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# Board of Internal Economy

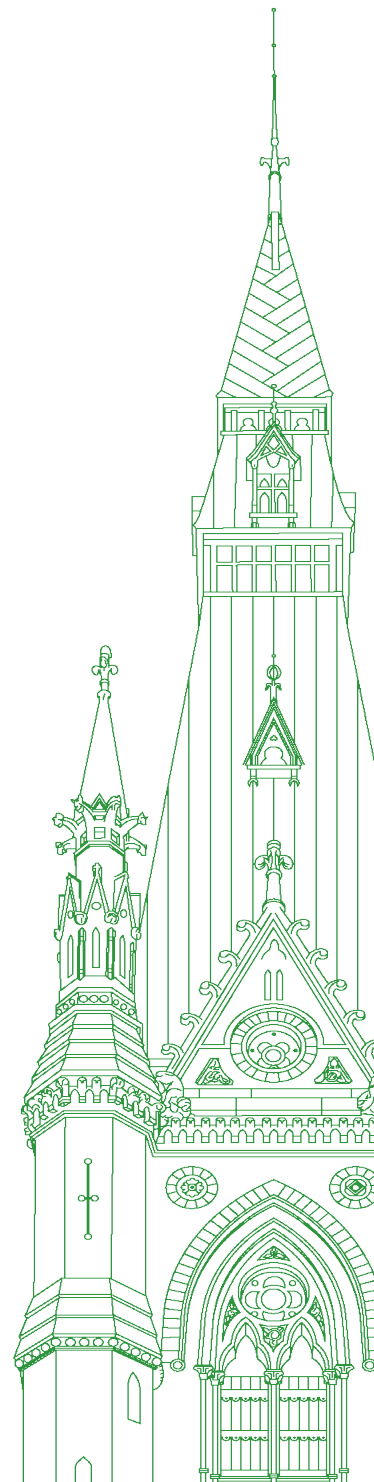
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Thursday, May 12, 2022

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## Board of Internal Economy

Thursday, May 12, 2022

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons):** I call this meeting to order.

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

[*English*]

We'll start off with item number one, which is the minutes of the previous meetings. Are there any questions or comments on the minutes? Very good.

Yes, Mr. Holland.

**Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons):** I know we were saying it informally and we had a chance to say hi on Monday, but Mr. Speaker, I want to welcome you back and say how nice it is to see you in such fine form.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Believe me, it's great to be back.

Now we'll go to item number two, which is business arising from previous minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, go ahead.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois):** It is my turn to officially welcome you, Mr. Speaker. I am very happy to have you with us. You have a big smile on your face and you seem to be back in shape, so we are happy.

I would like to begin by congratulating the House of Commons administration team for its rigour in maintaining and completing the dashboard on interpretation and technology issues, especially in committee. I know it is a lot of work. It gives us a good idea of how our committees work and how the administration adapts to technology or interpretation issues. However, I would like to ask a couple of questions about these dashboards.

At some point, we were provided with data showing that there were over 2,000 witnesses, 86% of whom communicated primarily or solely in English. In the next dashboard, could we get an update on that? If you already know the percentage, I would appreciate it if you could provide it now. If not, you could include it in the dashboard at the next board meeting, to see if the 86% of witnesses who communicate only in English is maintained.

Can you also tell me if many witnesses decide to testify in person, given that it is now possible in committee?

That is my first question, but I will have others for you.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I think Mr. McDonald can answer the first question.

**Mr. Ian McDonald (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons):** Yes, we will be able to provide you with those statistics at the next meeting. However, I must stress that we only take note of the language spoken by the witnesses. We do not have statistics on their mother tongue or their preferred language.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Speaker, we know that every member of Parliament has received three new headsets, which seem to improve the sound quality for our interpreters. Have you received any feedback on the use of these headsets from the interpreters or the translation bureau? Have you been told that the change has really had a positive effect?

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I will let Mr. Aubé answer this question.

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, we are in the process of collecting data to validate this information. However, I can tell you that we made the choice not only with the translation bureau, but also with the interpreters, to ensure that the sound quality was different. Informally, since we don't have all the data yet, I can tell you that we noticed a difference when these headsets were used. The sound quality is different for the people who participate, so we want to encourage them to use them.

So far, few people have been using the new headset, and some are still using the old system. We will be conducting an awareness campaign with members to ensure that the new headsets are used more widely.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** This is not documented or scientific, but I sense some resistance to the adoption of these new headsets, perhaps because they have two earpieces. Maybe that bothers some MPs who like to have a free ear. I tell the members of my caucus that they have to use them. In any case, we in the Bloc Québécois try as much as possible to attend meetings in person rather than virtually, to relieve our interpreters. However, I know that this can be uncomfortable. I don't know if people have talked to you about this, but I have heard members from other political parties say that they wouldn't really use it because it was too uncomfortable.

Before acquiring these new headsets, did you run a pilot project to see if there was guaranteed buy-in or if there would be resistance?

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé:** We carried out pilot projects with the headset that focused on its technical components. One of the things we wanted to try to do was to standardize the headphones, and we wanted to make sure that their quality would increase the sound quality for the interpreters.

We also assessed the usability, the ergonomics of the headset. Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you are right, we have had feedback from some members who find it difficult. However, we have different options for them.

We can provide a microphone that is not connected to a headset. That solution is also approved by the interpreters and the translation bureau. We will be working with all members of Parliament, and we will be in touch with them to get feedback. We will see what we can do to help them in this context. That said, we will need your support, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** You will not only need my support; you will need the support of whips from all parties.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, I would like to ask two more questions.

I saw that you note in the dashboard the percentage of problems that occur on the technology side, such as headset or connectivity issues. You document them, but we don't see the problems that you can't fix.

We have noticed that, when attempts to resolve a problem are not successful, some chairpersons let the witnesses speak, even though all members know there are problems.

We have some issues with that, but it's not documented in your dashboard. I wonder if this is exceptional or if it is just a courtesy for chairs to let the witness testify even though the connectivity, headset or channel issue has not been resolved.

In future dashboards, could you indicate whether the witness was allowed to testify even if the problem was not resolved? I think that would be an important piece of data to determine whether both official languages are respected by all committee chairs.

• (1110)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. McDonald has the floor.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** We are prepared to look closely at this issue. We have improved the way we collect system and witness information. We will see if that is already included. If not, we will see what the possibilities are.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Would it be abuse if I asked more questions? You know, this is my passion.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** You can continue, as no one else wishes to speak. I will take this opportunity to make a suggestion. When we ask questions, we will do a little analysis to see how many people want to speak. I don't want to belabour the point, but I would suggest that everyone limit themselves to about five minutes of speaking time. We will continue, and then we will go back to questions if they haven't been asked.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, I think you are the only one who wants to ask questions. So please continue.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Okay. I don't want to take up too much of the board's valuable time, since we haven't had a meeting in a long time, but these are issues that I think are pretty important.

I will address the issue of preliminary testing.

There has been a lot of improvement in that respect. I have seen your statistics, and I want to congratulate you. I know it's challenging for both Mr. Aubé's team and yours. When invitations are issued at the last minute, how do you proceed? Are preliminary tests done on the spot? Usually, chairs should announce it, as per the routine motions. However, few chairpersons follow the routine motion to announce that preliminary tests have been done for all witnesses.

However, you, the clerks, know if witnesses are testifying without a preliminary test being done before the meeting or on the spot.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Yes, it does happen. It always depends on how much time we have between the time the committee in question decides to hear from a witness and the time when the witness is available. According to our statistics, about 4% of witnesses are in this situation. We try as much as possible to deal with this in advance, but we know that sometimes it is impossible. We always try to do preliminary tests as much as possible.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Okay, thank you.

Mr. Speaker, my last question is for Mr. Aubé.

I went over the National Research Council's study on sound quality. The council did some testing. I have a little binder here with information that has improved my knowledge of acoustics.

I also reread your testimony, so I could understand all of this, but one question remains for me. There seems to be some suspicion that you doubted the results of the study, since you started a parallel study. Between the National Research Council's study and yours, which I believe is not complete, since we have not had the results, there is something of a gap.

I would like to understand that better. We have to be transparent, Mr. Aubé. I read the study. We had submissions from interpreters associations. You have testified several times. Yet I still do not have an answer.

What happened between this study and your current one? Why haven't we heard anything? Why do interpreters keep telling us they don't know what happened after the National Research Council's study and yours?

Can you clarify this for me, so that I can finally understand what is going on?

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé:** Thank you for your question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

There are two parts. I can assure you that we meet with the Translation Bureau on a weekly basis, sometimes daily even, to discuss the status of the committee rooms. We developed a five-part action plan with the bureau last fall. Our representatives have been meeting with the union over the past few months, as well as with the interpreters and the bureau. We're keeping them up to speed.

With respect to the report, I would like to provide a bit of background so that everyone understands the dynamics. To do that, I'm going to take a step back, because I want everyone to understand.

When we talk about the hybrid system in the House of Commons, we're talking about three things. First, there's the in-person conferencing system, which is the system you're using right now, in the committee rooms and in the House. This system was developed over the years by international experts and it's been tested to ensure that it meets the ISO standard for in-person conferencing systems similar to the one you're using right now. The latest ISO standard came out in 2020.

I can assure you that our systems meet the ISO standard, in both the committee rooms and the House. In most cases, they even exceed the standard in some respects, because the standard takes several things into account, such as interpreting booths, consoles, microphones and sound quality, which involves several criteria. As we know, we checked these systems in 2019, which was before the pandemic, and you've been using them ever since. We received very few complaints prior to the pandemic, and we haven't made any changes to them since the hybrid system was implemented in these systems. Two years ago, to allow witnesses or MPs to attend remotely, we chose a videoconferencing technology platform, Zoom. So we have two standalone systems: the in-person conferencing system and the videoconferencing system.

Then we have a third system that acts as a bridge between those two systems to transmit information from one side to the other. So that's how I would explain the hybrid system in the simplest of terms. It's much more complex than that, but it relies on those three systems.

As for the second part, the videoconferencing system, there is no ISO standard right now, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. We're trying to apply the ISO standard for in-person conferencing systems to a virtual environment. Many of the environmental factors of these systems are completely different. That's why the National Research Council report doesn't apply to some things. I will go over each of them with you, without going into too much detail.

The NRC regularly produces reports for us. When we set up complex systems like the ones we use here in the committee rooms, we always bring in third parties to evaluate them and ensure that they meet our quality objective and standards. We did that when we set up the systems in the House in 2019 and when we set them up in the committee rooms. We also do it for hybrid meetings. This was the second time we used the NRC to check the performance of our systems.

The NRC report was commissioned by the Translation Bureau, not the House of Commons, and that's to be expected, because the bureau wanted to protect its interpreters and make sure we provide them with quality tools. This is common practice, as I mentioned

earlier, and we supported the bureau throughout the process. People from the NRC were therefore hired by the Translation Bureau, they came to the House of Commons and we gave them the technical information about the configuration of our systems. Then they tested the House systems, including the Zoom videoconferencing system to determine if the sound quality was suitable for the interpreters. Five things came out of the report.

First, they wanted to confirm that the significant investments we had made in early 2022 to protect the interpreters from acoustic shock had paid off. The answer was yes, they had.

- (1115)

Second, they wanted to know if the House's in-person conferencing systems were ISO compliant. The answer was no. We completely disagreed, as we've done tests in the past and we know that the systems were ISO compliant. We met with the NRC and gave them our comments. However, I didn't go there to influence their report. I explained the facts and we looked into it. They found things that raised questions in our minds about how the data was gathered. There may have been errors, but we just want to check that information, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

We've hired people in the past to test our in-person conferencing systems and ensure that they met the ISO standard. They did, and we assume they still do. So, we figured we needed to have the AA rating confirmed by a third party. If people tell me the system isn't up to par, I want to know for sure. We therefore hired a firm to make sure our systems are ISO compliant.

At first glance, based on the information they gathered, our systems meet the ISO standard. There's a difference of opinion between the two organizations. Given that, the next step is to get our experts and their experts together to discuss why they have different opinions and different data, because we're unable to replicate some of the data provided to us in the NRC report.

Third, some said there were notches in the audio system. I don't want to get into too many technical terms, but essentially, notches are sound distortion that the interpreters hear. We're unable to reproduce these notches in the tests conducted with our experts. We have to talk to the NRC and ask them about it. However, I can't do that until I have that checked.

Fourth, they evaluated the headphones for us. We asked them to do that, because we didn't want to just make a recommendation. You asked me if there was any testing. The NRC looked into that, as did the Translation Bureau, and we chose the headphones together. That was one of the recommendations to move forward.

The fifth thing that led us to hire an outside firm was that the NRC identified in their data a loss of frequency in the virtual system. As I said earlier, there are three systems. Zoom does not provide all the auditory frequencies that the ISO standard requires for in-person conferencing systems. We said we agreed with that. We worked with Zoom to resolve it, and Zoom corrected the issue in January.

On the other hand, the report also pointed out issues with sound intelligibility. That would mean that people in the room right now, for example, should have trouble understanding what we're saying to each other. We didn't agree, so we asked outside experts to check the intelligibility of the sound emitted by our systems. We asked the chair of the international committee, who is interested in sound intelligibility, to check the quality of our systems, and according to him, our systems meet and exceed the standard in terms of sound intelligibility.

So we need to have a discussion with the Translation Bureau, because first of all, we also want to share our results with them. As always, we'll be forthcoming with the interpreters, so we will share the results with them as well. I also want to talk to the NRC to reconcile these differing opinions. I'm not going to tell you who's right and who's wrong. As you know, in situations like this, we must take care not to damage anyone's credibility. We want to do the right thing for the interpreters and for Parliament. I want to make sure that everything is based on facts, not opinions. If mistakes were made, we'll find them and discuss them, and then we'll come back here and present the outcome of discussions we've had with them, so we can all agree on everything.

We've already shared this information with the Translation Bureau, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. We have nothing to hide. We take the comments and criticism that some have of our systems very seriously, and I can assure you that we do disagree on some aspects.

• (1120)

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

Thank you for clearing that up, Mr. Aubé. That explains some of the information that we've read.

I also thank you for doing your entire presentation in French. It meant that my anglophone colleagues had to listen to a bit of interpretation, which is not a bad thing.

• (1125)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any more questions about this?

Perfect. We will proceed to the third item on the agenda.

[*English*]

Number three is "Ratification of a walkaround—address to Parliament".

I just want to make sure that everyone is still in accordance with the decision that was made about the walk-around.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Very good. Perfect. We have consensus.

Now we'll move on to number four, interim budgets for the special joint committees on the declaration of emergency and on medical assistance in dying.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McDonald and Mr. Lemoine, you have the floor.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** We are here today to present the interim budgets for the two special committees that were established recently: the Special Joint Committee on the Declaration of Emergency and the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying. These two special joint committees must apply to the Board of Internal Economy for their budget allocation. They each have an initial budget of \$50,000 in total, \$30,000 of which comes from the House budget for standing committees. We are therefore not requesting any additional funding today.

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

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Brassard.

**Mr. John Brassard (House Leader of the Official Opposition):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand that there have been some discussions within the emergency committee about seeking some outside legal counsel. At this point, no final decision has been made, but if the decision by the committee is to seek that outside counsel, what impact will that have, if any, on the budget that's being proposed today?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Thank you very much.

Through you, Mr. Chair, if the special joint committee decides to go that route, another business case would have to be prepared with a justification for the expenses, and it would come back to the Board of Internal Economy.

This is really just for initial expenses, any initial expenses that the committee may come up with. If it wants to hire any professional staff, if it wants to travel, or if it needs more funds, then it would have to come back to the board.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Typically, historically, do we have any projection on what the possible cost of that could be?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** It will depend on the scope that the committee would be looking for, so until that scope is defined.... It would be very important for the committee to define that well, as well, so that we could make an estimate for the board.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you for clearing that up.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Now Mr. Julian has a question or a comment.

**Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party):** Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

I will say, in my turn, that it is great to see you so hale and hearty and to have you back with us.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** There's no pun on the hearty, right?

**Mr. Peter Julian:** No.

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

**Mr. Peter Julian:** It's good to see you back. It's good to see you doing so well.

My question is about the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying. I am assuming that this takes into consideration the extension of the deadline for reporting back from the special committee, but I want to confirm that.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Yes, it's for any initial funds that the committee needs to spend. It would be taken from this amount. If the committee needs more, then they would come back to the board and ask for more.

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

Are we all in accordance with the recommendation?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

[Translation]

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Okay.

[English]

Very good. It's passed.

Now we'll move on to number five. The presenter will be Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc.

Go ahead, Mr. LeBlanc.

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm here with a request that has come to the board from the equivalent body in the Senate, the Senate Standing Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration, to modify the composition of the Joint Interparliamentary Council, the body that's responsible for providing oversight to parliamentary associations.

[Translation]

The equivalent body in the Senate is requesting that a senator be added to the membership of the Joint Interparliamentary Council, to allow for representation from all recognized groups in the Senate. Currently, there are only three senators on the Joint Interparliamentary Council, seven MPs and three senators, according to the 70-30 formula, which is common to international and interparliamentary affairs. This does not allow for the representation of all the recognized groups in the Senate, since there are four of them at the moment. Therefore, the committee requests a change to the composition of the council to reflect this.

There are several options proposed in the note before you. One would be to simply add a senator and have a composition of 11 people, seven MPs and four senators. Another option would be to increase the representation of the House, by increasing the number of council members to 13 people, in order to maintain the proportion between the two chambers. The status quo could also be maintained.

• (1130)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Do you have any questions?

[English]

Are there any comments?

[Translation]

Do you prefer one of the three options?

[English]

Yes, Mr. Brassard.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I have a point on the second option, if I may.

One or two would be acceptable to us, but on the second option, if there is a temporary change, can you confirm that when we do get to the 45th Parliament it would come back to that 7:3 composition? I just need clarification on that.

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc:** What we have recommended in all of the options is a formula that allows for some flexibility, depending on the partisan composition of both Houses. If there were fewer or more recognized parties in the House, or fewer or more recognized groups in the Senate, we could make adjustments to the composition in such a way as to maintain that 30:70 ratio.

It may not necessarily be 3:7. It may be a different formula, depending on how many groups or parties there are in either chamber.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Okay. Thanks for clearing that up.

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

[Translation]

Are there any other questions?

[English]

I think we have eliminated option three; I'm getting consensus.

Between options one and two, is there one that is preferred by the group? We have number one and number two.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Two.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Does anybody want to speak to going one way or the other?

Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins (Chief Opposition Whip):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I presume that if we don't make any decision, we'll maintain the status quo. Since there wasn't a whole lot of interest to talk about options one and two, my assumption is that the default is option three. I think that's where we're at as a board right now—unless we decide to opt for option one or two.

If we are going to choose one of those two options, I think John and I, at least, would go for option two.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Okay.

I guess the question is this: Is option three the option that we stay with as the status quo?

Go ahead, Mr. MacKinnon.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip):** Look, we're fine with option one. I'm attentive to Mr. Brassard's point about a kind of snap-back provision whereby it would revert or be adjusted, as Mr. LeBlanc outlined, in the next Parliament.

I wouldn't want to make that a permanent ratio. It is a function of the parties or groups represented, and not a function of permanently altering the balance between the chambers.

That said, option one is acceptable.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Do we have consensus for option one? If we don't, then we just default to number three.

Yes, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Peter Julian:** In my view, the first option is probably the best, as it would ensure that all recognized parliamentary groups in the Senate are represented. If we want the council to be effective, it is better to have all the recognized parties around the table. I would therefore favour the first option, although I am aware that this could change if the composition of the Senate or the House of Commons changes.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Is everyone in favour of the first option?

[*English*]

No, we don't have consensus.

Mr. Calkins, go ahead.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** I'm not saying we won't reach consensus. I just have a few more things I would like to address.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Sure.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** I am concerned about the 70:30 ratio. I'm also concerned that if we make a decision here that doesn't respect the 70:30 ratio, the Senate, being what it is, could learn from whatever decision we make here today and further fracture, or create other political entities, and we could be back here dealing with a fifth senator being added to the Joint Interparliamentary Council, among other things. I'm not saying that's going to happen, but there's nothing preventing that.

I'm okay with ensuring that those bodies in the Senate have representation on the JIC. I'm just not okay with losing the 70:30 ratio. That's my only consideration. We can figure out amongst ourselves how we're going to divide up our 70 here in the House of Commons, but I think the 70:30 must be maintained.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any further comments?

[*English*]

Are there any questions?

I'm trying to figure out where we go from here.

We have numbers one and two, or the status quo. With number one, we have one small group with 13 members. Do we let it sit and stay with the status quo?

[*Translation*]

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** I have no strong preference for any of the three options. However, I do agree with one of the decisions made, and that is keeping the 30-70 ratio. I think that this should be kept. Now we have to ask ourselves about the options and I think we are leaning towards the second option. Am I right?

Honestly, I do not feel the need to have an hour-long debate on the composition of the Joint Interparliamentary Council. I will accept any option that garners a consensus.

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

**Mr. Peter Julian:** I quite agree. We have a number of important issues to discuss today, and this one is less important, in my view.

If we start from the principle that all parliamentary groups should be represented, including all those in the Senate, and if we adhere to the 70-30 ratio, it seems to me that the most relevant recommendation is the second option. I will go along with that if we can get a consensus on it. If there is no consensus, I would find it unfortunate if this topic were deferred to the next meeting.

Listening to everyone, I get the impression that two principles need to be brought together. The only option that encompasses both of those principles, the 70-30 ratio and the representation of all parliamentary groups, including the Senate, is the second one.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Is there a consensus?

Mr. MacKinnon, you have the floor.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I agree.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Is everyone in favour of option two?

[*English*]

We have consent. Very good. Fantastic.

Now we'll take a short break and go in camera.

[*Translation*]

So we'll be back in about three minutes.

[*The committee continued in camera*].









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