



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Board of Internal Economy

TRANSCRIPT

NUMBER 019

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Thursday, April 20, 2023



Board of Internal Economy

Thursday, April 20, 2023

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I see we have quorum and every party is represented, so I'll call the meeting to order.

Let's begin with the first item on the agenda, that being the minutes of the previous meeting. Are there any questions or comments?

That's all well and good.

[*English*]

The second point is business arising from previous minutes. Does anybody have any comments?

[*Translation*]

Madame DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Mister Chair, I have some questions about the minutes from the December 7, 2022 meeting.

As you know, we've been working for a long time to determine whether we have the necessary interpretation resources to support the work of parliamentarians, whether in the House of Commons or at committee.

On the first page of the minutes, we see that the "Board [of Internal Economy] requests that the translation bureau work with the House Administration to inform them of the day-to-day capabilities of interpretation services."

Can you tell us whether daily meetings between the translation bureau and Chamber Administration actually do take place? If so, we can assume that the Administration is well informed about daily interpretation capabilities.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'm going to ask Mr. McDonald to answer your question.

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

Madame DeBellefeuille, we do indeed hold these meetings daily to ensure that we have the necessary capacity for that day.

Recently, we have begun to hold discussions on planning the resources that will be available in the fall. However, we have no further information on this subject at present.

Mr. Eric Janse (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): I would like to add something, Mr. Chair. Mr. McDonald can then add further details.

The translation bureau has hired an experienced person to ensure better liaison between Parliament and the translation bureau on capacity issues, among other things. As I understand it, this person even has an office here on Parliament Hill, but I don't know if she's set up there yet.

I don't know whether Mr. McDonald or Mr. Aubé has received confirmation of this.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have further comments on this subject?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Yes, I can confirm that this person is already here. We found her an office in the Wellington Building, near the interpreters and the committee rooms. That way, she will be able to observe what is taking place and will be in a position to support us if need be.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Very well, Mr. Chair.

So there are discussions every day to offer mutual support and to be well informed about available capabilities and resources.

Have you been informed of the news now circulating in the media that the new contract for freelance interpreters, currently under negotiation, may not encourage them to continue their interpreting commitment to parliamentary activities? That's because there's talk of increasing the number of hours worked under the hybrid formula. That number would increase from four to six hours.

Of course, the contract is not yet signed and is still being negotiated. I don't want to meddle in labour relations, but I would like to know if the Chamber Administration and the translation bureau are well informed about the associated risks for September. I'm thinking in particular of a possible reduction in interpretation capacity.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will ask Mr. Patrice or Mr. McDonald to answer that question.

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

We have not yet had any discussions about this with our colleagues at the translation bureau. We were informed of the situation and we've read the same articles in the media, but we have no further information at this time.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: So, as I understand it, the person who liaises between the translation bureau and House Administration hasn't had any discussions with the latter about what's going to happen in September. Yet you told me earlier, Mr. McDonald, that you were having discussions about the resources that would be available in September.

I think it's important to consider the whole issue of resources. Perhaps my colleagues in government will think I have OCD or that I'm fixated on interpretation resources. Maybe it's because of my experience as a manager. The truth is, I'm still not satisfied with the translation bureau's answers to my questions about its work-force planning for the next few years, especially for this coming fall. From what we read and hear, freelance interpreters would not be inclined to sign the new contract, as it would place them at greater risk.

I'm neither a manager at the translation bureau nor a sound engineer, but I am a francophone MP and I want to make sure that come September, there will be enough interpreters to meet my needs and those of all my anglophone and francophone colleagues.

Since it's important to have this information, I'd like to know if my colleagues would agree to invite translation bureau representatives to an upcoming Board of Internal Economy meeting and really get to the bottom of things. This would enable the Board of Internal Economy to be well informed and well prepared. As you know, discussions are ongoing to determine whether the work of Parliament will continue under the hybrid formula next September. With this in mind, it would be important to obtain this information from the translation bureau. Whether it's reassuring or, on the contrary, worrying, this information will help the Board of Internal Economy to prepare properly for the return to Parliament in September.

Would my colleagues agree to invite people from the translation bureau?

• (1115)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, I know you want to add something. Would you like me to wait until you've finished speaking before asking members if they agree to invite people from the translation bureau?

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader for the New Democratic Party): I would like you to ask the question after I am done speaking.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very well. You have the floor, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: I don't know if Mme DeBellefeuille is finished.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: No, I haven't finished.

Hon. Anthony Rota: My apologies. You may finish. Then Mr. Julian will have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm nearly done, Mr. Julian.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll wait until you're done. Then, I'll give the floor to Mr. Julian. After that, I will proceed with the vote, in the hope that we can reach consensus.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: If I may, Chair, I'd like to ask Mr. McDonald a question.

Mr. McDonald, you and I have often discussed the important role played by clerks in parliamentary committees, and the fact that they

are not informers, but advisors to the chairs. Indeed, they must advise the chairs on the spirit of the motion that governs us in the context of the hybrid Parliament. That said, they play a decisive role, even a leadership role, in making witnesses aware of the importance of appearing in person and minimizing virtual testimony. In this regard, you told me that you were going to consider and take very concrete measures so that clerks could show leadership and be sensitive to the cause of interpreters.

Could you inform the members of the Board of Internal Economy about the measures you've taken to encourage in-person participation by witnesses?

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

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

I can highlight a couple of important things.

We took the time to offer a presentation to all the committee chairs to inform them of the current situation, to invite them to explain the situation to people and to encourage them to promote the idea of witnesses appearing in person.

We have also changed our message to witnesses to indicate that it's perfectly normal, even preferable, for them to appear in person, although they always have the option of appearing virtually.

There are certainly situations in which it's perfectly logical for witnesses to be present in person. As we've discussed in the past, in the case of witnesses who are in Ottawa or the National Capital Region, it makes sense for them to travel to Parliament Hill to testify. It's certainly a practice we encourage as much as possible.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: From what I understand, clerks have received the directive to encourage in-person testimony.

Mr. Ian McDonald: That's the message that was sent to all the clerks, who then provide it to witnesses on behalf of the committee.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Very well.

I have one last question, if I may, Mr. Chair, and if my colleagues can bear with me.

You completed the virtual committee dashboard. Once again, I want to take the time to thank all those who are helping to put this information together. When you create a dashboard, you're able to assess yourself on the basis of very precise data and see how it's evolving.

I note that in March 2023, 64% of minutes of debate—we're not talking about percentages of people here, but minutes—were associated with in-person participants and 36% were associated with virtual participation.

Am I reading the table correctly?

• (1120)

Mr. Ian McDonald: In fact, Graph 5 refers to witnesses. It shows that 64% of witnesses participated in person and 36% participated virtually.

Graph 6, which we've just added for the first time, shows that 75% of committee debate minutes are associated with in-person participants, while 25% are associated with remote participants.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: So we can see a general improvement, if we compare the situation corresponding to the start of our interventions with today's situation. We seem to be on track for a return to face-to-face committee sessions.

Mr. McDonald, we've achieved a 75-25 ratio in terms of in-person and virtual minutes of intervention. However, in a committee meeting, a member who participates virtually could filibuster for two hours, for example. That's two hours of interpreting a remote member's words. And we know that interpreters don't want to go from four to six hours of work, as long as the ISO standard for sound quality is not the subject of a scientific consensus. I'm trying to understand the situation, as a parliamentarian, and to provide the necessary nuances.

You can't tell the translation bureau and a particular committee, say the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, that today's meeting will be 100% in person, or 75% in person and 25% virtual, for example. In reality, it's difficult for the translation bureau to plan interpreters' working time on a daily basis, since it doesn't know in advance what proportion of each committee meeting will take place virtually.

I don't know if I'm expressing myself clearly. Am I wrong to say that planning is difficult?

Hon. Anthony Rota: You have the floor, Mr. McDonald.

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

No, you're right. It's true that it's impossible to predict who will participate in person and who will participate virtually. We know a little about the intention of the witnesses, based on prior discussions with them. Again, it depends on the case. It's quite possible that witnesses from British Columbia, for example, will prefer to participate virtually. This is a logical solution for committees too.

So you're right that planning is difficult. We'll see what comes out of the discussions the translation bureau will have with its employees and with the freelancers it employs.

There are perhaps two things to add.

First, on the question of scientific testing, I think Mr. Aubé can give you more information. We are in the process of doing these tests, which will continue over the next few weeks.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: As you know, the translation bureau had requested that we carry out tests to verify that the systems we use during in-person sessions still comply with ISO standards. Tests have therefore been carried out in the committee rooms over the past few weeks. We should have the results within the next two weeks. It will take some time to validate the results. When this is done, this component will be determined.

We also recorded nearly forty encounters to determine the rate of sound frequencies. One of the interpreters' concerns was that the systems we use for remote testimonies do not provide a sufficient range of sound frequencies. We therefore carried out validations on this subject.

In the coming weeks, we'll also be running tests to ensure that the audio systems used for in-person sessions also protect interpreters from acoustic shock. We want to avoid a repeat of the situation experienced in the Senate.

All these tests to verify the capability of our systems are currently underway. We should be able to provide you with the results within the next few weeks.

Lately, we've also been in discussions with the University of Western Ontario, which has a specialized audiology centre where specialists are working in the field of compression, i.e., electronic transformation. Some people seem to think that electronic transformation is to blame. So we began discussions with people at Western University to get them involved in the round table as well. In addition to what has been done in conjunction with the translation bureau and the University of Ottawa, we have asked this specialized centre to get involved in audits to determine whether our systems are causing health and safety problems for interpreters. This is an issue of great concern to us. This centre is involved in these tests and will be part of the round table with the University of Ottawa. It will be able to give its comments and provide us with recommendations for improving the health and safety of interpreters. We should receive all this in the next few weeks.

Finally, I'd like to add that we count health and safety among our concerns. We're always working to improve the sound tests that are done before meetings. Sometimes people seem to think that we don't do much technical testing with witnesses who are going to participate remotely in meetings. We do tests 48 hours in advance to make sure people have the right equipment and a good Internet connection. We even repeat sound tests before the meetings. Lately, we've added another element: we inform the interpreters of the type of equipment and headphones that will be used by people participating remotely in a meeting. In this way, interpreters can decide whether or not to interpret what these people are saying.

We continue to improve all our processes and work with the translation bureau to protect the health and safety of interpreters.

• (1125)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you want to add anything, Mr. McDonald?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Yes. In fact, if I may, Mr. Chair, I'd like to add two things.

In terms of pre-testing, it's important to mention that we're now doing a double check. At the beginning, technicians do an initial test to make sure that people are using the right headsets and that the sound quality meets requirements. Then we ask the interpreters to carry out a second sound test to make sure the sound quality is right. This double verification process didn't exist before. It was put in place following the chair's ruling on March 7 and the changes made in response to the directive that the Labour Program sent to the translation bureau.

I also want to add that, in terms of the minutes of intervention that take place in person or virtually, the 75-25 ratio is roughly equivalent to what we observed before the pandemic. Let's not forget that, even before the pandemic, committees had the option of receiving witnesses via the videoconferencing system. According to our recent analyses, the statistics have been fairly stable since November. We're back roughly to the ratio we had before the pandemic, so that's encouraging.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I'd like to add something. This is an important issue for me. We do a lot of work to ensure the health and safety of interpreters and to improve the experience.

Lately, we've started to schedule a short feedback period with participants at the end of meetings. Ambassadors are on hand to carry out tests and collect data to provide statistics on incidents and their causes. We also take the time to meet with interpreters at the end of meetings to hear their comments on how things went and what needs to be improved.

In our opinion, all these measures we have put in place and continue to perfect will help improve the situation for our interpreters. I think the statistics will show that there has been an improvement and a reduction in the number of incidents.

Mr. Ian McDonald: The clerks are also involved in this process.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have anything to add, Ms. DeBellefeuille?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: In closing, Mr. Chair, I'd like to add a nuance regarding the 75-25 ratio.

Before the pandemic, all MPs attended meetings in person. They didn't participate by videoconference. Only witnesses could do so. This is an important nuance. You have to compare things of the same nature.

I feel that the data you've provided us with is an indicator that things are moving forward. I understand that. However, it's not a very fair comparison. We have no control over which MPs participate remotely in meetings and how many minutes remote participants speak for each committee meeting. It's this data that we can't control to ensure a better balance and guarantee our interpreters that they'll do the same job as before, except in a few cases where people will exceptionally participate by videoconference. This is something we don't have and can't control, because members can participate virtually, which wasn't the case before the pandemic. So it's an important nuance to make.

I am encouraged to see that the House Administration is sparing no effort to continue deepening its knowledge and perfecting its means to support interpreters and improve the quality of sound and equipment, because it knows we need it. The chair has also made

his contribution by making the wearing of headphones compulsory, and by refusing to give the floor to parliamentarians who do not wear them. This has greatly improved the situation.

I was jokingly reminding my colleague the whip of the Liberal Party that a man can't speak in the House of Commons if he's not wearing a tie and jacket. It's not a breach of privilege; it's in the Standing Orders. Now, in addition to the jacket and tie for men, if you're not in Parliament and want to take part in a session, you have to wear your headphones. Whether the headphones we're using are adequate, or whether we'll soon have to change headphones, remains to be seen. Consultation and scientific research will tell us whether there are better tools to support our interpreters.

So, I wanted to tell you that this issue is eminently important and that we haven't finished discussing it at the Board of Internal Economy. I'll be looking forward to having representatives from the translation bureau here with us to ask them a little more pointed questions about resources for the resumption of parliamentary business in September.

• (1130)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

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

First, I'd like to thank the people who prepared the virtual committees dashboard. It does indeed show that the situation in committees has improved, and that's important. I know that the priority for everyone around the table remains interpreter health and safety.

Mr. Aubé, thank you for looking after the analyses currently being conducted. It's important that the results be available sometime in the next two weeks.

I'm concerned, in particular, about working conditions. The proposal to increase the hours of work of freelance interpreters troubles me. If their working conditions improve from a technical standpoint, but get worse in other respects, I don't know whether we're any further ahead. Without interpreters, there's no Parliament; it's that simple. The House of Commons is where anglophone and francophone Canadians meet and communicate with one another. The interpreters are essential.

In light of all that, as Mrs. DeBellefeuille just asked, I'd like us to meet with translation bureau representatives as soon as possible. It should even take place before we get the results of the analysis being done by Western University, in Ontario. If I understand correctly, it'll be two or three weeks before we get those results. Given that my spouse is an audiologist, I understand full well the importance of that analysis, but I don't think we can wait for those results, unless it is certain that they'll be available in the next two weeks. Otherwise, we need to ask to meet, next week or the week after at the very latest, with translation bureau representatives who can tell us about interpreter working conditions. It's far too important to ignore.

I think everyone wants Parliament to function smoothly. There are advantages to having a hybrid Parliament, but when it comes to interpreter health and safety, if we don't do everything we can to improve working conditions and related technology, the situation won't improve.

If we could hear from translation bureau representatives as soon as possible, we could ask them questions and get very important answers.

Finally, Mr. Chair, the fact that you made wearing a headset mandatory is already having a positive effect. Members are starting to understand that they can't participate in meetings without one. This is an important step in improving health and safety.

• (1135)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Are there any other comments, in light of what Mr. Julian has said?

As for the date, the Board of Internal Economy will hold its next meeting on May 18. Is that too late?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, it's too late.

Hon. Anthony Rota: In that case, we'll see whether another date can be arranged. I don't want to make promises I can't keep; however, if we can meet before then, that's something we'll try to organize.

Thank you.

The other thing that—

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I think that Mr. Aubé may be able to provide an answer.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I apologize. I didn't see him.

Mr. Aubé, go ahead.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I apologize, Mr. Chair.

I just want us to separate the issue of working conditions from the issue of the expert reports.

We have little power, at present, over the experts' schedule, so I wouldn't want to commit to providing you with those results in the next two weeks. The experts are working on the analyses as we speak. Once we have the results, we'll send them to you. In keeping with how we work, we've committed to providing the results of the

analyses to interpreters and the translation bureau as soon as they're available, and vice versa.

I just want to ensure that we keep those two issues separate.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Mr. Chair, I just want to add one thing, about resources.

Tomorrow, we're doing a simulation with staff from the whips' offices to test the remote interpretation system. It's currently the subject of a pilot project and something we want to implement. We're working in close collaboration with our translation bureau colleagues. The interpreters helping us with this project are interpreters who've been accredited by the translation bureau. We'll do a simulation with staff from the whips' offices to see how we could introduce this new service at certain events in the coming weeks. We'd start with less official events, ones that aren't for broadcast but that still require interpretation services. That would give us the opportunity to try out this solution and see the results, with the idea that the system could be used for other purposes, such as committees.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I propose that we combine Mrs. DeBellefeuille's and Mr. Julian's proposals, meaning we invite translation bureau representatives to the next meeting of the Board of Internal Economy, which we would hold as soon as possible.

Is that an acceptable combination? Are we agreed?

Do you wish to speak, Mr. MacKinnon?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): I would like to know the basis for inviting the translation bureau officials. Could I get some clarification as to what we're asking them for?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think it was to obtain information, but it might be good for Mrs. DeBellefeuille to tell you exactly what she wants.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I think that the new CEO could give us a good update. I have a lot of questions about his workforce planning forecasts. For example, he could tell us how many interpreters are retiring and how many new interpreters will be coming on board. He has that information.

Above all, Mr. Chair, a new contract is being negotiated. Even if we don't want to get into labour relations, we still need to question the translation bureau about what would happen if freelance interpreters aren't satisfied with their contract proposal, because they have health and safety concerns and don't want to freelance for Parliament. We need to know the impact of that on the number of interpreters available to do the work and support us starting in September. That's what concerns me.

He's the CEO because he has extensive experience in management. I imagine that, as a good manager, he has a plan B to retain freelancers if they aren't satisfied with the contract. To continue our work in a hybrid Parliament, we always need to be cognizant of interpretation resources. That's a determining factor.

I more or less share Mr. Julian's sense of urgency, because I don't want the CEO to come here without any information. He has often appeared before us, so I'd like him to come prepared, to present his workforce plan, and to reassure us or identify future challenges or obstacles. That way, together, we can make the right decisions for the next session, which starts in September.

• (1140)

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

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I've heard two things.

First, I've heard specific questions about personnel and estimates, among other things. These are things we could surely get through you, Mr. Chair, from the CEO of the translation bureau. I also heard Ms. DeBellefeuille say that she didn't want to interfere in labour relations, but then ask all sorts of questions to that effect.

I just want the purpose of this meeting to be very clear. I don't wish to interfere in labour relationships either. I think that's best left to the people who have been entrusted with that task. However, as far as estimates and figures are concerned, I think we could very well get that information in writing, and before the next BOIE meeting.

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

Mr. Peter Julian: There are a lot of questions, and decisions will have to be made about the hybrid Parliament over the next few weeks. This information cannot necessarily be given on paper alone. There are questions that need to be asked. In the past, we have already obtained certain details from the translation bureau, such as its forecasts for the number of new interpreters and the means by which it hires them. All these questions are important. I think it's important that a Board of Internal Economy meeting be devoted to them. I'll certainly have questions, and I know Ms. DeBellefeuille will too.

If it's just the two of us who want to ask questions, the meeting may be shorter, but it has to be done, and we can't wait. In my opinion, it should take place on May 19. There are too many things that need to be addressed, and a lot of questions that require answers before mid-May.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I just want to make sure I understand.

You want to invite the new director to ask questions about his or her forecasts, since in the past we haven't had answers to the questions we've asked. Have I understood correctly? Is the reason for the invitation clear to everyone?

Are we in agreement that we will do our utmost to hold this meeting as soon as possible?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I don't think it is necessary to have a meeting at this point. I have heard nothing that convinces me of the need to urgently summon the CEO of the translation bureau.

Hon. Anthony Rota: So there is no consensus.

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I know that this topic is fraught and my Liberal colleagues are tired of talking about it, but it's very important.

I've found every appearance by translation bureau representatives unsatisfactory, because data is always missing. I can read, as can Mr. MacKinnon, but there's nothing like questioning someone after a reading.

Our meeting is public and we are discussing a very important subject. I don't understand why my colleague is refusing, by not giving his consent, for us to receive, at a future meeting, the president and CEO of the translation bureau. I find this curious, and I don't understand it. However, as it is the tradition here not to vote and to reach a consensus, I ask him to reconsider his decision and allow us to receive the CEO of the translation bureau.

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

Mr. Peter Julian: I agree with my colleague, Mr. Chair. On the one hand, I don't see why we would say no to information. On the other hand, there are motions that expire at the end of June.

In my opinion, the hybrid Parliament has been a great success from a technological and technical point of view. I know that parliamentarians in other countries see that we have put in place something technologically and technically exceptional that makes our country a world leader, given its vastness. However, the weakness of this system has always been the health and safety of the interpreters. A lot of adjustments had to be made, and there's still a lot of work to be done.

The question of interpreters is therefore paramount for the next few weeks. That's why it's essential for the Board of Internal Economy to hold this meeting. Even if it only lasts an hour, the answers we get will help the caucuses of all parties understand the issues and the importance of improving working conditions for interpreters so that we can make the right decisions soon.

We could keep talking about this, and I have a lot of respect for my colleague, but I hope he'll say yes, even if it's a lukewarm yes, so we can have this meeting to get some answers.

• (1145)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is there a consensus?

There is no consensus. Do we want to move on to item 3 or continue the discussion?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm bowled over. I won't ask for the vote, because there are important members who aren't here today, but I'll come back to it, because I find it unacceptable. It's unacceptable for a government member to refuse to let us hear from the CEO of the translation bureau about his workforce planning, his forecasts and his challenges and obstacles for the next session, in September, knowing that the issue of interpreters is paramount to the conduct of a hybrid Parliament.

We're not supposed to be partisan, here, but, sincerely, I consider this refusal a partisan gesture.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If there are no further comments, we'll move on to item 3.

[*English*]

Item number three is modernization of policies, part 1.

I'd like to invite Monsieur St George, Monsieur Aubé, Mr. Fernandez and Ms. Lafontaine.

[*Translation*]

Mr. St George, you have the floor.

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

I am seeking the board's approval for the modernization of two policies applicable to members of Parliament.

The first relates to the offer to MPs of an iPad paid for from the central budget at the start of each legislature. Given the technological advances of recent years, other types of devices are now available to MPs for the performance of their parliamentary duties.

As you know, MPs are entitled to a maximum of five computer devices paid for from the central budget. It is therefore recommended that the administration stop providing MPs with an iPad at the start of a new Parliament. The purchase of these devices would still be permitted, subject to certain limits, and their cost would be charged to the MP's office budget.

[*English*]

The second policy relates to the budget allocation for House officers. Operating budgets for certain roles are established using a fixed amount, while the budgets for other roles are based on party representation following a general election.

An additional budget envelope for wireless telecommunication services is distributed among eligible House officers, based on the weighted average of their respective operating budgets.

To simplify this calculation, administration is recommending that the budgets for wireless telecommunication services be permanently included in the operating budgets of eligible House officers. This would provide a revised base amount for the party representation calculation. The financial impact of this change, it is important to note, would be immaterial.

These two proposals would take effect following the next general election, and the members' bylaw would be amended accordingly.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my presentation. I welcome any questions the BOIE committee may have.

• (1150)

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

Is everyone on board with the recommendation? Do we have consensus?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Very good.

Now we'll go to item number four, the House of Commons strategic plan.

Mr. Janse, the acting Clerk of the House of Commons, will make a presentation.

Mr. Janse, go ahead.

Mr. Eric Janse: I'm very proud and pleased to be able, on behalf of the Clerk's management group, and in fact on behalf of the entire House administration, to present our strategic plan 2023-2026 and to seek your approval to have it tabled in the House.

[*Translation*]

This plan is the result of extensive consultations with members of the management group, their extended teams and many employees who participated in consultation sessions over the past year.

[*English*]

The mandate of the House administration is to support you, the members of Parliament, in the fulfillment of your duties. We may have other clients—for instance, the public, the media or the diplomatic corps—but our *raison d'être* is to anticipate and respond to the needs and requests of members.

The plan serves as a road map to guide the House administration's efforts to provide exceptional, integrated and accessible services to members, enabling them to carry out their essential functions as parliamentarians. The House administration has many ideas, projects and initiatives to better support members but does not, obviously, have the human, financial or IT capacity to undertake them all at the same time.

Therefore, the strategic plan will serve as a road map and assist in allowing us to prioritize initiatives and to align resources to allow for the most efficient delivery of services.

[*Translation*]

Our “One House, One Team” vision reinforces the idea that we have a common purpose and reminds us that we must work as one team to anticipate your needs as parliamentarians and offer you simplified, personalized, high-quality services.

Our mission underlines our commitment to fostering dialogue and enabling everyone, whatever their role within the organization, to contribute to our services and innovate with the aim of supporting MPs to serve parliamentary democracy.

[*English*]

At the heart of the strategic plan are our values: integrity, service excellence, collaboration and inclusion. They define who we are and what matters most to us. We take particular pride in serving all parties and all the members of each party equally. It is at the core of what we are as a parliamentary administration.

[Translation]

During the 2023-26 period, the work of the House Administration will be guided by three key strategic priorities.

First, we focus on our people, to ensure a healthy, diverse workforce whose members feel integrated and well supported in their professional development and careers.

We make our workplace another priority. We are committed to ensuring an adaptable, information-driven, connected and safe workplace to facilitate work now and in the future.

Finally, by focusing on our service delivery, we will continue to create a seamless, integrated, accessible and MP-centric experience.

[English]

Finally, our strategic plan now includes three leadership commitments. These commitments are important for my management group and for me, as they set the foundation for achieving the goals laid out in the plan and are meant to speak to leaders in the broadest sense and at all levels.

More concretely, here are a few examples of how we will bring the strategic plan 2023-2026 to life.

We will implement our accessibility plan to fulfill our obligations under the Accessible Canada Act. Work will continue to modernize and rehabilitate the Centre Block. We will continue to improve the quality of reporting and public disclosures, and provide you with a new system to submit and manage your claims and view your budget reports, whether working from the office, from home or on the go. We will begin using automated speech recognition technology to more quickly and efficiently produce Hansard. We will implement a new modern HR talent management system.

These are but a few of the many initiatives.

To conclude, we will continue to support you by assessing your needs, developing and implementing solutions, and monitoring and evaluating our services' efficiency and effectiveness. Major initiatives will always be brought to the board for approval, and we will continue to immediately react to directives from the board or other decision-making bodies, such as the Liaison Committee or the Joint Interparliamentary Council.

• (1155)

[Translation]

Thank you for your time. I will now be pleased to answer your questions.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mr. Janse.

Are there any questions or comments?

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): First, I just want to say that I think I found the proper head-set. Out of respect and in light of the previous discussion, I just want to make sure that it's okay for the translators before I continue.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We have the thumbs-up. You're ready to go ahead.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: That's great. Thanks very much.

I just wanted to flag something. Under the current strategic plan, in the section headed "Our Values", "Impartiality" is a stand-alone point, and it is fleshed out by saying, "We are non-partisan and we respect, support and promote the democratic process." I believe that under the current proposed strategic plan, impartiality is no longer a separate value that is highlighted and pulled out, and it's now rolled in with "integrity". It now reads, "We serve with impartiality, honour our commitments, and remain accountable for our actions."

In light of some of the concerns this board had studied in the House at some point with respect to the previous clerk, I'm wondering if you can speak to why the change was made to roll impartiality into another value. Integrity is important, but I think impartiality is just as important. Would it be possible to revert back to having that value of impartiality pulled out, highlighted, underlined and set in stone?

Hon. Anthony Rota: We have Mr. Janse, please.

Mr. Eric Janse: Sure. Thank you for the question, Mr. Scheer.

To start with, obviously seeking impartiality is absolutely critical for everybody who works at the House of Commons, regardless of their level or their position. It could be said that it's important for any public servant working in public service. Perhaps it is especially so for those of us who work here at the House of Commons, because again, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, we serve all parties and all members equally. To make the point, we drill that into the head of each and every new employee when they start at the House. It is again at the core of what we are as a House administration.

Through the discussions in developing the new plan, it was determined that impartiality could go perhaps under the umbrella of integrity, so it could also encompass, as you noticed, other things that we feel are important; but it certainly wasn't to diminish the importance of impartiality in any way.

I hope that perhaps addresses your question.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Is there a reason not to have it pulled out as a separate...?

I take your point and I agree with you that it is of paramount importance. I just think that including it in another value almost makes it seem like a subset of integrity, whereas I would argue that it is its own thing. Somebody can be a person of integrity but still not be impartial, depending on the situation, depending on the dynamic. Obviously, for your position or for a position in the House of Commons, I would say you can't be partial and still have integrity, but I would certainly encourage you to consider pulling it back out as a stand-alone, especially in light of what the administration of the House has gone through over the last couple of years.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you want to respond to that?

Mr. Eric Janse: We can certainly have a look at that to see whether maybe we could play a little bit with the language and the structure. Again, there was certainly no intention to diminish the importance of impartiality by integrating it under an umbrella value. We can certainly go back to look at that.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Scheer, are you done? Okay.

Now we'll go to Mr. Holland, followed by Ms. Findlay.

Go ahead, Mr. Holland.

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

I obviously respect what my honourable colleague said and share the value, unquestionably, but I actually think it does the opposite. By stating that impartiality fits under a value of integrity, you're actually strengthening the argument that impartiality is in fact a core value and represents integrity, but I'm not here to wordsmith this document. I think overall this is very strong. I support what is presented. I support the great work of the administration.

To the point that Mr. Scheer was making, I understand the point and I support the point, but maybe if you step back and you reflect on it, stating that for this place integrity and impartiality are one and the same and that there is an expectation that it is a core value, I think, is actually more powerful

• (1200)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Now we'll go to Ms. Findlay and then over to Mr. Julian.

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

I noted the same thing. I wasn't here through lots of the issues, but I certainly heard about them when I returned in 2019. I think what everyone wants to be reassured of is that through this all-party board, impartiality remains at the heart of the House administration's DNA. It may have not been a matter that was meant to be lessened or moved down—"downgraded" is maybe the better word—but it appears that way to me when I read it, especially as it was highlighted before and especially as it has been an issue. I am wondering what the harm would be in making it a stand-alone highlighted item.

I'm also wondering if it could be articulated how much collaboration with, or input from, House administration employees went into the preparation of this proposal.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Janse, I believe you can answer those concerns.

Mr. Eric Janse: Sure. Again, in terms of bringing out impartiality as a separate value, we can certainly go back to the team and discuss that.

For your second question, Ms. Findlay, regarding how the plan was developed and how the consultations were undertaken, I'll look to some of my colleagues in the room. I think it took about a year to develop. There were a number of meetings of the senior management team—the Clerk's management group, as it's called—to work at this based on the earlier plan, and then to bring in the new plan. There were also employee consultations. We had a number of working groups. I think they were done over the summer, if memory serves me well. There was a call put out to all employees, regardless of level, asking whether they would like to participate in focus groups on the development of the new plan.

It did take time, but it did involve quite extensive consultations. I hope that answers your question.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: It does, but I would ask you to revisit this. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have any further questions, Ms. Findlay? No.

We'll go over to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I certainly understand Mr. Scheer's point. I understand Mr. Holland's point as well, and Ms. Findlay's point. I think we are basically talking about the same issue, which is whether impartiality is a part of integrity or is something that coincides with integrity.

Looking at the actual values—"serve with impartiality, honour our commitments, and remain accountable for our actions"—there are a couple of elements that are clearly in the framework of integrity, and the issue of impartiality is there as well. I would suggest that one way of dealing with this would be to add "impartiality" to the title. If the values include inclusion, collaboration and service excellence, they also include integrity and impartiality, which really go together.

I think that perhaps strikes middle ground between what Mr. Scheer has said, which I understand and agree with, and what Mr. Holland has said, which I also understand and agree with.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is that an acceptable compromise?

Mr. Scheer, please go ahead.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: For clarification, could my colleague Mr. Julian specify exactly what wording he would like to see?

Mr. Peter Julian: The value title would be "Integrity and Impartiality".

• (1205)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I see some nodding. Is that acceptable to everyone?

I think we have consensus. Fantastic. That's very good. Thank you.

Are there no other questions or comments? Very good.

Now we'll continue to item number five. We'll be going in camera. We'll take five minutes, but if we get in sooner, we'll start sooner.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>