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• (1105)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I call the meeting to order.

I see we have everyone here, so we'll get started. We'll start off with number one, minutes from the previous meetings.

Everything is in order. There are no comments to be made.

[Translation]

So we'll move on to the second item on the agenda, business arising from the previous meeting.

[English]

Are there any comments or questions on business arising from the previous meeting?

Some hon. members: No.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[Translation]

We will now move on to the next item.

[English]

It's the travel budget for the Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship.

We have with us Mr. Hardie, chair, Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship. We also have Mr. McDonald, clerk assistant; and Scott Lemoine, principal clerk, committees and legislative services directorate.

We'll start with Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Chair, Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We noted with great interest a few months ago that the United States had appointed a select committee to deal with U.S.-China relationships. That was about three years later than our Parliament formed a special committee to look at Canada-China relationships.

With some of the initial things the select committee undertook to study, we could see some very strong common connections and common issues, such as that of Chinese police stations operating in the United States. Of course, we've had that same issue here.

We thought at that time that a connection with that select committee might be very useful to us in terms of trading ideas and iden-

tifying common experts we could draw from on strategies, background, etc. In fact, we could also start to look at the comparative tools that each nation has to deal with things like foreign interference or coercion or some of the other things that have very clearly been troubling us about our relationship with China.

There's also an opportunity to find synergies in the way we approach these issues. You might recall that former president Trump put an embargo or a tariff on Chinese steel, only to find out later that China was trying to basically launder steel through Canada to get it into the United States. Very clearly we understood at that time that Canada was seen by China as a way across the border into the U.S.

There are a lot of common interests, but more importantly, I think, opportunities to look at common strategies and common responses. I would go back to meetings we had just over a month ago as some of us from our special committee, along with other parliamentarians, visited Taiwan, where we got into discussions about their relationship with China. One of the key things that came out of those discussions was the need for care.

We have heard an awful lot about “refriending”, “reshoring”, etc., but when I was speaking with the foreign minister in Taiwan, we both identified the need to be very careful to try not to isolate China, because an isolated country of that size and with that kind of power could become extremely dangerous. Our two countries, Canada and the U.S., if we operate independently and in an unconnected fashion, could end up cumulatively creating difficult situations that could be far more troubling than we could imagine.

I think when we look at the effort we've put in and the things we have on our plate, such as the Indo-Pacific strategy—which will certainly have an influence on the other nations in the Pacific Rim—we see very clearly that the Indo-Pacific strategy has a very strong China component to it. The U.S. isn't involved in that, but they need to at least know what we're up to, what we have planned and the reasons for the actions we're taking.

I think Washington, D.C., itself has a very rich field of academics and of think tanks, over and above their parliamentarians, their congressmen, their representatives, and we're thinking of taking a couple of days, somewhere in the neighbourhood of July 10, 11 and 12, to go down there and have a discussion with the select committee, or at least with members from it, including the chair, Representative Gallagher, who, I believe, is from Wisconsin. I've been following their work, and they're getting into some interesting discussions that are not far out of focus with the discussions we've been having for the last three years.

Just yesterday in Parliament, I had the pleasure of tabling an excellent report from our committee on the perils that China represents to Canada. I think the United States shares many of these same perils, and the more we can coordinate our activities to end up in the right place with that country, the better.

• (1110)

We believe that being there in person and building personal relationships with some of the people on that select committee and with other legislators there will give us a much, much better chance of coming up with a cohesive and basically effective strategy to make sure that we're handling China, which has become very difficult and very bellicose.... It's hard to be friends with them, but we need the best way possible to deal with them. A few days of our committee spent with their committee and others in Washington would be time well spent and very valuable to our ongoing efforts to put our relationship with China in the right place.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[Translation]

Are there any questions?

[English]

Seeing none, we have a recommendation on the table.

Do I see unanimous consent around the table about putting it forward? Very good.

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Hardie. We have approved the recommendation. Thank you.

Now we'll go on to item four, which is interpretation resources.

Mr. McDonald will speak to this, I believe.

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

We wanted to update the board to make sure that members were aware that a letter was received yesterday from the translation bureau confirming their ability to maintain their current service levels this autumn. As well, they speak briefly about their efforts currently under way to hopefully increase their capacity in the future.

[Translation]

We also wanted to provide a brief update on the remote simultaneous interpretation pilot project.

Although this pilot project has only been run for a limited number of meetings so far, and there are still a few things to work out, we believe it has been somewhat successful.

We intend to consult with the whips' offices in the coming weeks to better determine whether the solution as presented is suitable. We will be looking at how we can responsibly implement this service for some meetings over the next few weeks. It's still a limited service, but we believe that, if we work with the whips' offices, we can find a way to increase capacity a little for certain types of meetings, for example steering committees.

I think Mr. Aubé also wanted to talk about the testing program we have.

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

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

We'd just like to provide an update on the situation since the last meeting.

As you know, we have a continuous improvement program that we're working on with the interpretation department to ensure we don't compromise anyone's health and safety, and provide an appropriate experience for all meeting participants.

In recent weeks, some people have questioned whether all our committee rooms meet the ISO standard. We have carried out these tests and called in experts from around the world to validate them. These tests were supervised by the NRC. I can confirm that our conference rooms and committee meeting rooms comply with the ISO standard. We have validated this over the past few weeks.

We have also validated the headsets. Questions had been raised about the ability of our headsets with microphones to reproduce a sufficient number of sound frequencies. We have carried out these tests. We have also validated them using independent laboratories. Our headsets meet the appropriate standard. I wanted to let you know.

We've also had an initial meeting with audiologists. We told you that we were going to set up a round table with audiologists from the University of Ottawa and the National Centre for Audiology at Western University. A first meeting was held to discuss the risk of the frequencies that have been measured and tested over the past few weeks. We should have a report from them shortly, but preliminary assessments seem to indicate that the frequencies are adequate. They are between 15 and 20 kilohertz in our conference rooms and between 13 and 14 kilohertz on the main videoconferencing platform used for these meetings, which is Zoom.

In summary, our tests are progressing well. We're working with the Translation Bureau and should be able to give you reports in the next few weeks. We just wanted to let you know about this. As a lot is being said in the media, we wanted to clarify where we're at and what we're doing in this context.

• (1115)

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's fine.

Are there any questions or comments?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your statements, Mr. McDonald and Mr. Aubé.

I read the letter from the Translation Bureau. I want to make sure I understand it correctly.

We've been told that, despite recruitment efforts, despite the action plan, which by the way isn't too detailed, we'll have the same number of resources in the fall when we start parliamentary work in September as we have now.

When we talk about 160 hours of interpretation in the House of Commons for sitting weeks, which includes House of Commons proceedings, 57 committee meetings and three caucuses, does that include the pilot project? Are we to understand instead that, if the pilot project is successful, we'll be able to have more hours of interpretation for committee, House of Commons and caucus work?

Mr. Ian McDonald: This will be in addition to the 160 hours of interpretation.

As you just mentioned, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, when the whips deem it conclusive and we have confirmation that we can continue, the Translation Bureau will then have to look at whether it has the staff to continue offering this service from now on. We believe this will be the case. Once this pilot project is approved by the House of Commons, we can go ahead and start seeing that the resources are in place to offer this service.

There are still questions to be answered, but we hope that this service will allow us to have in the fall a capacity similar to what we have today, that is eight meetings, in addition to the number of interpretation hours mentioned in the letter.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask Mr. McDonald this: How many committee meetings were cancelled this week, due to a lack of technical and interpretation resources?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Unfortunately, I don't have those statistics on hand. However, we do keep these statistics, so we can pass them on to the Board of Internal Economy.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I can give you a hint: Several committee meetings have been cancelled due to a lack of interpretation resources. In fact, we never know whether it's because there's a lack of resources in interpretation alone, or whether there's also a lack of resources in information technology. In any case, what we do know is that extended sitting hours in the House and in some committees result in a lack of resources, so parliamentary committees are forced to cancel meetings, which slows down parliamentary business.

This means that in September, we will resume our work with the same number of resources, despite all the efforts made over the past two years, even though we know that current resources do not meet the needs of parliamentarians to carry out their duties, both in the House of Commons and in parliamentary committees.

Have you taken any other steps, Mr. McDonald? What tools do you have to increase the number of resources or convince the Translation Bureau that what it's currently offering us isn't satisfac-

tory and doesn't allow parliamentarians to do their job? When committee meetings are cancelled for lack of resources, it's because we're not able to meet the needs expressed.

What does House administration intend to do to ensure that we are able to do our jobs as MPs?

Mr. Ian McDonald: We communicated this information as soon as the pandemic began. The Board of Internal Economy has repeatedly asked for more resources. At almost every meeting, we reiterate that this shortage of resources is having an impact on parliamentarians, on our staff, on everyone, ultimately. We understand that there are also repercussions for interpreters. That's why we're looking into the matter with them. After almost every meeting, all this information is communicated to the interpreters and to our colleagues in the Translation Bureau. So far, they don't have any solutions for us, but we're not going to stop communicating this information. They will certainly also take note of the questions you raise today.

• (1120)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: You've given new guidelines to clerks to encourage in-person testimony. Indeed, we know that the best way to take care of our interpreters is to ensure that the majority of testimony or discussions take place in person.

Has this letter helped you obtain any changes? Have you had any co-operation from the clerks' team to ensure that witnesses, MPs and ministers can attend meetings in person, so that we return to a level comparable to what it was before the pandemic?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I don't have those statistics on hand, but they will be in the dashboard we provide to the Board of Internal Economy for the next meeting.

We hope to see an increase in in-person participation. We haven't had a huge number of session weeks since the new guidelines were communicated, so it's impossible to say today whether this has had an effect. We'll see when we have all the statistics in hand. We'll certainly be in a position to comment on this at the next Board of Internal Economy meeting.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I'd like to make a comment, in conclusion. For the past two years or so, I've felt like I've been repeating the same questions. For two years, I've felt that there's no will. In fact, I don't know what to call it. Is it a lack of political will? Is it a question of organizational obstacles related to the Translation Bureau?

Through the media, we learned of the suspension of the University of Ottawa's translation program. I hope its interpretation program doesn't suffer the same fate.

I remain concerned and still dissatisfied with the answers we receive from the Translation Bureau. It's hard for me to imagine being in the shoes of the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, but if I were, I'd be nipping at the Translation Bureau's heels. The answers we're getting don't make me feel confident. The trap that's being set is that it's currently taken for granted that it's normal, in a hybrid Parliament, for committee meetings to be cancelled because of a shortage of interpreters. This is becoming part of our practice. Soon, it will be normal for committee meetings to be cancelled because the House is sitting longer. It's hard for me to understand why this is so readily accepted.

As I've already said to a few people in the House administration, I sometimes feel like Don Quixote, because I'm fighting windmills. As a parliamentarian, I'm very attached to the issue of language. Personally, I'm a unilingual French-speaker, and I'm not ashamed to say so. I want to be able to do my job in either official language. However, what I feel is that people think it would be easier if there were only one working language here.

The quality of the French translation of documents we receive is not as good as the English version. In fact, we receive translations of documents that are deemed unsatisfactory. There's a shortage of interpreters and things aren't getting any better, but I don't feel that there's as much concern as there should be. I do feel, however, that the House administration is very concerned about this issue. I know they're doing what they can. Having said that, it depends on the Translation Bureau, which in turn depends on a minister.

Sincerely, I'm not reassured about the health and safety of our interpreters. Nor am I reassured about the quality of interpretation and the number of interpreters we'll have in the fall.

I may exasperate some of my colleagues at every meeting, but it's important for the public to know that we're living through a pivotal moment here. In the autumn, we may take it for granted that we're going to stay at 57 events, and that this is quite satisfactory for all parties around the table. Personally, I find this truly unacceptable. I don't feel we have the will to take all the necessary steps to change things.

In conclusion, it's true that I'm feeling emotional, but I'm relying on facts. I've asked Mr. McDonald, by way of a letter rather than through the Board of Internal Economy, to tell us how many meeting minutes were held by videoconference and in person, respectively, before the pandemic. This will enable us to demonstrate that, even if we decide to renew the hybrid Parliament formula, it is to our advantage to impose certain limits to encourage in-person participation. The only avenue we can control is to attend face-to-face sessions as often as possible. That's how we can guarantee the health and safety of interpreters, as well as assure parliamentarians that they can do their work in either official language, without obstacles and without being told that resources are lacking.

This concludes my remarks. I hope that my testimony will be heard by the Translation Bureau and that we'll have better results to report in the fall.

• (1125)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Julian now has the floor.

[English]

He will be followed by Ms. Findlay.

[Translation]

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

At our last meeting, we discussed the possibility of inviting representatives of the translation bureau to appear, but there was no consensus. However, I believe it's urgent that we do so.

Mr. Chair, I know that you take this matter very seriously. In response to my letter, you indicated to me that the translation bureau was aware of discussions that took place at the Board of Internal Economy's last meeting and that the bureau had informed House administration that it intended to provide, in writing, information on interpretation capacity.

However, the letter we received from the translation bureau clearly falls short. It fails to provide any information. We don't even know the status of last year's accreditation exams or if they resulted in any new interpreters.

We aren't getting enough information, and the translation bureau doesn't seem to be taking this seriously. We aren't getting answers to our questions, because no representatives of the translation bureau were invited to appear. I myself have many questions for the translation bureau. I know that Mr. McDonald and Mr. Aubé are doing their best, but the translation bureau is the one that needs to answer those questions.

Even if I'm pinning my hopes somewhat on remote simultaneous interpretation, the reality of interpreter working conditions concerns me.

Indeed, as Mrs. DeBellefeuille so eloquently stated, it makes no sense to have to cancel so many committee meetings because there aren't enough interpreters. The government is spending billions of dollars to renovate Centre Block, but there are no investments to put in place the resources for the successful execution of the work that needs to be done in that building or West Block. In fact, without interpretation, Parliament can't sit. It's that simple. We're a bilingual country, so the elected members, be they anglophone or francophone, need to be able to participate equally in parliamentary debate. That's a fundamental principle of our country.

Having to cancel so many committee meetings puts us in a critical situation, given the government's inaction. The lack of information is not reassuring.

Furthermore, the whole freelancer issue is cause for concern. Is it true that, under the working conditions being implemented next fall, freelance interpreters will be subjected to an unsafe workload? We have no idea. Perhaps Mr. McDonald can comment on that issue. Whatever the case may be, representatives of the translation bureau need to come before the committee to provide us with those answers. I'm puzzled by the letter we received this week. There are so many questions that remained unanswered.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to suggest yet again, as we did during our last meeting, that we meet with representatives of the translation bureau as soon as possible. The purpose is to obtain answers to all our questions, as well as a plan of action to prevent the cancellation of committee meetings and ensure the health and safety of House of Commons interpreters at all times. Like Mrs. DeBellefeuille, I'm a bit frustrated, not because you aren't taking the issue seriously, Mr. Chair, but because we still don't have any representatives of the translation bureau here to answer our questions.

I have questions about freelance interpreters, and I hope that, this time, there will be consensus to have representatives of the translation bureau appear as soon as possible before this committee.

• (1130)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. McDonald, do you have any comments to make or answers to provide?

Mr. Ian McDonald: No, we don't have any other information. Those questions are really for the translation bureau.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

I think that everyone's frustrated by this situation.

Ms. Findlay, go ahead.

[English]

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

I have a few questions.

A hybrid Parliament is scheduled to sunset June 23. If we allowed it to expire, how would that change the resource picture for committees and House sittings this autumn?

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Aubé, do you want to respond?

[English]

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: From an interpretation perspective, Madame Findlay, it will all depend on the collective agreement that will be signed between them and the translation bureau, based on the number of hours and so on, so I wouldn't want to comment on that until that agreement is decided on their side.

From a technology perspective and a procedural perspective, I'll leave Ian to talk about procedure, but if they come back to this side, we certainly would have all the resources to achieve delivery on the requirements of the House and of committees and also for caucuses and chamber events.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I think we have to concede, even though it's obvious, that most of the problems we're dealing with exist because we have also chosen to have a hybrid Parliament. Because we have a hybrid Parliament, we have issues with interpretation that are ongoing and making it very difficult to do our work.

Do you have any insight, even anecdotal, on the current situation with interpreters' workplace injuries? Is the situation improving, worsening or holding steady? We've had several iterations of our headphones and all that. Is that helping, or is the situation static?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I don't have the exact stats here, Madame Findlay, but I can say that the number of incidents has certainly been reduced as a result of all the work we've done over the last months. That's clear.

As you know, we've put in place processes to actually meet. We've had a number of meetings with all the stakeholders to make sure we have understood if there has been an incident or there have been any risks. From our perspective, the number of incidents has gone down, but I wouldn't be able to comment on the numbers provided by PSPC regarding incidents because I don't have access to those numbers.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Even an anecdotal understanding is helpful in terms of knowing whether some of this seems to be helping their workplace satisfaction.

Mr. Ian McDonald: If I may just add one point to that, I would say that we know there have been occasions when there have been injuries when using the prepandemic system and even with the new technology. Every microphone you'll see in front of you has a warning about putting your earpiece close to the microphone, because doing so can cause feedback in the room. Those things still happen today as well, and those things lead to injuries. They're not necessarily related to a hybrid environment. Some may be, but not all of them will be. Some of them happened prepandemic, and they continue today, despite every effort to try to reduce those things as much as possible.

Those efforts are part of a long-standing commitment to continuous improvement, and we're working to try to reduce those things as much as possible as we go forward.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Are interpreters continuing to work the four-hour shifts that the pandemic brought on?

Mr. Ian McDonald: That's our understanding, yes. That's how they schedule.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: There's been no move to six-hour shifts?

Mr. Ian McDonald: There has not been any that we're aware of. We've read media reports, but we have no other information.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: When do you anticipate that the remote interpretation pilot will have us in a position to expand the pool of resources available for committee meetings weekly?

• (1135)

Mr. Ian McDonald: Through you, Mr. Chair, we are hoping that we can consult the whips next week to get a sense of their comfort level. We'd like to responsibly bring that capacity online.

We want to make sure it's fully meeting the requirements and the expectations of members. We were hoping we might be able to suggest, for example, that we start with steering committee meetings. There's been no capacity for steering committees, or very little. That takes away from other committee meetings, and so if that were of interest to the whips, maybe that would be a good place to start. Those meetings are not broadcast. They would be a slow start, a responsible start, to making sure that it fully meets the requirements. Based on that success, then it would be possible to, ideally, expand that to include full committee meetings and even broadcast committee meetings at some point in the future.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you. I have one last question, if I may, Mr. Chair.

It seems as though there is more committee resource rationing this spring. Our experience has been that meetings have been cancelled far more often. I've also heard it suggested that there are just more committee demands. Would you be able to assemble a statistical picture for us so that we can better understand that demand?

Mr. Ian McDonald: Madame DeBellefeuille asked a similar question a few moments ago, as you know. We're already working on that. We just didn't have it with us today. We'll definitely be sending something to the board.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

[Translation]

Apparently not.

[English]

We have a request from Mr. Julian to have the translation bureau come back. Are we all on board with that?

We have a consensus. Hopefully, we will get the answers to our questions.

We will move on to item 5.

[Translation]

It's the "Annual Report on the Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy 2022-2023".

First, we have Ms. Michelle Laframboise, chief human resources officer, House of Commons, to present the report.

[English]

We also have Annie Carpentier, deputy director of members' HR and business partner services, and Myriam Beauparlant, manager for respectful workplace, diversity and inclusion.

I believe we'll start off with Madame Laframboise.

[Translation]

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

Today, I'm presenting the "Annual Report on the Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Preven-

tion Policy 2022-2023". This policy applies to members in their role as employers and to their employees.

From April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023, a total of 13 new cases were reported to the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer. Three of them were resolved through the mechanisms set out in the policy, such as negotiated resolution, seven were resolved outside the policy framework, two were non-receivable under the policy, and one was still pending as of March 31, 2023.

[English]

You'll note an increase in the number of cases from last year and the year previous. This is not unusual when a new policy and process are introduced and significant awareness activities are undertaken. It's not an indication that there is more harassment activity, but rather that employees are more comfortable in bringing situations forward and are doing so earlier, which allows for early intervention and a quicker resolution. In fact, there were no harassment investigations at all this year, and most cases were resolved through negotiated or informal resolution and facilitation.

The report also outlines the training and awareness activities related to the policy framework. An increase in the promotion of training has resulted in an uptake by members' employees. Thus far, 1,423 employees have participated in the training. We are also fully compliant in regard to MP training, and new MPs are trained as part of the onboarding program.

I am happy to take any questions from the board members.

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

[Translation]

Mr. MacKinnon, go ahead.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): Thank you very much, Ms. Laframboise, and to your team as well.

On behalf of the office of the chief government whip, I just want to pass on our congratulations and our commendations. Your unwavering support is very important to us. A lot of work has been done in this area, as a result of your team's professionalism, but also as a result of the policies that were put in place. Great progress has been made. We agree that one complaint is one too many. However, there's now a reliable confidential mechanism with which to seriously assess and resolve complaints, one that ensures people can feel safe. I commend you.

Thank you very much.

• (1140)

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We will now move to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

She will be followed by Ms. Findlay.

[Translation]

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

I agree with my colleague about what he just said.

Ms. Laframboise, it's my turn to congratulate you on the report and the implementation of this policy. It's not always easy to develop a policy like this in the first place. I wanted to thank you for taking the time to consult with each whip's office. We were able to draw on our experience to improve the content of today's policy so that it truly meets the needs.

I also understand what you're saying about the increase in the number of cases. You're right: When we implement a new policy, and we see an increase in the number of cases, it tells us that people feel more confident and are more willing to file a complaint for possible resolution.

I also know that today is the last meeting of the Board of Internal Economy that you will attend, as you're retiring. I wanted to take this opportunity to say how much I've enjoyed working with you and your team. I can tell you that you are very well surrounded. It's often said that good leaders and good managers know how to surround themselves with the right people, and sometimes with people better than themselves. You've surrounded yourself with a great team. We in the Bloc Québécois caucus are very pleased with the human resources advisors you've assigned to us, especially Bruno and Geneviève.

We can see that your philosophy is to be at the service of the MPs' offices and to be at the service of the MPs themselves to give them all the tools and knowledge they need to carry out their duties with confidence. You support them in what are sometimes difficult times.

So I'd like to wish you a happy retirement and a good life. We hope that your successor is well trained and that we, at the Board of Internal Economy, will be able to return to an active leadership that is as responsive to all parliamentarians as you have been.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

It has been a real honour to work for the House of Commons.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll continue with Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I also want to thank you very much for all the work you do and the processes that have been set up.

It is extremely important to create a sense of calm outcomes. There is also the confidence it builds in people when they know there is a process and a place to go and that people are helping them to work through sometimes difficult and sensitive issues. I compliment you on that.

I wish you a happy retirement as well. I'm a little jealous, but I'll just leave it at that for now. I hope it's a happy time for you. Most busy people don't retire; they just find something else to do. I imagine you may be one of those people.

I have a couple of questions.

One is on the report. It speaks to three incidents under "multiple". I am wondering if you have more of a breakdown on what "multiple" means.

Maybe I'll just ask the second question at the same time and let you go from there.

In last year's report, you gave some data on "inquiries" as separate from "complaints". I don't see "inquiries" this year, so I'm wondering what the change is about.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you very much.

When we talk about "multiple", it's because when individuals file a complaint, it's typically based on a variety of behaviours, or maybe several incidents, and they're not always sure exactly what label to use.

"Multiple" means that there might have been some abuse of authority and there might have been issues that they feel were personal harassment. Those are considered two different types of harassment under the policy. When we say "multiple", it means that there are a variety of behaviours being brought forward that need to be addressed, and it's not just one channel.

As far as the inquiries go, in the first year we tracked inquiries because it was really important, as we implemented the policy, to get a sense of whether the employees understood it and what kinds of questions we were getting.

However, there is no requirement under the legislation to track inquiries. After the first year, we had the information we needed to make sure we were resourcing it appropriately, so we're no longer tracking the number of inquiries.

● (1145)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: It all makes perfect sense to me, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your good work.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

[Translation]

We're going to hear one last comment on the matter, from Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Ms. Laframboise, I wasn't aware that today was your last appearance on our committee. I'd like to add my voice to that of Mrs. DeBellefeuille and Ms. Findlay and, on behalf of the Liberal Party and the government whip, offer our congratulations and wish you a happy retirement, Ms. Laframboise. We have been blessed and well served by your presence here.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian also wants to ask a question or make a comment.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I have a comment for Ms. Laframboise.

There is clearly a consensus among the Board of Internal Economy, who come from all political parties, that you are extremely transparent, competent and professional. We thank you for the exemplary work you've done for the House of Commons and for our democracy. We wish you well in your retirement, but I also hope that you won't stay too far away from the House of Commons, and that you will come and visit us from time to time.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you very much, Mr. Julian.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Any other comments or questions?

I wanted to say a few words about that as well, but I was waiting until we had finished dealing with the sixth item on the agenda, the statistics on the diversity of the House of Commons Administration, which we're dealing with right now.

[*English*]

From our presenters today, we'll continue with Ms. Laframboise, chief human resources officer, who will be accompanied by Ismail Albaidhani, deputy director, HR strategy planning and execution.

Ms. Laframboise, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As part of its new strategic plan, the House of Commons is committed to creating an inclusive and diverse workplace where everyone can give their all. The goal is to ensure that all people, regardless of their visible or invisible differences, are able to fully participate, realize their potential and contribute to the House of Commons.

It is my pleasure today to present to the Board of Internal Economy the data we currently have on the representation of equity-seeking groups. The information in this report is dated May 1, 2023.

[*English*]

Understanding the status of diversity and inclusion at the House administration starts with understanding the demographics that are under its roof. The data we're presenting today is aggregated, meaning no personal identifying characteristics are associated with these demographics.

That being said, though, as we gather more data, we will be in a better position to disaggregate and analyze it, helping us to further understand where gaps exist and to inform direction and decisions.

In accordance with the Accessible Canada Act, we are updating and expanding the current categories and developing diversity metrics programs. In addition, many inclusion initiatives are under way under the leadership of the House workplace inclusion, diversity and equity program, and supported by the diversity council. These include increased training and awareness, partnerships and outreach to diverse communities, and a comprehensive review of recruitment practices and policies, among other things.

We must invest in developing inclusive leadership skills and in establishing a sense of belonging and trust for all House administration employees in order to strengthen our commitment to diversity.

I remain available to answer any questions you may have.

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

Seeing none, I will take the opportunity now to thank you for your service.

I think this bullet point number six was probably one of the prime examples of how you serve and how you work. Really, you have an ability to take something very complex and make it very understandable for everyone, and that's a rare skill. Sometimes we look at something and think, "Why can't this be simple?" This is something for which you have a very nice knack.

Item 6 was something I mentioned in passing on Monday, because an MP asked me about it. I said, "Well, what are we doing about this?" Lo and behold, within a couple of days we had a report. This is a very clear example of the way you operate the department. Whoever is coming in has some very big shoes to fill. We are going to miss you.

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

I wish you a very happy retirement. I'm sure you'll have a great time, and everything will go well.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I know I'm leaving this in the best of hands. I have the best team, and they are the people who drive all of this amazing work, so you'll be fine. Thank you.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Deputy Government Whip): You seem too young to be retiring. Have we just worked you too hard, or what?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you very much. I'm not, but I appreciate that. My grandchildren will appreciate spending more time with me, so that's definitely my plan going forward.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much.

We'll now move on to item number seven, dealing with the internal audit charter and audit and improvement plan and report for 2023.

[*Translation*]

To speak to that, we have Jennifer Ruff, chief audit executive.

I'm sorry, we're going to start with Mr. Janse, then we'll go to Ms. Ruff.

Mr. Janse, the floor is yours.

Mr. Eric Janse (Acting Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll be very brief.

[English]

Proper corporate accountability and transparency is of utmost importance to me as acting Clerk as well as to the entire House administration.

[Translation]

That's why the House has an internal audit function and conducts an annual external audit of its financial statements.

[English]

At the next board meeting in June, the audited financial statements will be presented by the external auditors. For today's meeting, we have internal audit updates to share with you.

I will now turn things over to Jennifer Ruff, our chief audit executive.

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

[Translation]

Ms. Jennifer Ruff (Chief Audit Executive, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm here today to present, for your information, the internal audit charter, the annual report and the business plan for the fiscal year that just began.

First, the internal audit charter explains the purpose, responsibilities and authorities that guide the internal audit function.

Second, the 2023-24 business plan outlines the missions that we've selected based on a risk analysis, which we've aligned with House Administration priorities.

[English]

Finally, the report, which covers the 2022-23 fiscal year, outlines the assurance engagements completed in that time frame, as well as the results of the follow-up on management actions through previously completed engagements.

Given the results of these engagements as described in the report, there are no significant issues or risks at this time that require the attention of the board.

I welcome any questions the board may have.

Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there questions or comments?

Go ahead, Ms. Findlay.

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

Do I understand correctly that this audit charter will, unlike its predecessor, see internal audit reports provided outside of House administration management?

Ms. Jennifer Ruff: The reports are shared with the board, as per the internal audit charter. This has always been the practice of the function.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: The new audit charter suggests, "Any significant issues relating to governance, controls, or risk management must be communicated to the Clerk and, as appropriate, to the BOIE." It says "as appropriate". Who decides when it's appropriate?

Ms. Jennifer Ruff: That would be a discussion between me and the Clerk of the House administration, but ultimately I do have the authority to report things to the board, if warranted.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Can you refresh me on...?

Mr. Eric Janse: I would just add a clarification, Ms. Findlay. Not only does Jennifer have the authority to report any serious concerns to the board; she also has the obligation.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: That's more clarification. Thank you.

Can either of you refresh me on when the board last received an internal audit report? I'm fairly new, so I'm orienting myself.

• (1155)

Ms. Jennifer Ruff: The last time the report came to the board would have been 2019, and I think previous years before that, as well.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Would it be possible to provide us with copies of internal audit reports, maybe for the last couple of years, so we can see how it's evolving?

Ms. Jennifer Ruff: By all means, because we did complete annual reports for each of the successive years since 2019. We'd be happy to share those.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Great.

What would you say is the biggest difference between the previous internal audit charter and this one?

Ms. Jennifer Ruff: The biggest change in the audit charter is that we've added a description of the types of activities that the internal audit function undertakes—i.e., the difference between the assurance and the advisory activities—because what you see in the report is very much a description of our assurance activities, whereas we also have many advisory activities that we do in the name of continuous improvement, such as advice and guidance.

Outside of that, there are not many changes from the previously signed charter.

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

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

Seeing none, we'll move on to item number eight.

[Translation]

This is part 2 of the policy modernization.

[English]

Our presenters today will be Paul St George, chief financial officer; Michel Bédard, interim law clerk and parliamentary counsel; Stéphan Aubé, chief information officer; and José Fernandez, deputy chief financial officer.

[Translation]

We're going to start with you, Mr. St George. The floor is yours.

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

My colleagues and I are appearing before the Board of Internal Economy to obtain the approval of its members to update six policies applicable to members of Parliament.

The first policy deals with relocation.

Currently, during a continuous term, MPs representing a riding outside the national capital region are entitled to a move from a residence in Canada to that region. They are also entitled to a move to a residence outside that region within one year of the end of their term. Under this policy, MPs who wish to move outside the national capital region before the end of their term must do so at their own expense. Furthermore, this policy does not provide MPs with the option of relocating to the national capital region once they cease their parliamentary duties.

The House Administration therefore recommends that eligible MPs be entitled to move from a residence in Canada to a residence in the national capital region, followed by a move to a residence in Canada. These moves could take place at any time during their continuous term and during the year following the end of their term.

The House Administration also recommends that the Board of Internal Economy provide the chief financial officer with the flexibility to authorize, on an exceptional basis, moves when MPs are faced with specific situations or situations beyond their control.

[English]

The next item refers to the delegation of forms and signatures.

The current policy requires that re-elected members sign the entire suite of administrative forms relating to various resource allocations, at least at the beginning of each Parliament. This practice is unnecessary, especially as the information remains mostly unchanged.

To streamline the process, the administration recommends changes, as detailed in the submission, to make the forms' delegations of authority and declarations valid for a longer period of time.

The third policy pertains to the nomination of the national caucus meeting organizer. In the current policy, only the party leader can inform the administration of the House officer designated to organize meetings. To facilitate this process, the administration recommends that the whip also be allowed to communicate the party leader's designee to the administration.

Mr. Speaker, I will now turn the floor over to Stéphan Aubé, who will provide the update on the next policy change.

• (1200)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: The floor is yours, Mr. Aubé.

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

The fourth amendment we want to make concerns the websites of parliamentarians.

At present, when Parliament is dissolved, the costs associated with hosting MPs' websites become their responsibility. However, we noted that this was a problem for a number of members. Some must continue to provide services to their constituents in their constituency offices, and to do so, they want to continue using their website. We want to give members the option of continuing to use their site as an official site for themselves, and the House would be responsible for the costs. However, members will have to ensure that they are following the rules of procedure set out by the House and by Elections Canada. Members will have to sign a form indicating that they are complying with these rules. This will allow them to continue to use their websites to provide services in their constituency office.

This is the fourth amendment we want to make.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Perfect.

Mr. Bédard, you have the floor.

Mr. Michel Bédard (Interim Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel): There are two final amendments.

The first has to do with the 21-day period that members of Parliament have to vacate their offices after an electoral defeat.

At present, this time frame doesn't take into account situations where a judicial recount would take place. If so, the 21-day period would be substantially reduced, or the counting could even end after the 21-day period has expired.

We recommend that, in the case of a judicial recount, the 21-day period should begin only after a decision on the recount has been rendered.

[English]

Another issue with the 21-day delay is that it does not take into consideration that some of these days may be holidays, which may reduce the amount of time and support that members have to vacate their office.

In those circumstances, we're suggesting that holidays not be taken into consideration in the calculation of the 21 days. Vacating the office is a particular challenge when the 21st day is a holiday. It's the last day, so essentially members lose the entire weekend to vacate their office.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions?

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I agree with the recommendations that have been submitted to us. I think it's very healthy for an organization to modernize its rules to reflect today's reality.

I'd just like to ask Mr. Bédard a question. I've already talked to him about this, but I would like to inform all members of the Board of Internal Economy of my concern. We may agree today that we have to wait until the end of the judicial recount in a riding before the 21-day period starts to apply. I would like it to be very clear that, for the sake of consistency, this same logic must extend to the members' orientation program.

In the last election, the Bloc Québécois went through a fairly lengthy judicial recount. While waiting for the result of the judicial recount, the candidate who had been declared the winner attended all the orientation and training sessions. In the end, it turned out that he had lost the election. Then it was an administrative maze for the reimbursement of expenses.

If we accept this administrative change today and understand the logic of it, we have to make sure that it's applied in the organization, right up to the members' orientation program.

In other words, it doesn't make much sense for a candidate whose election is subject to a judicial recount to be invited to all the orientation and training sessions as a member of Parliament, because that causes other problems.

It's not a matter for the Board of Internal Economy, but rather for the organization. However, I'd like to take this opportunity to tell the entire team that this logic must be applied to the entire administrative and organizational process for welcoming newly elected MPs, not candidates whose election is subject to a judicial recount, for example.

• (1205)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Mr. Bédard, would you like to comment?

Mr. Michel Bédard: I just want to tell you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, that it's been duly noted. We already notified those responsible for administering the MP orientation program to ensure that policies are administered consistently.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

Mr. Bédard, I will let you continue your presentation.

Mr. Michel Bédard: The sixth policy change relates to House officer contracts.

Currently, the rules governing House officer contracts and what happens to their contracts in the event of dissolution of Parliament vary based on the House officer in question and what type of contract they have, be it for professional services or for goods and other services.

To make things more clear, efficient and consistent, House Administration is recommending that the rules be standardized so that contracts for House officers, such as leaders or whips, continue on after dissolution and be assigned in the new session to their successor, as needed. The only exceptions would be deputy chair of committees of the whole and assistant deputy chair of committees of the whole, as well as national caucus chairs. These functions cease upon the dissolution of Parliament and are therefore no longer covered by a budget. These contracts would continue to be terminated in the event of the dissolution of Parliament.

Finally, to facilitate the work of House officers, we suggest that there be a general assignment clause in the contracts, so that they can assign contracts amongst themselves, which could make things easier if a House officer's budget has been reduced as a result of elections or new appointments.

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

Just to be clear, Mr. Bédard, can you confirm that, regarding the 21-day period, those are in fact calendar days, not business days?

Mr. Michel Bédard: Yes, it is 21 calendar days.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

If there are no further questions, we will now continue the meeting in camera.

[*English*]

I will ask anyone who is not related to the items to be discussed in camera to please clear the room. We'll continue as soon as we have gone in camera.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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