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Board of Internal Economy

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• (1105)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Welcome to meeting number 13.

[Translation]

This meeting is televised, and members may participate by videoconference.

[English]

We'll start with number one—minutes from the previous meetings.

Are there any questions or amendments?

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to clarify, with respect to the issue of having the flexibility around the two annual salary increases for regular employees, a decision we made on June 16, that it does not apply to bonuses currently.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That is correct.

Before going to number two, I'm going to welcome Ms. Findlay and Mr. Scheer, our two new members.

Welcome, and congratulations.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Just to clarify, which one of you two is going to be the official spokesperson?

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip): I believe that would be me.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. That's very good. Thank you, and welcome.

Now we'll move on to item number two—business arising from previous meeting.

Madame DeBellefeuille, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, welcome new members of the committee.

First of all, I want to thank you for the note explaining what happened regarding the lockdown alert. We wanted to know why the alert in French was sent a few minutes after the one in English, and why some didn't receive it. I think the explanation is clear. I also understand that everything is in place to prevent it from happening again.

Can someone confirm I understood the note correctly?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think that Mr. Patrice or the Sergeant-at-Arms could confirm that for you.

A/Commr Pat McDonell (Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Commons, House of Commons): I am sorry, Mr. Chair, but I did not hear the question.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The question is on the lockdown alert.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, could you repeat your question, please?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I was talking about the note we received explaining why Francophones received the lockdown alert after the alert in English, and why some people didn't receive it at all. Based on this note, I understand that everything has been set up so that all parliamentarians, regardless of the language they speak, will now receive these alerts in both languages.

Can you confirm that?

• (1110)

A/Commr Pat McDonell: I confirm it.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I have some questions about the committees' dashboard.

First, I want to congratulate the whole team, because maintaining a dashboard requires work, thoroughness and follow-up. I know the data collected are useful. Every organization needs performance indicators to improve, and the dashboard fulfils that role.

Basically, I'd like to ask two questions about graph No. 1; I can't tell you which page it's on, because all of the pages are marked No. 2.

According to this graph, in May 2022, retests were not conducted for 214 witnesses, 35 witnesses did not attend the planned pretest, and 19 witnesses failed the pretest. I find these numbers high.

After all was said and done, did all of these people testify? If so, could you explain the pretest process to me? Who participates, and who says what to whom?

Furthermore, who decides that a witness cannot testify if they do not meet the various criteria implemented to ensure witness participation and quality interpretation?

Mr. Ian McDonald (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): I will answer your questions first, and Mr. Aubé will be able to provide more details about the pretest process.

The first thing to mention is that, during the month of May, about 100 witnesses did not appear before the Standing Committee on Finance. Even though they were connected to the meeting, we knew it was very likely that they would not be able to testify before the committee. The month of May's statistics are therefore not very representative of the entire process, and I think that was mentioned in June.

I invite you to look instead at the numbers for the month of June, during which fewer witnesses appeared and none of them failed the pretest.

In general, committees do their best to conduct pretesting, sometimes even a second time just before the meeting, to make sure there will be no problems. You can see this by looking at the results for June.

The second thing to mention is that, in cases where a second pretest was done, that was when we could really see if we were going to have a problem.

In general, 60% of witnesses who did not go through pretests were invited less than three days before the meeting, which did not leave enough time to conduct tests. However, when we did test before the meeting, the success rate was 90%.

There is a process to follow to make sure the vast majority of witnesses go through pretesting and avoid problems. A smaller number of people had to do a last-minute test. Generally speaking, 90% of people pass the pretests, which avoids problems when they testify before a committee.

• (1115)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask a follow-up question.

If a witness doesn't participate in pretesting a few hours before their scheduled appearance, this is surely a failure, because it will have an impact on interpreters' health and safety, as well as on the witness who, without a doubt, will be interrupted. Furthermore, a member who does not use the same language as the witness will have the burden of ending that appearance.

Who decides if a witness that did not pass pretesting can still appear?

Mr. Ian McDonald: The committee makes that decision. Sometimes we don't detect a significant problem during pretests, only to detect it at the last minute. However, in the vast majority of cases, the information technology team detects problems and informs the committee clerk, who advises the chair or the members of the committee, as the case may be.

Sometimes, pretests occur before the entire committee, since these tests normally happen 15 minutes before the start of the meeting and members are already in the room.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: As you know, few chairs comply with the routine motion requiring them, at the start of each meeting, to tell members of the committee which witnesses went through pretesting, which ones passed, and which ones failed. I sit on several committees, and I can tell you that few chairs do this, if any.

I will give you a very specific example, which may resonate with my colleagues here. On September 26, the information technology team informed the clerk of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs that a witness had failed their sound pretest. It was not clear whether or not the clerk informed the chair. My little investigation led to two different answers. Maybe you know what happened?

In any case, if the chair were aware, why did he allow the witness to appear, knowing full well that interpretation would fail due to bad sound quality? Indeed, not only did that testimony negatively impact the interpreter, but our Bloc Québécois colleague was forced to interrupt and ask the chair to immediately stop the witness from testifying.

And so, I have the impression that the process is not standardized, which leaves a lot of room for the chair to play it by ear or exercise discretion. Do you think that the process is standardized enough, or that it leaves too much latitude for clerks and chairs?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Over the last few days, we already started communicating in writing with each committee clerk, reminding them of the importance of informing the committee chair of any technical problem with a witness, be it a bad connection or a witness's inability to provide sufficient quality sound.

It is important to us for committee chairs to be informed, because they and the members of the committee are responsible for decisions about these issues. Clerks are not the ones who decide if a witness may appear or not. That decision is always made by committees. The clerk can flag a problem, but the committee always has to make the decision.

That said, we must respect both official languages and the need to ensure interpretation for members, the witnesses themselves, and Canadians watching committee meetings.

• (1120)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: From what I understand, there were meetings with the clerks to raise their awareness.

Personally, I think there's a difference between informing and advising the chair. In the example I just gave you, I don't know if the clerk communicated information to the chair or advised them, but the chair certainly did not inform members that one of the witnesses had failed their pretest.

As whip for the Bloc Québécois, I don't want to have to give more examples like this at the next meeting of the Board of Internal Economy. This example should therefore be enough to get back on track.

We cannot allow a witness who fails pretesting to appear, particularly when that failure is obvious to information technology staff and the clerk. In my example, the chair, who was the only one with that information, did not communicate it to members of his committee. He alone decided to authorize that appearance, without the committee. In my opinion, this is an important distinction.

Mr. McDonald, a concrete example is always the starting point for making corrections. This example is good for everyone. Everyone needs to examine their own conscience, whether they are chairs, whips or people who coordinate committees. We must avoid letting this type of situation happen again.

This brings me to a final question, the dashboard being a passion of mine.

Can you tell me why the government whip and I were forced to work together to try and avoid holding an unofficial meeting of this committee? At the last meeting, we said informal meetings shouldn't happen, because they don't meet the requirement for holding meetings in both official languages.

Can you publicly say that this is the last time committee members will convene for an unofficial meeting held in only one language, in this case, English? The whips agreed that this is unacceptable.

Mr. Ian McDonald: That was indeed a mistake on our part, and you have our apology.

As we said in the spring, we never want that to happen again. We've discussed it with all of our staff to remind them of the importance of having access to interpretation during each meeting, since interpretation is part of the services we offer.

I'd like to come back to the difference you pointed out between informing and advising the chair. In this case, the chair must be advised. It's very clear and applies to both cases. We give advice and we will continue to give clear advice to committee chairs.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's perfect.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

We will now continue with Mr. Julian.

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

I would like for the Sergeant-at-Arms to go back to one thing, before I move on to Mr. Aubé.

I'd like to come back to the fact that the alert was sent in English several minutes before being sent in French. I know a new protocol is now in place for that, but I would like more details. Does your protocol provide for sending all alerts in English and in French simultaneously from now on? As you know, it's an extremely important health and safety issue.

[English]

A/Commr Pat McDonell: The protocol, Mr. Julian, is that they'll be sent in English and in French at the same time. That's what our community related to us when we were building this emergency notification system. They didn't want to have to wade

through one language to get to the content of the message in their first language. It is an emergency, after all.

In this particular case, and I'll go into a bit of detail on it, the operator didn't have the template for the message he wanted to send. A template hadn't been developed yet. It hadn't gone through the governance structure to be approved. So the operator, who was busy managing the incident, at the same time composed the message in English. He got busy again. Approximately six minutes passed. He composed it in French and then pressed the button.

Even with the new protocol that English and French will go out at the same time...and that's what it has been, actually, for all our messages. It's been English and French at the same time. You know, 5,000 to 6,000 or more messages will go out when you press the button. It's all computerized and it's about trying to find a line. We could all be in this room and you could receive a message one minute before I receive a message, or vice versa, because they're finding the lines to get out, finding the network.

But a delay of six or seven minutes is totally unacceptable, so we've addressed that.

• (1125)

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: That means messages in English and in French will now be sent at exactly the same time under this protocol. Is that correct?

A/Commr Pat McDonell: Yes, exactly.

With the help of Mr. Aubé's team, we are training system operators to make sure it does not happen again.

Mr. Peter Julian: That's perfect, thank you very much.

I will now address Mr. McDonald and Mr. Aubé.

Like Mrs. DeBellefeuille, I wish to extend a big thank you for the dashboard.

As for the provenance of the headsets, the House of Commons provided 70% of headsets used in June. Out of the 30% of witnesses who did not use a House of Commons headset, how many of them were unable to testify because their sound quality was too poor?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I do not believe we have that information at hand right now. We will need a little time to find it, but we will provide it to the Board of Internal Economy.

The reason we cannot always send headsets to witnesses is a lack of time to do so.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. I think it will be very useful to know when there were problems.

Mr. Ian McDonald: I think the number of witnesses unable to appear is very low, but we will send the numbers as soon we have them.

Mr. Peter Julian: Very good.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any comments or questions on the second point?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I think the audio system study was part of the second point.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm talking about the assessment study of the audio system. I believe that is the second point on the agenda for the public meeting.

Am I mistaken, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Anthony Rota: It was distributed to members of the committee for information purposes only, but if you have questions on it, you may ask them.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I don't have a question, but I wanted to speak. As this is a public meeting, I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks.

Another study drew conclusions after analyzing the problems that were found. Personally, I am quite happy that we can see these findings, because they give us a better understanding.

As I understand it, this study and the other one did not use the same technology or methodology, so you don't get the same results. In science, there is the whole issue of thesis and antithesis.

The message I would like to convey to the House of Commons Administration is this. The richness of the two studies before us demonstrates the administration's rigour in finding solutions in collaboration with the Translation Bureau.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that all those who contributed to the studies, namely the researchers from the National Research Council of Canada and the international specialist responsible for the other study, will sit down at the same table to agree on conclusions that will allow us to continue the improvement begun in the current process.

• (1130)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I know a lot of work has been done on this.

I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Aubé, who can explain what has happened so far and the negotiations that have taken place.

You have the floor, Mr. Aubé.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To quickly respond to the point you are making, Ms. DeBellefeuille, that is exactly our plan.

In October, we will hold a third round of meetings. As you know, we have been working on this report since January. We have been working with various stakeholders in the Translation Bureau and the National Research Council, NRC, to do this testing and to fully understand the initial NRC report. One of our goals was to address the issues raised by the Translation Bureau through the NRC.

In the document, we found action plans for this and we make recommendations, which include the deployment of the new micro-

phones and headsets. We are also going to make recommendations on interpreters' headsets, the second of the two main concerns.

I want to make it clear that these tests are done in a perfect environment, one that does not have Internet-related problems or the poor acoustics of a remote site. When we do tests for our House systems, as well as our virtual systems, it is not the elements of the system that cause problems.

So we want to validate this again with the Translation Bureau and NRC. During the week's break, we're going to do some testing with them and revise the document. We will try to reach a consensus on the reasons for the differences between the two studies.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Very well. Thank you.

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

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much.

I add my voice to all those who find it important to have proper systems in place. I know that a lot of work is being done. We must constantly seek to improve our systems.

The new report should be before us in the next few weeks. Mr. Aubé, do you know when that will be?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It will be submitted to the members of the Board of Internal Economy, Mr. Julian. However, we ask that you keep it to yourself for the time being. We don't want it to go around because it's important for us to have direct discussions with the people at the NRC. We don't want to end up with two documents that go in two different directions and could be open to interpretation. We want to have a meeting with the NRC, review our conclusions and validate them with them. Then, if necessary, the document will be made public.

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

Since there are none, we will move on to item 3: the 2021-22 audited financial statements.

This morning our speakers are Mr. St George, Mr. Fernandez, Mr. Newman and Mr. Généreux.

Mr. St George, I yield the floor to you.

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

I am pleased to present the audited financial statements for the year ended March 31, 2022, which have been prepared in accordance with Canadian public sector accounting standards. This document is one of the financial reports submitted by the House Administration to the board for the purpose of overseeing the financial activities of the House of Commons.

As part of the financial reporting cycle, the board received the unaudited year-end financial report for 2022 in June, which showed total expenditures of \$510 million. The purpose of this report is to compare actual year-end spending with spending authorities, and to report on budget variances.

[English]

From an authorities perspective, in the audited financial statements, the expenditures remained unchanged from the \$510 million previously reported to you. However, the Canadian public sector accounting standards require the board to account for other items, such as services received without charge. These total \$103 million and with other non-cash items bring the total net cost for operations to \$608 million.

Other notable reports in the package include the balance sheets, statement of changes in net debt, and statement of cash flows.

The financial statements are audited each year by an independent external auditor, which is currently KPMG. As in previous years, we have received an unqualified audit report.

I'll now pass the floor to Andrew Newman from KPMG to present the audit results. The board will then have the opportunity to speak to the auditors in camera following that presentation.

• (1135)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Andrew Newman, please proceed.

Mr. Andrew Newman (Audit Partner, KPMG): Thank you.

I am Andrew Newman. I am the independent auditor of the House of Commons, and my role is to provide an opinion on the external financial statements in accordance with the Canadian auditing standards.

Thank you for this opportunity to present our audit opinion on the 2022 financial statements and to provide a brief summary of the conduct of our audit. I would like to introduce my colleague, Jonathan Généreux, audit manager for the audit.

The chief financial officer has presented to this board the 2022 financial statements, which management has prepared using public sector accounting standards. Public sector accounting standards are used by all governments in Canada and are issued by the Public Sector Accounting Board, on which I served as a member and vice-chair for 12 years.

Our role as your independent auditors is to obtain reasonable assurance about whether these financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement.

The 2022 financial statement audit began with the development of our audit plan, which was based on multiple discussions with management. Our year-end audit was executed in accordance with that plan.

During our audit, we received full participation from the House management team and employees. All of our questions were answered, all of the required supporting documentation was received and all issues were satisfactorily resolved.

We have completed our audit, and we issued our audit opinion on July 7, 2022, in our independent auditor's report attached to the statements. That opinion states that the financial statements "present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of [the House of Commons] as at March 31, 2022, and its results of operations, its accumulated surplus and its cash flows for the year then ended in accordance with Canadian public sector accounting standards."

That concludes my report.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have any questions?

[Translation]

Does anyone want to comment?

[English]

Seeing none, I want to thank Mr. St George, Mr. Fernandez, Mr. Newman and Mr. Généreux.

I understand that it's normal and good governance practice for independent auditors to have a discussion in camera with board members without management present regarding the preparation of the year-end audited financial statements. Therefore, I would like to propose to board members that we hold a short in camera session without the House administration officials to allow board members to have this discussion.

Do I have acceptance of the members to proceed in camera?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Thank you. We will now take a short break to transition.

At this time, I'll ask the House administration's officials to exit the room, both in person and virtually. Once the discussion is complete, those in person will be summoned back into the room and those participating virtually will receive an email summoning them to rejoin us in the room.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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