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# Board of Internal Economy

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## Board of Internal Economy

Thursday, December 1, 2022

• (1105)

[English]

**Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons):** Welcome to meeting number 16 of the Board of Internal Economy.

[Translation]

We will start by reviewing the minutes of the last meeting.

[English]

With the minutes of the last meeting, is everything in order?

[Translation]

Perfect.

We will now move on to the second item on the agenda.

[English]

It is business arising from previous meetings.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

As mentioned on the agenda, we have received the new virtual committee dashboard. I want to again thank the team that keeps these statistics, these performance indicators. It is a concrete visual element to build on to continue to improve.

I have questions about at least two charts. Let me reassure my colleague Mr. MacKinnon: I am not going to spend an hour on the charts. However, I would like to ask some important questions, so that we can move forward and continue to make continuous improvement in this area.

As each page of the document is numbered “2”, I will refer to the number of the charts.

From chart 1, we can see that, as of October 2022, 55 witnesses had not scheduled a pre-test or did not show up for the scheduled pre-test. Looking at the percentage alone, one can say that everything went well, as 85.4% of the witnesses passed the pre-test. So it may seem that we are complaining about nothing. However, if we look at the number of witnesses involved, it becomes much more interesting. As I said, 55 witnesses either did not schedule a pre-test or did not show up for the scheduled pre-test.

Did these 55 people testify before a committee even though they had not done the pre-test or were not present for the pre-test?

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I think Mr. McDonald can answer your question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

You have the floor, Mr. McDonald.

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

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, I think it is important to look at chart 1 in the context of chart 3.

To go back to those 55 people, we did the test before the meeting. There was also a second test at the last minute, to determine whether or not the person could testify. Normally, the vast majority of these people pass this pre-test and can testify. However, chart 3 shows that for 17 of these 55 people, or 3.9% of witnesses, there were problems with the quality of the audio.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** In terms of wearing headsets, we see that there is an improvement. Efforts have really been made to tighten up the rules and lessen the ability of people who don't have the headsets recommended by the House of Commons to testify.

On the other hand, last week and this week, people were allowed to testify even though they did not have the recommended equipment. These people started to testify, but had to stop or postpone their appearance because of sound problems.

Despite all the efforts made, how is it that we still have this kind of situation? Why are we allowing someone who does not have the proper equipment to testify live to committee members?

• (1110)

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** A committee will always do everything possible to ensure that a witness can take part in the meeting.

As I mentioned earlier, the committee does a check with the person who is to give evidence before the meeting starts. It is at this point that the committee determines whether that person can testify. If they pass the test, they can testify. I would like to reiterate the importance of doing both pre-tests before the meeting begins.

However, there are still problems. Chart 4 shows that headset use continues to be a problem. Of all the issues identified in October, headset use is certainly the most significant, affecting 12 people. Every effort is made to encourage the use of the correct headset. It's really important to make sure that witnesses can participate in the committee meeting.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** I would like to know if committee chairs and clerks have a written directive encouraging them not to call on someone who is not wearing a headset and still wants to testify before the committee.

Is there a directive to make this infrequent and exceptional rather than fairly common, as it is now?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** We know that committees are increasingly tightening the criteria for witnesses. No motion has been passed by any committee or by the House of Commons requiring the wearing of a House-approved headset. However, the House and committees have the ability to make such a decision.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** We have all received a note from the Speaker in which it is written that headsets are now essential, if not mandatory.

In your opinion, how can this note be interpreted by the clerks and committee chairs?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Are you referring to the letter from the translation bureau?

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** No. I am referring to the note we received in which a reminder was given about the use of the headset provided by the House of Commons. It was signed by our beloved Speaker. We received it yesterday.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Yes. I think everyone is encouraged to wear House of Commons-approved headsets to all parliamentary activities to minimize the risk of having sound problems at parliamentary meetings.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** My last question is about the virtual committee dashboard. We have a target to meet and through the performance indicators we can see if we are making progress.

You will recall that it was said that having more witnesses appearing in person reduces interpreter injuries. The more witnesses and MPs attend in person and the more they wear their headsets when they attend remotely, the more you reduce interpreter injuries.

I'm quite curious, as this information does not appear in your dashboard charts. At the last meeting, you told us that 70% of witnesses appeared virtually and 30% appeared in person.

Have we made any progress on this? Are there any positive results?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** We did a check yesterday and we found that during October and early November, 60% of witnesses appeared virtually and 40% in person. So there was an increase of about 10% in the number of witnesses who appeared in person.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Basically, our goal was to reverse the trend, i.e., to return to the hybrid mode that prevailed before the pandemic, when 70% of the witnesses appeared in person and 30% remotely, by videoconference as we said at the time.

Mr. Speaker, I think it would be really relevant to encourage the addition of this chart to the next dashboard so that we can track the progress. Would it be possible for you to request this?

• (1115)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I think it's a reasonable request and Mr. McDonald is signalling to me that it would be possible.

So at the next meeting we will look at the dashboard with the changes that have been made, which will give us a good idea of how things are going.

Thank you very much, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. That's a good point you just made.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** That was my last question about the dashboard.

I have one last question about item 2b. However, if other people want to talk about the dashboard charts, I can stop here and speak again later.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** All right.

We will continue with Mr. Julian, and then we will return to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

**Mr. Peter Julian (House leader of the New Democratic Party):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If I understand correctly, we will first discuss item 2a, the virtual committee dashboard, and then we will discuss items 2b and 2c.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I opened the discussion on the whole of point 2. If you want to move from one point to another, that's fine. You can cover points 2a, 2b and 2c as you wish.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** It seems to me that it would be more coherent if we addressed the topics one at a time. I have questions to ask about each of them. For now, I will limit my questions to point 2a, i.e., the dashboard, which contains valuable information. Thank you.

As I understand it, in April, 92% of the witnesses had a successful pre-test, whereas in October that dropped to 85%. I know this is still an improvement on May, June and September, but it is still problematic that in 15% of cases the witnesses' equipment did not meet sound quality standards.

Now, if I understand correctly, this percentage does not include people who took and passed a sound test just before a meeting. If we include them, the number of failures drops from 55 to 17. So, can we say that the success rate for tests taken before or just before a meeting is around 96%?

[English]

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Go ahead, Mr. McDonald.

[Translation]

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Indeed, Mr. Julian, you are right. This is indicated in chart 3.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** All right. That's good.

With regard to the 17 people whose equipment was problematic, do we know how many of them gave evidence and how many were unable to do so because the chairperson or the clerk felt that the sound quality was inadequate?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** This information is not included in the table. It is not something that we have collected in a systematic way in the past, but we are changing our process to take it into account in the future.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** This is going to be extremely important for the dashboard, Mr. McDonald. So if there is a particular committee where there are still problems with sound quality and people are still allowed to testify, the whips will be better equipped to intervene with the chair of that committee to ask them to explain why people who should not be testifying are being allowed to do so.

Item 2c refers to the number of injuries. It is extremely important to prioritize the health and safety of interpreters.

It would therefore be good if the next edition of this dashboard could inform us of the number of people who were allowed to testify despite an inconclusive sound test. That way we can target the problems within the committees and follow up to make sure we have zero tolerance in this regard.

Thank you for answering my questions.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Before I give the floor back to Mrs. DeBellefeuille, I just want to remind you that earlier we decided to deal with item 2c when we got to item 3. So for now, you can still comment on items 2a and 2b.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

● (1120)

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you for sending us the results of the study conducted by the scientists who looked at the sound system in the House of Commons.

I am not qualified to pass judgment on their report, but what I understand from its findings is that they have assessed that the House of Commons sound system meets international quality standards. You can let me know if I understood that correctly.

If that is indeed the case, however, how come there are still accidents? I imagine these are due to external factors, such as connectivity issues or inadequate headsets, among others.

I would like to hear Mr. Aubé's views if he is with us. Now that we know the system is good, how are we going to further reduce the number of injuries to interpreters?

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I think Mr. Aouididi could answer that question.

**Mr. Yassine Aouididi (Senior Digital Product Manager):** Thank you for your question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

We have conducted sound tests with various scientists and translation bureau management. We have confirmed that the systems used for face-to-face participation meet all the requirements of the ISO standard, including sound quality. We have also confirmed that the previously noted problems with the hybrid format have been resolved.

I cannot comment on injuries, but I can say that the sound quality and intelligibility parameters of the systems were met.

You are right that there is still work to be done in relation to remote participation, where most of the sound difficulties manifest themselves. This is also mentioned in the report. Better control of connectivity, good equipment and proper use of the equipment are very important criteria for good sound quality and effective remote participation. If these criteria are not met, the sound cannot be improved further in the sound system.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** What more can IT departments do to ensure that everything is working properly before committee meetings? Can the sound problems be reduced further? Is there more to be done in this respect? If so, what should they focus on?

**Mr. Yassine Aouididi:** Thank you for the question.

We have a continuous improvement strategy in place. We evaluate incidents, look at what could be improved, and then focus on those aspects.

First, you have to do checks a few days before the witnesses appear and just before the meeting. Secondly, the equipment should be checked to ensure that it is adequate. The note sent by the Speaker, for example, talks about adopting a standard for headsets used to participate in a remote meeting. This will also help to improve sound quality.

For in-person participation, we already control all the parameters of the sound system. We try to replicate the same environment for remote participation. The more we control the sound parameters for remote participation, the better. This includes headsets, proper use of equipment, and sound testing.

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

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It says that the document "Simultaneous Interpretation System Witnessed Testing" is the property of the House of Commons and is not to be disclosed to any third party without the permission of the House of Commons.

The results of these tests must, of course, be passed on to the union that represents the interpreters. Have they been?

• (1125)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Aouididi, would you like to answer this question?

**Mr. Yassine Aouididi:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Julian, we were waiting for the consensus of the scientists, and it was sent to us by letter. So there is nothing to prevent us from releasing the document publicly.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** So, it has not yet been forwarded to the union.

**Mr. Yassine Aouididi:** Not yet, but it will be circulated publicly to all those concerned, including, of course, the union.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Making it public and passing it on to the union is a bit different. So I would encourage you to send it directly to the union, so that they can see the results of the testing that has been done.

Thank you.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any other questions on this issue?

I think we have covered point 2b.

[English]

We'll continue to number three, interpretation services. We've moved item 2(c) over to that as well.

We'll start with Michel Patrice, who will give us a short presentation.

[Translation]

**Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

At the last meeting, I made a commitment to meet with the deputy minister of the department responsible for the translation bureau. That meeting took place last week. I am here to provide an update.

As a first step, I clarified that we were still awaiting the response from the translation bureau to the issues raised at the September 29 Board of Internal Economy meeting. This response was received yesterday and, as I understand it, has been distributed to all board members.

I also indicated at that meeting that we wanted to see some movement on the remote interpretation service.

[English]

I can report that since then, the translation bureau has put out a call for freelancers who are interested in doing remote interpretation to provide their availability for the January to June period, so there's been some movement on that front.

[Translation]

The other issue raised was related to the marking of exams that took place in early November.

[English]

I can report that half of the exams have now been marked. My understanding is that everyone who has qualified or was successful in the exam will be offered either employment or a freelance status.

The onboarding time, with respect to those particular individuals, depends on the circumstances. We can assume that there are going to be new people who will be able to embark with the bureau. At this time I'm going to say that it's too early to conclude that those advancements would provide for an increased capacity for January, for the return of the House after the new year. It is my hope that in the short term it would at least stabilize the 57 events scheduled, avoiding potential cancellations.

That's my update. I'm to connect again this week with the deputy minister, and we'll continue to update the board as new information becomes available.

Thank you.

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

We'll start with Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Patrice, I found the information provided by the translation bureau, including the total of 51 disability injuries over the past two years, to be extremely significant. I feel we should always keep that in mind. We talked about the technical side of it; now we need to talk about the added workload. Thank you for your update.

This past November 4, 70 potential interpreters sat the annual accreditation exam held by the bureau. You just told us that the exams were marked for half of those candidates, so 35 out of 70. I'd like to know how many of them passed the exam.

The onboarding, integration and transition processes for new employees could require a great number of people. I know they won't necessarily be available over the next two weeks, but it seems to me that they should be able to complete those processes between December 1 and February 1.

Of the 35 individuals who passed the exam, how many will be available for February 1?

• (1130)

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** I don't have an answer yet as to how many of the 35 individuals passed the exam, but I'm committed to getting that information and clarification on the transition time for people who have accepted or would accept an offer of employment, either as an employee or as a freelancer.

Obtaining security clearance is a component of the transition period, and we're prepared to assist the bureau to the extent possible.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We will now go to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

She will be followed by Ms. Findlay.

[Translation]

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

I want to begin by thanking you for pressing for answers to our questions on more than one occasion. We asked them a while ago. Interpretation is central to the institution in order to ensure access to both official languages.

I'm a pretty genuine person, and I'm going to say sincerely that I find it unacceptable that the translation bureau has taken so long to answer our questions. To me, it's unacceptable, and I want to say that publicly so that the message gets through to the minister, whose role is to ensure that institutions like the translation bureau are serving parliamentarians and acting with diligence.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, I see that the letter sent to us is not dated. I wonder if the translation bureau is in the practice of not dating its letters when it's late to respond. I don't know if you could follow up on this.

The letter we received from the translation bureau raises a number of questions for me. I wish Ms. Laliberté were here with us, as it would have been easier to ask her our questions directly.

During his appearance, Mr. Ball inundated us with so many figures on new hires that we were unsure of the translation bureau's capacity. There was a great deal of enthusiasm, but we now realize that it was unreasonable to express enthusiasm. It wasn't reassuring at the time of his testimony.

The letter notes that seven interpreters have been hired and are already assigned to committees and the House of Commons. Therefore, these are not additional resources and they only maintain the commitment to cover 57 events.

Am I getting this right?

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** That is my understanding as well.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** The letter states that “new staff and newly accredited freelance interpreters were already included...” I will start by asking you to clarify whether this refers to interpreters waiting to be graded or new interpreters. I don't understand who this is and how many people we're talking about.

The bureau states that it has seven new employees and newly accredited freelance interpreters, but does not specify how many freelance interpreters.

I've been trying to get that magic number for several meetings now, but I still don't have it. How many interpreters are needed on the weeks when the House and its committees are in session and informal committee meetings are held so that foreign delegations may be received? The letter from the new acting president and CEO of the translation bureau does not specify that number.

Do you have the number?

• (1135)

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** I can't tell you for sure that we have that number.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Would it be worth our while to ask Ms. Laliberté to appear? Could we formally invite her to the next meeting? Some things are unclear.

This is just an observation by the chair, and the Board of Internal Economy must decide to invite her.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** I agree with your observation. It would give us the opportunity to meet her, since she recently took up her duties.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** If it's okay with everyone, we'll invite Ms. Laliberté, then.

[English]

We'll invite her to come to the board's next meeting. Hopefully, we'll have some clarification of what's happening with interpretation.

Go ahead, Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** I have one last question, Mr. Speaker.

Later in the first point, the letter states: “Should the House decide to go forward with this new way to provide services, we stand ready to work towards its implementation”.

I was surprised to read that. We received the letter yesterday and based on the French version, it would appear that the translation bureau is waiting to receive a formal request from the House Administration. I don't know whether we should understand the same thing from the English version—which says “Should the House decide to go forward”—but the French version says “Si la Chambre décide d'aller de l'avant”. However, we decided in May to conduct a pilot project, and on September 29 we gave the House Administration the green light.

Has the House Administration made a formal request to the translation bureau so that it can move swiftly and expeditiously?

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** That's a very good observation. It came up in my discussion with the deputy minister last week and I'm going to put that in the category of communication issues.

The decision made by the Board of Internal Economy at its September 29 meeting, for which the minutes have been released, includes a clear commitment to go forward with this new way of providing services.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** The deputy clerk of House of Commons Administration met with the deputy minister. When someone meets with a deputy minister, that means things have gotten more political, perhaps because there were communication issues with the translation bureau.

When I read the letter, I can see that there's a problem. It looks like the translation bureau has not been made aware of the Board of Internal Economy's request, although we've been requesting it for months. We're trying to find out how many interpreters the translation bureau has available to meet the needs of parliamentarians here.

The letter states that 70 interpreters sat the exam on November 4 and that those exams need to be marked. I'm not impressed when they tell me that 35 of those exams were marked by December 1. I wonder what the bureau is doing, because this is an urgent situation. We're waiting on this to continue our work. What's preventing the bureau from speeding up the marking process?

Also, as Mr. Julian said, just because someone takes an exam doesn't mean they pass it, and just because they pass it doesn't mean they choose to be an interpreter in the House of Commons or for committees. All those interpreters we are anxiously and enthusiastically waiting on could decide to go work elsewhere, in other sectors.

So I'm wondering if you've asked the translation bureau how they plan to speed up the marking of exams, so that we will know how many new interpreters will be available when members return to Parliament on January 30. This will allow the whips to make a schedule and see whether or not it's possible to increase the number of weekly events.

Has the bureau been asked this question?

• (1140)

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** That's part of the discussion, yes. At the last meeting, the information we had was that the exams would be marked after the House adjourned. I assume that the translation bureau has taken note of the Board of Internal Economy's deliberations and has begun the marking process.

I will be discussing this further with the deputy minister today or tomorrow. I'll try to get more information on how many interpreters have accepted an offer of employment and when they will be available.

I should point out that since last week's meeting, the deputy minister has been extremely cooperative.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Speaker, I'd like to conclude my questions with a thought.

As whip of the Bloc Québécois, I am called on by members of my caucus who sit on parliamentary committees and are asked to attend informal meetings. The chairs of these committees request interpreters for these meetings, but their requests are almost always denied because we don't have enough interpreters. Yet, even though the translation bureau has been unable to provide interpreters, committee chairs continue to hold meetings without interpretation, whether or not the meetings are arranged by the clerks. I find this situation unacceptable.

I want to tell you that, from the outset, as a francophone in the House of Commons, and as the whip for my party, I have been fighting about this issue and I feel I'm having to be the French police, which may seem heavy to my colleagues. Every day, I speak about issues with access to French on many levels, and many of my colleagues work with us, as does the House Administration, to find the necessary fixes and try to work miracles.

If we have no interpretation, the committee chair's or parliamentary secretary's first instinct should be to not hold the event, because it's not accessible in both languages due to the lack of re-

sources. However, I don't understand why we continue to hold meetings without interpretation.

Yesterday, I brought the issue to the attention of the chief government whip and the House Administration. We were receiving a delegation from Mongolia with members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. If I hadn't done something, if the House Administration hadn't done something, and likely if the chief government whip hadn't done something, the meeting would have been held without an interpreter, which would have been unacceptable.

The issue of resources and interpreting capacity is urgent and paramount for the next session. We're currently missing out on many events because they are being held in one language. I haven't mentioned the advocacy groups that come to the Hill to participate in multi-party caucuses or hold conferences that are accessible only in English because no interpreters are available.

This is urgent, because accessibility is really an issue right now. I could give you lots of examples, but I want to conclude by saying that you have my full cooperation. I appreciate the House Administration working to try to avoid this as much as possible.

I don't want to discourage my colleague the chief government whip. The reason interpretation services take up so much of our time on the Board of Internal Economy is because it's a major issue. Having access in both official languages to parliamentary proceedings and equally important informal meetings is part of our parliamentary duties.

I feel that when we see the new acting president and CEO of the translation bureau, we'll be able to tell her in person how important this issue is to us.

• (1145)

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

[English]

We'll now go to Ms. Findlay.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your work on this, Mr. Patrice.

We continue to have resource access problems. For instance, the ethics committee last night had to be cut short due to a lack of resources. The majority of committee members wanted to continue, but they couldn't. Finally the chair had to cut it because of the lack of resources, so this is an ongoing issue, obviously. We're all concerned about it.

I realize that I'm a relatively new member of this board, but at every meeting I've been at, we've been seized with interpretation and resources as issues that are hampering our ability to do our parliamentary work.



Given that, it seems to me, following from what Madame DeBellefeuille has been saying, that perhaps it's time for us to ask the public services minister to come so that we can express our concern on the urgency of these issues and get some response as to the priority the minister is placing on this and how they're seeing it from their side.

It's difficult to keep coming back with the same answers. My understanding from your report, Mr. Patrice, was that you said the number of new interpreters who have gone through the process, whose exams have been checked and who may stay on, simply stabilizes us at the 57 events. It is not increasing our capacity at all.

I don't have to be too much of a prophet to say that we will probably be continuing with hybrid Parliament in some form or other and hybrid committees. We are getting more of an uptake from witnesses, and, at the last meeting, we talked about encouraging more witnesses to come in person because that's easier for our interpreters. However, at the moment, we're still not even at fifty-fifty.

We need to elevate this discussion somewhat and get some direct answers from the minister. I don't know what my colleagues think, but that would be a suggestion I would have, because we find ourselves very concerned about workplace accidents. We're very dependent on a service that is high calibre—the ones who help us out, as they are today, are wonderful—but we need more of them and we've heard before that recruitment is difficult. This is a highly specialized field. On the other hand, people are coming through the process. People are testing. They are writing their exams, and we need to have some understanding of what our limits are going forward.

That would be my suggestion, as it remains very topical, very timely and a concern to everyone who works here.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thank you.

Mr. MacKinnon, I believe you had a comment.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip):** I would just like to address a few points. I do hear the comments from my two colleagues.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, I feel as much like the French police as you do. I can assure you that Mr. LeBlanc, our francophone colleagues in the government caucus and I are equally challenged by this situation. I hear the same things about this and I'm just as frustrated as you are.

As you and Ms. Findlay just pointed out, the amount of time we're spending on this issue on the Board of Internal Economy is beginning to take its toll on the entire board.

Mr. Speaker, I know that this is also weighing on you and the House Administration. So I urge us to continue to find solutions.

Here's a question, which I will direct to Mr. Patrice or the other participants.

When Mr. Ball appeared before us, we were talking about some thirty interpreters. However, yesterday's letter is far from that result: it speaks of seven new interpreters, and the possibility of

11 additional interpreters who would be willing to work remotely if that type of approach were adopted.

Is that correct?

• (1150)

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** The letter mentions a dozen remote interpreters.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** The letter does state the following: "Should the House decide to go forward with this new way to provide services [interpretation in dispersed mode], we stand ready to work towards its implementation. A dozen accredited freelance interpreters have already expressed an interest in participating in the project".

What are the roadblocks to this approach?

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** There are no roadblocks, Mr. MacKinnon. The decision was made by the Bureau of Internal Economy on September 29. When I spoke to the deputy minister, I reminded him that the House was eager to see these resources deployed.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** All right.

They have hired seven interpreters. If we add the 12 remote interpreters, that's 19 interpreters. We haven't reached 30 interpreters yet, but we do have 19 more.

Can that somehow help remedy the problems we're experiencing?

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** As far as the 12 interpreters who will be working remotely go, neither we nor the translation bureau can say how many hours they will be able to provide. Until we know that, we can't say how much additional capacity we will have in January. Anything I say would just be me trying to predict the future.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I imagine the same goes for the 70 prospective interpreters who wrote the accreditation exam. Obviously, they have to pass the exam and want to work in Parliament.

Can you tell us briefly how many of those 70 interpreters might be interested in working in this setting? Once they are accredited, how long would it take for them to be deployed, given that some would be employees and others would be freelancers?

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** I wouldn't want to speculate on that so as not to mislead the Board of Internal Economy in any way. As I said, it's an issue I will be discussing with the deputy minister the next time we meet, either today or tomorrow. I'll have more information for you after that.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I assume the translation bureau and the House administration will be pulling out all the stops to encourage the 70 prospective interpreters to work for Parliament.

**Mr. Michel Patrice:** I hope so, but you should ask the translation bureau officials when they appear.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thanks to both of you.

[English]

I want to make sure I have the right directions. We're going to be inviting the translation bureau and Ms. Laliberté to be a witness here, and we'll have questions.

On the minister, do we want to open the invitation, or do we have...? What do we want to do with that one? Do we want to wait until we've spoken to Ms. Laliberté before we invite the minister?

Ms. Findlay, is that good?

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** That's fine. Let's hear them first.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Very good.

If that's fine, we'll move on to item number four, which is supporting committee operations. Mr. McDonald will have a short presentation for us, and then we'll open it up to questions.

Go ahead, Mr. McDonald.

• (1155)

[Translation]

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In December 2021, at the beginning of this Parliament, the House administration submitted a request for additional resources to support committee operations. The Board of Internal Economy agreed to allocate temporary funding for five additional staff for the rest of 2021-22 and the 2022-23 fiscal year.

Today, we are seeking approval from the Board to make two of those resources permanent, specifically a clerk and a committee assistant. These resources are overseen by the group representing all committee clerks and assistants. Last year, all existing resources were fully utilized, and then some.

[English]

In the past, with lower activity levels, the administration staffed special committees using existing resources to support standing committees. However, currently the committees team is already fully committed in supporting the activities of standing committees. In addition, as we have shared in the document before you, we have had a consistent presence of special committees over the last four years, and an average of nearly two special committees per fiscal over the past 10 years. In fact, we are currently supporting four special committees by using the existing resources for standing committees and the two additional temporary resources granted by the board last year.

When the board granted these resources last year, it was with an understanding that we would report on their utilization at this time, and to determine if the need was ongoing and to confirm the permanent nature of these resources. As a result of the ongoing activity levels of committees in general and adding the ongoing activities and creation of special committees, we recommend this request to the board to help ensure committees continue to be adequately supported.

I'd be pleased to answer your questions at this time.

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

[Translation]

Is everyone in favour of the recommendation?

It's agreed.

We now go to item five, the increase to the parliamentary exchanges budget. Jeremy LeBlanc will be giving the presentation, and joining him is Marie-Ève Belzile.

The floor is yours, Mr. LeBlanc.

[English]

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am pleased to be here today to present a request, on behalf of the Speakers of the Senate and the House of Commons, concerning the budget for parliamentary exchanges. Joining me this morning is Ms. Marie-Ève Belzile, the principal clerk for parliamentary exchanges and protocol.

Parliamentary exchanges enhance Canada's ties with other countries and facilitate the sharing of ideas, knowledge, experience and Canadian values. Such activities include visits abroad by Speakers, generally accompanied by a delegation of members or senators, as well as visits to Canada by foreign Speakers. The envelope for parliamentary exchanges also supports the parliamentary officers' study program, which promotes the understanding of legislative institutions by offering a professional development opportunity to officials from existing and emerging legislative institutions.

During their visits abroad, the Speakers will generally meet not only with their counterparts but also with heads of state, heads of government, ministers and other parliamentarians. They afford an opportunity for all members of the delegation to promote Canadian interests from a parliamentary perspective.

Given our close co-operation with Global Affairs Canada, they also allow Canadian diplomatic missions abroad in the host countries to benefit from this prized access to senior decision-makers.

[Translation]

With pandemic restrictions coming to an end, diplomatic activities by parliamentarians resumed, and we noted a significant increase in overhead costs, as well as an increase in the number of requests for diplomatic activities in Canada and abroad. The current budget cannot keep pace with the level of parliamentary exchange activity.

The budget available for parliamentary exchanges has been roughly a million dollars for nearly 20 years. It has not been adjusted for inflation or recently soaring prices. The Speakers are therefore requesting a permanent increase to the budget to support the diplomatic work of parliamentarians in the promotion of democracy, good governance and the Canadian parliamentary system on the world stage.

[English]

The briefing note outlines the anticipated costs associated with activity levels for a typical fiscal year. Based on the expenses incurred since parliamentary exchanges resumed in earnest this fall, as can be seen in the table on page 3 of the note you have before you, at current cost levels a typical parliamentary exchanges program would far exceed the available funding, which explains today's request.

Therefore, the request before you is twofold. There's a request, first, for an adjustment for the remainder of this fiscal year, and a request for a permanent funding increase for the next fiscal and subsequent fiscal years.

As with all budgets for international and interparliamentary affairs, the budget for parliamentary exchanges is shared between the Senate and the House of Commons, according to the usual 30:70 ratio. I can inform you that the temporary increase for this fiscal year was approved by the equivalent of this committee at the Senate earlier today. The request for permanent funding is continuing through its main estimates process, which is currently under way.

I will stop there. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

• (1200)

[Translation]

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

[English]

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer (House leader of the official opposition):** First, just as a question, on page 3, where you have the anticipated average number of activities, would that include both Speakers, the Senate and the House?

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc:** That's correct.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** That's it for questions. I have some comments, but I don't know if anybody else has technical questions before I get into comments.

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

Go ahead with the comments.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** As someone who has been in the role that you have, Mr. Speaker, I of course fully appreciate the value that having parliamentary exchanges can bring to parliamentarians and to our overall knowledge here as it relates to our partnerships with other countries through a number of forums. I note that there are lots of those things going on, funded under the JIC, with parliamentary exchanges and all different opportunities for parliamentarians to visit with counterparts in other countries.

I just have a concern with the signal this would send. This is a pretty substantial increase in terms of percentages. At this time, especially if we think of some of the messaging in the Minister of Finance's speech about the things that are to come and the difficulties many Canadians are facing, without in any way trying to diminish the value of some of these types of exchanges, I just wouldn't be

able to support that level of increase. I think it sends the wrong message. There can be unlimited demand. It doesn't necessarily mean we always have to meet that demand. If there's a way to prioritize the goals that you may have, as Speaker, or that parliamentarians may have in encouraging you to strengthen ties with other parliaments, if we looked at it that way and came up with a bit of a ranking or prioritization, we should be able to manage.

As you said, the rhythm may have increased, but we can slow the rhythm down and live within the existing budget.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. LeBlanc, do you want to comment on that? No. Okay.

I believe we have Mr. Julian next.

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

I certainly see the value of the exchanges. I note that the uptake, up until recently, has been a little less than 60%. I find the budget increase that is proposed here to be significant. I think, particularly in the climate we're living in now, it needs to be re-examined in terms of the overall figures, as well as in terms of prioritizing, of course, exchanges.

All of this can be looked at and evaluated, but the amounts are significant. I think at this time it's probably worthwhile to look at this issue from another standpoint, and perhaps have a discussion with revised figures at another BOIE meeting.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any other comments or questions? I see none. That's very good.

This does affect me directly. Without taking the side of one over the other, I just want to point out that there have been 20 years without an increase. The real problem is that it hasn't been increased, and it doesn't really reflect the realities of inflation, especially post-COVID costs and increases. That's something I think everyone should consider.

There are two parts, of course, to this: the travel, which goes out, which people concentrate on, but also the reception of people coming in, which is a significant part of the costs.

I have a question for the board. What level of diplomacy do you want? When I get people requesting to come to visit with the Speaker, and I refuse them, shall I say that the board is no longer interested? That's just a question I'll throw out there for you. It's something to think about. Whatever the board decides I'm willing to go along with. It really is what is out there.

The parliamentary officers' studies program is something else that's included in there, where we have MPs going abroad and coming back. It is quite substantial. It's something to consider when looking at the costs of doing business as a government.

Those are the only comments I'll make there. I don't think there's much more to say other than that we have gone about three-quarters of the way through the year, and the coffers are now empty. I think there's no more than \$3,000 left. We'll go from there.

We'll go to Ms. Sahota. I'll let her continue.

• (1205)

**Ms. Ruby Sahota (Deputy Government Whip):** One thing I wanted to add to the conversation is that, although it may send the wrong signal or look bad, even as members of Parliament we are all spending more on flights and on the food that is in committees here. All of those costs are going up for these parliamentary diplomatic trips.

That's taken into consideration and that should be taken into account if the budget hasn't gone up in 20 years. You can imagine that in 20 years there's a huge difference in costs, even if it is the same number of trips or you're not dramatically increasing the amount of diplomacy work you're doing. It's important work. We have to recognize that this is the reality, due to the increase in costs today.

What do we do? Do we no longer have those opportunities, like the Speaker is saying?

That's something for the committee and all the members to consider and have an opinion on, but I think we should take that into account.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Very good.

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** Those are very legitimate points. Obviously, over the course of many years, inflation eats away...a lot more in the last few years. However, I think Mr. Julian's point is very significant as it relates to that. When we look at the budget utilization rate being where it's at, that would tell me there should be some room within that budget.

If I'm not mistaken, I think the JIC itself usually lapses. It might be hard to say over the last few years because of the pandemic, but I think if my recollection serves me, that's normally the case.

Perhaps that could be considered. If other envelopes are lapsing dollars, including the current budget that we're looking at, maybe we should wait a year or so and see how that shakes out and how many of these activities the Speaker can accomplish. The lapse rate of 40% would indicate that previous chair occupants in both chambers have been able to carry out their functions and welcome those who are visiting while still not using the full budget.

That would be my comment.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. LeBlanc, did you want to comment on that?

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc:** There are two comments that I would make it relation to that.

It is true that the utilization rate in previous years averages lower. I would say the cost increase over the last several years has been much more substantial than in previous times. As the Speaker has pointed out, in this year alone the entire envelope has been committed in nine months of the fiscal year. That's an indication of how dramatically the costs have increased associated with this.

The second point I would make around the JIC envelope is that the requests that we receive from associations each year far exceed the amount that is available in the JIC envelope. As a result, most

associations get far less than they request and are forced to reduce their activity levels, thereby reducing the size of delegations or not undertaking certain activities.

It is true that they end up lapsing funds, but they end up lapsing funds in part because they reduce their activity levels. If they're allocated \$100,000, they might spend \$80,000. Had they been allocated \$150,000, they might spend \$140,000. In working within the limited funds that are available at the JIC, they do end up lapsing funds on occasion. I think the utilization rate is somewhere around 75% or 80% for parliamentary associations, but the requests that are received each year from associations generally far exceed that.

• (1210)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Ms. Findlay.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Mr. Chair, may I suggest that we put this over to the next meeting and perhaps a revised suggestion could come forward? When we're hearing that funds have run dry three-quarters of the way through the year, that in itself and simple math would suggest perhaps some increase, but not a doubling of the amount.

I take Ms. Sahota's comments. I understand. We all understand that costs have increased over this period of time, even over the last year with inflation being what it is. I think the request is something I can't support at this level, but I would be willing to look at a revised request.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Is that the consensus?

**Voices:** Agreed.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Very good. We'll put it off until the next meeting.

Now we'll move on to item number six, which is the quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2022-23.

Monsieur St George, accompanied by Sylvie Lafontaine, will be making a report.

[Translation]

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

Today, I am presenting the quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2022-23. This unaudited quarterly financial report is based on a modified cash basis of accounting and was prepared by the House administration. I attest to the accuracy and reliability of the information contained therein.

The annual budget for 2022-23 approved by the Board of Internal Economy stood at \$581.4 million, representing an increase of \$20 million or 3.6% compared with 2021-22.

As of September 30, 2022, the House was operating within its authorities, with year-to-date expenditures of \$259.9 million. This is an increase of \$15.3 million compared with the same quarter last year.

[English]

The increase is mainly from four items. The first represents \$8.7 million for travel and members' and House officers' salaries. This amount is mostly due to an increase in travel costs following the easing of public health restrictions.

Another significant driver of the overall increase is in item number two—\$4.2 million—mainly pertaining to lower salary expenses as newly elected members transitioned into their roles and progressively hired their employees following the election last year.

The third item is an increase of \$1.1 million spent on travel by committees, associations and exchanges. Again, this is following the easing of public health restrictions.

The fourth item represents another \$1.1-million increase to employee benefit plans, mainly due to higher salary expenditures.

Mr. Speaker, there are no other financial material variances or concerns to bring to your attention.

This concludes my presentation. I welcome any questions you may have.

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

• (1215)

[Translation]

Are there any questions or comments?

[English]

No. Very good.

Thank you, Monsieur St George and Madame Lafontaine, for your presentation.

[Translation]

That brings us to item seven, the professional development pilot project for the employees of members, House officers and national caucus research offices.

Ms. Laframboise, please proceed with your report.

**Ms. Michelle Laframboise (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm here today to present a report on the professional development pilot project for the employees of members, House officers and national caucus research offices.

In June 2021, the Board of Internal Economy approved a one-year pilot project for the professional development of members' employees. As part of this project, each member could use up to \$5,000 from the central fund for the development of their employees' skills and competencies in support of the member's parliamentary functions.

On June 16, 2022, the Board extended the period of the pilot project until March 31, 2023 and agreed to expand the scope of the project to include employees of House officers and national caucus research offices. Thus far, 139 members have used the allocation under the pilot project, for a total expenditure of \$270,000.

[English]

The board asked the House administration to provide a progress report on the project before the end of 2022, which is why we're here today. In addition, however, and in consideration of the positive uptake to date, the importance of professional development for members, House officers and research office employees, and its positive impact on employee engagement and retention, we are recommending that the board adopt this pilot project on a permanent basis as a centrally funded initiative and approve its subsequent funding in the main estimates for 2023-24 and on an ongoing basis.

I remain available to answer any questions the board may have.

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

[Translation]

We now go to Mr. Julian, followed by Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

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

Thank you, Ms. Laframboise.

[English]

I support this recommendation. I think the reality is, as Madame Laframboise points out, that in terms of employee retention it has a key positive impact. I've certainly seen that myself.

Another element that isn't really contained within the report's recommendations is the impact on service to the public. What we can do is use this professional development to provide more skills for our staff, given that, increasingly, our staff, particularly in our constituency offices, are frontline workers. I think it's fair to say, and I don't mean this in a partisan way, that services have not been at the standard, in terms of the federal government, that I believe they should be. We are often called upon, as members of Parliament, and our staff are called upon, to be advocates for our constituents. Giving them, our staff, more skills to be even better advocates for the public is a very important component.

My impression is that this pilot project has been a success. It means better service for the public. It means more skills for our staff. It does have a positive impact, as Madame Laframboise has indicated so clearly, in terms of staff retention. That, as well, has real impacts for our constituents.

I certainly support the proposal and the recommendation. I think this is something that has provided a better quality of service to our constituents, which is what we're all about.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Madame Laframboise, is there any response to that? No.

Madame DeBellefeuille.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Laframboise, let me begin by commending you on this pilot project.

I'm not sure whether people remember, but the idea for the pilot project came from Mr. Holland, the Liberal whip at the time. He proposed allocating the funding to the professional development of our constituency staff. I think it was a very good idea. As Mr. Julian pointed out, the work that constituency staff do has changed greatly, as have the skills they need. For that reason, we need to help the people who work at our constituency offices and those who work for House officers develop the various skill sets they need, and provide them with that support. I am therefore pleased to support this recommendation.

My hats off to you and your team. Implementing a pilot project tends to be complicated, because you don't quite know what the up-take will be and how many requests will come in. In this case, the process for reporting and payment of training expenses was simple and easy. The pilot project was set up to make things easy for people, and I want to recognize that.

The Bloc Québécois caucus was really encouraged to take advantage of the pilot, and more than 80% of our members did so. The feedback I got confirms how wonderful and competent your organization and team are. Communicating with House administration and finance services was a smooth process. It's easier to get people to participate in a new program when they don't run into bureaucratic hurdles or red tape.

Mr. Chair, I wanted to take this opportunity to congratulate Ms. Laframboise's team and the people at finance services for making it so easy and pleasant to take advantage of the program.

• (1220)

**Ms. Michelle Laframboise:** Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** This is not a question; it's just a comment.

Congratulations to Madame Laframboise. I'm completely in agreement with Madame DeBellefeuille that the process has been very clear and easy to go through for my staff who have accessed professional development.

I neglected to give credit to Mr. Holland, and I should. He was the person who originally started raising this. We don't often give credit where credit is due to members of other parties, but I think Mr. Holland was a visionary.

Congratulations to the House administration and to everyone involved. I think this has been an unqualified success.

**Ms. Michelle Laframboise:** Thank you, Mr. Julian.

**Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons):** Thank you, Peter. That's very kind.

I just want to thank Madame Laframboise and everybody for the success of the program. I'm very happy that it's worked out and that it's serving folks well.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I take it that we have consensus on this.

**Voices:** Agreed.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We'll say that's passed and go on.

Now we'll go in camera. We're going to take about three minutes so that we can technically move everything over.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

The meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]









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