



Report of the Canadian Section of ParlAmericas

5th Gathering of ParlAmericas open parliament network

Virtual Sessions

March 15, 19 and 26, 2021

Report

Delegation members and staff

Between 15 and 26 March 2021, the Parliament of Canada hosted the 5th Gathering of ParlAmericas' Open Parliament Network (OPN), which was held virtually. Mr. Marc G. Serré, MP, Chair of the Canadian Section of ParlAmericas, led the Canadian delegation, which included Senator Rosa Galvez, Vice-Chair of the Canadian Section and Vice-President for North America of ParlAmericas' Parliamentary Network on Climate Change, Senator René Cormier, Senator Raymonde Saint-Germain and Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith, MP.

Julie Pelletier, Association Secretary, as well as Erin Virgint, Nadia Faucher and Alison Clegg, Advisors to the Canadian Section of ParlAmericas, supported the Canadian delegation.

Activities during the 5th gathering of the open parliament network

The theme for the 5th Gathering of the OPN was “Countering Disinformation to Promote Responsible Public Discourse.” The meeting was attended by parliamentarians from 26 countries, as well as parliamentary staff, subject-matter experts, and representatives of both civil society and youth organizations.

A. Working Session – March 15, 2021

1. Welcoming Remarks

The Speaker of Canada's House of Commons, Mr. Anthony Rota, MP, welcomed delegates before providing an overview of the ways in which the Parliament of Canada has continued to function and remain transparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. In commenting on the relevance of the meeting's theme, Speaker Rota said that disinformation during a global pandemic can compromise public health and safety.

The Speaker Pro Tempore of the Senate of Canada, Senator Pierrette Ringuette, joined Speaker Rota in opening the event. Senator Ringuette highlighted the range of negative impacts that disinformation campaigns may have on elections, suggesting that such campaigns may obscure legitimate information for voters, polarize social discourse and weaken confidence in the electoral process.

Bahamian Senator Ranard Henfield, the OPN's Vice-President for the Caribbean, also provided introductory remarks. Senator Henfield outlined the dangers of disinformation, particularly the threats to democracy, underscored that disinformation is a risk to both national security and democratic governance, and commented that disinformation should be addressed from different perspectives.

Finally, Professor Taylor Owen, Beaverbrook Chair in Media Ethics and Communications at McGill University's Max Bell School of Public Policy, introduced and contextualized the problem of disinformation. As well, Professor Owen commented on international best practices designed to mitigate the impacts of disinformation.

In noting that disinformation is not a new phenomenon, Professor Owen underscored that the technologies spreading it are intensifying its harmful effects, and added that disinformation is leading to a decline in the quality of news and other content online. According to Professor Owen, there is no "silver bullet" solution to the issue of disinformation, and countries and social media platforms need to work together to mitigate its negative impacts.

2. Working Groups

(a) Addressing the gendered dimensions of disinformation

The first working group was moderated by Jamaican Senator Natalie Campbell-Rodriques. She introduced panelist Sandra Pepera, Senior Associate and Director for Gender, Women and Democracy at the National Democratic Institute, and invited Ms. Pepera to talk about the gender dimensions of disinformation. Ms. Pepera began by defining violence against women politicians and explaining how it manifests online. Ms. Pepera then discussed the consequences of this violence, which include delegitimizing women's work in the public sphere, discrediting their leadership and restricting their participation in political life. In addition, Ms. Pepera explored sound practices for fighting this issue, such as understanding its nature and collecting data on how different groups are affected.

During the Q & A period, Mr. Serré asked how parliamentarians can help women politicians who experience online violence, as well as how they can encourage more young women to go into politics. Senator Pierrette Ringuette asked how countries could impose online sanctions against those responsible for disinformation. In response, Senator Campbell-Rodriques suggested that politicians should lobby their governments to adapt laws to the digital era, promote civic education in schools and join with other countries to create a monitoring body.

(b) Ensuring data protection and securing electoral integrity

The second working group was moderated by Senator Reginald Farley, President of Barbados' Senate, and involved presentations by Estelle Massé, Senior Policy Analyst and Global Data Protection Lead with Access Now, Daniel Arnaudo, Advisor for Information Strategies with the National Democratic Institute, and Victoria Welborn, Technology and Innovation Program Manager with the National Democratic Institute.

Ms. Massé's presentation focused on the European Union's (EU's) *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR), which was adopted in 2016 and came into force in 2018; the GDPR outlines rights and protections for those who use the Internet, and imposes obligations on all organizations that collect data relating to citizens and residents of the EU. According to Ms. Massé, while the GDPR is not the sole solution to the harmful effects

that data collection may have on users and to the spread of disinformation, it is an important step in addressing the power imbalance between users and corporations.

The presentation by Mr. Arnaudo and Ms. Welborn examined the spread of disinformation in the electoral context. They believed that the spread can lead to worsened social and ethnic divisions, as well as increased hate speech and violence, including that which is based on gender. Moreover, they suggested that the spread of disinformation during an election campaign can confuse voters, decrease participation, create unfair electoral advantages for certain candidates or parties, lead to violence against politicians and electoral candidates, and reduce confidence in electoral processes. In their view, in the Americas and the Caribbean, candidates and voters who are women are consistently targets for disinformation campaigns during elections.

According to Mr. Arnaudo and Ms. Welborn, any legislative measures implemented to address disinformation during elections should: restrict the sharing of such content by parties and candidates; promote transparency and equity; and encourage the dissemination of clear and reliable electoral information. They also commented that measures directed at social media platforms should require those platforms to remove content and should prohibit them from posting paid political advertising.

Following the presentations, participants highlighted initiatives to address the spread of disinformation during their countries' elections. They agreed that strong data protection laws and enforcement mechanisms are key to combatting disinformation. Senator Cormier mentioned Canada's adoption of the federal *Elections Modernization Act* in 2018, which introduced new measures to counter foreign interference in the country's electoral processes.

(c) Collaborating with the news media sector and promoting ethical algorithms

The third working group was moderated by Senator Alincia Williams-Grant, President of the Senate of Antigua and Barbuda. The presenters were: Nazima Raghbir, a journalist from Guyana and First Vice-President of the Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers; and Micaela Mantegna, Professor at the Center for Technology and Society at Argentina's University of San Andrés.

Ms. Raghbir focused on the ways in which legislators and those in the news media sector can collaborate to prevent the spread of disinformation, and summarized the challenges that the media face in providing the public with accurate and real-time information. According to Ms. Raghbir, traditional media's advertising revenues have been redirected to some social media platforms, which is affecting traditional media's capacity to produce independent and high-quality content.

As well, Ms. Raghbir noted that the emergence of social media platforms has contributed to an increase in misinformation and disinformation; as a result, the news media sector is often obliged to counter social media disinformation. In Ms. Raghbir's opinion, these platforms are not always checking the facts in articles prior to posting – which traditional media are required to do – and may indirectly contribute to disinformation being disseminated. In speaking about the Caribbean, Ms. Raghbir identified three areas of collaboration between the news media sector and legislators to prevent disinformation:

the introduction or strengthening of access-to-information legislation; discussions about freedom of expression and freedom of the press when data protection and cyber-crime legislation is being enacted; and the implementation of measures to ensure safe work conditions for journalists covering legislative activities.

In addressing the promotion of ethical algorithms, Ms. Mantegna explained that artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms are used for data processing and automated reasoning, and suggested that algorithms can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. According to Ms. Mantegna, while algorithms can help to process data relating to mental health and thereby support suicide prevention efforts, AI can contribute to disinformation by creating synthetic media products known as “deep fakes.”

Moreover, Ms. Mantegna provided suggestions for a regulatory framework that would minimize the negative outcomes associated with AI. In Ms. Mantegna’s view, the framework should include requirements regarding the protection of data, intellectual property and consumers, and these requirements should be informed by the principles of transparency and respect for human rights.

Following the presentations, participants highlighted some of the effects of, and concerns relating to, disinformation in their countries. In particular, they underscored that: technology is consistently ahead of the laws, which quickly become outdated; a new regulatory model for online news is needed; in certain cases, the platforms directly or indirectly contributing to misinformation and disinformation – fall outside of their jurisdiction; some countries or governments use, or benefit from, disinformation and misinformation; and regulations could be misused and could impinge on freedom of speech.

B. working session – mArch 19, 2021

On 19 March 2021, a working session was held in Spanish and Portuguese. Senator Galvez participated as a representative of the host parliament and moderated the session. Chilean Deputy Javier Macaya Danús, then Vice-President of the OPN, provided opening remarks.

Deputy Macaya highlighted that the spread of disinformation threatens both individual safety and national security, and emphasized the heightened potential for such spread during the COVID-19 pandemic as people spend more time communicating online than ever before and use platforms through which misinformation can spread rapidly. In Mr. Macaya’s opinion, many different forces are behind the spread of anti-democratic and hate-related disinformation, and governments alone cannot control it.

Senator Galvez then outlined how the Parliament of Canada has been operating virtually and mentioned the growing role of social media, which is increasingly being used to update the public about the activities of Parliament. As well, Senator Galvez pointed out that legislators and other public figures have used social media to try to counteract disinformation and to influence public opinion, including by showing themselves being vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus. According to Senator Galvez, online media have been a valuable source of information for members of the public who are attempting to keep abreast of recent health restrictions; however, online media have also been sources of disinformation.

Marco Aurelio Ruediger, Director of Public Policy Analysis at Brazil's Getulio Vargas Foundation, gave a keynote presentation that focused on the forms that disinformation can take and the ways in which it is spread. In Mr. Ruediger's view, democratic societies have checks and balances in place to ensure that power is not inappropriately concentrated, and they offer numerous ways for citizens to exert influence; that said, disinformation can interfere with the role of a dynamic civil society comprised of informed citizens.

Mr. Ruediger explained that well-organized groups plan and execute disinformation campaigns to meet a variety of objectives, such as instilling doubt about the legitimacy of an electoral result. In speaking about Brazil, Mr. Ruediger suggested that groups from outside the country have an interest in the breakdown of Brazilian society. According to Mr. Ruediger, social media companies have inconsistent policies, with some social networks removing certain prominent U.S. users from their platforms for disseminating disinformation without explaining why prominent users in other countries who are similarly spreading disinformation are not removed.

Moreover, Mr. Ruediger asserted that democracy is under threat by disinformation campaigns, and urged legislators both to take responsibility for protecting democracy, and to indicate their full opposition to hate and intolerance. In Mr. Ruediger's opinion, legislatures need an entity that investigates complaints and deals with false statements, and powerful technology is needed to monitor constantly for coordinated actions that could undermine democratic processes. Mr. Ruediger stated that the next generation of "fake news" will be very different from that of today because of the rapid pace of technological change; in two or three years, democracies could be in a situation that is much more precarious than at present, and governments need long-term strategies for debunking hoaxes and "fake news."

In concluding, Mr. Ruediger suggested that democracies cannot afford to delay; they need to regulate or legislate to protect individual rights and the fundamental bases of democratic society, and to prevent disinformation, especially that which is intolerant and anti-democratic.

Following the keynote presentation, participants entered virtual breakout rooms on the following topics: the gendered dimensions of disinformation; privacy and protection of personal data online; electoral integrity; communication between legislators and the media; and ethical algorithms.

Guatemalan Deputy Andrea Villagrán moderated the discussion in the breakout room in which Senator Galvez participated: the gendered dimensions of disinformation. Amalia Toledo, a consultant on gender and technology, made a presentation about the links between disinformation and the violence that results from "machismo." Ms. Toledo commented that people of all genders need to be part of discussions about gender and disinformation.

Ms. Toledo suggested that public discourse has been an expression of masculinity since antiquity, and commented that women who express themselves in public – particularly on the Internet – are much more likely than men to become the subject of disinformation campaigns or to have violent online attacks directed against them. According to Ms. Toledo, expressions of violence directed towards women are often amplified in an online

context, and online harassment is especially toxic for women and gender-diverse people who are politicians, journalists or public figures; an intersectional lens should be applied in order to understand such harassment because people of minority racial or cultural groups typically are the subject of harsher online abuse than those who form part of a majority. Ms. Toledo outlined the nature of the harassment that is used against women, indicating that it typically reinforces gender stereotypes, involves comments about their bodies or sexualizes them, sometimes in graphic ways. In Ms. Toledo's view, gender-based harassment has a negative impact on democracy and limits the number of women who decide to engage in politics.

In presenting possible solutions to gender-based harassment in politics, Ms. Toledo suggested that legislators and others should inform themselves, and know the facts about, both online and in-person gender-based violence and harassment. As well, according to Ms. Toledo, they should address the root causes – including patriarchy and sexism – of the problem, with both legislators and the private sector being pushed to develop protocols that prohibit disinformation and harmful content, and that punish abusers appropriately.

Mexican Senator Martha Lucía Míchler Camarena, who is president of the Senate's committee on gender equality, presented an example of a law that punishes online harassment: the "Olimpia Law," which is a collection of reforms that entered into force in June 2021. Senator Míchler Camarena commented that the reforms penalize the use of digital media to violate another person's sexual privacy, including by making it a crime to disseminate images, videos or audio materials of an intimate or sexual nature involving an adult without that person's consent; the penalty for such crimes is three to six years in prison. As well, Senator Míchler Camarena described the extensive consultation that led to development of the law and to the consensus on certain definitions within it, and highlighted a phrase that helped to legitimize the suffering that virtual crimes can cause: "The virtual is real."

In the discussion that followed Senator Míchler Camarena's presentation, some participants described similar laws in their countries, and others gave examples of problems with the way in which their countries' judicial systems address these issues. Senator Galvez noted that harassment and violence against women are not just problems in countries in the Global South, but can happen anywhere, including in Canada. In describing the Senate of Canada's new harassment and violence prevention policy, Senator Galvez noted that, in her view, the "parliamentary privilege" of a harasser in the Senate can be taken into account to protect them, while the parliamentary privilege of a victim of harassment may be overlooked. According to Senator Galvez, if legislators – especially men – do not make a point of "calling out" inappropriate behaviour by others, they risk becoming enablers.

Following the discussions in the virtual breakout rooms, participants returned to the plenary session, which Senator Galvez continued to moderate. They made observations about the discussions in the breakout rooms and explored such other topics as the ways in which disinformation and digital violence can transcend political borders, thereby creating a need for international approaches and solutions. Participants heard that there is a link between "machismo" and violence, that the impacts of disinformation are different for women and non-binary people than they are for men, and that many algorithms are

gender blind. Ms. Mantegna suggested that legislators who do not understand the technical processes that underlie algorithms may not feel confident legislating about AI and ethics. Finally, participants mentioned that democratic processes are under threat from disinformation, and highlighted the importance of creating laws to protect people.

Nicaraguan Deputy Maritza Espinales, who is a member of ParlAmericas' Board of Directors, provided closing remarks that mentioned the serious problems that can result from disinformation. In Deputy Espinales' opinion, legislating against disinformation is difficult for individual countries because the issues are complex and there is no single solution; because of the globalized nature of the phenomenon, disinformation must be countered in a holistic way.

C. Plenary session – March 26, 2021

1. Inauguration

The plenary session for the 5th Gathering of the OPN provided parliamentarians with an opportunity to share legislative proposals and open parliament initiatives for addressing disinformation in their countries.

Representing the Parliament of Canada, Senator Ringuette and Mr. Bruce Stanton, MP, Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, provided opening remarks. Senator Ringuette discussed the complexity of disinformation and noted that legislators should find the right balance between promoting a diversity of views and ensuring the accuracy of information. Mr. Stanton mentioned that technology plays a critical role in informing the public on matters of national importance, such as a global pandemic, and advocated a role for legislators in ensuring the existence of standards, integrity and reliability in the dissemination of information online.

Paraguayan Senator Blanca Ovelar, President of ParlAmericas, welcomed participants before speaking about the globalized and multifaceted nature of the problem of disinformation, and about the need for a coordinated and collaborative approach to combat it. Senator Ovelar warned that it is necessary to approach the issue of disinformation cautiously and to avoid infringing on freedom of speech.

2. High-level expert panel

During a session moderated by Senator Henfield, the following presenters discussed the impacts of disinformation on democracy and international progress to address this phenomenon: Catalina Botero Marino, member of Facebook's Oversight Board; Lucina Di Meco, an expert on gender equality and co-founder of #ShePersisted Global; and Mr. Erskine-Smith, who – in addition to being a member of Canada's House of Commons – is a part of the International Grand Committee on Disinformation, an international group of legislators, policy advisors and experts working to address the negative effects that the spread of disinformation online is having on democratic systems.

Ms. Botero Marino's presentation focused on the role that social media platforms play in combatting the spread of disinformation. In Ms. Botero Marino's opinion, the content on these platforms should be moderated by individuals who are independent of both the

platform and the government. As well, in suggesting that national solutions do not go far enough, Ms. Bontero Marino advocated global dialogue on the issue of disinformation.

Ms. Di Meco commented that disinformation campaigns often target – and lead to online harassment of – women in politics, with them being the topic of false narratives that frequently concentrate on personality, appearance and race. According to Ms. Di Meco, gendered disinformation is prevalent during elections, and can discourage voters and candidates who are women from participating in the electoral process.

Mr. Erskine-Smith identified elements of an interparliamentary agenda that prioritizes the fight against disinformation. In characterizing the spread of disinformation as a global problem that requires global solutions, Mr. Erskine-Smith encouraged international collaboration on the issue and underlined a need to recognize that not all countries will completely agree because they vary in their understanding of freedom of speech. As well, Mr. Erskine-Smith called on the private sector to establish content standards to combat the spread of disinformation.

3. Commitments

Participants had an opportunity to report on the progress made in their countries' legislatures concerning implementation of the commitments presented at the previous OPN gathering, which occurred in 2019.

Senator Galvez provided an update on the Canadian Section of ParlAmericas' work, indicating the prior commitment to develop a guide that would identify steps to be taken for the co-creation – with civil society representatives – of an open parliament action plan for the Parliament of Canada. In highlighting the establishment of the Canadian Section's Subcommittee on Open Parliament, Senator Galvez – as the current chair of that Subcommittee – announced that a “roadmap” for the co-creation of such a plan is nearly finalized. As well, Senator Galvez said that the Canadian Section will present the road map to develop an open parliament action plan adopted by the Executive Committee of the Canadian Section of ParlAmericas to the House of Commons and the Senate of Canada and implement the concrete actions it identifies.

A [final declaration](#) stressing parliamentary commitments to address disinformation in ParlAmericas' member countries was adopted and the election results for the OPN's executive committee were announced. Among these results was the election of Senator Cormier as the OPN's Second Vice President for North America.

Respectfully submitted,

Marc G. Serré, MP
President, Canadian Section of ParlAmericas

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION

Canadian Section of ParlAmericas

ACTIVITY	5 th Gathering of ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network
DATES	March 15, 19 and 26, 2021
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Hon. Rosa Galvez Hon. René Cormier Hon. Raymonde Saint-Germain
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Mr. Marc Serré Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith
STAFF	Ms. Julie Pelletier Ms. Alison Clegg Ms. Erin Virgint Ms. Nadia Faucher
TRANSPORTATION	0.00
ACCOMMODATION	0.00
HOSPITALITY	0.00
PER DIEMS	0.00
OFFICIAL GIFTS	0.00
MISCELLANEOUS	0.00
TOTAL	0.00