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Tuesday, May 17, 2016

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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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•(1110)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Because of time constraints, I'm calling this meeting to order.

Good morning. This is meeting number 21 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for the first session of the 42nd Parliament. This meeting is being held in public, and it's televised.

Our business today is the main estimates 2016-17, vote 1 under the House of Commons and vote 1 under Parliamentary Protective Service, followed by a second hour, maybe, with witnesses from the United Kingdom House of Commons in connection with the study of initiatives towards a family-friendly House of Commons.

I will call vote 1 under House of Commons and vote 1 under Parliamentary Protective Service of the main estimates for 2016-17.

Our witnesses are the Honourable Geoff Regan, Speaker of the House; Marc Bosc, acting Clerk of the House of Commons; Michael Duheme, director of the Parliamentary Protective Service; Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer, Parliamentary Protective Service; and Sloane Mask, deputy chief financial officer, Parliamentary Protective Service.

I invite your opening statements. I'm sorry for the delay and the rush.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's nice to be back at the procedure and House affairs committee after a number of years of absence, and in a different capacity from when I was here as a member of the committee some years ago.

I'm pleased to be joined today by Marc Bosc, the acting Clerk of the House of Commons; Daniel Paquette, the chief financial officer; Chief Superintendent Michael Duheme, director of the Parliamentary Protective Service; and Sloane Mask, the deputy chief financial officer of the Parliamentary Protective Service, or PPS, as I'll call it.

I'll be presenting the House of Commons main estimates first, followed by those of the new PPS.

We're also joined by other members of the House administration's executive management team: Stéphan Aubé, the chief information officer; Philippe Dufresne, the law clerk and parliamentary counsel; André Gagnon, the acting deputy Clerk, procedural services; Benoit Giroux, director general, parliamentary precinct operations; Patrick McDonnell, deputy Sergeant-at-Arms and corporate security officer; and Pierre Parent, the chief human resources officer.

[Translation]

You should all have a copy of the presentation, so I won't read it. I prefer to give you an overview, so as to leave more time for questions and answers.

•(1115)

[English]

I'll begin with the House of Commons main estimates for 2016-17, which total \$464 million, an increase of 4.55% over 2015-16.

I'll provide an overview of the relevant line items in the main estimates along four major themes: budgets for members, House officers, and presiding officers; House administration; electoral boundary redistribution; and the PPS.

[Translation]

Let me begin with the budgets for members, House officers and presiding officers.

At its meeting of March 10, 2015, the Board of Internal Economy acknowledged an increase of 2.3%, effective April 1, 2015, to members' annual sessional allowance and additional salaries. This funding is statutory in nature and is in accordance with provisions in the Parliament of Canada Act. The increase amounts to \$1.3 million for the 2016-2017 fiscal year and subsequent years.

[English]

In December 2015 the Board of Internal Economy approved a one-time increase of 20% to members' office budgets and to House officers' budgets. This comes after six years of these budgets being frozen, the last increase having occurred in 2009-10. Future adjustments will be based on the consumer price index as measured in September of the previous year.

There was also a one-time increase of 5% to the members' travel status expenses account.

Following the general election, the House officers' office budgets were established, based upon the election results for all parties in accordance with the long-standing formula approved by the board. The resulting funding increase of \$1.1 million is being sought for 2016-17 and subsequent years.

I should also point out that members' statutory budgets were reduced by \$5 million, due in part to savings generated through the individual and corporate flight pass programs.

[Translation]

Let's now look at House administration.

The first element is \$3.4 million in funding for salaries of the House administration employees.

Several new and rehabilitated buildings that are part of the long-term vision and plan are opening in the coming years. This will require increased resources and funding. Two examples include the commissioning of the Sir John A. Macdonald Building, last September, and the upcoming commissioning of the Wellington Building, this fall. This funding of \$5.6 million was approved for the 2016-2017 fiscal year.

[English]

With the opening of these buildings, additional funding is required for salary, operating, and capital expenses to ensure continued support of the building assets transferred from Public Services and Procurement Canada as they are completed. Unfortunately—before you ask—I don't have control of office allocation.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Geoff Regan: Funding of \$3 million for the 2016-17 fiscal year is being sought to support these facilities.

To support the ongoing maintenance of information technology assets and their life-cycle replacement costs associated with the long-term vision and plan, in 2014 the board approved funding on a five-year basis. This year's funding has increased by \$982,000.

With regard to funding for security within the parliamentary precinct, this year saw an overall reduction of \$25 million as a result of resources being transferred to the PPS, which fully integrates the protective services of the House and Senate with those provided by the RCMP. This \$25-million transfer includes funding sought to continue the implementation of the Enhancing Security Across the Parliamentary Precinct project, which had been initiated by the House of Commons prior to the integration of the protective services.

Mr. Chair, this just occurred to me. I should remember what a challenge it can be for the interpreters to interpret when a witness is speaking so quickly, so I'll try to slow down a bit for them. Normally, I speak at about 200 words a minute, with gusts of up to 400.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (1120)

[Translation]

Additionally, the House is seeking \$600,000 to continue the implementation of the emergency notification system—one of our priorities.

Another strategic priority involves modernizing wireless telecommunications services by making the latest smart phones and tablets available to members and staff. A mobile work environment gives members and House administration employees much greater

flexibility to carry out their activities and work. This commitment will allow the house to be more adaptable to the ever-changing demands of parliamentary work.

[English]

An example of a recent change to the way we do business is of course the creation of the electronic petition system, which was launched in December. As of mid-April, 64 e-petitions had been opened, and more than 150,000 Canadians had added their signatures electronically in support of various policy initiatives. To continue to support the e-petitions system, funding of \$195,000 is being requested for 2016-17 and subsequent years.

[Translation]

We will now move on to funding allocated for the electoral boundaries redistribution.

Prior to the election in the fall of 2015, 30 constituencies were added. In June 2014, the board approved temporary funding of \$17.6 million for 2015-2016 and permanent funding of \$24.5 million for 2016-2017 and subsequent years.

This funding takes into consideration requirements for members, including pay and pension, travel, telecommunications services, office budgets, parliamentary and constituency office expenditures, and additional funding requirements to enable the House administration to support the institution and ensure the same level of services to the expanded membership.

[English]

Now for the PPS, the Parliamentary Protective Service, which is one month shy of its first anniversary. It has implemented a single command oversight mechanism, formalized an intelligence unit, and is in the process of deploying a common uniform. Integrated teams now work together on a daily basis at the vehicle screening facility, the place we all know as “the car wash”.

The PPS is focused on deploying resources so as to make the best use of the expertise that already exists within the current complement of employees. I think we're all aware of the increased security presence on Parliament Hill.

In 2016-17 the main estimates for the PPS total \$62.1 million, including a voted budgetary requirement of \$56.3 million, as well as a statutory budget component of \$5.8 million to fund the employee benefit program. The PPS's 2015-16 budget was established by Bill C-59, which transferred the unexpended physical security funds from the Senate, House of Commons, and RCMP.

It's recommended that \$32.3 million be permanently transferred to the PPS from the Senate and House of Commons protective services and the RCMP A-base budget.

This would fund personnel, operations and maintenance, and full-time equivalents. This amount includes \$4.7 million needed to reimburse the RCMP for the cost of physical security for operations and maintenance. A permanent increase of \$14.5 million is required to sustain the current security posture and \$5.1 million to sustainably support previously approved salary increases, security enhancement initiatives, and the integrated organizational structure.

The PPS requires a permanent increase of \$3.9 million for the funding of an administrative team to manage this new parliamentary organization. A total of \$400,000 is required in temporary funding to support the renewal of the baggage screening facility at 90 Wellington through 2016-2017.

This concludes my overview of the House of Commons and the PPS's 2016-17 main estimates. I look forward to questions from members.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and all the House of Commons staff.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Speaker, while you speak at 200 gusting to 400, as interpretation services will attest, the last time the “wordervane” tried to measure me it broke.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: First of all, what is 90 Wellington? Which building is that?

• (1125)

Hon. Geoff Regan: The building at 90 Wellington is directly across from Centre Block. It's the visitor welcome centre.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay.

I have a question mostly about the Parliamentary Protective Service.

We heard last winter that there was a lack of winter wear for guards standing outside. Has that been rectified?

Hon. Geoff Regan: I'll turn it over to Mr. Duheme.

C/Supt Michael Duheme (Director, Parliamentary Protective Service): It has.

When PPS first started off, people came with the equipment that they had. I meet with the president of the association as well as with the president of PSAC on a monthly basis, and the issues are addressed. Mind you, if you have to change an order of dress for 400 people, it could take some time, but the issues are addressed.

Hon. Geoff Regan: This was brought to my attention by members, and I appreciated it at the time. I certainly raised it with the PPS. I'm also looking forward to integration in relation to the uniform that is en route. I think there will be eight pairs of pants and eight jackets for everybody. It takes a long time to get all that from the supplier, but it's coming. We expect it in the coming weeks, hopefully.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That would be 3,200 jackets. That's a lot of jackets.

Hon. Geoff Regan: You must be a math major.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Some members of PPS have mentioned to me that there has been a hiring freeze and there are a lot of vacancies. Is that being filled? Are there any vacancies right now?

C/Supt Michael Duheme: There hasn't been a hiring freeze. We actually have a course going on right now, and there's another course prepared for July.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay.

C/Supt Michael Duheme: There's an overall review being done of all the operational posture we have right now to determine the best way forward for the resources and for the recruiting of additional resources.

To give you an example, for the recruit program that's scheduled to take place in July, I think we're looking to process 30 individuals, and there are 500 applicants for it. We are maintaining the training and filling in the vacancies.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: How is the integration of the Senate and House of Commons unions going? Are they going to be left separate?

C/Supt Michael Duheme: As it stands, right now they're separate. We're respecting both collective bargaining agreements until we come to an understanding on the way forward. We did submit a proposal to the board in November to go to one single bargaining agreement. We're still waiting for the way forward on that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Another thing that came up in the last Parliament—I was a staffer here at the time—was the question of privilege related to access to the Hill. I think it's related to state visits. I remember Yvon Godin, and I saw that incident happen outside the window where I happened to be standing at the time.

With all the new people coming in and all the integration, are a lot of people coming on who aren't aware of privilege? How is the training going to make sure that it doesn't happen again?

C/Supt Michael Duheme: All of them are briefed as they enter into PPS. We're putting the final touches on a little pamphlet the members can keep as a gentle reminder of what parliamentary privilege is. When there is a visit on the Hill, we'll make sure that our members are briefed and reminded of parliamentary privilege.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Do you have sufficient funding to provide security over the entire precinct? Is everything where you need it to be?

C/Supt Michael Duheme: That's the discussion I'll have with the Speaker.

As I said, the budget of \$62 million that was presented was the budget that existed previously at the House of Commons, the Senate, and the RCMP. It was just brought together. There is a caveat there: there is also service that the RCMP is providing that is not factored into that \$62 million. As we grow, there will be additional requests for funding on the executive and the management structure.

As I said, in different committees we gave ourselves two years to finalize all the review and to state exactly how much it's going to cost.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay.

I have another quick question. A number of other buildings, such as 131 Queen, use a security force at the gate other than the PPS. Is that going to remain the same, or will that be changing over time and be integrated into the PPS?

C/Supt Michael Duheme: That will be part of our ongoing reviews.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: No decision has been come to at this time.

C/Supt Michael Duheme: No. The review for that portion hasn't even started yet.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's fair enough. Thank you.

Do you have a quick question, Anita?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Yes.

I noticed that there was a decrease in travel points usage, which in part led to savings of \$5 million. In our committee, we've been talking about a family-friendly Parliament. One of the things we've heard is that some families with a number of children actually don't have enough travel points. How can you explain the fact that it's actually gone down?

Hon. Geoff Regan: The first thing to understand is that the 64 travel points that members have, except for the leaders of the parties, who have a few more, have not changed. The same number of trips is still available.

If members wanted to bring forward something in relation to changing that number, I would suggest that they speak to the House leader for their party or to the members of the Board of Internal Economy from their party to propose that. I take note of what the member for Ottawa West—Nepean has said, but I'll turn to the Clerk to add to that.

• (1130)

Mr. Marc Bosc (Acting Clerk, House of Commons): I would just add—and Dan may jump in—that in fact what we find is that members don't fully utilize their points. That's the statistical analysis that we've done of it. That's what it shows.

The Chair: There were six months because of the election....

Hon. Geoff Regan: But this, Mr. Chair, for the overall cost, is about right. It's what I said. The total budget is based upon the fact that some members—many—don't use the full allocation, right?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Yes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: But it doesn't reduce the ability of members to use their full number of points.

The question you're raising is whether or not there ought to be more points for those with young children, for instance, who are concerned about that. As I say, you might want to take that to your member of the board for discussion.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Okay. That would be part of our study.

I note that the bells are ringing, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. I'm going to push the envelope.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: It would likely be because the cost of the trips has gone down, and there are members like me, of course, who live in Ottawa, who don't use the travel points.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Of course, we've always had members from the national capital region; I guess we perhaps have a few more with redistribution these days. It's more that the cost has gone down because of the flight pass system we're using, and the fact that some members don't use the full allocation of points. That has created some savings for the House.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate all of you being here.

You mentioned the electoral boundaries redistribution and some of the costs associated with it. That has me thinking a bit towards the next election and whether there would be any changes required there. Obviously, there is discussion happening right now about potential changes to our voting system. There are going to be some consultations taking place. We're certainly hoping that there will be a referendum of Canadians.

Looking at that situation, any system that's adopted, outside the Prime Minister's preferred option of a ranked ballot or the current system we have being maintained, would require some combination of either a redistribution of the seats or a change in the number of seats, or possibly both. Obviously there would be some lead time required, especially when you're looking at increasing the number of seats, in order to get the chamber prepared for such a thing and to make sure there are enough offices for members of Parliament. I understand that we're not aware of what those changes will be, but we have to understand there's a possibility that there could be an increased number of seats or a redistribution.

In both cases, there would be some lead time required. I wonder if you could give us some sense as to what lead time would be required in order to have the chamber, members' offices, and any other changes that would be required prepared in time for the next Parliament.

Hon. Geoff Regan: The difficulty is that this is a hypothetical question, and it could go in various directions. As Speaker, I'll be watching with great interest to see what the House decides and what Parliament decides in relation to this question. I'm optimistic that it will happen without any tie votes—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Geoff Regan: —but we'll wait and see on that question. I'm certainly interested in seeing that. It's very hard to respond in view of the fact that we don't know what will come.

Obviously, after the last election, the 30 new seats of course entailed additional expenses, which I talked about in my comments earlier and which are accounted for, of course, in our proposals in relation to the estimates.

Do you want to add anything, Marc?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Other than administration, we are always prepared to analyze whatever proposals come forward, and we can turn that around fairly quickly as an administration. We are fairly agile. We will have to wait and see what comes of it.

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that we have to wait and see, and I appreciate that it is a hypothetical question. However, when we are contemplating such a change, we do need to understand what is possible and what can be accomplished.

I guess I will ask the question again. If the system that is brought forward calls for an increased number of seats or a redistribution, we must have some sense as to how long we would need to accomplish that.

I guess I will add to that question. We could be moving into the West Block chamber following the next election, or we may have already moved in, or we could still be in the current chamber if things are behind schedule. Could you give us some sense as to how many new seats could be accommodated in the current chamber, if necessary, and in a move to West Block, how many seats it could accommodate if that was necessary? You must have some sense as to....

We need to have that information when we are making those decisions, I think.

•(1135)

Hon. Geoff Regan: First of all, I can tell you that last Thursday, along with the House leaders and the whips of the three main parties, I had a tour of both the West Block and the Wellington Building. In the Wellington Building, the construction is basically finished. What is happening is the wiring and so forth. Getting it ready for members to move in and for committees to be meeting there is under way. That building will be used for a number of things, including 10 very nice committee rooms. How many offices for MPs were there?

Mr. Marc Bosc: It was 70.

Hon. Geoff Regan: There are 70 offices for MPs. Again, as I mentioned, I don't determine the allocation. We expect it will be open during the winter break. In other words, when we come back in the new year, we should be using it, I expect. That is well under way.

As for the West Block, the construction there seems to be going very well and is on schedule. It is an impressive development there,

which I am sure you have heard about before. Maybe this committee wants to have a tour of it. I presume that is possible, and I encourage you to do that.

I will let Marc continue.

Mr. Marc Bosc: To go to the rest of your question, Mr. Richards, it is very difficult for us at this stage to go any further than what we have already said. It is a completely hypothetical construct at this point.

What I will say, though, is that in the West Block the floor space—and I stand to be corrected, Stéphan—is actually larger than in the current House. My understanding is that the currently planned seats that will go into the West Block are full-size seats like the ones in the old House. Is that correct?

Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Blake Richards: What you are saying is that we would be getting rid of those benches that are on one wall.

Mr. Marc Bosc: That is the idea, yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sorry to be insistent, but is there no way we can get any sense as to what number of seats that could accommodate if it was necessary? There must be some way....

Mr. Marc Bosc: We would have to get back to you on that. I don't have the answer.

Mr. Blake Richards: If you could, I would appreciate it.

Hon. Geoff Regan: One of the neat things about it, of course, is that with the big dig next to the visitor centre, there are three floors that will be underground there. Also, in the middle of the West Block, what was the courtyard has been all dug out, so there will be three floors below the level of the new chamber, where there was just bedrock. It was just a slab before. They have created a lot of additional space that will be available in that building.

Mr. Blake Richards: What do I have for time?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Blake Richards: Rather than move to something new, I think I will just thank you there.

The Chair: We go to our last speaker. Go ahead, David.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thanks, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Speaker, and everyone else who is here.

I want to start with BOIE. It is my understanding that the government promised in the last election to open up BOIE, and I haven't seen anything yet. I wonder if you can give us a sense of when we are going to throw open the doors of BOIE.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I am aware that this was mentioned in the mandate letter for the government House leader. I anticipate legislation on that at some point.

Mr. David Christopherson: Does it take legislation to open the doors?

Hon. Geoff Regan: Yes, it does.

Mr. David Christopherson: Can you expand on that a little?

Hon. Geoff Regan: It is in the Parliament of Canada Act, as I recall, but I am going to ask the Clerk to add to that.

Mr. Marc Bosc: I am going to call up the law clerk, because it is a legal question.

Hon. Geoff Regan: He doesn't want a non-practising lawyer answering that.

Mr. Marc Bosc: This is Philippe Dufresne, law clerk and parliamentary counsel.

Mr. Philippe Dufresne (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel): Thank you.

Mr. Christopherson, the Parliament of Canada Act provides for the Board of Internal Economy, provides for confidentiality, and provides for an oath to be made by board members that prevents them from disclosing a whole range of matters, so opening that would require an amendment to those—

Mr. David Christopherson: Any part of the BOIE opening would require a legislative change?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Our view is that the confidentiality provision is quite broad, and there may be some aspects, but there are significant limits to disclosure in the act. That would be—

Mr. David Christopherson: Fair enough. I didn't realize that. That's fine.

Can I ask, Speaker, if there are deliberations currently? I won't ask the nature of them, because it is confidential, but is there discussion in the BOIE on the kind of legislative changes we're talking about?

• (1140)

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think Philippe has just answered your question by indicating the fact that we can't—

Mr. David Christopherson: No, he didn't, sir, because I was just asking whether there were discussions in BOIE.

Hon. Geoff Regan: What I mean, Mr. Christopherson, is that he made it very clear that under the Parliament of Canada Act and the oath that is taken by members, the members aren't able to discuss the topics raised at those meetings.

Mr. David Christopherson: Understood.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I can't really respond to your question is what I'm saying.

Mr. David Christopherson: I see. Okay. Well, it's interesting; it's a catch-22. We want to get it open, but we can't ask questions about whether it's being discussed or not.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think the important point that's taken from this is that it requires legislation, which of course the BOIE doesn't initiate.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, no, but I would assume, having sat on BOIE at Queen's Park, that the similarities are such that if you're going to make changes to BOIE, some of those changes would start with a discussion at BOIE.

I understand that you can't say much, and that's part of the problem, isn't it? It's just too closed. Here we are at a meeting, and I can't even find out whether opening the doors at BOIE is being discussed, because the doors are slammed shut so tight.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I would suggest that you talk to the member for your party on the Board of Internal Economy with your views on the subject, but of course you may also want to talk to the government House leader, who we would expect to be the person who'd bring legislation before the House.

Mr. David Christopherson: Right, and that tone I'll take with him. I certainly wasn't with you, Speaker.

Next I want to follow up on Mr. Graham's comment about access, because we've been here before. It's almost always after the fact, when there has been a crisis, and then we do a whole review. Monsieur Godin was one example. There have been at least two others since I've been here.

Every time we ask ahead of time we're told, "Yes, don't worry", and then inevitably there's a problem. There was a problem the last time. I didn't raise it because it wasn't big enough and it was early in the term, but the green bus that I was on was stopped from getting to Centre Block, and we were told we couldn't go any further. Quite frankly, everybody was unceremoniously dumped. That was fine. We walked across the lawn. However, one of my colleagues—I won't mention her name—had a temporary disability and was using a cane. She still had to walk across the front lawn in order to get to Centre Block.

Speaker, I am asking, I am all but pleading, to please make sure that these things are thought through ahead of time. Identify a route that works. The last thing we want to do is risk the security of an honoured visitor to our country, but we have been emphasizing over and over, since Canada was formed, the absolute, unfettered right of parliamentarians to access Centre Block, and yet it keeps happening.

I'm asking you and I'm asking everyone there to try to get ahead of this thing. Think ahead of time, when there's a crunch, about how you get the members to the House. It is a constitutional requirement. Hearing "sorry" afterwards is getting a little frustrating. I am urging you and Monsieur Duheme to please keep in mind, as a priority, when you are putting those barriers in, how the members get to the House, given that they have a constitutional right.

I'll leave that with you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Look, I can assure you that this is a preoccupation of mine. Privilege, when it comes to this kind of issue, is about the right of members of Parliament to be able to do their jobs on behalf of their constituents. That's what privilege means, of course, in this context. I can tell you that when I hear about proposals for events on Parliament Hill, this is something I raise on a regular basis to try to ensure that we avoid those kinds of things.

Mr. Duheme may want to add a comment.

C/Supt Michael Duheme: I'm not quite familiar with the incident you're referring to, Mr. Christopherson. When there's a major event on the Hill, in the planning we have looked at an alternative to get the buses up toward the—

Mr. David Christopherson: Sir, I'm sorry. I hear you say that, sir, but the fact of the matter is that we have been stopped. I'm not questioning you, but at some point your desire to have these commands carried out doesn't always work on the ground. It just seemed to me that the last time.... Again, it wasn't an incident, so you wouldn't be aware of it, but it did happen. There were other colleagues there. If need be, I could get them to say it happened, but trust me, it happened.

It was just thoroughly a lack of identifying how that green bus would get through the security maze to find its way up. That's all that was required. It didn't happen.

I hit this hard because my goal is that we never have to deal with this in this Parliament. That would be perfect, but my experience is that there's a good chance that it will happen. Maybe under the new regime we can actually make this the priority.

I hear you, Speaker. You're a man of your word, and I'm sure you are doing everything you can. Let's just hope that it doesn't happen this time.

That's my time.

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, guests.

• (1145)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: We will adjourn for the first 60 seconds. When we come back, we'll have the votes on these two estimates and then, in deference to our U.K. witnesses, we will have them on video conference and start as soon as we can after the vote. I'll be suspending.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses. I know you're all very busy, and we really appreciate it. We'll talk to you individually if we have other concerns.

The meeting is suspended.

• _____ (Pause) _____

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• (1220)

The Chair: We're in session.

While people are getting organized, I'll go over the formalities.

In a minute, we're going to have a vote on the estimates. Before we do that, I will introduce our witnesses.

We're going to resume our study of initiatives toward an inclusive, efficient House of Commons.

Our witnesses are here by video conference from the United Kingdom's House of Commons. I would like to welcome David Natzler, Clerk of the House of Commons; Anne Foster, head of diversity and inclusion; and Joanne Mills, diversity and inclusion programme manager and nursery liaison officer.

Before we begin, I would like to thank the clerk for drawing our attention to the work of Professor Sarah Childs, who's completing her report on reforms that would make the U.K. House of Commons a more inclusive institution.

You all got a note on that from the clerk. There are some advanced points she's looking at, and we look forward to seeing her report in the interim. It's very timely. She's doing a report. Someone has full-time work looking at modernizing the House of Commons.

I'm going to call the votes on the estimates.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$307,196,559

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

PARLIAMENTARY PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$56,313,707

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes on the main estimates for 2016, less the amount voted in interim supply, to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Once again, we're sorry for our procedures holding you up. I know you're busy, and we would love to hear your opening statements. I think this will be enlightening for us.

• (1225)

Mr. David Natzler (Clerk of the House, United Kingdom House of Commons): Shall I start now?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. David Natzler: Thank you.

We well understand from Westminster. Things here sometimes get interrupted by votes as well. Whether that's family friendly or not, I don't know.

We're honoured to be asked to give evidence and very happy to answer your questions, so I will try to keep this opening statement pretty short.

I have with me Anne Foster and Jo Mills, who can answer questions as well. As well as talking to Sarah Childs, I hope you might have the opportunity to talk to or invite evidence from some of your colleagues over here, because they know better than staff about family-friendly policies as they relate to members and their staff.

In general we are, of course, keen to be a family-friendly employer of our staff, to the extent that we can control the necessary demands made on them. That means, for example, flexible working arrangements; an openness to consider requests for compressed or special hours; part-time working; job-sharing—and we have had job-sharing in quite senior jobs—leave, despite the House sitting; and bearing down on what can be a prevalent late-work culture. On that and those subjects, I'm sure that Anne can help you further.

We don't really have much influence on the work-life balance or the family-friendliness of the staff of members. We neither employ them nor pay them. As for members, we have, I guess, even less influence on their work-life balance. They manage themselves. We are, of course, conscious of some of the strains on their lives, but again, as fellow members, you would know that better than anybody.

You asked about sittings and sitting hours. They are decided by the House, and from 40 years' experience, I can confirm that whatever is decided is always controversial and not popular with everybody.

It used to be assumed that an earlier start and therefore an earlier end to the day was in some way better and more family friendly. Of course, it may mean that you can neither take your children to school nor collect them at the end of the day. If there are votes at seven o'clock, it's questionable if that is automatically better than votes at ten o'clock. It is a short, but very intensive, 60-to-70-hour, Monday-to-Thursday working week. It's very good for non-London-based members, but possibly not so good for London-based members.

The good thing is that our sitting patterns through the year are now more reflective of people's non-working lives. In particular, we have a break at February for school half term. What is not so good is that we normally return in October, just as the autumn half term from school beckons. We have the problem, which I don't know if you share, that in different parts of the United Kingdom there are different times for school holidays. In Scotland, school holidays start substantially earlier.

You asked about voting. Broadly speaking, voting is similar here to your system. We have no proxy voting. We have no facilities for absent voting, although there is "nodding through", which is an informal procedure whereby members in the precincts who in some way are unable to pass through the lobbies can vote.

Infants, meaning very small children, are now permitted in the voting lobbies, but not as yet in the chamber itself. Jo is able to explain about our day care and nursery facilities. We don't have a drop-in or crèche, but there is quite a lot of demand for something like that, and we are conscious of what you are planning on that.

There is notionally something described as maternity leave for members, but it isn't, for I think obvious reasons, on the standard statutory lines. Of course, it doesn't stop those members who are on "maternity" leave from attending, speaking, or voting.

You asked about technology. I think the main advantage of technology in this context is enabling staff to work at or from home with remote links. We, of course, have an advantage over you: we're all in the same time zone.

● (1230)

We have had an alternate chamber, which I know you were also asking about, since 1999, based unashamedly on the Australian practice, and it's been a huge success. I'm happy to answer questions on that.

Finally, I think I should say there is an issue here with the extent to which the members' expenses regime—that's the allowances—affects the ability of members from outside London to lead anything like an ordinary family life by having their family members with them in London. Our expenses regime is, as you may know, under the auspices of an independent authority, which is currently consulting on exactly that point and has quoted in their document the fact that MPs often suggest the authority is not supportive enough of MPs' families and of their desire to have some sort of family life, including spouses and dependent children living with them when they are in London rather than the constituency.

I hope that was helpful.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Once again, thank you for being here. It's very helpful.

We'll start with Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much.

As we know, there are a number of similarities between our two Parliaments. Often we can learn lessons from one another, so I appreciate your presenting to us.

I want to ask about the alternate chamber. You said this was a grand success. What is it about it that you think makes it so successful?

Mr. David Natzler: The measure of the success is that members attended enthusiastically. Often the debates there are at least as well attended as debates in the main chamber. There are no votes in the alternate chamber. It's not possible to vote, and if the question is opposed it has to be decided in the main chamber. In 15 years, that has never happened, because the business there can possibly be controversial but not necessarily require a decision of the House or a decision of the House on any value.

The debates proceed on an effectively procedural motion that the matter has been considered, and then the debate can take place. It also enjoys a less formal atmosphere than the main chamber. Knowing the size of your current chamber reasonably well, and indeed the one you may be moving to in the West Block, what we have is a room that takes about 60 people in a double horseshoe shape, and it is slightly less oppressive in terms of panelled wood than either our chamber or your chamber. I think that encourages members to take part in a slightly less partisan spirit, but that is also because they sit in a horseshoe shape rather than facing one another, and also because it has a modern feel to it and a less oppositional mode.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: When you say it's in a horseshoe shape, does this mean that one party and another party are still sitting separate from one another, or is it open?

Mr. David Natzler: My answer as the clerk is that they can sit where they like, but to be truthful, they still sit by party. The minister sits on one side and the shadow minister on the other side, and members will generally sit by party.

I think the physical layout helps. It is presided over not by the Speaker, but either by one of the Deputy Speakers or more normally by one of the panel of neutral chairs we use to chair our committees on bills. It lowers the temperature while still enabling some passionate, well-attended, and interesting debates.

• (1235)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Would there still be a question-and-answer period after each speaker?

Mr. David Natzler: No, we don't have that. There are speeches, but they can be interrupted if the member concerned gives way, so it exactly reflects the same rules as in the chamber.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: You mentioned ministers, so this is not something that's specifically just for private members. Is there actually government business being debated and are there ministers who speak in this chamber?

Mr. David Natzler: Nowadays there's very little government business, but a member can raise a debate. They can choose a subject and make a speech. Other members, depending on the length of the slot, can also make a speech, and then the minister will respond. Otherwise it would be quite pointless.

In other words, we don't just talk, as you do. The purpose is to get a ministerial response.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Chair, I'm sharing my time with Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

Hello. Thank you for being with us today. We're quite intrigued, because we share a similar parliamentary style.

Could you inform us a little bit about what your sitting week looks like? That's my first question, because I don't know if you're sitting Monday to Friday or what days of the week you sit.

Mr. David Natzler: We sit for 36 weeks in the year, Mondays from 2:30 to 10:30, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 11:30 to 7:30, Thursdays from 9:30 to 5:30, and we sit for 13 Fridays only in the year from 9:30 to 3:00.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

I also have another question about gender parity in the House, male versus female, and diversity. What is the percentage for that?

Mr. David Natzler: We can send you the exact facts. Twenty-nine per cent of the members are female, which I think means that the others are all male. Well, let's be careful; we have no transgender members.

I'd rather send you the latest ethnic minority breakdown. We have an issue.... Members, unlike staff, are not asked to self-identify, so the identification is external. I think we now have either 32 or 34 openly gay members, which for some reason I'm proud of. It is the highest of any parliament in the world.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Very good.

Also, you said that you have a maternity leave plan, but you described it as "notionally something described as maternity leave". Could you please elaborate and explain exactly what kind of leave you provide?

Mr. David Natzler: I'm referring to members here. Obviously, our staff enjoy the same social security benefits as everyone else, and there's a standard public sector package. Indeed, Jo—she's on my right, but I'm not sure where you see her—is about to enjoy the benefits of that package in a few weeks, so she can speak to it more.

In terms of members, because they're not employed, they don't get maternity leave in the form of a different salary arrangement or a time in which they are expected to be away, but we do have, for demographic reasons, increasing numbers of members who have children while they are members, and their parties effectively grant them something they refer to as maternity leave. I'm cautious about using that phrase, because it isn't the same as the leave their constituents get. It is both more advantageous in that they make their own arrangements, but also less advantageous in that they may feel they have to continue with some of their constituency duties very soon after giving birth. It is noticeable that most of them will go away for a short period after the birth before returning to Westminster.

We recently had a minister—and in fact, it's not the first time; it occurred in the last Parliament as well—who had her first child, so she has been given leave. I believe she continues to draw—and you can ask her—her ministerial salary, but someone is substituting for her in her ministerial role while she is away. That is, as it were, an informality. It's not a statutory form of leave.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much for your time today. I do appreciate it.

I have a quick question to build on what you've just said. Somebody would be substituting for the minister. Is that another MP appointed by the Prime Minister? I'm just curious.

Mr. David Natzler: Yes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay.

I missed your start and finish times when the House is in session. Could you repeat that for me?

Mr. David Natzler: You want me to repeat the starting times and the finishing times?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, please.

Mr. David Natzler: On Mondays it's from 2:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.; on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 11:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.; on Thursdays, 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; and on those Fridays on which we sit, 9:30 till 3.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: In terms of the alternate chamber you were talking about and the success you saw, what would the attendance typically be in that secondary chamber?

Mr. David Natzler: It's difficult to typify. If it's a half-hour debate, it's sometimes simply attended by the backbench member who has raised it and the government minister, sometimes accompanied by a whip or a PPS—in other words, a member who helps to assist him.

In longer debates, the 60-minute or 90-minute debates, you would normally expect seven or eight, and the opposition take part in those as well. There is an opposition front-bench spokesman—a shadow—plus the third party, because, like you, we have a third party. A third party shadow also takes part.

On Monday afternoons between 4:30 and 7:30 in our parallel chamber, we have debates on e-petitions, which are electronically submitted petitions that have reached generally more than 100,000 signatures. We've had about 20 of those. It's a novelty. Those have been quite well attended and, in some cases, very heavily attended.

For some of the hour-and-a-half debates, we may get 30 or 40 members. For example, if it's on the steel industry or on a particular region or issue, then the regional members are all likely to attend and may only have three or four minutes each to speak.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Part of the concern I had with the secondary chamber was that you were basically speaking to an empty room. I'm glad to hear that in your case there is some back-and-forth and that the attendance isn't just one person speaking to himself or herself.

Mr. David Natzler: No, that's correct.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Sometimes you can feel like that in a regular chamber, I guess.

Mr. David Natzler: Yes, just so.

The important thing, if I may emphasize, is that a minister responds. A member can speak for 15 minutes in a 30-minute debate, but then the minister is obliged to give an answer, which is perhaps even more important than the backbench member speaking. That is his purpose in raising the debate.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: As a member of the opposition, I like that. It's good to have that direct contact with the minister or the parliamentary secretary. That's very interesting.

Going off topic, in terms of family friendly, you may not have the exact stat—and I do appreciate that—but do you know roughly, on average, how many MPs outside the greater London area bring their families to live in the greater London area?

Mr. David Natzler: No, I don't, and I don't think it's knowable. From the IPSA document recently, I can tell you that 168 members out of 650 had, quote, “336 registered dependants”. That is a dependant for whom they might claim travel to come to London or to have people living here. Now, that doesn't mean that they do bring them and, of course, they may have a split life.

I'm looking at my colleagues. Do you have any sense of that, Anne?

• (1245)

Ms. Anne Foster (Head of Diversity and Inclusion, United Kingdom House of Commons): No, we don't have numbers, but we do know anecdotally that the fact we have an on-site nursery has given the option to our members to make a decision about whether they're going to bring their family down to Westminster or keep them in the constituency.

Mr. David Natzler: On the on-site nursery, I think there are five members currently, and you have to book in. It isn't a drop-in facility. There are five members whose children will be here for I think the whole school year.

Can we say vaguely which constituencies they come from?

Ms. Joanne Mills (Diversity and Inclusion Programme Manager and Nursery Liaison Officer, United Kingdom House of Commons): Not off the top of my head. I haven't brought that list with me, but it is a mixture. We have some who are London-based and others from further out.

Mr. David Natzler: Ashford, Leicester...I think one of them brings two children—

Ms. Joanne Mills: They're from the Midlands.

Mr. David Natzler: — from the Midlands. Presumably he brings them on a Monday. This is a male member. He is a big nursery supporter, which is why we know him. They're here through the week.

Also, of course, London being, if I may say so, different from Ottawa, some members who are members for seats outside London have always basically lived in London. They will have a house in their constituency, so they haven't had to move to London. What they've had to do is find a place outside London in which to spend the weekends. Quite a few members have partners who are London-based because they work in London, so the partner may work in London but the member may represent a constituency in the rest of the country.

It is a very varied picture. We also know there are members who might have liked to bring their children to London if they had been more confident that they could have set up life here, but you have to remember, as I'm sure is the case in Canada, that there is a lot of pressure from the constituencies to have the members visible there in the riding, so it does cut both ways.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Absolutely.

I have some questions about travel.

The Chair: Ten seconds.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I guess I won't be asking any question.

Thank you for your time. Hopefully we'll have time in the second round.

The Chair: Now we move on to Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

Good news, Mr. Schmale: I only have one question. You may get more time yet.

Thank you so much for your presentation.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: It's in eight parts.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, actually it's one question, one part, straight and smooth.

It's on travel. First of all, do you have the travel point system for members travelling around the country?

Mr. David Natzler: I don't understand the phrase a "point system".

Mr. David Christopherson: The answer to that would be no, then.

Let me try another approach. This may take longer than I thought.

What system do you have for members travelling within the country, and what is its reporting mechanism?

Mr. David Natzler: Members can travel on parliamentary duties more or less where they wish. Most members' travel, which is reimbursed, is through IPSA, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. Therefore, it's not my responsibility, and so I have to be cautious.

Most members' travel is between the constituency and Westminster. That doesn't include select committee travel, which is paid for by the select committee budget, but if members wish to be reimbursed for travel elsewhere, it is up to them to show that it is for a parliamentary purpose, as opposed to, let us say, a party purpose. If there is some parliamentary purpose—let us say one of their constituents is in prison in another constituency—then they can, as I understand it, reclaim the costs of travelling to that place.

The vast bulk of members' travel is on the fairly simple line back and forth between the constituency and Westminster, and then travel within the constituency, which is also reimbursable.

Mr. David Christopherson: What about family travelling with them to the capital?

Mr. David Natzler: There are circumstances in which travel of dependants between the constituency and London is reimbursed by IPSA. Not much of it is used.

I'm looking at the costs here. It was £52,000 last year. That's—

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

• (1250)

The Chair: There we go. We're back.

Mr. David Natzler: Sorry. We were interrupted.

The Chair: The last words we heard were "£52,000 last year".

Mr. David Natzler: Right. That was one year's expenditure on dependants' travel. That's partly because the full details of all of the members' claims are immediately publicly revealed on the IPSA website. By anecdote, members are not always happy at having their family travel arrangements exposed to immediate public view.

Mr. David Christopherson: Perfect—

Mr. David Natzler: But IPSA—say that again?

Mr. David Christopherson: No, you're right on the point that I was asking about. Go ahead. Please continue.

Mr. David Natzler: Until 2009, the scheme was that 12 journeys by a spouse or dependent child to and from London were permitted. I don't know what the IPSA scheme is at the moment, but we can make those things available to you. I think it's broadly similar.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

The question I was asking was exactly that. We've heard from some family members, particularly when there's a young family with a number of children, that the family is somewhat reluctant to take advantage of their opportunity to travel because of the politics of the reporting. Part of what we're seized with is recognizing that dilemma and doing something about it without losing the accountability that caused the problem to rise up in the first place.

It doesn't sound as if you have any new, particularly creative ways of doing this, but it does seem to be a consistent problem in both countries.

Mr. David Natzler: It's not a problem that I would claim to be an expert in, other than knowing members fairly well, but no, I think there is no creative way out of it.

Some travel by members is paid for by the House, and we do not publish it immediately. Some of it we publish only in total and not in detail and publish later, either quarterly, annually, or on request, although under the freedom of information regime, which I think is similar to yours, not everybody asks all the time.

I think it's the immediacy of something appearing on a website that causes people concern. Saying "Yes, in the course of the year, I got £900 so that my partner or dependent child could be with me for some days at Westminster" is less embarrassing than someone saying "Oh, I see that yesterday there was another £42 gone on bringing whomever down to London." That's an impression I have.

Mr. David Christopherson: I leave it with the chair. I don't know whether it's worth having our analyst follow up to see whether there's something there in the detail that we should look at.

The reason I'm riding this one is that it doesn't affect me. My experience is that it's best for those of us who aren't involved ourselves to be raising these issues.

My daughter is 24, so it doesn't apply much, and she's almost in her last year of using it, but there's got to be some method. When spouses say that the family had been reluctant because of the politics, that's the antithesis of why the travel points are there and it's the antithesis of a family-friendly parliament, so I'm hoping that we'll spend some time finding a resolution that still leaves accountability in place. No one is ever suggesting we let go of that, but we want to do something that prevents this chilling effect from stopping members from uniting with their family because of the politics of it. That should be the least of it, yet it seems to be the most of it.

Thank you so much. You've been very helpful on an important file for us.

• (1255)

Mr. David Natzler: If I may say without wishing to lead you, you might find it of value to look at other bits of the public service where there is separation, particularly in the armed forces and, in our country, the foreign office. They have family schemes whereby family members can join whoever is serving abroad or is serving in other parts of the country, again with accountability but with some privacy as well.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, David.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Not surprisingly, you got to use over seven minutes with your one question.

We'll go to Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Well, taking away what David used....no, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay.

First and foremost, I'd like to echo the comments of my colleagues around the table. Thank you so much to all three of you for taking time out of your busy schedules. For the past few months now, we've been looking at the issue of family-friendly models and we really want to collect all the information that we can, so we appreciate your time and your comments this afternoon.

I have a few questions just to piggyback a bit on Ms. Sahota. She talked to you a bit about the issue of paternity leave or maternity leave, and I was wondering what the average length of time is that parents are taking when they do take the leave?

Mr. David Natzler: Are we talking about people in the country generally, not members?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No, I'm talking about members of Parliament.

Mr. David Natzler: Well, I have not put this well.

Members don't take maternity leave in any formal way, so it's very difficult for me to say. You would have to ask each individual member, I think, how long they think they were on maternity leave, because it's a private arrangement, in essence, between them and their party whips.

Some of them are paired during absence. In other words, they're not expected to come to Westminster to vote, and someone from the other party—if you know pairing—and possibly a different person each day, is paired with them to cover their absence.

Somebody will have an idea as to how long. I saw a member who had very recently had a child. She was sitting in the atrium here in Portcullis House, and naturally I went up to see the child. I said, "What are you doing here? I thought you were away", and she said, "It's a keeping-in-touch day, a KIT", which of course we have in our ordinary maternity regime for staff.

It's quite difficult—I'm sure it's different in Canada—to keep politicians away from Westminster.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Do you have a written policy when it comes to maternity leave?

Mr. David Natzler: Do you mean in relation to members?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes.

Mr. David Natzler: No, but in relation to members, each party may have something close to a policy. I think it happens sufficiently rarely. About every nine months, we get a birth. We're very busy people. They work it out as they go along in each case. It makes a difference whether or not you're in London. It may make a difference depending on each individual's circumstances and whether it's their first child or not.

Do you have a feel for that?

Ms. Anne Foster: No, I think it's been much along the lines of what you've said.

Mr. David Natzler: I think it's probably ad hoc, but you could always ask the parties what they have done, and I'm sure they would happily respond to you, possibly more willingly than to me.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: You said that 29% of your parliamentarians are female. What is the average age of your female parliamentarians?

Mr. David Natzler: I have no absolutely no idea, but that is something we can easily find out, and we can give you the mean as well as the median.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That would be great. Thank you.

Mr. David Natzler: There are some who are quite experienced. There's also an interesting issue with regard to age of first election, if you see what I mean. One tends to assume they'll be young, but they're not young in every case. There are women of quite a wide variety of ages entering for the first time. There was concern in 2015 because several first-term female members unexpectedly stood down and did not wish to be re-elected. I think that was from a mixture of personal circumstances, but there was also concern as to whether that suggested an unfriendly culture or a failure of our family-friendly policies in some broad perspective.

I think Professor Childs will probably be better placed to answer that.

• (1300)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

Could you also perhaps elaborate a bit on the issue of Fridays? You've indicated, I believe, that you sit on 12 or 13 Fridays during the calendar year. Could you explain to us what is different on Fridays? Is it routine proceedings? How does that work? What does that look like?

Mr. David Natzler: Fridays are merely for backbenchers to introduce legislation.

There's no government business, so there is no whipped business. There can be quite a lot of members here, but they don't have to be here according to their parties. On a big day, on the first Friday of the session that just ended, we had about 450 members here because there was a bill on assisted dying, which is obviously a very major subject, but I would mislead you if I suggested that was a typical Friday. On a typical Friday there's a handful of members.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: How do you deal with your private members' bills? Where do you fit that in to your calendar?

Mr. David Natzler: We deal with it just on these 13 Fridays.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Is that all private members' bills?

Mr. David Natzler: Yes. There's no other time that they can be dealt with.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

I'm going to share my time with Mr. Lightbound.

Mr. Joël Lightbound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): I have a quick question.

You mentioned earlier that you have a voting system called "nodding through". I am wondering if you could elaborate on what that is.

Mr. David Natzler: Nodding through, although members may not recognize this description—I mean my members—is actually a form of proxy voting. A member is in the precinct but too infirm or uncomfortable for it to be reasonable to ask them to pass physically through the voting lobbies. We vote by passing through lobbies, past a desk at which the name is taken, and members are then counted, unlike standing in the chamber.

If you are ill or, for example, on crutches temporarily or indeed permanently and the whips of both major parties agree, they will confirm that the member is in the precinct. They will then discover which way he or she wishes their vote to be cast, and then one of the

whips will act in effect as a proxy in order to cast that vote. It is pretty rare. It is mainly used, as I said, for those who are either quite seriously ill or temporarily or permanently incapacitated physically. It has, I believe, been used recently for those who are in the final stages of pregnancy or who are nursing an infant.

The Chair: In England, you have to walk through either the "yes" lobby or the "no" lobby. You don't stand at your seat to vote, because not everyone has a seat.

Mr. David Natzler: That is correct.

The Chair: We're technically finished time-wise, but because we started late, does anyone have any pressing questions?

Mr. Joël Lightbound: I have a very, very short one.

The Chair: Okay. You learned that from David.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: You mentioned precincts. When you say the member has to be in the precinct to nod through, what are the precincts? Can you say what that includes?

Mr. David Natzler: I'd rather not.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Natzler: That's really a matter for the whips, and we have no formal knowledge of how they do this, but we are pretty confident that "precincts" means where the Speaker's writ runs. I think it can include an outbuilding, but the whips are supposed to go and inspect the member to make sure they're alive.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Natzler: Therefore, they're unlikely to be in an office in an outbuilding. That normally means in the palace. What can't be allowed is a member who is, let us say, 10 or 15 minutes away, communicating by email or telephone or even video conferencing. It's the physical presence of the member in the precincts that counts.

I think you have precincts as well, do you not? In other words, you have the same concept, I think, of the parliamentary precinct—

• (1305)

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. David Natzler: —and whether it would include Sparks Street or whatever is for Marc to tell you.

The Chair: Very good.

Mr. David Natzler: But it means being within the parliamentary area.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: At the beginning of the presentation, you were saying that you've been watching changes that we've been talking about as well.

What interests you about things that we've been discussing? Are you planning on making amendments to the way that your House operates in England?

Mr. David Natzler: I might ask Jo very briefly to have a word about the crèche issue, which in my view is the most pressing service issue for us. You have, as I understand it, what you call a nanny system—I know it's not called that—but you can call up someone to come to help, which we don't have.

I'm in the middle of producing a paper for our procedure committee on proxy voting. That follows demands from some members—I don't know how many—for some possibilities of voting while absent beyond those that already exist.

It would also possibly avoid the need to bring in seriously ill members in order to cast a vote by, at the worst, lying in an ambulance in New Palace Yard, with someone coming to visit them. This reputationally hasn't happened for some time, but is very damaging to the House and makes us look ridiculous, as well as being dangerous. There is a prospect of some slight change there.

I'll have Jo say a word about the crèche proposition.

Ms. Joanne Mills: What we have is a nursery, which is a full-time facility provided primarily to members of the House of Commons but also to members of the House of Lords, their staff, the House of Commons staff, and the House of Lords staff. It's open 52 weeks of the year, from Monday to Friday. However, we are now getting demands for a more ad hoc crèche service requirement, which the nursery we have in place at the moment doesn't offer.

I was interested in your Parliament and the crèche facility I believe you have, or an ad hoc child care provision you have in place and how that works and how that's benefited your members.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's interesting. We're working in parallel, the two Parliaments, and we'll probably have many changes to come.

Thank you, and thank you for your presentations.

Mr. David Natzler: On the crèche, the particular issue with the crèche for me as the accounting officer is that although I'm keen that we should be family friendly and enable members of all sorts to operate fully as members, I have to be aware the public are watching and will ask, "Why should members get something that I can't get in my working life?" I think I can answer some of those criticisms—*[Technical difficulty—Editor]*

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'm sorry. You just cut out.

Mr. David Natzler: That always happens when I start being controversial.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

[Technical difficulty—Editor]

The Chair: It's MI-6.

Can you still hear us?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: They can't answer if you can't hear them.

•(1310)

The Chair: While we're waiting, committee, on Thursday we're giving instructions on our interim report. I assume the drafting instructions are normally done—

Can you hear us?

Mr. David Natzler: Yes.

I was going on about the crèche. It's difficult to have a facility that is just there in case somebody might want to use it on a wet Monday night, because you have to have staff, you have to have a physical facility, and it could be that somebody wants to leave a child there either for a short space of time or for a longer space of time, and over widely varying age ranges.

However, I think we can be much more sensitive, including for school holidays. I don't know if this is an issue for you, but I know members here feel strongly about it. If we're sitting, quite a lot of them are joined by children during the school holidays or at half term, and they currently leave them in their offices or with their staff, which isn't ideal for either party. I'm sorry that's a long answer, but I think it describes a challenge for all of us.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate this. You have some unique parts of your system that we'll be exploring, and we appreciate your taking the time out of your busy day. We're sorry for the technical glitches and our being late because of the vote, but it all worked out, so thank you very much.

Mr. David Natzler: Thank you. We will send you what information we can on anything else, but Joanne will no doubt be in touch.

The Chair: If you want to know more about our child care, or crèche, Joanne will let you know how it works.

Mr. David Natzler: Thank you.

The Chair: Are we doing drafting instructions on Thursday, in camera?

Mr. David Christopherson: Is there anything else for Thursday? Is that it?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Are you okay with tonight?

The Chair: Yes, we have a meeting tonight.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We have another meeting tonight from six o'clock to eight o'clock.

The Chair: From six o'clock to eight o'clock, it's New Zealand and Australia.

Mr. David Christopherson: I have somebody subbing for me because I'm chairing another meeting. You threw me off, but somebody will be here for us.

The Chair: We have New Zealand and Australia, and we are where? Right here in this same room?

Okay, that's it.

The meeting is adjourned.

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