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Board of Internal Economy

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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the eleventh meeting of the Board of Internal Economy of the 44th Parliament.

[*English*]

We'll start off with the minutes of the previous meeting.

[*Translation*]

We have a point of order, or a request from Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order and also a request.

I move to reverse items 6 and 7, and to take item 9 following item 4.

The idea is to concentrate all the decisions concerning members and administrative rules affecting members so that we can review them today. That is my first proposal.

I would like to know if my colleagues agree with that.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have everyone's agreement?

Mr. Brassard would like to speak

[*English*]

Mr. John Brassard (House leader of the official opposition): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

While I don't disagree with Madame DeBellefeuille, I think we should be going right in camera and dealing with item 8 first and item 7 second. I think we can defer item 6 in camera to later, and then we move into the public portion of the meeting after that. My suggestion would be that we move to item 4 in the public portion after we finish with those two items in camera. I think they're very timely matters that need to be addressed. That would be my proposal, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, is this acceptable?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I don't object to this, but I still want to warn my colleagues. We may have one more meeting to go. I really want to make sure that, before we leave at the end of June, we have made decisions on all the things that have to do with constituency offices, MPs' budgets, and so on. I would like to make

sure that we deal with all of those items today or, perhaps, next week.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's fine.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian (House leader of the New Democratic Party): I agree with Mrs. DeBellefeuille on this. Given our agenda, we will meet next week, it is unavoidable. It is better to determine what we want to discuss today. I agree with Mrs. DeBellefeuille that item 4 and item 9 are important and that we need to determine what we will discuss next week.

Since we will also be holding part of the meeting in camera, we need to establish what would be the best way to proceed. It seems to me that we could set a time today to go into closed session, after we have considered items 4 and 9. I would agree to that. The other important items could be deferred to next week.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Holland, you have the floor.

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's my view that we have an agenda in front of us. I'm comfortable with the order that's there. I think, if we want to invert this to be in camera, we could talk about that, but doing so would be left for in camera. I think we should just proceed with the agenda we have.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you.

After hearing the discussion again, I think we can get through four items today, two in camera as a priority, and two in public.

If I hear Madame DeBellefeuille correctly, items 9 and 4 are the in public priorities. I agree with that. In camera I would suggest numbers 7 and 8, and if there is an opportunity to meet next week to deal with these other issues, then we're prepared to do that at any point at the beginning of the week or at the end of the week, Mr. Chair.

Thank you. That would be my recommendation.

• (1105)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have consent to adopt the new order, which would be item number 8 followed by number 7, and then over to number 4 and then to number 9?

Does that make sense? Did I read that correctly?

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: I hadn't understood it that way.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: No?

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: I understood that we would start with items 4 and 9 in public, and then move into closed session later.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I see.

I had understood that we would meet in camera at first, but we can—

Mr. Brassard, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. John Brassard: I think there is a priority on the part of the committee to deal with item 8, considering that we're running up to a timeline. I don't expect items 7 and 8 will take much discussion, and I expect that perhaps item 4 and item 9 will take longer discussions, but I expect that we could get through these four items within the allotted time.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I guess what I'm looking for is direction.

First of all, do we agree on the change, and what will that change be? Do we go the public route first and then over to the in camera route, or vice versa? I'm hearing different stories.

Mr. John Brassard: My proposal is that we go in camera first and then we go public second.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. That's what I had heard.

Is that acceptable?

Mr. Peter Julian: In the interest of consensus, Mr. Chair, I will cede on that.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Holland is shaking his head.

No...?

Hon. Mark Holland: No. We have an agenda to deal with the in camera item. I don't mind it if you want to start with a priority item, but I think we have to deal with that first.

My preference would be to do public first. I don't think it will take a lot of time, as we've had conversations on it. I think it should be dealt with first.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are we okay to start with numbers 4 and 9 and then come back in camera?

Mr. John Brassard: Okay. We're fine.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I would like to submit a brief point of order about next week's business.

You are aware of the security event that occurred on Parliament Hill. All MPs received alerts to inform them of the emergency situation. As you know, the French alert message arrived eight minutes after the English alert message. The form and colour of the message was different from the messages we usually receive. There are even members of my caucus who thought that hackers had sent the message.

I have spoken with the Sergeant-at-Arms about this, and he is well informed about the situation. However, we would like to see a report so that we can find out the cause of this discrepancy. If an event with serious consequences were to occur, it would be problematic for the French-speaking people to receive the alert message eight minutes after the English-speaking people.

I would like clarification on this. If you could add this to the agenda for next week's meeting, I would be very grateful.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very well.

I think we're all in agreement to ask that the Sergeant-at-Arms give a report at the next meeting, which is next Thursday.

We will start with item 8 on the agenda.

[English]

I'm sorry. We're going to go in camera first.

Mr. Peter Julian: We do the public first.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'm sorry. That's my mistake.

We've gone back and forth so many times I got confused.

That's fine. We'll start with number 4: "Cost Pressures on Members' Budgets".

[Translation]

Mr. St George and Mr. Fernandez will make their presentation.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I believe we have Mr. d'Entremont here for the third item, and I guess the question would be whether we allow him to get back to his day.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Realistically, Mr. d'Entremont, if you don't mind coming back at our next meeting...?

Mr. Chris d'Entremont (Chair, Working Group on the LTVP and the Centre Block Rehabilitation, House of Commons): I'm wonderful for the next meeting and my report as long as that is okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We apologize for bringing you out.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont: It's not a problem, sir.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Thank you for bringing that up, Mr. Julian. That's a good point.

While we're still public, do we want to cover item number 2?

[*Translation*]

This item pertains to business arising from the previous meeting.

[*English*]

Everything is okay? Good. We've done one. We've done two.

Now we'll go to number 4: "Cost Pressures on Members' Budgets".

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Mr. St George, you have the floor.

Mr. Paul St George (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am submitting proposals to the Board of Internal Economy that are intended to address questions raised by members of the board, that have been analyzed by the House of Commons Administration. These issues relate to the impact of rising costs caused by the growth in the property market and the increase in the limit on advertising expenditures.

The first question relates to constituency offices. Over the past five fiscal years, the median monthly rental costs of these offices have increased by more than members' budgets.

To provide members with greater budgetary flexibility, the administration is requesting that the board allow members to charge the equivalent of \$3,000 per month for rental costs to the central budget. This amount is based on median constituency office rental costs.

The administration also requests that the board authorize the chief financial officer to review the maximum threshold annually based on the consumer price index.

The administration would monitor the impact of additional costs charged to the central budget, and if necessary, submit a request for funding through the 2022-23 supplementary estimates and the 2023-24 main estimates.

[*English*]

The second item relates to secondary residence rental costs, which is the largest expenditure under the travel status expense account. The administration observed that the average rental costs incurred by members have increased by about 20% over the past five fiscal years, while the account increased by approximately 10% during that same period. As a result, the administration proposes that the board approve a one-time increase of 10% to the travel status expense account to offset the increase in secondary residence rental costs.

The final item relates to the advertising limit, which was temporarily increased by 10% to 20% of members' office budgets, as of April 2020. The administration proposes that the advertising expense account limit be set permanently at 20% of the member's office budget, to provide members with greater flexibility to communicate with their constituents during the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my presentation. I would be pleased to answer any questions that the members may have.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

We'll have Mr. MacKinnon, followed by Mr. Julian.

Mr. MacKinnon.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'd also like to thank the House Administration staff for their work. On behalf of many of my colleagues across party lines, I can certainly say that there are more and more challenges in providing services to the public.

A great deal of pressure is also mounting around wages, as Mr. St George mentioned. We are far from parity where staff is concerned. So we face a challenge in terms of keeping wages competitive as well. There are also issues in terms of where services are provided to the public.

We would prefer to be on main streets so we can be conveniently located for all our constituents. Rents are up across the board.

Thank you very much for your analysis, and I draw the same conclusions as you.

The geographic location of offices also presents challenges. You mentioned constituencies that are large in area or have a high population density.

In your analysis, do you plan to look at differences between ridings across the country, on which we could base future adjustments?

• (1115)

Mr. José Fernandez (Deputy Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): In our analysis, we looked at supplements provided to MPs based on the regions or constituencies they represent. In particular, I'm talking about the supplements provided based on the number of constituents and geographic location. The supplements are paid to account for the added pressures there might be in urban centres or in rural areas, where expenses such as travel costs can be a little higher.

We continue to monitor budget utilization to determine if there may be pressures in that respect.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Perfect.

[*English*]

Now we'll go to Mr. Julian, followed by Mr. Calkins and then over to Mr. Brassard.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker.

This is an important question. We are, as members of Parliament, really the last line of defence for Canadians who are looking for support in a wide variety of federal issues and in interaction with federal ministries. My riding office in downtown New Westminster is an example of that. We've helped about 20,000 people over the years, but we're finding that there are more and more people who are coming in to seek assistance. As a parliamentarian, I have the job of making sure they get that assistance.

When Kabul fell there was literally a lineup. I'm on Carnarvon Street in downtown New Westminster. There was a lineup right under the SkyTrain station, and the lineup went around the block and into the area where the SkyTrain station is. The need is very big, but I've certainly found that with the high cost of rent, I'm not able to allocate as much of my budget to making sure that we're actually taking care of the increasing caseloads we're seeing.

I think this proposal helps to address that in part, but I look to the B.C. model. For B.C. members of the legislative assembly, the budget is actually taken out of their members' office budget. It is applied centrally. There are criteria, according to which, for each of the offices there are a certain set number of square metres; one has to make sure it's an accessible office; one has to make sure it has certain limitations in terms of visibility. All of that is set, and so all the members of the B.C. Legislative Assembly have basically the same criteria. It's a system that works extremely well. It means that those MLAs in high-rent districts aren't penalized in providing supports to their constituents compared to MLAs who live in communities where there is much, much lower rent.

My question to Mr. St George and Mr. Fernandez is to what extent they have examined the B.C. model. I would suggest, in terms of the recommendations, that part of those be to mandate the administration to look at the B.C. model and to make recommendations at a future Board of Internal Economy so that we can look at the best practice, which to my mind is, really, the one in B.C., in terms of ensuring that members' office budgets really go to providing services and not to the increasing amount of rent.

Were you able to look at the B.C. model? Is it appropriate that you'd come back with recommendations at a future meeting?

Mr. Paul St George: Thank you for the question, Mr. Julian.

We did look at a couple of models. We do intend, obviously, to look at them further. However, currently, we feel that in the existing model we have we do have supplements that look at electoral and geographical locations. Therefore we already have various levers that are in place to ensure that there's equity from that perspective.

Certainly it's something we could go back to look at a little more closely. We'd have to come back with an understanding of what the full impact to the members' constituents would be, in terms of the contracts, the insurance, etc. We certainly can do that.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. So you would be amenable to that.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to suggest that we add to the instructions to the administration that they come back at a future meeting with recommendations based on best practices. Perhaps there are other ju-

risdictions that have taken a similar approach, but the B.C. model seems to me to have really appropriate ramifications for how we structure our work at the local level.

• (1120)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have consensus on requesting that from Mr. St George? I believe we do.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm not sure. I understand the argument being made, but does it keep us from adopting these recommendations?

Mr. Peter Julian: No.

Hon. Anthony Rota: No, not at all. We're asking Mr. St George to submit a report so we can determine if there will be other solutions in the future.

[*English*]

We're good with that.

Now we'll go to Mr. Calkins, followed by Mr. Brassard.

[*Translation*]

Then it will be Mrs. DeBellefeuille's turn.

[*English*]

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Chief opposition whip): I just want to speak to what Mr. Julian brought forward.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Look, I don't necessarily have a problem with asking for it, but I think we're asking the administration to tackle something that's extremely difficult, considering the breadth of the country and the number of regions we have. The various costs associated with living in numerous cities in numerous provinces are going to be much more substantive than they are for simply looking after the needs and modelling after a single province, like British Columbia, with one relatively concentrated area. Two-thirds of the population of British Columbia live in the GVA-Victoria area. It's a completely different thing from what we have for the country.

I guess that doesn't stop us from trying, but I wouldn't want to be the one to have to undertake that task. I'm pretty satisfied with what we're actually doing right here.

Hon. Anthony Rota: What exactly are we saying here? We're not asking for a report, or we are, or there's a problem with asking for some kind of examination?

Go ahead, Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I would support Mr. Julian's suggestion that we have an analysis of some of the things that he mentioned. I endorse the proposal as a whole, unless there are further comments.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

We'll continue....

Mr. Brassard, did you want to add to that?

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair, first of all, I want to thank the administration for coming back with this suggestion. Obviously, staff have been extremely.... The demand for their efforts has been extremely high over the course of the COVID pandemic. We've seen that in our office with the amount of interactions we've had.

This will help, and we're hearing from our members about the retention of staff and the pay impacts. This will help with that. It's my intention to use any realized savings—because of the central budget looking after the office—to increase the salaries of my staff, because they deserve it, quite frankly, and they are relatively low paid, in my view, compared with some of the other work that goes on.

I would suggest one thing, and I'm going to look for consensus on this, Mr. Chair. In the course of the fiscal year, we're allowed to give one raise to our staff members. In some circumstances...certainly in my circumstance, I have done that at this point. I would ask that consensus be sought for a recommendation that we add a waiver for the one-year spacing between employee raises.

If it is the intent of members to use this money to augment salaries for our employees, some of those employees have already received an increase this year. That would make them ineligible until the next year.

I'm looking for some consensus to allow that to occur, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is that something that we—

Mr. Peter Julian: Agreed. That's a good point.

Hon. Anthony Rota: —would take care of in camera, along with number seven?

Mr. John Brassard: We could.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think that would be a more appropriate place for it.

Mr. John Brassard: That's fine. I know we're public. I want to signal that, because it could be a problem for some members that we need to realize, but we can deal with it in camera.

Hon. Anthony Rota: It seems like it would fit better in item number seven, which is our fourth item.

Mr. John Brassard: Perfect. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think the argument's already been made, and it seems like there's some consensus, so we'll move on and get back to that one in a second.

Right now, we have Mr. Calkins, followed by Mr. Brassard

[*Translation*]

Then it will be Mrs. DeBellefeuille's turn.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I wanted to get some clarification on the travel status expense account, because this is problematic for some colleagues.

My understanding is that for those colleagues who choose to purchase a secondary residence or have a residence that they own here in the capital region, there is an allocation for them to...I think it's \$50 a day, if my memory serves me correctly.

Can you confirm that's the case?

• (1125)

Mr. José Fernandez: Yes. For the ones who own, it's \$50 a day.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That has been in place since 2003. Is that correct?

Mr. José Fernandez: I don't recall, but we can find it.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: It's been a long time.

Mr. José Fernandez: It has been for some time.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Any of the increase that we're proposing to the travel status expense account right now would be beneficial to people who stay in hotels or stay in a rented apartment. Would anybody who stays in a purchased residence see any change to that?

Mr. José Fernandez: No, since the maximum they can claim is \$50 per day.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: All right.

The other thing I would like to get some clarification on is the use of the travel status expense account for members, even when they're outside their home province. If a member of Parliament is outside of their home province, they must use the travel status expense account for any hotels or accommodations, whether they're in Ottawa or not.

Is that correct?

Mr. José Fernandez: When they're outside the national capital region, they have a choice. They can either charge it to their TSEA or the MOB. That's why there's some...they can maximize. The TSEA is only for the use of the member. It's not for their employees. They can charge on this account the accommodation and per diem expenses they incur while travelling in the constituency, the province or elsewhere in Canada as well.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mr. Brassard.

You're fine? Very good.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I will be brief.

I want to thank the House Administration staff for doing an analysis based on documented data in record time. They listened to the staff in the members' offices, our staff and our teams. I support all the recommendations before us.

I agree with Mr. MacKinnon when he says that perhaps we should be doing more in-depth analysis of the supplements based on number of constituents and riding size.

It's more expensive for rural MPs to travel to their ridings. For example, the member for Lac-Saint-Jean said yesterday that it takes him an hour and a half from his constituency office to get to Normandin to attend a dinner, and that doesn't include the time it takes to get back. That's a total of three hours' driving time. It's a lot of time and mileage.

I agree with Mr. MacKinnon that these supplements must be reviewed at some point. I think it's important, particularly for ridings that cover a lot of area and include many municipalities, which translates into a lot of travel and driving to meet with constituents.

Thank you very much. I urge you to close the debate so that this passes.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, the floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mrs. DeBellefeuille summed up the proposal well.

I would also like to thank the finance team for this.

I think the decision will lead to better quality services for the public. That's basically what the work of parliamentarians is all about.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions or comments?

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Holland.

You're on mute, Mr. Holland, or there's a glitch of some sort.

Hon. Mark Holland: Can you hear me now?

Hon. Anthony Rota: We can hear you. It's perfect.

Hon. Mark Holland: You can hear me and I can't hear you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: The interpreter is indicating to me that the sound quality is very poor, which is making her job difficult.

[*English*]

Hon. Mark Holland: I will have to replug this.

Anyway, I'll figure that out later.

Hon. Anthony Rota: There's no interpretation, apparently, due to the quality of the sound.

• (1130)

Hon. Mark Holland: Okay.

How about now?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's good. Please proceed.

Hon. Mark Holland: There's something wrong with that other headset. I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker.

First of all, yes, I'll extend my thanks to the House Administration. The reality is that our offices provide essential functions on

the front lines for Canadians. This will go entirely, I think, towards assisting constituency offices to be able to help their staff. I think that's important.

I have a question to follow up on Mr. Calkins' question. There hasn't been an adjustment in the daily amount for those who own a residence. I'm sorry; I just want to confirm that it's not contemplated to change that \$50 a day in this as well. There's no adjustment to that.

Mr. Paul St George: That is correct. It's not in the proposal today for an adjustment.

Hon. Mark Holland: Okay. I was just curious what the logic was if there's an adjustment being made for 10% for the budget generally and for other related expenses but not to adjust that expense. It hasn't been adjusted in a long time. Would it not also make sense to adjust that?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Monsieur George or Monsieur Patrice can take that.

I believe Mr. Patrice wants to take this question.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): Yes, given the discussion that we had today and the various elements that were raised, obviously it was our intention to proceed with a deeper analysis of all of the cost pressures and our different rules to simplify and clarify them. Obviously we'll consult with the various House leaders, whips and so on to address ongoing matters that would create issues. The administration will do that review in consultation with the various whips over the course of the summer to address any kind of inconsistencies or pressures that need to be addressed.

Hon. Mark Holland: Just as a final point on that, Mr. Chair, if there is a process by which these things are adjusted automatically, as many other items are, so that we don't have to deal with this on an ongoing basis, it should be adjusted as costs change. It would change in the way that the per diems automatically change.

That makes sense so that we don't have to continue revisiting it, but I would just posit that, if you are changing the other amounts, and this amount hasn't been changed in a long time, it would seem logical to me that there also be a change there. That seems to be a bit of a miss.

I don't know if other people have the same feeling. I would be comfortable applying the change to that as well.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Then what we are doing is this. I seem to have consensus on the recommendations, and we will be coming back with a report. The staff will be coming back with a report on the office costs, possibly looking at the B.C. model.

From there, the other issues will be looked at on a separate basis, so we are good.

Very good, we'll continue then with item number 9, "Professional Development Project and Training for Members' Employees".

I believe Ms. Daigle will be making the presentation. Am I correct?

Yes, okay, we'll let Ms. Daigle continue, and Ms. Laframboise will be there as well.

[Translation]

Ms. Robyn Daigle (Director, Members' HR and Business Partner Services, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Today I am submitting a proposal for the professional development project and training for members' employees.

In June 2021, the Board of Internal Economy approved a one-year pilot project to support professional development for MP employees. As part of this pilot project, each MP was provided with up to \$5,000 from the central budget to support training and development to support members in their parliamentary duties. The pilot project coincided with the summer break and the fall election, which took place in the context of a pandemic.

The limited use of the pilot project has made it difficult to assess its success. To date, 111 MPs have participated in the pilot project, incurring total expenditures of approximately \$150,000. This figure reflects only the use of the pilot project for MPs' employees since employees of senior agencies and research offices were not included in the initial pilot project.

• (1135)

[English]

Given the timing of the pilot, we are recommending that the pilot project period be extended until March 31, 2023. This will allow for better evaluation and review of the pilot.

We are also recommending that the pilot include the employees of House officers and national caucus research offices. Caps would be set based on employee counts commensurate with MP offices.

In a related but separate note, in reviewing the delivery of training offering some members' staff, we are also recommending that the existing health and safety training as well as retirement planning training for members' staff be charged centrally.

I am happy to take any questions from the board members.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there questions or comments?

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that I am fully support the recommendation.

I recall a certain meeting during which Mr. Holland convinced us to approve this pilot project with the support of the entire Board of Internal Economy.

As a member of Parliament, I have used this budget. In the context of a pandemic, it is very demanding for our staff to work and serve the public. Our staff need resourcing, additional training, and support. I can tell you that this budget is very well spent and very useful for our human resources.

We also have very good support from your organization, Ms. Daigle. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, as I've learned through the grapevine that you have to leave us, because you've been promoted. I'm very proud of you, and I'm sure that the people you'll be working for are very lucky to have your expertise.

Personally, as whip, I have enjoyed working with you and your team. I salute your professionalism and take advantage of the fact that this part of the meeting is public to thank you for your dedication and your professional rigour. I wanted to put that on the record.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'd also like to praise Ms. Daigle.

Ms. Daigle, thank you for your work. I'd also like to congratulate you on your promotion. I know that you will continue to contribute to democratic and parliamentary life. I wanted to thank you very much.

I wanted to ask you a question about the budget. It seems to me that several MPs didn't take advantage of the amounts offered. Indeed, 111 out of 338 MPs were able to take advantage of the budget. A total of \$150,000 was used. The average expenditure is between \$1,300 and \$1,400, which is only a third of the budget allocated to each MP. In my opinion, this budget for training is extremely important.

Having a budget is one thing, but having MPs use it to improve employee training is another.

What can we do to get MPs to use this budget? It makes sense to me that they use these funds.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

That's a very good question.

The pilot project, which was launched last summer, during the election period, was offered at an opportune time. This is an important factor.

In terms of promotion and awareness of the pilot project, I have to say that not all MPs' offices were necessarily aware of it, even though there were communications to that effect.

This time, we have set up a messaging system for whips' offices so that they can inform their caucus members, who in turn will inform MPs and their staff. I think that's an important point.

Another issue is the availability of employees to participate in training and the various service offerings.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much.

That would have been really important.

In my opinion and in the opinion of the people who work in my office, the idea of contributing to the training of our employees was successful. Employees wanted to take the training, and they used the budget allocated to it.

In my view, this is a success, but we need to know what the next steps will be before we can assess whether the pilot is truly a success. It would be important to make this a permanent project.

How do you see the next steps for this pilot project? If this is seen as a success, what steps would be needed to make this pilot project a permanent one?

• (1140)

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Promoting the program is the next step to ensure that everyone is aware of it. Before the end of the pilot project, the Board of Internal Economy will review the results. We will also work closely with the whips' offices to ensure that the information is shared with MPs and their staff.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

Mr. Holland, go ahead.

Hon. Mark Holland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I want to thank Madame Daigle for all of her incredible work. It's absolutely been a wonderful pleasure working with you. I wish you every success in the future. It will be very well deserved, I'm sure.

Similarly, I want to say that we've used this in our own constituency office to great success we suggest that it's something that every office would benefit from. I think a lot of employees aren't aware of it, so we need to do whatever we can do to raise awareness of it and make sure that it is as successful as possible. Giving our employees an opportunity to have access to funds dedicated to their betterment and training is, I think, incredibly important.

I'm very appreciative of all the work that has been done at this point.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any other comments or questions?

I take it that we are all in accordance with this and the recommendation is going through. Very good.

I think—

Mr. Peter Julian: Sorry—

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I want to get a sense of when we will be reviewing this program. I know that Madame Daigle said it would be before the end of the pilot project, but it seems to me that it's possible, perhaps, to have an interim evaluation even prior to that, and perhaps have the Board of Internal Economy decide, even before the end of the program, whether we feel that the pilot program has been a success.

I wouldn't want to put all of that consideration off into 2023. I think it is something we could examine as early as this fall.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. We're good till March 31.

Is there a date you want to suggest?

Mr. Peter Julian: I was going to suggest before the end of the year.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You're suggesting the end of the year.

Does that sound good to everyone?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. We'll come back with it before the end of the year. Very good.

Ms. Daigle, on behalf of the board, thank you very much for your service. I wish you all the best. I'm very happy you're not leaving the Hill. You're still going to be within arm's reach—I should say “arm's length”—if we need you. You are leaving a void, but we wish you all the best in your new endeavour.

Thank you.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Voices: Hear, hear!

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll now go in camera.

[*Translation*]

The meeting was suspended for a few minutes.

[*English*]

I would ask everyone to stick around. As soon as we go in camera, we'll continue.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

• (1140)

(Pause)

• (1215)

[*Public proceedings resume*]

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We're going to number 5. It's the “2021-2022 Year-End Financial Report” and carry-forward to 2022-2023.

We have Monsieur St George and Monsieur Fernandez.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor.

Mr. Paul St George: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to present to you the 2021-22 Year-End Financial Report. It compares the year-to-date financial information for this year with the previous year.

This is the first of two year-end financial reports. The second report will be presented to the board this fall following the external audit. This report, prepared by House Administration staff, was not audited and is based on modified cash basis of accounting in accordance with Public Accounts of Canada.

I attest to the accuracy and reliability of the information contained therein.

• (1220)

[*English*]

Turning your attention to slide number 2, which relates to the year-end results, the authorities for 2021-22 total \$547.6 million. Expenditures amounted to \$510 million, leaving a surplus of \$37.5 million. This surplus corresponds to the lapse that will be reported in the Public Accounts of Canada.

In next slide, as shown in the surplus analysis, the amount of \$37.5 million is broken down as follows: 55% pertains to office budgets of members and House officers attributable to the general election, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other various items; 17% relates to the budgets of committee associations and exchanges, mainly due to the impact of the pandemic; while 28% pertains to House Administration, mainly attributable to job vacancies, the pandemic, as well as delays caused by global supply chain issues.

Annually, with the board approval, the House carries forward lapsed amounts of up to 5% of the main estimates, which corresponds to \$19.2 million for this fiscal year. Therefore, a total of \$6.8 million would be allocated to the office budgets of members and House officers. The remaining \$12.4 million would be allocated to the House Administration and could be used to offset unforeseen operating pressures, as well as various member-related projects and initiatives: for example, the life-cycling of IT infrastructure not received last year due to supply chain issues, the continuation of corporate prevention programs related to occupational health and safety, improvements to members' financial management tools and the management of corporate assets.

[*Translation*]

Therefore, I am seeking the board's approval to include a carry forward of \$19.2 million in the 2022-23 supplementary estimates.

This concludes my opening remarks, Mr. Speaker.

I look forward to your questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

[*English*]

Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you for the presentation.

Based on the slide that I saw, the carry-forward that MPs have from the fiscal prudence or the election-related savings is \$6.8 million. Is that right? And of that, the lapsed budgets for members of Parliament was \$20.58 million. Did I remember that number correctly?

Mr. Paul St George: From the prior year, that's \$20.6 million.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Yes, \$20.6 million. That's that difference of \$12.4 million you had up on the slide—and you listed a few projects that would be covered by that. I'm wondering if you could give me some more clarification.

It seems to me that it's money that should be allocated to improving the quality of service that members of Parliament can deliver. Can you assure me that the \$12.4 million will be spent directly on things that improve the ability of members of Parliament and their offices?

Mr. Paul St George: That is a very good question.

The surplus itself—the \$12.4 million targeted for next year—as in previous years, is used for initiatives the House implements for various systems. For example, we have a very significant one next year that is referred to as the “expense management system”. That's creating a significant change to the way claims and transactions are processed by members directly. It's providing a system that is more efficient, at the end of the day.

It is also used to cover various pressures. For example, at the last meeting, we talked about retroactivity of salaries for certain members within administration. That is not a budget item within the authorities. Sometimes we will look at those surpluses. They may carry forward and be utilized to offset some of that.

• (1225)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions or comments?

[*English*]

Everyone is in accordance with the recommendation.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll move on to number 10.

We have Ian McDonald, who will be presenting to us.

Mr. Ian McDonald (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The annual report was distributed to Board of Internal Economy members yesterday, following its adoption by the Liaison Committee yesterday. It includes information on the activities of each joint and special standing committee during the 2021-22 fiscal year.

[English]

In the last fiscal year, committees held 852 meetings, heard from 3,725 witnesses and presented 148 reports to the House. Total expenditures were \$156,000.

The current period included an election in the fall of 2021, which helps to explain a small decrease in the level of activity compared with other full.... It's comparable to election years and a small decrease over previous full years. However, if we look at the level of activity from January 1 to March 31, 2022, there have been more meetings, witnesses and more hours of meetings than at any other time for the same period during the last eight fiscal years.

The report also contains an updated virtual committees dashboard as an appendix, which is also the next item on the board's agenda.

With that, if board members have any questions, I would be happy to try to answer them.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

You know how much I like to have this item on the agenda of Board of Internal Economy meetings.

I'll try not to take too much time. These dashboards and reports reflect all the work done in committee by members. As we read the report, we can see that this represents a lot of work for the administration, the clerks, the analysts and the researchers, but also for all members and their staff.

Mr. McDonald, you have written this to us, but I would like to hear you to say it publicly. At my request, as a member of the Board of Internal Economy, you have produced an appendix in our documents on the number of witnesses who testify entirely in French or in English.

Could you tell us what percentages you mentioned in your letter?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Certainly. I'll be happy to do so.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'm sorry to interrupt.

Are you referring to item 10 or item 11 of the agenda?

I see that we're at item 10.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I can save my questions for item 11, if you like. It's still the report, but the dashboard is appended.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The question will still be for Mr. McDonald, but I want to make sure that all the participants know what item we're referring to.

Mr. Eric Janse (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, this is part of item 10.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. That's great.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: You know that I do my reading, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You do it very well. I have no doubt about that.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I saw that the dashboard was in the appendix of the report tabled in the House.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Perfect. We're going to continue.

Perhaps we can discuss items 10 and 11 at the same time.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Does my question stand, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you for the question.

As you mentioned, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, we did research that information. Since the beginning of this Parliament, we have observed the situation and taken into account all the participants, that is, members and witnesses. This research found that 20% of all participants spoke French and 80% spoke English. For witnesses only, 17% spoke French, and 83% spoke English.

• (1230)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: So the witnesses spoke in French 17% of the time. The others spoke in English.

Mr. Ian McDonald: That's just the witnesses.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: All right.

I feel it's important that we take a look at those percentages.

Mr. McDonald, it's been two years since our last update, and the situation seems to be unchanged. Since Parliament resumed in 2019, the ratio has been fairly consistent, with 80% of witnesses choosing to speak English instead of French.

That explains why francophone members become annoyed from time to time. Interpretation and technical issues take a much greater toll on members who speak French or who are unilingual francophones, so I want you to know that.

You also talk about technical issues in your report. We have noticed a definite improvement in the number of interruptions, even though February was a challenging month, from what I gather. We felt it, and we alerted you to numerous issues at that time. The dashboard figures illustrate that, in fact.

I think headsets are one of the key issues. You bought better-quality headsets at a cost of \$120 each. As I understand it, all 338 members of the House each received three headsets.

Have you noticed that few members wear the headsets, which aren't all that popular?

I was at Friday's Liaison Committee meeting, and I noticed that more than half of the chairs weren't wearing their prescribed headsets, which were purchased at great expense to improve sound quality for the interpreters.

How do you plan to improve compliance with the headset rule? How much of the responsibility falls on the clerks?

It's a real problem.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you for your question.

Since the pandemic began, we have worked very hard to do everything we can to ensure good sound quality and make improvements.

As we saw recently, one of the reasons why the headsets were chosen was their high-quality built-in microphones, and that improves sound quality for everyone—the interpreters as well as in-person and virtual participants.

Through our research, we came to understand the important role these microphones play in sound quality. We realized that they were even more important than we had thought, so we certainly need to continue educating witnesses and members on the importance of these devices.

We rely on members to use the tools we make available to them. Members who feel that it's not the best device for them need to know that other options are available. They can choose a headset that goes over only one ear, as you mentioned in another meeting, an earpiece, a desktop microphone and so forth. Members who don't find the headset suitable have other options. Mr. Aubé's team and the House of Commons staff can certainly help anyone needing that type of assistance.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Who is responsible for letting members know that they aren't wearing the proper headset and that not wearing it could cause hearing loss for the interpreters?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I think that responsibility falls on the members, themselves. Many times in the House, when an interruption occurs, the Speaker moves on to the next person. It is very important that members use the equipment available to them.

• (1235)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Very well.

My next question has to do with the number of interpreters. You don't specify in your report whether the number of interpreters is sufficient or not. In the hybrid Parliament, a number of committee meetings have been cancelled because there weren't enough staff or technical personnel to accommodate parliamentary committees and the legislative agenda at the same time. The part about the interpreters isn't very thorough.

I will focus on item 11, unless the chair would prefer that I discuss the matter of the interpreters. I am actually very worried about committee travel. The Liaison Committee oversees that funding. Interpreters are going to accompany many committees on international trips.

Let's say all those committees travel so they can conduct their studies and take parliamentary interpreters with them on those trips. Will Parliament—which may or may not be hybrid—have enough

interpreters left so that parliamentarians, in Parliament and on committees, can carry out their duties?

Are you able to answer that question?

Mr. Ian McDonald: That's very hard to answer because of all the variables involved. As you mentioned, we are not sure whether meetings will be held in a hybrid format or not. Whether meetings take place in person or in a hybrid format will have an impact on the availability of interpreters.

Something else to consider is whether the committees will all be travelling at the same time and whether they can hire interpreters on site or whether they will need parliamentary interpreters.

Those are three variables, but there are certainly more.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: From what I've read and heard on the board, only one committee will be hiring interpreters locally, the Standing Committee on International Trade, I believe. Interpreters will be accompanying the other committees.

I'm not asking you to say for sure that we won't have enough interpreters. Would you agree, however, that the situation poses risks given the shortage of interpreters and the fact that Parliament will probably continue to sit in a hybrid format?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Yes, that's certainly a possibility, but there are ways to manage things. Committees could travel during weeks when the House is not sitting. As you mentioned, only one committee plans to hire interpreters on site, while outside the country. The funds that would be used to send interpreters with the committees could be used to hire interpreters locally, where the committee is meeting.

Although this isn't something that was planned for, there are solutions. We will look at how to make the best use of interpreter resources to support committee meetings here, in Ottawa, even when committees are travelling.

However, interpreters travelling with a committee likely won't be available to accommodate another meeting being held that day or even another day. It will depend on the length of the trip. As I said, a number of variables enter into the mix. Each case has to be examined to identify the specific consequences. To some extent, we do that now when we look at the availability of interpreters for committee meetings. We reach out to your offices every day to keep you informed.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: You're quite good at answering the questions, so my hats off to you, Mr. McDonald. Nevertheless, you aren't making me feel any better about the possibility of finding ourselves in a tight spot as far as having enough interpreters for the next session of Parliament is concerned.

Over the past two weeks, some chairs have got into a bad habit. They are convening informal meetings, arranged by the clerk, with-out interpreters, because none are available, since a number of committees have been cancelled as a result of the hybrid model.

You can't tell me for sure, but what you are saying isn't all that reassuring since the decision has yet to be made as to whether the hybrid Parliament will continue. We don't know how Parliament is going to work in the fall.

I know enough at this point to conclude that it's not necessarily the best time for committees to travel outside the country.

I greatly appreciate your answers, and I commend you on your report.

• (1240)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

Thank you very much, Mr. McDonald.

This item doesn't require a decision, but it certainly brought some issues to our attention.

Shall we move on to item 11?

[*English*]

I'm sorry. We have to table....

Are we okay with tabling this report?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Good. I think that's fair.

We're down to item number 11. Have we already covered that?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I have a question for Mr. Aubé about item 11.

Mr. Aubé, my question is fairly straightforward. You have appeared before the board throughout the year to update us on the improvements you had made to the audio system, to meet audio quality standards for the interpreters.

The last time you were here, you told us that a study was under way.

Will you be sharing the findings of that study soon, or will we have to wait until the fall?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Aubé, please go ahead.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, Digital Services and Real Property, House of Commons): Mrs. DeBellefeuille, the consultants actually submitted their report last week.

The first step was to meet with the people at the translation bureau. We sent them the full report as well as the summary. We are in talks with them about possibly sharing the report with the NRC to identify where the report differs from what our records show. We will be sending the report to the Board of Internal Economy and presenting the findings to you.

As we thought, our in-person systems comply with ISO standards. Our virtual systems were shown to be of excellent quality.

The report contains recommendations on standardized headsets and microphones. You asked earlier whether it was important to standardize the use of microphones for all users participating virtually. The answer is yes. All the tools that were recommended are the ones we are currently using.

All the board members will receive a copy of the report. We don't want to make it widely available because we need to meet with the stakeholders first, the interpreters and the translation bureau.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Aubé, when will the report go out to the members of the Board of Internal Economy?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We can send it to you soon, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Can you send it today?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: That's what we would like to do.

Mr. Peter Julian: Can you send it by next Thursday?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We will check with the translation bureau to see whether we can get the translated report as soon as possible.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mrs. DeBellefeuille asked some important questions. As you know, we have been discussing the issue for weeks. A pilot project will be conducted in the next few months.

The interpreters are performing a colossal task, one of tremendous value. Every effort needs to be made to ensure their health and safety in the workplace. All of us on the Board of Internal Economy believe that. This information could be crucial. If next Thursday is our last official meeting for a while, we need to be able to discuss this issue.

• (1245)

Hon. Anthony Rota: What I've heard is that the report will be shared with members once it has been translated.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions or comments?

We will now go to item 12, "Report to Canadians 2022". The presenter will be Charles Robert, the Clerk of the House of Commons.

Go ahead, Mr. Robert.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): Hello.

I am pleased to present today the Report to Canadians 2022, the annual report of the House of Commons.

[*English*]

This report provides an overview of the work carried out by members of Parliament during the fiscal year 2021-22, as well as the efforts of the House of Commons administration to support you.

This year's report showcases the House's pursuit of service excellence. It demonstrates how the House Administration was able to ensure that business would continue while introducing new programs and enhancing services to members.

For example, the "Highlights from the Hill" section speaks about the efforts to support the opening of the 44th Parliament. For the first time, the members' orientation program was offered in a hybrid format. This included welcoming and swearing in re-elected and newly elected members and accompanying outgoing members in person or virtually.

This section also details the launch of a new application that enables members to easily submit employment-related requests.

It showcases a timeline of significant events during the year, including the dissolution of the 43rd Parliament in August and the 44th general election in September, and the opening of the 44th Parliament and the election of the Speaker.

[Translation]

To mark 100 years since the historic election of the first woman member of Parliament, the section includes a list of pioneering women who have marked the evolution of our parliamentary institutions over the past hundred years. Under "Members' Activities", the Report to Canadians 2022 describes the scope of work done in the House, in committees and during international and interparliamentary activities over the past year.

The "Reporting on Results" section describes how the employees of the House administration offered continuous support to members, in particular by ensuring the continuity of House activities and by protecting the health and safety of employees over the past year. For instance, it includes an overview of the latest developments and the rehabilitation work on the Parliament building, the renewal of the LEGISinfo website, and House administration's adoption of the new core value of inclusion.

[English]

Further to your approval, the report will be tabled in the House and made available to you on ourcommons.ca.

A promotional image of the report for use in householders and constituency mail has been prepared for you and will be available on the printing and mailing services website. This will give you an opportunity to highlight the report in your communications with your constituents.

We will also share the report through our social media channels and with our parliamentary partners and legislative counterparts.

The "Report to Canadians 2022" is offered in a printable HTML format. It is mobile friendly and accessible.

[Translation]

Thank you for your attention.

I am ready to answer your questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I have read the entire report. It was so interesting that I thought I would show excerpts to the students we sometimes meet, because it is very concise and well done, and includes Internet links.

Congratulations, Mr. Robert, for the accessibility of this report. In many cases, reports are produced, but are not meant to be read. They are meant to be stored in a library.

Your report was very interesting this year, Mr. Robert.

Mr. Charles Robert: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, the goal of our communications team was indeed to make the report much more available, accessible and interesting for all Canadians, because Parliament's activities are so important for the nation.

We think it is useful to present the report in a format that is more interesting and intriguing for all Canadians. This is helpful when you meet your constituents because it allows you to easily show them that you are not alone in doing your work, and that all members and all of Parliament contribute.

• (1250)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Just the part about the whips I thought you had not provided a lot of information.

Mr. Charles Robert: Noted.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Congratulations on your report. It is a good report that deserves to be read.

Mr. Charles Robert: Thank you very much.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Any other questions or comments?

[English]

We should table it in the House of Commons.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

There is just item 6 remaining, and the meeting will end in 10 minutes. I do not think we have enough time.

I will give Mr. Julian the floor, and then over to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Item 3 should be the first item on the agenda for Thursday's meeting. There will be some discussions in the coming days.

There is also the issue of the interpreters.

I think we already have enough on our plate for next week's meeting.

I propose that we begin with the LTVP working group for the parliamentary precinct and the rehabilitation of Centre Block.

I think Mrs. DeBellefeuille also suggested that we obtain a report on security incidents and on the opinion sent to members last week.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, do you have something to add?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I think it would be best not to start on another topic today. If you wish, we may adjourn, if the members of the committee agree.

After the meeting, I would like to talk with my colleagues about the interpreters and committee travel.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Brassard, do you have an intervention?

Mr. John Brassard: I'm okay with the agenda next week. I think we should defer item six, as well. We'll talk about what Mrs. DeBellefeuille wants to talk about afterwards.

Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Thank you very much for your co-operation today. We did cover a lot of ground.

The meeting is adjourned.

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