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Board of Internal Economy

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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Good morning. Welcome to the second meeting of the Board of Internal Economy of the 44th Parliament.

[*English*]

We'll start off with item number one, minutes of the previous meeting. Are there any comments or questions on those? Everything's clear.

We'll go on to item number two. Is there any business arising from the previous minutes? Very good.

Now we're on number three, supporting increased committee activity levels. We'll go to Mr. McDonald to give us a presentation.

[*Translation*]

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

At the last meeting of the Board of Internal Economy, we were asked to provide more information on the five additional positions we would like to create in order to continue providing full support to all committees.

At the request of the Board of Internal Economy, we revised the briefing note you have in front of you. Our key message this morning is that this request has nothing at all to do with the pandemic. The pandemic actually delayed the request. We would have still asked for these resources, but probably sooner.

The reasons why the House Administration needs these additional resources can be summed up in three points.

First, we have seen over the past decade a significant increase in committee activity. Committees have been sitting longer and hearing from more witnesses. In addition, the number of witnesses appearing by video conference is on the rise, and that started even before the pandemic.

[*English*]

Beyond the statistics and trends, it is important to mention that the work these resources do is not just the work that is seen in committee. As just one example, more witnesses means more time contacting and planning for these witnesses to appear. In addition, our teams often contact more witnesses than actually appear, as not everyone is available based on the committee schedule. Often multiple interactions are required to coordinate an appearance. This all

amounts to more work for the team acting on behalf of the committee to make those meetings happen. This is but one example of all the work that is being done behind the scenes by the teams supporting committees.

Also, as video conferencing technology has improved and become more accessible across the precinct, members have used these tools to reduce travel costs for witnesses, to allow witnesses who might not otherwise have time or be able to travel to Ottawa to appear, and to allow easier access to international witnesses. However, as the number of witnesses who appear via video conference grows, this also takes more resources and time to coordinate, to test the connectivity of each witness and to make sure it is as positive an experience as possible for all concerned. This is in addition to the time during which those resources are available during the meeting when they are ready to support and resolve issues.

Second, we have seen the modernization of many tools and services used to support committees over the last 10 years. These are tools such as online and more accessible electronic libraries of all committee documents for members and their staff, a social media presence for committees, and more documents publicly available via the committees' websites, such as the large number of briefs received by committees as part of their various studies. That is along with the fact that there's increased access to and improvements of the video conferencing system, which is now available in all committee rooms. This is contrary to the situation that existed in the past, when there was only a limited number of rooms in which it was possible to video conference.

[*Translation*]

Members asked for these services in support of their committee work. In response to members' wish, tools were put in place as time went on to improve services and make it easier for members to do their committee work. Those new services, however, have resulted in a heavier workload for the teams who support those activities.

[*English*]

As a third and final point, the House team has always worked hard to support additional committee activities within the existing resources that the board has provided. As could be seen over the course of the last decade, committee activities have grown but no requests for additional resources have been made to support these activities.

When new committees, such as a special committee, are added, we have to reassign staff and sometimes have clerks double up on committees. This situation has become difficult to sustain, and the teams find it increasingly difficult to meet the client service expectations of members. This is why we are requesting these additional resources at this time.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We'd be pleased to answer any questions the board may have.

• (1105)

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll start with Mr. Holland, followed by Mr. MacKinnon.

Mr. Holland, go ahead.

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and through you to Mr. McDonald, thank you so much to you and all those who have been working to support committees in what has been an exceptionally difficult time through a pandemic.

My first question is in relation to the addition of special committees, new committees. Do you have a sense of what the cost would be for the formation of each of those new committees?

Mr. Ian McDonald: As I just mentioned, we don't really do it as a specific cost per, so I don't have that information. In essence, the way we do it is that we use the existing resources and we reassign them to be able to support the committees as best we can within our existing envelope. We're finding now that because of the level of activity and because of the extra work we're asking our staff to do, we're getting to the point where it's increasingly difficult to be able to ask them to take on another committee. That's why we're asking for the additional resources today.

Hon. Mark Holland: Just on that, if I could, Mr. Speaker, I don't know exactly the number, but at this point we have in the order of magnitude of 26 or 27 committees. We have in contemplation, I've heard, potentially four additional special committees.

If we were to get to 30, 31, 32 or 33 committees, can you speak to what effect that would have on your ability to deliver service to committees?

Mr. Ian McDonald: As always, we would evaluate that. If new committees were added, whether standing committees or special committees, we would evaluate that. If need be, we would come back to the board and ask for additional resources.

We're looking at what the current demands are. Based on those current demands, we feel that the additional resources we've requested are the ones that we need in order to be able to support that. Should the number of committees increase, then we'd have to look at that again and we might have to come back to the board again.

Hon. Mark Holland: I'd just make the comment, Mr. Speaker, that we are a big and broad nation. Of course, many issues face us, but I do think at some point....

We have standing committees for a reason. I am concerned with the proliferation of special committee after special committee after special committee. We have standing committees. I think we should attempt to use those standing committees. I think we should be judicious in adding new committees. I know that there are a lot of im-

portant issues, but most of these issues can be dealt with within the existing framework of committees.

When we're having these conversations around the strain that this is placing on resources, and we're having conversations about the difficulty of staff to be able to populate all of these, that is significantly compounded every time we move from 26 to 27 to 28 to 29 to 30, 40, 50. I don't know when it ends. At some point we have to recognize that there are restrictions on the ability for us to serve them, let alone how many members are present to populate them.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go to Mr. MacKinnon.

[*Translation*]

We'll hear from Mr. Deltell after that.

Go ahead, Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My comments are along the same lines. In an effort to accommodate existing committee operations, resources are being stretched thin, as you pointed out, Mr. McDonald. Having to provide support to committees that can be added periodically does indeed increase your workload.

At the same time, with respect to regional caucus meetings focused on specific topics and held on an as-needed or regular basis, members are being told that they can't necessarily count on the services they are accustomed to receiving, because those resources could be assigned to the new committee or special committees.

Eventually, we are going to have to think about adding resources to support the organization of those very important meetings, which take place within every party. We were accustomed to that service. I think we need to do that before we think about adding services to support new committees that are created by Parliament from time to time.

I wanted to bring this up, and I will keep pressing the issue until a level of service comparable to what was provided in the last Parliament is restored.

Thank you.

• (1110)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Deltell, followed by Mr. Richards, Mrs. DeBellefeuille and Mr. Julian.

Go ahead, Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McDonald, it's always nice to have you here, on familiar ground, in the House of Commons. Like you, all Canadians, are welcome in their House of Commons, for that matter.

When it comes to parliamentary democracy, there is no room for the straining of resources—the proverbial tightening of the elastic. A parliamentary democracy must address the needs that are most pressing as they arise. No one gets up in the morning wondering what committees could be created simply for the fun of it. In recent years, we have witnessed the creation of committees that were entirely relevant. Take, for example, the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations. Five or 10 years ago, no one anticipated that there would be so much conflict in Canada's relationship with China. The issue really had to be addressed.

I want to remind everyone that the creation of committees is not based on the will of one parliamentary group, creating committees simply for the fun of it. We saw that yesterday, in fact, when our motion was duly voted on in the House. At the end of the day, parliamentarians are the ones who can—and must—decide whether it is warranted, in accordance with their conscience. Obviously, it is something that has to be examined.

[English]

This is what politics is all about. When we have some ideas to address some specific issues, there is room for that and there is a tool for that. That's what we call a “special committee” on a special issue. That's fine, but I think, Mr. Chair, that we have to keep in mind that democracy is not an elastic and we cannot, just for the fun of it, create something just for the pleasure of it. If there are some serious issues to address, we need to have a serious special committee on that. I don't want to put aside the responsibility of all of the committees.

[Translation]

Committees exist in earnest. They have real work to do. Certain issues have to be addressed by certain committees. One does not preclude the other, however. As Conservatives, we are, of course, always mindful of the use of public funds and so forth, but we are, first and foremost, parliamentarians with issues to deal with. As long as we deem it necessary to have a special committees handle a certain issue, we will keep doing what we did yesterday, in other words, recommending the creation of a special committee in the House, and the House will decide.

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

We now go to Mr. Richards. After that, we will go to Mrs. DeBellefeuille, followed by Mr. Julian.

You may go ahead, Mr. Richards.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip): Thank you.

I appreciate your coming back with a bit more detail and with some revised proposals. That's appreciated. What I think I'm hearing here is that currently some of the essentially temporary needs we're facing are being managed with some amount of overtime and some casual staff. That's fair. If I'm understanding that right, how are those resources being covered now? What budgets are those coming from?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Through you, Mr. Chair, I know that during the pandemic we've been re-tasking people—as was mentioned by Stéphan last week—from all sorts of different service areas, people

who have the knowledge and the experience and expertise to be able to come. In some cases we've helped train them up to be able to support committees in particular, but also other activities during the pandemic. That's really not what this is about. The pandemic has been a specific situation. A lot of those resources will go back to what they're.... For example, we've been asking the Parliamentary Associations secretaries to come in and work as committee clerks because there's been no parliamentary international travel, as we know. They can come in and lend a hand. We've been able to support those types of activities by re-tasking people that way.

● (1115)

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe Mr. Patrice would like to add to that.

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

As Ian pointed out, the pandemic situation we see as a temporary situation, so we're managing it in a temporary fashion. That's why we're not asking for resources in terms of the pandemic situation. We're reallocating resources and changing the level of service in certain respects to make sure to support it, because as we see it, hopefully, it's temporary. It has been almost two years, but that's the way we've been managing.

As Ian pointed out in his opening remarks, this request for resources would have happened earlier had it not been for the pandemic. It's a question of incrementally adding responsibilities and tasks. Technology has definitely been a pressure in terms of the resources, but it offers great opportunities for committees and the House—for example, to meet more witnesses, to have more meetings and to be cost-efficient in terms of travel by witnesses. That request would have come earlier, as I said, had it not been for the pandemic.

If a special committee or other tasks are added, we're also able—there's always kind of an ability—to manage it through overtime and so on, but at some point, there's a trigger point where we cannot manage and ask our staff to be on overtime all the time. That's why we're making that request.

As you saw, now we've transformed our demand in terms of temporary relief for this year. It's our commitment to you that during the current year we'll reassess in terms of whether we have a permanent need for those resources. I believe that we do, but that being said, we're going to take a second look in terms of the current year. Hopefully, we'll be out of the pandemic by then. Then we'll be able to assess and come back to the board in terms of the cycle of the next main estimates.

Mr. Blake Richards: I guess the challenge I see here is that we are dealing with a temporary situation, a pandemic situation. I know you're indicating that you feel there are ongoing needs. I just find it hard to picture how we're able to really fully and properly assess those at this point, because we are in fact managing in a temporary situation.

There have been, and probably will continue to be, for the next little while, resources that are being reallocated, as we're hearing and as we're discussing right now. As an example, committees aren't travelling, so there are resources available because that is not happening, and parliamentary associations aren't as active or active at all. There are ways to reallocate.

I'm not looking to try to make things difficult, but I'm really struggling to see how we can make proper decisions about how we move forward when we're in the middle of an emergency situation and dealing with a different-from-normal scenario.

I was obviously happy to approve the very clear ongoing needs that we approved last week. I still struggle, though, to make a decision about how we move forward when we don't actually know what moving forward is fully going to look like. I do appreciate that you've indicated that if new committees are set up and if situations and needs change as a result of that, you could come back to the board. I would certainly encourage that to happen if and when that needs to happen for those specific circumstances, but I struggle with making a decision when we're....

As it stands now, we're sort of looking at June as the end date for some of these hybrid situations and things. There's a travel ban on until the end of March, so we're still in a situation of having three to six months of trying to manage through something. I would much prefer to see us evaluate this and determine the needs going forward at the end of those six months, when things, we all hope, go back to normal. Maybe then we can understand fully what "normal" is going to look like going forward.

That would be my suggestion. I think this is something we should defer until the temporary measures are lifted.

• (1120)

Mr. Michel Patrice: I appreciate that, and you're right in terms of committees not travelling and those types of activities. That actually has allowed us to support more resources in the current hybrid context. However, these resources that are freed from travelling do not necessarily have the same competency and skill set that are needed to support the ongoing operation in terms of the technology and the witnesses and video conferences. It's a different skill set.

The other fact I would like to put on the table is that, while the pandemic is ongoing, we are in the process, as you have probably noticed, of resuming more normal operations. We have data on physical presence in the precinct in the last couple of weeks that shows us that people are coming back to the precinct, with an average of over 2,000 individuals accessing the precinct, which was not at all the situation, for example, prior to the election.

We are resuming our operations in a more normal fashion, recognizing that the House still has an order for hybrid sittings in committees. The actual fact is that the administration is resuming its operations in more of a pre-pandemic context, which again gives us a bit less leeway in terms of reallocating resources, because we're returning, in a way, to normal activities.

That's why we're making this request, and that's why we feel that we need those resources to properly support the House, its members and its committees.

Mr. Blake Richards: I guess I can appreciate that. I think we all hope that's where we're headed, and very soon. I just think it's difficult to judge based on the last few weeks, because obviously we've now put in place new hybrid provisions for all the functions that we perform as parliamentarians. We don't fully know exactly what the usage of those is going to be. We don't know what percentage of committees on average will be in person and what percentage will be virtual. We don't know the same for the House or for voting and things like that. I know those things aren't necessarily what we're talking about, but I think all these things do tie together to some degree.

Again, I struggle with the idea of making a decision about something without knowing all the information, and I don't think we do right now. My suggestion would be that when we do have that information, we come back and have another look at this. I know that this is asking for three or maybe six months of managing through, but we have obviously approved some additional resources, which I think will help. We can get those in place and utilize those.

I'm of the belief that I would rather have all the information when we come back and look at this in three months or six months, when we're in a position to know exactly what things look like.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay, very good.

[*Translation*]

We now move on to Mrs. DeBellefeuille. Then, it will be Mr. Julian's turn.

[*English*]

Then we will go over to Mr. Holland.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

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

I don't really agree with what my fellow member just suggested. I think the explanations provided in the documents we received leading up to today's meeting are quite clear, and even quite specific. Top of mind for me are all the staffing considerations. Any organization attempting to modernize itself has to deal with the issue. We have had the benefit of witnesses and evidence demonstrating that the House Administration has done everything in its power to optimize the use of human resources in order to deliver pre-pandemic-level support in accommodating members' needs.

What I take from the documents is that, even before the pandemic, the House Administration was operating at full capacity to keep up the pace, level and quality of support members need in fulfilling their duties. That requires not just analysts, researchers and clerks, but also IT staff. All of those resources are needed to support this level of activity.

At the last meeting of the Board of Internal Economy, my fellow member asked, and rightfully so, for additional information. In my view, that information has been provided to us and is sufficiently clear.

It's not normal for the House Administration to have to rely on its employees doing an unreasonable amount of overtime just so that it can provide the level of support that parliamentarians as a whole require. It's fine for a little while. The pandemic exacerbated the reliance on overtime. That is my understanding after reading the information provided. To keep up its performance, an organization cannot rely on making its staff work overtime or pulling people from one section in order to prop up a busier section.

I gather that the additional resources being requested would allow the House Administration to continue providing high-quality service, while allowing employees to work a reasonable schedule without always having to be ready to do overtime. What's more, the House Administration had already conducted an assessment and was going to submit this request regardless. As we have been told, even without the pandemic, we would have probably received more or less the same request for new resources.

As far as the modernization of IT services is concerned, some good practices may be here to stay. I'm glad to see that parliamentarians are returning to Parliament in person, because, as we all know, hybrid sittings not only require more resources, but are also more demanding for interpreters and other categories of personnel. The fact remains, the level of activity and the desire of parliamentarians to create committees and to study pressing issues demand agility, proficiency and a high level of performance from the House Administration. That means the level of service must be steady and balanced.

I want my fellow members here today to know that, when you have a stable organization, you can also look after your employees and manage operations on a more personal level. In light of everything that has happened, we need to give the House Administration the ability to look after its staff while delivering high-quality service to parliamentarians.

For those reasons, I don't quite agree with my fellow member, Blake Richards. We often have the same concerns, but I think not giving the House Administration what it needs to better support us in our work is akin to clipping its wings.

I am in favour, then, of this recommendation.

• (1125)

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

We continue with Mr. Julian, followed by Mr. Holland.

You may go ahead, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Do we know how much of the funding initially set aside for committee and witness travel has gone unused since the beginning of the pandemic? I know the Board of Internal Economy has been provided with those figures in the past.

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

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

Since the pandemic began, no funds have been spent on travel. I don't have the exact figures on hand, but I can tell you that travel-

related spending has been quite low during the pandemic. Those costs have been limited.

The annual budget for committees is \$4 million, and that money is carried over from year to year.

Mr. Peter Julian: What is the travel budget? How much money is spent on travel in a regular year?

Mr. Ian McDonald: No funds were spent on travel.

Mr. Peter Julian: I realize that, but in a regular year, how much is budgeted for witness travel?

Mr. Ian McDonald: It doesn't quite work that way. No specific amount is really budgeted for that.

First, a committee decides on the places where it wishes to hold meetings. A request is then submitted to the committee, and that request is forwarded to the Liaison Committee, which is in charge of approving such requests.

In this case, we haven't received any requests.

Mr. Peter Julian: Very well. I'm going to rephrase my question to get at the answer. This feels a bit like being in question period.

In the year before the pandemic, how much was spent overall on witness travel so that people could appear before committees in Ottawa?

Mr. Ian McDonald: We will confirm that for you momentarily.

• (1130)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Patrice, you may go ahead.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We are going to have to check on that, but I will say that we did not spend a cent on witness travel during the pandemic, because witnesses could not appear in person.

Mr. Peter Julian: That wasn't what I asked.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Mr. Janse can correct me if I'm wrong, but as I understand it, the committee budget is approximately \$4 million, and witness-related expenditures are drawn from that budget. That \$4 million allocated to committees also covers committee travel costs when committees wish to hold meetings outside Ottawa.

As Mr. McDonald was trying to explain, no specific amount is allocated to witness travel. Instead, the overall \$4-million budget covers various expenditures stemming from committee activities.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a point of order.

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

Mr. Blake Richards: The translation doesn't appear to be coming through. I'm not sure if the microphone is off in the translation booth or what, but it doesn't seem to be coming through.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Maybe I'm talking too fast.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I can accuse you of lots of things, but talking too fast is not one of them.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: I understand what you're saying about the \$4 million and the lack of witness-related expenditures. However—

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Wait one minute. No, there was nothing on there.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We seem to be having a technical problem. The interpreter behind me is definitely interpreting, but the sound is not going through. Maybe we could wait.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will ask everyone to pause for a second. We will get started as soon as that gets fixed.

• (1130) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1130)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: The problem with the interpretation is now fixed.

Carry on, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: To be honest, I didn't mean for my question to be this complicated. I completely understand that this is not a budget item in and of itself, but that it comes out of the overall \$4-million budget. I simply want to know how much was spent on witness travel annually before the pandemic.

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

Mr. Eric Janse (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): We'll have to do a bit more digging to find out exactly how much was spent on travel.

As for the \$4 million, we spent just \$165,000 last year. The year before that, so fiscal year 2019-20, that number was \$702,000. The year before the pandemic, we spent \$2.6 million. In 2017-18, it was also \$2.6 million, and for 2016-17, it was \$3.3 million.

That is what committees spent on travel and witness-related costs, among other things. That money is entirely separate from the operating budget of the Committees and Legislative Services Directorate. That money cannot be used to fund temporary resources for the Committees and Legislative Services Directorate.

• (1135)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. That's what I wanted to know.

I fully understand that it isn't the same budget. Nevertheless, when I look at these amounts, which seem quite low, I think it's important to budget for these new expenditures to ensure proper follow-up for committees. Therefore, I fully support the recommendation.

In addition, over time, this could change how we work in committee on a number of fronts. I'll give you two examples. First, the introduction of some key tools has, of course, brought down travel costs. Second, for someone like me, who comes from British Columbia, or for any witness who is asked to appear before a com-

mittee, the benefit of not having to spend three days in Ottawa is obvious.

For all of those reasons and in light of everything that is expected of committees and of staff in terms of delivering quality service—as Mrs. DeBellefeuille so rightly pointed out—I think these amounts are warranted.

[English]

The last point I wanted to make was in terms of how the administration has responded to the challenge of this virtual Parliament. Like many members of Parliament, I think, I've been remarkably impressed by how quickly we were able to put into place tools that we've never used before as parliamentarians.

Even today, the vote app that is being put into place is going to make a big difference in terms of our effectiveness in voting. Hopefully, everything works well today. Certainly, it makes our work much more efficient. Instead of spending an inordinate amount of time voting, it's a quicker way of expressing the will of our constituents, to vote and to move on.

To see, after the passage of the motion on the hybrid Parliament, all of the personnel and the administration lined up to work all night to make sure that the next morning, after our vote on Thursday, the provisions for the hybrid Parliament were set up and ready to go I think is a remarkable achievement.

I see these amounts as justified, but I also wanted to pay tribute to what has been a very strong and effective reaction from the administration in a very difficult period to keep our parliamentary functions continuing and to put in place new tools that have allowed us to work through this pandemic in as efficient and effective a way as possible.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Holland, who will be followed by Mr. Richards.

Mr. Holland, go ahead.

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

Just on the point of the voting application first, I thought it was quite appropriate that the last vote this Parliament probably will ever have by Zoom was on time allocation, but in any event, there are a couple of things I wanted to say.

One is that if we take a look at the figures that are provided in the report—not including the pandemic period, which was even higher—the average number of witnesses appearing before committees was up 74%; the average number of hours of meetings was up 49%; the average number of reports published was up 28%; the average number of meetings by video conference was up 54%. It's worth repeating, because I think it makes the point so clearly.

This doesn't even factor in the number of special committees that are taking place, which I was talking about in my earlier comments. Mr. Deltell is absolutely right: There are very important and pressing issues that are happening in the world, but this is not the first time there have been very important and pressing issues happening in the world. Previously, for example, if a matter was happening at the height of the Cold War and its tensions, we had a foreign affairs committee, and that's what we used for such matters. Now we're creating a special committee every time there's a new issue happening anywhere on the planet.

If that's going to be the trajectory of things, it's a bit of a strange position on the one hand to say, "Let's vastly increase the number of committees and vastly increase the number of witnesses and vastly increase the workload", but then turn around and say, "Well, I don't see a reason to increase the amount of money we're giving you to support us in doing this work." I think that's a disingenuous position, and I think we're already seeing the implications of that with regional caucuses, which are without support. As the chief government whip has indicated—and as I'm sure every caucus feels—when members are getting together to discuss how they're going to plan and organize themselves and how they're going to meet the issues of the day, they are not able to be serviced right now.

The recommendation is very simple, which is how to deal with the existing context to make sure that "the needs and expectations of Members of Parliament in Committees" are met. I'm not comfortable at all leaving this place with basically saying to the House administration, "Good luck. Find overtime. Beg, borrow and steal from every other part." It just shows no respect for the people who are serving us, frankly. I think that if I were them and I were watching us explode the amount of work in committees.... You're choking the oxygen out of the scuba tank while at the same time saying "Go deeper." That's just not fair, and I don't think that's how we should run a professional place.

• (1140)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

We'll proceed to Mr. Richards, followed by Monsieur LeBlanc.

Mr. Richards, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

First, I'll maybe just address those last comments. At the end of the day, if the decisions made by the House of Commons lead to there being additional committee needs in this place, then obviously, as I indicated earlier, we need to look at the resources that are there. What we're talking about is our current situation, not what the situation could be in the future. Should that happen, well, then, we have an opportunity to address that. I do want to address the current situation.

As I was saying earlier, I feel like, if we want to look at what our future needs are, we need to do it in a place where we know all the information about what our future needs are. Right now, when we're dealing with temporary provisions, I feel like it's difficult to properly assess that. For me to make a decision about a permanent change, I want to know what that's going to look like. I think three

to six months from now, we're all hoping we're going to be in a place where we're better able to do that.

Having said that, with the current situation being what it is with hybrid committees, we saw in the last session of Parliament the limitations of the schedule that goes with virtual, at that time, and at this point hybrid committee meetings. To use one example of many, the procedure and House affairs committee had a meeting that went on in two-hour or sometimes slightly longer chunks for weeks because one party was looking to avoid a specific outcome. That lack of resources was used strategically by the government to try to avoid a certain outcome.

I guess if I'm going to look at a supplementary proposal rather than look at what our needs will be in three to six months, I need to look at it and evaluate it based on what kinds of outcomes it produces now. What I want to hear is this: Should these resources be approved, would that minimize or reduce or preferably even eliminate the ability for the resource excuse to be used strategically by any political party to try to avoid any specific outcome? In other words, can the resources provide for extended hours of sitting of meetings and things like that so that we can actually address things and not see resources be used strategically by political parties?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe Monsieur Patrice will take that question.

Mr. Michel Patrice: It would certainly mitigate that risk. The last thing we want is the resources issue to be used as a strategic purpose.

So yes, it would mitigate those risks and it would limit those risks. That is for certain.

• (1145)

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that statement. That's an important assurance. However, I'll ask for a bit more detail on that, if I can.

Obviously, you've analyzed this and you've looked at the needs. I'm certain that you would be able to tell us what you expect the outcomes to be of the new resources. On that specific point, can you give us an indication of what exactly that would look like? In other words, would that allow meetings to carry on?

Maybe give us a bit of an idea of what the limitations would be on that and what they wouldn't be. Knowing that it will be improved is great, but what does improvement look like? Can you give us some sense of that?

Mr. Michel Patrice: In terms of the meetings carrying on, following incidents in the last Parliament we developed a protocol to ensure that meetings carry on. We have to realize that it may have an impact on a subsequent meeting that is scheduled. That is just a matter of meeting room location and all of that. This would allow us to stabilize our resources, as I said, and mitigate the risk that we have a resource issue that would have a negative impact on the operation of the House and its committees. Obviously, I cannot offer guarantees—for example, if we had an explosion of COVID cases within the ranks of the administration and all of that. These things are always possible, potentially, but it would definitely allow us to stabilize our resources.

We will continue to use our staff, who are devoted to the operation of the House and the continuity of the House, recognizing that it's one of the foundations of democracy, and to offer and provide additional hours in terms of overtime and do what needs to be done. But there's definitely a mathematical issue and a human resource issue: People cannot give beyond what they can give.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay—

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe Mr. Robert would like to comment on this as well.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sorry. Okay, sure. I have a follow-up question, but please go ahead.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): I think there is a need to recognize that committees actually have an administrative infrastructure, and when you create a committee, you need to have that infrastructure in place in order to support its operations.

To your point, Mr. Richards, the issue that needs to be remembered is that even if there is an increase in the number of committees and we are able to provide the necessary support to allow for their operation, we are still going to come up against the problem of the number of interpreters who are available to service the committees, so even if we multiply our committees, the way they can be scheduled and the way they can be operated will always be constrained by the availability of the interpreters.

[Translation]

As we know quite well, we can't operate in only one official language. We have to function in both languages to respect bilingualism. If we can't hire people who satisfy your language needs, we have a problem.

[English]

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

Mr. Blake Richards: I'll just follow up on that, probably more so to Mr. Patrice, but Mr. Robert, you're welcome to add if there is anything to add, as are you, Mr. McDonald.

I do understand that the challenges aren't all about human resources. Some of the challengers are about room availability, and I understand that. At least I believe that's the case, that some of it is around room availability and things. I understand that we are limited, for example, by how many qualified interpreters are available, and I hear the point you're making that the more committees there are, the harder that is.

I get that, but let's operate on the current situation and where we're at. Can you give me a bit of a sense, concretely, as to what in the new resources that are being requested today will enable that? I understand the challenges around room allocations and things like that, as well as interpretation and qualified interpreters being available. I know that's important, but I need to get a sense of what exactly in this strategic use of the situation will mitigate meetings being prevented or eliminated or reduced. Can you give me a couple of concrete examples of how these new positions or other things that we are being asked for could help mitigate that?

• (1150)

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go to Mr. McDonald.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Richards, for the questions.

The first thing I would say is that in very concrete terms, with the addition by the House yesterday of a special committee, two of the resources we're looking for are a committee clerk and a committee assistant to be able to support—

Mr. Blake Richards: I don't want to interrupt, but I'm going to, because I thought that in last week's meeting the three positions we approved were specifically for that. Was that not the case?

Mr. Ian McDonald: There were three resources approved, two for the new Standing Committee on Science and Research, and one technical resource to support additional committee time, meetings, witnesses, etc. So no, these resources....

In really concrete terms, what we see is that we have an ongoing.... It's not just the special committee that was created yesterday in the House. If you look at the trend in one of the tables we provided in appendix B, you'll see that we've had an ongoing number of special committees going back to the last decade. There's almost always one that exists. We've always readjusted internally to be able to support those, but we're finding that, as the activity levels go up and as the service standards go up with the modernization of tools and stuff, it puts a great deal of extra pressure on us and we're having a more challenging time finding the resources to be able to support another committee that's been added. In concrete terms, if these two resources are granted on a temporary basis, as is being recommended—and we'll come back with an evaluation of that in a year's time—those resources would essentially be focused on supporting a special committee.

The other element is that there are three resources that are more focused on video conference. We used to only be able to offer a certain number of video conferences. In the typical committee schedule, there are six meetings in a block, as you know. We used to be able to support only a limited number of committees that had video conference. That was okay because we used to have fewer video conferences. We used to have fewer rooms that were capable of video conferencing, but, as we've tried to demonstrate, that has kept growing over the years, and committees now expect to be able to have witnesses by video conference, not just during the pandemic but before the pandemic. During the pandemic, certainly, it's even more complicated and absolutely more true, but even before the pandemic that's what was happening.

These three other resources are more focused on being able to set up video conferences. We did a Lean process review to look at how long it takes to set up a video conference. It's very extensive. We've tried to streamline that as much as possible, but it still involves a lot of calls. You mentioned PROC earlier. When PROC wants to hear witnesses from Westminster, there are all the emails and calls to set that up, and the testing that's required in advance. More and more committees are taking advantage of that. That was, again, pre-pandemic, and it's certainly more so during the pandemic.

That's why having some additional resources and being able to handle all the meetings that are going on throughout the day, and a little bit of wiggle room, is what we are looking for.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have one last question, I hope, with regard to the blocks we're dealing with now. That's what we're talking about in the current environment, at least until the end of June. We have the six committee blocks. That's our maxed-out situation. I suppose it might be less of an issue when it's the last committee of the day—you might be able to carry on a bit more easily—but for the earlier committees, it's a bit more of a challenge.

Would these new resources, for example, add capabilities? Say one of those six committees had to carry on and there were other meetings coming after. Would this potentially enable one of those committees to carry on beyond its time if it needed to get to an outcome on whatever specific issue it was dealing with? If I could see that there's the ability for that, for example, or maybe two of them could carry on.... Could we get some sense of what that would mean in concrete terms?

I know that it may be hard to predict exactly, but I need some kind of a sense. I can see a very important outcome there, if that's the case.

• (1155)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe Monsieur Patrice has a comment on that.

Mr. Michel Patrice: I think we have the same answer.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Perhaps I can start, then. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and through you to Mr. Richards.

The short answer is yes. What we're always aiming to do is to be able to support as many activities as possible, whether that's within the blocks or even beyond those. Whether it's meetings going on or extra meetings being added, we want to be able to support those as much as possible.

But there are many variables. As the Clerk referred to before, we sometimes have a bottleneck around the interpretation resources that are available. As was mentioned, a protocol was put in place in the last Parliament. Every time we get a request, we reach out to all of our partners to see if everybody is okay to do that—from the PVOs, who are there working the microphones and recording who spoke at what time, all the way to the interpreters, the clerks, the technicians and everyone. We make sure we can support, because we need everyone in the chain to be available so we can support.

So, yes, these resources will help supplement that, but they're not the only resources involved in that chain. We need to continue working with them, but we are looking constantly to see how we can bring improvements. We're working with our partners in the translation bureau interpretation service to see where we can bring improvements around the tools they're using and everything else as well.

Mr. Blake Richards: Caveats aside—and I understand there are caveats—what you're telling me is that you believe there should be the ability to see meetings being extended, where possible, in order to avoid strategic use of resources as a reason not to arrive at an outcome in a meeting. You're of the belief that this should enable us to see some improvement in avoiding that as a strategic tool being used. Is that fair?

Mr. Michel Patrice: That is fair, caveats aside.

Mr. Ian McDonald: I would just add, from a House of Commons perspective, in terms of the team from the House that supports committees, absolutely.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. Now we'll go to Mr. LeBlanc.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities): Mr. Speaker, thank you, and through you to our colleagues.

I want to align myself with the comments of our House leader and others, including Madame DeBellefeuille. We have a thoughtful recommendation from the House administration. We can ascribe partisan meanings to all kinds of extensions of different meetings or additions of special committees. It's not particularly constructive at a Board of Internal Economy meeting.

If the idea is to better serve members of Parliament in their work on committees that the House sets up through whatever process is in place, I would hope that we're all in favour of ensuring that those committees and the members who serve on those committees can do their work as efficiently and as effectively as Canadians expect. We have professional managers from the House of Commons administration who have thoughtfully prepared a responsible submission on what will increase our ability to better serve those committees.

Mr. Speaker, I would be very happy to approve the suggestion as made by the House administration and move on to other agenda items.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I don't see any more comments.

Do we have consent to proceed with the recommendation?

Mr. Blake Richards: To be clear, what we're doing is approving the resources on a temporary basis, with a review in one year.

An hon. member: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are we good?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. We'll move on.

[*Translation*]

That brings us to the fourth item on the agenda: confirmation of the mandate and membership of the Long-Term Vision and Plan, or LTVP, Working Group.

Go ahead, Mr. Patrice.

[*English*]

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The purpose of this briefing note is to seek the approval of the board to confirm the mandate and the composition of the LTVP working group that was set up by the board in the last session of Parliament. The LTVP group would be composed of the Speaker or their designate—in this scenario, that would be Mr. d'Entremont, as the last time it used to be Deputy Speaker Stanton; three members from the government; two members from the official opposition; and one member for each of the third and fourth recognized parties. The same mandate would apply to the functioning of the working group that was approved in the last session.

I'm open to questions.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have any questions or comments?

Go ahead, Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I completely agree with the recommendation. I would just like to know when you expect to stand up the committee.

[*English*]

Mr. Michel Patrice: We'll be waiting for the parties to provide us the names in the following weeks, but no meeting is planned before Christmas. After, in January—

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You would like us to provide you with names, then.

All right. Thank you.

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

Is everyone in agreement?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That brings us to item five on the agenda. Before we begin the discussion, I would ask that we move in camera.

[*English*]

I want to remind everyone that we'll take a couple of minutes before it gets shifted over. Maybe we'll take three minutes. It's noon right now. At 12:03, we will proceed.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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