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• (1105)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I call the meeting to order. If I could have your attention, we'll start.

[Translation]

We will move on to the agenda of meeting number 14 of the 44th Parliament.

[English]

This is meeting number 14 of the Board of Internal Economy.

[Translation]

The first item on the agenda is the minutes of the previous meeting.

Does anyone have any questions?

No questions, okay.

[English]

We'll continue with item number 2, business arising from previous minutes.

Are there any questions?

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would first like to thank you for writing an official letter to the Translation Bureau so we could get this invaluable information. I was expecting that there would be a response in my agenda book to the questions we had asked during testimony by the Translation Bureau.

Second, I would like to say that I am very pleased that the third item, concerning interpretation services, has been included in the agenda. Given recent events, it is a subject that it is very important to discuss.

Thank you for adjusting the agenda and prioritizing interpretation services in our discussions today.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You're quite welcome. We are here to serve you.

[English]

Are there any other comments on the business arising from previous meetings? No.

Now we'll go to item number 3.

[Translation]

Ordinarily, we should go on to the third item on the agenda, but I would like us to move quickly on to the fourth item, because the member who is testifying is here right now and she has other important things to do.

If everyone agrees, I would like us to move on to the fourth item on the agenda before going to the third item.

[English]

We'll do that one quickly, if possible. We'll bring forward Ms. Dzerowicz and Mr. LeBlanc, who will give us a short presentation. Hopefully, if there are any questions we can have them answered.

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Chair, Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association, House of Commons): Good morning, everyone.

[English]

It is a true pleasure for me to be here before such an esteemed and august committee. I am here with Jeremy LeBlanc, who is the clerk assistant in charge of international and interparliamentary affairs. I come before you to ask for your approval for Canada to host the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's annual session in November 2024 in Montreal.

Earlier this summer the executive committee of the Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association asked the international and interparliamentary affairs directorate to prepare a draft budget for such a session, which it did. The Canadian NATO parliamentary executive committee adopted the draft budget and asked that I submit it for your consideration.

The budget, which all of you should have a copy of, is in line with typical costs and follows the guidelines for annual sessions held in Canada, and meets all the requirements of the international secretariat of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. It has been prepared to take into account the number of participants, which, according to the international secretariat, will be 650.

I'll mention a few other things. Canada was specifically asked if it could step up and host this session in November 2024. The reason is that because of the illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine, the NATO European countries have lots of extra things they have to deal with. They have asked if Canada can step up and host this meeting. It's an important conversation, particularly in the times we are in right now. It also provides an opportunity for Canada to step up and show leadership in hosting this discussion.

I also want to mention that I have been before JIC, the joint inter-parliamentary council, and I've also been before CIBA. Both of them have approved both our hosting of the session and the budget.

I would now like to open the floor for any questions.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Does anyone have a question or comment?

[*English*]

We have a recommendation in front of us.

Is everyone in favour of the recommendation?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Ms. Dzerowicz and Mr. LeBlanc.

Now we'll move on to item number 3. We'll allow the witnesses to come up.

This is something that has been very important to all of us—and to people's health, if nothing else—so that we all have interpretation in both official languages.

[*Translation*]

Everyone wants this to be resolved.

We will start with Mr. Aubé, Mr. McDonald and Mr. Lemoine.

Mr. Aubé, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As you remember, at the last meeting there were discussions on the analysis and the reporting that was done on the quality of the in-room systems, both by the NRC and by our team and our experts who are supporting our team. We finally have some results that are coming back based on the final analysis that was done a little bit more than two weeks ago. We met with the NRC and the translation bureau on Monday.

[*Translation*]

In those discussions with the two teams who support us in analyzing our systems, the National Research Council of Canada and the consultants, we were able to confirm that the audio systems we use in person comply with the ISO standard. We agreed on that point.

We also agreed that there is no loss of intelligibility in the hybrid mode in which meetings are currently being held when people participate in the meeting remotely. That is the second thing we wanted to verify with the NRC and our teams.

Last, there was the issue of the sound quality in terms of frequencies and notches. The data that was analyzed independently by the two groups over a period of about two weeks showed that the frequencies used at in-person meetings complied with the standards and there were no notches in the sound that would have the effect of reducing the sound quality for the interpreters.

At that meeting, we also agreed that there is a lot of work still to be done in terms of the sound tests that have to be done before the meeting with the people participating in the meeting. We also have to check that the sound quality is good.

We will have to continue establishing formal processes that will enable us to decide whether or not those people may participate in the meetings. That is the last point on which the two organizations want to work together in order to make progress. The two organizations are going to have to work together to establish a procedure to assure us that the sound quality is good. There is always a risk that sound quality will be bad, but we want to prevent that happening. We have to be able to give the interpreters a guarantee that the sound is good quality, before the witness appears.

Those are essentially the results I wanted to provide to the committee.

I had been asked for reports.

[*English*]

The report that we have right now is a one-pager. Basically, that's what we have, and we've asked our board of consultants to provide the detailed reports. We're going to get them translated and submitted to the board in the next few weeks, as soon as we receive the final documents from both the NRC and the consultants. We felt it was important today to bring that back so that we can provide the status of where we are.

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

I hope that answers the questions that were raised at the last meeting.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there questions or comments?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm wondering whether we should hear all the witnesses before asking our questions or we should ask our questions as each one speaks.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I don't think there are any other presentations.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The appropriate person answered the questions, but there was a presentation from...

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I was thinking that Mr. McDonald was also giving a presentation.

If I may, Mr. Chair, I would like to ask a few questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I am pleased to see that the scientists at the National Research Council of Canada, the NRC, and the experts hired by the House administration have agreed to work together to achieve the results referred to earlier. The last study done by the experts is still confidential. When it was sent to the members of our committee and of the Procedure and House Affairs Committee, it was still identified as not accessible to the public. I don't know whether the plan is to make it public shortly, but we are being asked for it. Since we are being diligent, however, we are respecting confidentiality.

I am eager to read the final report and the scientists' conclusions, because that may enable us to explain why there are still serious accidents relating to acoustic shock. Despite all the efforts made, accidents are still happening.

I understand from the reading I have done that there is an ISO standard that applies to the audio system in the House, but there is no quality standard for the hybrid system. There needs to be more documentation about this. As has been said, it is obviously very important to do everything in our power to reduce the number of accidents and improve the interpreters' workplace safety.

As we know, the House has decided that meetings could continue to be held in hybrid mode until June 23.

I wondered how we, the people around this table, had the power to make simple changes that might give the interpreters more support.

I have read the documents that were also distributed to members of the Procedure and House Affairs Committee carefully. If I understand correctly, members are increasingly attending House debates and committee meetings in person. Based on observation, an average of 70% of members attend debates or meetings in person and 30% of members attend virtually.

However, the figures are reversed for witnesses: 70% of people testify virtually and 30% of people testify in person.

If we want to give the interpreters more support, it seems to me that we should make efforts to switch the numbers by June 23 and get back to what the numbers were before the pandemic, that is, 30% virtually and 70% in person.

That will certainly change how the work done by the team of clerks is organized, now that they have got into the habit of working with people who testify virtually for the most part. To make that change, there will have to be political will. The clerks also have to be asked not to give witnesses the option of participating in the meeting virtually, as was previously the case. In my opinion, we have the power to make a decision and we can influence the clerks, so that they invite witnesses to testify in person. I think we can make changes in this regard by June 23.

I also suggest that we discuss the mandatory of headsets, that is, the one that has been approved by the IT team to reduce injuries as much as possible.

I must say that I find it a bit unusual that I need to say that this is a way to reduce injuries, since, in my opinion, it is a rule that people should already be following. Unfortunately, there are still members, witnesses and chairs who do not follow the rule about wearing headsets.

Parliamentarians and House officers should use every means at their disposal to make headset wearing mandatory.

● (1120)

One analysis found that some people will not want to testify if we require that they wear a headset.

We have been working in hybrid mode for two years. We may have got off to a bad start and are finding it hard to understand how we could bring witnesses back to meetings in person and make headset wearing mandatory, but I think that is a very tangible way of showing the interpreters that we take their health problems seriously.

I am an eternal optimist, as we know, and I am always positive and constructive.

I know that the chair of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food and the chair of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities have taken responsibility for this and said they would refuse to let anyone speak, whether witness or member, who was not wearing their headset.

However, other chairs allow witnesses to appear without headsets. That is the case for the chair of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, for example.

So there is some inequality at present. Each committee decides for itself how it will function, but things can't go on this way. It seems to me that we have a responsibility to provide the interpreters with the best possible working conditions. At the end of the day, if too many interpreters are injured, the labour shortage and the inadequate number of employees will have direct consequences on the ability to access interpretation in both official languages.

My third suggestion will have to be taken under consideration by my colleague, the government whip: committee chairs should not chair meetings virtually; they should do it in person. I believe they should set an example.

I rarely speak without getting information beforehand. We have prepared an outline of the situation, based on three weeks of meetings, and we have determined that nine chairs are in the habit of chairing meetings virtually as often as possible.

I think it is within our reach to explain to them that chairing a meeting virtually is not an optimum solution when all the other committee members are present. If our committee asks the chairs to chair meetings in person by June, the point when we will be making a decision, it will reduce the risks for the interpreters, which is our goal.

I can certainly provide the names of those nine chairs to my colleague, the government whip. They would need to be made to understand that by June 23 they will have to be chairing meetings in person.

I don't imagine that the Speaker of the House of Commons would be presiding over debates remotely. It is hard enough to do it in person, but it would be even harder to do it remotely. The same thing applies to committee chairs.

Some people have told me that a chairperson could chair a committee remotely if they were sick, for example if they contracted COVID-19. In my opinion, when you are sick, you take leave. After all, there are two vice-chairs available to replace them.

Those are the three methods I am proposing. I think they are constructive and easy to implement and they would be in addition to the efforts made to improve the pre-testing process.

I agree with Mr. Aubé that the pre-testing is not being done equally diligently in all committees. Some tests are not done on the day itself, and members of the second panel of witnesses often don't have to pass the tests. There are several gaps in the testing process. I think the pre-testing process should be uniform in all committees. If you want examples, I can give several.

I want to raise two more points.

I feel it is my duty to speak up since the Senate does not seem to be as concerned as we are about the interpreters' working conditions. Mr. Aubé, is it true that it is the pages in the Senate who do the sound tests with the witnesses and senators?

• (1125)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for her question.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, in the Senate, at present, it isn't the technicians who do the tests, but I can't tell you whether it is just the pages who do them. However, I know there is a team present to do the tests, but its approach differs from ours. As you know, in the House of Commons, pre-testing is done when the witnesses are invited to appear and another test is done before the meeting, to make sure the sound is adequate. The Senate's strategy is a little different. They have been left to do things in their own way.

I have no other comments to make on that point, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, is it true that the House and the Senate share the same pool of interpreters?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That is a question that would have to be put to Mr. Patrice or Mr. Aubé.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: From what I know, it's the same pool.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: We work with the same resources, but we have different ways of doing the sound tests.

Mr. Rota, could you write to the Senate officially, on behalf of the internal economy committee, to inform it of our concerns? That is only a suggestion, but it would mean we could align the way we work and guarantee our interpreters better working conditions. Essentially, we share the same resources. It would be different if the Senate had its own interpreters and we had ours.

It seems to me that the Senate should be made aware of our concerns, since we share the same pool of interpreters.

Is that an acceptable solution for you and my colleagues?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Personally, I don't think it's a problem. If everyone agrees, we could write a letter to the Speaker of the Senate to inform him of how we do things. He would then be able to understand how we operate. We can't control the senators; they do what they consider appropriate. If we show them our approach, they will perhaps adopt it.

Is everyone in agreement?

[English]

Is everyone okay with our writing a letter to the Senate and saying, "These are our best practices", and encouraging them to do the same?

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (House leader of the New Democratic Party): Mr. Chair, may I have the floor?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, your name is on the list, Mr. Julian.

[English]

I have Ms. Findlay and then Mr. Julian, but please go ahead. If there's something to add to this suggestion, please do.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: I think our approach to the Senate should be firmer, even though we can't require them to do anything.

I think it's important to tell the senators that we want to make sure they will not be tolerant of people who do not have the necessary equipment, the purpose of which is to protect the interpreters. There has to be a zero tolerance policy on this.

Our approach has to be firmer. The Senate needs to comply with this obligation. We can't just tell it that we have adopted better practices.

It's unfortunate that the interpreters are still suffering injuries, and everyone wants to avoid that happening anymore.

The House of Commons and the Senate share a responsibility to the interpreters. If they have questions or they want to discuss it further with us, we are prepared to do that. However, there has to be a zero tolerance policy on this, to avoid workplace injuries.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Our door is always open.

We will do what is best for members and senators. The Senate and the House are different entities, that is, they each have their own managers.

We will write a letter. After that, I can consult you to see whether you are satisfied or I can send it myself.

[*English*]

I don't want to start with the big guns firing right off the bat. I'd rather open up diplomatically with just a concern, with suggestions. Hopefully they will take them seriously. I'm sure their interests will fall into play.

We share the same pool of interpreters. If we start injuring our interpreters, then both sides lose. Interpreters lose because they lose people, and they're injured. Obviously, that's a personnel problem. The Senate loses because it loses resources, as does the House of Commons. Let's put something together, then.

I can appreciate what you're saying, Mr. Julian. Maybe it will be a little bit more of a firm request. I don't want to come across as Arnold Schwarzenegger, for lack of a better word, as the Terminator. It's more about seeing how we can progress in a way that we all benefit from, but thank you.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

Are there any other questions?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I have a question concerning procedure.

I would also like to say something else, if time permits. Of course, I also want to allow my colleagues to speak.

I identified three methods: invite witnesses to testify in person, require that headsets be worn, and ask the chairs to chair meetings in person.

In terms of procedure, what should be put in place to require or order that these three methods be implemented?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think Ian McDonald will answer your question better than I can.

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

I think the best way to deal with all these issues might be for a decision of the House to say clearly what rules and procedures the committees must follow. The committees have a relatively high degree of latitude, so a committee can also make certain decisions.

The limit is imposed by the Standing Orders and the procedure and practice of the House.

In terms of mandatory headset wearing, that is already part of the information that we send witnesses. However, we know that a certain number of witnesses don't wear them.

If we really want to reinforce the idea that these headsets or a headset approved by the technical services of the House has to be

worn, it is important that there be a clear decision about that; the decision can be made by the committee or by the House.

On the subject of committee chairs being present, I think the motion passed by the House on June 23 gives all members the option of participating in the meeting in person or remotely, so I think it is important that this be a decision of the House

Regarding testimony in person, a motion was passed unanimously by the House on April 6.

The motion reads as follows:

That, notwithstanding any order adopted by the House, as of Monday, April 25, 2022, at their discretion, witnesses appearing before any standing, standing joint, special, special joint or legislative committee may either do so in person or by videoconference.

The House passed a motion to give witnesses that option. A clarification may be needed, but it is important to point out that we have also heard witnesses by videoconference for over 20 years.

We simply have to find the best way of presenting it. The important thing is that we want to encourage it. However, in some circumstances, witnesses have to be given the choice. I am thinking, for examples, of witnesses who are outside Canada or who cannot travel. If the committee in fact wants these witnesses to appear, it has to give them the opportunity to do so remotely.

That can be a decision made by the House or the committees.

We are prepared to work with any party to introduce a motion in the House or in committee.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will let you think about that.

I don't think we can make that decision here at the Board of Internal Economy.

If I understand Mr. McDonald's remarks correctly, it can be done by motion in the House or by agreements in the committees.

[*English*]

Next we have Ms. Findlay, followed by Mr. Julian.

Go ahead, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip): Thank you.

With respect to the letter to the Senate, with all due respect, I don't feel we could say, "We expect you to impose a zero tolerance rule" when we don't have a zero tolerance rule ourselves yet. We may be moving in that direction. It's clear that our translators and the expertise they provide are a very precious commodity that we all share, but I would support the approach that you've suggested.

I also think that the letter should go to the Prime Minister, as chair of the cabinet committee. Cabinet uses the same interpreters. It's something we need to all join in on and be part of in trying to do better.

With respect to Madame DeBellefeuille's various suggestions, I want to say that Conservatives agree that the chairs should not be virtual. It's important for committee business. Also, when chairs are trying to deal with people both in person and virtually, etc., things are happening in the moment with the clerks, etc. They really should not be appearing virtually.

I have been in committees where almost all the members were present but the chair was virtual. I can say that those meetings did not go as smoothly or in as orderly a fashion or as quickly as when the chair was there. We support the idea of committee chairs being there in person. If for any reason they can't be there, that's why we have designated vice-chairs. Someone else can take the chair if they're sick or if there's a good reason they can't be there.

We would also encourage witnesses to be in person. It's the way we used to do it in the old days. Most witnesses appeared in person unless there was a reason they could not, and then we made video conferencing available.

It is clear to me that with the precious commodity of our translators, to a certain extent members of Parliament prefer their convenience to the health of these workers, who are essential to our business. They've made it very clear, from what I understand, that a lot of the problems they're facing or the workplace injuries they have occur because of virtual proceedings. If they're in person and we're in the room, they have a much easier time of it and we don't have the same extent of reports of injuries.

We would also agree that this should be encouraged and that we somehow go back to the way we did it before, when it was possible to appear, but not just an open invitation. We have processes that we used in the past to offset some expenses and things like that. We did it before. I think we can do it again.

I also think, along the line of zero tolerance, that we need to find a way to have some consistency across committees. I understand committees like to see themselves as the authors of their own business—and they are—but on this issue, a workplace safety issue and a health issue, for committees to operate very differently does not seem prudent or even reasonable to me at this stage.

Thank you, Mr. McDonald, for mentioning that as of April 25, we gave discretion for appearing. There must be ways to change that or encourage that it be changed in order to accommodate these workplace safety issues, which I don't think were as evident in April as they are today. We have actual injuries, actual hospitalizations and the like.

I have, along with some comments, a couple of questions.

I understand that at the start of the pandemic, when we had to look for virtual options, the Zoom video conference platform was assessed as the best option, at least at that time. It's been suggested by some that Zoom is not the best option, as it is the Zoom platform itself that has been contributing to the interpretation challenges.

• (1135)

Do we routinely review and assess video conference platforms to ensure that we're using the one that is most fit for the purpose? Could you enlighten me?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think Mr. Aubé would be best to answer that question.

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

Since the beginning of the pandemic and even after we made the choice of Zoom, Madame Findlay, we have been continuously reviewing. We have a five-track continuous improvement program with the translation bureau that we've been working on over the last few years. We continue to actually do that. One track is assessing other platforms. Through these assessments, we've looked at different platforms. It was clear and it came out—and we mentioned that at this committee—that there's no standard to which all these platforms adhere. There's no virtual standard for ISO when it comes to ISO platforms for conferencing platforms of the kind we're using.

Having said that, I will tell you that we've assessed the majority of them. When we selected Zoom, we had assessed a multitude of platforms, and we've continued to do that. We still believe that the platform we're using is the right choice.

I would just like to correct one part. We don't believe that it's the platform that's causing the issue. We believe that it's the users, the environment that they're participating in, the headphones, and the connectivity that they're using that are causing the issue. It's actually not the platform, because the platform is performing really well. I would suggest that we don't see any issues with 95% of the participants. It's that 5% that's left that we keep bringing back in our dashboards that we need to deal with.

• (1140)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I'm glad to hear that you're constantly looking at it and reviewing it. I appreciate that.

My understanding is that PROC heard testimony from a Welsh assembly official who said that their workplace surveys reveal that their interpreters are satisfied and very happy with their working conditions. Do we have a handle on the technological arrangements that they have in place, which have led to what appears to be more satisfaction with their systems?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: At this time, I wouldn't be able to comment, Madame Findlay. However, I would certainly love to come back to you and make a comparison. I can tell you that we've worked with the Welsh assembly during the pandemic, at the beginning. I have not been kept up to date on any changes they could have made since then, but we can come back and provide you with some feedback as to the differences in what they're using.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I'd appreciate that.

Next, there was a shortcoming....

Do I call you “Chair” or “*Monsieur le président*” or “Speaker”? What do I call you in these meetings, as a newcomer here?

Hon. Anthony Rota: “Chair” is probably the right one—either “Mr. Chair” or “Mr. Speaker”. Whichever one you’re comfortable with I’ll respond to.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chair, a shortcoming was identified in the consultant’s report we had before us earlier this autumn concerning the headsets used by the interpreters in the booth. Is that equipment the responsibility of the House or the translation bureau? That’s my first question.

Second, what efforts are under way to ensure that the headsets are upgraded in light of that report’s findings?

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

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

The headsets, Madame Findlay, are the responsibility of the bureau. They’re not the responsibility of the House, these particular headsets. Different interpreters would like to use different headsets, from a comfort perspective, but they do have a series of them that meet the standards that are required. We are working with them to ensure that they are standardizing on the headset aspect.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: That’s in process, in other words.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: That’s in process.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I see.

Next, Mr. Chair, the procedure and House affairs committee will soon be considering a draft report on hybrid proceedings. Through the chair, Mr. Aubé, I’d like to know your views on the viability of rules concerning the microphones and Internet connections used by those connecting remotely to hybrid meetings. Do you have a view on this?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It’s clear to us that three main factors are affecting participants or the quality of the audio when they’re participating: their microphones—and that’s why we’re recommending that headset with a particular microphone—their connectivity and their environment. We need to test them to ensure that when they are participating, they’re actually meeting the requirements.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Mr. McDonald, would you like to add to that?

Mr. Ian McDonald: If I may, yes. Thank you.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I think the question was also about the rules related to the equipment. Rules, such as standing orders or other rules, need to be flexible so that they can adapt to whatever new standards emerge as new testing takes place.

Also, there are different types of microphones. We have certain witnesses who will appear who can’t wear a headset with both earpieces on, for example, or can’t use an earpiece at all, so they end up using a desk microphone. It’s just that there would need to be some flexibility in terms of thinking about possible rules around microphones and headsets. It’s important that they would be House of Commons-approved to make sure that they meet the standards so

that we don’t have a return of audio quality concerns. At the same time, the wording would have to be a little bit flexible on the headset, I would suggest.

• (1145)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Last of all, Mr. Chair, I think we’re all frustrated by the lack of resources, especially translation resources. This is leading to changes in scheduling quite often—weekly, if not sometimes daily.

The government has taken upon itself to cancel committee meetings unilaterally of late, especially, it seems, when Conservative private members’ bills are on the agenda. We are hoping we can return to greater consultation and co-operation on which committees should be cancelled for whatever the business is at hand, and we would like to see, as I said, some better co-operation on that.

Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will leave that to the House leaders to work out among themselves.

Mr. Julian, I still have your name down on my list, but I don’t see your hand up. Do you want to ask some questions as well?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Aubé, could you confirm that at present, about 70% of witnesses appear before committees remotely?

In addition, on the subject of the sound tests, do we have an idea of the percentage of people who do not meet the ISO standards?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: In answer to your first question, we are in the process of validating the information we have submitted to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I will provide it to you in a few seconds.

However, I did not quite understand your other question. When you talk about ISO standards, are you referring to users? At present, those standards are not used to measure sound for users, they are used for the audio distribution system.

Mr. Peter Julian: That means that those measures are not currently being taken. All that is done is to make sure people are wearing the mandatory headset, but we don’t know what percentage of witnesses meet ISO standards.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: ISO standards aren’t used to measure sound for users. However, each witness who participates in a parliamentary committee meeting has to pass a sound pre-test. That is the rule and we intend to continue applying it. The technicians carry those tests out before the witness appears, to make sure that connectivity, the microphone and the environment are adequate.

However, witnesses sometimes arrive at the last minute. As was said earlier, a small percentage of people still participate in the meeting even if the sound quality is not as good.

At the beginning, the interpreters were involved in the process. We wanted different people to give opinions about the quality of the sound. That process changed a little during the pandemic, because we didn't want the interpreters to be taking risks by participating in the tests. At present, it is qualified technicians who evaluate the sound quality: they listen to people talking and ask them questions, to make sure the sound will be adequate during the meeting.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Let's come back to the question of zero tolerance.

I am in New Westminster at the moment. One kilometre from here, there is a Scott Paper Ltd. plant. When you visit it, you have to wear safety equipment like a helmet, a vest, and other things to be visible and avoid injury.

It seems to me that we should take exactly the same approach, that is, mandatory wearing of a headset. We should even inform witnesses that they could not testify if they do not wear the headset. I agree with what my colleagues have said, that headset wearing is mandatory.

In addition, the chair of a parliamentary committee should be physically present during a meeting or, if not the chair, the vice-chair who replaces them. I think everyone takes this seriously and it should be the same for the Senate.

Mr. Chair, I would not want you to be like Arnold Schwarzenegger, but I would like you to talk about the importance of the situation in your letter to the Senate. An interpreter was sent to hospital. That is something that should never happen again.

Solutions have to be sought with the Senate to make sure that all our interpreters are protected and that occupational health and safety standards are complied with. That is a responsibility we all share.

The importance of this has to be reiterated in the letter, along with the fact that we want to work with the Senate so it never happens again. We have to be very clear that we are adopting a zero tolerance policy when it comes to workplace injuries, and that starting now, people will not be able to testify if they are not wearing the headset. It's as simple as that.

Those are the comments I had and I agree with the comments made by my colleagues.

• (1150)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Aubé, do you have a comment to make or an answer to give?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I would like to come back to Mr. Julian's question and tell him that in September, it was 71%.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you. We will continue with Mr. MacKinnon and then Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

You have the floor, Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank my colleagues for their comments. Mine will be very short. However, I would like to recognize the work done by Mr. Aubé, Mr. McDonald and Mr. Lemoine, which is always appreciated, particularly since it was done in exigent and less than ideal circumstances.

Mr. Chair, I note that you sent the letter to the Translation Bureau. At our last meeting, we agreed, or at least it was understood, that there would be additional resources. I note that you requested details in writing. Since that letter, and in response to your questions, has there been an answer, or even conversations?

Hon. Anthony Rota: We have not yet had an answer to our questions.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I know that Mr. Ball and his colleagues were very clear, and I definitely understand the challenges the Translation Bureau is facing. However, the message was quite clear regarding the available resources they had identified, further to our various efforts to find new capacities.

We all want to see a safe work environment, we all want the interpreters to be able to come to work without fear of injuries, and we all would also like to move on to something else, because our committee is spending an enormous amount of time on this question.

I don't feel that I have the skills to analyze reports from the National Research Council of Canada on sound quality, but I accept Mr. Aubé's explanations on that subject. I certainly do not doubt that we have pulled out all the stops to make sure we have the best equipment and the best possible working conditions for our interpreters, in spite of the challenges posed by virtual Parliament and the other arrangements we have put in place.

However, I very much hope that we will be able to move on to something else. I think that unduly limiting the work of the Parliament of Canada because of this issue is starting to get irritating. We have to look to our partners at the Translation Bureau to get answers and additional resources, and I think the answers are slow in coming.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to tell everyone who is listening to us that I very much hope that, in addition to a safe workplace, we could ensure continuity and that the resources needed for Parliament to function properly will soon be available.

I know there is no easy answer to this question, but, as valid as it is, we have to resolve it.

• (1155)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Right.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille will now have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to conclude on this subject and I will be brief.

Mr. Aubé, I am still wondering about something. I know the pre-testing is done two or three days in advance, when possible. However, you have just said that, essentially, the key elements are the connection, the headset and the environment. So I understand that whether or not a witness may testify will be determined on the day itself.

You make a lot of efforts upstream to eliminate or equip certain witnesses, but the fact remains that the tests done on the day of the meeting itself are the determining factor. I know that few witnesses have their equipment and their connection tested, especially if they are in a second panel of witnesses. That is not acceptable, in my view.

Today, we have to send a clear message to the administration and ask it to do everything in its power to ensure that the testing process is uniform in all committees and that it is done on the day itself for both panels of witnesses.

I would like to raise one final point and here I am referring back to what was said by my colleague the government whip.

As administrators, we can't get a clear idea of the interpretation capacity we can expect in the short, medium and long terms, knowing very well that there are going to be retirements. We have asked the person in charge at the Translation Bureau to help us understand where we are heading.

As we speak, there are 57 events scheduled. Nonetheless, committee meetings are being cancelled when the House sits for extended hours, and it might be said that people think this is normal. Personally, I think it is completely abnormal.

Let's not forget that as we speak, the plan is for hybrid sessions to be held up to June 23, 2023. I don't know what decision will be made for the rest of the parliamentary session, but the fact remains that we can't continue cutting back parliamentary work because we lack resources, not just for interpretation, but also for IT support.

If Parliament sits until midnight, do we know how many events it would take for us to determine what we are lacking in order to maintain resources at a level that meant no committee meetings would have to be cancelled?

At present, even with the increased resources, committee meetings are being cancelled, and, in my opinion, that is unacceptable at this point in our hybrid Parliament.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. McDonald or Mr. Aubé, would one of you like to answer the question?

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

It is certainly frustrating for us also. We are spending a lot of time managing interpretation capacity, sending the whips daily updates, and communicating the adjustments needed when things change over the course of a day or a week.

We are working closely with all the partners to verify the daily capacity, but, in the longer term, we want to know what the capacity will be in January. We would like to determine when things are going to get a little more back to normal, and we would like to avoid cancellations when the House sits late or when a committee wants to sit longer.

We know it is problematic at present and we are doing everything possible to find solutions. We will be starting to prepare for January over the next few weeks, and we hope to have more information in the weeks to come.

I believe Mr. Aubé would like to add something.

• (1200)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: You are correct, Mrs. DeBellefeuille and Mr. Chair.

In the House, we always try to adjust our resources based on Translation Bureau resources, which we know are limited. We do the same thing when it comes to IT.

We have had discussions recently to try to increase our capacity to provide that flexibility. The three teams will nonetheless agree and determine the maximum capacity.

The pool of interpreters at the Translation Bureau is limited and we are trying to coordinate the services. There is no point in the House hiring more people if we can't count on there being more interpreters. Our approach is to adapt and give you the most resources possible to produce the most events possible.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I have read that we needed between 30 and 70 interpreters to handle our 57 events.

How many interpreters would be needed in order for nothing to be cancelled if the House of Commons has to sit until midnight?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will hand the floor over to Mr. Patrice.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): I am taking note of your request, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, and we are going to work with our partners to do modelling that will take these various scenarios into account.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That will allow us to assess the difference between the number we have and the number we want, and the steps taken by the Translation Bureau to make up the difference.

I know my colleague would like to move on to another subject, but interpretation and access to both official languages are very important. The burden is borne by francophones at present since more than 80% of witnesses speak in English. A lot of the responsibility for interrupting people to raise points of order falls on the shoulders of the members from the Bloc and other parties who want to understand what is being said in the other official language.

I therefore think that we have to send the interpreters a message that the Board of Internal Economy considers it a priority to ensure optimal functioning that makes it possible to guarantee both the interpreters' safety and the high quality of the interpretation in both official languages.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

[English]

Go ahead, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Mr. Chair, when we're looking at capacity, I think we also have to recognize that right now, although we see ourselves as operating bilingually, we have virtually no interpretation services for any ad hoc meetings. For parliamentary associations, stakeholder meetings or anything where we want the full participation of all members of Parliament, those resources simply aren't available at all, because we're already having to cancel committee meetings because of limited resources.

It has certainly come up in our meetings that it's limiting our ability to work bilingually on all of the things that we members of Parliament do within our world here and in our dialogue.

Thanks.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any other questions?

[*Translation*]

Because no one else wishes to speak on this subject, we will now move on to the fifth item on the agenda.

Just before that, I would like to give a clarification.

[*English*]

I just want to make sure that the letter will go out to Senate as well as to the Prime Minister's Office to make sure that both cabinet and Senate are aware of our best practices and will hopefully stick by them.

Now we will go on to item 5. It's the Joint Interparliamentary Council report on parliamentary associations' activities and expenditures for 2021-2022.

We have Mr. LeBlanc coming forward. Mr. LeBlanc, the floor is all yours.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This is the annual report on the activities and expenditures of parliamentary associations that the JIC forwards to the internal economy committees of both Houses each year.

Since there was a moratorium on travel that only expired on April 1, there were a limited number of expenditures, as you might expect. They were largely the international contributions that Parliament makes to belong to multilateral associations. The rest of the envelope was unspent.

There were also limited activities that associations were able to do for some of the reasons you have just been discussing, but there were a number of virtual activities held by associations that are part of multilateral associations.

• (1205)

[*Translation*]

These associations had the support of the technical resources of the international secretariats.

If you have questions about the report, I will be happy to answer them.

It is essentially a summary statistical report on the activities of the associations during the last fiscal year.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there questions or comments on the report?

[*English*]

Go ahead, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: It's a question, Mr. Chair.

Can you confirm that the funding envelope for interparliamentary associations is approved as part of our annual budget process? In other words, will it be part of our discussions later this autumn when we're considering the 2023 budget?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: The envelope is approved as part of the main estimates process each year. You're correct. As with all activities for international and interparliamentary affairs, it's funded on a formula of seventy-thirty, so 70% of the budget would come from the House of Commons and 30% from the Senate. It's approved through the main estimates process of both Houses.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: As a follow-up, Mr. Chair, can the board impose conditions or caveats on these budget envelopes?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: What sorts of conditions?

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: For instance, if we felt that there would be a reason to review or limit certain resources available to certain associations, is that something we can do, or has that arisen?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: Ultimately, the boards have the authority to recognize or not recognize associations. I would suggest perhaps that the Joint Interparliamentary Council is a more appropriate forum, since the JIC provides oversight to all associations and has representation from both Houses.

If there were conditions that members wished to impose on the activities of certain associations, or if they wanted to have the budgetary allocation to different associations reflect certain priorities or certain conditions, then the JIC would be able to make those decisions, I would suggest.

I think that's probably a more appropriate forum, since it includes representation from both the House and the Senate, as opposed to the internal economy committees of each House doing it separately.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Last, Mr. Chair, in the environment we're in and alluding to the previous conversations, I'm wondering how interparliamentary associations are functioning in this environment of limited resources. Are they reverting to in-person meetings for now? Is that how they are operating for the most part?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: I would say that the capacity challenges are particularly felt for meetings of executive committees or meetings that occur within the parliamentary precinct.

In terms resuming travel to conferences overseas or for bilateral business in other countries, they are able to do that because they are not limited by the need for interpretation resources. For example, a briefing that occurs before such a trip is difficult for us to organize, because it's difficult to access the resources we would need. In some cases, we have had to offer two separate briefings, one in English and one in French, because we can't have interpretation resources.

Executive committees are finding it quite challenging to be able to meet during weeks when the House is sitting, so by and large, they have been regulated to meeting during recess weeks, which means the meetings are virtual. Members are in their ridings during those weeks, by and large.

Yes, there has been a challenge for associations to access resources to be able to function at the same level they did pre-pandemic.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I appreciate those answers. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any other comments or questions?

Mr. LeBlanc, if you want to stay, we now have item number 6.

I'm sorry. It's the other Mr. LeBlanc. That's my mistake. I was going to say Mr. J. LeBlanc, but that wouldn't help much either.

We have Mr. LeBlanc, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc (Principal Clerk, Journals, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today, I am presenting a submission on behalf of the parliamentary internship program.

This nonpartisan program was established over 50 years ago following a motion unanimously adopted by the House of Commons. It gives ten recent graduates the opportunity to work with government and opposition MPs, carry out research on parliamentary issues, and participate in academic programs. The interns' services are always very much appreciated by the members who host them.

The program is administered by the Canadian Political Science Association, the CPSA, which is the interns' employer. The program is funded entirely by the sponsors. The Speaker of the House is the honorary patron of the program. The House of Commons provides 50% of an administrative assistant's time to support the program and facilitates access to meeting rooms and certain training and translation services. Unlike similar programs in the provincial legislatures, the House does not provide any direct funding to the program.

• (1210)

[*English*]

Today I'm presenting three requests on behalf of the CPSA.

First, they note that the stipend paid to the interns has fallen well below that offered by comparable internship programs. While the PIP, the parliamentary internship program, has secured increased

contributions from its sponsors, allowing the stipend to increase to \$29,000 this year, they feel it unlikely that existing sponsors could support further increases needed to match similar initiatives.

Increasing the number of sponsors would also prove challenging, as the PIP already manages relations with over 45 sponsors and partners.

Also, it's hoped that an increase in the amount of the stipend can help improve the diversity of the program by attracting candidates from under-represented communities who may face financial barriers due to the relatively low value of the stipend.

The CPSA notes that all other legislative internship programs in Canada receive the majority, if not the totality, of their funding from the host legislature. They're asking the House to consider a similar approach by committing to fund a portion of the intern's total compensation. Different options are presented in the submission. For example, the House could agree to finance the gap between the existing stipend and the proposed amount, or it could agree to finance a certain percentage of the stipend.

If the board agrees, it is proposed that this support would begin next fiscal year and be reviewed again after five years.

[*Translation*]

The second request concerns the number of interns.

In 1969, when the program was founded, the House was composed of 264 MPs; it now has 338, while the number of interns has remained constant at 10 interns. The interns' services are in high demand and a small increase in the number of interns would mean that more members would have access to their services. It would also give more young people the opportunity to participate, including those from underrepresented communities.

For the reasons already addressed, it seems unlikely that additional interns could be funded by the existing sponsors. If the Board of Internal Economy agrees to increase the number of interns, the CPSA would ask that it provide funding for the additional interns' salaries and the various costs associated with their study trips and training.

[*English*]

The third request deals with IT equipment and support. At present, host MPs are responsible for providing IT devices to their interns out of their own allotment. The CPSA has asked if the House would consider providing a secure laptop device to each intern during their participation in the program.

This would also facilitate the ability of interns to work remotely if required, something that has become much more commonplace since the pandemic.

I would be happy to answer your questions.

Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any questions on item number 6?

Do we have a consensus on going ahead with all three items?

I believe we have a question. We have Ms. Sahota, please.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Deputy Government Whip): First, I will talk about what I am clear on. On the increase for the number of interns, we should go ahead and increase the number by two additional interns.

Then on the IT equipment, I think it goes without saying that IT equipment should be provided. Given the way we are doing so much virtually, they should have access to the IT equipment needed. I don't think the cost would be too high on that. I believe the House of Commons has in its possession quite a lot of equipment as it is that could be provided to the interns.

Then, on the first question of the stipends being increased, I was wondering if I could have a little better explanation between the first and second options on how we could increase that.

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

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: The options that are proposed in the submission.... The current stipend is \$29,000 per year. The internship program is hoping to increase it to \$35,000 per year.

The first option that's presented would be for the House to pay the difference between the existing stipend and the proposed amount. In the options that are listed in point 2, there are three different percentages. If the House were to agree to provide, for example—and these are percentages suggested by the CPSA—25% of that \$35,000, 30% of that \$35,000 or 33% of that \$35,000, that is what those numbers mean.

• (1215)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It sounds like number one is the simple option to go with.

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: It's fairly straightforward, yes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: How does everyone feel about that?

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll have Mr. Julian, followed by Ms. Findlay.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to understand. If we're talking about thresholds for the House of Commons providing support, I completely agree with the increase in the stipend.

What does it mean if we take a lower percentage, as opposed to a higher percentage? How is that difference made up?

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: The answer to that question is that the program at present is entirely financed through private sponsors. Depending on what the House is willing to contribute, they would make up the difference through their own fundraising with their sponsors.

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay. Thank you for that.

I would argue for a higher percentage of the House of Commons' support for the simple reason that this is a really important program, and the reality is that the cost of living has skyrocketed for

everybody. The average one-bedroom apartment in Ottawa is now close to \$2,000 a month, I think.

Having an increase in the stipend for pages who are doing important work on our behalf is important. It would also make sense to ensure that the program is able to do that and that the House of Commons contributes the higher percentage to ensure the stability of the program.

They do terrific work and their work is even more important now, so I support the recommendations and think we should bring them forward.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go on to Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Mr. Chair, I have a question.

Are there any concerns that the association's usual sponsors—I think you said there are over 45, which is excellent—might reduce their contributions if the House starts funding some of the program's budget?

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: That concern hasn't been expressed to me by the CPSA. The CPSA has indicated that perhaps one of their main reasons for requesting funding from the House is that management of those relationships with sponsors has been rather unpredictable. Every year, they lose a few sponsors and they gain a few sponsors, and they're constantly trying to build up sufficient support to provide the reliable budget they need.

I suppose it is possible, but it's not something they've expressed.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

I tend to go more toward topping it up to what is being asked for, as opposed to a percentage. The reason I say that is that if we end up on a fixed percentage, it seems to me we might be tied to automatic increases in the support any time the program chooses to increase its stipend, as opposed to looking at it at that time to see what would be appropriate. I'm more in favour of the idea of contributing up to the suggested amount.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Good.

Go ahead, Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It looks like we're building consensus around this.

My question is a bit offside. I wanted to know, in terms of the 45 sponsors, if it's ever made transparent as to who the sponsors are for the PIP. There have been findings of the Ethics Commissioner regarding what types of groups can present interns or which interns you can take from which associations, and the declarations that have to be made accordingly. I'm wondering, with 45 different sponsors, how we are to know who is sponsoring these interns.

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: I believe the list of sponsors is on the parliamentary internship programme's website, so they are transparent about who is sponsoring the events.

I recognize that the concern raised by the Ethics Commissioner was also a concern that troubled the CPSA, because the program, while funded through private sponsors, is a program that was created at the request of the House and is administered by the CPSA at the request of the House. It's an official non-partisan program, so there was perhaps some concern expressed that the program be treated differently than other internship programs that are sponsored by perhaps more specific groups.

• (1220)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: According to my understanding, the Ethics Commissioner hasn't really come out and made a decision one way or the other on that. Is that right?

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: I'm not an expert in that matter.

My understanding was that the Ethics Commissioner expressed some concern around the idea that the services of an intern could be seen as free labour—essentially as a gift that could be used to influence members of Parliament. However, the CPSA's position is that the program is a non-partisan one. It's not built to advance any particular interest, especially not those of the sponsors. It's something the House asked to be created.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe our legal counsel has a comment to make on the ethics as well.

Mr. Michel Bédard (Acting Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel): If I may, there was an advisory opinion on the issue in 2018 by the Ethics Commissioner. The issue was looked at by this Board of Internal Economy. PROC has also studied the matter and made recommendations for amendments to the code. The report is now before the House.

After BOIE had looked at the issue, a letter was written by the then-law clerk to express the fact that since the program was established by a motion in the House, in our view it was not putting the members in conflict of interest, provided that it was sponsored by the program. There was no decision or inquiry report made on this matter.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I understand that at PROC we put forward that recommendation. I'm just wondering where that will end up landing and what the results will be.

Thank you for explaining to me your understanding of the 2018 advisory opinion.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any other questions or comments?

There seems to be a consensus around the amount for the increase in pay. That's good. The other one is two additional interns as well as the IT equipment. Is it fair to say that we have consensus on that?

Very good. Perfect. Thank you, Mr. LeBlanc.

Now we'll bring on Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc for item number 7.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

In June, the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians wrote to the BOIE with a proposal to substantially increase the

funding that it receives from Parliament. The board asked the international and interparliamentary affairs directorate, which has the administrative responsibility for staff assigned to the CAFP, to analyze this request.

[*Translation*]

The brief you have presented outlines the support currently offered by Parliament to the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians: two logistics officers, who also devote their time to the Parliamentary Spouses Association but work mainly for former parliamentarians, and an administrative budget of about \$29,000. It should be noted that there was a third logistics officer from 2005 to 2012 and the budget was slightly higher at the time.

As for all expenses for international and parliamentary affairs, the funds are shared between the House and the Senate on the 70/30 basis.

In addition, Parliament provides the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians with office equipment, office space, access to meeting rooms within the precinct and access to translation and interpretation services.

[*English*]

The briefing note compares the support that Parliament provides with the support provided to some other external organizations, such as the parliamentary internship programme, which we were just talking about, and the Canadian Study of Parliament Group. It also compares the support that this group receives with that provided by other legislatures to similar bodies, ranging from no funding or support provided at all by the U.S. Congress to its association, to a 230,000-euro subsidy provided by the European Parliament, along with three staff people.

Section D of the briefing note outlines the funding request that was presented by the CAFP. It attempts to provide some context on how the proposed programs may complement, or in some cases overlap with, existing parliamentary activities such as, for example, the orientation and transition support that is provided by the members orientation program, the outreach promotion of Canadian democratic values or the election-monitoring activities that are done by some parliamentary associations.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

One of the problems we encountered in analyzing this request is the lack of details concerning how the funds would be spent. It seems that a large part of the funds would be used to pay the salaries of the additional personnel or travel expenses for members of the Association.

However, it should be pointed out, as we do in the note, that the budgets for the parliamentarians who participate in the activities of the parliamentary associations or committees are subject to approval processes and to oversight, review and proactive disclosure mechanisms.

[English]

As this isn't the administration's request, we did not make a particular recommendation to the board but are instead seeking some direction from you. If you are favourable to the association's request to create or expand certain programs, then perhaps we could seek more detailed information from the association about how it intends to spend the funds for that program or arrange to have the president of the association appear before the board and answer some questions.

If you are open to increasing the administrative support that's provided by Parliament, either by restoring a position that was cut earlier or by modifying the operational budget, then we could provide a more complete picture of the funding associated with that. This would also require, however, the approval of the Senate since, as I noted earlier, the costs are shared between the two Houses.

[Translation]

If you support the idea of restoring or creating certain programs, but you think they should be funded by other means, we suggest certain options for doing this.

Thank you for allowing me this time. I hope our analysis will be useful in assessing the association's request.

I am prepared to answer your questions.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We have a question. Go ahead, Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I believe we should go with the suggestion that further information be provided as to how this funding would be used and what accountability measures would be put in place for this committee so that we can better understand how this funding is getting spent.

We could have the president here, but I don't think it's necessary. Of course, if he chooses to come and explain, I think anyone is welcome.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Generally speaking, I don't really see either enough detail or a business case proposed here. This is an extraordinary amount of money to be asking for.

I note in some of our notes under "democracy building initiatives" that half a million dollars was for the Global Democracy Initiative, an organization that has become inactive, and there was half a million dollars for an election monitoring program that was previously funded from a not-for-profit organization.

I just don't see the business case here. In my mind, this is not something I'd be inclined to support. However, if there is any notion of looking at it, then I think we need a lot more detail, a proper business case put forward and some answers.

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

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I am thinking somewhat the same thing as my two colleagues who just spoke.

I was a former MP myself, in 2011, and I can tell you we are offered excellent services to support us and provide guidance. The programs currently offered by the House administration are very good. I therefore don't really see what role this association would play in this new program.

As the deputy government whip said, we have a lot of important matters to deal with at the BIE. In all sincerity, I don't see the need to ask people to come back here to provide us with additional information, because I don't get the feeling we will authorize this big expenditure for the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will now hand the floor over to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously, we don't have enough information today to grant the association's request. However, it will always be open to the association to provide us with more details at another meeting, in a few months. That is what we should tell it: there is not enough detail and we have questions about programs that don't exist or programs that already exist. The association can provide us with those details later, of course. However, we have to let it know clearly why we are not granting its request today.

● (1230)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Right.

Mr. McKinnon, you have the floor.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I think we are all on the same wavelength.

I also think the proposal is lacking details. It would be useful to us, as well, if the House administration could tell us whether some of the services the association is requesting funding for are already offered by the House administration or by other government agencies.

Mr. Julian has proposed that we ask the association to provide us with more details and the accountability measures associated with them. I think that is a reasonable request. We should communicate with it. Personally, I would be prepared to hear what they propose to us.

In any event, I agree that it is lacking in detail and we would have to know the House administration's views as to what possible overlaps it might cause.

If everyone agrees, I would ask that we communicate with the association to obtain additional details.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Right. I think there is a consensus among the members.

[*English*]

We'll continue and ask them for more details.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. LeBlanc.

[*English*]

Now we'll go to item number 8, ground transportation between the secondary residence and the normal place of work.

We have Monsieur St George and Mr. Fernandez.

[*Translation*]

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

I am addressing you today to seek the approval of the Board of Internal Economy for updating certain provisions of the policies on MPs' travel when they are in travel status.

The first point concerns travel expenses between the secondary residence, which may be a hotel or a rented or purchased residence, and the normal place of work. Under the policy, members who are in travel status are personally responsible for those expenses. The House administration recommends members be allowed to be reimbursed against their office budget for travel between their secondary residence and the normal place of work.

[*English*]

This measure would provide members with greater flexibility when choosing a secondary residence further away from the parliamentary precinct, where lodging could be more cost-effective.

The second item of the submission relates to car rentals within the national capital region. These also are currently not an allowable expense under the policy. The administration is recommending that when members are in travel status and their eligible employees are more than 100 kilometres from their normal place of work, car rental costs be charged to the member's office budget.

The proposed changes would standardize the policy, which currently allows the reimbursement of other living expenses when members are in travel status. As the expenses would be charged to the existing member's office budget, no additional funding would be required.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'd welcome any questions the board may have.

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

[*Translation*]

Are we agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

● (1235)

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: That went well. It was easy.

Very good.

[*Translation*]

I am now going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes before we go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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