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Board of Internal Economy

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• (1105)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Welcome to the first meeting of the Board of Internal Economy of the 44th Parliament.

Some new people are joining us this morning.

First, we have Mr. Holland, who will be here in a few moments.

[English]

Ms. Sahota is joining as well, in her case remotely.

Also, Steven MacKinnon hopefully will be here shortly.

Welcome to the Board of Internal Economy.

We will go on to item number one, the minutes of the previous meeting.

[Translation]

Is everything in order? Do you approve the minutes?

[English]

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip): This is in relation to I think the July meeting we had. With regard to the first item on the agenda—which might have been the only item on the agenda—in fact, I made the request for an external review of the situation with Administration. I had asked that it be recorded in the minutes that I had requested an external review. I don't see that reflected in the minutes.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

[Translation]

Mr. Patrice, can you answer that?

[English]

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): We'll ask the law clerk, who was present at that meeting, and we'll make the correction accordingly.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments?

[Translation]

In that case, we will move to the second item.

[English]

Next is business arising from previous meetings.

We have Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): At the last meeting in June, I asked about the staff we have available to interpret the meetings we hold. Having read the note that was prepared for us, we know that a hybrid Parliament requires more resources for interpretation, because the interpreters have to work for shorter periods of time, given that, in this situation, their job is more physically demanding.

As I read the documentation, I gather that, currently, at the beginning of the Parliament, we have a staff of 64 permanent interpreters and 60 freelance interpreters. We are therefore starting this Parliament with 124 interpreters. I have a number of questions about that.

So 124 interpreters have to meet the combined needs of the standing committees, the special committees, the House of Commons, and the government apparatus. Do we feel that a staff of that size puts us at risk, or is it sufficient to allow a hybrid Parliament to operate until June 23, 2022?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Aubé, can you answer that question?

Mr. Stéphane Aubé (Chief Information Officer, As an Individual): Thank you for the question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, but I think that it should actually go directly to the Translation Bureau. It is difficult for me to comment on that staff.

However, I can tell you that, according to the Translation Bureau, that is the staff needed to hold 54 meetings per week, which is the number of time slots we have available. So, yes, this is the number of interpreters that the Translation Bureau has told us we need.

If you want more specific answers about that staff, I think that you will need to put your questions directly to the Translation Bureau.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Let me turn the question back to you, Mr. Speaker; could we ask the Translation Bureau?

I would like to ask a related question. The Standing Committee on Official Languages has studied the interpreters' situation. We were made aware of a report by the International Association of Conference Interpreters; it states that, for optimal interpretation of a speaker of French into English, for example, it is important for the interpreter to have French as the native language.

So I would like to add a dimension to my question. Of the 124 interpreters that the documentation says are available, is the number of interpreters whose native language is French enough to support members who speak in French, in the House of Commons or at standing or special committees? Is that number sufficient for us to have optimal interpretation, meaning that our words will be translated by an interpreter who has the same native language as we do?

I would like to make the one last comment. We have debated the hybrid Parliament a great deal and we have seen that it has certain limits. This is clear in the documentation submitted to the Board of Internal Economy today stating that we have a maximum of 54 time slots available for all the meetings required. Of course, we need to think about disinfecting the rooms, about breaks for the employees and about other changes. There are all kinds of obstacles that do not exist in Parliament in normal times.

As you know, I have been concerned about the interpreters right from the start. We will be in a better position to monitor the interpreters' situation, with the answers that we will be given at the next meeting of the BOIE.

I have one last request. When the standing committees start their work, will it be possible to make another dashboard so that we can closely monitor the number of testimonies that are given in English only? Then we can see whether the interpreters, and the francophones, are experiencing the same situation as they did at standing committees last year. We did that exercise last year and we saw that the great majority of the testimonies, 86% of them, were given in English. It's good to make that comparison each year to see if the trend is continuing. It will help us to understand any shortcomings in terms of interpretation, or in terms of the availability of interpreters working from their native language. This concerns me greatly. So I would like us to monitor the situation for our coming year.

• (1110)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Agreed. No problem. We will come back with a report on the interpreters, with a focus on those issues.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to welcome the new members to the Board of Internal Economy.

I echo Mrs. DeBellefeuille's comments. I am also wondering whether 124 interpreters are enough. The number does not seem sufficient to meet the needs of all the committees that are going to meet, given the requirements. I fully support the hybrid Parliament, but things have to be planned. Given the requirements in the House

and at committees, the number does not seem sufficient to me. I would like to see it justified.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille asked another good question: we need to know whether those interpreters are working from English to French or from French to English, because the requirements are different. If we do not have enough interpreters working from English to French, for example, we need to know, because it would be a problem that we would have to correct.

I understand that the hybrid Parliament provides a number of advantages in terms of the health and safety of the workers on Parliament Hill. However, I also see a weakness, given the requirements for interpreters. I would like us to have a comprehensive report on the matter. But I would also like the House Administration to invest more to ensure that the interpreters have a good working environment in terms of health and safety and to solve the difficulties they encountered in the first version of the hybrid Parliament. They would then be able to continue the excellent work they do without having to face those difficulties.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's great. Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

I have a couple of questions.

In the report, it indicates that meetings have to "be scheduled for a maximum two-hour duration." That's based on the challenges with resources; but then it also says that "Current capacity would be able to accommodate", potentially, "additional evening committee meetings." It almost seems, on the surface at least, that maybe there's an incongruity between those two comments. If we can only do a maximum of two hours, but we maybe do have additional time available in the evenings, it almost seems like we're maybe saying that we have to cut it off after two hours when we might have available time.

Can I get some comments on that?

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll get Mr. McDonald to answer this question.

Mr. Ian McDonald (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Sure. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Through you, Mr. Speaker, to Mr. Richards, I think that's a good point. I think the idea was really around where meetings would be running up against each other. If there are staff available, and of course if we can plan in advance, it helps everybody to be able to make sure we can accommodate as best as possible any requests that come forward.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I guess what I'm sort of hearing there, to some degree, is that when we're talking about maybe the morning meetings, they end up bumping into the afternoon ones, but in the afternoon there may be a possibility of extending meetings where needed. Is that what I'm hearing?

Mr. Ian McDonald: That's especially if we can plan it in advance.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Obviously, that can't always be the case, but you do your best to accommodate that, I assume.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

I have a couple of other quick questions.

Obviously, now that it's a hybrid situation with committees, MPs have the ability to choose to be there in person or to attend virtually. I would assume—actually, I think you noted it in the report—that resources are less strained when people are there in person. But now we're in a situation where some will be and some won't be, potentially.

Is that on a sliding scale? If half of the MPs attend, as compared with only one MP who attends in person, or if 11 of the 12 attend in person, are there different strains on resources? Or is it a situation where, if one person is there virtually, there would be the same strain on resources?

• (1115)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'm not sure who will answer that. Will it be Mr. Aubé or Mr. McDonald?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I can answer this one. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Through you to Mr. Richards, one of the challenges we have is that it's also the people who are speaking. There may be members or even witnesses who are attending committee meetings who are not actively participating or who may only participate for a short period of time. These are the challenges we have when we're talking with the translation bureau about the interpretation services. It's just a matter of having an idea of how much time the people who are participating remotely will take. We don't always know that in advance, so it's a real challenge.

Generally speaking, the information we receive from the interpretation service is that their preference is that there be.... Where there are members in the room, that generally increases their ability to support those meetings.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. So if I were to try to just put it really short and sweet in a broad statement, the more in-person participation there is, the less strain there is on the interpreters and on the resources. Is that fair?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

In that scenario, if more MPs—and witnesses, I suppose, if that were possible—chose to attend in person, it might allow less strain on resources, and possibly, then, we could actually have ability not to keep meetings shorter. Would that be fair to say?

Mr. Ian McDonald: As a general statement, I think that's fair. I think the challenge is that there are always a lot of variables that we have to evaluate for every meeting. We have to analyze those on a case-by-case basis, but as a general statement....

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I appreciate that. It sounds like the more who can attend in person, the better, then.

I have a last question in that same vein. With regard to witnesses, as it stands now, we haven't had witnesses attending in person. I think it's January 31 or somewhere near the end of January that the rule about not allowing visitors is up for renewal again.

I'm wondering about the idea, in the submission for renewal, of including permission for committee witnesses to be able to access the precinct so that we can, where possible, bring up those numbers in person and have less strain on resources. Is that something that's being contemplated?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Through you, Mr. Speaker, as it stands right now, there is the board decision, but there's also the motion that was adopted by the House in relation to hybrid proceedings, which stated that all witnesses needed to appear via video conference until the end of June. Of course, that's up to the House to decide.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, thanks.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay, now we'll proceed to Mr. Holland.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I could ask a series of rhetorical questions about virtual meetings and whether or not we save money by people not having to fly here in planes or drive here in cars, or about all of the resources of the House, but, of course, I wouldn't ask rhetorical questions like that.

I would just say, however, because we're kind of slipping into the fourth item, that on a generalized basis that there's been a major increase in committee activity—and that's outside of the pandemic. Let me say that I think for the most part that's a very good thing, but I do think we need to have a conversation both here and perhaps on the fourth item, and certainly outside of this meeting, about making sure that we are allowing room for the system, not just from a financial perspective but also from an operational perspective, to breathe. The reality is that downtime is incredibly important so that folks not only have the opportunity as members to work on their constituencies but also that our systems have an opportunity to breathe and recalibrate.

I will end my comments here. I often think about the Gettysburg address being only 272 words long. It took two minutes. Anybody can give a 20-minute speech. Anybody can talk for a long time. It takes great effort and preplanning to speak briefly, so as the committees are ballooning out and out and out and out, I think we do need to think about what we are actually expanding in terms of impact versus the resources we are consuming and, operationally, the stress we are putting on the system by not allowing a lot of downtime.

Everything we are going to see in the fourth item, Mr. Speaker, doesn't contemplate the volumes we saw during the pandemic, which were much higher than anything we've ever seen at any other period of time, and even outside of that, the volumes at committees were already much higher, so as members, as people using interpreters, as people using staff, as people using House resources, as people using dollars, we should be mindful of these things.

• (1120)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any other comments on item number 2?

Okay, we'll proceed to item number 3, the ratification of the walkarounds. We have four items here. The decisions have already been made. They went around. We just need the ratification.

Do we have consent on that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Everybody is in agreement.

Okay, we'll move on to item number 4, supporting committee operations.

We'll go back to Mr. McDonald.

I'll let you take it from here.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As board members will know, at the end of the last Parliament, the House agreed to modify its Standing Orders, and a new Standing Committee on Science and Research was created.

Following the addition of this committee, the House administration conducted an analysis to see if this could be properly supported within existing resources. However, based on the activity levels of the past few years, it was ultimately determined that this would not be possible.

To illustrate the high level of activities for committees in recent years, we have provided some information in the note that you have before you, as well as some statistics in appendix A that show the increase in the number of witnesses and reports in recent years, just as a couple of benchmarks.

[Translation]

Moreover, for some years, we have seen the House create special committees on a regular basis. We have always supported those committees with existing resources, but that has become more difficult in recent years because of the high levels of activity that we have just mentioned.

That is why we are here today. We are asking for your approval for two additional resources for the rest of the current financial year and for four new resources starting in the next financial year, in order to support committee activities.

[English]

This part of the request would essentially mean a clerk and a committee assistant to support the new committee and at the same time to support special committees and to support the ongoing high activity levels.

In addition, there is another component to this request that is based on the same activity levels. That's why they are together, but it's more from a technical point of view.

Stéphan is ready to address that now.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Ian.

Mr. Speaker, Ian has clearly articulated the increased capacity we've seen in committees by the number of witnesses over the last six or seven years that we've seen. In the note, we have demonstrated that there is an over 44% increase in the number of witnesses

through the committees, which is requiring resourcing for us to actually make sure that these resources, which are participating mostly through e-conferences lately, are tested and validated, and also that we're there to ensure that the proper quality of audio is provided to the folks who are participating in the meetings. This is causing a strain on our resources from a technical perspective.

There is another element in addition to that, in the fact that now all committees are being webcast or televised by leveraging the video conferencing systems, and also by leveraging the broadcasting equipment that we have in committee rooms, sir. That is causing a strain on our resources, so in addition to the requirements I've mentioned, we are seeking, as of the next fiscal year, an additional four resources from a technology perspective. These would be technicians who would be there to support the committees and the clerk and the interpreters to ensure that the meetings are held in the proper way.

That is our request, sir.

Thank you.

• (1125)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good, and we have a question from Mr. MacKinnon.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My thanks to my colleagues for this submission. Clearly, I see no problem in supporting this increase in resources. I would even add a comment. In our caucus, for example, a good number of regional caucuses meet simultaneously. Some have told us that the House does not have sufficient resources to support their meetings being held in a hybrid format. I also observe, as we have just heard, some additional workload and pressure, specifically on the technology services and the clerks.

Can we not look at some accommodation so that those meetings, which have been held forever, can be held in a hybrid fashion for the period covered by the motion to approve the hybrid format for parliamentary work?

That question occurs to me, but, clearly, I support the submission that was made.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think that Mr. Aubé is able to answer that question.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Your question is a very good one, Mr. MacKinnon. As you know, we currently have to prioritize certain meetings, not deliberately, but because of the limited resources we have. Our priority is always the House of Commons itself. Then come the committees, then the national caucuses. When meeting rooms, interpreters and resources are available, we will surely support regional caucuses. However, in the current situation, we have to prioritize the events that I have just mentioned. Then, if we are able, we will support other events for which resources are requested.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: So what would that take? Are we asking for sufficient resources to use support the activities? I emphasize that these meetings have been going on for ages, but they now have to happen in a hybrid format. Is the House looking to obtain sufficient resources to support those meetings?

If not, can we consider making such a request?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Aubé, you have the floor.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our current request does not include those services. It actually focuses on catching up, in terms of the need for resources by the people taking part in the priority meetings.

However, we are open to having discussions with the members participating in this meeting to make sure that we fully understand the additional requests for regional caucuses that they would like to make. We could then come back to you and submit a proposal, if necessary.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Now we'll go on to Mr. Richards, who will be followed by Mr. Julian and then Madame DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

With the report we received for our previous item, the limit we were given was 54 blocks. I'm wondering if this budget increase will help to improve that number at all.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you want to reply, Mr. Aubé?

[English]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Ian, do you want to go first?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Sure.

I would say that certainly from a committee's perspective, this would not have any impact on that. This is really to support the procedural, administrative and logistical functions on the committee side.

Stéphan may have some other points to add.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: We are requesting resources, sir, to support one more committee. There would be availability for a couple of blocks with the discussion we're having. If that position goes forward, we would have one or two blocks to support the new committee, but it wouldn't increase our capacity to support any other events as you're requesting, sir.

• (1130)

Mr. Blake Richards: I understand that three of the eight positions that are being asked for would be to support that new committee. That's completely understood and it makes sense. If the other five do not increase the delivery of what's received, what would the implications then be if we were not to approve that? In my mind, if additional resources were provided, that should mean more service should be available.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you, Mr. Richards, for the question.

From the committee's perspective, I know we'll be able to support the ongoing requirements to support special committees. As

we show in the note, that number has been fairly constant over the last number of years. The challenge we've had is that in the past we've always been able to support those with internal resources, but unfortunately we're at the point where we're finding it increasingly difficult to do that. That would represent two of those five.

Perhaps Stéphan wants to talk about the other three.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I can speak to that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Richards, over the past years, and more specifically over the last two years, we've been reallocating resources from other services. We've actually been stopping other services in order to make things happen, recognizing that there are more members coming back on site and recognizing that there's a need to re-establish some of the services that were previously offered. We're seeking these resources in order to move forward and offer more of the services that we had on-site while continuing to support the hybrid model, sir.

Mr. Blake Richards: Could I ask for a bit more specificity on that?

What are some of the services that haven't been provided that would be provided with the three new positions?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Through you, Mr. Speaker, I can add from a technical perspective, that we've been reallocating services to support committee rooms such as this one. In terms of resources, for example, we used to have the concept of ambassadors within different buildings so members' offices could be supported.

There's more of a need now to re-establish that service so that people can be well supported within their buildings since we recognize that they're back in their buildings. We're still putting a stop to some of these services in order to support the committee rooms. That's a perfect example, sir, of the services we'd like restored in order to have the resources we need in the committees to support committees, sir.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Sir, I'm still not sure I'm clear on this.

What are the specific services? I'm not trying to be difficult, but we're asked to provide resources, and I'm not clear in understanding what they're for.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: More specifically, sir, we're talking about the IT technical support within the committee rooms and also within the offices of the members. We have people who are now dedicated to supporting committee rooms, who previously were supporting members and their offices. While they're mobile, we've restored these resources to serve committee rooms and we'd like to restore some of these services while continuing to deliver services for the committee rooms.

Mr. Blake Richards: On that, maybe I could just ask, if these people were repurposed, what the impacts were. What is the measure? Can you give us some metrics or indication of what impacts the reallocation would have had? I guess I personally didn't experience that. When I had issues, they were always addressed quite quickly. Perhaps there were impacts that I didn't see, but what were they?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: During the pandemic, sir, we didn't notice these impacts, because most of the members weren't in the buildings. We had service desks within each of the buildings or each of the facilities that are there to support the members or members' staff or any member's request, so now that members are coming back and they are on site, we are trying to restore some of these services.

I'm giving you just one example. To do that, we need to have dedicated people on these sites, and if I need to remove them from the committee rooms, I will now affect committee rooms versus the members' offices, and we don't want to do that, sir. That's a specific example that we're trying to demonstrate here.

The resources we're seeking are specific technical resources to be in the committee rooms to support you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks. I appreciate the clarity on that.

I have one last question. One of the things I note in the report that was supporting data for the request was the number of committee reports that have been written. There was an increase in those.

It's always been my understanding that it's primarily the Library of Parliament that supports that. What is the House staff role in writing and bringing support—

• (1135)

Hon. Anthony Rota: That question will go to Mr. MacDonald.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Through you to Mr. Richards, the House staff do play a role. It is the analysts who prepare the drafts for the committees, but the clerks also play an important role, and the committee assistants also play an important role in the administrative processes that support those activities and also in making sure that the documents are prepared, printed, etc., so they can be tabled in the House.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Now we'll go on to Mr. Julian, followed by Madame DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I have no doubt that establishing a new committee requires additional human resources. However, in these figures, I do not see an answer to the question about interpreters that we have been discussing.

Am I correct that this budget proposal does not include money for interpreters?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Patrice, you have the floor.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes, you are correct. Since hiring interpreters is not in our jurisdiction, the interpreters are not included in our resources.

I want to clarify one matter in reply to Mr. Richards' question about the ability to hold 54 meetings per week. This request for additional resources would give us some room for manoeuvre in terms of the number of events. However, the problem is the Translation Bureau's interpretation capacity. That is where the issue lies.

The request for additional resources would allow the work of the new committee and the special committees to be supported on an ongoing and regular basis. The latter, by their very nature, are ad hoc, but the statistics show that there are always special committees, session after session. The topics change, but they keep coming. Our analysis has made it clear that we need additional resources. Actually, we are somewhat stretching the current resources in order to be able to support the work of the special committees.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for the answer.

The budget that we are looking at right now is a partial budget, in the sense that we are adding one committee and we know the services that will be provided to that committee. But we have not yet really had the opportunity to see all the consequences that result from a hybrid Parliament at the same time, including this new committee and other new committees that could be added if Parliament so decides.

It seems to me that approving this budget proposal is potentially just a first step. It is really important for us to have a discussion about the consequences that all the decisions we make as a Parliament will have on the work of the interpreters. It seems to me that it would be important to have those figures at hand so that we can discuss the issue. In that way, we would be able to see whether the 124 interpreters are sufficient to meet all the requests from an in-person Parliament, a virtual Parliament, all the committees we establish, the new committees and potentially other special committees that may be created in the coming months. We have to examine what the consequences will be on the work of the interpreters as we establish each of those new committees.

We can make decisions, but we have to know what their consequences will be. It concerns me a little that I do not know whether we really have established a suitable environment for the interpreters. We are a bilingual Parliament, which is very rare around the world. Furthermore, we have a Parliament with additional requirements. Given that situation, the interpreters are doing an extraordinary job.

It seems to me that, as decision-makers, we should have all that information in front of us before we decide whether these budget requests really do meet the needs of Parliament, especially the requirements for interpretation. It has already been established that those requirements present a difficulty, a challenge, that we have to face.

Personally, I would be ready to approve this first request, but with the condition that we would come back to this discussion on the interpreters. Then we can properly identify all the consequences that establishing this new committee would have on the extraordinary interpretation services provided to the House of Commons, and all the other factors at play.

• (1140)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Patrice, you have the floor.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Mr. Julian, you certainly raise a very important aspect of the dynamics involved in supporting the House and its committees.

We are in an ongoing dialogue with the Translation Bureau's interpretation services. The matter goes beyond the questions that have been asked and that we will put directly to the Bureau about its resources. We know that they are putting a lot of effort into recruitment, in order to increase the number of interpreters across the country.

In fact, we have to consider this situation as one whole, in its entirety. Our involvement comes where we have the authority. In other words, we operate according to the House Administration's capacity to support as many activities as we can and as best we can. This means the House, the parliamentary committees, the caucuses, the regional caucuses, or any other event.

Your comments are duly noted. We will continue our discussions and we will report to the Board of Internal Economy as soon as we have appropriate information.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One thing concerns me.

We adopted a motion that allows Parliament to sit on a hybrid basis until June 23, 2022. Fingers crossed that, by then, the pandemic will really be behind us, Parliament can go back to normal, committees can meet in person and the hybrid Parliament will have been but a temporary episode.

The House of Commons Administration did an excellent job of getting a hybrid Parliament up and running quickly so that we could safely carry out our parliamentary duties. That said, the hybrid model is slated to end on June 23.

Is the request for additional resources due to the fact that it takes more resources to hold hybrid meetings? Will the extra resources still be needed after June 23, once things go back to normal?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'm not sure who the best person to answer that is.

[English]

Mr. McDonald, I'll let you answer that one.

[Translation]

Mr. Ian McDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Several of the issues related to this proposal have to do with two things. The submission that you were given clearly states that the request is not related to the virtual or hybrid parliamentary proceedings, but really has to do with the level of activity, the number of committees and the fact that we nearly always have special committees now. Today's proposal is not at all related to the hybrid parliamentary model, at least as far as procedural, administrative and logistical support is concerned.

Did you have something to add, Mr. Aubé?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: On the information technology side, our position is the same as Mr. McDonald's.

As you can see in the appendix, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, these are pre-hybrid Parliament figures. Those needs are here to stay.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for clarifying all that, especially since the people following the proceedings at home don't have our notes.

Mr. Chair, I support the request. Adding a committee means more meetings. In light of that, to do our job, we have to have adequate administrative and management support, whether it's analysts or clerks. That is especially important when it comes to information technology. There are tools that, as a member, I cannot do without in order to carry out my parliamentary duties. When one of them isn't working properly, it's extremely important to be able to access IT support quickly and to not have to wait two or three days to get the issue resolved.

As I understand it, every organization builds its organizational capacity so that it can provide the same calibre and level of support to employees in the course of their work. Here, we've added a committee, and the computer technicians should have the freedom to pull back from the hybrid Parliament a bit in order to serve offices on the Hill, even provide more support to constituency office staff. I think that's a normal progression, so I support the request.

I would still like to follow up on what Mr. Julian was saying. Increasing our workload is a good thing because it shows those who pay attention to Parliament that we are working hard and want to do our jobs as parliamentarians. However, we all have to be able to do so in a fair manner and in both official languages. It goes hand in hand with the limits on the interpretation services available to us. The Board of Internal Economy should pay close attention to the whole issue of interpretation, to ensure that members, no matter which language is their mother tongue, can do their jobs properly with the support they need from interpreters.

That is why I support this request, and I hope all of my fellow members will be able to rely on Mr. McDonald's team for the support they need. We need more resources to do our jobs properly, in terms of both IT support and clerks.

• (1145)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Richards, do you have a question?

Mr. Blake Richards: I guess I had some similar thoughts and concerns regarding the proposal. I certainly understand the resourcing need that has been suggested for the new standing committee that has been set up; there's a suggestion that we would need three new positions to support that. I'm certainly comfortable supporting those at this point. I'm not convinced, personally, that I've heard enough of a case for the other five permanent positions that are being suggested here.

I would suggest that there are probably a couple of opportunities to deal with what sound like they would be temporary needs, hopefully, during the course of a pandemic. One suggestion I could make would be that travel budgets are not being used. Could those be reallocated to meet some of these resource needs, or could we ask that the administration bring back to us a proposal that would show the costs on a temporary basis until June 23, when we expect the hybrid provisions to expire? Could we have one or both of those options brought back to us? I certainly would be more comfortable looking at approving that, but I'm just not convinced of the need on a permanent basis beyond the three for the new science committee.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Patrice, please go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Michel Patrice: Certainly, we'll look at coming back to the board to review, on a temporary basis, the position for which we did not make a convincing case. We'll look at it and make proposals in that respect. Maybe—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry. I'll just interrupt you for a second. I don't want to indicate that I don't appreciate the work that's been put into the proposal. I don't want to indicate that I don't.... It's certainly not to cast any doubt on any of that, but I did hear a lot of conversation about the fact that we were reallocating resources because members weren't here and things like that. It certainly sounded pandemic-related. I don't mean to cast any doubt on anything that was said or suggested, but, at the same time, we do have to look at value for the resources. If we can find a way to fill some of the needs that we all hope will be temporary, that would be best.

I wanted to clarify that. I don't want to leave the impression that I'm casting any doubt on anything that was presented to us.

• (1150)

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you. We'll come back with a revision in terms of those positions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe that Ms. Sahota has a question.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Deputy Government Whip): Yes, I have a comment first. Maybe it will be followed by a question.

From the explanation that was given for the need for the extra resources, I don't see from the explanation.... I know, verbally, some mention of the temporary situation was given, but, for the most part, it looks like a situation that arose even prior to the pandemic, where there was an increase in committee work and there were more witnesses. A 74% increase in witnesses between the 41st and 42nd Parliaments is no small thing. That takes a lot of work on the administrative side.

Having seen that fairly up close in many committees, I feel that we really should be approving this request, because that's not temporary. The 42nd Parliament was prior to the pandemic. There is something going on if committees are feeling the need to invite all of these witnesses and have special committees. I know that, at times, committees have had more members and have also travelled, and those requests have come from both sides of the aisle.

I don't think it's right for us to not give this required increase at this point. Like some of the other members have said, if anything,

we should be coming back again and taking a look at how we can increase resources for interpretation, as well, because that resource is very much needed.

Those are my comments. I just wanted to put them on the record.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[Translation]

Mr. Patrice, over to you.

[English]

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you very much for your intervention.

We're going to look at this. What I heard is that there is an openness in terms of temporary resources, but the other element in terms of resources....

Any discussion at this time gets a bit confusing, I must admit. We're talking about both the normal operations and the progression and the level of activities of the House of Commons and its components, and the pandemic always comes into the discussion. Sometimes it's not the intent, but it does come into it, because we're living it day after day.

The other aspect, with regard to the request for resources, was about the webcasting of committees. While in recent years, we were broadcasting only two committees out of six, now we've added capacity and technology that allows for all committees to be broadcast, whether by traditional broadcasting or webcasting. That's an element in the submission in terms of the request for additional resources.

That being said, we'll prepare. We'll look at our submission, review it and come back to the board with a revised proposal or case.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If there are no more questions, then I take it we have consensus.

Do we have consensus for the recommendation?

[Translation]

Would you like me to read it?

[English]

Are we not going to pass this recommendation and wait for additional information? That's the way I understand—

Mr. Blake Richards: What I was suggesting was that we see a revised proposal.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's of the whole...? Okay.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, did you have something to say? No? All right.

That's it, then. We'll wait—

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: Having said that, I will offer, as I did earlier, if it is something you can do and if it's easy for you on the spot to tell us if there's a way we can split it out, that I would be comfortable with that. Maybe you need to go back and approve the three for the additional committee. If that can be done on the spot, I'd be comfortable with that, but otherwise we'd come back with the whole thing.

What's easier for you?

Mr. Michel Patrice: What I heard from your intervention is that you were comfortable with three positions for the new committee and that we come back with the analysis and a proposal for the five left. I understand that the board would be ready to approve three, and then we can come back with a revision in terms of the other five positions.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm certainly comfortable with that.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I want to make sure I understand this.

We're approving the recommendation that's being made—

• (1155)

Mr. Michel Patrice: It's three positions out of the eight requested.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. Very good.

Is everybody in agreement with that?

Good. Perfect.

We'll go on to item number 5.

[Translation]

It's a review of the Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy and related procedures.

Our presenters today are Ms. Laframboise and Ms. Daigle.

Ms. Laframboise, please go ahead.

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

I'm glad to be here today to provide the Board of Internal Economy with a report on the internal review of the implementation of the harassment policy, and to inform the Board that adequate and accessible policies and procedures are in place for members' staff.

This is in response to harassment allegations that appeared in the media and to a letter written by member of Parliament Michelle Rempel Garner to the Clerk of the House regarding the measures to protect employees in the parliamentary workplace. I was asked by the Clerk to assess the situation and determine whether the Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy or its implementation was deficient in any respect, and make recommendations as needed.

[English]

The previous House of Commons policy on preventing and addressing harassment, which had been approved by the board in 2014, was replaced by the new, members of the House of Com-

mons workplace, harassment and violence prevention policy in January, 2021, to respond to the new regulations established under part II of the Canada Labour Code. This review included both current and former policies.

It is of paramount importance to the House of Commons that everyone who works in the parliamentary environment knows and trusts the policies and processes that have been put in place to protect them and to ensure a healthy and safe work environment.

The review concluded that these policies are accessible to employees. Not only are they provided to them upon hiring, but they are also available on the internal website. Training is also offered to all MPs' staff to ensure that they know where to find them and how to use them. Mediation is a legislated requirement and must be offered; however, it is voluntary and no one is ever steered towards mediation or forced to mediate. It is a useful tool and a best practice to manage conflict between parties.

The complaint process is impartial. Mediation and investigation are conducted by a neutral third party with the requisite expertise, as is outlined in the Canada Labour Code. They cannot be unilaterally selected.

Workplace assessments can also be accessed outside of the complaint process by a member who's seeking to gather information about the current workplace environment, to address conflict, and to identify opportunities for improvement. Reprisals are absolutely not permitted under the policy, and mechanisms are available to anyone who may feel that reprisals are taking place.

Although the policy is made available to them and they are supported and guided throughout the process, employees cannot be compelled to access the harassment complaint process.

[Translation]

My office is mandated to report annually to the Board of Internal Economy on the implementation of the policy, and provide information on the use of the policy and all training and awareness activities that were undertaken.

The policy is subject to ongoing monitoring. Furthermore, the policy sets out a three-year policy review cycle.

No deficiencies were identified in the harassment policy or procedures that were in place at the time of the allegations or that are currently in place. Nor were any deficiencies identified in the management of employee concerns overall. Employees and members have adequate recourse, both within and outside the formal resolution process.

Further to this review, we can confirm that, like the previous policy, the current policy is adequate and accessible. It provides an impartial forum and useful remedies, while meeting its objectives.

[English]

I'm happy to answer any questions the board may have.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Does anyone have questions or comments?

Mr. Holland, you may go ahead.

[English]

Hon. Mark Holland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I want to thank Madame Laframboise and, through her, her office for their work. There's been a great deal of additional support brought to bear in this area. I appreciate the overview, which I think demonstrates very clearly how robust the system we have is. I want to go back to the first point that was made.

If it's okay, Mr. Speaker, I won't do this in the form of a question, because I would have to do so rhetorically. I have just a couple of points that are important to make here.

The first is how important it is for every person who works in this place to understand that these policies exist, that they are there for them and that they work. On any question of harassment in any form, folks should feel free to come forward and know that there is no fear whatsoever of reprisal and that their claims will be properly heard.

I think we have a responsibility as members not to attack the “mortar” of this building. We do have disagreements, of course, on matters of policy, but when we question how robust these policies that we have are, frankly what we do is we push people away who would otherwise come forward, because they're worried: “Maybe I'm not going to be listened to. Maybe this isn't something that's going to be taken seriously. Maybe there will be reprisals.”

So I invite members, if we have questions on a particular case, that we have an in camera session a little bit later. That's a really good opportunity to flesh out how this was handled. I welcome members, after hearing in camera, that if any one of us has mishandled a case, then absolutely it should then go into a more public forum, and it should be called out. But we should be very careful about taking guesses about that and adjudicating these things in the public forum, either on the floor of the Commons or elsewhere.

Maybe it's a bit aspirational that all employees are listening to these proceedings today, but I hope that any employee who is listening shares the heartfelt desire, I believe, that exists on the part of every member of this board. Anybody who has experienced harassment, come forward. Anybody who is experiencing harassment, you will be listened to. Anybody who is experiencing harassment, there will not be reprisal. We have strong policies in place, and it's essential that you come forward.

In fact, I'll even go a step further. When I was leading the Heart and Stroke Foundation in Ontario, I proactively did assessments of the environment to ask every employee confidentially what they thought was happening in their workplace. I took that same measure as whip. I will take that same measure, after I do a little bit of time as House leader, of proactively doing an environmental assessment where all employees can confidentially give a report back as to what's happening in the office and where I can improve in better

doing my job. I encourage all members, because that is something that is available to members of Parliament, to be able to do those environmental assessments. I think we would be a better place if every member of Parliament did that.

I want to take one moment just to finish, if I could, Mr. Speaker, to explain to folks what that process is when it's triggered.

Madame Laframboise, if I'm missing anything, just raise your hand and correct me.

If you come forward, there are a couple of options. You can go to the whip of your party. If you're uncomfortable going to the whip of the party, you can go to House administration. You can raise these issues directly with the CHRO's office. That will then trigger the opportunity for either a formal complaint process, or, if you don't want to move to a formal complaint process and want to try to deal with it before reaching that stage, we can do an environmental assessment. We can take a look at the situation and make sure there's a full understanding of what that situation is; try interventions, if it's a low-grade problem, to fix it; and if it's a more serious problem, then have conversations with the CHRO's office about additional measures that will be taken.

I just want to lay down a bit of a marker on this. I know that these things are salacious. They are quick to get headlines. Careers take a lifetime to build and they can be gone like that. We don't want to create an environment in either direction—a direction where there's any sort of fear of not being able to come forward on a complaint of harassment.

• (1200)

We also don't want to create a circumstance where we operate by Napoleonic law, where somebody is tried simply by an allegation, with no opportunity to make their case and to do so in a forum that protects their confidentiality so that information is heard.

In the thrust and parry of this place, we have tipped a bit dangerously toward adjudicating some of these things in a public forum. We have an in camera forum. I welcome that it to be used. Again, if any of us are negligent in our duties, then we should be attacked, but all cases need to be, at first and at least, adjudicated in camera.

I want to thank the office of the CHRO for its work. I've had to deal with many very difficult and sensitive files, and I have found them to always be incredibly professional and helpful in that.

We want this to be not just a good place but an extraordinary place to work, and I know that we are all committed to doing that.

• (1205)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, the floor is yours.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Laframboise.

I took a keen interest, both personally and professionally, in the review of the policy. Having a robust policy, coupled with an impartial and robust process, is extremely important. I spent hours upon hours reading and reviewing the policy before us now, the one currently in place. I think it really is representative of our desire to show zero tolerance for violence, be it physical, psychological or otherwise, to ensure employees and members have a safe and respectful workplace.

I want to commend your office for taking the time to consult every party in the House of Commons when the new policy was being adopted. Neither a party nor a whip can claim that they aren't familiar with the policy.

For that matter, it is the party's responsibility to ensure that all of its employees take the training. I can attest to the diligence of Ms. Laframboise's office, which ensures compliance with the law. Indeed, all new employees must take the training within three months of being hired. Similarly, each party is subject to rigorous follow-up to make sure members are complying with the law and taking the training.

It is clear that the House Administration is making significant efforts to ensure that all parliamentarians and employees have the necessary tools and understand the process should a situation arise.

Members are also responsible for making the policy known and ensuring it remains an active consideration. The policy's implementation is not over and done with just because someone took a three-hour training session after being hired. People tend to forget that. Members have a responsibility to remain mindful of the process and the concepts learned. I agree with Mr. Holland that we should conduct annual assessments within our teams. I want to state publicly how impressed I am by Ms. Laframboise's office and its rigorous follow-up with each member's office and each party. It shows that the issue is being taken seriously.

I am a social worker and a family mediator accredited by the Quebec department of justice, and I've been in management positions my entire life. Perhaps my work experience is the reason I'm telling you this, Ms. Laframboise, but I have tremendous confidence in the process and in the policy, because it is impartial. If anything at all happens to anyone, that person has all the tools they need to speak up, access support, be heard and be guided through the process. I wanted you to know that.

Drafting policies is no easy task. It's not easy to make sure people understand the process and procedures. I think we managed to do that. I say "we" because every single one of us did our part in coming up with this policy. We managed to build a policy that truly lives up to the high expectations, in other words, zero tolerance for workplace violence in any form. My hats off to you.

Like Mr. Holland, I look forward to moving in camera to examine the issues that have been brought to our attention. They are complex because they are human. Anything human is complex. Nevertheless, I repeat, I have full confidence in this policy, a policy that was adopted only recently. As whips, we simply need to remember that we are responsible for making sure those in our respective parties remain mindful of it.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Certainly, I concur with many of the statements made by others and with how important it is to ensure that everyone in this place feels completely safe. I concur that, where there are any allegations that come forward, they be taken incredibly seriously and that there be proper processes in place to make sure that happens. That's a critically important part of any workplace, including this one, without a doubt.

I note, as others have, that we do have two items on our agenda today. This one is in public, which is a more general review. Then there's one that is more specific to the case that precipitated both of these items, which will be in camera. I have some questions now, but they are general in nature in order to help better understand the policy and determine comfort with the conclusion that you have arrived at in relation to the policy and its adequacy.

One of the things that arises for me from this is around workplace assessments. When a workplace assessment is conducted, who participates in that?

• (1210)

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Workplace assessments, typically, are done to establish and get a good handle around workplace culture and the environment. The participation is always voluntary. No one is forced, so it depends on the situation. The mandate of the workplace assessment could vary, depending on what information we're looking for. It really is a sort of fact-finding exercise.

It varies.

Mr. Blake Richards: There is a bit of leeway in terms of who's involved.

What about employees who are on medical leave? Could they participate in an assessment?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Employees who are on medical leave can participate, provided they get medical clearance from their authorizing physician.

Mr. Blake Richards: I understand.

Now, in the case where the circumstances that triggered the medical leave are related to this policy, does that get factored into this equation? To me, it would seem like that might become a shortcoming in this policy. If the assessment is triggered based on an incident and the employee is now on medical leave as a result of that incident, it does seem to me that this person's not being included would potentially be a shortcoming here.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Actually in my experience.... First of all, it's important that we absolutely rely on the physicians to be the ones to make the decision, regardless of the type of medical leave. In my experience, however, I have found that many physicians encourage employees who are on medical leave to be part of an assessment if they feel that it will contribute to the person's wellness and potentially to their healing or getting better.

I have seen both. I've seen some physicians who have encouraged employees to participate, even though they're on medical leave, and I've seen others who just don't feel it's healthy for the employee to do so. We really do rely on the physician's decision.

Mr. Blake Richards: Are the results of the workplace assessments or of harassment investigations that are undertaken provided to party whips or to party leaders? If so, how much detail is provided in those?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Workplace assessments vary. It depends on why you're doing it and whom you're doing it with. You're going to decide at the very beginning what you're going to share.

In some cases, you may make the decision to share outcomes only or recommendations only. It's important to share, though, because the employees have contributed and you want them to be able to get a sense that you are accountable for the results and that you're going to act on them, so you do typically share the outcomes and the recommendations.

As far as whom you share them with, it depends on who requested it and who participated in it. Every party has its own internal structure, so some of these workplace assessments may have been requested by a member of the party, in which case the information may be shared. If not, if it's handled outside, then they may not.

Mr. Blake Richards: When you say "a member of the party", is that specific to the party whip? Is that the party leader? Is it either? Could it be any member of the party? I'm trying to get more clarity as to who can precipitate these things and whom the information would be shared with.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: That also varies. Typically, we deal with the whip and the whip's office, but if it's a member of Parliament who requested the workplace assessment, then it would be shared with them.

• (1215)

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. It's not specific to the whip or the party leader. It could be either or it could be others. Is that what I'm hearing? It depends on the circumstance.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Yes.

Robyn?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I just wanted to add that in a lot of cases with the workplace assessments, because they are outside of the formal harassment process, it's often the member who's requesting it themselves. In those cases, it's the member who is receiving it. In other cases, if the whip might be involved to help support the member, they may get a copy, but that's a little bit different from investigations, which are much more formal. Under the new policy, the whips don't actually get a copy of the report, whereas under the former policy they did get the investigation report.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Maybe could you just clarify for me a little bit the former policy versus the current policy—what role the party whip has, what role the party leader has and what the change is there.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Certainly.

Under the previous policy, the 2014 one, both the whip and the CHRO could receive and have carriage over the complaints. With

the changes that came into effect in 2021, the receipt of those complaints is now placed with a designated recipient. In this case, it's the office of the CHRO, which has delegated it to the respectful workplace program. It doesn't necessarily mean that a whip might not be made aware of an allegation, but then they would be referred to the office of the CHRO through the respectful workplace program.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

I have one other question. What would be the role or responsibilities of an MP who receives allegations about a caucus colleague? Are they supposed to turn that over to their whip? Are they supposed to turn that over to HR? What should an MP receiving allegations about a caucus colleague do with that information? What is their role and responsibility to the person who has brought those allegations to them?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: It would depend also on party structure. As you know, the different parties have different structures in terms of how they report information internally. In terms of the actual policy itself, witnesses can report allegations of harassment directly to the designated recipient.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. So it would depend on—

Ms. Robyn Daigle: The situation.

Mr. Blake Richards: —the policy in place for the particular party. Is that what I'm hearing?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Well, just in terms of.... We don't always.... We get it at one point, but we don't know what's occurred up until that point.

Mr. Blake Richards: Understood.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Under the current policy, the designated recipient is the respectful workplace program. Allegations are most often brought forward by the employees themselves, because we can't proceed without actual specific allegations in terms of a complaint.

Mr. Blake Richards: So the expectation would be that at some point it comes to you, but that may not be the starting point. Is that what I'm hearing?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: It's possible, because for a complaint to proceed, as well, even if it is a third party or witness who provides the information, the individual themselves will have to be willing to proceed with the complaint. We can't proceed without that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

I think those are all the questions I have for now.

Thanks.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go now to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Laframboise, thank you for your presentation.

Obviously, we agree that a policy created to combat harassment and violence is extremely important. It is meant to ensure a workplace free of harassment and violence of any kind. A lot of people have worked hard to achieve that.

As far as the internal review is concerned, what's important is making sure that the policy truly reflects the objectives that have already been set. I'd like to know who was consulted as part of the internal review. Were the whips consulted in connection with this report and the answers we were just given?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you for your question, Mr. Julian.

No, the whips were not consulted during the internal review.

The first thing we did was have our teams and legal service conduct an examination to make sure the policy satisfied all of the legislative requirements established under the Canada Labour Code. The code is pretty thorough when it comes to the elements that a policy on the prevention of workplace harassment and violence should cover. We made sure that the policy met those requirements.

The second thing we did was make sure that the best practice elements in policies outside the House of Commons were in place. We looked at policies adopted by other employers to determine which were the most effective and complete. We can say quite plainly that our policy is on a par with those adopted in other workplaces. We made sure of that.

The third thing we did was examine our own internal process for impartiality and accessibility. We made sure the training was clear and well delivered. We checked our internal mechanisms to monitor the training. We made certain that the policy was not only sound on paper, but also well implemented in real life.

• (1220)

[English]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you very much for that answer. Of course, the NDP on Parliament Hill has a bit of a different structure, because we're the only party that has a collective agreement and unionized workers. There's also a very strict anti-harassment policy within our collective agreement. What we endeavour to do is to take the anti-harassment policies that are agreed on by all parties and add to that the protection that is offered through the processes that are in our collective agreement.

The idea of getting to zero tolerance and ensuring that there is no harassment and no violence whatsoever in this workplace is extremely important, I think, to all parties. We've added an additional and I think important level of protection. I would like to suggest with the internal review that it would be a helpful further step just to consult with the whips of the parties to ensure there's feedback coming in.

I know there is a suggestion in the conclusion that we look to a review, but it seems to me, since the question has come up and since we have this report before us, that it's a useful and helpful next step to ensure that what we're putting in place as an anti-harassment, anti-violence strategy and policy is working; and that

whips, who are really on the front lines for a number of reasons on these issues, have the opportunity for feedback as well.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

As I mentioned, we do have to do a review in three years, but that doesn't mean we don't constantly monitor and evaluate the performance of the policy to ensure that it meets everyone's needs. I think a dialogue, getting feedback from the principal users and stakeholders of the policy, is definitely the way to go, so thank you for that.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there questions or comments?

I believe we have consensus on the recommendation in the conclusion of this report.

Right now we'll proceed to item number six, the quarterly financial reports for the second quarter of 2021-22 and revised 2021-22 supplementary estimates (B).

Mr. St George, our financial officer, will be proceeding.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul St George (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am here today to present the quarterly financial report. The report in your package covers the period from April 1 to September 30, 2021. Reporting is consistent with the practices used for the Public Accounts of Canada.

Total authorities approved for the House of Commons for the current fiscal year are \$561.4 million. As of September 30, the House had spent \$244.6 million, so 46.6% of the amount for the year. The rate of usage has gone up slightly, that is, 0.8% over last year.

[English]

When comparing this year's first six months of expenditures with the prior year's, we continue to see financial impacts from COVID-19, offset by impacts due to the recent general election.

While these have resulted in some of the \$13.8-million increase to date, the majority of the variance was expected, and was driven by the economic increases for House administration employees and the \$22.4 million added to the 2020-21 authorities to support security enhancements, sustainment of information technology, cost-of-living increases and other approved initiatives.

Furthermore, I'd like to bring it to the attention of the board that the \$18 million that was approved on June 28 for the 2021-22 supplementary estimates (B) was reduced by \$300,000 to \$17.7 million to account for the postponement of the 65th Commonwealth parliamentary conference to next year.

The specifics of the report and variances can be found within your package in the quarterly financial report.

Beyond that, Mr. Speaker, there are no other financial material variances to bring to your attention.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

• (1225)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions?

Mr. Holland.

Hon. Mark Holland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I just want to take a moment to welcome Paul to BOIE and to his role.

As well, through you, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Daniel Paquette for his service and wish him a very happy and fulfilling retirement. He's served the House very well. Hopefully, you can extend our appreciation for his work.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions or comments?

Okay. We'll proceed to number seven.

[Translation]

The audited financial statements for 2020-21.

We turn once again to Mr. St George.

Mr. Paul St George: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to present the audited financial statements for the year ended March 31, 2021. They were prepared in accordance with the Canadian accounting standards for the public sector. This document is one of the financial reports that the House Administration provides to the Board of Internal Economy for the purposes of the financial activities of the House of Commons.

During the financial reporting cycle, the unaudited year-end financial report for 2020-21 was submitted to the Board on June 28, 2021. This report contains total expenditures of \$610 million. The purpose of the report is to compare actual year-end expenditures with authorized expenditures and to report any variances.

[English]

From a cash perspective, in the audited financial statements, the modified cash expenditures remain unchanged from the original \$610 million that you have seen. However, the public sector accounting standards require to account for other items such as net amortization and services received without charge—for example, accommodations at \$69 million and other non-cash items—for a total expenditure of \$705 million.

The financial statements are audited each year by an independent external auditor, which currently is KPMG. We are pleased to report that we have received an unqualified audit opinion.

I will now pass the floor to the auditors from KPMG to present the audit results.

Mr. Andrew Newman (Audit Partner, KPMG): Thank you for the opportunity to present our audit opinion on the 2021 financial statements and provide a brief summary of the conduct of our audit.

I am Andrew Newman, KPMG partner, and the independent auditor of the House of Commons. I would also like to introduce my colleague, Alexandra Racine, senior accountant on the audit.

The chief financial officer has presented the 2021 financial statements, which management has prepared using public sector accounting standards. Public sector accounting standards are used by all governments in Canada and are issued by the Public Sector Accounting Board, on which I served as member and vice-chair for 12 years.

Our role as your independent auditors is to obtain reasonable assurance about whether these financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement.

The 2021 financial statement audit officially began with an audit plan presented to House management on May 25, 2021, which was based on multiple discussions with management in the preceding months. Our audit was conducted in accordance with that plan.

During our audit, we received full participation from the House management team and employees. All of our questions were answered, all of the required supporting documentation received and all issues were satisfactorily resolved.

We are pleased to report that we did not identify any new significant control deficiencies during our audit, and our prior year observation relating to payroll change review controls has been corrected by management.

We have completed our audit and issued our audit opinion on July 7, 2021, in our independent auditor's report. That opinion states that "the financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of the House of Commons as at March 31, 2021, and the results of its operations, its accumulated surplus and its cash flows for the year that ended in accordance with Canadian public sector accounting standards."

That concludes my report.

• (1230)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

I want to thank you, Mr. St George, Mr. Fernandez, Mr. Newman and Ms. Racine.

I understand that it is a normal and good governance practice for independent auditors to have a discussion in camera with board members, without management present, regarding the preparation of the year-end audited financial statements. I would therefore like to propose to the board members that we hold a short in camera session without House administration officials to allow the board members to have this discussion.

Do I have the acceptance of the members to proceed in camera?

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just before we do, I have a couple of very general questions that I think don't need to be in camera without the officials, for which it would probably be helpful to have everyone here, if you don't mind. They are not—

Hon. Anthony Rota: I just want to make sure I have a consensus. I don't want us to do anything we'll regret later. That's why—

Mr. Blake Richards: No. I'm confident that you'll find—

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. I'll trust your confidence, then. Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have just a couple of very general questions for Mr. Newman from KPMG.

With regard to reporting relationships, I wonder if you can give us your advice on what is the best reporting relationship for an organization's internal auditors, if you have any advice on that. I guess maybe I could even ask, specific to our situation, is that reporting relationship best to the Clerk, to the Speaker or directly to the board...? What would your thoughts or advice be there?

Mr. Andrew Newman: Thank you, Mr. Richards, for the question. Through you, Mr. Speaker, you referenced "internal auditors", so I do want to acknowledge that I am the independent external auditor of the House. I'm not your internal auditor.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, understood.

Mr. Andrew Newman: As the leader of our local not-for-profit group practice for many years and a former national leader in education for KPMG, I can say that the normal course for an internal audit relationship would be for the reporting relationship to come to what would normally be referred to as an audit committee or a board, in the normal course. In the House of Commons environment, that would be this board, I would believe.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, much as you are coming to us to report your external audit—

Mr. Andrew Newman: That's correct.

Mr. Blake Richards: Ordinarily, you would suggest that the internal audit would be presented to the same board or body.

Mr. Andrew Newman: That would be the ordinary course in a public sector organization, yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I have just one other question.

With regard to the materiality threshold, I believe your audit has a materiality threshold of \$5 million. Now, we're not all accountants or, as in my case, married to one, so could you just elaborate in layman's terms on what that means for those who may not—

Mr. Andrew Newman: Yes, Mr. Richards. You're very lucky to be married to an accountant, I have to say.

Mr. Blake Richards: I believe I am, yes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Andrew Newman: You have to say that. You're in a public forum.

Yes, we do set an audit materiality of \$5 million. That's about 0.7% of the expenditures of the House. For a public sector organization—and that's how we view the House, for obvious reasons—the threshold would be between 0.5% and 3% of the expenditures of the organization, so 0.7% is very much on the low end of the scale.

The reason it's at the low end of the scale is that when you look at users of the financial statements, you also look at certain factors, such as, are there investors? Are there debt holders? But for the House of Commons, one of those factors is, is it a high-profile organization with lots of people who are interested in those statements? For obvious reasons, the House of Commons qualifies for that, so that is why we're at the low end of that threshold.

What does materiality serve? It serves two purposes. One, it helps determine the nature and the extent of testing that we would do. That doesn't mean that we can only test things over \$5 million. It means that when we put in statistical sampling, the \$5 million is one input into that. In addition, it is a quantitative estimate on the level of misstatement that could be in the financial statements that would not impact the accountability or an economic decision of a reader of the financial statements.

Total operating expenditures in 2020-21 for the House were about \$730 million. What that means is that there would not be a different accountability decision, based on a read of the statements only, if that number were in fact either \$725 million or \$735 million.

Now, clearly, this board and management have a much higher level of precision required in what you can do day by day, but that is just based on the reader of these financial statements. Would they make a different accountability decision on the cost to run the House of Commons if it were in that range? Materiality gives you a range around the benchmark number, which in this case is the total expenditures.

● (1235)

Mr. Blake Richards: As a last thing, to go even more basic than that, just to explain this to someone in really simple layman's terms, on that \$5 million, if we're talking about something that's \$4.99 million, what does that mean?

Mr. Andrew Newman: Okay. If it's \$4.99 million, that's pretty close to the \$5 million. What happens when we find—or were we to find—a misstatement is that for anything that is above 5% of that number—in this case, \$250,000—we would speak to management and ask that it be recorded, corrected, in that regard. We would report that to management on our findings on whether it was recorded or not. If those were viewed as significant, we would report them to, in a normal sense, an audit committee, but in this case, this board.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate your indulgence.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. We will proceed to go in camera. Do I have the acceptance of members to proceed in camera?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[Translation]

We will now break for a few minutes so that the committee can move in camera.

I will now ask House Administration staff to leave the room. When our discussion is over, we will let House Administration staff know that they can rejoin the meeting. Those participating online will be placed in a virtual waiting room and re-admitted to the virtual meeting at the appropriate time.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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