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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Speaker of the House of Commons): Colleagues, we will begin our meeting. I see that we have a quorum, plus a representative from each of the recognized official political parties in the House of Commons.

Welcome to meeting number 26 of the Board of Internal Economy.

Since we have a rather full agenda, we will move quickly.

We'll start with the minutes from the previous meeting.

[*English*]

Are there any comments, or would anyone like to approve the minutes arising from the previous meeting?

Thank you, Mr. Gerretsen and Madame DeBellefeuille. Are all in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

We're moving on to the second item on the agenda, which is business arising from previous meetings.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

First, I'd like to talk about the virtual committees dashboard. With your permission, Mr. Chair, I will turn to Mr. McDonald.

The results on this are quite impressive, especially in terms of the increase. I'm particularly impressed that the number of minutes spoken in person has increased and the number of minutes spoken virtually has gone down. However, that progression seems to have levelled off.

I have a question for you, Mr. McDonald.

First, I'd like to thank your team, because I know that it's demanding for the teams to keep a dashboard, which is a self-assessment tool. I proposed this tool because it's the best way to measure how well we are meeting our objectives. I know it's a lot of work, and I want to thank all of your teams.

To your knowledge, do many public servants who work on or off the Hill still work from home? I'm trying to see how we could increase the number of in-person appearances; the witnesses who work in the departments, for example, are my first target group.

Do you have that data?

• (1105)

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

No, I don't have that data. We can see if it's possible to provide it to the Board of Internal Economy at the next meeting or to provide it in writing. We don't check that generally. We're not looking at that specifically.

I know that the Liaison Committee made an effort to encourage officials to testify in person, and a letter was sent to the Privy Council Office so that this information was sent to all departments. However, I don't have the statistics in front of me. We will find them and get them to you.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: In terms of remote interpreting, do you have any preliminary conclusions to present to us? Perhaps you'd like to talk about this at a future meeting, since it's not part of the dashboard.

Have you received any comments or feedback from interpretation services, the interpreters or the technology team? Can you quickly tell us how things are going right now?

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

We can certainly provide more information on that at a future meeting. We consulted the whips of all parties in January. We haven't changed the system. We've kept the same system and the same remote interpreters, but since we resumed in January, we have changed the way these resources are assigned to committees to make them a little more flexible and to ensure greater availability of resources in order to provide more flexible support to committees.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Have you cross-referenced workers' compensation data? For example, has integrating remote interpreting mode reduced or increased workplace injuries related to the work of interpreters? Do you have that data?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I believe Mr. Aouididi has more information on that.

Mr. Yassine Aouididi (Senior Digital Product Manager, House of Commons): Good morning, Madam.

Mr. Chair, I thank the member for her question.

At this stage, the pilot project is going very well, technologically speaking. We've made no specific correlation with respect to workplace accidents.

As Mr. McDonald pointed out, the primary goal was to expand the time slots available to committees for this service, in order to maximize the interpreting resources assigned to this service and to give the committees more flexibility here.

Again, we've had no issues in terms of technology. Generally speaking, we've had positive consultations with members of Parliament, political parties, the Translation Bureau and interpreters working remotely. Once again, we will continue to keep an eye on this to see if we can find ways to improve things.

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

I don't want to take up so much time that the government leader has a heart attack. It just so happens that we take a lot of time to discuss this subject at the Board of Internal Economy.

Mr. McDonald, are you going to cross-reference the data, or can you provide us with this information at a future meeting? I am very satisfied by the fact that, since we resumed our proceedings and remote interpretation was implemented, no committee was cancelled due to lack of resources, even when parliamentary hours were extended.

I am always diligent about making sure that this way of doing things contributes to increasing current interpreters' occupational well-being.

I think we are at the point of getting the required resources to do our work.

I would be grateful to you if you could provide us with information on cross-referenced data at the next meeting of the Board of Internal Economy. That would help us see if this new way of working causes workplace accidents, and so on. It could be worthwhile to cross-reference the data.

Mr. McDonald, you know that we want a large number of interpreters and we don't want them to get ill. That is why I'm paying close attention to this issue.

Once again, as an MP, I only use interpretation, even if there are sometimes sound issues. I can confirm that the sound is not always the same. The quality of the interpretation isn't always either. However, I am aware that everyone is doing their best to get the best possible results.

I thank you and your team, as well as the IT team, for all of the efforts made and your willingness to improve the situation.

• (1110)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. It's been noted.

We will try to come back with more information at the next meeting.

We thank you for your accolades regarding progress made to date.

Mr. Peter Julian (House leader of the New Democratic Party): I would also like to offer accolades.

It is true that we have made progress in terms of health and safety for House of Commons interpreters. Without interpreters, we cannot engage in our democracy and do our work at the House of Commons. They play an extremely important role.

I only have one question to ask and it is about interpreters. Every time you come here, we like to ask you the same questions.

Have you hired other interpreters since the last time you presented your report? Have you held an exam to recruit more potential interpreters? What do you plan to do by the end of the year in terms of exams for interpreters to hire more of them?

The issue of interpreters' occupational health and safety is obviously important, but the number of interpreters available to us is as well. We have been short-staffed for several years. The problem must be solved now.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Mr. McDonald, you have the floor.

Mr. Ian McDonald: I think those questions should be directed to the Translation Bureau. We will certainly take note of them and send them to the Translation Bureau to get more information, which we will then provide to the Board of Internal Economy.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there other questions on this subject? No? Very well.

Thank you very much, Mr. McDonald and Mr. Aouididi.

[*English*]

We will move to the LTVP working group.

Deputy Speaker d'Entremont, please lead us off.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont (Chair, Working Group on the LTVP and the Centre Block Rehabilitation, House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As chair of the LTVP working group, I am here today to update the board on the progress on the Centre Block rehabilitation program and what the working group has accomplished over the last two months.

We have numerous recommendations for the board's consideration and approval today. The working group has met several times to ensure that key project elements are being reviewed in a timely manner so that the board can provide key decisions in alignment with the project schedule.

As an overall project update, the site work continues to progress very well. PSPC has confirmed that the overall project health remains in line with the planned approved scope, cost and schedule.

The 50% design development package for Centre Block was submitted at the end of December by the design consultants and is in full review by our House of Commons project team. A review package submission on this project consists of over 2,000 drawings and over 10,000 pages in the many supporting specifications and reports. The 50% design package for the Parliament welcome centre is expected in March. The working group has four more meetings scheduled this spring to be able to advise on the many key decisions required on behalf of parliamentarians and to support the project's progress.

In that regard, and from the latest detailed reviews the working group has been involved in, the following recommendations are proposed for BOIE decisions to facilitate that work.

Today we are seeking endorsement on the following key elements: endorsement on the proposed accessibility improvements in the Memorial Chamber and Peace Tower; endorsement for the proposed general layouts for lobbies and new lobby support space; endorsement on the multimedia enablement strategy, including a proposal to look at options for locations of simultaneous interpretation; endorsement of the proposed circulation, excluding material handling; endorsement of the proposed strategy for heritage rooms within Centre Block; and a further update on dedicating space in the fourth floor central courtyard infill.

As well, we are seeking endorsement on the overall security approach for the Centre Block welcome centre, but this will be briefed in camera at the end of my presentation.

[*Translation*]

There are innate accessibility challenges leading to and within the existing high heritage space of the Memorial Chamber. These challenges are part of the original design to distinguish the significance of what the Memorial Chamber represents and the lives that are honoured within. The materials that were used in the design are also significant themselves, as they are from the battlefields upon which many Canadians fought and died in the First World War.

The Working Group reviewed various detailed proposals for improvement and the type of intervention required to provide greater accessibility. We believe a balanced approach is advisable. The following are recommended improvements we are proposing to enhance accessibility during the visitor experience. They are achievable while still respecting the historic and heritage architectural nature of the space.

On the slide, you can see the many improvements listed, such as improved access to ramps into the Chamber, incorporation of Braille on the handrails, tactile mapping to help with wayfinding, modification to the angle the Books of Remembrance are displayed for improved viewing and handheld devices to assist viewing on the central altar.

Accessibility challenges in the Peace Tower observation deck are also intrinsic to the original architectural design. Public Services and Procurement Canada proposed a low-tech solution to enhance

the viewing experience and overcome the stone windowsill obstruction. The introduction of periscopes, a creative solution, will enable various diverse users to fully enjoy the viewing experience. Other amenities such as seating and a washroom will also be added nearby to improve universal accessibility.

The Working Group recommends the proposed approach for accessibility improvements in these areas for the Board's consideration and endorsement.

- (1115)

I hope you carefully reviewed the proposed layouts we presented.

[*English*]

On the proposed layouts for lobbies and new lobby support space, as you recall, the board gave direction to the Centre Block project to respect the heritage architecture of the building while modernizing to meet the needs of a working Parliament, and it endorsed an interconnected two-floor lobby and lobby support area.

The working group was consulted, as were the whips' offices, including their lobby representatives, to gather requirements and feedback. An on-site visit to the lobbies also facilitated further understanding of the importance of the functioning of the lobbies.

The working group has reviewed the proposed layouts. The lobby space has increased and is approximately two-and-a-half times larger than that of the pre-closure Centre Block. The lobbies will continue to have the same entrances off the chamber, with improvements for accessibility.

On the chamber level, the primary functions of the whips' and MPs' seating are prioritized, with space for the page desk and supporting amenities, such as technology and water services. Connected by internal stairs in each lobby, a lower floor offers further space and functions to support the work of members in the chamber, including the modern-style PODs that ensure some private work areas.

Additional members' amenities are included in close proximity to the chamber at the lower level, such as a coatroom, washrooms, meeting rooms and a larger family room with upgraded features, including electrical requirements as per feedback received during MP consultations.

The working group is satisfied with the proposed general layouts of the lobby space and lobby support space and believes that the proposal takes into consideration members' needs for supporting their work in the chamber.

We recommend that the proposed general layouts be endorsed, noting that they offer flexibility with free-standing furniture that can support a variety of arrangements in the future.

[*Translation*]

The next item is on the multimedia enablement strategy for Centre Block. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic response to provisioning of innovative technologies to support Parliament, such as remote interpretation and e-voting, limited proof of concepts were undertaken.

In 2021, the Translation Bureau and PSPC, in collaboration with the House of Commons, pursued a limited technical evaluation to determine if secure, encrypted centralized simultaneous interpretation, or CSI, would meet the Canadian parliamentary and global ISO standards for audio and video quality. Based on the successful security test for the Senate and House of Commons, the interpretation strategy warrants further testing to determine the reliability, scalability, operational impacts and client user experience.

The project is leveraging the success of the limited tech evaluation for centralized simultaneous interpretation as a probable solution for the space pressures within Centre Block and the Parliament Welcome Centre. Space pressures to accommodate modern parliamentary functions, universal accessibility, as well as basic building upgrades, required Parliament to prioritize space and investigate alternate approaches to deliver services to support parliamentarians.

Given the technical security evaluation success for the House of Commons, designs for Centre Block and the Parliament Welcome Centre were advanced using the concept of centralized interpretation, and not traditional simultaneous interpretation booths.

Based on the success of the upcoming proof of concept, including Privy Council Office security validation, CSI is expected to deliver a modern environment, custom designed to meet the needs of parliamentary interpreters.

- (1120)

A centralized facility, as well as backup capabilities located in the Centre Block Underground Services, will be planned and implemented to align with the opening of Centre Block. Parliamentary Protective Services will continue to secure these spaces.

The working group supports this approach, as it also offers good potential for efficiencies in terms of business continuity, support and operations, as well as potential cost savings. We recommend that the Board of Internal Economy endorse the centralized approach for simultaneous interpretation for Centre Block and for the project to pursue options for the location within the Precinct.

[*English*]

On the proposed circulation strategy, a presentation on design progress was provided to the working group with the aim of explaining the circulation into and within the new parliamentary welcome centre and the rehabilitated Centre Block. The circulation strategy includes visitors, business visitors and parliamentarian routes.

Reviewing the plans to understand how the buildings will function is quite complex. While the working group has the opportunity to engage, ask questions and develop a detailed view of this circulation, we believe that the proposed circulation is conducive to the functioning of Parliament with a balance of accessibility and security. We understand that the circulation paths will continue to devel-

op as the design evolves, and we will continue to monitor the progress to ensure that it aligns with parliamentary operations.

We are recommending that the proposed circulation strategy be endorsed by the board.

[*Translation*]

Now, let's talk about endorsement of the proposed strategies for heritage rooms within Centre Block.

There are 50 high-heritage spaces in Centre Block that require conservation and modernization to support parliamentary operations and base building improvements. The board specified that heritage rooms must be protected and restored to reflect the importance of their history and the role they play in support of Parliament.

The Working Group was briefed on the extensive analysis undertaken on the project to understand the original design intent and heritage features of these rooms. Subsequently, this analysis informed the end-state design vision. It will guide design decisions wherever upgrades are required.

The strategy for heritage rooms proposes three options for treatment types defined to guide the design of all individual heritage spaces within Centre Block.

The first option is preservation and restoration. Construction will restore the original design intent, particularly where it has been eroded or concealed over time by significant alterations. An example of this design preservation strategy is the House of Commons railway committee room.

The second option is sensitive reinterpretation. It reveals and respects the original design intent but balances it with the contemporary role of the room or space and occupant expectations. The parliamentary dining room is an example of the design preservation strategy.

The third option is the contemporary option. It is reserved for spaces less sensitive to change. It aims to create a legible but subtle and respectful distinction between what is historical and what is new through the design of contemporary elements and features. An example of this design preservation strategy is a non-pavilion parliamentary office.

With this strategy approval, the project team can start to apply the concept to individual heritage rooms and develop the design. The team proposes bringing forward each individual room with a design recommendation developed by heritage experts for review and endorsement, thus ensuring it meets the expectations specified by the Board of Internal Economy.

The working group recommends endorsing the high-level proposed strategy for the treatment of heritage rooms in Centre Block. We will update the Board of Internal Economy with the actual proposed design for individual rooms as they are developed.

• (1125)

[English]

On the proposed indigenous cultural practices room, at the last LTVP update that I provided for the board, you asked that the working group reconsider the use and name of the dedicated shared space on the fourth floor of the central courtyard infill that would be constructed with appropriate systems to accommodate events that would require the use of smoke.

The board did give approval for the building design to progress in support of such a room, but felt further discussion was required on its name and future use.

This week I received a request from a member of the LTVP to revisit a few points on our decision. I will bring this back as soon as possible. I know we're booked for the next few meetings. We will bring that back at the next one.

[Translation]

In conclusion, before we go in camera for the last item, I would like to mention that the working group was very engaged in a detailed review of issues and proposed designs for Centre Block and the new Parliament Welcome Centre. We remain confident that parliamentarians' requirements are taken into consideration. We hope to be able to update the board on the design through the spring and as work progresses.

I am happy to take your questions along with my two friends, Ms. Jennifer Garrett and Ms. Susan Kulba, whom I should have introduced at the beginning of my presentation, so that we may confirm the proposed endorsements. We will then have a discussion in camera.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mr. d'Entremont, for your very complete presentation.

Dear members, do you have questions to ask or comments to make before moving on to the in camera portion of the meeting?

Mr. Scheer, you have the floor.

[English]

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House leader of the official opposition): Thanks very much.

I just have a question on the "strategies for heritage rooms within Centre Block". I think it's on page 27 of the deck. Under "Sensitive Reinterpretation", it says, "Revealing and respecting the original design intent but balancing this with contemporary role of room or space and occupant expectations."

I just want to clarify that some of that beautiful historic art and architecture in some of the larger committee rooms I'm thinking of—the reading room and the railway room—are not what you're talking about.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Could you speak more slowly, please?

• (1130)

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Okay.

[English]

In those historic rooms, like the reading room and the railway room—the larger committee rooms—there are fantastic pieces of art, architecture and heraldic devices carved into stone. You're talking about balancing with the contemporary role of the room, but when we planned the move, the board at the time was very insistent that all of that historic art and architecture would remain, because there's a tendency with architects and artists to update things with some awful modernist stuff. I'd hate to think that we're going to lose any of those aspects of this generational heritage we have and are all looking forward to moving back into. I'd hate to arrive and then suddenly see that a modern lens has been added to some of the art or to some of the devices in and around the building. I just want some assurance that this is not what we're talking about when we're talking about updating things to be more contemporary.

I'm hoping it means just accommodating some of the modern technology, some of the needs of MPs, who now carry Surface Pros and filming devices. Perhaps you could just enlighten me a little bit on that point.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont: I'll start off with.

When it comes to those historical items, there are a number of these rooms that are historic in their nature. Looking back at the design of those rooms, I use the railway room for the example. Which part of that design do we look at, the original design or the updates that happened over time?

We have to look back at what the original intent or design of those rooms would have been. We're trying to preserve everything we possibly can. I'll get Jennifer to answer more specifically, but what is historic will stay historic, and what is sensitive we will make sure stays as sensitive as possible, knowing that there's a modern...not a modern, but a more appropriate use of some of these items, and then the contemporary is kind of the new stuff that will happen—offices, and that redevelopment as it proceeds.

Jennifer, maybe you can take it on.

Ms. Jennifer Garrett (Director General, Public Services and Procurement Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question.

I'm Jennifer Garrett, with Public Services and Procurement Canada. I'm the new acting assistant deputy minister accountable for the work we're doing on the long-term vision and plan for the precinct.

Let me start by saying that I want to assure you in terms of your concern that absolutely our intent is to protect the heritage. We've done extensive studies of the heritage of the building and we want to respect it, but we understand the direction that came from the board on that matter and we're taking that and applying it to all of the Pearson special rooms, and in fact the entire building.

When those integrated design concepts for those rooms are ready to come forward, you'll be able to see them at some point in this forum and see how that heritage architecture is being maintained and how those modernizations are being delicately put into the building. At this point in time, I think we're in a really good position in protecting and respecting the heritage nature of the building.

The chambers and the committee rooms will largely return to looking very much the same as they did before, as an example. What we are trying to do, though, is make sure that as Parliament needs to be modernized and as modernizations need to happen to support the working building, we are doing those modernizations in a delicate fashion.

This board will see those modernizations as they come forward room by room as architectural concepts, and you'll get your chance to give us feedback before the design is finalized. We are taking special care to make sure that those delicate interventions are being done.

I would just say one final thing, which is that one of the most fascinating aspects of the project to date is having the opportunity to see how the building has evolved with time. In fact, there is something that we call "unsympathetic change" in the heritage world. These are beautiful heritage features that might have been original to the building but have been covered up with paint or other plaster aspects over time. We've uncovered those, and as we bring those rooms forward, you'll see what we've discovered and how we propose to actually reintegrate some original features back into the building.

Hopefully that answers the question.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. MacKinnon has the floor, followed by Mr. Julian.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank Mr. d'Entremont not only for his very complete presentation, but also for chairing the working group so masterfully. Collaboration is fully entrenched in this group. I also note that, for the very first time, Ms. Garrett is here with us. She took on a new role recently. We congratulate her for it. There is also Ms. Kulba, who always answers the call of duty and provides us with all the required information. I want to thank them. This is a monumental project requiring many decisions. I would say we've come to a stage where many decisions must be made quickly.

I want to remind all parliamentarians, those on the Board of Internal Economy, those in the working group and those elsewhere, that tardy decisions are very expensive. We want to be consulted and we are, but we have to let people move the work forward if we

want to go back to Centre Block—I think that's what we all want—at the lowest possible cost.

I want to remind all my colleagues of the need to keep paying attention to these decisions and respond promptly when our approval is requested.

On that point, I told Mr. d'Entremont, as we told the working group, that we agree on all the proposals before us today. We are really looking forward to the final product.

• (1135)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

I don't think there are any comments to make on that.

Mr. Julian has the floor, followed by Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

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

Thank you very much, Mr. d'Entremont, Madam Garrett, Madam Kulba. I appreciate the presentation and am very supportive of the direction that's being taken.

I want to come back to Mr. Scheer's comments because I found them very apt on the issue of heritage rooms in the Centre Block. There are unbelievably incredible rooms within the Centre Block that need to be preserved.

What I hear you saying, Ms. Garrett, is the unsympathetic changes that we've seen over time would be removed. Is it fair to say that what we are looking for is more the type of approach that was taken with the Library of Parliament? That was a magnificent renovation that renewed that beautiful building and made it something that is quite distinct and singular in Canadian architecture. Is that the direction that we can expect in terms of these heritage rooms, something like what we've seen emerge from the Library of Parliament renovation?

Ms. Jennifer Garrett: I can confirm that this is the general intent that we'd like to take and that we are taking on this program.

I'll give you a bit of a sense of the kinds of things that you might look to see in terms of what I hope would be positive improvements to the heritage fabric of the building.

As an example, in your packages you saw photos of the heritage committee rooms pre-closure. At some point, there were very large lights that were incorporated into those heritage rooms, probably with great intent, but under today's lens, they aren't exactly in alignment with the original heritage intent of the building. One of the things we're working on with the House of Commons and that we will bring back is an appropriate lighting strategy for those heritage rooms.

To give another example, in the Prime Minister's office, there was a beautiful compass rose that had been covered over when new lighting was put in place in the 1980s. In our heritage investigations early on, we uncovered that compass rose, and we would like to reinstate that beautiful sculptural element.

There are many examples of beautiful painting schemes that have been painted over, and people may not even be aware that they existed and are original to the building. We're looking at those and considering how we might bring that intent back when we bring the rooms back.

All of those things will be made fully transparent to the working group and to the board for consideration when we come back with those heritage rooms.

That's just to give you a sense of it.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Next we have Madame DeBellefeuille and Mr. Gerretsen.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I would also like to thank the entire team.

Each party participates in the working group. I know that the meetings are important. On our side, Mr. Louis Plamondon, the dean of the House, takes part in the working group. We make a point of talking to each other before and after every meeting to avoid any disconnect and make sure that we remain fully aware of the situation.

I want to tell you that you've done a thorough job and I appreciate the fact that you testified before the Board of Internal Economy. We can talk with you and you listen to our requests. I see, as I read the recommendations, that the group has been listening. I agree with the government leader's proposal to approve all your recommendations today, so that the work can proceed and the rest can be organized as quickly as possible, at the lowest possible cost.

I extend my congratulations to you. I know it involves a lot of meetings, planning and coordination. It is very demanding, because we expect you to be thorough. I offer you my congratulations.

If there is consensus, we can approve all your recommendations.

• (1140)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I am happy about what I heard.

Mr. Gerretsen, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Deputy House leader of the government): Perhaps I'll save it for the LTVP committee.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Very good.

Dear colleagues, as Mrs. DeBellefeuille suggested, does the committee consent to greenlighting the proposals put forward by Mr. d'Entremont?

I see you nodding.

We will now take a break before resuming in camera to discuss certain matters.

The meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera.*]

• (1140)

(Pause)

• (1230)

[*Public proceedings resume.*]

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Colleagues, we're back in public. Thank you very much for your co-operation.

We are now at item number 5, the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians.

I will turn the floor over to the president of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, Matt DeCoursey. He is accompanied by a former Manitoba member of Parliament, Dorothy Dobbie.

It's a pleasure to see you again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Thank you, Mr. Chair and Mr. Janse.

Committee members, thank you for inviting me to meet with you for the third time.

The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians is submitting a budget request that will help us better reflect the mandate that we received from Parliament in 1996 through the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians Act.

[*English*]

Thanks for having us back.

I'm really pleased to be joined today by my immediate predecessor as president of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, Ms. Dorothy Dobbie. In just a moment, Dorothy can talk to you a little bit more about her vast experience and time as a parliamentarian and also about some of the trajectory of our association.

I don't want to take much time. You've heard from me and my colleague Léo Duguay numerous times. When we were here in November, we heard clearly from folks that there's broad agreement on the importance of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians. Our mandate is vital to the success of this institution; to, hopefully, the health and well-being of those who have served in office; and to the vitality of democracy across the country.

We heard your guidance and advice to narrow the focus of the request that we are making. We come back to you today with a revised proposal that is approximately 40% of our original ask. It focuses on the human resources capacity that we need to undertake the important work of supporting the transition in and out of office of parliamentarians and former parliamentarians, as well as the mental health supports that go along with that, and to continue to build on the important democracy support work that we do in the country.

We are here today to answer any outstanding questions that you may still have. We're hoping that we can leave today with some direction to work with the administration of the House of Commons to finalize our plans for the upcoming fiscal year so that we know what we are working with as we continue to undertake our mandate.

[Translation]

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here.

I'll now give the floor to Ms. Dobbie.

[English]

Ms. Dorothy Dobbie (Past President, Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians): Thank you very much.

I want to mention, first of all, that you can see that I'm a little bit older than Matt. I'm considerably older than Matt. That's one thing that's adding to the need to make some changes to the way that the association is run. It is really important to have older people like me with lots of experience and background, but it's also important to have youth leading our organization, because there are another 30 years to come that will require some experience. People like Matt are going to be the ones leading the way in the future.

Since 1993, when the Tories got kicked out so unceremoniously that there were only two people left, the Tories have basically been the backbone of the association. I see that in the future for the Liberal members who will perhaps be younger and be ready to take on that role.

When you're young and you have a young family, as Matt does, you don't have the time to do the things that Leo, Andy and I and fellows in the past have had to do to take on the responsibilities of running the association.

The association is very important to the future of democracy in Canada. It's really important that we have an opportunity to teach young people about how Parliament works, because they just don't know. I don't know if you've been reading the information recently about that. Even my adult children don't really understand how Parliament works. Some of them don't know the difference, in many cases, between the federal government and the provincial government. Don't ask them about municipal politics, because that's really confusing for them.

What we do as former parliamentarians, in terms of letting people understand how this institution works and how parliamentary democracy works worldwide, is a really important function of what we have in mind. Even more important is the way that we can support new members coming into the House of Commons who don't really know what to expect, and then really support the folks who leave. You don't have to leave involuntarily to go through what I call "falling off the cliff".

Just very recently, a former member who left voluntarily came to me. I thought she wanted to talk about something that had to do with provincial matters. She wanted to talk to me about what was happening to her as a voluntary, very high-profile member of Parliament and how she was being rejected by the community. That's what happens, folks.

It seems really weird, but when I left I was very lucky to have a former Liberal minister come and ask me for lunch. She told me, "Dorothy, it's going to take a decade to get rehabilitated." I thought she was joking, but I did listen to her, and it really helped me to understand what I was coming up against, because she was someone I had really admired when she was in Parliament.

I discovered that she was right. It did take a decade to become accepted into the community and to be able to make a difference. Part of the difference was being asked to come back and join the association of former members, which was formed about three years after I left Parliament. They just reached out and asked, "Whatever happened to Dorothy Dobbie?"

Well, that was all I needed to be back, saying that I'm here and I'm willing to serve. I think that if you're born into a life of service to the public, it sticks with you. It's in your heart. It stays with you. When you finally leave, being rejected for that service is kind of difficult, but to be able to come and meet with colleagues you formerly worked with and have an opportunity to still make a difference is something I think is just endemic to who we are as Parliamentarians.

I am very glad that we have Matt to run things in the future and to carry on the traditions of the association, but he needs the resources to be able to do the job that we were mandated to do in the very beginning. You've all heard what those mandates were. They are an act of Parliament. I guess the only thing I can say is that it's a mandate, and we haven't been able to completely fulfill that mandate.

I hope you that you will consider our request. We're willing to make compromises and to have discussions, but we really want to move this agenda forward and make sure that the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians is here for the future for any of you who might need our help when that day comes.

• (1235)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

Are there any questions or comments from colleagues around the table?

Go ahead, Ms. Sahota.

Hon. Ruby Sahota (Chief Government Whip): Thank you for coming here today.

First of all, thank you for coming back with a more concise ask. It's been whittled down somewhat as well.

Can you explain to me how you made these choices and why these specific categories will help you accomplish the work that you're doing, and maybe even reference the work you propose to do in the coming years?

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Thanks very much.

The revised proposal is a consequence of the advice that we received from folks at this table.

In the letter that heads that proposal, you'll see that we have every intention to continue the full objectives that we set forth in our original proposal, but we understand, as former politicians, that there are political realities this board has to deal with. We're willing to start by ensuring that we have the human resources in place to help us fully engage the potential roster of 1,000 former parliamentarians in the mentorship and transition supports—which Dorothy spoke about eloquently—and in the outreach to young people, primarily, across the country to support democracy-building initiatives that we think are so vital at this time in the country.

Dorothy referenced an Abacus poll that came out just a little over a week ago. It talked about the severe dearth in civics education that exists across the country and the consequence that has on Canadians' ability to engage in tough conversations.

We're at a point in this country's history where we need people who can engage in tough conversations. We believe—as experienced former parliamentarians who understand not just the institution but politics, and the fact that compromise and learning different perspectives are important parts of the practice of politics and getting things done in this country—that we have something to impart to young Canadians. That can be beneficial in the long term for the country, but we need an office staffed with people who can do the work of engaging our membership from coast to coast to coast.

We're looking for an executive-level decision-maker who can be the leader in the office, undertake the umbrella of all of our activities and also engage in fundraising activities that would complement any public funds to support our organization. We need a full-time administrative support person and lead who can ensure that any outreach, any engagement and any back-end supports for the office are fully considered. We need logistics and communications to support fulfilling our mandate, and we need someone to lead this mentorship and transition program, which, if I recall—and I've read through the Hansard of our last gathering—seemed to garner the most consensus from folks at this table.

We're willing to practise the art of compromise right now, should there be any outstanding questions, to at least give us a start in this next fiscal year to launch our broad agenda, which we believe fits squarely into the mandate given to us by a unanimous act of Parliament.

• (1240)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you for coming and presenting. I'm just curious about how you plan to keep Parliament and this board informed of your progress. How do you quantify the value for the money?

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: If given direction from this board to move ahead with this funding proposal, we would be more than willing to work with the administrative team to set up a results framework and to come back and report on our progress at whatever interval this board deems appropriate, whether it is six months, annually or biannually.

We feel that if given the start, we can demonstrate an increased engagement in membership, in activities that support the mental

well-being of outgoing members and better preparation for incoming members, and help tackle some of those lagging civics education numbers as well.

I mean, we have a whole breadth of activities already set up for this year. We are stretched thin beyond our means to make good on all of them, but we have regional meetings that will engage our members in Atlantic Canada.

[*Translation*]

In Quebec, we're carrying out an activity that will give us a chance to work with our American counterparts.

[*English*]

We have intentions to deepen our relationships with democracy-building civics organizations like Samara Centre for Democracy, like Democracy Engagement Exchange, like Apathy is Boring, like Nominee—all of those organizations that are doing their best to fill the apparent need that exists in the country.

We're willing to have a clear results framework set up—we'll take your direction on that—and we'd be happy to come back to report on where we are whenever asked.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much.

Thank you for your submission.

I have two questions.

First, you speak in your letter about more than 1,000 former members of Parliament. Do you have a sense of what percentage of former members of Parliament are actually active members of the organization and to what extent this funding might make a difference?

Second, what contacts do you have with other groups of national representatives worldwide—parliamentarians from other countries, former members of the U.S. Congress, of the French National Assembly, of the U.K. Parliament? How are they organized? To what extent do we see those organizations receiving funding to ensure that there are linkages and that former parliamentarians are able to be involved in initiatives and projects?

• (1245)

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Today we have approximately 200 of those former members registered as members of the association. That number is much less than the membership number prior to COVID, which was in the 400 to 450 range. We have had periods of time when we've been able to engage a full-time executive director and more resources that have very much contributed to the increased membership numbers in previous years. We think that with the staff in the office to engage fully in the outreach, we can double our numbers and increase beyond that 400 range that we've seen previously.

Dorothy can speak a little bit more about the relationship with other organizations, but I mentioned briefly that within Canada we have great ongoing collaborations with former members of the Ontario provincial Parliament.

[*Translation*]

We're currently planning an activity with our counterparts in Quebec. It may take place in May.

[*English*]

We have a very strong relationship with our colleagues in the U.S. We are hoping to send a delegation to their annual general meeting this June in Austin, and we are expecting to invite them to speak to us about the state of democracy in this election year in the U.S. at our annual general meeting in June.

Dorothy, you've spent time engaging with our colleagues in the European Union. Perhaps you can speak a little bit more about that collaboration.

Ms. Dorothy Dobbie: I'd like to also add, first of all, that when you say that we're thinking about sending a delegation to Austin, you need to know that we, as individuals, pay our own way, and we also carry the costs of taking a staffer with us. We pay them a per diem. We pay for their travel, we pay for their accommodations, and we pay for their meals. These are not junkets. These are serious people taking on serious tasks to further the cause of democracy and also international relationships.

Yes, we do have a very solid relationship with the European Parliament. It usually sends somebody to our annual meeting. We don't always send someone there because it's very expensive, but in most cases, we usually find a member who is willing to go at his own cost.

We also have a very strong relationship with the Americans, with former U.S. congressmen. As I think you heard in the last intervention, both of those organizations are very well supported. They are supported a little differently from the way we would do it, but they do have very substantial support from their governments or through government connections, one way or another.

That's very appropriate, because as volunteers, even though we've been doing it since 1996, we just don't have the energy anymore. There's just not the interest in fundraising that there was with people from whom we actually got our funding. I think you know that a few of our members, including an NDP member, a Liberal member and a Tory member, over the 30 years, have taken on the responsibility of funding this organization.

I'm getting off track, but the other organizations are funded separately. I think it's time for us to do the same.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm going to cut it off there.

Are there any other questions or comments from members?

Seeing none, is there a consensus going forward?

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I appreciate the presentation and the sincerity with which both of you approach the organization, and, as

we've heard over the course of a couple of different presentations, the interesting work that you do.

Given the current climate that we're in when we're certainly focused on finding areas where we can reduce expenditures or hold the line on expenditures, at this point in time this isn't something that we can support.

• (1250)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I have a quick question for you, Mr. DeCoursey.

Are your services and programs available to a unilingual francophone former parliamentarian? Can a unilingual francophone access your services and programs? I'm asking out of curiosity. I have a feeling that everything is done in English.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Francophone former parliamentarians can certainly access services in French. We face the same issues as you, the current parliamentarians, when it comes to simultaneous interpretation. We try to have it at every board meeting. We want to provide it at our annual general meeting and at our regional meetings. I hope that we'll have it here, in June. However, we have the same issue as the committees here on Parliament Hill. Is it available? Do people have access to the technology to ensure that the service is provided safely?

I hope that, as a member organization of this parliamentary ecosystem, we'll have access to this interpretation. Some members of our board of directors are former parliamentarians from Quebec. I'm a New Brunswicker. My first language is English, but I'm bilingual. We're doing our best to ensure that all our activities are bilingual, like Canada.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Be very brief, please, Mr. Gerretsen, because I have to ask if there's consensus.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I just want to try one thing.

I understand that the Conservatives have no interest in this matter. I think it's unfortunate that we've asked you now to come back. Even the Conservatives last time said to please go away and come back, and you keep doing that, and yet you seem to have been met with a hard no.

Mr. DeCoursey and Ms. Dobbie, I believe that during your comments, you both indicated that you were willing to make some further concessions. I see you nodding.

I guess my question is to Mr. Scheer. Is the position of the Conservatives absolutely no, or do you want to work with Mr. DeCoursey and Ms. Dobbie to find a solution? Are we just at a hard no? It's just so I know where we're at in terms of having the discussion.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I think at this point in time, I can take that back to Kerry-Lynne. She's not here today. We can have a further conversation. We had Daryl Kramp, a former colleague, pass away, so that's where my colleague is today.

We know that with the government increasing spending, driving up inflation and keeping interest rates high, we have to find areas where we can control that spending and where we can exert our influence as the opposition, and that's the situation we find ourselves in today. The \$600,000 might not mean a lot to my colleague Mr. Gerretsen, but it would be \$600,000 more that taxpayers would have to pay and \$600,000 more of additional spending during an inflationary cycle.

That's where we're at in the Conservative Party.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm not seeing consensus at this time.

I'd like to thank Mr. DeCoursey and Madam Dobbie for their presentation and for the work that they put in on this important initiative.

Let us move on to item number 6. I would invite Paul St-George and his team to come up to the table for what I hope will be a quick discussion.

Colleagues, we have two more items. While they're coming to the table, there is one thing I forgot to do. Where are my manners? We would all like to welcome Mona Fortier to the Board of Internal Economy.

Welcome aboard, Madame Fortier. I see that you have adapted yourself very quickly to the affairs of this committee.

• (1255)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier (Deputy government whip): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you and my colleagues.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'll turn the microphone over to Mr. St George.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm here to present the quarterly financial report for the third quarter of 2023-2024, unaudited. I attest to the accuracy and reliability of the information in this report.

As of December 31, 2023, the House's cumulative net operating costs totalled \$525.2 million, an increase of \$41.2 million over the same quarter last fiscal year.

[*English*]

The variance over the prior year mainly reflects previous submissions approved by the board, as detailed in the enclosed report. As of December 31, the House was operating within its approved authorities, demonstrating strong financial stewardship.

I welcome any questions the board may have.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Does anyone have a question or comment? It doesn't look like it.

Does the Board of Internal Economy consent to the adoption of the report?

Mr. Scheer, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: No, I'm sorry. That's fine, yes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Does the Board of Internal Economy consent to the adoption of the report? It looks like it.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Thank you very much, Mr. St George, for keeping within the mandate that was approved by the board for the financial expenditures of the House. Congratulations.

Now we have Mr. MacKinnon on another issue.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'm just wondering if, with everyone's indulgence, we could revert back to item 2. I have a procedural question. Is that okay?

There was the issue raised, I believe, by the ethics and access to information committee about travel points and possibly amending the conflict of interest code. I'm just wondering when that might come up for our consideration.

Mr. Eric Janse (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): We're currently working on a briefing note for the board members. It could be as soon as the next meeting, although I think that meeting is going to largely be on security. Obviously we would follow the direction of the committee in terms of where it should fit in the order of priorities.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I just don't want to lose sight of that issue.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian is next.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: When will the next meeting be held?

Mr. Eric Janse: I think that it's scheduled for March 15.

Mr. Peter Julian: I was wondering—

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian, it's actually scheduled for March 21.

Mr. Peter Julian: In my opinion, the security issue is pressing. The same applies to the issue raised by the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics concerning the recommendation to change the system for sponsored travel. I think that it would be a good idea to hold another Board of Internal Economy meeting in two weeks. That would be the Thursday of the week after the break. Next week, we'll be in our respective constituencies.

I think that we need to focus on these issues next week. If we don't finish studying these two issues now, we'll do so in April. That's the next time that we meet in Ottawa. I believe that the best approach would be to have the opportunity to hold two meetings in a row, the first in two weeks and the second in five weeks.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

If the board agrees, we can certainly schedule a meeting during these weeks.

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I agree with the proposals made by Mr. MacKinnon and Mr. Julian. I think that some important issues must be discussed. I don't see a problem with holding this discussion when we return from the break and on March 21. That seems reasonable.

We haven't finished discussing the agenda today. For example, we haven't discussed item 7. I don't want to put this item off until April. I'm sure that everyone is anxious to put this issue behind us. If we decide to add a meeting when we come back from the break, we could discuss the recommendation of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, along with item 7. That way, the topic of the March 21 meeting would be the security issue.

• (1300)

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: We'll make sure to get back to you on that matter.

[*Translation*]

There seems to be some disagreement. I gather from Mr. Julian's comments that security is a pressing issue.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: If you want to do the opposite, I have no problem with that.

Mr. Peter Julian: I agree with Ms. DeBellefeuille.

Sometimes, we can address all the items on the agenda quickly, and other times it takes longer. If we meet for two hours in two weeks, we may have a chance to discuss the security issue; the issue raised by the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics; and item 7, which we haven't covered today.

Mr. Eric Janse: I want to say that we're working very hard on a submission on security, but it won't be ready in two weeks. It will certainly be ready for March 21, but not in two weeks.

As Mrs. DeBellefeuille suggested, it may be better to wait until later to discuss the issue raised by the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics; item 7; and the other

scheduled items. That way, the March 21 meeting can be devoted to the security issue.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Colleagues, I know that it's 1 p.m. If you want to, you can discuss item 7. I have to leave, as planned. It depends on your availability. I've made a commitment.

Would you prefer to discuss it at the next meeting?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Perhaps we could address item 1 to make things easier.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Okay.

[*English*]

Mr. Gerretsen, the final word goes to you.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: This is an issue I want to raise. I've had discussions with Mr. Aubé about it and I think the board should give consideration to the matter, which is the fact that more and more members of Parliament are driving electric vehicles and using the facilities on the Hill to charge them.

I see two issues that I think should be considered and brought forward to the board. One is with respect to the fact that members of Parliament are allowed to use those charging facilities free of charge—and, quite frankly, staff, for that matter—whereas if we were to use those anywhere else, we would have to pay for those facilities, so should there be consideration as to whether or not those facilities should be pay per use?

Then the other issue relates to the mileage calculations. I had an interesting scenario a couple of summers ago, trying to have a discussion with the financial portal folks about how to properly claim mileage when I stop to charge a vehicle as opposed to filling it up with gas. I was not able to get a definitive answer as to how I should proceed, and it was basically just put into my hands that, “Well, you could do this in a couple of different ways, but it's really up to you to do it.”

We're seeing a growth in the number of MPs and staff using electric vehicles. I think we need to at least give some consideration as to whether or not there should be a different calculation per kilometre based on electric vehicles. Perhaps the result that comes back is, “No. What is current is fair.” However, I think consideration should at least be given to it, so I would ask that at some point in the future we have a report and perhaps a discussion on that topic.

Hon. Greg Fergus: It is noted, and we'll bring that back for a future discussion.

Thank you very much, colleagues.

I declare the meeting adjourned.

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