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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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● (1140)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Welcome to the 91st meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The first part of this meeting is being held in public today. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(6), we are studying the interim estimates for 2018-19: vote 1 under the House of Commons, vote 1 under Parliamentary Protective Service, and vote 1 under the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer.

Members will recall that in June 2017 the House made a number of provisional changes to Standing Order 81. As it currently stands, these changes will be in effect for the duration of the 42nd Parliament. Of note for the purposes of today's meeting is that "interim supply" was replaced by "interim estimates". They're treated in the same manner as other sets of estimates, including being referred to and studied by committees.

For this reason, we will be pleased to have with us shortly the Honourable Geoff Regan, Speaker of the House of Commons, joined by Charles Robert, Clerk of the House of Commons; Michel Patrice, deputy clerk of administration; and Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer. Accompanying the Speaker from the Parliamentary Protective Service are Chief Superintendent Jane MacLachy, director, and Robert Graham, administration and personnel officer.

I just want to quickly do one piece of business before we go on. The subcommittee had a couple of witnesses who we have to have a budget to pay for. The subcommittee approved a budget of \$2,750. We just have to reaffirm that approval.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Good.

While we're waiting for the Speaker, I'll just remind you that on Thursday we will go over the report, which you've all received, on the debates commissioner. Then on the first day back after the two constituency weeks we will be looking at the use of indigenous languages, as scheduled. Tentatively in the first hour we would have Charles Robert, Clerk of the House, and senior officials from the House of Commons, and in the second hour we would have the first of the three MPs we've invited, Romeo Saganash. We will have a translator for him into East Cree. Then in the second hour on Thursday of that week tentatively we would have Georgina Jolibois, member of Parliament, for the first 45 minutes, and in the second 45 minutes we would have Robert-Falcon Ouellette, member of Parliament. In the last half hour we would have Bill C-377 with

Brenda Shanahan and clause by clause on that, which is just changing the name of the riding, as you all know.

Are there any comments on that schedule?

John.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Is there a reason we're having all three of the MPs on different panels rather than on the same panel?

The Chair: Yes. If you don't have them separately and they want translation—two haven't asked yet—it costs extra money because you need an extra translation booth.

Mr. John Nater: I knew there must have been a reason there.

The Chair: Is there anything else? That's what we will go with.

If it's okay with the committee, after the first questions there are some questions similar to what we were asking before related to PPS and human resources that we'd like to do in camera. Right at the end we would go in camera to do those security questions.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): I probably missed this part, Mr. Chair, but what's the plan? Do we shorten the meeting?

The Chair: We'll do the House and PPS right now and then after that we'll have the Chief Electoral Officer, but just a shorter time.

Mr. Blake Richards: How much time are we going to have for each, then?

The Chair: Half of what's left.

Mr. Blake Richards: When will you cut off the current panel, then?

The Chair: Unless people want to stay later, we can cut it off between 20 and 25 after.

Let's go to the Speaker for his opening comments.

It's great to have you here, and thank you very much. We have to move quickly because of the votes.

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Thank you for welcoming us here today. I am pleased to appear before you to present the 2018-19 interim estimates and address the funding required to maintain and enhance the administration's support to members of Parliament and to the institution.

I am joined today by the executive management team from the House administration: Charles Robert, clerk of the House of Commons, Michel Patrice, deputy clerk of Administration, and Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer.

• (1145)

[English]

I will also be presenting the interim estimates for the PPS, and so I am accompanied by Chief Superintendent Jane MacLatchy, director of PPS, and Robert Graham, the service's administration and personnel officer.

As a result of an amendment to the Standing Orders, the interim estimates must now be tabled. This will provide Parliament with the information it needs to align the federal budget and the estimates.

The 2018–19 interim estimates include an overview of spending requirements for the first three months of the fiscal year, with a comparison to the 2017–18 estimates, as well as the proposed schedules to the first appropriation bill.

The House of Commons' interim estimates, as tabled in the House, total approximately \$87 million.

Further to the tabling of the main estimates in the House, I anticipate that we will meet again in the spring, at which time I will provide an overview of the year-over-year changes, as has been the practice in previous years.

Today, I'll cover the main themes of the House's requests for funding and priorities. The operating budget for the House covers members' and House officers' budgets and expenditures, committees, House participation in parliamentary diplomacy, and funding for the House administration.

[Translation]

The House administration's first priority is to support members in their work as parliamentarians, focusing on service-delivery excellence and ongoing modernization.

Key initiatives include the digital strategy on modernizing the delivery of parliamentary information and the implementation of the new constituency connectivity service for constituency offices, new householder formats in support of members' communications with their constituents, and optimized food services in the Parliamentary Precinct.

[English]

The renewal of our physical spaces and services provided within them is another key priority for the House administration. Public Services and Procurement Canada, the House of Commons, the team of builders and architects and senior officials are overseeing a number of large-scale projects, most notably the reopening of the restored West Block and the closure of Centre Block.

Upon the completion of the restoration of West Block, there will be massive planning required to move critical activities and accommodations from Centre Block to West Block while ensuring that Parliament continues to function seamlessly.

The operation, support, maintenance, and life-cycle management of equipment and connectivity elements in buildings are closely

linked to the long-term vision and plan. Those key elements are essential to the implementation of a mobile work environment for members and the administration. The expected outcome is that heritage buildings are protected but refurbished with modernized technological infrastructure, a bit like this one has been.

[Translation]

The House of Commons and its security partners continue to collaborate on an enhanced emergency management and security approach. The institution's collective vision is the result of ongoing security awareness and education efforts.

The various groups responsible for security on the Hill and in satellite offices work together to prevent, respond to and manage disruptive events. They also build communication and awareness with all stakeholders around new physical and IT security approaches.

In keeping with evolving cybersecurity threats and information technology developments, it is imperative that the House be equipped with a robust cybersecurity infrastructure and a renewed IT security policy.

These are the current House administration priorities in support of members and the institution.

• (1150)

[English]

I will now turn to the interim estimates for the PPS. The PPS is requesting access to \$20.7 million in these interim estimates, which will cover regular operations and the continuation of the external video surveillance improvement project over the first three months of the fiscal year 2018-19.

Regular operations include employee salaries and operational funding required to maintain our current service levels. The external video surveillance improvement project will introduce technical upgrades to existing infrastructure and ensure better coverage of the parliamentary precinct. Funding for this project was previously set aside in the fiscal framework by the RCMP and was recently allocated to the PPS.

Following the tabling of the 2018–19 main estimates, the PPS will return and explain the changes from the 2017–18 main estimates.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my presentation. My team and I would be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

What I plan to do is one round of seven minutes for each party. For the last round, Mr. Christopherson's, we'll go in camera. You can split up your rounds between your members any way you want to.

We'll start with Mr. Graham.

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

First of all, for PPS, can I get a breakdown of which aspects the \$20.7 million goes to, of what goes where?

Mr. Robert Graham (Administration and Personnel Officer, Parliamentary Protective Service): Of the \$20.7 million, \$17.3 million is for operations and \$3.4 million is allocated to the camera project that the Speaker mentioned.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Of that operational money, how much goes to front line officers and how much to management? Can you divide it between front-line officers, management, and supplies?

Mr. Robert Graham: I don't have the specific breakdown, but I do know that 80% of our FT count is operations, front line staff. I can return with the specifics, but it's approximately 80% of that \$17.3 million.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I would appreciate that. Thank you.

I have a quick question for you. Is there any attempt being made to look at ways of identifying RCMP officers seconded to the PPS as PPS officers?

Chief Superintendent Jane MacLatchy (Director, Parliamentary Protective Service): I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Right now, RCMP on the Hill are part of PPS, but they're also part of the RCMP, so they show up in RCMP uniform. I'm wondering if there's any attempt—we've discussed this before—of having a PPS patch or something to identify that an RCMP officer on the Hill is PPS versus somebody from off the Hill who is not.

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: There has been no discussion on that up to this point. For the RCMP members who are assigned to our force division, they're assigned in support of PPS. They're a support service to PPS, wearing the RCMP uniform as per the policies of the RCMP. There has been no discussion in terms of changing that uniform in any fashion. To my knowledge, it's not been raised with the RCMP.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Are we now fully staffed in terms of front-line officers at PPS?

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: We're pretty close.

Mr. Robert Graham: We currently have 46 operational vacancies, which is a reduction from last year. We also have a training course and plans to fill those in the coming months.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: How many RCMP officers are assigned to the Hill?

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: We were 110-ish, but I can get you the exact number.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is that number constant or is it trending up or down?

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: No, it's constant right now. However, as I mentioned to this committee during my last appearance here, we are looking at possibilities to reduce that footprint. There has been some interest already for this potential. It's still a conceptual piece. However, I would suggest that in the short term what you will see

while we're waiting for the LTVP and the move from Centre Block is no change.

In the longer term, we are considering a reduction, potentially, of RCMP who are doing protective functions such as the static posts externally and replacing them with front-line PPS personnel. That is the long-term goal at this point: to start phase one of that reduction by exchanging RCMP and moving...so the marked RCMP vehicles will no longer be on post and you'll see a PPS presence instead.

• (1155)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay. I appreciate that.

I have one final question for PPS before I move to on further topics. With respect to privilege in the chamber, if the Sergeant-at-Arms issues an order to lock the doors and PPS operations says “don't lock the doors”, which order will be followed?

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: That's an interesting question. It depends on the situation.

If PPS determines that there is a serious threat to security of having those.... I'm not sure I understand the question entirely.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm just trying to figure out lines of authority because inside the chamber the Sergeant-at-Arms is king, under the direction of the Speaker.

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: That's correct.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If the Sergeant-at-Arms indicates to the officers in the galleries to lock the doors, and operations says to do a somewhat different activity, will the Sergeant-at-Arms take precedence inside the chamber?

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: That's a good question. It's not been discussed at my level, I but I can certainly have the discussion with my operations officer. I don't see that there would be a conflict. If there is something going on, generally our response would be to lock those doors. Unless there is some reason that we need to evacuate and we need to evacuate right now, I would not expect to ever see a countermanding of the Sergeant-at-Arms' direction.

That being said, the Sergeant-at-Arms might not have the information of what's happening outside the chamber, in which case—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Lock the doors.

C/Supt Jane MacLatchy: All that being said, it's an interesting hypothetical, but unless there is a serious threat to life and limb, I see no reason why we would countermand the need to lock those doors.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Fair enough. Thank you.

Moving on to the West Block, I'm particularly interested in this. It's a great point of pride in my riding that all the windows in the West Block, except in the roof, were made in my riding, in my hometown of Sainte-Agathe. I just want to put that on the record.

Are we on track to move into West Block this year?

Hon. Geoff Regan: Let me hand it over to the deputy clerk.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The project is underway. We're putting up all of our resources and Public Works and Procurement Canada is working collaboratively to put in all the required resources with the hope that we're going to be transitioning into the West Block in the fall of 2018 as planned.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Does it make sense to move in the fall of 2018 and then having one final short sitting before the election, or would it make more sense to do it in 2019 when there are quite a few more months to do it, and we wouldn't have to move a second time afterwards?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Let's just say that if we are able to achieve it by the fall of 2018, it would be good for Parliament and the parliamentary precinct buildings, because we have the Centre Block to also get into working shape and to modernize.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think I mentioned, when I last appeared here, the mild concern I have about the condition of Centre Block, the fact that we have ancient—and maybe ancient is the wrong word—but certainly old water pipes, wiring, etc., and I am anxious to get that work under way for the preservation of that important building and not to have our work interrupted or moved somewhere else before West Block is ready, because of a leak, for example, as I mentioned last time.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Public Works once said it could be kept until 2017, so thank you for that.

Hon. Geoff Regan: In fact at some point, the Board of Internal Economy will have to make the decision, probably over the next couple of months.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I appreciate that. Thank you.

I'm out of time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Graham.

Mr. Speaker, can you speak as quickly as Mr. Graham when you answer Blake's question so he can get as many questions in as possible?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: How did you know I had so many questions, Mr. Chair? It sounds as though you read my mind.

My questions might be best directed to Mr. Robert, but I'll let you decide that for yourself.

There has been some talk that there has been a senior officer in the Privy Council Office, which is obviously the department that supports the Prime Minister and the government House leader, who has been seconded to the House administration for the purposes of working on a rewrite of the Standing Orders.

I wonder if you can confirm for me that there is a PCO employee working there with that assignment currently.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Yes, it's true. The individual has been brought over. I don't know what rank he holds within the Privy Council Office, but he is a Privy Council Office employee.

He was brought over initially as part of an exchange between Procedural Services and PCO. That was modified to be just PCO, at their request, and he was brought over, as you point out, to work on a possible revision of the Standing Orders.

● (1200)

Mr. Blake Richards: I wonder if you could maybe fill us in a bit on what that Standing Orders rewrite is about. Normally those kinds of things, obviously, would go through this committee, and I think especially in light of the debacle we saw last year with the government's attempts to rewrite the Standing Orders without the consent of all the opposition parties, it's something that I am quite surprised and obviously disappointed to hear. I'm sure it will be shared among many of my colleagues in the opposition that there seems to be this new backdoor effort under way to now change those Standing Orders. I wonder if you could fill us in a bit on what that Standing Orders rewrite is about.

Mr. Charles Robert: It's not so much to change the Standing Orders, and the exercise was undertaken at my initiative. I had discussed this with various staff of the different parties represented in the House of Commons. The purpose is, for me anyway, personally, to understand the Standing Orders because I find them to be written in a rather complex fashion.

The commitment that I had made is that there would be no change to the Standing Orders; that the purpose would be simply to make them more user-friendly, and to institute tools that would allow the members using the Standing Orders to appreciate the interrelationships among some of the Standing Orders to others. For example, there are practices that indicate that the leader of the government or certain individuals may have unlimited time in speaking, but that's not universally true. The idea would be to explain, when you're looking at the standing order, where, immediately after you see that yes, you have unlimited time, underneath it you would actually have listed when you don't have unlimited time. When a member's looking at the Standing Orders, they can appreciate, is this circumstance applicable? Do I have unlimited time, or am I limited in time to five, 10, 15, whatever number of minutes there might be in the opportunity to speak? It's meant as an aid, and again, understanding completely that no changes are being recommended through this exercise.

Mr. Blake Richards: You're confirming it's your intention, at least, that this is simply to rewrite and clarify language, not make any changes to the Standing Orders.

Mr. Charles Robert: Absolutely.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Also, I think there's been some discussion about the establishment of a new deputy clerk's office. I'm wondering if that office's budget is reflected in the estimates before us.

Mr. Charles Robert: It is.

Mr. Blake Richards: It is. Okay.

I wonder if you could tell me—I haven't seen any major problems in the way things are operating around here, but you're obviously more inside on seeing that than I am. I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the motivation for that change, adding a new deputy clerk.

Mr. Charles Robert: As I explained to the Speaker and also to the Board of Internal Economy when the proposal was accepted, the idea is to have somebody capable of supervising all the intricate operations that are part of corporate services, that are designed to assist you as members. In the same way that we have a deputy clerk over procedure, managing the operations there for the purposes of providing the documents and staffing of committees and all the other parliamentary operations, it seemed to me that it was equally logical to have a position created of deputy clerk of administration who would be responsible for providing the same kind of oversight.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. In my recollection, previous deputy clerks have always been appointed by the Governor in Council. Who made the—

Mr. Charles Robert: That's been true since about the 1990s, and it's not statutory, which is one reason that the deputy clerk was stripped of the GIC component and made a direct appointee.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, so who made this appointment decision, this particular decision?

Mr. Charles Robert: Which one?

Mr. Blake Richards: For the new deputy clerk.

Mr. Charles Robert: I did.

Mr. Blake Richards: You did. Okay.

Was there some kind of competition?

Mr. Charles Robert: No.

Mr. Blake Richards: No, so how was that decision made?

Mr. Charles Robert: The decision was mine because I knew that, coming in as clerk, it would be important to have an operation that was as good as it possibly could be to assist the members in fulfilling their parliamentary duties. As you will recognize, certainly before the board, the topics that are generally discussed deal with the supports that are given to the members by way of technology, travel points, offices, contracts for employees—all of that. In order to make sure that I would be as well-served as I thought I needed to be, I decided that I would appoint somebody as the deputy clerk of administration.

• (1205)

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. There's also been a rumour that the House administration is going to be assigning a procedural clerk to work in the government House leader's office.

Mr. Charles Robert: That was part of the original proposal that was worked out with Privy Council, but Privy Council declined to take the offer.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, and was that offer made to all the various parties' House leaders' offices, or just the government House leader's office?

Mr. Charles Robert: I would certainly be open to considering the possibility of assigning such proceduralists if the House leaders across the board decided it would serve their purposes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go in camera. Yes...?

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): On a point of order, Chair, I have two things quickly.

One, if we're going in camera, I want to mention that the subject matter is the HR issues that we've talked about before. With consultations with colleagues, we've agreed that it's probably best to do that in camera.

However, before I do all of my time, I'd like to ask one question in public first.

The Chair: Sure, go ahead.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

I just want to follow up with my friend's questions on the Standing Order thing. I want to clarify, because it was kind of jarring.

Mr. Charles Robert: Okay.

Mr. David Christopherson: You start talking Standing Orders, and I mean the House owns the orders, not the Clerk's department.

I'm curious as to the end result of this process that we will see.

Mr. Charles Robert: Again, as I explained to the executive assistants of all the House leaders, the purpose was initially to help me understand the Standing Orders, because I don't find that they're particularly user-friendly.

Mr. David Christopherson: I heard that.

Mr. Charles Robert: The idea would be to provide them in simpler language, rearrange them so the order is a bit more logical, under the absolute guarantee that no changes would be made and no product would be finalized without the approval of the procedure and House affairs committee.

I quite agree with you. I don't own these Standing Orders, these are yours.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes.

Mr. Charles Robert: We're going to be going into a new parliament, presumably in two or three years, or whenever the next election. There is an opportunity for the members to discuss the Standing Orders. If in the meantime, through negotiations and shared information, the House leaders recognize there might be some value in rewriting the Standing Orders, again I underline, not for the purposes of changing them but for the purposes of them making more user-friendly, etc., it seemed to me that this would be a worthwhile project.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Let me be clear though. There would not be one period changed without a report coming to PROC, without everything going through PROC, correct?

Mr. Charles Robert: That's correct.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay. I thought so, but I wanted to nail that down. We don't want any surprises, at least as few as possible.

With that, Chair, my other questions would be in camera.

The Chair: I'll let Mr. Reid do a short intervention here.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I just want to ask the question. There are annotated Standing Orders. They haven't been republished in many years.

Mr. Charles Robert: That's correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would that not be a good starting place? You don't need anyone's approval to do that, and that would give a very clear indication of the kinds of confusion that exist. Further annotations could—

Mr. Charles Robert: I guess the issue is that the annotated commentary is attached to the structure of the Standing Orders as they currently exist. The idea perhaps would be to work—for your approval in the end—a revised Standing Orders version, and then use that as the vehicle to consider either a new annotated Standing Orders edition, the third, or to begin the work on a possible fourth edition of the manual.

Hon. Geoff Regan: We should keep in mind, of course, that the annotated Standing Orders were there before the manual was first begun and it kind of replaced them. However, there's no question that I thought it was a very useful tool.

Mr. Scott Reid: I agree. It's a really useful tool.

The Chair: We will suspend for a minute to go in camera.

If anyone who's not allowed to be here could leave, that would be great.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

• (1205) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1225)

[Public proceedings resume]

[Translation]

The Chair: Good afternoon. Welcome to the 91st meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This afternoon, we are continuing our study on the Interim Estimates 2018-19.

Our witnesses from Elections Canada are Stéphane Perrault, Acting Chief Electoral Officer, Michel Roussel, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer with Electoral Events and Innovation, and Hughes St-Pierre, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer with Internal Services.

Thank you for being here.

I will give the floor to Mr. Perrault for his presentation.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Acting Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I welcome this opportunity to appear before the committee today to present Election Canada's 2018-19 interim estimates as well as to update members on the status of our preparations for the 2019 general election.

Today, the committee is voting on Election Canada's interim supply, which totals \$7.7 million. This represents the salaries of some 350 indeterminate positions for the first quarter of the fiscal year beginning April 1, 2018. It does not include any of the agency's other expenditures, which are funded from a statutory appropriation.

In addition to supporting Parliament in its review of legislative changes, you will recall from my appearance on the Main Estimates last spring that Elections Canada has been pursuing two strategic priorities since the last general election.

Our first priority is to modernize our electoral services through a range of initiatives such as the introduction of electronic poll books to improve the process at the polls, and other projects regarding services to voters and political entities. I will come back to that in a moment.

The second strategic priority relates to the replacement and improvement of key infrastructure assets that are required for the delivery of elections, such as our data centres, IT networks, telecommunications services and the pay system for poll workers.

To be ready for the next general election, we need to have completed our transformation projects by September 2018 in order to begin integrated testing of all IT-enabled projects, which would enable us to reach a state of complete preparation in the spring of 2019. This timeline means that final decisions about the scope of our transformation projects have already been made, or will be, in the next few months. In this regard, I would like to briefly highlight the progress made on key improvement initiatives.

First, I am pleased to report that a company was selected last fall through a rigorous procurement process to provide electronic poll books at the next election. This will allow us to automate a number of record-keeping transactions at the polls. Ballots will continue to be marked and counted by hand.

For the next general election, electronic poll books will be deployed in some 225 electoral districts for advance polls only, which can be done under the current legislation. Deployment of this technology in advance polls will address the most critical challenges experienced in the last general election in terms of wait times in urban and semi-urban districts. The use of electronic poll books at ordinary polls will be considered only after the next general election, if changes are made to the legislation. In rural areas, where the main challenge for voters is the travel distance to the polls, returning officers will be provided with new IT tools to inform the creation of polling divisions and improve the proximity of polling places to electors.

We are also working on the first release of an online portal for political entities. Our objective through this service is that parties, candidates and official agents will be able to complete and file various documents online, including nomination papers, if so enabled by legislation change. We have engaged the Advisory Committee of Political Parties throughout the development of this project and, I would add, of all projects involving services to constituents or political entities.

Other key projects related to voting services include the expansion of voting on campus opportunities from 40 post-secondary institutions to some 110, close to triple the number. This matter had interested committee members last spring. This summer, returning officers will be reaching out to university and college administrations to make the necessary arrangements. In spring 2018, returning officers will also begin working with remote Indigenous communities to improve registration and voting services.

• (1230)

[English]

We have also made significant progress in renewing infrastructure systems and services.

In December, the agency selected a new data-hosting service provider to support many of the systems used to deliver electoral services, as the current contract expires later this calendar year. A schedule is being finalized to ensure a seamless transition to the new Canadian hosting site.

As well, by the end of summer 2018, the agency will have finalized the development of a new system and processes for its various contact centres, in order to provide Canadians, election workers, and political entities with more timely and relevant information.

This spring, we will also complete the procurement of field telecommunications services for local offices and will have updated a key component of the system to pay poll workers.

Finally, the agency is making progress in renewing the system used by political entities to file financial returns electronically, in order to provide additional capabilities and make it more convenient to users.

As the agency enters the final phase of its preparations for the next general election, I see two main challenges ahead.

The first relates to cybersecurity and the broader issue of disinformation. The Communications Security Establishment estimates that multiple groups will very likely deploy cyber-capabilities in an attempt to influence the democratic process during the 2019 federal election. In response, Elections Canada is taking a number of steps to further strengthen its security posture. For example, the security design of our IT network has been improved, and our new data-hosting services will offer a range of additional protections. The agency is also commissioning an independent audit of its security controls, which should be completed this spring.

Upgrading the agency's technological infrastructure to meet the requirements of the new security environment, however, requires considerable investments. The incremental costs required to improve and maintain this infrastructure are funded through our statutory appropriation. These costs will be reflected in the agency's expenditures, beginning this fiscal year.

With respect to the broader issue of disinformation, we are working with the Commissioner of Canada Elections, and our integrity program is keeping abreast of developments. Our main role in this area is ensuring that Canadians have the correct information on where, when, and how to register and vote.

The second challenge for the agency relates to the implementation of legislative changes as we get closer to the general election. At this time, two bills introducing changes to the Canada Elections Act remain before Parliament, and the introduction of further reform, as indicated by the government, is expected. We remain hopeful that it will include several of the important changes this committee has recommended.

Having said that, the window of opportunity to implement major changes in time for the next general election is rapidly closing. We will continue to support parliamentarians as they examine new electoral legislation, and to inform them of the impacts of the changes and the timelines for the implementation. As always, we will keep in mind the imperative of ensuring that processes, systems, and training necessary for the delivery of the election are well tested and ready to be deployed without risk to the election.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, I am pleased to report that Elections Canada is progressing as planned on its improvements and is now entering the final phase of preparations for the next general election.

Thank you.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you very much. You've done a lot of great work and made great changes. It's exciting.

I'm going to do the same as was done with the last witnesses. We'll have seven minutes for each party. Split it up as you will. At the end of the meeting, if anyone wants five minutes to go in camera to talk about security, we can. We might want to discuss some of the things you just raised in camera, if there are questions.

We'll start with the Liberals, for seven minutes.

Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had some security questions, but obviously I'll wait now in light of that.

On electronic poll books, I understand what you're saying when it comes to the urban mechanism, but you then talked about the rural efficiencies you're hoping to achieve. Could you explain that again to me? I may interrupt you—and I apologize in advance—but what rural efficiencies are you talking about, again?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: In rural areas we see fewer lineups at the polls. Of a greater concern is the travel distance to the polling places. In many cases, the drawing of the polling divisions, at the last election was not adequate, so we've sought ways to improve that.

One of the ways we're improving that is by starting to identify potential polling places and then drafting the boundaries around them, rather than drafting polling divisions and then trying to find a polling place in there. We're reversing the process.

Mr. Scott Simms: Right. What you're doing then, is it based on distance? Would you say to someone, "You live here, so you should go there"?

The reason I ask is that in my opinion, it's better to have divisions for certain towns where they find their hub of activity. This is going to sound really crass, but basically, put it next to Walmart and it would work a lot better, quite frankly. It's as simple as that, sorry. Or a Giant Tiger, whatever you want to use. I'd find that more efficient. Don't you feel the same way?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's a valid point. There are two things. One is distance, and it's not the only factor. What we're introducing here in terms of distance is technology that enables a calculation of the travel distance, not as the crow flies, but driving distance. I know Mr. Reid had issues in his riding at the last election. This is the kind of technology that will help resolve that as well as the process of reversion that we're starting with polling places. However, we have a new policy that will be published soon and we've engaged the ACPP on that.

Proximity is one factor, but there are others. Familiarity is one. Convenience is another one. There are several other factors. In your example it may be that the location chosen is not the closest geographically to every median driving distance but it is in fact most convenient because of where people go.

Mr. Scott Simms: Is that driven by the returning officer? Would they be the arbiter as to where it should be?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Correct. They will start this spring well in advance of the election. That's a new change that we're introducing. They will start identifying potential polling places based on all kinds of criteria, including accessibility. From that they will start working on the polling divisions. It's going to be an ongoing piece of work starting this spring.

• (1240)

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes, I think that's a great idea because I think the returning officer in each of the ridings certainly should have the final say as to where these polls and divisions should be. No offence, but—

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely.

Mr. Scott Simms: —looking at a map doesn't give you an indication of the dynamic of how people vote and where they vote, and so on and so forth.

The rest I'm going to hand to Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I was going to go down the same line. In 2015 my largest poll was about the size of the greater Toronto area. I'm just curious. What is the distance that you are going to be looking for? What's the limit that you will ask an elector to go?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'll ask Michel to speak to that point because he's responsible for that area.

Mr. Michel Roussel (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Events and Innovation, Elections Canada): In terms of the guidelines that will be provided to returning officers when they design the service areas, we expect that 95% of the addresses will be located in urban settings within 10 kilometres of their advance voting locations, and in rural areas within 30 kilometres of their advance voting locations. For the election day polling locations, we would expect the target of 95% of ordinary election day polling locations would be within five kilometres of electors' addresses in urban settings and 15 kilometres in rural areas. This is a guideline.

Returning officers, as we said earlier, have the final say. The principle that we ask returning officers to apply is that of reasonable distance for electors to go vote in advance or on election day.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: One of the concerns we've had in the past, when we've discussed addresses, is accessibility requirements often cut out huge chunks of rural areas. Are we going to see more exemptions for that kind of thing to allow it?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think it's important to keep in mind that we are legally bound to ensure, wherever possible, accessible polling locations. However, in many cases there are options and there are other considerations than accessibility for the choice of polling locations. There is not a clear-cut answer to your question, unfortunately.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I do have more questions but I think I'll save them for the in camera portion.

The Chair: Marc Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): With regard to the polling locations, I just wanted to ask about resources for cities and towns that have been amalgamated. For example, Greater Sudbury has been amalgamated since 2001, but still in 2015 there are five Main Streets and the addresses are still mixed up, the polling is still mixed up. Still to this day it's very frustrating to try to get to, I would say, the right individuals. I've talked to the DRO and mentioned that and it's still not resolved. There are other amalgamated cities across Canada, I'm assuming, and this has been happening since 2001. Something needs to be happening on that. That's greatly appreciated.

Mr. Michel Roussel: Unfortunately, this is an issue we are aware of, particularly in northern Ontario. One of the advantages of taking an early look at the electoral maps is that returning officers will raise those issues with us and we should be able to find remedial solutions to those cases.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I noticed in your presentation you talked a little bit about cybersecurity. I would like to leave a little bit of time, as I know my colleague, Mr. Reid, does have a question about that.

On a related matter, when we talk about cybersecurity one of the things we're talking about is the potential for foreign influence in our elections through those kinds of channels. The other area that I think leaves a lot of room for foreign interference in our elections is one that isn't talked about a lot currently but needs to be. I know that at the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Mr. Côté, the Commissioner of Canada Elections, indicated his office had received a significant number of complaints about third parties for both the 2011 and 2015 elections. This has become such an issue that it may see some third parties so significantly involved in some ridings that it may result in unfair electoral outcomes. Further to that, he also stated that he thinks it's time for Parliament to re-examine the third party regime to ensure a level playing field is maintained.

Do you agree with this? What are your thoughts on this?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely.

As you recall, there are two main problems for the current regime. One is the scope of regulated activities. Right now, the regime in the Canada Elections Act limits the expenses of third parties in terms of election advertising expenses only. That does not capture a range of activities such as "get out the vote", canvassing, or other activities that may be campaigning in nature. The first question is to what extent should we look at expanding the scope of the regime.

The second question is in terms of revenue. Right now, only revenues obtained for the purpose of election advertising are regulated by these third parties. The act does not regulate the use of general revenue and through general revenue a lot of third parties have all kinds of funding coming to them for various reasons. To the extent that they can use their general revenue to fund their campaign activities, even currently regulated activities, then through that we can see some foreign money coming in. Both aspects need to be looked into. I know that this is something the committees conserved when they reviewed the recommendations report. We provided some suggestions to the committee, which it has endorsed. I, of course, support those recommendations.

• (1245)

Mr. Blake Richards: The other issue, and certainly the commissioner had indicated previously that he was confirming this as well, is one of the challenges is that contributions that are received more than six months before an election campaign can't be looked at in that regard. Obviously, with a fixed election date that becomes something that's very easy for a third party to manage and say, look, make sure your contributions are in six and a half months before the election. That then allows, obviously, unlimited use of foreign funds for everything besides advertising.

What are your thoughts on that? Do you think that might actually have the ability to impact elections?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely.

I do agree that we need to remove that six-month limitation in the Canada Elections Act for the regulation of revenues to third parties. We've supported that and I personally support that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Thank you to our witnesses as well.

I have a question regarding cybersecurity, but before I do that, I just want to follow up on the comments from Mr. Graham and Mr. Simms regarding the issue of people having unreasonable driving distances, particularly to advance polls. I did indeed have a problem in the last election with one particular part of my constituency where people who live in a place called Port Elmsley had to drive 45 minutes in each direction, passing a number of other advance polling stations.

First of all, when we raised the issue, Elections Canada was very businesslike about correcting that situation. Second, I think the solution you're proposing is exactly the right one, so thank you for

that. Starting by working out driving distances is clearly the logical way of handling it.

With regard to the issue of the problem of finding accessible locations, which ultimately is the issue, my understanding is that Elections Canada is under a court order, effectively, to only allow certain locations. This has the unintended consequence of eliminating a lot of public buildings that are accessible—and I think it's in five different ways—meaning that they become frequently inaccessible to everybody, disabled and fully able together.

The only way to solve that over a court order is legislation. If we think it's enough of a problem, then we'd have to suggest a legislative proposal. We could all understand how that could be cast as being against the rights of disabled people, so you'd have to be very thoughtful about how to do it. There would have to be multipartisan support for anything of that sort. I think that's a good understanding of the situation there.

Finally, there's a question I want to raise about cybersecurity. The issue that concerns me—should concern you is a better way of putting it—is this: during an election, the most effective way of causing disruption would be to cause people to inadvertently give up their right to vote by sending them to the wrong location, by announcing that they should go to this location or that location rather than the real location, that polling times had been changed, or something else like that.

It's a modern version of the old theme where you'd announce that so-and-so had withdrawn his or her candidacy, but it wasn't true. I think it would be given out by people purporting to be Elections Canada. It would be given out retail as opposed to wholesale, making it hard to trace these things. That would be the way that would be logical if you were a foreign power trying to disrupt an election and make it uncertain who had won. I think that's what you should be protecting against. How you do that I have no idea, but that's where the danger lies, frankly.

• (1250)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: You raised a number of interesting and important points.

On the first one, I do want to remind the committee that there are recommendations we made regarding the expansion of transfer certificates for people with disabilities. If we have that, in that way we'll introduce some flexibility into the system to provide those with disabilities access to other polling locations.

On the point of sending people to the wrong place or at the wrong time, of course, that is at the heart of our mandate. Our concern there is making sure that Canadians know where to get the right information. One thing I have asked my team to work on for the next election is having a repository available online, on our website, of all of our public communications, our advertisements, and our social media. If somebody sees something that they're not quite sure comes from Elections Canada, they would be able to verify against our website whether, in fact, it is from Elections Canada or not. There would be a public record to check against. That's one administrative measure.

There are provisions that were introduced in 2014 in the act that prohibit and create an offence for impersonation. Of course, unfortunately, that's after the fact, and that's the role of the commissioner to enforce. Administratively, we do have a key role to play in making sure people have access to the right information, and if they're not sure, they can verify there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I agree some detailed questions that are best asked and answered in camera, but there are some general questions, I think, that can be asked. For instance, I know a little bit about security from past life, and I would imagine that you're working with the national security agencies, which is where our state-of-the-art best efforts would be. We also know that we do very little completely independently of our allies, particularly the U.S. It's reported today -I just want to know if this applies- that the President of the United States has still not given an absolute direction to the security forces of the U.S. to take whatever action necessary. That straight up order has not yet been given, as I'm reading in the news today.

I'm wondering, if they haven't issued that order and their national security apparatus isn't seized of the issue formally on direction from the commander in chief, how much is there for our security agencies to tap into if they're not doing anything. In other words, I doubt we would do it alone. We would want to do it in concert. We're allies. We have common international opponents. Therefore I would think we would do things in concert if they don't have that order and aren't moving forward, where does that leave us? Is that a huge problem for us, that the U.S. has not engaged in their own cyber problems in the way the world would kind of expect on their own cyber problems, and how does that relate to us, given the overlap of our security apparatus with theirs?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are a couple of elements to answer. It's not just going to be a full answer. We have been working very closely with the communications Security Establishment. First, they provide, standards that we need to meet. Second they assist us in the procurement of technology, and they do supply-chain integrity for us. We know we're buying from trusted partners. Third, they provide advice. We've included aspects in our procurement, whether it's the poll books we're going to use at the polls or the hosting services, they've advised us on including certain requirements in the RFP, which are some of the costs that I referred to. We're getting the advice from the real experts, Communications Security Establishment, and we're also having a third party come in and do an independent audit, so we're being very careful about that.

I've asked to start engaging with our partners in Canada: CSIS, the RCMP, PCO, I expect meetings to occur very shortly where we will begin a conversation leading up to the next election. We do that at every election. This election is a bit different than others perhaps because of the experience around the world. But we go through scenarios and explore roles and responsibilities and the interventions that may be required. We should be starting this in the coming months.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay. I'll follow up, but I think the details of that should be best in camera.

I have one last question, Chair, before we go in camera.

In your report, you mentioned two bills outstanding in Parliament. You can't answer this but I'm going to take the opportunity, since we have a gaggle of parliamentary secretaries today, which Mr. Bittle was good enough to give me a heads-up on. Since we are blessed with such power concentrated in this one little committee today, perhaps one of them can give us the assurance that, notwithstanding the politics of the House and everything, the government's intent is that this legislation will be passed in a timely enough fashion for Elections Canada to act on.

• (1255)

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): Thank you for that Mr. Christopherson. I have to apologize. I was deep in thought on a previous point you had made and missed your final point. Were you talking about—

Mr. David Christopherson: You were sleeping again through my comments again.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: I was enjoying thinking about your prior comments. Which piece specifically are you talking about?

Mr. David Christopherson: The report this morning says there are two bills. I'm trying to think of the numbers. I think one of them —

An hon. member: It's Bill C-33.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Bill C-33, and there's another one. Anyway, those two bills have been through us, but they're waiting. They need them passed, and I'm just asking if we can get some assurance from the government that they're going to be made law so that Elections Canada can act, because time is running out.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: You can predict the answer. Of course, we want to move them as quickly as we can to get them both in place for the next election, but many variables are beyond our control. This committee is one of them.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think they're already past this committee. They haven't even been to this committee. Bill C-33 has got a lot of the big changes. Is this going to be a problem, Chair? I'll leave it open ended, but I've got to tell you there's going to be hell to pay if we went through all that work and Elections Canada is raring to go and that legislation doesn't get through Parliament. You can blame the opposition all you want; you're the majority government; you control the House; you control everything. I'm a little disappointed that one of you isn't confident enough in your own government's ability to pass legislation so you'd give us that assurance today.

The Chair: Mr. Miller.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.): I can guarantee that I'll wield the immense power that I hold within government to move this forward.

Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, well it's funny until it doesn't get done and then it's not so funny.

The Chair: Before we go in camera, and so we don't have to come back in public, can we do the votes that we have to do on the estimates?

We'll do the votes 1 for the House, for Elections Canada, and PPS.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1—Program Expenditures.....\$86,751,081

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER

Vote 1—Program Expenditures.....\$7,692,230

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

PARLIAMENTARY PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Vote 1—Program Expenditures.....\$20,700,000

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes of the interim estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

We'll go in camera quickly. Don't leave your seats.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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