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**Standing committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Subcommittee report

Use of technology

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

Rapport du sous-comité

Utilisation de la technologie

Chair: Margaret Marland
Clerk: Donna Bryce

Présidente : Margaret Marland
Greffière : Donna Bryce

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DE L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE

Thursday 1 November 2001

Jeudi 1er novembre 2001

The committee met at 1550 in committee room 1.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

The Chair (Mrs Margaret Marland): I would like to call this meeting of the standing committee on the Legislative Assembly to order.

First of all, I would like to report that I tabled the first report of the standing committee on the Legislative Assembly in the chamber this afternoon.

Interjection.

The Chair: No, that was the report I tabled in the House. Now, following that, Mr Duncan will move the subcommittee report.

Mr Dwight Duncan (Windsor-St Clair): Your subcommittee met on Thursday, October 25, 2001, and agreed to the following with respect to reforms that would expand the use of technology in the House and its committees:

(1) The committee will invite the Speaker and the Clerk to appear before the committee on Thursday, November 1, 2001.

(2) Following this meeting, committee members will be encouraged to canvass their respective caucuses with respect to their views on this issue.

(3) The committee will meet on Thursday, November 8, 2001, to continue their discussion on this issue.

The Chair: Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? That motion is carried.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Chair: We are privileged to welcome this afternoon the Speaker, the Clerk and the Clerk Assistant. Welcome to all three of you.

Hon Gary Carr (Speaker): I must say that I am looking forward to coming back into committee. It's been about two years since I've been in the committee. We're looking forward to it. I'm in your hands, Madam Chair. If you would like, our Clerk Assistant and Executive Director of Legislative Services could give a short introduction about some of the technology we have, probably less than five minutes, or we can go directly to questions, whatever the committee chooses.

As you may know, as Clerk Assistant, Deb is also the Executive Director of Legislative Services, which entails a lot of the technology we may be talking about. We can do it either way: we can just start with questions, or Deb can do a short introduction and touch on things like some of the technology we presently have, some of the technical services, and then we would be pleased to answer any questions that any of the members may have on any of the issues.

The Chair: I'm at the wish of the committee. What would you like to do? Hear from Ms Deller?

Mr Duncan: Hear the presentation, yes.

Hon Mr Carr: With that, Deb will give us a short overview of some of the technology and some of the things you may want to take a look at. I think it will stimulate discussion on some of the issues you may want to take a look at in your deliberations. With that, I think you all know Deb.

Ms Deborah Deller (Clerk Assistant): I hesitate to start off by saying this, but I'll be brief. I just thought that maybe it would be a good idea to start with a little summary of where we are today in terms of technology both in the chamber and in and around the precinct.

In the House and committees, as you know, electronic devices are prohibited. They are prohibited by a series of rulings that were made by successive Speakers against the use of any electronic devices in the House, including cellphones, pagers, laptops, PDAs, anything like that.

From time to time in committee, at the discretion of the Chair of the committee, members have been allowed to use their laptops, and I think they have found it particularly helpful in committee when they're doing summaries of testimony from witnesses or even during the clause-by-clause consideration.

Additionally, laptops have been used in committees by research staff and from time to time by Hansard staff. There is a bit of a distinction between members using electronic devices and House or committee staff using electronic devices. Maybe the best example of this is that you'll notice we have intercoms on the table in the House—not telephones, intercoms. What that does is give us access to the Journals branch so we can deal with them in the preparation of the House documents for the following day. When staff are using a laptop or an electronic device, it is in the course of fulfilling their role and function with respect to the business of the House.

The technical services that are available: members will probably be very familiar with all the proceedings of the House and some committees being broadcast by means of OntParl network. They're available throughout On-

tario by cable or by satellite. Legislative Information Systems acquires and maintains computer hardware throughout the legislative precinct. They also provide and install hardware for your constituency offices. I think this past year they installed a second computer in the constituency offices at the direction of the Board of Internal Economy.

Software acquisition and maintenance for members, though, is kind of a mixture of services between Legislative Information Systems and the caucus system branches. Legislative Information Systems also maintains the Legislative Assembly network, again with caucus access to a greater or lesser degree depending on their own systems arrangement. For example, e-mail is available throughout the assembly, but not all caucus have chosen to be on that system.

Internet and intranet: the Legislative Assembly has its own Internet site. I'm hoping you're familiar with that. House documents are on it. They're posted along with information that's of interest to the general public: status of bills, visitor information, who's my member?—that kind of thing. The Legislative Assembly also has an intranet site, which you may be more familiar with. It's available in-house only. It also contains House documents, but it includes things like draft Hansard, which isn't immediately available to the public, for obvious reasons—it's a draft. It also contains a variety of administrative and research information for members and staff: the members' guide to services and benefits, the ballot list for private members' business and that sort of thing. MPPs and staff can access the Internet through personal accounts, and they are also accessible from the constituency offices now.

Some time ago, we in the Office of the Assembly recognized that there's a whole lot more we could be doing to improve both the Internet and intranet sites and in fact improve computer services throughout the assembly. In that regard we established a couple of committees. One is the Web management team, which looks at the content and style of the Internet and intranet. In addition to that, there's something I chair, called the information technology advisory committee.

We're kind of in baby stages right now, but we are reviewing our services and our content on the Web. We're also reviewing the installation of hardware, maintenance, all those kinds of things, to try to improve services, primarily for members but also for staff. One of the things we are working toward is trying to improve— and I hesitate to use this word as well—the interface of the information we have available on-line for members so there can be better manipulation of that information for whatever use you have.

The Speaker and the Clerk and I had some discussions about the use of technology in the chamber and in particular your mandate, which is to take a look at the enhancement or expansion of technology in the chamber. We're not entirely certain what kinds of things you would necessarily be talking about, but we've taken a stab at trying to guess.

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One of the obvious things is probably the use of laptops. In our view, the first thing the committee probably needs to do is to consider what they want laptops to be used for in the chamber. If the idea is to simply allow laptops in the chamber so that members are able to do office work on their own personal notebook computers or laptops, then that's probably a fairly easy thing to effect. It involves no costs or little cost to the Office of the Assembly, at any rate. There are no issues of wiring. The only thing that needs to be considered is that the Speaker would probably have to establish some guidelines for use, and I'll get to those a little bit later on.

If in fact what is in mind is members using laptops that are hooked up to the network so that they can easily send or receive e-mail or access the Internet, then there are other issues to consider. Does the chamber need to be wired? Should we go wireless? Consideration then also has to be given to the appropriateness of members receiving e-mail in the House or sending e-mail in the House and, in addition to that, accessing Internet sites. The Speaker again would still have to establish certain guidelines around that. The other thing to note is that that involves a higher level of cost for the Office of the Assembly, and the Speaker and the Clerk will both tell you that we don't, at this point, have the money to do that.

There is a third level of use for laptops in the chamber, and that is the use of computers in the chamber for the purpose of House business itself. For example, it may be that there is some advantage to members, if we ever go into committee of the whole again and do clause-by-clause, to be able to see amendments on their computer screen inserted at the appropriate place in a bill at the time they're actually being moved. That may be something that would be useful to the members, and it's certainly something that would avoid photocopying a whole pile of paper.

This is really something, though, that needs to be considered for a period of time and very carefully. It involves really all members having the same standard level of hardware. It would involve some investigation into the applications that are necessary in software. There would have to be at least some network between members in the House and the table, and there would have to be lots of discussion with legislative counsel around their involvement, because they are the primary drafters of amendments, and in fact the legislation itself. You'd still have the wiring versus wireless issues to deal with, and the Speaker still would have to establish certain guidelines.

The cost, in the case of that third option, really is quite large. Again, that's something that has to be considered in the context of the resources that are currently available to the Office of the Assembly, and probably there would have to be some consideration of putting something in estimates to forward that purpose, if that's where the committee's going.

In any of the cases that I've outlined, the Speaker probably will have to establish some guidelines for the

use of laptops in the chamber. Some of the guidelines that have been established in other jurisdictions and that you may want to look at are things like quiet keyboards—no sound options on the laptops or notebooks in the chamber—and when they can or cannot be used. For example, some jurisdictions have determined that it's inappropriate to use laptops or notebooks during question period. Others have decided that it's only appropriate to use them during committee of the whole.

The committee may want to consider issues of decorum. For example, maybe it's a good idea to say that laptops shouldn't be used if you're seated beside a member who has the floor and is speaking.

The other thing the Speaker would want to consider is, can those notebook or laptop computers be used for any purpose in the House, or should we restrict the use of things like e-mail in the House?

That's really a summary of our discussions on the use of notebooks or laptops in the House. That led to a discussion of PDAs or PalmPilots, the BlackBerry, whatever you want to discuss. I think in our view the same considerations as are given to notebooks and laptops apply. The only thing is that PDAs are possibly less intrusive and may be subject to less rigorous guidelines. I don't know.

The other issue that many jurisdictions, including this one, have discussed with respect to technology in the chamber has to do with electronic voting. There are all kinds of studies done by all kinds of jurisdictions, including Westminster and the Canadian House of Commons, on the use of electronic voting in their chambers, and to date most of those jurisdictions have declined to implement it.

I think if the committee is going to consider the use of electronic voting, it's probably a good idea to start by determining why we would want to implement it. Often the arguments in favour of electronic voting point to more efficiency in the process. However, with a small House such as ours voting, as you'll know, it isn't terribly time-consuming. The cost of installing and maintaining an electronic voting system is likely to far exceed any benefit that might result. That's really been the conclusion of many of the jurisdictions that have looked into electronic voting. Then again, if the motivation for going to electronic voting is to allow members an opportunity to vote virtually or from off site, then there are a whole bevy of other security and possibly constitutional issues that would probably need to be considered.

For us, in our discussions, we agree that it's usually easy to see the benefits of technology in general: it enhances the power to communicate; it has the potential to make us more efficient; it allows us to do more faster, although I'm not sure that's a benefit sometimes. What is more critical, though, to consider, especially in the context of expanding the use of technology in the chamber, are its effects and its consequences. Just as an example, in the case of electronic voting, does it make the voting process more efficient? Does it make it more or less transparent? Does it entrench or erode party discipline, and are there advantages or disadvantages to that?

In the case of laptops, do they enhance the work of the House and/or individual members therein? Will they improve or worsen decorum, or is decorum a whole other issue for debate?

I think if the committee were to start with some discussion of the purpose of the chamber and the role of the members in it and from there fully consider how technology can serve to support that function, that purpose and role, then maybe it serves to focus the committee on what technological changes, if any, it wants to recommend.

Hon Mr Carr: Just before we turn it over for questions, I wanted to add that I know you have research people, but if there's anything we can do to assist you in your deliberations and any questions you may have ongoing as you take up this challenge, we'd be pleased to assist in whatever way we can. As you know, we have some of the experts who can answer any of the questions you may have, and it would be our hope that you'll be able to come up with some things that may be of assistance. If you do, you're probably aware then that the committee can do the report, presumably it would be adopted by the House, and then we can proceed. We're certainly in the hands of the committee as to what you would like to see. We can probably make almost anything work, and we wish you well in your deliberations, because I think it's a very important question that you'll be looking at.

With that, Madam Chair, we'll open it up to see if there are any questions that might be forthcoming.

The Chair: Mr DesRosiers, do you wish to make any comments?

Mr Claude L. DesRosiers (Clerk of the House): No. I think all of the points have been accurate and have been well processed by Deborah and the Speaker, and they are the results of discussions that we've had amongst ourselves. Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Dwight?

Mr Duncan: The history of our parliamentary chambers and traditions, everything from the sovereign not being allowed into the chamber in Westminster to the Sergeant at Arms sitting toward the door and the bars at the door, is such that members can debate and transact the business of the House without influence from the outside. Is that correct? Physically we've attempted to prevent outside influences from coming to bear on the floor of the House.

Mr DesRosiers: That's basically been the discussion, yes, and that's been maintained by most Commonwealth Houses that have studied this.

Mr Duncan: One of the things that concerns me—and we have not caucused this—about the presence of technology, particularly technology that's either wired to the outside or is wireless but able to communicate outside the floor of the chamber, is influence from outside of the chamber. Would that be something members of the committee should consider seriously?

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Mr DesRosiers: I think so. One of the purposes of technology is just to communicate with the outside, and I

think the committee should stop and reflect on that, whether that is a desirable thing or not.

Ms Deller: If I could just add something to that, I think what you say is very true. In fact, a jurisdiction that has used technology extensively is the American jurisdiction. Many of the state Legislatures have electronic voting and allow laptops. Their system is different, though. There is more access to the members by lobbyists. Even with that, there still have been issues in some of the American state legislatures about the use of e-mail inside the chamber, and many of them have even restricted it because of outside influence on the floor.

Hon Mr Carr: Just to add something I actually hadn't thought of—it's a very good point to raise. As we were discussing this, I think Deb said earlier that we have to take a look at what the purpose is, and if the purpose is to, say, enhance debate, as she talked about, it would be very difficult for any Speaker or any of the people in the House to monitor what happens on your laptop. So we may lose that ability. If it was specifically to enhance debate, we wouldn't be able to do anything—for example, if somebody is surfing the net, we would not be able to police it, to say they are looking up something relative to the debate. If you do let it in, it makes it very, very difficult. So the purpose may be to enhance debate, but we wouldn't have the capabilities of policing, to make sure that in fact they are dealing with something in the debate and not simply contacting the constituents.

That's something you need to think of. Maybe the place to do that is in the House, that you do want to be doing work, because as you know, sometimes people are doing work or reading the paper. But if they do come in, we won't have the ability to say, "I'm sorry. You're contacting a constituent with e-mail. That's only to enhance debate in here, and you should be doing something"—we would lose that. I think the point you made is a very valid and very interesting one, one I hadn't thought of, quite frankly.

The Chair: Can I just ask for clarification on this point? We don't preclude notes and papers and so forth being handed in at any time, do we?

Hon Mr Carr: No, and as you know, you see in question period—and as I understand it, and the Clerk may have more, I think even at the federal House now they use PalmPilots to receive messages. As you know, the staff send them in question period. I believe they're doing that up at the federal House now.

Mr DesRosiers: I saw that recently. I was up in Ottawa and I saw that in operation. Some ministers use it; others don't. But Ottawa never had the system that we have here, never instituted the system of notes coming in from behind the Speaker's chair as we have here. In Ottawa, that never really existed. Ministers, once they were on the floor, were pretty well on their own and there was no way of sending in notes to them. There's no place in Ottawa for a bevy of ministers' assistants to be nearby; there's just no place on the floor for that in Ottawa. The closest they could be is in the lobby, and sending in notes really has not been a part of their way of being, but

recently I've observed that a few ministers had a Palm-Pilot during question period and were communicating with, I presume, assistants outside on various possible questions coming up.

Ms Marilyn Churley (Toronto-Danforth): I wanted to follow up on that. I hadn't realized they were doing that in the House of Commons. I'm aware that in certain standing committees I have personally received e-mail from members sitting on committees: "I'm sitting on a committee, just sending you this quick note," about such-and-such. That's the first time I became aware of that. I also didn't know that the House of Commons didn't have the access for staff to hand in notes, so I suppose that answers why they went ahead with this.

I'd be interested to know who made the decision. How was the decision made to allow that to happen? Because I would assume that it would be a fairly major issue for us, particularly, I would say at this point, for the opposition or anybody in opposition, the idea that cabinet ministers could be sitting there with their little PalmPilots and, although you figure it might take a while, you can come up with key words and codes and stuff to be getting instant answers to questions. The tradition is that sometimes they know the answer, sometimes they don't. We all know the cut and thrust of what goes on in there, and I think the way this was decided is of interest to us: an all-party equal committee, was it, or who made the decision?

Mr DesRosiers: I'm not too sure. We can easily find out for you. The way decisions like that are made in Ottawa is basically the same way decisions like that are made here. It would have been the procedure committee studying the thing and making recommendations to the House and the House adopting the recommendations, basically. Don't get me wrong here; there wasn't a proliferation of ministers using this on the floor. I saw two ministers using it. But think about the mechanics of it: the very nature of our question periods is a no-notice question period. So therefore there is no time, especially in the House of Commons, where the question period unfolds at a very rapid pace. There's just no time for a minister to say, "Just hold on a minute, I'll consult my assistant here," because they have basically 35 seconds on their feet to either ask the question or answer. So a PalmPilot I think is not really that much help. I did see, when they weren't being questioned, a minister communicating, but what he was saying to whom I have no idea.

Ms Churley: You're right that it's a rapid-pace question period there, which I'm sure you envy, Mr Speaker, and we in opposition, occasionally, when we're trying to get to our fourth question. But it's true that it would be hard to figure out how they would get in that rapid pace. Nonetheless, that opportunity is there.

The other question I have to ask is more generic. We're looking at the use of technology, but from your presentation, what would you say is lacking or problematic within our system that you think would require, or where it would be useful to have, technology? Leaving aside the members and whether or not I want to

be sitting in the House when I don't have anything on that day, but I'm on duty for the afternoon and evening, I've got some e-mails to catch up on and I've heard this debate a million times—anyway, I know exactly what Ted is going to say and what Margaret is going to say—I have to be there and it's attractive to think that I could get some work done. On the other hand, as Dwight pointed out, in theory we're there to debate and listen and respond to each other.

That whole question about how members use this technology: we have to discuss all of these issues. But for the workings of the House, are there any things that you think—and you too, Mr Speaker—would help facilitate your work or perhaps hinder it? Is there a real need for this at this time?

Hon Mr Carr: Maybe I'll jump in first.

Interjection: So I'll go second.

Hon Mr Carr: Just from my own personal standpoint, one of the things we do is that each day we take the bills and put them in the binders. There is that capability to look them up electronically. If you did have the laptop there, instead of filing them each day—and we run around and steal each other's bills when we don't have them and we get our fingers caught in the binders and so on—I think that using the laptop and being able to pull up and have the capability to look at bills electronically would be very helpful.

Having said that, there's a different degree in terms of members' ability. So that might be fine for some of the members who are used to them and use them. Other members would not want to have that. So, if we brought it in to use technology to make it easier, which I think it would, there may be a large percentage of members who still wouldn't want to do that—

Ms Churley: Even if it's a small number, you'd still have to provide that paper.

Hon Mr Carr: That's right—so it would be unfair. So we might be trying to do something to eliminate a lot of paper, and saving time and pages and so on would do it, but we might not really save any time because there might be whatever percentage—5%, 10%, 15%—who still need that and we couldn't say to them, "I'm sorry. If you want to do it, you've got to do the training." That's a difficulty I see, and I don't know at what point we'd ever have the capabilities to do that. It's a lot easier in terms of filing. As Deb will explain, we're doing that now: we can look up bills and we can look up the Hansard and so on. It's a great way to do it, but not everybody is up to the same speed.

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Mr DesRosiers: In direct answer to your question: not much. I don't think that technology today can bring a lot to a British-style process because, I agree, basically you're there to debate and to listen to the debate and to bring your own arguments. What the Speaker says is true. You could have a bank there that gives you access to the bills and so on, but I agree: how many members would really use that?

In other jurisdictions it's very, very useful, as Deb referred to earlier. In the States and in a lot of Continental jurisdictions, mainly a lot of the new democracies and so on, they've combined, for example, electronic voting and laptops and combined machines. Jurisdictions that work a lot in the chamber on amendments and on text and so on might vote 100 times a day on the different texts. So they combine a voting machine with a text machine, the text is projected on a wall and members will vote maybe 100 times a day on different wordings of text and so on. But that's not the British system. We don't do that.

There is one application. For example, if we had laptops at the table, Todd, Lisa and Deb could do the inputting of the journals and do a lot of communication. But if truth be known, if you ask Todd and Lisa, they do very well with that intercom as well, the combination of the intercom and television, talking with the folks who are working in the branch across the street. It produces the journals quite well and it produces the journals I think quickly for those people.

If you're looking for applications for members, I think we have to go back to what Debbie said earlier: you have to think of the two applications, the two very different workings of a member. When they're in the chamber to work on legislation, how much would technology help them there in that part of the job? Very little, is my humble opinion. If the other side of their job is working with constituents and so on, then if they want to bring that in the chamber, it could be of certain help.

Ms Caroline Di Cocco (Sarnia-Lambton): Just a couple of things, because some of them have already been spoken to. To me, it's looking at the purpose we have in the Legislature, as a chamber, what our purpose is in there, and the functionality. Sometimes I believe that the whole discussion, the evolving technology—it's almost like you want to fit whatever the purpose is and somehow say, "Well, we need a laptop because we can't function without it." I'm looking at the practicality aspect of it.

In the chamber we have the venue to debate, to discuss bills. Even when we're supposed to be sitting there, we're there in the evening, there's still a debate going on. I know we take work in there and so on and so forth. I think we would be losing that whole system, if you want, of what the Legislature is for. If the purpose is that we're going to try to connect to our offices, I mean completely link to them electronically, we're losing it.

It's the needs and the wants—to me this is one of those questions, the needs and the wants—and also, what isn't working now? How fast do we want Hansard on our laps? Is it speed? I heard someone say it would be more efficient, but in what way would it make it work better if we have the laptops? That's what I'm looking for. Sometimes I look at this and I try to see it objectively and I think, "The functionality, the purpose of the Legislature: is it being met without laptops on our desks? Is it being met without our needing to be sitting there trying to access whatever we need to access? Maybe somebody can give me an opinion.

Ms Deller: We don't give opinions.

Ms Di Cocco: Oh, sorry. I shouldn't say "opinion." A comment, then.

Hon Mr Carr: I'm so rarely asked these days.

I think you're right. We've gotten away in some respects from what's the debate, and the question I think you have to ask yourselves is, would it make it any worse? We all know that people are in there signing Christmas cards when they should be listening to the debate. We're also sitting more nights now, we're sitting longer, and that tends to now—any night you go in there people are talking; they're not listening and so on. Does this make it any worse? It probably would, but are we not meeting the objectives of being in there and listening to debate now anyway?

When I first came here, I remember that in the afternoon it would start out where all ministers, and even the Premier, would come in in the afternoon and debate. Sometimes that slipped off too. We have to take a look at what the whole issue of debate is and why that has slipped. Quite frankly, I think the reason it has slipped isn't because of the technologies there. Some would argue this could in fact make it a little bit worse and make it a lot easier for you to do other things. Sitting beside Ted I could never get any work done, because all we did was talk all the time. When I was first elected, I didn't even know the order of business in the House because a lot of times you get in there and you start chatting. I think the true intent and purpose of the House to listen to debate has often been lost for a number of reasons. The question you have to ask yourself: is this going to make it worse? Many would argue it would, I guess.

Ms Churley: Mr Speaker, do you listen to all the debate?

Hon Mr Carr: I certainly do now.

Ms Di Cocco: I guess in that context, the question that has to be asked is, how does having high-tech stuff on our desks assist in what the purpose of the Legislature is supposed to be? That to me is the question, not how can we fill our time, but how does having a laptop help us to fulfill the purpose for which we are in the Legislature? To me that's the key question.

Hon Mr Carr: Just very quickly, I also know one of the members, who will remain nameless, has some complaints, because originally there weren't really a lot of written speeches done either. Members would get up and they would know the bill and they would talk about it. I've heard some fantastic debates and stories of people who have gone in there and have done tremendous debates. They hadn't seen the bill and in two minutes they'd get up and talk like they're experts. That has also changed now, and you see people coming in with texts that are written and debate that has been publicly produced by somebody else. You don't even know if they read it the first time.

The Chair: Which is contrary to our standing orders, which don't allow us to read at length except for the purpose of quoting.

Hon Mr Carr: What I think has happened is people abuse notes and to some extent we've gotten a little bit away from that. The purpose and intent way back was that if you have to get in there and stand up without a note, you can't really fake it. We are all pretty good now as politicians, but anybody can come in and read. If you are standing up and speaking on your own, you really have to know something about the bill. We've drifted away from things like that.

Again, the question is, does this just enhance that? Theoretically, what could happen is that you could be in there and you could be reading on your laptop as you go along, and if somebody asks a question, you can change it. It can become electronic and literally somebody could be, as they say, pulling the strings from outside. Technology is such where it is a little bit more difficult to do that. The question to be asked is, is that a good thing or a bad thing for the institution? That's your challenge to decide then.

The Chair: Could I also ask in this discussion that you cover silent pagers and silent telephones—without using them in the House, but as a paging system—because we are focusing on laptops to this point.

Mr Jerry J. Ouellette (Oshawa): Essentially just flogging a dead horse in saying the same things as others are saying, that it is difficult enough now to get members to focus on the debate, let alone debating the topic that should be debated and focusing on what's supposed to be there, because there are so many other distractions that are currently taking place, whether it is corresponding with constituents or dealing with other issues that are about to come up or other areas. We are adding to that by putting this other option forward.

I would like to hear the questions come from individuals and the answers come from the individuals as well, as opposed to, OK, here's the question, there's the answer, and then the supplementary will be coming in. Wait. Supplementary. If they say this, you're now going to be saying that. No. We have to have the members stand on their own merit. It is very necessary to do that. Otherwise, why don't we just e-mail everybody the questions and answers and get that done?

What I'm hearing here is very similar, although I am understanding a bit of the Clerk's side on how it may assist them. In regard to that, I don't see where I have a problem with the system the way it works now. I get the information when I need it, as fast as I need it. They do a great job and they know their job very well. I don't see any problems there.

I do have one concern that Deborah didn't mention about the Internet site. We are hearing quite a bit about that, that they're attempting to change the name and that it could be called the "All Bradley, Galt and O'Toole Show All the Time." Is there any truth to that?

Hon Mr Carr: Even I won't comment on that one.

1630

Ms Churley: Madam Chair, you brought up the issue of silent pagers and telephones. That's something that I have mixed feelings about simply because, fortunately—

and it is happening slowly—we are getting more women in Parliament. I know of a particular woman who has young children out of town. There are times when she's in the House and she has her silent pager because there's something going on with the kids and she's nervous. I remember being in that position and not having any way at that time, if something happened with a kid in hospital, except having my staff, far away, run in and get me. I have mixed feelings about it, but I also understand. I don't think we should be conducting business on it, but there are times when, because we have this technology and because we have these silent things, if you are having some kind of family emergency there is a possibility to have a certain comfort there if you're on duty for hours. That's a consideration.

The other thing I'd like to say in this discussion is that we also don't want to sound like Luddites here. I'm unfortunately in many ways too caught up in technology. I'm one of those who has learned how to use it fairly effectively and have it all and carry it all with me. In a way, I don't like it. I'm always wired. Wherever I am, there's the PalmPilot, there's the pager, there's the cellphone, computers everywhere: in my home and in my office.

The reality is that it is the age we are living in, and as time goes on, it is going to be used more and more. At some point—and I'm not saying it should be now—technology is going to catch up even with the parliamentary system that we have now. What we are hearing here is that most of us, if not all, agree at this point that we don't want to move in that direction. I don't mean to be speaking for everybody, but I think that's what I'm hearing.

I still think, given that there is some information from other jurisdictions, albeit some are so different that there's no relevance, that we should be looking at it in terms of how it can best serve us. If there are ways that technology can serve us better in the House, we shouldn't dismiss it out of hand. I'm one who has mixed feelings about having a laptop in the House. I've got to admit that there are times—and I would support very strict rules around how it is used—when I would like to be able to have a laptop in the House to do certain things.

What is the difference? I bring in stuff to read: books, magazines, articles. I catch up on my reading from printed material. I write letters in longhand in the House. I do all that stuff anyway when I'm on duty and I've got to get it done. You have to question: what is the difference, since more and more of us are using laptops to conduct our work, if we are doing it in there anyway? There are issues around noise, the keyboards and all of that. I'm not suggesting that we recommend that we do it now. I think the day is going to come when we will, and we should be looking at other jurisdictions and the best kinds of rules to have around it. I don't want to just say, no, we are not interested, forget it, and let's not do any more work on it.

Hon Mr Carr: Just on the issue of the silent pagers, we haven't wanted to be intrusive in checking for them as people are coming in, so what we do is, just occasionally, if somebody's out in the open playing with something, Wayne will do something. As you know, you can bring it in, because we don't check, and very discreetly—

Ms Churley: And you can't hear it.

Hon Mr Carr: And you can't hear it; it just vibrates.

Ms Deller: I'm just going to add to that and say that the issue with cellphones and pagers was an issue of intrusion on the debate and disruption. With vibrating pagers and cellphones, that becomes less of an issue. I think the Speaker and the other presiding officers have exercised some tolerance with allowing the silent pagers, or at least ignoring them whenever possible. The only thing is, if you do not switch them from "sound" to "vibrate" and they go off in the House, Wayne does take them from you. Just be forewarned.

I think you've all hit on the crux of the issue, which is something we were saying at the beginning, that maybe the starting point is to look at what the purpose is of the House and the role of the members therein, and that's what you first determine before you determine whether or not laptops and what they are used for. I think to a certain extent, Marilyn, you make a good point, that eventually it's probably coming down the road and what is necessary is to consider what are the guidelines around their use, and, ultimately, is the issue one of decorum or is it one of technology?

The Chair: I have four speakers. I just want to remind you that the purpose of today's meeting is to try to get as much information as we can from the Speaker, the Clerk and the Clerk Assistant and then go back to the caucuses and come back next Thursday with whatever the consensus is from your own caucuses. The clerk pro tem for our committee, Ms Freedman, has had her staff compile an excellent package of references. I know that our caucus members have each received a complete copy of that. When our caucus colleagues say, "What is used successfully or unsuccessfully in other jurisdictions?" don't forget we've got that tremendous tool that the clerk invested a lot of time in.

I'm going to try to get into a rotation here. So even though, Dwight, you had your hand up to speak, I'm going to Julia because she hasn't spoken.

Mrs Julia Munro (York North): Thank you, Madam Chair. I would just like to pick up on a couple of the comments that have already been made with regard to this issue. Marilyn referred to not wanting to be a Luddite, and I feel the same way. However, at the same time I'm reminded that even in our own motion, where it talks about the fact that we're looking at reforms that will improve democracy and enhance accountability—if I keep those two things in mind and then I look at this introduction of technology proposal, it seems to me that one of the dangers of this, other than those which have been suggested, and certainly the decorum, the question of the use of any of that technology, is, does it take away from the opportunity for debate? In the current system that we have, members have an opportunity, very often spontaneously, to do things like the two-minute hits. I

think that the more distraction you have—and yes, like Marilyn, I bring in my stack of stuff—the less the likelihood of your being part of that debate. That would be really defeating the primary purpose of our being here.

I recognize that the Chair's comments are that we are to use this opportunity to hear this and then have further discussion on it, but I think we have to use those ideas that have been laid out for us in the resolution as the key for the manner in which we do this.

On the issue of the silent pagers—and maybe, again, it's a bias that mothers share more than fathers—I see the opportunity for the blind eye, if you like, to the silent pagers because they shouldn't be a distraction. I think the current system is appropriate. If they aren't turned to being silent, then I certainly agree that we shouldn't have those distractions in the House. But I do think there is a role for them if they are silent.

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I think that speaks to the bigger issue in terms of coming back to, what are the ways that we can enhance our ability to take part? While we have the paper distractions and those commitments and people go out for telephone calls and things like that, I am reluctant to move too far in the direction of increasing further the kinds of distractions and ways by which we get left out of what is our primary objective, and that is to be involved in debate.

Mr Duncan: Like Marilyn, I'm wired all the time, but it has nothing to do with technology.

Ms Churley: We noticed.

Mr Duncan: First of all, I do listen to members in debate. There are times when I pick up a book or something, but I listen to some members because they are entertaining, and I mean this sincerely, on all sides of the House, and sometimes because that particular member in my view, regardless of political stripe, usually says something worth listening to. I learned something last night from Ted Chudleigh and Bill Murdoch about farms. Remember he was talking about maintenance of the farm and who's to look after the fence on the left-hand side?

My own view is that, given the history of Parliaments in the Commonwealth and given what theoretically we should do, although I, like everyone, acknowledge that that has perhaps gone by the wayside, I don't think we should go down the laptop route in the chamber. I feel very strongly about that. I would like to see us move to a position where perhaps we are respecting one another more and listening more to one another.

There are a couple of other technological issues that we may want to address too. Fewer and fewer cable services are carrying the legislative channel. I consider that to be very serious. I would think members of all parties—the government obviously would like the opportunity to use the parliamentary channel to get its message out, we'd like to get ours out and the third party would like to get their message out. That may be something we want to be concerned about.

One other little pet peeve I might see a use for some kind of technology for: I hate snapping my fingers at those kids. I just hate that.

Ms Churley: You don't have to do that.

Mr Duncan: I know you don't, but a lot of people do. I don't know if that's an ancient parliamentary right or whatever. If I had a little red thing I could hold up or a blue thing or an orange thing, whatever, or if I had a little button you could push like they have on planes—but I don't either. I try to go like this, but some days you hear that and these poor kids jump.

The Chair: It's Wayne who does it.

Mr Duncan: That's a little pet peeve of my own. You asked about things that technology might be able to help with. If I had a little button on my desk that could signal the need for a page, I might enjoy that.

I think we should be looking at ways of making the House a more deliberative body. When we get to our other discussion about the role of members in the House, we may want to look at reforms. We're going to put forward some ideas—for instance, joint sponsorship of bills between private members of both parties, those sorts of things—where the body could become more deliberative and encourage less grandstanding—I know none of us likes to talk about that—and more deliberation. There are some nights in there when there might be two or three members and the debate is interesting. I know the folks at Tim Hortons aren't going to be talking about it, but for those of us who have been given the responsibility of being here, I think it's very worthwhile. I say that with sincerity. There are members on all sides of the House whom I enjoy, some because they're entertaining and some because inevitably they lend real insight. I do believe that's the direction we should be moving in. I believe that technology and all the attendant glitz that goes with it may in fact hamper that, and I think we should be very cautious about this.

The Chair: I just want to confirm, Dwight, that the second part is the role of private members, period; it's not just limited to members in the House.

Mr Ted Arnott (Waterloo-Wellington): I've just taken receipt today of this BlackBerry, which is manufactured I think in my constituency, as a matter of fact. When this issue was last discussed by this committee, I think in 1996, these things were just a figment of somebody's imagination. This, to me, is totally different than a laptop. It's completely unobtrusive. I can sit down here and send and receive e-mails and it won't bother anybody. There's no sound associated with it. I'm learning to use it, so I don't know its full capacity, but I don't think it's conducive to sending and receiving long e-mails or messages from my staff who tell me what to say and I stand up and say it, although maybe that is a possibility in the future. I don't know.

But it is a very discreet piece of technology that I don't think would bother anybody. I have from time to time observed some members of the chamber privately using these new gizmos in a way that helps them do their job. Perhaps they're more productive; perhaps their staff can get in touch with them when there's an emergency that requires their immediate attention. And all of us as members have demands on our time that are consider-

able. There's time that's set aside for us in the chamber, and then we have committee duty that we have to attend to. Most of us have an office here at Queen's Park and one at home in our constituencies, and then we have constituency functions, so we are rather hard to get hold of when our staff need to get hold of us. So I think this is going to be something that I will use a great deal.

The Chair: If you have permission.

Mr Arnott: Right. If I have permission from my colleagues. I gather that this is technically illegal—that's not the right word, but technically I shouldn't be using this in the chamber right now, so I won't, for now. But I think there will come a time when most of us will be using this kind of technology, because in a way, to me, it's perfect for MPPs, maybe members of Parliament too. It's almost like it was designed with us in mind. All of us are busy people, and in trying to keep up with everything it's something that will be very helpful in terms of our productivity.

I was opposed to the use of laptop computers when it was discussed last time by this committee. I think I actually had an opportunity to play a fairly decisive role in defeating the motion that would have made a recommendation that we allow their use; is that not correct, Lisa? It was just a recommendation, was it not?

The Chair: It was 4-4, wasn't it?

Mr Arnott: Yes. It was a tie vote and I was chairing the committee, and I voted against allowing the use of laptop computers. I agree with you, Dwight. I think we want to maintain that chamber as a forum for debate, and to the extent that we can do that, we're doing the right thing. And decorum is important to me. I feel very strongly that we all need to comport ourselves in a way that would make our constituents proud of us. So we have to be cognizant of that at all times, but at the same time technology is coming and there are new technologies that I think all of us might find to be useful in the future.

The Chair: It's kind of humorous glancing up at the monitor. I hate to admit it but, having been here before we had television, and for any of us who were, I think it would be a fair comment to say that the decorum in the House did somewhat degenerate once we got into television, and the drama and theatre of it became far more exaggerated.

Mr Duncan: Sobriety increased.

The Chair: Well, true. That's what I'm told, in the evening sessions.

I don't have any other speakers on my list. Are there any more questions for our guests?

Mr Duncan: May I just respond for a moment, please?

The Chair: Yes, of course.

Mr Duncan: This may be a little more difficult for the third party, but the way we're able to spread our time in the House, I know the government has to maintain—we have an hour and a time when we have to be there. In terms of the technology you're using, I have one of those things. I rarely carry it around with me. I guess where

I'm coming from is that when we have that hour, in our case—and I know it's probably more difficult for the third party and likely for the government, just given the nature of the creature, but when we're there for an hour, I think our objective should be to find ways of focusing members' attention on that chamber for that hour or for that two hours whenever you're there.

Myself, I do use that thing in other circumstances to communicate not only with my constituency office but with my family and with others. But I would hope that in our deliberations here, not only as we're dealing with technology but with the role of backbench members in all of its potential, we try to find ways where we can focus attention on the issues and on one another, because you represent a group of people that I don't. When you speak, I am seeing 100,000 people from your county, or at least the majority of them, being represented, and it may be a diametrically different position than those that I represent. I think it's important that we try to find ways where we can bring greater focus to that, and I hope we can find some ways of, again, making this place a more deliberative body, number one, and one where when we do divide and we do have serious differences, we can express them.

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But one of the rule changes we agreed to in 1999 that I am very pleased about is the reference of bills to committee after first reading. That, to me, was a good decision, and I'll give the government credit. When the federal people introduced that, what they did was they took away second reading debate. This government left that in. The federal government—my colleagues, my cousins, whatever you want to call them—have sent some pretty controversial bills that way; for instance, the UI changes back in the early 1990s, where by sending it to committee you got rid of second reading debate. That hasn't happened here.

I think Brian's Law was probably the best example I have seen in my time here of where people of goodwill of different political stripes can work together. In my view, even though you may differ at the end of the day with it, it raises the tenor of debate and it raises all of us up. It makes us look like what I think all of us hope to achieve at some point, a body worthy of the respect of the people who sent us here.

Ms Di Cocco: Just in addition, for me the whole relevance of the chamber is what I certainly want to see us protect, and when things encroach on that, whether it be the decorum or whether it be technology etc—I really do believe that one of the good things about this committee is to be able to enhance that relevance, and Dwight eloquently put where we learned something in the chamber. I think maybe it's time; it's time we moved forward through this debate in discussing what the purpose and that relevance is and how we can make it a better place to conduct the business of this province.

Mr Joseph N. Tascona (Barrie-Simcoe-Bradford): I think what we're hearing here is somewhat of a consensus. I'm pleased that we've had our Speaker and

the Clerk and the Clerk Assistant, because their views are very valuable, and certainly if there's anything that could assist them in doing their job, I think they would have told us, in terms of technology. But certainly the comments about what you're there for in the House—you're there to debate and you're there to participate in the debate. And there are certainly avenues. If you want to leave the House, you've certainly got technology outside of it to use; it isn't too far away.

I think Ted's comments are fairly to the point. The type of technology you're talking about—the Black-Berry, the laptop, the silent pager, the cellphone—is all for the same purpose, which is to do business which is outside of the House, in essence, and not to assist you in the debate. If you could magically push a button and have a speech come on or get some good research to help you in the debate, I think we'd all be looking for that, if it could contribute to the debate.

But I think the point is, I could see laptops—I'm only speaking for myself personally, but I could see that type of technology really distracting away from the members' concentration on what's going on. When you need some help in terms of the debate, I think Julia can say that, especially with the two-minute hits in terms of trying to get people to participate, it's tough if they're not focusing on the debate and what people are saying.

So I think this serves a useful purpose, and I think for Ted it's something that's being revisited in a sense, but I think the purpose of it has been served. So I'm pleased that we've had some discussion on it.

We'll report back next week. I can't say what we'll report back on, but we'll have some differing views.

The Chair: Thank you. I think this has been a very productive meeting, and I thank all members for their constructive comments. I particularly thank the Speaker, the Clerk and the Clerk Assistant for your being here and giving us information from your perspective, which is very important to all of us on all sides of the House.

So if there isn't any further business before the committee—

Mr Duncan: Could we not pose questions to the Speaker on a number of other items right now?

The Chair: We might all have questions.

Would someone like to move adjournment?

Mr Arnott: I move adjournment.

Mr Duncan: Support.

The Chair: Thank you. All in favour? Carried.

The committee adjourned at 1655.

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