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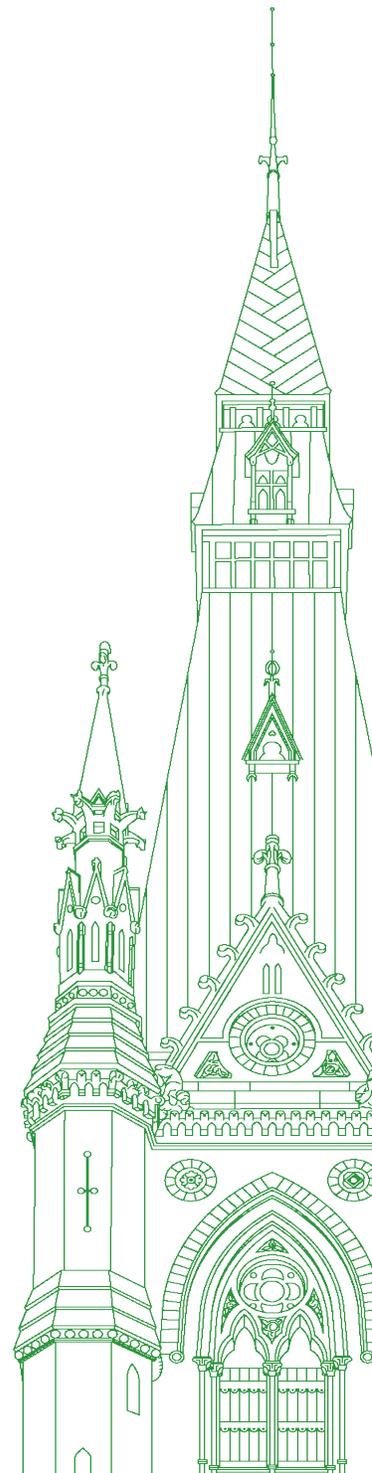
Board of Internal Economy

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Thursday, February 16, 2023



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• (1105)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): This is meeting number 18 of the Board of Internal Economy.

[Translation]

Today is February 16, and this meeting is televised.

Members of the Board of Internal Economy are participating remotely, by video conference.

[English]

Before we go to the first one, I'd like to change the agenda a bit.

Would that be okay?

[Translation]

Item 3 requires a bit more time, so I suggest we deal with items 1, 2, 4 and 5 first. I think we can get through them fairly quickly.

[English]

Then we can move on to number 3 and take our time. I believe that one will take some time.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): I'm fine with that, Mr. Chair, but we have to discuss item 5 in camera. Were you planning to have the committee go in camera to discuss item 5 and, then, resume in public to deal with item 3?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes. Those in the room can stay for the in-camera portion of the meeting. We will discuss what we need to discuss in camera, after which, we will come back to item 3.

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): I'm fine with that as well, Mr. Chair. I hope all of my fellow members will stay to discuss that item and not try to duck out.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Some things I can't control, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. That said, considering everything that's going on in the House and in committees, I don't think anyone will slip out.

That brings us to the first item of business, the minutes of the previous meeting.

Are there any questions or comments?

I see that the committee is in agreement.

[English]

Under business arising from the previous meeting, item 2c is Internet expenses for members and their employees.

Ms. Findlay, do you want to cover that?

Mr. Eric Janse (Acting Clerk of the House of Commons): Was it Ms. Findlay who wrote a letter?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes. Ms. Findlay wrote a letter asking...

Do you want to speak to that? Either you or Ms. Findlay...

Mr. Eric Janse: I'm assuming Ms. Findlay might like to start. If not, our finance folks might.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. Maybe we'll let the finance folks talk to it first.

Mr. Eric Janse: Ms. Findlay, do you want to introduce it?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. It's fairly straightforward. I think anybody who has read it understands it.

Ms. Findlay, if you want to say a few words on that, that would be great.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip): I think it is quite straightforward. The issue is, I believe, payment of bills for Internet at your home or for staff at their homes, which, given the circumstances that Canadians find themselves in, having a difficult time paying bills and with inflation at the high rates it is at, seems to be something that should be a personal expense and not tied to your job as an MP or as staff to an MP.

That being said, some MPs have spoken to me and said that at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdowns, etc., when they had to work from home, being in particularly rural communities, they had to upgrade their Internet. One MP even had a tower erected in his backyard in order to facilitate that. However, those costs were incurred in the past. Now that we are where we are, our feeling is that this should be a personal expense and should no longer be charged to members' budgets.

We as a party have taken the step of telling our members not to claim those charges anymore. I believe others have done likewise, but I don't know the status for all the parties.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Mr. Holland.

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'll just add that we concur. We have advised our caucus the same. While there may have been a time when this particular item made sense, in the contemporary context it does not. Internet is something we all have to have in our homes, in the same way that we have to have hydro. I think for principal residences, it makes sense to withdraw the ability for members to apply for that.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: I just wanted to ask how many MPs accessed the home Internet costs over the past year.

Mr. Paul St George (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): If it's the percentage, we're looking at about 20% in terms of claims of the 338 over the last fiscal year.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that.

Were those MPs from all parties, or preponderantly from one party?

Mr. Paul St George: That would be from all parties. That's primary residence only.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have anything else, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian: I don't have an objection to the proposal. I saw some news reports that indicated that one party seemed to have accessed the home Internet costs more than other parties.

I think it's important that we have a consensus on this. I have no objections. It's fair to say that in BOIE we have a responsibility to take off our partisan hats. I will suggest that something like that shouldn't be, when we have correspondence around the BOIE, trying to tweak a sort of partisan element to it. I didn't appreciate the tone of the letter, but I certainly appreciate the intent.

• (1110)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

We'll now go to Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm fine with changing the policy, Mr. Chair. It's important to ensure that the rules keep pace with the times. I completely agree with Mr. Holland on that. We should ask the House administration to repeal the policy.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very well.

[English]

Are there comments on that?

Go ahead, please, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I just wanted to add that I think the preponderance of MPs who serve rural ridings was the issue—not in all cases, but as I said, to my knowledge, those representing rural ridings have upgraded their Internet to a standard that is acceptable in the House and in committee.

At this point, I think we should move forward now, as the government House leader said, to look at the modern and current situation and act accordingly.

Thanks.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe we have consensus at the table. Everybody is nodding their head in favour.

The question is timing. I understand that it was in place until the end of March. Is that a good time to stop it from continuing? If we do it right away, it might cause some confusion.

[Translation]

I propose ending it on March 31, at the same time as the policy.

[English]

The expiration of the rule will cause it to sunset. Is that fair? Does that work well?

[Translation]

Over to you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's fine with us, Mr. Chair.

I think people have heard or read that almost every party has already opted to halt the practice. Logically, then, there shouldn't be any requests coming in, since each caucus came to the decision on its own.

I understand that, from an administrative standpoint, the rule has to expire, so it's better for that to coincide with the end of the fiscal year. It's important for those following today's proceedings to understand that the members of each caucus made the decision to put an end to the practice.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Everyone is in agreement, then.

[English]

Everything is in place. Very good. I believe we have unanimous consent, which is nice.

Now we'll move on to number four.

Monsieur St George, Monsieur Fernandez and Ms. Lafontaine will be presenting on the quarterly financial report for the third quarter of 2022-23.

Go ahead, Monsieur St George.

[Translation]

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

Today, I am presenting the quarterly financial report for the third quarter of 2022-23.

This unaudited report, based on a modified cash basis of accounting, was prepared by the administration. I attest to the accuracy and reliability of the information provided in the report.

As of December 31, the House had spent \$391.6 million, which is an increase of \$24.8 million over the same quarter last year.

The increase is mainly due to four items.

The first accounts for more than half of the increase, so \$11.6 million, resulting from an increase in travel costs as activity levels on Parliament Hill increased and public health restrictions were lifted.

[English]

The second item represents an increase of \$3.6 million in equipment costs, mainly due to equipment delivery delays in the previous year and IT projects in support of members and equipment life-cycling.

The third item is also attributable to increased parliamentary activities and amounts to \$3.1 million for supplies for food services and printing services.

Finally, the fourth item accounts for \$2.7 million, an increase mainly for IT projects and initiatives related to members' security enhancements and higher hospitality costs.

Most importantly, it should be noted that as of December 31, the House was operating within the approved authorities, and there are no other financial material variances or concerns to bring to the board's attention.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my presentation. I welcome any questions the board may have.

• (1115)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any comments?

[English]

Okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. MacKinnon.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): Thank you for your always diligent work.

I have a very quick question.

My understanding is that the increase over last year is due to activities resuming once public health restrictions were lifted, meaning that members returned to Parliament Hill instead of continuing to work remotely.

Mr. Paul St George: Yes, Mr. MacKinnon. The rise in parliamentary activity accounts for the entire increase.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there other questions?

Okay, we'll now go in camera. We'll take two minutes, have a bit of a break, and then come back. While we are in camera it shouldn't be very long. I'm going to ask those who are not privy to this to please vacate. At 11:20 a.m., we'll start with the in camera session.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

• (1115)

(Pause)

• (1150)

[Public proceedings resume]

• (1150)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We are ready to carry on.

We are now on agenda item 3.

Thank you for agreeing to deal with the items out of order so we could spend a bit more time on item 3, which is a very important item for everyone here and at the House.

Before we begin the discussion, I'm going to ask Mr. Janse to give us a bit of background on the subject.

Mr. Eric Janse: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[English]

As the newly appointed acting clerk, I would like to state on behalf of the House administration that we fully realize how challenging and frustrating the issue of interpretation capacity has been and that, frankly, it has taken too much of the board's time.

This issue is a priority for us, as it is for the translation bureau.

[Translation]

A few weeks ago, Dominic Laporte became the Translation Bureau's new CEO. One of the first things he did was contact me so we could meet to discuss the matter, which we did. Since then, he has been meeting with Ian McDonald and Stéphan Aubé nearly every day.

[English]

The three of them have some information to share on the issue. Afterwards, of course, we'll be more than pleased to answer your questions.

I think Dominic is going to start, if that's okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes.

Our presenters today are Monsieur Dominic Laporte, chief executive officer of the translation bureau, Matthew Ball, vice-president of the translation bureau, Ian McDonald, clerk assistant of the committees and legislative services directorate, Scott Lemoine, principal clerk of committees, and Stéphan Aubé, chief information officer.

Now we'll turn it over to Monsieur Laporte.

[Translation]

Welcome, Mr. Laporte, and congratulations on your appointment.

Mr. Dominic Laporte (Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Good morning, honourable members of the Board of Internal Economy. I would like to recognize our parliamentary partners who are here today. I would also like to recognize and thank Cécilia Shea, Bernadette Blain and Linda Ballantyne, who are providing the interpretation services for today's meeting.

I am pleased to appear before you for the first time since taking on the role of chief executive officer of the Translation Bureau in January. Of course, you know the fellow who is with me today, Matthew Ball, vice-president of the services to Parliament and interpretation sector.

It is with great humility that I appear before you to discuss the complex issue of interpretation service capacity.

Over the past few weeks, I've had the opportunity to examine the issues affecting interpretation services in an effort to grasp all the implications. Matthew Ball and his team gave me a detailed history of the situation, describing the significant measures that have been implemented.

Let me assure you of something: my priority is to step up efforts to ensure the health and safety of interpreters, while, as you mentioned, improving interpretation capacity.

[*English*]

Since my arrival, I have met with the House administration partners who are in charge of the technical setting for interpretation services. They have clearly explained the logistics that need to be taken into account from Parliament's point of view, as well as the difficulties that service interruptions and the lack of capacity cause for parliamentarians.

As far as capacity is concerned, as you may have heard, our accreditation exam in November added 10 new freelancers to our pool. Their arrival does not in itself represent an increase in our capacity, given the number of injured interpreters and departures, but they are still welcome reinforcements.

We are also continuing to work with the House administration to implement the provision of interpretation from outside the parliamentary facilities using freelance interpreters. We now have contracts in place so that we can provide two additional two-hour meetings per day from Monday to Thursday, as we promised in December, using interpreters outside of Ottawa.

We are working on another long-term project to increase our capacity, such as a tour of universities to foster the next generation.

That said, even if we increase the number of interpreters, we won't make any headway if we cannot guarantee their health and safety.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

I've had the opportunity to meet with our staff interpreters twice in the past two weeks. I was extremely impressed by their professionalism and their determination to serve the needs of their parliamentary clients. I was also very moved to hear how distressed they were by the current circumstances. It's terrible to learn that interpreters can no longer go to concerts and have trouble hearing their

children at play because of hearing injuries they suffered while doing their jobs.

Those discussions actually helped dispel a misconception I had. I was under the impression that if the audio quality was fine for me, as a virtual or in-person participant, it was also fine for the interpreters. That is completely untrue, however. Interpretation is so cognitively demanding that in order for interpreters to listen and speak at the same time, the audio has to be broadcast quality.

That is why improving the sound quality is so crucial. The use of proper microphones by participants is part of the solution. Another part is encouraging participants who are in the area to attend meetings in person. What's more, the Internet connection, the computer equipment, the audio system and education all play a role, and it doesn't end there.

After seven weeks on the job, I am well aware that there is no magic formula to fix everything. It's a long-term undertaking. I understand the challenge we are facing.

When I say "we", I don't mean only the Translation Bureau. One thing is clear to me: the bureau can't fix this on its own. All the stakeholders have to work together. The bureau is grateful for the House administration's support.

[*English*]

Honourable members of Parliament, you are certainly aware of the direction that Employment and Social Development Canada's labour program issued to the translation bureau on February 1, 2023. In accordance with these directions, our interpreters are instructed, as of February 6, not to interpret participants who do not use an appropriate microphone. We will soon be commissioning random sound tests in real work situations in the House and Senate committee rooms.

These instructions are in line with the work we were already doing with the administration to improve sound quality. They are not the solution to everything, but they clearly illustrate how important it is that we remain truly committed to our efforts.

Every new measure and every small gain in our long-term work to promote sound quality benefit not only the interpreters, who can do their work safely, but also the translation bureau, which will have improved capacity thanks to a healthy workforce, and the users of interpretation services, who will enjoy more stable services.

Honourable members of the Board of Internal Economy, thank you for your co-operation with the translation bureau and thank you for inviting me to speak on this important topic.

Matthew and I will now be happy to answer your questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Do we have any comments or questions?

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

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

It's my turn to congratulate you on your appointment, Mr. Laporte. I wish you much success as you take on this new challenge in your career. I appreciate the magnitude of the challenge you're facing, with the labour shortage and the impact it's having on one of our valuable resources, interpreters.

I read the letter you sent the Speaker on February 15, and I have a few questions.

That is well within the bounds of the topic, is it not, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes. Go ahead.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Wonderful.

There's been a lot of information out there about how many interpreters were trained and wrote the accreditation exam. There was talk of 70 interpreters at one point. At the end of the day, my understanding is that 10 interpreters passed the exam. They are Canadian residents and are at the end of the security clearance process, but they opted not to accept positions with the Translation Bureau as staff interpreters, unfortunately. Instead, they decided to work as freelancers. From what I gather, for freelancers, the House administration is a client like any other client whom they agree to provide a certain amount of coverage to.

In simple terms, the additional resources are calculated not in interpreters, but in blocks of time or shifts, because they involve freelance capacity.

In your letter, you say that the bureau will provide coverage for eight meetings or shifts, so two hours per day from Monday to Thursday, as promised.

Do I have that right?

Mr. Dominic Laporte: Yes, that's exactly right.

I would like to clarify, though, that the new resources for remote simultaneous interpretation are not resources that were previously assigned to Parliament. Those individuals, who do not live in the national capital region, do represent new resources, so that is really additional capacity. The two additional events per week that we will be covering—for a total of 59, instead of 57—are events that we would not have been able to cover without those interpreters.

• (1200)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Those resources come from the off-site interpretation pilot project, which we are examining. Do I have that right?

Mr. Dominic Laporte: Yes.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Very good.

I have another question.

Both the House of Commons and the Senate require your interpretation services, Mr. Laporte. Who will decide where the interpreters covering those eight new shifts or meetings are assigned?

Mr. Dominic Laporte: With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I'm going to ask Mr. Ball to answer that.

Mr. Matthew Ball (Vice-President, Services to Parliament and Interpretation Sector, Translation Bureau): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The bureau schedules the daily assignments according to client needs. As you already know, the bureau prioritizes services to Parliament first. Once those interpreters agree to work for us, we decide which meeting they will cover.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have anything to add, Mr. McDonald?

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

I simply want to point out that, once the Translation Bureau makes the resources available, the whips decide who gets the available meeting capacity, whether for committee or other meetings. Usually, committees are given priority, but it's always up to the whips.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Will we be sharing the capacity for the new shifts with the Senate, or is it strictly for the House and its committees?

Mr. Matthew Ball: The freelancers working for the translation bureau serve both legislative chambers. Their priority is Parliament, before clients from the Government of Canada.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Who will decide whether they go to the Senate or the House of Commons? The needs of the House of Commons and its committees are already not being met. Who will make the decisions? How will agreements be reached? What is the mechanism?

Mr. Dominic Laporte: Since the remote simultaneous interpretation pilot project is being conducted in close partnership with the House of Commons, the resources will be allocated to the House at first. I think we will learn a lot from the pilot project.

To be honest and quite frank with you, we are not necessarily planning for additional resources. I talked about the limited capacity. The new resources will simply allow us to continue providing the services we currently provide to the Senate and the House of Commons, in the same proportion.

We are not in a situation where we can allocate additional resources to the Senate or the House of Commons, except through the remote simultaneous interpretation pilot project, which we are conducting with the House of Commons Administration.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I see.

I understand that the pilot project was set up by the House of Commons. The eight new shifts will therefore be attributed to the House.

Mr. McDonald, when will these new shifts be available? Is there a planned start date?

Mr. Ian McDonald: No start date has yet been set for the use of this new service, as we are still conducting tests. Once the tests have been successfully completed, we will offer demonstrations to staff from whips' and parliamentary leaders' offices so they can try this new service and find out how it works and what the details are.

We also want to try this service in other meetings that require interpretation services but that are not necessarily committee meetings. Once we have completed these steps, we will give BOIE members, or at least the whips, a report to indicate that the service is ready to be used at committee meetings.

At that point, the whips will be able to decide and determine how to use the capacity that will then be available.

● (1205)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I imagine you have a time frame in mind. Can you tell us when you are hoping to make this service available?

Mr. Ian McDonald: We hope to have it available in mid-April, after the Easter holidays. It will all depend on the other steps of the process, and we will have to make sure everything works without any hiccups. We know that interruptions during committee meetings have a significant impact on parliamentary work.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I'll ask one last question before giving the floor to my colleagues. I'll speak again afterwards if there is still time left.

Mr. Laporte, you know that, since Parliament switched to hybrid mode nearly three years ago, everyone has worked hard to do their job in a virtual and hybrid setting. We are now at the last steps of refining the system, so that everything can be done even more easily.

Your co-operation with the House of Commons Administration is critical to really ensure teamwork. You can support us by following the system's development closely and ensuring people's health and safety, as well as by providing high-quality service with enough resources to meet parliamentarians' needs.

We talked a lot about incident reports, injuries, and all of that. In another life, I was a manager, and I know that incident reports are very important in informing our practices.

I wonder whether your co-operation with House of Commons IT and Administration is close enough that you could send them your incident reports quickly, so that they can follow up just as quickly. Can they use the recordings and do their own analyses for you to also get answers much more quickly? This would allow you to draft and analyze your incident reports.

I sense that there is new, even closer co-operation between the bureau and the House. Will it lead you to communicate quickly as part of your processes, your procedures and your incident reports?

Mr. Dominic Laporte: Based on what I have seen, co-operation between the Translation Bureau and the House of Commons Administration has always been excellent and we want to build on that co-operation.

We have work to do to be able to send information in real time. Often, interpreters will inform us as soon as there is an incident or a service interruption. Multimedia services staff are also informed of the incident. We need to send the information more efficiently and in real time.

I am currently working to hire a director who will be dedicated to these protocol issues. This is an important priority for me.

If we want to be able to correct certain situations and distinguish between problems that are purely technical and those that threaten interpreters' health and safety, we really need technological platforms that will allow for information to be better transmitted in real time.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, you now have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Laporte, I congratulate you.

We have understood that part of the responsibility lies with parliamentarians. I think it's extremely important that all members use ISO-compliant headsets at all times. We are talking with each other and I think we are making progress, but there is still work to do there. Our interpreters do important work and we want to contribute to ensuring their occupational health and safety.

With that said, I would like to know how many interpreters will be hired. If I remember correctly, we were told before Christmas that about 40 new interpreters, 42 to be exact, had passed the exam.

Am I right, Mr. Ball?

Mr. Matthew Ball: In fact, almost 70 candidates took the exam. Of these, many do not live in Canada and therefore would not have been able to provide services. Of the approximately 40 candidates who live in Canada and could provide services if they passed the exam, 10 passed and will be able to provide services soon.

● (1210)

Mr. Peter Julian: So three-quarters of the candidates on Canadian soil failed the exam: that's a pretty high failure rate.

Can you explain whether this is related to their education? Did they almost pass the exam? Do they just need to acquire some concepts and get some more training to pass the exam?

Mr. Dominic Laporte: The success rate, at 23.9%, is one of the highest. I know it seems low, but I would really like to emphasize the rigour with which we select and accredit an interpreter. We want to make sure we have the best interpreters and maintain our quality standards.

I think the Translation Bureau will never lower that bar to get more interpreters. Its exam takes place every year. This year I still consider us very lucky; it's a good success rate.

I know that the Translation Bureau helped interpreters from York University and the Glendon campus prepare for the exam. This has been very helpful in increasing the success rate, but I don't think there is a magic bullet to increase the success rate, especially if we want to maintain the quality of services and not lower the standards.

With regard to the accreditation exam...

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Laporte, excuse me for cutting you off, but I am not talking about lowering these standards at all. That is out of the question, and we certainly want quality interpretation. Nor am I talking about waving a magic wand so that interpreters can pass the exam.

That said, the problem is that there is a shortage of qualified interpreters. In my opinion, the question is how to access more qualified interpreters. I am more aware of what happens in other fields and I know that sometimes people just miss passing an exam. In these cases, as an employer, we might need to find ways to help these people get the qualifications for the job.

Mr. Dominic Laporte: The bureau works with candidates who have nearly achieved a passing grade and encourages them to take the exam the next time.

I am also working with Mr. Ball and his team to take further action. For example, there will be another accreditation exam on June 27. We will now have two exams per year. I know we access the same pool of resources, but if we can get more people interested in taking that exam, that will be very positive.

I am also working on hiring a recruitment firm that will contact other people in settings where the bureau has less of a presence, such as conference interpreters in other organizations, to see if they are interested in taking the accreditation exam or joining the bureau.

I also want to add that some foreign candidates have passed the accreditation exam. Indeed, we do accredit some of them. These are candidates we don't want to forget, because they are very good interpreters. So it's a matter of maximizing the steps to accompany them in a sponsorship process if they want to immigrate.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. I really appreciate your response because it gives me some ideas.

Have you ever done a labour market assessment? Here in New Westminster—Burnaby, we sometimes turn to skilled immigrants to fill certain positions where there is a shortage.

Has the House of Commons ever taken this step to allow those who have qualified outside the country to come and work for us and help solve the shortage of qualified interpreters?

• (1215)

Mr. Dominic Laporte: I will let Mr. Ball answer, as he may know more than I do about what has already been done.

Mr. Matthew Ball: Mr. Julian, we do this in some specific cases, such as for rather rare languages for which there are no resources in Canada.

On the other hand, we have not yet done it for the daily or weekly needs of the House of Commons. However, it could be something to consider.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Holland, you now have the floor.

[*English*]

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

I just want to start by thanking the House administration interpretative services. An enormous amount of effort has gone into expanding interpretation services to improve quality and deal with the concerns of members. I want to acknowledge that work.

I want to acknowledge that we've seen service standards improve. Quality is actually better than it was during the pandemic, which is important. We often forget that even prior to hybrid we had an enormous number of witnesses who were participating virtually. An enormous amount of the volume that the House was already dealing with was at a distance. The improvement of that was important not only for the contemporary circumstance where we have hybrid sittings, but of course it's also important with respect to the witnesses that already existed.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to be plain on this. We spend about 50% of BOIE talking about interpretation services. It is incredibly important, and I don't want to diminish that. It is exceptionally important that those services are available and that we are able to conduct our business in both languages, but I am anxious to find a way, hopefully, to not have this become a one-hour standing item on every meeting.

Maybe what we can do is give this a little breathing room to be able to look at the changes and the work that's being done and come back in time to have a bit of an evaluation of how that's working.

There's one thing I think would be helpful. There were 13 different instances that were enumerated where interpretation was stopped due to a feeling that the meeting couldn't continue because of the quality of the audio. Then, in a subsequent review, there wasn't really a finding that something was going on with that audio.

Because the audio is registered, maybe it would even be appropriate for us to hear what those problems are, in instances where audio is stopped and where interpretation isn't able to be provided. We could go and receive that, as a whip's office, and hear that audio, so we can specifically go and talk to the member about what the problem was. We could sort of forensically dive into that and hear in real terms what is happening with that audio and what concern may be there.

Of course, the service standard we want to deliver on.... As I speak in person right here and now, I am speaking through technology that goes into a soundproof booth. There is a digitization of my voice that is occurring, even as I am here in person. It seems to me that it's a reasonable objective—or at least it should be the objective—to get to a service standard as quickly as possible where if you were to put me, like the Coke and Pepsi taste challenge, in a soundproof booth and I could listen to audio that came in virtually and came from in-person, the sources of those would be indistinguishable. Obviously, that's our goal.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just really want to take the opportunity to thank House administration interpretive services for its work.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[*Translation*]

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

The Chief Government Whip and the Government House Leader tell us often enough that they are weary of discussing this important issue. However, until the problem is resolved and it is going to prevent parliamentarians from doing their job properly, and until the needs are met, I think we will unfortunately have to continue to talk about it.

I commend the work of Mr. Aubé and his team, the clerks and the Translation Bureau, because I know it is quite a challenge. We are making history. We need everyone's participation and co-operation so that parliamentarians can do their job properly while ensuring the health and safety of our interpreters. This is quite a challenge. When we make changes, we have to be patient. I therefore invite my colleagues to be patient and consider that everything needs to be done properly.

My questions will be about the virtual committee dashboard: is it time to talk about it? Can we discuss items 3a and 3b together?

• (1220)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think it's all part of the same topic, so we can naturally move from one point to another, as long as the questions are answered. That's what's important.

You may continue, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

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

I would say we're talking for nothing, because if I believe the dashboard submitted to us for the period ending on December 31, there are no more problems.

I gave each member of the Board our own version of the dashboard, which starts on January 18. This brief document, which I tabled in both official languages and everyone has in hand, including the principal clerk, lists all kinds of problems, be they technical difficulties, interpretation problems or bad equipment. We can see that, every day, many committee meetings were interrupted to varying degrees because of various problems. Very sincerely, when I look at our dashboard, I don't feel reassured, because almost all of those committee meetings were interrupted.

Because I am more of a solutions kind of person, I want to raise awareness among clerks and others because we decided together to make an effort to increase the number of witnesses appearing in person. We know the best solution to protect our interpreters is on-site participation. We cannot refuse virtual participation, because it existed already before the pandemic and will continue. However, before the pandemic, 70% of people testified in person, whereas 30% did so virtually by videoconferencing, as we used to call it back then.

With everything we've been through over the last two weeks, what is the clerks' action plan? What are their instructions? What do they plan to do to reverse this trend, which is hovering around 60-40, so that in the next dashboard, we see it moving in the right direction? I'd like to know what concrete measures they want to implement, mainly for witnesses, who participate in our meetings more than any others.

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

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

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, thank you for your question.

I'd like to seize the opportunity to mention that, for the first time, we included graph 6 in the dashboard. This table includes information on the number of witnesses who appeared in person before committees. We see that the trend changed in December, due to rather specific reasons. First of all, committees were studying bills, which often requires departmental witnesses to appear. Then, when committees were looking at appropriations, departmental officials were often called on to testify before committees. We therefore saw a trend, and it will be interesting to see if it's maintained or not in the next dashboard.

To answer your question more directly, I'd say that there are many possible measurements.

We're currently reviewing invitations sent to witnesses. At the start of the invitation, we almost always offer witnesses the choice of appearing in person or virtually. According to the motion passed by the House on April 6, 2022, witnesses still have a choice and the final decision is theirs, even if committees can inform the clerk they prefer to invite witnesses to appear in person.

Often, there are reasons underpinning witnesses' choices. For those already in the national capital, it's much easier to get to Parliament to testify. However, for those who live in Vancouver or other areas, travel is longer. That's a factor to take into account when it's time to choose between going to Ottawa, which is always a possibility, or appearing remotely.

• (1225)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. McDonald, what I'm saying is there is a way of preparing the invitations to raise awareness among our witnesses about the fact that we are experiencing a problematic health and safety situation. In my opinion, witnesses will certainly respond to this sensitive issue. Some can therefore choose to travel instead of testifying virtually. Obviously, we understand long distances and everything they imply in terms of factors to take into consideration.

However, my opinion is that we should all work together to increase the rate of in-person witness appearances. This committee has held many meetings and therefore heard from many witnesses, between 2,000 and 3,000. I think we may be able to reduce the number of those appearing virtually. I also understand that is an objective for your team.

Mr. Ian McDonald: Yes, we are following this information closely, and that's one of the reasons we now include it in the dashboard.

The other thing to note is that, after receiving information from the Translation Bureau about headsets and microphones, I sent a letter to all committee chairs. I pointed out that committees always have the possibility of asking witnesses to appear in person. It can also cut down the time dedicated to conducting sound tests and improving sound quality.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: The table we just submitted to you, and I invite my colleagues, especially the whips, to read and consult, shows that clerks don't conduct preliminary sound tests. For example, during the February 1 meeting of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, we noted, "sound tests not done."

It is also possible to forget to do the tests. Nonetheless, what measures are you putting in place to make sure your clerks follow the sound test process? How are you making sure to follow up closely with members of your team?

Mr. Ian McDonald: We will make sure to follow up with our clerks to remind everyone of the importance of conducting the tests.

We are also working closely with Mr. Aubé's team, the people in the room and those assigned to technical support. We are also working with the Translation Bureau and the interpretation team to see how to improve the process.

We are studying this closely. In fact, we talked about it earlier this week. We want to see our processes improve specifically in this area over the coming weeks.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I hope my colleagues aren't becoming too impatient with my questions.

Is it true that members participating remotely, either in the House of Commons or on committees, don't do sound tests before taking the floor?

Mr. Ian McDonald: For a while now, yes. A test system is always available for members. They can access it simply by contacting an IT ambassador. Since members often participate in meetings,

however, at a certain point these tests were deemed less necessary. However, we are currently looking into the issue again.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Is it also true that interpreters don't participate in sound tests, and that only IT staff do them with witnesses?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I will ask the Translation Bureau team to discuss it and add it if necessary.

Mr. Matthew Ball: If I may add something, there was a time when interpreters participated actively in sound tests. At one point, they were excluded, but we are currently reviewing the process for them to participate again.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, allow me to add a point.

I heard Mr. Holland's statement earlier. I think it's not efficient to conduct these tests without interpreters if, once the meeting starts, they deem the sound to be inadequate, contrary to the IT staff's opinion. Both the IT staff and interpreters should conduct these tests at the same time, so that both parties can confirm at the start of the meeting whether the sound is adequate. It would save both the IT staff and the Translation Bureau a lot of time dedicated to analyzing each event, since both parties would be partners up at the outset and agree the test was successful. That's what I'm proposing, and I'm trying to convince my colleagues. It would be a good solution.

As you've seen for yourself, I raised a point of order in the House of Commons, because a member participating remotely asked a question without his headset. No one advised the interpreters. No process is in place to check if the equipment is adequate.

Mr. McDonald, how are we going to conduct these sound tests at committees and in the House of Commons? What will the process be? If we don't conduct the tests with members, how can we know they don't have the right equipment?

• (1230)

Mr. Ian McDonald: When interpreters participate in sound tests, time available for committee meetings is correspondingly shortened. At one point, we had a discussion with our Translation Bureau partners to see how to grant a little more time to committee, because we often lacked the resources to extend meetings. In the fall of 2021, during the election, it was decided that it would be enough for the technical team to conduct sound tests. That way, committees would be able to benefit from a little more time. This decision was therefore made in the interest of efficiency and giving the most time possible to committee meetings.

Due to the incidents we have seen recently, however, I think it's important to return to this practice. We therefore requested it several weeks ago, before the House even resumed its proceedings. I know the Bureau is discussing it with the interpretation team. We are also reviewing the issue with our colleagues to see how to return to this practice.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Aubé, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): To answer Mrs. DeBellefeuille's question regarding the House, both the procedural clerk's team and my own team are currently looking into microphone use in the House to provide this information in real time. As always, we leave it up to each whip to manage their members, but we are also looking into different mechanisms to provide you with this information, such as the dashboard, which you already have.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe there are no more comments or questions.

In my opinion, we should all try to set up something that works, as these efforts can attest.

I hope the problems will be resolved soon, and that things can work for everyone, be they members or interpreters. Our democracy has to function. When we have a good understanding of what's being said, our decisions and legislation make sense.

[English]

We are going to adjourn this session.

I want to thank everyone for coming out.

Thank you to our witnesses.

Again, Monsieur Laporte, congratulations on your new position.

This session has now ended.

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