that regional MPs can elect to meet closer to home, thus allowing for a deeper connection with constituents rather than being expected to travel to Ottawa. Finally, this also facilitates the informalities that are necessary for Parliament by allowing a smaller group of MPs to engage in consultations with other MPs rather than only operating digitally.

This model of liaison offices also contributes to a more transparent discussion. If offices were instituted in Canadian capitals, regional and local journalists could more easily cover debates and topics in addition to national media. Further, this coverage allows constituents to be more informed of policies, and the more informed a body is, the more likely they are to hold governments to account. Based on the current hybrid system, only 5% of the Opposition are satisfied with the level of [Parliamentary scrutiny](#). Ultimately, liaison offices would lead to more

media attention, which in turn would lead to more informed and politically aware constituents. As there is a current scrutiny deficit in Parliament, liaison offices would be advantageous.

While this type of institution is not a panacea for representation, it provides an alternative route towards representation and an additional mechanism for MPs to meet. The infrastructure can be developed with the provinces and can ensure that there is greater access for Parliamentarians who want to stay close to home. If this measure is adopted, it could change the way Ottawa functions during a pandemic and beyond.