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• (1105)

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Speaker of the House of Commons): Good morning everyone. Welcome to the 34th meeting of the Board of Internal Economy.

I see a quorum. We'll now begin our meeting.

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

Would you like to make changes, amendments?

[English]

Not seeing any desire for that, I will presume no dissent for carrying item one.

[Translation]

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Mr. Speaker, my earpiece isn't working. I'm having trouble hearing the interpretation.

Can you speak in English, please?

[English]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Does the interpretation work now, Madame DeBellefeuille?

[Translation]

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: No. The earpiece may be defective.

[English]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Can I have somebody from technical support? Thank you.

[Translation]

Is it working now, Ms. DeBellefeuille?

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: Yes.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Excellent.

[English]

We're on adoption of item one.

[Translation]

We're adopting the minutes of the last meeting. Thank you.

Let's move on to the second item, which is business arising from the previous meeting.

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I'd like us to follow up on the minutes. Would it be possible to tell us where we are in comparing the service level of the insurance coverage? I'd like us to follow up on that.

Hon. Greg Fergus: We'd be happy to do that. We'll ask Ms. Evangelidis to give us an update.

Ms. Carolyne Evangelidis (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, through you, I thank Ms. DeBellefeuille for her question.

We've almost completed the study and analysis. We'll get back to you shortly, at the next meeting on November 28. We're waiting for some details from the Treasury Board Secretariat to ensure that we have all the information required to better inform you.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's fine.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to follow up on that, if I may. It has to do with interpretation resources.

I'd ask that we hear from the Translation Bureau representative at the late November meeting or on December 4, so that he can give us an update on the pilot project he presented to us the last time he testified. That pilot project deals with the hiring interpreters who haven't reached entry level, who didn't obtain certification to interpret parliamentary proceedings. There was a whole action plan. I thought it might be time to get an update on where things stand and how things are progressing. We could also have a discussion with him. I think that would be entirely appropriate.

Hon. Greg Fergus: That's an excellent suggestion and it's entirely appropriate. So we'll take note of that and we can invite Translation Bureau representatives to our next meeting, which will be held before the holidays.

Is there any other business?

[English]

Are there other items to raise on matters arising from the previous meeting?

Seeing none, do I have approval from everyone to proceed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

We'll move on to item three, travel expenses for witnesses appearing at the bar of the House of Commons.

[*Translation*]

I invite our law clerk and parliamentary counsel, Mr. Michel Bédard, to speak.

Mr. Michel Bédard (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The House of Commons administration is seeking direction from the board regarding the reimbursement of travel expenses for witnesses appearing before the House of Commons.

As you know, witnesses frequently appear before parliamentary committees as part of their studies. When travelling, committee witnesses may be reimbursed for their travel expenses. Measures relating to reimbursement of witnesses' travel expenses apply only to parliamentary committees. There's no provision for witnesses appearing before the House.

• (1110)

[*English*]

Until recently, the last appearance of a witness before the House dated back to more than a century ago. That said, as members will remember, last April a witness appeared before the House. Also, there is currently a motion on the Order Paper that, if it were to be adopted, would result in another appearance before the House.

The House administration is seeking direction from the board as to whether the measures respecting the reimbursement of travel expenses of committee witnesses should also apply to witnesses appearing before the House. Also, in the special circumstances of an appearance before the House, we're seeking direction on whether the travel expenses of their counsel should also be reimbursed.

We'll be happy to answer any questions.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any questions or comments?

Mr. Scheer, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): I'm not terribly familiar with how many times witnesses at committees have had to bring legal representation with them, but can you tell me what the current practice is for committee appearances in terms of reimbursing travel expenses for lawyers to assist the witnesses?

Mr. Michel Bédard: Witnesses being accompanied by their counsel is not frequent before parliamentary committees, and the policy respecting the reimbursement of witnesses' travel expenses will not apply to their counsel.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Sorry, your piece wasn't working at the very beginning. You're saying that right now, legal representatives of witnesses do not have their travel expenses covered. Is that correct?

Mr. Michel Bédard: That's correct.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. Gould, go ahead.

Hon. Karina Gould (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Is the question here being put forward because it has been raised by someone or because the House is simply looking for direction? Where is this coming from?

Mr. Michel Bédard: We're seeking direction. It has not been raised.

In the previous example that we had in April, the witness was a local resident, and also measures had been taken so that the witness could park on the Hill.

Now, as you know, there's a motion on the Order Paper that is calling for the appearance of another witness before the House, and that person is not a resident of Ottawa, so in anticipation of the matter being raised, we're being proactive and seeking direction from the board.

This person has already appeared before a committee and had to travel and did receive the form to seek reimbursement, so that's why we anticipate that the issue, if that person were to appear before the House, would likely be raised.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Scheer, go ahead.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: To your knowledge, in civil court cases, when witnesses are summoned and issued a subpoena, if they have to travel for that, is it normal in courts across the country to cover travel costs for witnesses who are summoned? Do you happen to know that?

Mr. Michel Bédard: Yes. For witnesses, it's common, and if a party were to serve a subpoena on a potential witness, one of the measures would be that the cost would be covered. That's for witnesses.

If you're a party to a proceeding, then the rules are different and, of course, if you're a party, you will pay for your own expenses.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any questions or comments?

[*English*]

Madame DeBellefeuille, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: In fact, that's the main question. We may have to live with that situation. If they refuse to testify because they don't want to pay for their travel expenses, what would our recourse or our response be as administrators? What would we tell them if they don't want to pay for their travel costs? What would be the response of the clerk or the Speaker of the House of Commons?

• (1115)

Hon. Greg Fergus: The floor is yours, Mr. Bédard.

Mr. Michel Bédard: All right.

In the absence of a political decision regarding reimbursement of travel expenses, there's still an order from the House asking the person to appear. So they should comply. If they don't show up because they can't pay their travel expenses or for any other reason, it will be up to the House to decide what action to take.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. Gould, you have the floor.

[English]

Hon. Karina Gould: My understanding, though, and correct me if I am wrong, is that if someone were to be called to the bar and refused to show up, the Sergeant-at-Arms would have to bring them in.

Mr. Michel Bédard: That will be an option and a logical next step, but that will have to be a decision from the House. Once the House realizes that the person who has been summoned is not there, the matter could be raised and a decision of the House could be taken as to whether to have the Sergeant-at-Arms go get the person.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Perhaps we can go back to what BOIE could do if it chose to make that decision.

[Translation]

Our information package states the following: "[t]he expenses of any person appearing at the bar of the House of Commons (and their counsel) [if this is decided] shall be reimbursed in accordance with the regulations, policies and directives applicable to the reimbursement of expenses of committee witnesses, with the necessary modifications."

[English]

Hon. Karina Gould: Is this the recommendation from the House administration?

Hon. Greg Fergus: It's not a recommendation. It's just that if the House were to choose to do this, this would be the form that we would prepare.

Hon. Karina Gould: I guess my question for the law clerk is this: Is this the recommendation that you are putting forward as something you think the House should do?

Mr. Michel Bédard: In terms of the wording of the decision, that's the recommendation. If the board were to make a decision, that's how it should look.

Whether or not those fees should be reimbursed, including their counsel fee, is a policy decision. In the absence of direction from BOIE, and being cognizant of the fact that it is politically sensitive, we're seeking direction from BOIE. We do not make a recommendation.

The wording that the Speaker just read is how the decision should read.

Hon. Greg Fergus: To put this in the right context, which we're all aware of, this would be the third time in 100 years that we would have called somebody to the bar. For the two other times that we could verify—we're not certain about the case in 1913—both witnesses were local, so it wasn't necessary and this question wasn't relevant. This question could become relevant and before it's asked of us, we want to get ahead of the ball.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Chief Government Whip): I think we're all a little.... You can tell that nobody really knows which side to take on this issue necessarily. We're looking for some kind of guidance and precedents in other areas of the country.

From Mr. Scheer's questioning about how courtrooms deal with the issue, I don't know if there would be comfort around the table to handle it in accordance with the way our judicial courts handle it.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madame Gould.

Hon. Karina Gould: Based on the way you phrased it, would an individual who comes to the bar be seen as a witness or as someone who is part of a case?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: They would not be party.

Hon. Greg Fergus: In this case, to answer your question, it would be both. The person is there to receive an admonishment for not answering questions that were asked of them at committee to the committee's satisfaction. Part of the motion is for them to also testify and answer questions of the House.

• (1120)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: They're seen as both a party and a witness, if you were to make a parallel to how the courts deal with this.

Mr. Michel Bédard: If we look at the judiciary, as I was referring to in answering the question, if you're party to a process, even if it's a civil content process, your travel expenses will not be reimbursed.

One option for BOIE is that if the person is asked to appear at the bar solely to be sanctioned, then no travel expenses be reimbursed. If, in addition, the person is there to testify, then the expenses could be reimbursed.

Speaking to Mr. Scheer's question, if we're to apply the same rules applicable to committees, then there will only be the expenses of the witness, not counsel. That's one option for BOIE.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Before we continue the discussion, I would like to fill this out.

We've now had an airing of the issue. Would members like to come back to this issue in camera, or do they want to continue or make a decision right away?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I think we should make a decision, because this was on our agenda last time as well. There has been some time to reflect. It's kind of new since we haven't really had practice in it since 1913, and now we are facing this, so I can understand why you want direction on that.

It seems like what we're coming to is a middle-of-the-road type of policy. Maybe we could set some type of sunset clause on that to revisit it if it becomes a more routine occurrence than we expect it to be. For the time being, we can identify what purpose the person is coming for and then treat them either as coming to the bar to be admonished, in which case we would not pay their fees, or as a witness, in which case we would treat it the way we do at committee. That way, when the witnesses come, their expenses get paid, but perhaps their attorney's or their lawyer's expenses do not.

I don't know. Is that a happy medium? I'd like to hear from others at the table.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian.

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

I've been listening very attentively to my colleagues. I cannot see a circumstance where being called before the bar is anything other than an admonishment, even if the witness is being asked to answer questions they refused to answer at committee. We have another case coming, potentially, of another question of that nature, which will be before before you, Mr. Speaker, in the coming hours.

Listening attentively, I understand the issue of regional disparity. Somebody from the national capital region doesn't have the expenses that somebody who is brought to the bar from Saskatchewan, Alberta or British Columbia would have. At the same time, because it is a process of admonishment, I think it's fair to say it's not necessarily appropriate to reward that individual and provide them with additional resources.

I find this is a difficult question. I would suggest that the idea of providing support for their counsel sends the wrong message, because we are admonishing them if we bring them before the bar. Having reasonable travel expenses covered for the individual, I think, provides that regional equity that, as the largest democracy on earth, we need to maintain.

My suggestion would be that we reimburse an individual and not reimburse their counsel. In that way, we can ensure that we are being fair to somebody who is brought before the bar, even if they come from western Canada or Atlantic Canada, but we're not providing additional resources that I think would be inappropriate.

• (1125)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian has put forward a point of view. How do other members feel about it?

[*Translation*]

Does he have support? How do the other members of the committee feel about his proposal?

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: I want to make sure I understand Mr. Julian's proposal. He's saying that travel expenses not be reimbursed to individuals who are required to report to the bar of the House of Commons, let alone their counsel. Is that correct?

Perhaps I didn't understand correctly.

Hon. Greg Fergus: No.

I'll let Mr. Julian explain.

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

I was suggesting that reasonable expenses be reimbursed for the individual, but not for the lawyer.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I have a question. At the beginning of your intervention, I understood something differently. You said that you don't see it as reasonable to reimburse expenses. That's how you began, but then the conclusion ended up being different, so I'm a bit perplexed.

I think your conclusion is exactly what I stated as well: If they're coming to be admonished, we do not reimburse them; if they are coming to be merely a witness, we reimburse them, but we do not reimburse counsel in any situation.

Is that where we are?

Mr. Peter Julian: What I said was that, in all cases, they're being admonished, even if they are providing additional testimony that they refused at the committee level. When they're brought before the bar, they're brought to be admonished. I understand that we are imposing additional penalty on somebody who has to travel from Saskatchewan to come to Ottawa to be admonished, as opposed to somebody who lives in the national capital region.

Rather than providing what I think would be an undue level of support, including their counsel if they choose to bring a lawyer, I think it is fair to pay those reasonable travel expenses for the person, understanding that, in all cases, if they're brought before the bar, it's to be admonished. Hopefully they can then provide responses that they didn't provide at committee.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I believe that is a clear approach.

How do members feel? Do I see consensus?

I see that there is an agreement to move forward with covering the expenses, if requested, of a person who's coming from outside of the national capital region to the bar of the House, but not counsel.

Thank you.

Colleagues, we're moving on to item number four, quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2024-25.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul St George is here and he's accompanied by Ms. Mélissa Côté.

Go ahead, Mr. St George.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

I'm submitting the unaudited quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2024-2025.

Year-to-date expenditures are consistent with the approved budget and variances are forecasted and aligned with the submission approved by the Board of Internal Economy. As of September 30, 2024, the cumulative net operating costs of the House of Commons are \$370.6 million. This amount represents an increase of \$29.2 million from the same quarter last year.

[English]

The \$29.2 million is mainly due to cost of living increases and staffing for board-approved initiatives pertaining to security measures and transformation of parliamentary proceedings.

There are no other unexpected variances to bring to your attention today, and I now welcome any questions that BOIE may have.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any questions or comments?

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'd like to ask a question, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to know whether the \$7.7 million for enhanced support for members' security includes the total cost of all the measures we passed during the year and that the Sergeant-at-Arms came to ask us about. Does this amount include that?

Mr. Paul St George: Yes, Ms. DeBellefeuille. It covers all activities.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: All right.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any other questions or comments?

Would someone like to move that we adopt this report?

Ms. Gould, you have the floor.

Hon. Karina Gould: I move that we adopt this report.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Is everybody okay with that?

(Motion agreed to.)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Let's move on to item 5, which is the use of House of Commons resources for a video.

I invite Mr. Michel Bédard to take the floor again.

[English]

Mr. Michel Bédard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're seeking a decision from the board respecting the use of our resources for non-parliamentary functions.

Last September, the clerk received a letter from a political party stating that a \$500 transfer had been made to the Receiver General for Canada respecting the use of the Leader of the Opposition's office for an advertisement of the Conservative Party of Canada. The video is of a duration of 15 seconds, and the office is seen for about one second. We are informed that no other House resources were used for the video.

To assist the board in its consideration of the matter, the administration assessed the potential value of the House resources at issue.

The rental costs of a conference room in downtown Ottawa range from \$500 to \$1,500 for one day.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Bédard: There are two precedents, dating back to 2018 and 2023, whereby the board considered that a refund of \$500 was an appropriate corrective measure for the unparliamentary use of a member's office. In a more recent precedent, the board set that amount at \$1,500, but other resources of the House had been used in that case. We're seeking a decision from the board as to whether the \$500 is an appropriate remedy in the circumstances or whether another amount should be determined.

I'm now ready to answer your questions.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

Are there any questions or comments?

Ms. Gould, the floor is yours.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[English]

I'm sorry, but could you clarify which political party did this?

Mr. Michel Bédard: It was the Conservative Party of Canada.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you.

What parliamentary resources did they use?

Mr. Michel Bédard: They used a parliamentary office on the Hill.

Hon. Karina Gould: Do we know for how long they used the office to film this partisan video?

Mr. Michel Bédard: We know that the portion that was used in the 15-second ad was one second of 15 seconds, but we don't know for how long the office was used.

Hon. Karina Gould: Okay, so we don't know how long they spent in the office filming this partisan video. Is that correct?

Mr. Michel Bédard: We don't know.

Hon. Karina Gould: The Conservative Party of Canada used the office of the Leader of the Opposition for an indeterminate period of time to film a fundraising video.

Mr. Michel Bédard: It was not a fundraising video. It was—

Hon. Karina Gould: It was advertising.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I have a point of order.

I think Ms. Gould may be confused. The fundraising video that was used as a precedent in our backgrounder was actually Justin Trudeau's case, where he used the Prime Minister's office to create a fundraising video.

My understanding of this one is that it was just part of a generic video that had the one-second clip.

Hon. Karina Gould: It was used. There was an advertisement. It was a Conservative Party of Canada advertisement.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Before we get into a—

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Yes, but the fundraising video was Justin Trudeau's fundraising.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

I have Madame Gould, and then Madame DeBellefeuille.

Hon. Karina Gould: For clarification purposes, they used this video to advertise on behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada, using parliamentary resources.

Mr. Michel Bédard: That's correct.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As members of the Board of Internal Economy, we're concerned about not having a partisan debate. So I'd like my colleagues to refrain from engaging in partisanship.

The Standing Orders were breached when House resources were used for purposes other than carrying out parliamentary functions. The good thing is that the person realized his mistake and has already repaid a certain amount. What we have to decide is whether that reimbursement is satisfactory.

Mr. Speaker, people around the table won't be surprised, but I honestly don't agree with comparisons that have been made. We can't compare a hotel room in Ottawa to the office of the Speaker or a leader of the official opposition. Those are important locations, and we can't compare them to a mere conference room—I've already explained that and I've already made my points—especially since the \$500 amount is never increased. Inflation isn't taken into account when making those comparisons.

In my opinion, the penalty must be much higher to have a dissuasive effect. Basically, if it costs \$500 to make a video in one's office, that's nothing, because the person will have to pay that amount to rent a space anyway. Personally, I think the fine should be changed to make it much more dissuasive. We certainly can't compare the office of an official opposition House leader to that of the Speaker. One thing is certain: this isn't an ordinary member's office. So I'm proposing another amount. I'm willing to discuss it, but I think there has to be a gradation. Most importantly, we need to send a message.

I'm not passing judgment, because we sometimes lead crazy lives, Mr. Speaker. Things move quickly, and it's possible that members or their staff may take action without knowing that they're breaking the rules. Furthermore, in this case, it was reimbursed before we even asked for it. It's clear that there was no intention to break the rules.

However, I'm still not satisfied with the way the cost was set. I'm afraid that we're trivializing the use of House resources. If everyone around the table agrees on an amount of \$500, I won't object. However, if people think that what I'm saying makes sense and want to discuss it, I'll propose another amount. Otherwise, \$500 will be the norm, and that's what you're going to have to pay if you break the

rules. You might think twice if the amount is higher, and the deterrent effect is greater.

That's my position on this, Mr. Speaker.

● (1135)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Scheer, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I just want to respond to the comments from my colleague.

I disagree with her assessment that it's not appropriate to compare it to rooms that you could rent at hotels. With all due respect to the great work that was done in creating the space as a temporary place for MPs to occupy while we're waiting for Centre Block to be finished, most of the offices in here are very nondescript. They don't have those historical features, and they don't add much to a video or an advertisement.

If it had been in the chamber, I think she might have had a point, because that is unique. Even the temporary chamber is very unique and iconic. It's very obvious it's the place that it is. However, when you look at some of the conference rooms and boardrooms that are available in hotels around the city, I would say most offices have a very comparable feel to it.

I think we should view this in two separate parts. One, there has been a body of precedents on appropriate reimbursement. Remember, that's what this is supposed to be. It's supposed to say that if you had to go out and book a commercial space to do what you did, it would have cost in the range in front of us. To make sure that parliamentary resources weren't going into partisan activities, the House recoups that. I believe that if members feel that's unsatisfactory, that's fine. We can maybe have a discussion on that on a go-forward basis.

However, in this case, we have an incident where it was self-reported. It was realized after the fact. I can tell you that the Conservative Party has space nearby. It wasn't that they needed a particular shot in a parliamentary building. To me, this is akin to an oversight. When a member submits a whole bunch of receipts and maybe something should have been categorized as a personal expense, they reimburse it. The House of Commons has always accepted that.

I would suggest that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's use of his office when he shot an actual fundraising video that was used to solicit donations was accepted at that time. I would make the argument that the Prime Minister's office is more of a heritage building. It's more obvious what it is than what the Leader of the Opposition's office is. That was accepted at that time.

I was the subject of a similar situation where an oversight was made in terms of scheduling various video shoots. Mr. Speaker, you had your situation.

I think this is very straightforward. This is the type of thing where we can imagine many of our colleagues forgetting the rule or not being as attentive as might be optimal. This is a way to make sure that when they do that, Canadians can have confidence that parliamentary institutions and resources aren't being used inappropriately.

I think \$500 is fine. I would propose we accept this, in keeping with past precedents.

If Madame DeBellefeuille believes that this is something that needs to be more heavily sanctioned going forward to make members think twice, I'd be happy to entertain that conversation. However, I think when these things happen, if the reimbursement is made, the situation is kept whole, and that's where it should end.

That would be my proposal, that we accept the self-reported, proactive \$500 payment in keeping with past precedents.

• (1140)

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

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

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

I totally agree with Ms. DeBellefeuille that we should always put aside our partisan hat before we go into a meeting of the Board of Internal Economy. It's extremely important for us not to be partisan. What's important is to work for the well-being of the institution that is the House of Commons.

[*English*]

I also agree with her in that I don't think \$500 sends the message. My colleague, Mr. Scheer, has a long experience. He did say that the issue of forgetting a rule is something that is the case here. That's fair enough.

I would suggest a larger fine of \$1,000 moving forward. It is a very, very clear message so that no parliamentarians forget the rules. The rules are very clear. We cannot use taxpayer-funded space, whether here in Ottawa or in our constituency offices, for partisan reasons, so I think \$1,000 is an appropriate fine to levy to make sure that we do not forget the importance of that rule.

I think \$500 may have been appropriate a few years ago. I think we need to revise that now, and I would support \$1,000 as a reasonable amount. It was self-declared, and that's important. I think that's a mitigating factor, but I do think we have to send a very clear message about the use of public resources.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Sahota, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'll start off by addressing the last point that was just made. I think even Mr. Scheer has said—and I agree—that if we want to have a conversation about changing the penalty that's imposed, that's a separate conversation that we should have, maybe after moving on from this item today or at another date, and set that

on the agenda, so that we have a clear rule in place moving forward. I'd be in support of having that conversation and coming to some type of consensus on that.

As to why this was imposed in the first place, and even the previous cases that we've seen, I'd like to have a better understanding, because I feel the reasoning that Mr. Scheer is providing here today is somewhat different from the reason that this penalty is imposed, I believe. It's not the nature of the wall behind you or of the hallway, but more regarding using taxpayer-funded resources for partisan purposes, whether it be partisan advertising or partisan fundraising. If you had used and spent money for that anywhere else, there would be some kind of cost involved, so using taxpayer resources is the reason that we're imposing these penalties, not because the West Block room is not as valuable, in Mr. Scheer's opinion, as one that is in Centre Block.

Could you give me some insight as to how we arrived at the penalty in the previous cases?

• (1145)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Before I pass the comment back to Monsieur Bédard, just so that all members are clear, the \$500 to \$1,500 assessment is not a penalty; it's an assessment for resources that are being used. It's a reimbursement. I want to make sure that we're all using the same language.

Go ahead, Mr. Bédard.

Mr. Michel Bédard: In respect of the comparison, the comparators that were used were what was available for rent in the downtown Ottawa area. I'll ask my colleague from finance services, the chief financial officer, if he has more details on the comparators that were used in previous cases and in this case.

Mr. Paul St George: Yes, back in 2018, we went through the same process of evaluation in terms of different types of rooms. At the time, the range was \$350 to \$1,000, and that began the discussion in terms of arriving at the \$500.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I have a follow-up on that.

Was the historic nature of the building taken into consideration, or was it the fact that you were using taxpayer resources that needed to be reimbursed? Was that the basis of coming to this type of conclusion, or was it based on the fact of the historic nature of the building?

Mr. Paul St George: At the time, 2018, and even, I would say, for the most recent ones, we did not consider the historic nature of the building. What we looked at was the utilization of the resources, inclusive of the square footage, space and similar size, that would be available anywhere, whether or not it's at West Block or at a conference centre within Ottawa.

Mr. Michel Bédard: If I may add, in terms of other resources that may have been used, when we're dealing with such cases, one question that is always asked is whether any other House resources were used. In this case, it appears that the only resources that were used were the premises.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you. That answers my question, and it brings me to the conclusion that, as has been imposed in previous cases, we should move forward with the \$500 reimbursement in this case.

With regard to Mr. Scheer's comments about whether a certain type of room was used in the past when this type of occurrence happened versus the room that was here, I don't think there's any purpose for those comments. They don't add anything to this conversation, other than taking partisan jabs, really. We can see that Mr. Poilievre has made a similar mistake. It's good that he is owning up to his mistake of using taxpayer-funded resources, and that the reimbursement has been made.

I think we are open to having the discussion, moving forward, on whether the penalty should be increased if other incidents like this occur.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Bédard, do you have anything to add?

Since that's not the case, I'll go to Mr. Scheer.

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thanks very much.

I appreciate part of the comments from my colleague, Ms. Sahota. I do agree that the more we can keep partisan comments out of the board, the better and more productive it is.

My comments about the nature of the building were not meant at all to be partisan. My thought process is—and you can disagree if you like—that it's not so much that using these premises cost the taxpayer extra money. The buildings are built; they exist. There's no meter running when you walk into the building. There's a benefit to a party, and that's the lens through which we look at it. That's what I was thinking in terms of the nature of the room itself. I could find many rooms a walkable distance around here that would look awfully similar to the rooms that are up on the fourth floor. The benefit to the party of having that space be where that part of the video was shot would be very comparable to rooms nearby. My point about more iconic buildings is that if you want to create a look or a feel in a video of the chamber, of a ministerial office or of a historical office, then I think that dollar amount would change because it would be very difficult to replicate that type of a backdrop or a set.

Those were my comments. They weren't meant at all to be that one mistake was more grievous than the other. I'm just thinking through the lens of what benefit a political party got from the physical location. The intent was more of how to think this through and how to link a dollar amount to something.

I appreciate the indication of agreement on applying a similar remedy here as has been used in similar cases. If we want to bring this back as we go forward, I think it is important that, if we are going to change something and create a new precedent, maybe that be communicated proactively for members so that it sharpens the mind and adds something to their checklist before they do something. I would appreciate that conversation being held separate from the current case.

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: All right. We have two more people on the speaking list. I hope we can then finish the meeting.

Ms. Gould, you have the floor.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to move that we say we support the \$500 proposal at this time. However, at a future meeting, we can discuss this issue to ensure that the amounts are reasonable and better reflect the current situation.

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

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian: I believe we may have a consensus, then, on \$500 for this case.

I'd just like to propose that we make it \$1,000 for any future cases, rather than having the discussion. I think that Madame DeBellefeuille's comments are well-founded, and I think it sends a very clear message that people shouldn't forget the rule.

I agree with Ms. Sahota, Ms. Gould and Mr. Scheer in this case with regard to \$500, but I think we can make the decision to make it a higher amount moving forward.

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

Mr. Gerretsen, you have the final comment—I hope.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): I just want to make sure that we continue to distinguish the difference between reimbursement and penalty. To Mr. Julian's point, I find the issue might be clouded a little, the way I'm hearing it. I think that both are appropriate if we deal with this situation the way we've dealt with previous ones, but if we want to establish a precedent moving forward, it would be best to establish a penalty and then a reimbursement that is more subject to the use of the space that it occurred within. One is the deterrent, and the other is the reimbursement of utilizing the resource. I think it's important to distinguish between the two.

If you used a room and it's only \$500, but then it was done somewhere else where you might put the value on it at a lot more, then we're just going to be back here having the discussion again later about why it should be upped. Rather, I think it would be better to set a penalty for doing it, which would then be accompanied by the utilization of the resource.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mr. Gerretsen.

I see no other discussion on this matter at this point.

We're going to go to Mr. Bédard.

Mr. Michel Bédard: If it's the will of the board, we could come back at a future meeting proposing a principled approach to these cases.

Also, we heard the terms “penalty” and “fine”. It’s important to consider that the BOIE jurisdiction in terms of penalties and fines is limited for constitutional and legal reasons.

If it’s the will of the board, at a future meeting, a briefing note could address and make a proposition as to appropriate options in the circumstances when the bylaws are breached.

• (1155)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Do we have consensus? There are two things. One is to accept the \$500 reimbursement. The second is to come back to the board at a future meeting to discuss this issue. We’ll lay out several options that are available to us within the parameters of what we’re able to decide here on the Hill.

Madame DeBellefeuille, you have the last word.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Claude DeBellefeuille: I agree with everything that’s been said, but we understand that the administration is currently rather overwhelmed. There are many things to talk about. We also understand that this isn’t an emergency, but that it is important.

Hon. Greg Fergus: In fact, we haven’t promised to come back at the next meeting, but rather at a future one.

Is there a consensus?

Mr. Scheer, do you have a suggestion?

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: This will be very quick. It’s not—

Hon. Greg Fergus: Let us not seize defeat from the jaws of victory here.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I just wanted to put on the radar that several members who are engaged in the FMO pilot project for members portal have brought some feedback to us with some concerns and some negative experiences. I understand it’s a pilot project, so that’s why they’re there. I was wondering if the House administration could inform either parties or reps at the board here how their feedback will be incorporated and how the things identified as being cumbersome or problematic will be addressed.

I would like to flag for a future item that we get an update from the House administration when they’re prepared, and when we can go back to our respective caucuses with actual specifics, so we can make sure that the new system is ironed out before it’s launched.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. St George, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul St George: Absolutely. We could take that away and come back to you.

We have been tracking all the feedback within FMO. We have been using that and revising the approach for the next phase, which involves your comments and your experiences. We’re moving ahead with an approach that I would say is more centred on the member in terms of the change management, as to where you need to be probably a year from now on the system.

We’re absolutely happy to bring that back.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

The meeting is adjourned.

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