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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 12 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I'd like to start the meeting by providing some information following the motion that was adopted by the House on Wednesday, September 23. The committee is now sitting in a hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either virtually by video conference or appear in person. All members, regardless of their method of participation, will be counted for the purposes of quorum.

Witnesses must always appear virtually. Today, we do have the House administration in who are physically present. Thank you.

The committee's power is limited to sittings by the priority use of House of Commons resources, as determined by the whips. Any questions must be decided by recorded vote. Just to let you all know, today we will be voting on the main estimates and the supplementary estimates.

The committee can deliberate in camera, provided it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent in such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's proceedings are going to be made available via the House of Commons website.

As a reminder to everyone—although I think everyone here is probably an expert at this now—the entirety of the committee will not be shown on the website, only the member who is currently speaking. I think it's good to have that in mind.

You can use any of the choices of “floor”, “English” or “French” on your screen, for those who are participating virtually.

Hopefully will it continue to work, through some innovation, that we no longer have to switch those choices on the screen when we're switching the languages we're speaking. That is fantastic because it definitely held things up in the past.

Remember to speak slowly and clearly and also to wear your headset. It has been very difficult on the interpreters, so let's be mindful of that. It's mandatory to wear the headset, so please let me know if there's some kind of problem and you can't receive a headset. I just heard there was an issue. We'll try to help as best as possi-

ble to facilitate, if any issues arise where you can't get access to a headset with a boom mike.

Wait until you're called upon by me to begin speaking. Unmute your own mike and then you're going to have to mute your own mike; it's not done automatically. Please remember to do that. If there are any points of order, just unmute your mike and state that you have a point of order.

If anyone wants to speak to that point of order, then please use the “raise hand” function at the bottom of your screen.

Today is meeting number 12, Tuesday, November 24, and we're going to be meeting from 11:00 to 1:30. We're going to have two panels.

On the first panel we have appearing before us, we have the Speaker of the House, the Honourable Anthony Rota, and of course the Clerk of the House, Mr. Robert. Thank you for being with us again.

We also have Monsieur Patrice and Mr. Paquette, as well as Parliamentary Protective Service within this panel.

Welcome to the director of Parliamentary Protective Service.

• (1105)

There are quite a few participants in this meeting. Just to let you know, there are other House of Commons administrative staff here in case there are some questions that the Speaker or Monsieur Robert cannot answer—although I find it hard to believe that there would be many questions where you or Mr. Leahy or Mr. Patrice would not be able to answer. There are others to supplement and help out, so we get the most fulsome answers possible.

In case anybody doesn't know, Mr. Paquette is the chief financial officer, because we're dealing with the estimates.

We will start with the Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, may we have your opening remarks.

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Good morning.

It's a pleasure to be here with you today and to see all of you again, whether in person or virtually.

[Translation]

The past nine months have been, to say the least, challenging. We members of Parliament, our staff, and the employees of the administration who support us have all had to deal with professional and personal trials even as we worked to continue the business of Parliament in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[English]

For the past several years, the administration has invested in technology infrastructure, recognizing the importance of providing members with the ability to connect to their constituents and their staff, and giving administration employees the means to stay in touch with the organization's network from anywhere at any time. As a result, the investment made by the administration enabled both parliamentarians and employees to be securely and reliably connected to the House of Commons and to each other. These investments formed the building blocks for the hybrid system we're using in the second session of the 43rd Parliament. Now we all rely on the technology, and I'm grateful to the talented and dedicated employees who have helped us, as we are doing today.

As Speaker of the House of Commons, I will be presenting the main estimates and supplementary estimates (B) for fiscal year 2020-21 for the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Protective Service.

I am joined by officials from both organizations. As mentioned earlier by the chair, representing the House administration, we have Charles Robert, Clerk of the House of Commons; Michel Patrice, deputy clerk, administration; and Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer.

From PPS, I am joined by Kevin Leahy, the director of the service; Robert Graham, administrative and personnel officer; and Antonia Francis, director of human resource services.

I will begin by presenting the key elements and the key themes of the 2020-21 main estimates for the House of Commons. These estimates total \$516.4 million, representing a net increase of \$13 million, or 2.6%, compared with 2019-20's main estimates.

To start, the funding of \$4.7 million for cost of living increases covers requirements for the House administration, members' and House officers' budgets, as well as the statutory increase of the members' sessional allowance, and additional salaries.

The annual budget adjustments for members and House officers are based on the consumer price index. Cost of living increases are essential to our recruitment effort and to those of the House administration.

Returning to major investments, the Board of Internal Economy approved an increase of \$4.4 million in this area.

• (1110)

[Translation]

This funding supports new HR advisory services for members, as well as digital office solution introduced for the 43rd Parliament. This solution facilitates collaboration and greatly enhances the ability of members and their staff to find relevant information and se-

curely access their work from any device. We have seen how much more we are relying on these functionalities.

[English]

Another focus for major investments, which this committee has seen in the past, is the funding requirements to support information technology systems and assets when they are transferred to the House of Commons within the context of the long-term vision and plan.

I would now like to move to the increase of \$2.3 million for the adjustments for members and House officers. This comprises the funding for the addition of a recognized party following the last general election. Funds were also required for the House of Commons contributions to members' pension plans. These costs are contributed by the Treasury Board. Similarly, the main estimates account for adjustment to the contributions for the House of Commons' employee benefit plan.

While the main estimates had originally identified funding for a parliamentary assembly and conference, it will come as no surprise that the 29th annual session of OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has been cancelled and that the 65th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference has been postponed until August 2021. As a result, this funding has been used to reduce the funding request in the supplementary estimates (B).

Looking more closely at supplementary estimates (B), our first line item confirms that temporary funding in the amount of \$16.3 has been sought for the operating budget carry-forward. The board's policy allows members, House officers and administration to carry forward unspent funds from one fiscal year to the next up to a maximum of 5% of the operating budget in their main estimates.

In addition, we sought \$5.5 million in 2020-21 to fund economic increases for House administration employees. Further, \$816,000 is allocated for contributions to employee benefits plans.

I will now move to the 2020-21 main estimates for the Parliamentary Protective Service. For the 2020-21 fiscal year, the service's budget request totalled \$92.6 million, which represents an increase of \$1.66 million from the previous year. This amount served to cover economic increases and wage adjustments related to collective bargaining decisions. It should be noted that the service is not seeking additional funding through the 2020-21 supplementary estimates process.

Since the service's last appearance before this committee in April 2019, it has made significant and sustained progress on further stabilizing its budgets. As such, the service will not be requesting an increase to its appropriation for fiscal year 2021-22 efforts. As the function previously performed by the RCMP has been progressively transitioned to the service, the organization has become more efficient overall.

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

At five years of age, the service has advanced through a series of important developmental phases, from the tactical to the strategic. While it was created through the amalgamation of previously existing services, it is successfully managing the integration of the many systems and processes that it inherited and it is making significant progress towards unifying its workforce. The service has matured into an organization that applies strategic and business planning best practices, implements financial safeguard mechanisms and resource optimization initiatives, and appreciates the importance of diversity, inclusion, well-being and mental health.

[*English*]

The public funds made available to the service continue to be well aligned with the mandate and priorities of ensuring the physical safety of parliamentarians, employees and visitors on Parliament Hill and in the parliamentary precinct.

Madam Chair, this concludes my overview of the main and supplementary estimates for the House of Commons and Parliamentary Protective Service. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We'll start our first round of six-minute questions with Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair and Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Robert, it is good to see you.

For years I used to be on this committee back in a former life, at least in a former government. For nine years I was on PROC, so quite regularly we had appearances by speakers and House administration personnel, but this is my first chance to greet both of you. I'm glad that you're here with us. I go all the way back to the days of William Corbett, so I've been around. I've seen my share of speakers and clerks, but I'm very pleased to have both of you here today to answer some questions.

My first question would be posed to Monsieur Robert, and it's more of a curiosity than anything else. It seems to me that there are a number of new faces at the Clerk's table in the House of Commons, although it's difficult to tell with everyone wearing masks. Is this normal at the start of a new Parliament? Are we seeing more turnover of clerks and personnel than we have in the recent past?

The Chair: There is an issue with the sound; it's not connecting. It sounds as though you're speaking from very far away. Could you test the sound?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Madam Chair, there seems to be a problem with the Clerk's audio. We'll look into it.

Could you suspend for a minute or so?

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Can you hear me now?

The Chair: Yes, I can hear you now, Mr. Robert.

Mr. Charles Robert: All right. Again, I'm technology-challenged, so you have to bear with me.

I don't think, in fact, there has been a significant turnover in the staff that you see at the table. There have been some retirements in recent months. There have been competitions to replace those people. I don't think it's much more than that at the moment.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: You would just put that down to normal attrition, I assume, then, sir.

Mr. Charles Robert: Yes, sir. That's right.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Perhaps you could expand upon what some of the challenges are, and the costs associated with those challenges, in recruitment and training. I'm assuming that if you're looking for a new procedural clerk—whether it be for committee or at the table—it's not as simple as just walking down to a local job fair and looking for interested candidates, or putting an ad on ZipRecruiter. You're talking about people who have a highly developed skill set that would be unique, probably, to an environment such as the House of Commons.

How challenging is it to invest time—and what costs are incurred—trying to find qualified people? Of course, I hope you would be able to retain those people for an extended period of time to ensure some continuity.

What challenges do you find, Mr. Robert? Could you share those with the committee? Have you found it difficult to find qualified personnel in years past and do you currently?

Mr. Charles Robert: I will give you a short answer and then turn it over to André, who is the deputy clerk of procedure. In fact, I think in the House of Commons, we have actually built quite a deep pool of talent. For recruitment purposes, we tend to select people from inside. In fact, it's a way to acknowledge the work done by those who want to make a career here and advance over the course of a number of years.

I'll let André finish with a more comprehensive reply.

• (1120)

Mr. André Gagnon (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): Good morning, Mr. Lukiwski. I hope you're hearing me well.

I will add to what the Clerk has just mentioned. In terms of the number of table officers, what you've probably seen is that we have increased the number of table officer threes—we call them TO3s—because of the virtual proceedings. We've added a certain number of other individuals who come and support us in house. That's probably why you've noticed a couple more individuals in the House. Those individuals are either managers at Procedural Services or very experienced procedural clerks.

In terms of recruiting procedural clerks, yes, we've been lucky enough to be able to recruit a certain number of procedural clerks over the years, and we're quite lucky to have extensive retention capabilities. Why is that? That is because we offer not only good training opportunities but also different career opportunities.

You've probably seen, since the beginning of your career here, some procedural clerks working as committee clerks, working in International Affairs or working at the Journals Branch. We're quite lucky with the work that the team does.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you very much.

I suspect that some of our new MPs, who have been elected only recently, have missed out on some of the activities of the table clerks, which I've found to be extremely interesting and almost entertaining over years past, particularly at the start of a new Parliament. If you have a new table clerk who calls the vote for the first time—and having 338 MPs stand up, deliver their names and riding names sometimes perfectly—it always ends up with a big round of applause, well-deserved from all Parliamentarians. That's something I miss, quite frankly, in a virtual Parliament.

Thank you for the answers and thank you for expanding on the challenges you've found on the recruitment and training end.

Madam Clerk, how much time do I have left? I do have a question or two left for both the Speaker and Mr. Robert.

The Chair: You have a little over a minute.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you.

I want to turn my attention now to you, Speaker Rota, on security supports for members of Parliament.

We have heard recent reports that new security supports will be delivered to members of Parliament. I think all of this, or much of it, at least, came about in light of the news report we heard a few months ago about how Mr. Singh was confronted—I won't say accosted—on the streets by a citizen as he was walking to Parliament. Could either you or Mr. Robert expand upon what security supports members of Parliament may be able to expect in the coming months, if any?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'll start off, then hand it over to Mr. Robert.

The security of members is something that has been a concern since first being elected. We've had a number of meetings, not only with our own security people, but also with legislatures and speakers around the world, such as England, New Zealand and other places where we have been able to learn from each other, which is important. We want to make sure that all of our members are safe and that we do everything that we can to protect them.

I'm not sure if I'm going to hand over to Mr. Robert or Mr. Leahy.

Our Sergeant-at-Arms, Pat McDonell, will take it from here.

The Chair: Thank you.

Good morning, Sergeant. Could you answer quickly, please?

Mr. Patrick McDonell (Sergeant-at-Arms and Corporate Security Officer, House of Commons): BOIE has approved additional security measures for members. That's in line with best practices. We would be better off giving the details of those security measures in camera.

The Chair: That was very quick. Thank you very much.

Next we have Mr. Alghabra, for six minutes.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's still morning, so good morning everyone, Speaker, Clerk and staff.

I do want to take a second to express my gratitude and appreciation to the staff and the entire team of the House of Commons at all levels for their amazing accommodation and adjustment during this pandemic. The whole machinery had to turn on a dime and they did it very quickly and professionally—from IT to cleaning services to other staff. I want to take a moment to acknowledge that. Whether it was during the committee of the whole to now a virtual sitting of Parliament, it's worthy of acknowledgement and appreciation.

This is a question for either the Speaker or the Clerk. I'm interested in knowing an update on the voting app that we heard about.

● (1125)

Mr. Charles Robert: I think it would actually go to Stéphan Aubé.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Okay.

You may want to lower your mike.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, Digital Services and Real Property, House of Commons): Thank you for the question.

As you know, since September we've been working to develop a tool that could allow the members to vote.

We're still in consultation with the whips of each of the recognized parties. We've made a presentation to them over the last weeks. We're awaiting some feedback from them on some key functionalities that would be required from them. Once we finalize that—hopefully in the next couple of weeks, if the decision is put forward by all the parties—we will be able to proceed with the onboarding of members, so that we can start training and planning some simulations if the decision is made to go forward with this, sir.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Aubé, do you have an expectation of a date when that's going to happen?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We don't have a commitment for a date, yet. I would leave that to different parties to make that decision. From a readiness perspective, we're almost there. We're just waiting for these decisions to be made. As soon as they're made, we'll be able to engage all the members from the different parties, if they decide to go forward, sir.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Thank you very much.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If I could just chime in on that.

The IT department, under Mr. Aubé, has been very visionary and has been planning to accommodate whatever the members of the House really want to do. As soon as somebody mentions something, they fall into place and do their due diligence to see what can be done. They've been very effective on having everything ready should the membership of the House decide to go that route.

I just wanted to compliment them and recognize their hard work and diligence in making sure that everything is there for us when we, as the House, decide.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Thank you for saying that, Mr. Speaker.

I can attest to this. I had to change my entire hardware at the constituency office to make sure that we had House-managed devices. My team and I went through a smooth transition period. It was done quickly and proficiently. Again, thank you.

Mr. Speaker, this is may be a question for you or for the Clerk. One of the issues we're having to deal with today because some of the cleaning requirements is availability of meeting rooms. There were times when we used to book a meeting room right after another meeting and now we are having to wait. That reduces the number of rooms available.

Is there anything that can be done there to ensure that there are more options?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Maybe I'll pass this one on to the Clerk.

I know that we've gotten to the point where a lot of the committees can meet now. Initially, there was some ramping up that had to be done. Again, with all the work that's been going on in the background, I'm not sure about doing it in person, but as far as doing it virtually goes, like we're doing now, we've come a long way. We pretty well are ready to accommodate that way, whether it's translation or services.

Charles?

The Chair: There's an issue with sound again.

Mr. Charles Robert: Okay. Can you hear me now?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Charles Robert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Alhabra, the issue that comes up is the allocation of the resources that are available in addition to the health protocols that have to be followed when we move from one event to the other.

On the committee side, for example, there has been a ramp-up of services that we are offering this week. We can now do 54 events, but there is going to be a ceiling, I guess, at some point, as long as we are obliged to meet in either hybrid or virtual format.

I can ask the deputy clerk of procedure to offer supplementary information, but I think, in fact, that we have done pretty well as much as we can for the moment in providing support to you.

● (1130)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Go ahead, Mr. Gagnon. Did you want to say something?

Mr. André Gagnon: Thank you, Mr. Alhabra.

I have just a short addition to what the Clerk has just mentioned.

This increase in services provided by all of the services of the House of Commons, including the services provided by the translation office, has been done through the whips' offices. A great collaboration has taken place there. That's why we were able to increase significantly the amount of services and the possibilities for members to do so. That said, working with the different time zones and with the different protocols that need to be followed make it very difficult to increase significantly more the possibilities for the future.

That said, I know that we're working very actively to at least try to evaluate and anticipate future needs, but clearly, working with the different whips has been quite useful. I would probably encourage you to do so, and to contact your whip's office if there is a special need for, let's say, a special meeting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gagnon.

I have Monsieur Therrien for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Good morning.

I'm very happy to be with you today. I must congratulate you on the good work you're doing. I think we can all agree on that.

Before we start looking at the budget, I'd like to ask you a question about security for MPs. When Jagmeet Singh had the bright idea to call me racist, I got tens of thousands of hate emails. One of the problems we have in our work is social media. I've received tens of thousands of messages, if not more, and several death threats. As a result, my constituency riding and my home have had to be monitored by the police in Roussillon, in my part of the country.

First of all, I'd like to know how security for MPs works. Have you been contacted? Did the RCMP contact the police?

I know that the employees in my office called the Roussillon police because they were worried about my safety. My children, who are 8 and 11 years old, found it extremely strange to see the police walking back and forth in front of our house; they were very worried and even scared.

Could you take a minute to talk about how you proceeded and whether you were involved in the situation?

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's a situation we took very seriously. We had already taken several steps before it happened. I would say that we were ready for just about any situation.

I'll let the Sergeant-at-Arms speak so he can explain exactly what we did in detail. Much of this information is still being studied in camera, away from the public.

I'll let the Sergeant speak, as he will be able to provide more details, to a certain extent. It may also be a conversation that we will have to continue a little later.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Mr. Chair, this is going to be a very short conversation because we had to discuss security issues behind closed doors. That's all I can say about it at the moment.

Mr. Alain Therrien: It was a rather exceptional episode that I experienced, but leaders of opposition parties, including my own, were threatened on several occasions. My colleague, Mr. Lukiwski, spoke about this. We have called for increased security for our leader, but also for the other opposition leaders. It's strange, I have a feeling that it's not coming as quickly as we would like.

• (1135)

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Mr. Therrien, I can assure you that we've talked about security at every internal economy meeting for the past three weeks, and we'll continue on Thursday regarding the security of party leaders, ministers and all MPs.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I'm talking about this because social media ignites certain situations. One political party, not to single out the NDP, has repeatedly called the Bloc Québécois, its members and myself racists, which does not make life as a parliamentarian any easier.

I'd like to come back to the budget very quickly. I think the question will be for Mr. Rota, but I'm not sure.

The largest increases were in personnel. We're talking about \$14 million. If I believe what you said, it's simply because of the increase in the CPI, which means that salaries have gone up. That's the only thing that would explain this significant increase.

Is that correct?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Absolutely. I'm going to turn to Mr. Paquette, who will be able to answer your question in detail.

Mr. Daniel Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Certainly.

A large part of the \$14 million comes from the increase in the cost of living and the cost of living index, which is about \$5.5 million. We also had approval to increase our support capacity for members of Parliament. A human resources team was put in place to assist MPs as employers. That's just over \$2 million. There is also just under \$1 million for the capacity of our law clerk group. Every time we change teams, there are costs; we know that salaries are expensive.

Other investments include standardization of computers in constituency offices. The team in place for this has also been added. There was also approval, even before lockdown, to increase web-casting of videos for this team as well. Each of these things contributed to the total increase. That's where the \$14 million came from.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay, thank you. That's clear.

I have one last quick question for you, hoping that time permits.

I see that from one year to the next, there is a marked decrease in repair and maintenance services.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: A few years ago we purchased a lot of equipment and supplies for the implementation of the long-term vision and plan project for the West Block and the building at 180 Wellington. This infrastructure has been purchased and is being put in place. There will probably be some stability, but since everything eventually wears out, I can predict that there will be growth again at the end of the useful life cycle of the equipment installed in these new buildings.

Mr. Alain Therrien: It's still—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Therrien.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, you have six minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses for sharing their time with us today.

Those of us who were here in the last Parliament remember the collective bargaining process with PPS as being one in which the PPS members felt quite disrespected and had to fight really hard to make headway. Ultimately, that went to arbitration, and they did get a raise through the arbitration process.

I'm wondering if someone could confirm for us whether the back pay for 2015 to 2018 has been paid out to PPS members, or if they're still waiting for that back pay to be issued.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I know there's been a lot of change in the morale around the Hill with the PPS, but what I'll do is maybe pass this on to Mr. Leahy and he'll be able to give us more details on that.

Mr. Kevin Leahy (Director, Parliamentary Protective Service): I'm wondering, Madame Francis, if you would have an update on the status of the back pay as a result of the arbitration decisions.

• (1140)

Ms. Antonia Francis (Director, Human Resources Services, Parliamentary Protective Service): I do, Director Leahy. Most individuals have been paid out. We do have some individuals whom we expect to have the pay process completed in December, and that is due to the retroactivity challenges with the Phoenix pay system. That is what's taking some time. We recently sent out an update to the individuals who are currently being paid by the Senate for us, on our behalf, and they're the ones whom we have outstanding payments for and an adjustment to their premium. We do anticipate that to be completed in December 2020.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

I wonder, Mr. Speaker, if you might inform the committee on what steps you're taking to try to ensure a less antagonistic bargaining process, because the agreement determined by arbitration will expire and the parties will be back at the table. I think we would like to see a much better process where members of the PPS feel they're being respected by those whom they are negotiating with. I just wonder if you've begun any initiative to try to change the bargaining strategy of management in order to conduce a more amicable negotiating process.

Hon. Anthony Rota: As I mentioned, we've already started that. There is a better relationship between both management and PPS members. I'll pass that one back to Mr. Leahy or Ms. Francis to give us some information on it.

Mr. Kevin Leahy: Mr. Speaker, Madame Chair, Mr. Blaikie, the relationship that we have with the members of our union and their representatives has been a priority of mine and the rest of the team since my arrival at PPS in June 2019. We've worked very, very hard over the last 15 to 18 months to create an atmosphere where there's respectful, cordial and collegial work done with the representatives of the workers. I think we've made great progress in that regard, to the point where just very recently we issued a joint statement with the president of the union following recent mediation where collectively we resolved to turn resolutely towards the future with the confidence that our relationship has been reset on a solid and positive foundation. We collectively committed to working together in a determined manner to maintain a positive relationship from now on

and to co-operate in order to promptly address and constructively resolve differences that may arise in the future.

My team and I are one hundred per cent committed to continuing to work to maintain that relationship and the progress that we've made over the last 18 months.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you for that commitment and for the work you're doing to make that real. Please know that there are many members who are watching this closely and would like to see you succeed in that endeavour.

Mr. Speaker, one of the issues that's arisen in parliamentary life as a result of the pandemic has been the question for some members of what to do when they travel home from Ottawa. It's an ongoing question. At one time, Ottawa was one of the hot spots in the country in terms of COVID-19 cases, whereas other places had less instances of COVID-19. I think it's fair to say that no member wants to be responsible for bringing the virus back into their community during a period where cases are relatively low.

Many of us have made room in our travel budget by being in Ottawa, and less as a result of the hybrid Parliament. I'm wondering if you've put your mind to the question of whether members might be able to use some of their travel budget to self-isolate in their own city upon return from Ottawa, particularly if self-isolating at home would mean massive disruption to family life, where there's a spouse who has a job, children who are in school, and where self-isolating at home means pulling the family out of their work and their school obligations. Has there been some thinking on that, because it wouldn't involve extra financial exposure for the House if it were coming out of existing travel budgets. Has there been some thought put to allowing MPs to use their travel budget for that purpose?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Maybe I'll pass this one on. I'll just comment a little bit on it at first, though, because it's one of the things that we have been working on with individual members to make sure that their equipment is up to date. Also, if they are using equipment, it has to be mainly the House equipment so that we can interject and make sure it's working correctly.

As far as requests for money from the travel budgets is concerned, I don't think we've had any of that requested yet, but it's certainly something that could be considered. I'll pass this on to Monsieur Paquette since it involves financial decisions.

Monsieur Paquette.

• (1145)

The Chair: Reply very quickly, please.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes, for sure.

We've been looking at our various policies and have gone to the board to adjust and add the flexibility needed for the COVID pandemic situation.

I'll be honest that this is new to me today, so I will take this away and we can look at it and come back to the board, and possibly look at some of these options here to consider if it is feasible to use the travel budgets of members who are isolated at home or be on travel status, in essence, when they are in their constituencies.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

The Chair: I am sure, Mr. Blaikie, that Mr. Christopherson, who used to be a member of this committee at one point before you, would very much appreciate the line of questioning you just asked. He had a flair and a passion for many things, but that was definitely a concern he did share. I was thinking about him right now. He served from 1990 all the way to 2019, first in the legislature in Ontario and then here from 2004. He was a really passionate member, and I definitely learned a lot from him.

If you do see him—and I am going to try to get in touch with him again—please say my hello.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I will.

The Chair: Next we have Mr. Tochor for the second round. You have five minutes, Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our Clerk and Mr. Speaker and to all of the officials who are here today. I appreciate the hard work you're doing during these trying times.

My line of questioning is around cost savings. I'd like to hear from the Clerk if he has asked for any official cost savings review of any of the departments.

Mr. Charles Robert: Not per se. We have been careful about how we supervise our expenditures to make sure that we are able to provide the support and services that members need.

Mr. Tochor, as you may realize, when we went into “hyper mode”, if you like, or warp speed to bring about the virtual and the hybrid sittings, overtime expenditures were incurred to make that possible. Without that kind of effort, we would not have been able to provide the support the House and parliamentarians need.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Mr. Speaker, have you asked for any official review of savings, because there are going to be natural savings from less travel when operating Parliament during COVID. Have we asked formally for any review, or are you not interested in that?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's something that's done on a regular basis, just to see where we can save.

In these times when you're spending like we're doing, you look at everything and try to maximize whatever you are putting into it.

I'll pass this on to Mr. Patrice, who can maybe give us a little more detail on some of the actions that have been taken to date.

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

We are continually monitoring the cost savings and expenditures in relation to COVID that we have been having since the start of the pandemic. The administration gave a report to the board in early October on the status of the expenditures and savings that we have

noticed since the start of the pandemic. We are going to provide a further update to the board at the meeting in December.

Obviously, as you can imagine, there were savings in relation to travel costs for members, but we had some technology offset costs in preparing for the virtual hybrid Parliament and committees.

● (1150)

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you very much.

To the Clerk, have there been any layoffs of your staff due to the pandemic?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: And how many individuals?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It was not per se a layoff, Mr. Tochor. It was more a case of some contracts not being renewed in the normal cycle of the activity of Parliament. There were 83 individuals who were in that situation.

Mr. Corey Tochor: How many different individuals were brought on?

Mr. Charles Robert: The answer would be none.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Do you mean in terms of the current contingent of administration staff?

Mr. Corey Tochor: Correct.

Mr. Michel Patrice: The administration has been continuing to work and operate during the pandemic. What has happened since the start of the pandemic in March is that a lot of staff have transitioned to working from home. In terms of people who come on site to work, it depends on the nature of the activities, as necessary to maintain the operations of committees or the chamber.

Mr. Corey Tochor: All right.

I understand some of the sensitivities of the following. I'm going to switch gears to security. How do we measure the security risk for members? This might have to wait until we're in camera, but I'd like to know how we actually measure that.

The Chair: Please be quick, Mr. Aubé.

Hon. Anthony Rota: No, I believe we'll go to Mr. Leahy on that one.

The Chair: Mr. Leahy, sorry.

Mr. Kevin Leahy: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We work collectively with law enforcement partners and the intelligence community to determine the overall threat environment domestically. With respect to the individual security threats faced by certain parliamentarians, I think that the Sergeant-at-Arms would be better positioned to respond to those questions.

The Chair: Perhaps there's something you'd like to say in 10 seconds. We are over time.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): On a point of order, Madam Chair, I really feel that we have to be very aware that these conversations are not taking place in camera. I certainly appreciate that it's really important for all of us, but if we're going to have these conversations, I believe they should really be in camera, as we don't want to put ourselves at an elevated risk.

The Chair: Fair enough. I do think if the members are interested, we could have a meeting about this issue. I know that Mr. Tochor is interested by his line of questioning, and I think there were a few other questions. Monsieur Therrien had quite a few questions, and obviously it's very concerning to hear that he's been facing these threats. I'm sure there are many other stories too.

So—

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I was going to save this for my time for questioning, but it has been raised a number of times now, and we have the Sergeant-at-Arms, as well as other members of the House administration here. I think we should move in camera to continue this conversation. Clearly, our colleagues have some serious conversations on this. As we all know, the world is getting more and more divisive, and online attacks as well as the threats to members of Parliament are becoming more and more pervasive. I think it would serve us well to be able to have some sense of appreciation of where we're at, and the knowledge that our Parliamentary Protective Service has the resources it needs to be able to carry out its roles accordingly.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): On that point of order, Madam Chair—

The Chair: Hold on, Mr. Gerretsen.

I believe Ms. Vecchio is next, and then it could be you.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): I thank you very much. Just as my colleague was indicating here, I think this is a very important conversation that we're having, especially after what Mr. Therrien has shared about his situation. I know that a number of other members have gone through things. Unfortunately, we're seeing that it's a little bit crazier out there in the world right now, and we do need to make sure that we're taking into consideration our safety.

I too believe that going in camera... I'm looking at these panels. I recognize that we have the best of the best on these panels, so trying to orchestrate it once again might be difficult. Perhaps we can talk about going in camera and vote on that.

Thank you.

● (1155)

The Chair: We have Mr. Gerretsen and then Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I think it's a great conversation to have, but there are some questions. Not everybody has questions, particularly with stuff that's dealt with in camera. We do have other items on which people have questions to pose legitimately in public, and the public have a right to know the answers to those questions.

Would it be possible to arrange a separate in camera meeting to exclusively deal with items that should be in camera? That would be my preference.

The questions that I have to ask I would like to be on the public record. I want people to be able to see the answers to my questions. They are not of a nature that deserves to be in camera.

The other aspect is that there's a bunch of work that needs to happen here to go in camera, which is going to delay our meeting and cut off our opportunity to ask questions.

My preference would be that we invite the witnesses back for a separate in camera meeting so we can discuss those items that should be discussed in camera.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Blaikie, speak very quickly, if you can, because we're cutting into time for the speakers, and we only have them until 1:30.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Along similar lines, I'm open to going in camera almost now.

I do have another question that I wanted to ask that doesn't pertain to security, so I'll just ask that, if we are going to go in camera, I'd be able to do that.

Alternatively, if we'd like to arrange for another meeting, I think that's probably not possible between now and December 11, because our schedule is very tight.

I do have another question.

Maybe we could go in camera 10 minutes from now for 20 minutes, or something like that. I'm open to different ideas.

The Chair: I have discussed it with the clerk, and it is going to be difficult to do that at today's meeting. We've done it before, and it takes almost 15 minutes to transition from public to in camera.

Would you be okay with discussing things that we can discuss publicly at this point and then still be comfortable with voting on the estimates today?

I could then set a separate meeting where we could talk about just the security issue and bring in only the relevant witnesses for that. We could have one full meeting on that issue. I think it's very important, but I don't think it's necessary for us to vote on the estimates today to have that in-depth discussion.

I know it's difficult to find that time, Mr. Blaikie. We don't really have that time up until the winter break, so it could be in January that we have to find that time, unless I can talk to the whips and see if there is extra time.

We have Mr. Turnbull and then Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Madam Chair.

I really appreciated Mr. Gerretsen's comments.

I totally value the opportunity to have an in camera discussion about security matters, but I really think today's meeting should be focused on getting our questions answered on the public record.

I would humbly submit that I think a separate meeting would be better. It would certainly be my preference.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'm glad there are some members who feel that way. I think we do need to have these questions.

Like I said, it's just technical; otherwise, I would do it today, because there's no time better than the present. We just can't do it due to technical difficulties.

We have the Métis witnesses waiting to get on at 1:30.

Mr. Therrien, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Chair, I'd like to say very quickly that, for me, I've said what I had to say. I understood that the valuable colleague who is responsible for security was going to discuss with me about what had been done in my case. That satisfied me. If you want to discuss this in camera later, I have no problem with that.

However, for me, I'd be willing to continue the discussion on the budget with the current witnesses. There, that's what I wanted to say.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Lukiwski, I think you'll be the last speaker on this point of order.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Very quickly, from a procedural standpoint, obviously, if we continue with this discussion in camera and we are not able to get to a vote, the estimates will still pass as if presented, so we don't have to take any time away from an in camera discussion on a very serious issue just because we have to have a vote. It would pass regardless.

• (1200)

The Chair: Yes. You are procedurally correct, Mr. Lukiwski. That's why it's great to have people with lots of experience on the committee.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair?

The Chair: That is true, but members still have some questions that they wish to ask in today's meeting.

Yes, Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Just very briefly, we have one panel witness who has taken the time to be here. We never want to defer somebody or an organization, but this is an important discussion. I wonder if it would be possible to move that witness to another discussion on this on another day, and instead move to in camera at 12:30, if our Parliamentary Protective Service and the Sergeant-at-Arms are available.

The Chair: We've only given them time up until 12:30, so I don't know. I guess we could ask, but the witnesses have been very difficult to secure and arrange and they've prepared statements and given them in advance and all of that. We'll talk about this at the very end. Our calendar is full up until the winter break, and we

need to get this information in to the analysts so that we can work on our interim report and then the final report.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor: We have a motion on the floor to go in camera. Can we have that vote, please?

The Chair: Okay. Maybe that is the best way to resolve this issue.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Wait—do we have that motion? It's a point of order. Do we have that motion, because I never heard a motion moved.

A voice: Yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I moved it.

The Chair: Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I didn't realize there was a formal motion, but yes, of course, a discussion, and if you moved that motion, we could have a vote.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'd like to discuss that motion.

The Chair: You'd like to discuss the motion or vote on the motion?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'd like to discuss it.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: As would I, please.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, you're up next.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Just on a quick point of order, Madam Chair, maybe we can get some advice from the clerk. I can't recall the routine motions, but I think that, typically, unless we've provided otherwise, a motion to move in camera is not debatable. I think we might have a rule that says—

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: —a representative of each party can speak for up to three minutes to a motion to go in camera, but I'm just looking for it. I know that's been done on some committees and not on others, so just to be [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I have been informed that it's non-debatable, so we will move to a vote on this at this time.

Justin, could you help us out with this, please? Maybe you could call the question so that they know to vote....

The Clerk: Yes. I apologize.

Members of the committee, the question before the committee is to proceed in camera at this point.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: Although the motion was defeated, I do think the issue is very important, and we'll definitely be calling the witnesses back so that we can have a fulsome discussion on it. Hopefully, the whips can help us out and we can have it before the winter break so that these very timely issues can be discussed.

Next up we have Mr. Turnbull for five minutes.

I think we can get the second round in with the amount of time we have left before the next panel.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to all the witnesses for their patience.

I really appreciate you being here. Wow. What incredible work you've done. I don't know how you've managed it. I see that some of you still do not have a full head of grey hair, and I am shocked and surprised, given the challenges you've had to overcome in service to all of us for us to be able to operate at this time. I just want to acknowledge that, as my colleague Mr. Alghabra did, but I really feel strongly that I have to state that outright. I really admire the work you've done. Thank you for your leadership.

I want to ask you a few budgetary-related questions, because that really is supposed to be the focus of our discussion today. That's my understanding.

In terms of the cost of living increases, Mr. Speaker, and the contributions to employee benefit plans, can you speak to the statutory requirements? Those are not budget increases based on some discretion that you have. I believe they're requirements. Could you speak to that?

• (1205)

Hon. Anthony Rota: The statutory increases happen regardless of what happens. The 1.9% is a standard increase. It does compensate for cost of living. They're not voted on; they're put in place. That is just pretty well standard.

I can pass it to Mr. Paquette, who can maybe go into a little bit more detail on the way it functions. I believe you described it quite well. That's the way it works.

Mr. Paquette.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: It's exactly that. Being statutory, they are in the acts themselves and we don't need to review them annually. The cost of living indexes are done for various items that are either for the operating budgets for the members or their sessional allowances in all this, so that we can move forward and the money is available for them.

On the other side, the other statutory item there is all the benefits relating to those various salaries, be it for members, members' employees or the House administration. It's about 15.5% that we add to this. We have to pay for the employer's share of pension plans, the employer's share of the health benefits and all the other benefits that are made available to employees. That is a rate that we must pay that is transferred to the central agencies to be able to absorb this.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much for that clarification. To me, these are standard items that just go without saying.

It was brought up before about capacity. I realize that we've expanded the capacity in a hybrid setting to operate committees and caucuses virtually. I know there have still been some challenges around securing the necessary interpretation and translation capacity. I understand that it's a human resource issue.

Is anything being done on that front and is there a budget implication?

Mr. Speaker, maybe I can put that to you and you can direct it to whoever is best to answer that one.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The challenge has certainly been having the right people. Our people have worked quite long hours and they have acquired further resources.

To elaborate on that, I'll pass it over to Mr. Aubé, who can tell us a little bit more about what's been going on in the background. Again, it's what's going on in the background. When you go into the bowels of the IT department and find out what's happening, you really grow to appreciate the work and the overtime and the hours that have gone into making sure that everything works well.

I've spoken to a number of speakers from around the world. We are the envy of the world. It has been working out very well for us, thanks to their hard work.

Mr. Aubé.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Turnbull, for the question.

As you know, the interpretation services are provided by Public Works to the House of Commons as a service. We have been in dialogue with them because they understood through the summer that we needed to go back to pre-pandemic levels from a committee and a caucus perspective.

Having said that, through our discussions with them it was clearly identified to us that they are having a human resource issue. It's the availability and capacity of resources here in Ottawa for them to be able offer the services to us. They are looking at different scenarios to actually have access to different resources across Canada.

I would not say that it is a funding issue, Mr. Turnbull. The issue is more linked to the availability and capacity of resources for them in order to expand the services that we require here on the Hill.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: You have the budget that you need to expand that human resource capacity if needed. It is needed and it sounds like you're in the midst of solving that issue. You do have the financial resources, right?

• (1210)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I've not been told by PSPC that they have a budgeting issue. They've actually allocated more funds to try to recruit more people. The showstopper is not the budget for them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aubé.

Mr. Therrien, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I've lost track of it all a bit, with the discussions that took place after the presentation of my situation. Forgive me if I repeat things. With regard to COVID-19, you have additional expenses, but on the other hand, there is some money saved because there are fewer members in the House. However, there are more technological tools and health regulations to be respected.

When you look at the current and projected expenditures related to COVID-19, the expenditures are, in my opinion, higher than might have been originally imagined, as well as higher expenditures than savings resulting from fewer members in the House.

I'd like to hear your views on both the additional costs and savings associated with COVID-19.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's a good question.

I'll ask Mr. Paquette to respond. He'll be able to do so very precisely.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: We ask ourselves this question every day to make sure we have the resources and capacity to serve you.

If you look at the additional disbursements we made during the pandemic for equipment, hardware, connectivity and so on, it's just over \$3.5 million. These are large amounts, but a lot of work has been done to enable virtual work and so on.

On the one hand, we have reallocated existing resources to help support change in this environment. We reduced the investments we had planned. In some cases, this involved certain updates or renewal of our technology tools and internal projects. We're trying to find the balance.

On the other hand, the savings are quite significant, as far as travel is concerned. We're talking about nearly \$9 million in travel savings. You have to be careful, because \$5 million of that is a statutory budget that I cannot deploy elsewhere. However, if you look at the committees, the associations and the House Administration, including travel, we still see fairly significant amounts that are approaching \$4 million.

The savings also include all equipment and supplies for our printing department, which was closed for a while. In addition, as the operations of restaurants, cafeterias, committees and other events on the Hill have decreased, there is no need to purchase equipment for these services.

Looking at trends, there are even more savings than expenditures because of COVID-19, because we've made an adjustment to allocate resources elsewhere.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Paquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay. I fully understand.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

I want to return to the earlier question about the voting app.

I know that members of the House administration said they were consulting with the parties on that. But I also want to emphasize, even though I'm not one of them, that a number of members don't belong to the recognized parties in the House of Commons, and it is important that the voting system works for them as well.

I'm wondering what kind of consultation has happened with them to get their feedback on the voting app, and how it might work or not work for them as members who aren't supported by a party whip's office.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's a very good question. I know the staff has been very thorough. Mr. Gagnon has been taking care of that. I will pass it on to him, and he can answer it.

Mr. André Gagnon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

Indeed, members of the unrecognized party are also quite interested in the voting application, and also in the way we've been managing hybrid sittings. My office is specifically in charge of connecting on a daily basis, if not more frequently, indeed many times a day, with the different members of Parliament, either from the Green Party or independent members.

The motion that was adopted in September directed the House administration to work very closely with the recognized party to ensure the development of a voting application. That has taken place. That is why you have heard of discussions taking place with the different parties. That said, we are keeping the members of the Green Party and the independent members aware of any development that will take place, including for instance, very important onboarding and training sessions. We have done so, for instance, when some simulations were taking place to ensure the Zoom voting.

So, yes, we are in very direct discussions with independent members and the Green Party.

• (1215)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much for that answer.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If I could add to that just for a moment, right from the beginning, my biggest concern with the change in practices and going to the COVID-19 measures was to make sure that all members, regardless of party, had their privileges protected and be able to express their privileges. That's something the House has said and the staff has taken very much to heart, and is considered in any move that we do make.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I have Mr. Doherty for five minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to echo the sentiments of many of my colleagues. We do appreciate the service that the House administration, as well as our Parliamentary Protective Service, put forth every day. I know that very often that goes without anyone saying thank you, so I would like to say a heartfelt thanks to you all.

Mr. Speaker, when are the estimates prepared that we're looking at today?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think I'm going to refer that one right to Mr. Paquette. He'll be able to give you exact dates on that.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Basically, if we look at it, we're in the midst right now of preparing the estimates for next year.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay, so would these have been done pre-election 2019?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: It was just after the election. They would have gone to the board in late November or early December.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Have they been revised since COVID?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: At this point, we've adjusted the request for the supplementary estimates (B), which are usually done once the fiscal year has started. That's where we've adjusted our request for the carry-forward and reduced it by the amount of the committee and associations, the funding that had been provided there for events that have either been cancelled or postponed. So we have not kept keeping the cash attributed to us if we didn't need to use it. That's why we adjusted it, but at this point here, because we have access to the supplementary estimates, that is where we would do the adjustments had there needed to be some for the current fiscal year.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Have you had to adjust up, given the additional costs of the hybrid sittings and protective services and technology, or have those estimates stayed the same?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: The estimates have stayed the same at this point because we're looking at a trade-off between some of the savings that we've had and have just talked about—some of the travel savings and savings in materials and supplies from some of the services that were closed during the lockdown. Those savings at this point have been sufficient to cover the incremental costs or disbursements relating to COVID.

Mr. Todd Doherty: One of the highlights of the new study of this year's main estimates for the House is a program for human resources advisory services for members in our capacity as employers. What does this program involve?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: I think I'd like to pass this on to Michelle Laframboise, our CHRO.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michelle Laframboise (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Paquette.

[*English*]

The member advisory services is a team that has been put in place within the human resources services to provide advisory services to members in their roles as employers. This team does several things. One of the things they do is provide individual counselling and advice on employment situations on a variety of different human resources functions. They also put together the onboarding program and the continuous training program for members and their staff. Obviously, that program is much busier after an election, but there is a fairly constant and ongoing need for continuous training and development.

• (1220)

Mr. Todd Doherty: If I'm understanding this correctly, there's non-partisan House staff getting involved in recruiting, screening and hiring political staff for MPs for their own offices.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: No, they provide advice, guidance, templates, tools and draft policies for members to consider if they

are looking for advice. Really, it's a consulting service. We're not responsible for the function itself. We provide purely advisory and consulting services.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Are all parties taking part in that?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: That's a very good question. I'd have to go back and confirm, but my understanding is that they are.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can you table with the committee your findings?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Yes, I can.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you.

In past years when the estimates were under consideration, there were questions about a plan to place a procedural clerk directly in the Liberal House leader's office.

Mr. Robert, can you confirm that none of our non-partisan clerks were placed there?

Mr. Charles Robert: Yes, I can.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Then that proposal is dead and it hasn't been revisited?

Mr. Charles Robert: Not to my knowledge.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

For our Parliamentary Protective Service—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Doherty, but that's all the time we have before we start with a new questioner.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

The Chair: Next we have Dr. Duncan, please.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of you. I think you've heard a resounding thank you from everyone in the committee for the tireless work you've done to allow virtual sittings, so I add my thanks as well.

We work with tremendous people in the parliamentary precinct, and like you, all of us want to make sure we're doing everything to protect them.

Mr. Speaker, have there been any cases within the parliamentary precinct, please?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'm sorry. Can you clarify? Any cases of...?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Have there been any cases of COVID-19 in the parliamentary precinct?

Hon. Anthony Rota: There have been.

How many did we have altogether?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: If you could table that—

Hon. Anthony Rota: It was in the thirties. We'll get that information and table it to you so that you have it.

It was all very well documented and very diligently taken care of. As soon as someone had any inkling of either being exposed to someone or actually testing positive, they went into quarantine and did not come back until their time had expired. Therefore, it worked out very well.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know how diligent you all are. Regarding the number of cases we had, were they linked? Were they in certain professions? While protecting everyone's privacy, I want to know whether there was additional spread.

Following any cases, was there an audit or an evaluation of the protections, please?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. I'll let Monsieur Patrice answer this question. He'll have better access to that information.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Michel Patrice: First, if the committee agrees, we'll provide you more detailed data following this meeting. However, our occupational health and safety team has been very active and working closely with the various public health agencies, be they from Ontario or Quebec, because we have people living in both jurisdictions.

As the Speaker said, the cases number in the thirties. In some of the cases, some people who tested positive did not contract the virus on the premises. Some who tested positive had never even been on the premises. However, in our parliamentary family, in the House of Commons family, there have been some cases on the premises, and we're very active in contact tracing and assisting the people in the surroundings.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: We just want to make sure that our parliamentary family is all looked after. From what you're saying, I can gather that these are community cases.

Who was providing the health advice to the parliamentary precinct, and when is the last time there has been consultation with them, please?

• (1225)

Mr. Michel Patrice: We have a head nurse, an occupational safety nurse, who is actually in daily contact with the public health authority, be it the Ottawa public health services or the similar service on the Quebec side. As I said, we are continuing to update as new information arrives. Obviously, we are also attuned to advice and recommendations that the Public Health Agency of Canada is offering.

For clarity, some of the cases happened in the precinct, but a limited number. It was not necessarily contracted in the precinct.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: However, you will be sharing that.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Is there a way to consult, for example, the pages and the employees about the COVID-19 protections? Is there a formal or informal mechanism?

I know it exists for the members, but is there one for all the employees in the parliamentary precinct, and of course, anyone within the precinct?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes, there is.

Regarding the page program, I'll ask André to maybe add something, but we're communicating on a regular basis with all members and all staff and members' staff to provide an update as to the status of the pandemic in terms of how it affects us, and a constant reminder of the various measures to be taken, and so on. Management is reminded on a continuing basis to be attentive to the well-being of the staff.

André, do you want to add a few words?

Mr. André Gagnon: Thank you, Ms. Duncan.

Regarding the pages very specifically, we've paid special attention to working not only with them but also to continuing to work with the health officials here at the House of Commons to ensure that their health continues to be our main priority. That's why you've probably seen a couple of adjustments.

First of all, in the House, there are much fewer pages participating in our deliberations. As well, they are seated outside the different lobbies, but always accessible to help out members or the different parties. There have also been other opportunities for them to help out.

That's how we have been adjusting to ensure that the pages operate in the safest environment possible.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

Would you be willing to table with the committee the formal and informal mechanism, with consultations with the members, all of the employees and our pages? We all want the same thing: we want everybody protected.

Thank you for the tremendous work everybody's doing.

The Chair: Thank you.

This ends our first panel for today's meeting. I'd like to thank all of the panellists, all of the witnesses. Thank you, of course, to the Speaker of the House Mr. Rota, to Mr. Patrice, Mr. Paquette, Mr. Leahy, Ms. Francis, Mr. Graham, Mr. Gagnon and everyone who is here today.

You brought a big team, and your answers were well appreciated. Thank you for always taking so much time out for this committee. We know you're very busy and we appreciate it.

You can log off now, I guess. We will carry on with the vote on the main estimates and the supplementary estimates.

I want to find out something from the committee members. If we do not group the votes together, we have six separate votes. If we group them together, we would have two votes. We could have one vote on the main estimates and one on the supplementary estimates.

Is there agreement to group the votes together? Is there any opposition to grouping them?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Certainly from my standpoint I think that would be wise.

The Chair: Perfect. Seeing agreement, and I don't hear any opposition, we will group them together.

Should I call the first vote, Mr. Clerk?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Pardon me, Madam Chair, I was going to say that I'd be happy to simply have these pass on division, if that's acceptable to the rest of the committee.

The Chair: Do we have to have it recorded, Justin?

• (1230)

The Clerk: Madam Chair, you don't. You can proceed, if there's consent, to group them all together, and then indicate that they're on division, if that is the will of the committee, and I could minute it accordingly.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I second that motion from Daniel Blaikie.

The Chair: Is there any opposition to that?

No. All right.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$360,043,935

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

LEADERS' DEBATE COMMISSION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$1

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$48,225,193

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

PARLIAMENTARY PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$83,452,443

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1b—Program expenditures.....\$21,771,121

(Vote 1b agreed to on division)

LEADERS' DEBATE COMMISSION

Vote 1b—Program expenditures.....\$5,147,844

(Vote 1b agreed to on division)

The Chair: Thank you. Those are the main estimates and the supplementary estimates. We are done with these.

We will welcome in—

Justin, yes.

The Clerk: Madam Chair, before you move on, generally there's also a motion asking you to report the estimates back to the House. It is a formality, but you can proceed with it very quickly.

The Chair: Yes.

Is there consent that I report back to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I will report back to the House, then.

Thank you so much for that.

We are going to move to our second panel for today.

Yes?

The Clerk: Madam Chair, sorry, it's the clerk again.

Our witness has not entered the waiting room or meeting yet; we are still waiting on that person.

We're trying to get hold of him so that he can appear. We don't have the witness right now.

The Chair: Okay. Let's move to some of the committee business we were going to save until the end.

First, just off the bat, I'd like to mention that at Thursday's meeting we're going to have three panels. It's going to be a three-hour meeting. I don't want anyone to be caught off guard—Monsieur Therrien especially—by that.

If you need a replacement for the third hour, then please try to find a replacement now for that hour. We'll be going from 11:00 to 2:00.

Once again I apologize. I know that's going right up against QP, but it's not by my choice that we're doing it this way.

During that meeting on November 26, Thursday's meeting, we're going to have three one-hour panels. We're going to have Professor André Blais and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba. In the second panel we'll have People First Canada and then Canada Without Poverty. Then in the third panel we will have—

Justin, do we have CARP confirmed?

The Clerk: Madam Chair, unfortunately, CARP cancelled yesterday, and so we no longer have them.

The Chair: Okay, so we no longer have CARP, but we have the Canadian Federation of Students and the Canadian Association of Retired Persons for the third panel. That is our meeting for Thursday.

We had a subcommittee meeting on November 19. The subcommittee report was circulated to everybody. If you do have that before you, you were given an updated calendar with the report as well. The report has seven different decisions that were made. I'm just wondering if everyone has had enough time to look at that subcommittee report, or if they need a minute right now.

Then I just need your consent to move ahead with the letters I have to write and some of the scheduling that has to be done accordingly.

We will have a meeting on prorogation. I think that's of importance to mention.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair, I move to accept the minutes.

The Chair: Okay.

There has been a motion to accept the report of the subcommittee.

Is everyone okay with what is in the report?

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Could we have a minute, Madam Chair, as you suggested, just to have a quick look over it?

• (1235)

The Chair: Okay.

I think the main things to note are that we need to have our recommendations in by December 1 at 5 p.m. That's the important deadline to know. We will come to that December 1 meeting. We have a meeting earlier that day in our regular 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. time slot. All of you should bring your recommendations to that meeting and hopefully we can hash them out a little bit during the meeting, and then by 5 p.m. later that day they can be submitted to the analysts so that both of them can start incorporating them into our draft report.

The other thing of notice is that we are going to ask Dr. Tam to submit a brief instead of making an appearance before the committee.

We're also asking for briefs from the health officers of the other provinces whom we've already met with just to see if there is any further information they'd like to submit to this committee, and also in particular asking whether their elections contributed to any of the cases arising in those provinces currently.

The meeting on prorogation will be on December 10. I would request that all parties submit one constitutional expert or academic of their choice for that committee so that we can schedule that accordingly.

It looks like everyone has now maybe had enough time to read through the subcommittee report have an understanding of what is in it.

There has been a motion to pass this subcommittee report.

Is everyone in favour?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I have a quick comment, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: On item two, I just wonder if we might also be able to add the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, because I understand that the FCM had already declined—although we might be getting someone from them now, due to the good effort of Mr. Doherty. I thought that the Saskatchewan organization might offer a good perspective of what some of the challenges might have been for rural communities as well during a pandemic election.

The Chair: Justin, would we be able to fit that in if there's availability?

The Clerk: Yes, Madam Chair. I can amend the report to include the Saskatchewan group as well. And since we're on the point, I would also let you know that I've heard back a second time from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and they are still not available to appear. So what we would have remaining is an out-

standing invitation to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, and I can also get in touch with the Saskatchewan group.

The Chair: All right, there has been what I would take as a friendly amendment made to the subcommittee report. Is there any opposition to this report?

Okay, the report passes and we will plan accordingly. Thank you to all the subcommittee members for taking your time that day to help us plan our important next steps.

Now to our next witness, Mr. LeClair. I'd like to welcome you to our committee. Thank you so much for appearing before us as a witnesses. I apologize for our handling some internal committee business at this time, but we saw a little bit of a gap and took that opportunity.

We welcome you. This panel will only have you, I believe. The other witness who was scheduled to appear is unable to do so today, so thank you for being the voice of the Métis today here at this committee.

We look forward to hearing your opening remarks for five minutes, and thank you for sending those in advance as well.

Mr. Marc LeClair (Senior Advisor, Métis National Council): Thank you for having me.

President Chartier and president Chartrand were unable to make it, but they asked me to appear.

I've been the lead negotiator for the Métis nation for just over 30 years, hence, I've participated in a lot of work that we've done with Elections Canada over the years. I was at one time the main researcher and clerk for the Lortie commission that studied elections and party financing and came up with a plan to increase aboriginal representation in Parliament. That's in Mr. Lortie's recommendations in the report. I have a bit of knowledge about the electoral system. I worked with former Chief Electoral Officer Kingsley and put an end to the incentivized voting bingo blotters. That's how they tried to encourage people to participate in the past.

This year marks the 150th year of the entry of Manitoba into Confederation. The Métis people negotiated that, and the banners are all over the House of Commons.

Who are the Métis nation? The Métis nation is primarily a western Canadian phenomenon. We emerged during the fur trade; we number about 400,000. Our traditional territory includes the Prairies, northeastern British Columbia and northwestern Ontario. Now we have province-wide governing members in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba. We are a very democratic nation; we have been practising one person, one ballot for over 50 years. Our provincial leaders are elected by province-wide ballot. We've been a strong advocate of increased Métis participation in the electoral process and other indigenous participation.

We understand that we have similar challenges to first nations in that many of our people live in poverty; we have a higher incidence of homelessness and mental health issues, which are not being addressed. Because a big part of our population is in the hinterland, we have all of those challenges of transportation. We have not been that successful in employment with the electoral system; we're not as employed there as our population warrants. We have voter registration challenges, although those have been addressed by Elections Canada recognizing our membership cards, which was a big step forward.

The biggest challenges we have are related to communications, and it's become all the more difficult in this pandemic, because the indigenous newspapers that rely on advertising for their money have been hit hard. The rural papers aren't being published as often, which that creates real challenges for Métis to understand what the parties are offering them.

To be succinct, and I think you've heard this before, we're recommending extending the voting period, perhaps over a weekend. That would provide more social distancing, greater access to voting stations—and the key issue is where those voting stations are. This would open up the schools, for example. We need to ensure that returning officers have the flexibility they need to make sure that everybody's safe, particularly in the long-term care facilities where we have our people. We think there's a need for enhanced mail-in ballot options, because some of our older people have taken this pandemic very seriously and are not moving around at all. In fact, we're telling them not to move around, so we really need to expand that voting method.

One of the things I don't believe this new Chief Electoral Officer has done is meet with our governing members, our province-wide members. We'll have locals in each of our provinces of about 80 different communities where there are significant numbers of Métis, so our governing members at the provincial level are best placed to advise the returning officers where these election boxes should be placed so that we can maximize our participation.

• (1240)

The other challenge we have is that we're in areas where there isn't broadband. Overall, though, the biggest challenge is understanding what the parties are proposing to improve the quality of life for Métis people. That's critical.

I'll give you one example. I'm not picking on any party or anything like that. The new Leader of the Opposition came out with a platform on indigenous things, which is good, but in the platform, he said, well, we're going to continue this national process with first nations and Inuit. You know, we've had a process with the government, structured by a court, that has resulted in \$2 billion spending over 10 years. It's a very good process. Everybody has commended the process. It has worked real well. But either the opposition leader doesn't like the process or he failed to communicate. For us as a people, that's a pretty big issue. Now, with the more limited communications, we really need to find a way to address that in the pandemic election. That's really a challenge for everybody, I think.

I'll end it there.

• (1245)

The Chair: Mr. LeClair, thank you so much for representing the Métis National Council.

We will now move to formal rounds of questions. The first round will be six minutes.

We will begin with Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our guest.

Mr. LeClair, could you tell me what the population demographics are of the 400,000 Métis?

Mr. Marc LeClair: It's hard to say, because the census questions have not been accurate. We've actually just reached an agreement with the chief statistician on how to ask the question about who is or who is not a Métis.

Roughly speaking, we're 100,000 in Manitoba, 75,000 in Saskatchewan, close to 100,000 in Alberta and about 75,000 in British Columbia. There are some Métis in the Northwest Territories and there are Métis in northwestern Ontario who are part of the historic Métis nation.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Would you say your population is aging, as in older, or is there—

Mr. Marc LeClair: It has characteristics similar to the other indigenous populations. It's a little bit older, but half of them are under 24.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Are there whole Métis communities who live together, similar to other first nations, or is most of population base spread throughout those provinces?

Mr. Marc LeClair: The hinterland and boreal forests will have majority Métis communities, and some southern parts of the prairies, but by and large it's very urban. About 60% of the population is living in the major urban centres.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I'm going to shift away from our elections discussion to talk a little bit about a topic you brought up. I am a special adviser on mental health, to our leader, and I want to know whether the Métis nation is experiencing the same mental health challenges other first nations are seeing in terms of suicide epidemics.

Mr. Marc LeClair: Well, there are mental challenges for sure. I wouldn't call them suicide epidemics, although we've had some. We operate some of the child and family services in the prairies, so we see how this is impacting on a daily basis. Our workers are raising that. We're in the process of developing a strategy on that. We would be happy to share it with you once we're done.

Mr. Todd Doherty: In your view, how important is giving Métis communities access to in-person polling locations to vote within the context of a pandemic election?

Mr. Marc LeClair: We need more ballot boxes. We need to get them closer to the Métis population.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Has the Métis nation taken the same steps as other first nations communities in banning outsiders from coming into their communities?

Mr. Marc LeClair: They did a little bit in northern Saskatchewan. There was an agreement with first nations and Métis in northern Saskatchewan to limit the number of people going north.

• (1250)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. LeClair, you said that there are 80 different communities that the Métis nation are spread throughout?

Mr. Marc LeClair: That's just in Manitoba.

We're spread throughout the prairies. We were pushed off the lands in Manitoba and moved right up through to the Northwest Territories and Peace River. We went wherever the work was and that's why we're spread throughout.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. LeClair, have you met with our leader, Erin O'Toole, with respect to your comments?

Mr. Marc LeClair: No, but we did send him a letter, which we haven't received an answer to.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I will endeavour to advocate on your behalf to get—

Mr. Marc LeClair: Our hope is that it was just somebody putting something together quickly and...we've turned the page a little bit at the national level on what the responsibilities are by the federal government for the Métis nation.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Understood.

A few weeks ago, the Prime Minister appeared to walk back on the government's promise to end boil water advisories by March 21. In the context of a pandemic election—with the numbers going up both in Manitoba and the provinces right across our country—how confident are you that we could host a pandemic election, given the increasing numbers?

Mr. Marc LeClair: It's not going in the right direction at the moment, as everybody knows. I think all the parties just need to make sure that it's going to be safe to hold the election if it's done. You guys play a big role in that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That's why we're here today and that's why your testimony is so important.

Madame Chair, how much more time do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Todd Doherty: We know that voter turnout is an issue in regular elections. You've clearly brought forward some challenges in terms of communications.

What steps do you believe should be taken to ensure that voter turnout within our first nations, Métis and Inuit communities are strong?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Our national organization and our governing members play a role in this. It's really important the better we are able to communicate what the approaches of all the parties are—for us to be able to communicate that to our citizens. That's why I'm saying that we want to make sure that anything your party leader says goes unfiltered to our people, so they can make the right choice for them.

Mr. Todd Doherty: With that, Madam Chair, I'll cede the floor.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Gerretsen, you have six minutes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Madame Chair.

Mr. LeClair, I'm actually on the Métis Nation website and have come across an article from 2015 regarding the Fair Elections Act that the former government had brought in place. In that article, it says:

The Conservative federal government's Fair Elections Act disallows Canadians from using the voter information cards they receive in the mail as proof of identity at polling stations. It also ended the practice of “vouching” in which voters with acceptable ID could attest to identity and addresses of those who lacked it.

I'm wondering if you can comment on the new legislation that came through in Bill C-76 to increase the accessibility of polling locations and to ensure that culturally appropriate electoral services were available. Can you speak to the changes made between that 2015 piece of legislation and the 2019 version and how they have affected the turnout among Métis people?

Mr. Marc LeClair: I think I can. This has been an endemic problem in the electoral system.

When we looked at that system to increase indigenous representation in Parliament, in 1992 there were only 12 indigenous people elected to Parliament of the 11,000 other members who came before that. We've had increases since then, but it's mainly because we've changed the electoral system to provide for majority indigenous districts, like Churchill and Churchill River—and we have Nunavut now, and NWT has a majority. The exceptions are really proving the rule. I think we find that in those jurisdictions there's greater participation. I think there's greater participation because people see themselves in the election. The biggest problem has been that it's not our system; it's not us, because we're not seen in it. We have one Métis elected in Winnipeg, which was good, and we had one before, Shelly Glover. The way to increase participation is to get Métis people participating more in the electoral process and its operation, its administration, etc. With the identity question, and because we have so many people living in poverty, you have to increase that system.

The biggest issue has been that elections are costly, and so they limit the number and the distribution of those ballot boxes. That's what this new legislation tried to do, but legislation ain't going to change the practice. You have to actually go out and change it. This election would be a good time to see whether or not expanding the number of ballot boxes would increase the participation of the indigenous population.

• (1255)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: In terms of the accessibility of polling locations, do you find there's been an improvement from the Fair Elections Act versus the new elections legislation in Bill C-76?

Mr. Marc LeClair: I think in theory it's gotten better, but in practice—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: There are still challenges.

Mr. Marc LeClair: There are challenges, yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: In your introductory remarks, you mentioned that the electoral process can be “more open to enhanced Metis participation” by embracing the “mail-in ballots”—in particular—“for a longer period of time”.

You also used the word “enhanced”. You said, and I wrote it down, “enhanced mail-in ballots”. Can you give us a sense as to how that process can be enhanced to better suit the needs of the people you represent to encourage Métis participation?

Mr. Marc LeClair: One of the things we've been advocating for is more use of our registries, where we have a good number of people. I know that in Manitoba, for example, there are 40,000 registered Métis citizens. That's not including the children. The information is confidential, but there are ways for us to use the registries to make sure that those people, particularly in the hinterland, receive the ballots so they can get them back in. I think we should open up discussions with the Chief Electoral Officer on all of those.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's a really interesting point about the registry.

On the topic of mail-in ballots—and I have been asking this question of almost all witnesses who have come before us in this study, because of what's going on down south with claims of fraudulent activity as a result of mail-in ballots—I can appreciate that your answer would be anecdotal, but are you concerned about fraudulent mail-in ballots as a result of their use? Do you think there's an increased risk of fraudulent activity from using the mail-in ballots?

Mr. Marc LeClair: No, Mark. We just had an election in British Columbia amongst the Métis. In our election there, we found no evidence of any problem with the mail-in ballots whatsoever.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Perfect.

Mr. Marc LeClair: I'm sure the Chief Electoral Officer and the systems we have in place now—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: And they did. We did have the chief electoral officer from British Columbia, who said the exact same thing. I was more interested in your personal opinion on it.

I appreciate your taking the time to answer my questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gerretsen.

Go ahead, Mr. Therrien.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. LeClair.

I imagine that across the territory you represent, participation must vary from place to place. We're talking about nearly 400,000 Métis in western Canada.

What, then, is the participation rate from one location to another?

Do you see big differences?

[*English*]

Mr. Marc LeClair: What we find is that the Métis turnout is pretty good. In fact, during this last federal election, we had our governing members working to turn the Métis vote out. We had staff who were looking after that in each of the governing members.

We have a pretty good civic participation rate. We have a lot of Métis mayors. The Winnipeg mayor is Métis. We have good civic

participation, and we're proud of that. We encourage our people to vote.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: I don't need to tell you this because you understood it long before I did, but 400,000 Métis is an extremely important democratic force. If you're well organized, you can, as you said earlier, increase indigenous representation, particularly in Ottawa.

I'd like to know the following. If we want to increase indigenous representation in Ottawa, what do you think is the most important thing to help you do that?

[*English*]

Mr. Marc LeClair: As we told the royal commission in 1992.... Senator Marchand was the chair and has now passed on. He was the first indigenous person to sit in Pierre Trudeau's cabinet. I've been around for the last eight prime ministers or 18 ministers of indigenous affairs. I've been trying to find a way to increase the number of indigenous people. In the 2008 election, for example, we had nearly one million people, and we had one indigenous MP elected, and that was from the Northwest Territories.

We've been very good in the electoral system in getting communities of interest to vote together. Look at our minority language voting groups in Québec. We make sure that we draw the boundaries around them to strengthen their ability to produce people. We do that in Atlantic Canada to some degree.

The challenge for the Métis is that we're spread so far across such a large territory that there's no ability for vote concentration, except in those northern ridings. We have the Churchill and the Churchill River ridings, and we produce indigenous candidates there all the time.

We're 4% of the population in Canada, and you'd think we should have 4% of the number of MPs. I know this isn't on the subject, but we need to change the electoral system to make it more responsive to the indigenous population, for sure. There is no doubt about it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Listen, even if it's not the topic we're addressing today, I think it's important to talk about these things because you need to have better representation of your demographic strength. I couldn't agree with you more. Since you represent 4% of the Canadian population, de facto, you should have at least 4% representation in the House.

I have the following question for you. I know that we're branching off a bit, but this interests me and I think it's important to have representation both in the vote you cast and by the politicians we elect.

What do you think a political party should do to improve your chances of representing yourselves?

[English]

Mr. Marc LeClair: We started by trying to increase representation in the national political parties. Back in the day, I was involved in writing the policy for the Liberal Party to guarantee representation of aboriginal people in that party. That came into effect in the election between Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin—the first one. Those 158 guaranteed electors got to vote on the leadership.

We worked with the national Conservative Party. They had the Conservative committee. They didn't do anything in their constitution, but they at least were paying attention to it.

The NDP doesn't do anything structurally, but they're very friendly policy-wise to indigenous Canadians.

The Bloc and the others are a little bit different because there are bigger challenges sometimes in Quebec on some of those issues.

When we say “enhancing participation”, it should be everywhere. We want to participate in all of these processes; it shouldn't be marginalized to just one party. It should be everybody making an effort.

• (1305)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, you have six minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much to our witness for joining us. I'm coming to you today from Manitoba, the homeland of the Métis nation.

You may well know that we're having a rough go of it right now with COVID, and the province is locked down quite severely. What we're studying here at the committee are the potential risks, not just public health risks, but the risk of disenfranchisement as a result of holding an election during a pandemic. We want to learn as much as we can about what those risks are. I'm just wondering if we can hear from you on what you think are the particular barriers that Métis people may face as a result of the pandemic, and if you have a few concrete action items you think the committee ought to recommend to government to take to reduce or eliminate those barriers as best we can in the circumstances. Those would be very much appreciated.

Mr. Marc LeClair: That's a very good question.

I know Manitoba better because my family comes from Saint Lazare, Manitoba, and I've been working with the Manitoba Metis Federation and President Chartrand to address the pandemic issue. I'll say a few things.

First, we live in crowded conditions. We thought if it hit us, we needed to find places for the people to isolate, so we bought seven tiny homes, moved them around the province, made those available. We turned our work camps, which we had for Bipole III and Enbridge line 3, into isolation camps. President Chartrand made those available to the province last week, I think, because they were going to use other....

One thing we need to share in a pandemic is our resources. That's number one.

Two, this pandemic showed how vulnerable health-wise the Métis population is. We were able to do food security. Our camps are full of food in case that's needed. We can isolate, but Métis people have no real access to the health care system, whereas first nations have at least the nurses, etc. In part of our national work, we were trying to move on this to create these Métis health hubs in the province for cultural safety—just better care, better results from care.

We don't have a good relationship with the premier, and that's well known, but we realized that the provincial health care system is straining. Our proposal was for Canada was to say, okay, let's use the resources to transition, to create these health hubs, and then in the long term have them funded by the provincial health care system. We were looking to transition those sorts of things.

Then we also asked for resources for our most vulnerable only—only for those under a certain income level and those who are older to have non-insured health benefits so they weren't making trade-offs between food and medicines.

One of the lessons we've learned from this pandemic is the need to move to create that health infrastructure for Métis.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: When it comes to the role of political parties, I know you'd mentioned in your opening remarks the need to enhance communication to Métis electors on the positions of political parties. I recognize that there you're making a general comment not just about pandemic circumstances, but I wonder what some of your thoughts are on how parties might best do that.

Both generally and then specifically within a pandemic context, what are some of the things that parties ought to be aware of as they conduct outreach, so that they can do it better?

Mr. Marc LeClair: It all starts at the top. I do a lot of work for the Métis nationally, and also provincially. Quite frankly, and maybe it's partly our fault, too, we need to reach out to the leadership of the parties and to have that dialogue. We've had it with the Prime Minister, because we've had that permanent bilateral process, but especially in this type of election, it's important for the leaders to meet and discuss, and then go from there.

• (1310)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: If an election were held today, do you think there would be a serious risk of disenfranchisement of Métis voters because of the circumstances of the pandemic?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Some of our people really take this thing seriously, so they would have to be convinced that everything was done that was possible to be done, or we would disenfranchise them, that's for sure. There's no doubt about that.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I guess that speaks to some of your earlier comments. I know we've heard from chief elections officers and from public health officers who say that they think they can set up an election that would be safe according to the rules but that people's perception of how safe it is might be a reason they don't vote, as well. That's something for us as politicians to take into consideration when the House is deliberating on an issue that might cause an election.

Do you have any thoughts for us as political actors on election timing?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes, and I'm sincere about this: You guys should figure out a way to govern for a little while and let's see how this thing goes for a bit. That's what you should do.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. LeClair.

We should be able to get through the complete second round, and maybe, if we're lucky, the first speaker on the third round, who would be Mr. Lukiwski.

The second round is five minutes, starting with Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Mr. LeClair, thank you again for being here. I appreciate your insights in the holding of elections during these very trying times.

The Métis National Council website speaks about how your election should be held, as a province-wide ballot box election.

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: How is that different from or the same as what Elections Canada does for a general election?

Mr. Marc LeClair: It's very similar. We have electoral districts. For example, Manitoba has seven electoral districts. We have the leaders run at the provincial level. The ballots for the president are counted in each of the seven regions. It's very similar.

In British Columbia, which just held a province-wide election, they used more mail-in ballots this election. The same thing was true of the Métis Nation of Ontario, which also had a large number of mail-in ballots. The process is similar.

Mr. Corey Tochor: In that vein, I understand there was to be a national council election in the spring. To your previous comments, you found a way to govern without having an election during a pandemic. That's obvious, because you haven't had that election.

Knowing what you know now about COVID, would you still make that same decision, to hold off on having those elections?

Mr. Marc LeClair: We have a couple of other internal issues that we're working our way through that make it difficult to convene an election. For the current leadership, if there's any risk to any citizen....

Remember that we're coming from four provinces, so that creates risk in itself. We're watching this thing very closely. We want to get to an election, but we have to have the conditions that are right for it.

Mr. Corey Tochor: You're taking into consideration just four provinces. Do you have any comments on a federal election that would take in all the provinces and all the territories and all the challenges that we would face in a federal election?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes, I remember voting last time here in Chelsea and those line-ups were pretty long. There are risks associated with voting in these conditions, and just like we're trying to find a way to govern, I think you guys need to find a way to govern. I think you need to hold the government to account. There's no doubt about that. And from a citizen perspective, it's going okay. Obviously we need to see, and I guess we'll see at the end of November, a budget statement to see where we're at, because everybody realizes that this is not sustainable for the long term. You guys can keep it together, I think.

• (1315)

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you so much for your comments.

I cede the floor, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Mr. LeClair, for being with us today. I always appreciate having an opportunity to meet and to exchange views. Over the past number of years I've had the privilege of meeting and working with many Métis leaders including Clem Chartier, David Chartrand, and also Clara Morin Dal Col, and you, and it's always great to be able to have candid, straightforward conversations. Sometimes we agree to disagree, but I always feel that I leave those conversations very well-informed, indeed better-informed, as a result of them.

I've got a few questions and they're not all going to follow each other. First and foremost, would you be able to share with us the test positivity rate of the Métis population across Canada when it comes to COVID-19?

Mr. Marc LeClair: I wish I could, but we haven't disaggregated the data against those registry records, which is something that we could do. But no, the system is not in place to do that.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay, thank you for that.

Getting to the electoral process right now, could you tell the committee members what is your relationship with the Chief Electoral Officer, or specifically with Elections Canada? I know right now that, first of all, we're in the midst of a global pandemic, but also that we are in a minority Parliament. When would you usually have conversations with Elections Canada in preparation for the upcoming election?

Mr. Marc LeClair: They would be ongoing by now. I don't know this new Chief Electoral Officer Perrault, but Kingsley was very good in reaching out and did so on an electoral basis. So we would expect we'd have those conversations with them.

By the way, is that a war picture there in the background?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It is.

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes, I just want to let everybody on the committee know how proud the Métis are that we finally settled for our Métis veterans.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

During your comments or in one of the responses you gave today, you indicated that during the last election of 2019, you worked very hard to “turn the Métis vote out.”

What steps did you take to increase that vote?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Calls, we had a team of people calling. We have a list of our own electors, which we used to make sure they got out, and we helped out if there were transportation issues. In Manitoba we have 800 employees who work for the Manitoba Métis Federation, so we're able to assist with getting people to the polls, especially the elders.

That's what we did. We had a dedicated portion of the website geared towards this. I think they did in Saskatchewan as well. We tried to make it easy for people to understand what the positions of the parties were. The national body had a special election section where we posted all of the material that was provided to us by the parties. We had posed questions to the parties on Métis issues or issues important to Métis, and posted the answers there. It wasn't perfect, and it's going to be a little bit more challenging now, I think.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If we look at the normal percentage of Métis who get out to vote in federal elections, would you have that number? What is the percentage of people who turn out to vote in a typical federal election?

Mr. Marc LeClair: It's in the seventies.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It's in the seventies?

Mr. Marc LeClair: It's in the seventies, yes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay, that's excellent.

We spoke today a bit about mail-in ballots. I come from the province of New Brunswick, where mail-in ballots aren't particularly popular. But we certainly recognize during a global pandemic, and I'm assuming with an aging population, that many people are perhaps going to want to use that tool. But also we're going to educate people on using that. Do you think there are specific programs or information that we're going to have to provide to Métis people to encourage them to use that as a tool as well, as you've indicated that many people are staying home because they fear the pandemic right now?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes.

In some of those northern communities I'm familiar with, those people aren't moving anywhere. And they've been told not to move anywhere, so we were sending mixed messages.

I think one of the best ways to deal with this, and just as Elections Canada has done in the past, is to use the governing member organizations to provide that communications channel to make sure they're comforted by that.

• (1320)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I can tell you, Mr. LeClair, when I hear you say your members are taking this matter very seriously, it warms my heart because I wish that every Canadian would stay

home and take the matter very seriously. We all have a role to play and we know that this virus is very social. If we stay home, we'll be able to flatten the curve, as Dr. Tam likes to remind us day in and day out.

Do you think there's anything Elections Canada could do to promote mail-in ballots to make sure people understand it a bit—

Okay, Madam Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: I thought you were ending. I was going to let you end your thought, but that's all the time we have.

Mr. Therrien.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. LeClair, you said that the territories are large. Are all the polling stations that you have to deal with on your territories?

[*English*]

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes. As I said, 60% of the Métis population will be in the large urban centres and the big rural centres, but we have communities all over the boreal forest, that whole lung of Canada, and throughout what we consider our traditional territories right into the Northwest Territories. That's where our people went to fish early on and that's where the fur trade ended and we stayed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

I've already asked you this question, but I would like to ask it again.

You say that 60% of the Métis population lives in urban centres. I guess that people are little bit closer together and that it's a lot easier for them to vote than for people who live in the north, for instance. Have you noticed a difference in voter turnout? It's still high at 70%, which is close to the rate for Canada as a whole.

Have you noticed a difference in voter turnout between urban centres and more remote locations?

[*English*]

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes, I think the demographics are different. In the rural areas, we'll have more of an aging population. They've been there a long time. They're not flocking to the cities or anything like that, so you could have a lower participation rate.

But again, our civic participation is pretty strong, and we pride ourselves on it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: I recognize that 70% is still very good.

I have one last questions about urban centres and more rural places. With respect to the mail, do you think people who live further north will be resistant and difficult to reach for postal voting?

[English]

Mr. Marc LeClair: From an administrative point of view, probably.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Mr. LeClair.

I have no further questions. I've learned a lot, and I'm still taking notes because there are other speakers after me.

Long life to you and the Métis of the west.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I know you mentioned some challenges with getting mail-in ballots to folks in the hinterland, as you put it. One of the things that has come up in the course of this study is the option of voting by phone, something they have in B.C. and that was a part of the B.C. election. I was wondering if your organization has given any thought to that or would have an opinion on it.

Mr. Marc LeClair: Any way to increase the distant access to voting would be good. I can check with our leadership, but their main line is to make it as safe as possible, make it as long as possible if that makes it safer, and, if you can, avoid it until we get out of the pandemic. That's basically what our position is.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I just have a little bit of time remaining, so I'd like to offer that time to you. If there is anything we haven't covered in our questioning that you think is important for our consideration as a committee on the topic of pandemic elections, I want to give you whatever time I have remaining to offer that.

• (1325)

Mr. Marc LeClair: Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

I'll mention something that came up with the Assembly of First Nations, namely the voting date.

We have a fixed voting date in October, and that's hunting season, generally. In Manitoba, at least, we regulate that hunt. That date is something you might want to consider shifting eventually. The fixed election and all that is fine. It's just that it's not the most convenient time of the year for indigenous harvesters.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. LeClair.

Mrs. Vecchio, please.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much for joining us today.

As you indicated, typically there is about a 70% turnout in your elections. You had mentioned that to Ms. Duncan.

Has that grown? Has that number increased over the last number of years? I should ask, what was your starting point?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes, it's grown in every election.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Fantastic.

Mr. Marc LeClair: I can't say every election, but the trend line is growing.

One of the things, especially in the federal election, is that until five years ago, the federal government claimed very little responsibility for the Métis people. They provided employment, training and governance funding. Now that's expanded to include early learning, housing and support for post-secondary education assistance.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent.

Mr. Marc LeClair: Our participation in the election was to try to push for the things that the people needed, so this is why our participation was always a little bit higher.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Awesome.

You had talked about the number of Métis that should be represented here in the House of Commons. Do you know approximately how many members of Parliament are Métis at this time?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Danny Vandal, our Northern Affairs Minister, is a proud Métis from Manitoba. Michelle Rempel Garner has Métis heritage, but she doesn't identify as Métis.

We have a couple of senators who have been appointed.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent. When we were going through them, we were even thinking that within our own caucus, Marc Dalton happens to be there and Marc Serré, who is also one of the Liberal sitting members. I think we figured out that there are six or seven, so I think you've done a tremendous job to make sure it is recognized that it is important to have all people from across this great nation here in the House of Commons to help on that.

When we're talking about the pandemic, some of the concerns I heard from other groups were having people from Elections Canada come either onto reserve or onto the lands of the indigenous people. I'm just wondering if there have been any issues where you don't want that, or in any parts of Canada where they are saying that they don't want Elections Canada to come there and put a polling station. Has there been any push-back?

Mr. Marc LeClair: I can certainly say that in Saskatchewan there was. The first nations and the Métis decided there weren't going to be any visitors up there, never mind Elections Canada visitors.

I think that's a risk in all the northern parts of western Canada. It's nice to see the southerners, but maybe not so much in the pandemic.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I totally agree and fully respect where you're coming from on that.

What would your recommendation—

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay, fantastic.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Mr. LeClair, it's great to see you, and thanks. I'm really finding all of your testimony straight to the point and really helpful. I appreciate the way you cut through much of the stuff that politicians deal with.

I want to go back to mail-in ballots. We've heard over and over and over again just how important that process would be in a pandemic election. What we're really here to discuss is how to ensure in a pandemic election—if it should happen, nobody really wants one, of course—that all people can participate safely and exercise their democratic rights. The Métis people are a priority and I think you've outlined many ways in which you've overcome challenges in the past. You've also spoken about enhancing mail-in ballots.

I just want to give you some more time. Are there specific things you think we can do or that Elections Canada can do to streamline that process, making it simpler and easier? I think what I heard you mention earlier were timelines, having more time and having the voter registration cards and other aspects of the kit sent out earlier. Are there aspects of that process that you can tell us about that could or should be improved?

• (1330)

Mr. Marc LeClair: Well, I think that your committee should recommend to the Chief Electoral Officer a process of engagement with Métis governing members to ensure that the ballots go to the people they should go to. We'll do our part to encourage people to vote and help them to understand how to vote, and we can work with Elections Canada on that basis. Our governing members will be completely engaged in this election to make sure that we get every vote out that we can. It's up to people to choose whom they vote for, but it's our responsibility to make sure they do vote. We take that very seriously and we would work in advance with the Chief Electoral Officer to make sure that those communities with Métis people in them are targeted.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I appreciate that and I will certainly bring that forward as we move towards making recommendations. We'll keep that in mind, and your point is very well taken that the Métis National Council is a key partner in making that happen.

When do you think that process should start? I understand you haven't necessarily been contacted by the Chief Electoral Officer to date, so when do you think that process should start?

Mr. Marc LeClair: I think this process has started that process. I think we should get on that right away. I mean, we don't know how.... We're hoping you guys will govern for a longer period while we work some of these things out. This is precisely why we need to start those conversations sooner rather than later, and you guys can rag the puck on the Hill for a while.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks very much for that. We'll do our best to continue to govern.

The other question I have—and you brought this up—is about communications. This has been important to me throughout this study. I know you mentioned it within the context of parties making

more effort to communicate with Métis people across Canada, and I really value that point. I also want to check whether you think Elections Canada could be communicating more effectively if there were a pandemic election, to reassure people of the safety of the voting process. Do you have any recommendations? Are they similar to the mail-in ballot process? I take it that they may be, but are there specific methods for communicating that Elections Canada could use?

Mr. Marc LeClair: Yes, we've worked with Elections Canada and Stats Canada actually, to encourage Métis participation in the census. There are ways we target our communications at the regional level and through our meetings to make that happen. As you know, the biggest demographic with the lowest participation rates is the youth of Canada. This is why we work with them, to target stuff at that demographic to ensure that we increase their participation as we go forward.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. LeClair.

I have no more questions, your Honour.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. LeClair, so much for coming before committee today. I was really hoping to get in one more speaker, but we are past 1:30 now and at the end of our second round. We really appreciate your input. It's given us a couple of things to take back to our government, I'm sure. I'm also sure that the Chief Electoral Officer has been listening to this testimony as well. He's been following this study. I think you've made some very important contributions to ensure that everyone's rights are protected, including their right to vote in a federal election. Thank you so much.

Mr. Marc LeClair: Thank you.

I look forward to a future conversation on how we can increase the number of indigenous MPs in the House of Commons. That's a much larger conversation, but I look forward to that in the future.

• (1335)

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Marc LeClair: It was nice to see all of you.

The Chair: Yes, we would welcome that and I look forward to that day as well.

Thank you.

Thank you to all members of the committee. We've already resolved, I think, the few issues we had, so there is no need for any committee business at this point. I hope the rest of your day is good. I'll see you on Thursday. I will just remind you again that we have three hours on Thursday.

Thank you. Goodbye.

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