



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

ETHI • NUMBER 078 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Monday, May 6, 2013

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Chair

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP)): Order, please.

I call to order the 78th hearing of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. We are continuing our study of the votes in the main estimates.

Today we welcome the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, Ms. Mary Dawson. I call vote 15 under Parliament.

Ms. Dawson will have 10 minutes to make her presentation. She is accompanied by Ms. Robinson-Dalpe and by Ms. Benoit. Afterwards, the members will have about an hour to ask questions.

Without further ado, Ms. Dawson, I give you the floor for this study of the main estimates. You have 10 minutes.

Ms. Mary Dawson (Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner): Mr. Chair, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today as the committee considers my office's budgetary submission for the 2012-2013 main estimates. As you said, with me this afternoon are Lyne Robinson-Dalpe, Assistant Commissioner for Advisory and Compliance, and Denise Benoit, Director of Corporate Management.

To provide some context for my remarks, I will begin by reviewing briefly the organization and operations of my office. Then, I will outline our budgetary requirements for the current fiscal year and discuss any relevant considerations.

[English]

To fulfill my mandate as effectively and efficiently as possible I've organized my office into five divisions. We're fully staffed and maintain a stable staff complement of 50 employees. Advisory and compliance is the largest division, accounting for about one-third of my staff. This group provides confidential advice to public office holders and members of the House of Commons about their obligations under the Conflict of Interest Act and the Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons. It reviews their confidential reports of assets, liabilities, and activities; maintains internal records of this information; and administers a system of public disclosure.

Our primary goal is to help public office holders and members meet their obligations under the act and the code through education and guidance. Our advisory and compliance services are complemented by a range of education and outreach activities coordinated

by our policy, research, and communications division. It also contributes to policy development, compiles research, conducts public communication and media relations, and coordinates our dealings with Parliament.

While the major focus of my office is on prevention, we also investigate possible contraventions of the act and the code. Our reports and investigations division leads our investigations and coordinates the preparation of our annual reports. Legal services also plays a critical role in our investigations and provides strategic legal advice on all facets of our work.

Our corporate management division oversees the development and implementation of all internal management policies and the delivery of services and advice on human resources, finance, information technology, information management, and the management of office facilities, including security. It also administers our shared services agreements with the House of Commons and the Library of Parliament in the areas of information technology, security, and financial services, and with Public Works and Government Services for compensation services.

Finally, my own team within the commissioner's office provides general administrative and logistical support for the office. For the past five years I've maintained the same operating budget of \$7.1 million. My budgetary requirements for 2013-14, which I will review with you in a moment, are sufficient to discharge my mandate in its current form. I know, however, that both the Conflict of Interest Act and the conflict of interest code for members are under review. Any resulting changes could have resource implications for my office. We would have to review any amendments to access what, if any, resource adjustments they might entail. Most of the recommendations that I've made are resource neutral and the ones that are not are unlikely to have a major impact on our resource requirements.

This year, in keeping with the current climate of fiscal restraint, we are proactively offering a reduction to our operating budget. I expect my office to be able to fund its operations with a reduced budget of \$7.035 million in 2013-14. In 2012-13 we conducted a spending review that identified opportunities for efficiencies. These include using e-mail rather than letter mail to communicate with some of our many stakeholders, and restructuring the delivery of some of our internal functions. We also reduced the amount set aside as a reserve to cover unexpected situations. As a result, I was able to reduce the non-salary portion of my 2013-14 budget by \$190,000, which is equivalent to 3% of the 2012-13 total budget.

● (1535)

This reduction, however, is partially offset by a requested increase in our salary envelope of approximately \$90,000 to cover the economic increases that came into effect in 2013-14. The economic increases are in line with the results of collective bargaining in Parliament and the public service.

I note that in the fiscal year just ended we absorbed within our existing salary budget the payment of severance allowances for some employees. This is the reason for the overspending in last year's salary budget. This was absorbed through the conversion of non-salary funds rather than by requesting additional funds.

We remain cognizant of the ongoing need for budgetary restraint and for good financial management and internal controls. We regularly and carefully monitor our spending and ensure that our financial practices adhere to standard government practices. We have, for example, documented our internal financial management processes, identified potential risks, and ensured that internal controls to address those risks are in place. Although we have no legal obligation to do so, we follow the practice of proactive disclosure and publish reports of spending on travel and hospitality on our website.

I'm also pleased to report that for the second year the annual financial statements for my office were audited independently, and we again received a positive opinion. We continue to follow good management practices in other areas of our operations as well. Priorities for my office are identified each fall at a strategic planning session of senior management and refined through the fiscal year as appropriate. My office has a strong policy framework in the area of human resources that in 2012-13 enabled us to put in place policies and guidelines on specific issues. For example, this year we instituted a guideline on job shadowing to support and encourage the career development of our employees as well as a policy on workforce adjustment that is similar to policies in Parliament and the public service.

The policy on workforce force adjustment was not developed because of any current plan to downsize, but rather proactively to put in place appropriate mechanisms should we be faced with such a situation in the future.

Other policies and guidelines under development address such topics as occupational health and safety, and disability and duty to accommodate. We have also updated our terms and conditions of employment to reflect similar changes made to leave provisions and severance pay in Parliament and the public service. Although there are strong indicators that the office is a healthy workplace, including

the now stable staffing levels and very low turnover, we've contracted with an independent third party to conduct an employee satisfaction survey later this spring. We're developing a performance measurement strategy to demonstrate the effectiveness of my office in fulfilling its mandate.

In the area of technology, we have invested in a new application to manage the content of our website because the current application has reached its full capacity. We expect to deploy it in the near future. This improvement follows the launch in April 2012 of a new integrated case management system.

I also regularly share best practices and exchange information with my provincial and territorial counterparts. This will be a particular focus of our activities in September when I host the next annual meeting of the Canadian Conflict of Interest Network here in Ottawa.

[Translation]

Detailed financial and other information is available on my office's website and in my annual reports.

Again, I thank the committee for inviting me to discuss the main estimates today. I look forward to answering your questions.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement, Ms. Dawson .

We will now have our seven-minute question round.

Mr. Angus, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Madam Commissioner, for coming. We certainly appreciate meeting with you as we often have been doing recently, and I thank you for the layout of your report. It's very helpful for us. I have a couple of questions about your budget and your mandate.

I notice that you say your budget is sufficient to deal with the issues in the current form but it may change if there are other issues that are added to your mandate. As you know, there have been a number of recommendations brought forward by all manner of civil society and interested stakeholders on the Conflict of Interest Act.

Have you looked at the possibility of impacts from some of those recommendations on your service?

Ms. Mary Dawson: So far we've really just gone through our own recommendations to see what the impact would be. Who knows which ones will get accepted? There have been quite a few of them so we haven't done that second exercise yet.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Some of the recommendations that were made had to do with outreach and education, and as well there was a suggestion of meeting individually with all members to make them aware of their obligations, as a preventative measure. That is done in some of the provincial jurisdictions, I understand, where they deal with probably less numbers than we do with the federal civil service. Under the members, we have 308 members. We have ministerial staff. We have all designated public office holders.

Do you have a sense of what that would mean if you were to take on personally meeting with all the key public office holders including members?

Ms. Mary Dawson: I personally couldn't meet with all of them because there are 3,000 public office holders and 308 members.

We have that similar recommendation in our own recommendations, but it's perhaps a little milder. We've suggested that there be a meeting of some sort, either in a group situation or a one-on-one, depending on the circumstances.

It is one of the ones that we identified that would probably increase our workload somewhat, but we do at the present time spend a lot of time dealing with individual members and public office holders. I don't think it's an enormous difference, but it depends on how we structure it.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You produce three annual reports: on the sponsored travel by members, on the MPs code, and then on the administration of the conflict of interest. You also have education and legal work, in terms of people who breach the code.

If, for example, the meeting were to include the 308 members, would you see that in the long term that would give you less work because it may head off problems? Have you done any sort of cost benefit analysis on that?

Ms. Mary Dawson: In terms of sponsored travel, I'm not sure there'd be much of a change, the rules are pretty light. You can do it and report it. Mind you, we're talking about the code here with your question of 308 MPs.... We're on the estimates meeting.

Certainly, I think meeting with the members would be manageable because there are 308. We could meet with them individually. I think Lyne and I already meet with quite a number of them.

Ms. Lyne Robinson-Dalpe (Assistant Commissioner, Advisory and Compliance, Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner): The way it works now is that one of our staff automatically meets, or calls, individual public office holders and members of Parliament. There is no requirement for a one-on-one meeting, but there is a verbal briefing with each individual, including MPs. If MPs request a one-on-one meeting, we do accommodate that.

Unfortunately, the commissioner is not always available for those meetings, but advisers are assigned specific MPs and they are assigned to meet with those MPs on a regular basis at their request.

Ms. Mary Dawson: If I may point out, if any MP requested to meet with me, I certainly am available to do so.

Mr. Charlie Angus: The framework is roughly in place. It hasn't been clearly codified about a mandatory meeting, but it's the ability

to address that, at least in terms of the members of the House of Commons.

Ms. Mary Dawson: We're not too concerned about that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: We are coming up to the end of the review of the Conflict of Interest Act. As you know, you've brought a number of recommendations and many groups have brought recommendations. Some are complementary; some are contradictory.

Is there anything you want to put on the record now, before we begin our final deliberations of that act, that you think we should be aware of or maybe hasn't been addressed?

• (1545)

Ms. Mary Dawson: None come to the top of my mind. When I appeared the second time, I did refer to a couple of the proposals that people had made and I think I hit the main ones.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Your office doesn't negotiate with the Treasury Board Secretariat, you set out what you determine you need. Are you informed in advance that there is going to be a cut in budget, or if it's going to be stable? If you determine that you need more, how does that work with the Treasury Board, if they're setting guidelines for 3% or 5% cuts?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Our responsibility is to submit our estimates to the Speaker, because we are part of Parliament. We are different from the other agents of Parliament with whom you've met. The Speaker then forwards our estimates to Treasury Board, and to date, we've never had anything kept back.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Are you satisfied with the present set of arrangements, that it works? It goes through the Speaker, then over to Treasury Board, and you haven't had any.... I'm looking at your budgets and they seem to be fairly stagnant. Is that because the numbers you're getting are okay and you're not looking for better office furniture?

Ms. Mary Dawson: No.

We started off not spending all of our budget when the office was set up, but then as we got our investigation process in place, and started staffing, and as we got to year four or five, we were much closer to spending our budget. We have not found, to date, a problem within our budget.

Mr. Charlie Angus: How many investigations did you do last year? Is it up? What's the number that you would do in an average year?

Ms. Mary Dawson: I think we did about seven. I always have these figures in my head and then I forget them.

I think we issued five reports in the last year. We usually have a larger number of cases that are not formal examinations, or inquiries, as they're formally called, because we receive a lot of information from people, the public, and members. The larger numbers are the ones that aren't informal examinations or inquiries, but then some of those become formal inquiry examinations.

I was looking at the figures earlier today and we get about 33 new files a year and we close about the same number a year.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Mayes, for seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to talk a little bit about corporate management, just because that's the background that I come from.

Have you had trouble, has your office had trouble, with recruiting and retaining employees this past year? What is the rate of turnover, and how many employees do you have?

Ms. Mary Dawson: We're doing really well. We've had, I think, only one retirement, and nobody's quit, so we haven't had to do any staffing as such.

Mr. Colin Mayes: What is the number of staff that you have?

Ms. Mary Dawson: I think 49 is our complement.

Mr. Colin Mayes: One of the things that came up last year that concerned me when we discussed the estimates was the fact that you had two people on staff in the human resource department. It interested me that you had two people, because at that time you made the statement that you had your full complement of staff and you didn't think you'd have to do any recruiting.

Do you still have two people on your human resources, and if so, why?

Then, I'd like to know if it's a civil service contract that you would pay severance on. How long have those people worked in the office when you...? Well, you had only one retirement, so you didn't have anybody, but you talked about severance.

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes, but there's a continuity between our office and if they've been in the public service before or something, so there could be a significant severance package involved there, which I think was the case of the one who retired.

On your other question, though—and I'm going to turn this over to Denise—we took note of the comments that were made last year about our corporate area. There are several people who are on different kinds of leave at the moment, and we'll take a good look at just how we reconfigure in the long run.

Denise, why don't you take it from there?

• (1550)

Ms. Denise Benoit (Director, Corporate Management, Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner): Exactly. Although we do have two positions in HR, one of them is vacant right now. One person is on an extended leave without pay, and we

haven't replaced her. That was duly noted. When one of those two positions becomes vacant permanently, at that point there will be a decision. Because you're right, as long as there are a number of staffing actions under way... The other person mostly works on policies and systems, but at one point we'll have to make that judgment call as to whether or not two full-time resources are required for HR.

On the severance allowance element, as part of collective bargaining in the public service the accumulation of severance allowances was cancelled. What happens is you liquidate whatever severance they had accumulated, and that's what we've done. In disbursements this year, it was close to \$350,000 of severance allowances that were paid to employees, but now they don't accumulate anymore.

So that's what it is, and we shouldn't see any more of those payments in the future.

Mr. Colin Mayes: I just want to make sure we go on record that there is no longer severance in the civil service for the Government of Canada, correct?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Right.

Mr. Colin Mayes: It is a \$50 million savings per year, a significant amount of money, and it's really great that we've been able to get that kind of cooperation.

Do you contract out for services? You talked about interdepartmental assistance, where you're sharing, which I think is really great. But do you contract out to a third party for any services other than auditing?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Occasionally, and I'll let Denise list the ones. It's been just a couple of times.

Ms. Denise Benoit: We have shared services agreements with the House of Commons and the Library of Parliament, and that covers IT and finance, and also with Public Works for pay. Those are the services that we contract out for, but they're still within the public service.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Okay. You're answering all the questions. That's great.

It's a very good report, too, because it explains exactly what you're doing. Your presentation was also great.

When you're talking about the five divisions you have, you have one-third of the people working on compliance. I put down "advice on files and policy research". Is the policy research going to sort of dwindle too as we review the act and then move forward, or is this an ongoing thing?

Ms. Mary Dawson: I think it's ongoing. That is a different section from the advisory, and that is policy, research, and communications. A fair bit of their time is spent on communications, but then there are always new things to research and things going on. I don't expect the size of that section would change particularly.

Mr. Colin Mayes: As far as legal services go, how many lawyers do you have on staff?

Ms. Mary Dawson: We have four, three plus an articling student.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Okay, that's great.

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Good.

That's all I have.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mayes.

I now give the floor to Mr. Andrews, who has seven minutes at his disposal.

[English]

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you very much, and welcome back, folks.

Madam Commissioner, what percentage of your budget goes to your investigations division?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Do you have those figures, Denise?

Ms. Denise Benoit: Their budget is about \$800,000 out of the \$7.1 million.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Okay, so it's just a little more than one-fifth.

You also mentioned that you opened 33 investigations and closed 33. Are they firm numbers?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Actually, the term "investigations" is a confusing one. The formal thing that we do under the act and the code is that we have inquiries or examinations. Investigations can include those, but they can also include the preliminary research in deciding whether we should institute an examination or an inquiry. When I talk about the 33 files that we opened, it's both of those things.

Mr. Scott Andrews: How long do these investigations normally last? Do they span a number of calendar or fiscal years, or are they usually concluded within one fiscal year?

Ms. Mary Dawson: It depends on the kind we're talking about. The inquiries and the examinations, I would say, average about a year. They vary quite a bit. The longest one was over two years, and the shortest one was five or six months. There are some upfront processes that you have to go through that add onto that time. It takes a couple of months to actually start the investigation, where you're asking for comments from the person accused and that sort of thing. That's the investigations.

With respect to the other cases we're looking at, which are brought to our attention, they could be dealt with in a couple of days or they could take five or six months, depending on what we're looking into. I'd say they average about a month or two to decide, and that's usually when we're trying to figure out the basic facts to see if there's enough to warrant a full-fledged inquiry or examination.

• (1555)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Do you have enough resources allocated to your investigations division? Do you sometimes shift around resources to help move them along, or is it a case of "it is what it is", and they have to work within that envelope?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes, it is what it is. The legal branch spends a lot of time working with the investigations section, assessing where we are. The investigations take the time they need to take. A lot of that time is waiting for documents to be submitted, waiting for the setting up of meetings for testimony. Sometimes you have to wait a couple of months before people are available or make themselves available. That's what takes the time in an investigation. There's uptime and downtime, usually.

Mr. Scott Andrews: When you're requesting documents for your investigations, do you have much trouble getting them from the different departments? I know you ask the individuals for them, but sometimes you have to go beyond that to the departments. Do you have much resistance? Does it take some time to get access to the documents you're looking for?

Ms. Mary Dawson: No. We get very good cooperation from the departments and the individuals. Sometimes it takes a while for them to gather the documentation.

The only place—and I have it in my various five-year reviews—where we've had difficulty was with the documents under the control of the House of Commons. We have also had some delays in connection with cabinet documents. But I suspect those won't be too bad in the future.

Mr. Scott Andrews: I have a final question. You talked about the recommendations under the act. You said most of them will be revenue neutral. Are there any that you recommended that would look at significant expenditures or resources?

Ms. Mary Dawson: There are three or four that come to mind. The gift provisions we have suggested, I'm not sure how much that would add, but it would be one of the ones that would add some work. There are two aspects to that. One is lowering the reporting requirement, which would be a good thing if it adds to our workload. It would mean we're finding out about things that we didn't find out about before. The other aspect is expanding the gift provisions' reporting requirements to include not only the reporting public office holders but also the plain old public office holders. There are a lot more of them than there are reporting public office holders, but I don't think they get that many gifts. So I'm not sure that it would be huge.

The other one that strikes me as one that would add to the resources to some extent is that we have proposed that the public office holders, the non-reporting ones, report to us on their outside activities. That would require a bit of looking at. We don't hear a lot from the ordinary public office holders, because there are no rules that apply to them at this point.

On the other one, which I think Mr. Angus raised, there may be a slight increase, depending on what we go to with respect to compulsory meetings.

Those are the three that come to mind.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Butt, who has seven minutes for his questions.

[English]

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Commissioner Dawson and your team, for being here today and presenting to us a very thoughtful and reasonable main estimates for 2013-14. I see that you're recommending a slight decrease, and I think we're at a stage now where we're trying to look at how we're spending and making sure we're hitting the right balance between what we are allocating to spending and getting the job done. I was pleased to hear in your presentation to the committee that you feel you can continue to get the job done with the funds you're requesting.

I did find it interesting, though, that your agency operates a little bit differently from some other departments in that your office doesn't need to negotiate with the Treasury Board Secretariat. You present your estimates to the Speaker of the House of Commons and then the Speaker, I guess, submits them to the Treasury Board.

Can you explain that process? What role does the Speaker's office play in reviewing your recommended budget, and how do those discussions take place to make sure that what finally gets submitted meets those aspects? Can you explain how that works, because it is a little bit different from what other departments and agencies go through?

• (1600)

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes. The reason, of course, is that I'm appointed under the Parliament of Canada Act. My mandate is very deliberately and clearly made totally independent of the government, which is why there's no direct relationship.

You know, I really can't tell you very much about what happens in the Speaker's office when we send our estimates. We send them and they're always sent forward to Treasury Board, and I don't know what happens in the interval. We have never had any push-back of any sort, so I've never had occasion to deal with problems.

Mr. Brad Butt: You mentioned you are overseeing 3,000 individuals, including members of Parliament, etc. I have to admit last week was our two-year anniversary of being here. You learn as you go, and hopefully you know the rules and hopefully you're doing the right thing.

Are you generally finding that the public office holders you are overseeing who are reporting through the process are getting better at it and are understanding the system better? When things are brought to their attention, are they able to react fairly quickly? I would suspect most, if not all, want to comply. Nobody wants to be on the wrong side of what the rules are. People want to make sure they're acting appropriately.

As we move along, would you say it's getting better, whether it's a full investigation or simply advising a member? I know I submitted some documents a couple of weeks ago and the person in your office responded very quickly. It was done and things were registered properly and I was thrilled because it was done fairly quickly. I think that's because I know more and I appreciate the role of the office.

Would you say that's generally what you're finding, that most of these 3,000 people you have to work with to ensure compliance are getting better?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes, the only thing about it is that there is quite significant turnover in the 3,000. So there are always new people to deal with, particularly in ministerial offices, for example.

Mr. Brad Butt: Right. Good point.

Ms. Mary Dawson: I think that's the biggest one that changes quite frequently.

There are always new people to deal with, but as individuals are here for a longer period of time, they get to know the system.

Would you like to comment, Lyne?

Ms. Lyne Robinson-Dalpe: I think we're doing a lot of outreach to people. We tend to explain the rules to them and we meet with them, and by doing that I think they're more cognizant of their obligations, and of course, they do want to comply with the rules. So whatever we tell them or whatever advice we provide to them, they tend to follow and they tend to want to submit the information in a timely fashion.

So I would say yes, as time goes by, people are more informed.

Mr. Brad Butt: Have you set any new priorities for the new—well, we're already into it—fiscal year that we're presently in that would be different from what you've done in the past? Have you set one or two additional priorities in what you're doing? Are you putting more of an emphasis, let's say, on the public education side with the public office holders, rather than sitting...? I know you're not sitting and waiting for something to happen, don't get me wrong. But you know what I mean, being more reactionary than proactive, is that kind of the priority?

Are you setting some of those newer priorities to focus more on the proactive side to make sure you're keeping us out of trouble, rather than seeing some of us, perhaps, getting into trouble?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes. This past year, we've been pretty busy, actually, between putting the five-year review document together, and in the previous year, putting together the code five-year review.

But we do try, to the extent that we have the time to devote to it, and that's why we have a separate policy section, of course, just so there is some designated area that will devote some time to that. We do try to put out information notices as we see necessary.

As I say, there has been a fairly significant bit of work on the investigations issue, too, so the office has been pretty busy over the last year, but to the extent that we can, it's always our priority to get those information notices out as well.

• (1605)

Mr. Brad Butt: Okay.

Do I still have some time, Mr. Chair? Okay?

I know that we've had some of the other commissioners here, and they've talked about shared services among other departments and agencies. I know that one of them is going to be moving, and that's going to be part of a new shared services kind of arrangement.

Is this the same thing that you're looking at on an ongoing basis? Are you looking at where you can share resources, whether it's with offices of other officers of Parliament, or other similar departments, or simply because you're housed in a particular—I'm not sure where your offices are, to be completely honest—building where you can maximize your ability to share resources with other agencies and departments?

Is it a kind of ongoing plan to look at those things again and say that maybe you could be sharing with this group or that you're on the same floor as this other office and maybe you can be sharing some stuff? Or because of the nature of your office, do you have to keep things a little more separate?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes, it doesn't work so well for us. Our office is actually a designated parliamentary precinct, so we're under the parliamentary security systems, and it really would be very difficult. Maybe we could live close to somebody, but we can't really share the facilities, I don't think. The extent to which we do make use of other facilities is as we mentioned, in that we get some support from Public Works on certain aspects and some support from the Library of Parliament and whatnot.

The other thing, as I understand it, is that the reason why there is a move happening with some of the agents of Parliament is because their building was closed down, so they took advantage of the opportunity to kind of rejig their facilities. That has not happened to us, so I don't see that as being a particular item for us.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now have our five-minute question period. Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Ms. Dawson, for being here with us today.

Thank you very much, ladies, for this presentation. Your presence here is appreciated.

I'd like to raise a matter which has already been broached. It concerns your budgetary process. Yours is different from that of other organizations. You do not negotiate with the Treasury Board Secretariat. You submit your budgetary requirements directly to the Speaker of the House of Commons, who then submits them to Treasury Board.

How do you determine the amount your office will need for the next fiscal year?

Does the Speaker of the House of Commons conduct a critical analysis of these amounts, or does he simply transfer your request?

Ms. Mary Dawson: I'm going to ask Ms. Benoit to answer your question.

Ms. Denise Benoit: Unfortunately, we are not very well aware of what goes on in the Office of the Speaker of the House. We submit our budget every year.

We determine the amount we will ask for by carrying out an internal exercise, of course. We first determine the financial needs of each directorate and then we compile that information.

The fact that we have asked for the same amount over the past five years may be one of the reasons why there has not been much opposition from Treasury Board.

If we asked for additional funds, we would have to do so through the main estimates and this would have to be tabled with you, or we would have to do so later in the course of the year, using the same process. We would also do that for the supplementary estimates. We can't just ask for any amount of money and expect to obtain it. There is a process in place. There would also be preliminary discussions with Treasury Board. We would not ask for a larger amount without prior notice.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: You have been remarkably frugal over the past few years. However, there is inflation to contend with, and this implies that employees' salaries go up, as do the cost of office supplies such as paper, and so on. In 2008, \$7 million was worth more than the same amount in 2013. What did you have to eliminate or abolish? Did you have to tighten your belt? What services do you no longer offer? What are the consequences?

Ms. Denise Benoit: As Ms. Dawson indicated earlier, in past years, we had budget surpluses at the end of the year. They were in the amount of approximately \$1.5 million the first year I worked at the Office of the Commissioner. A lot of money was returned to Parliament. At the end of the previous year, we returned close to half a million dollars. However, we do always set aside a contingency fund for unexpected expenditures.

In addition, as Ms. Dawson mentioned earlier, we carry out an internal exercise. We studied our internal processes and tried to identify possible improvements or initiatives that would allow us to save money. This year already, we are seeing results, as Ms. Dawson mentioned earlier. We are using email increasingly frequently to communicate with our clients rather than regular mail service. The difference this makes is incredible.

We decided to reduce our expenditures by eliminating individual printers. In fact, we had observed that we were spending a lot of money on paper.

We have a small budget, which allows us to identify potential savings.

• (1610)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Earlier, you mentioned that you oversee 3,000 individuals, which is enormous. These are not only members of Parliament, but many other people as well. Moreover, there is a high turnover. It was said that you meet a lot of people individually.

Can you tell me how many individual meetings you conduct in a year, on the average? I am not only referring to the commissioner, but also to all of your team.

Ms. Lyne Robinson-Dalpé: I have a statistic on that somewhere. In fact, it always depends on the number of people who are appointed. We contact all of the public office holders and all of the members at least once a year during the annual review. We also communicate with all those who are appointed for the first time. We offer to meet with them personally to explain their obligations under the act or the code. This can sometimes be done through a simple phone call.

This year, I think that people want to meet with us in person, more and more. We meet with them. I think that this year, there were approximately 50 such meetings. We have to make sure that these are meetings with new office holders. I think there were about 200 new public office holders appointed during the last year. Of these 200, about 50 asked for a one-on-one meeting.

You must also consider the fact that many public office holders are in different locations throughout Canada. Consequently, having to travel to meet them would cause us to incur much higher expenses. We try and balance the two. We often offer presentations to groups of public office holders.

Mr. Alexandre Boulé: What is the main priority of the Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner for 2013?

[English]

Ms. Mary Dawson: Responding to what you decide on our proposals is what I see as probably a significant challenge coming. I don't know how long it will take. The code we're still waiting for. We submitted that a year ago, but I expect we'll have something to react to coming out of that, which would be the main preoccupation.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your answers.

Thank you, Mr. Boulé.

I now give the floor to Mr. Carmichael for five minutes.

[English]

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner Dawson.

Just following up on my colleague's question, the main priority is responding to what we recommend, and hopefully the response will be a good deal faster than the one you just referred to on the code. As a new member two years ago and having just gone through our two-year anniversary of being here, I think I mentioned to you once previously that I had the opportunity on a one-to-one basis to get a good education on my responsibilities under the act, and under the code for that matter.

I'm one who thinks these one-to-one meetings are very important. Clearly, with the number of areas that impact our lives on a daily basis, certainly for the 308 members, your people do a terrific job of turning around the information and helping to ensure that we're well informed, and when we do call they respond and the information is very strong.

I wanted to just quickly confirm that I have the five divisions of your commission correctly identified. You have advisory and compliance, legal services, investigations—

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes, and reports.

Mr. John Carmichael: —and reports.

Corporate management—

Ms. Mary Dawson: Yes.

Mr. John Carmichael: —and policy, research, and communications.

Ms. Mary Dawson: Right.

Mr. John Carmichael: You mentioned that investigation takes about \$800,000 right off the top of your budget. Would you be able to roughly summarize what the other groups are?

• (1615)

Ms. Mary Dawson: I'm pretty sure Denise has these figures.

Ms. Denise Benoit: I do.

The budget for advisory and compliance is \$1.4 million. Actually, if you include the benefits portion, it's \$1.6 million. We've already covered reports and investigations. Policy, research, and communications is \$850,000. Legal services is \$600,000. Corporate, because we cover all the costs of the MOUs of the shared services agreements, is \$2 million.

Mr. John Carmichael: Thank you.

As I'm looking at the numbers, obviously we're going to impact your lives dramatically with the report, and I appreciate that you've commented on that already. I think that there is going to be some strong benefit for you and for those who are covered under the act.

Beyond that, what are the main challenges? You've talked about the main priority in the coming year just addressing it, and it could be it's the very same thing. What are the main challenges that your office would be faced with in the short and medium term?

Ms. Mary Dawson: I don't think they have changed at all. The investigations are always a challenge because there is a lot of commentary about the length of time these things take. They take the time that they take, as I said, but we do everything we can to move those along as quickly as we can. That's always a challenge.

Putting together our information notices is very important, but you have to be very careful to get them 100% accurate so that you don't have any loopholes there, so those are challenging as well.

What else? It's really more of the same, I think. We're doing the job as best we can, and I don't have an area that's particularly problematic.

Mr. John Carmichael: Which is probably a very good thing. You probably get some good sleep at night with that.

But how do you measure your success or your progress at the end of the year? Do you do a report card internally, or does somebody measure that for you?

Ms. Mary Dawson: Go ahead, Denise.

Ms. Denise Benoit: If I may, we're currently developing a performance measurement framework. We had to put the policies and the processes in place before we could come forward and evaluate them. We're currently working on doing a performance measurement framework, as I mentioned, where we'll come up with some indicators and some measures to be able to come back and report to you on how well we're doing.

When the commissioner prepares her annual report at the end of the year, there are statistics there but they're quantitative, so they're numbers. You can see how many initial compliances were done, so you'll get some statistics. But to do some true performance measurement, it's going to take at least one more year, if not two, to be able to come back with that information.

Mr. John Carmichael: So then, within advisory and compliance, as one division, would you plan to measure the performance of each of your officers, the people we talk to, in terms of the number of calls, the amount of information and support they're required to provide on a day-to-day basis?

Ms. Mary Dawson: We have, of course, performance evaluations every year on each of our individuals in the department. We do performance appraisals as a matter of routine.

We've certainly been cognizant of timelines. I know that in compliance and advisory there has been a lot of attention paid to how quickly we manage to go through various processes.

Lyne, would you like to add to that?

Ms. Lyne Robinson-Dalpe: Yes, exactly as the commissioner mentioned, evaluations of staff account for the number of transactions they've done, so basically how many people they've put in compliance, how many people they've dealt with on their annual reviews, and so on and so forth.

We've developed some service standards within this area as well, because there are some very tight deadlines for initial compliance, for example. Advisers need to be able to report back to the public

office holder in a timely fashion, so there are service standards we've established there. Advisers are aware of them, and when they're evaluated, we look at everything, not just the numbers but also the quality of the advice that's provided.

• (1620)

Mr. John Carmichael: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I thank the commissioner for her testimony before the committee.

This concludes our proceedings.

I am now going to call the question. I am going to do so in English.

[*English*]

PARLIAMENT

Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner

Vote 15—Program expenditures.....\$6,234,980

The Chair: Shall vote 15, under Parliament, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

(Vote 15 agreed to)

[*Translation*]

The vote carries.

We will now consider the second item on our agenda. This part of the meeting will take place in camera.

I am going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow those who are not authorized to stay to leave the room.

We will resume in a few minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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