



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Board of Internal Economy

TRANSCRIPT

**NUMBER 021**

**PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT**

Thursday, June 15, 2023

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## Board of Internal Economy

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• (1105)

[*English*]

**The Honourable Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons):** I call this meeting to order.

We'll start off with item number 1.

[*Translation*]

Those are the minutes of the previous meeting on May 18. Are there any changes?

[*English*]

No...? Okay.

We will proceed to item 2, business arising from previous meetings.

I see nothing. We'll continue.

Item number 3 is CPA conference surplus utilization.

[*Translation*]

The presenters will be Mr. d'Entremont, co-chair, Joint Interparliamentary Council; and Jeremy LeBlanc, clerk assistant and director general, International and Interparliamentary Affairs.

[*English*]

Mr. d'Entremont, I give you the microphone.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Chris d'Entremont (Co-Chair, Joint Interparliamentary Council, House of Commons):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Colleagues, I am pleased to present this request on behalf of the Joint Interparliamentary Council, which I have the honour of co-chairing.

[*English*]

In August of 2022, the Canadian region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association hosted an international conference in Halifax. Funding for the conference was provided by the House of Commons and the Senate, as well as by the provinces and territories, in the form of a contribution to the Canadian region.

After settling all the expenses related to the conference, a surplus of approximately \$343,000 remains, of which half is the federal share. Since the funds were provided as a contribution, any surplus that was left over did not immediately lapse at the end of the year.

As a portion of the overall funding was not needed for the purpose for which it was approved in 2022-23 by the board and CPA, these bodies could request that the federal share of the unused funds be returned using the usual formula—70% House of Commons, 30% Senate. If returned, these funds would not be available to be spent in 2023-24, given that they are associated with an expense in a previous fiscal year.

[*Translation*]

The JIC, however, is recommending that the board and CIBA approve an approach that would allow the surplus funds to be used as a credit toward the annual contribution of the federal branch to the Canadian region of the CPA and to use the savings generated to finance other association activities.

[*English*]

Given the anticipated annual contribution for the coming years, the surplus conference funds could cover contributions for the next two fiscal years and a portion of the contribution in 2025-26. The savings generated by using the surplus funds as a credit for the annual contribution over the next three fiscal years would remain in the JIC envelope and would therefore be available to finance other association activities. This would represent approximately \$75,000 each in 2023-24 and 2024-25, and approximately \$20,000 in 2025-26. As we know, our budget is very constrained at most times, and a lot of associations are having trouble meeting the requests that are coming to them.

I'd be happy to respond to any questions that you might have on this issue.

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

[*Translation*]

Is all that clear?

Okay.

[*English*]

Thank you for the presentation. Do we have consent around the table to approve the budget carry-forward for fiscal 2023-24?

Mr. Scheer.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I understand that a lot of these associations have robust activities that allow parliamentarians to meet with others from around the world or within Canada that have similar institutions. Having been Speaker and having actually chaired JIC myself, I certainly can appreciate some of the benefits that come from that, but I think we are in an era where we really do have to tackle the cost of living crisis that is fuelled by inflationary deficits, and any dollar that we can return back to the consolidated revenue fund is a dollar that will help alleviate that pressure.

Therefore, I would be in favour of allowing these funds to lapse and be returned to the consolidated revenue fund.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We don't have consent.

Ms. Findlay.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip):** I have a question. Do all branches have to make the same decision, or could we, for example, decide to return our contribution to the consolidated revenue fund while allowing provincial branches to treat their shares of the surplus as credits if they want to?

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs):** Ultimately, that's a decision that could be made by the Canadian regional council, which is the body that manages the funds for the Canada region, but I don't see any particular problem. The funds were contributed by each of the 13 branches, so the region could abide by the decision that a particular branch has made.

If some wish for it to be returned to them, then it could be returned. If others wish for it to be used as a form of credit for their contributions, that could be done as well.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** What I'm getting is that we don't have consent to go ahead. I'm not seeing consent.

Mr. Holland.

**Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons):** I apologize as I was working on something.

Can we just go over the nature of the concern about the application?

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** My understanding, based on the briefing note, is that if we don't approve the recommendation then the money will just lapse and return to the consolidated revenue fund. When we're looking for places to save money, as your finance minister colleague indicated, government spending is fuelling inflation and I think this would be just about the easiest \$172,000 we could ever find to help alleviate that pressure.

**Hon. Mark Holland:** I thank you for the clarification. There are two points.

The first point is that I would like Mr. d'Entremont to respond about how that money might be used. One of the things I'm concerned with is that this was a success story. This is money not being utilized, being returned, and we're being asked to repurpose it, which would offset future costs. I'm concerned that the message we would send after they diligently worked to keep under budget and to underspend what they had is, "Don't do that again because if you do it then you're just going to have it taken away," and that would

actually encourage overspending. That's my concern. I would just ask what the use of this money would be.

Then on the second item, I don't want to get into a debate that spills over into the House, but if it's said I have to take umbrage with it. Canada has the lowest inflation rate, one of the lowest inflation rates in the OECD. We have lower than the G7 average, lower than the G20 average, lower than the United States, lower than the U.K. and lower than Germany. We're not going to fix global inflation by cutting services. I'm totally on board with making sure that we instill a culture where we use money correctly. I just want to make sure, if this money is going to be repurposed and used, that it sends a very positive fiscal message to encourage organizations to underutilize their budgets and then ask to repurpose that money and allow it to stay in the envelope. That may enable them to expand their impact and also encourage the wise and judicious use of their budgets.

I'll ask, if I could, Mr. Speaker, for Mr. d'Entremont to respond.

• (1110)

**Mr. Chris d'Entremont:** Yes, absolutely.

In the \$340,000 that was saved, from a very successful CPA conference in Halifax, the partners funded that into their own bank account. The House of Commons, the Senate and the provinces all put their money into this account, and it's been sitting in that account waiting for all of the bills to finish up. It finished up with \$340,000 sitting there.

The idea is that we can take our component of that and spend it on CPA dues for the next three fiscal years, \$75,000, and that will free up what we can use for other associations, not just the CPA but other associations within our global \$4-million budget, approximately \$4-million budget. This will maybe allow other associations as they get close to the amount of funding that's available to them—because we try to give them a certain percentage at the beginning of the year and then we give them a second percentage at the end of the year—to find out exactly how the budget is being spent. This would give us a little bit more room. It doesn't give us a ton more room, but it gives a little bit more room to allow some associations to travel, which they've been having trouble doing over the last couple of years anyway because of the cost of travel at this time.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Now we'll go to Mr. Scheer, followed by Mr. Julian and then Ms. Sahota.

Mr. Scheer.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** I appreciate my colleague's comments and I definitely don't want to import political debates from the chamber into this body, so I will resist the temptation to refute some of that. However, I will just say that anything we can do to help deal with inflation we should be looking for in all aspects of government and parliamentary life.

My understanding is that this was an allotment that the board approved. Rather than viewing this as a punishment, yes, it was a success story that the event came in under budget, and I think maybe what we can do is we can write a congratulatory letter from the board to those involved in planning and organizing the committee, maybe even a certificate of appreciation to show that we all appreciate the good work and encourage them to bring that kind of fiscal rigour to future events that the CPA and other associations might host.

This will not affect any services provided to Canadians. These associations have been managing with the budgets they have for quite some time and, as I said, I think as members of Parliament from all different political stripes, when we're looking to be responsible stewards of taxpayers' money, this is the easiest \$172,000 that we can ever reallocate to the consolidated revenue fund.

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

Okay. That's very good.

We'll go to Mr. Julian, followed by Ms. Sahota.

Mr. Julian.

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

I've said many times, and I will repeat it, that the Board of Internal Economy is where we leave our party affiliations at the door. I feel very strongly about this. We don't have partisan debates in here. We have to look at the best interests of the institution. I'll repeat that, once we enter that door for this meeting, we're no longer members of any political party or representatives of any particular political affiliation. We are all here as administrators of the House of Commons and our parliamentary democracy.

That comment put aside, I wanted to ask Mr. d'Entremont what the dues would be for the Canadian branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association over the next three years. I believe you were saying \$75,000 a year, so is it actually \$225,000 over the next three years?

**Mr. Chris d'Entremont:** Maybe I'll let Mr. LeBlanc answer that.

• (1115)

**Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc:** The formula for the Canadian region has a certain amount based on the size of each legislature. The federal portion is half of the contribution, so the amount of dues that the federal Parliament pays to the CPA Canada region this year would be \$75,000. Next year it would be approximately \$77,000, assuming there's about a 3% increase year over year.

The amount that's left over in the conference fund would be sufficient to pay the entirety of the dues in the next two fiscal years, and then the balance of about \$20,000 would be a portion of the dues in 2025-26.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** I think the recommendation of what the JIC adopted, which was to simply allow.... Those were payments we're making anyhow. I'm a little perplexed about this being a complicated function when we have a surplus that can actually serve to pay what are going to be outstanding accounts that we're going to need

to pay anyhow. It just seems to me to be the prudent approach, so I support the recommendation.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Scheer.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** I just want to make sure the point is clear from our perspective. If we were going to reduce the association's budget by the amount we saved, then I would agree with my colleague, Mr. Julian. However, what I understand is going to happen is that, if this recommendation is adopted, the \$172,000 will be re-allocated through the JIC, however it decides, to pay these dues. Because the associations will not have to pay those dues, that will free up their budgets to spend on other things, so there will not actually be a saving to the taxpayers. It will just be a little bit of a flow-through that will free up spending from some of these other associations.

I just want to make that point clear. It's not that we're going to reallocate this to the associations, and the associations are going to save money and send that back to the consolidated revenue fund. It will actually increase and allow them to spend more. That's where our reservation is, and that's why I can't support this recommendation.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We have Ms. Sahota, followed by Mr. Holland.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota (Deputy Government Whip):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Being a member of JIC as well, I have had the opportunity to sit through many meetings where it's been really challenging to listen to many of the chairs of different associations that have come before us. They're all coming before JIC to ask for incremental, small increases, not major changes to their budgets, but costs have gone up for travel for so many things, as has been mentioned here before.

Although I hear Mr. Scheer's point that we want to hold onto that savings, I think eventually we won't be able to hold onto it, and it's better if they have it in their accounts, so that they have to ask us for a little less in the coming times—because we will be asked to contribute more. It gives them some flexibility, and we don't have to be going back and forth.

As my colleague, Mr. Holland, has said, we know that attitudes might change, or we might find in the future that associations may try to use all of the money if they think they will be penalized and won't be able to save it for some other use in the future. I think, rather than send them a congratulatory letter, we should congratulate them by having the savings. Hopefully they can continue to use the savings in a responsible way in the coming years, whether it's for dues or other areas, and we won't have to increase our next ask all that much, or the board won't have to approve a very heavily increased ask in the coming days or months.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We'll go to Mr. Holland and then over to Mr. Scheer again.

**Hon. Mark Holland:** This is actually a very well-studied area—

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I'm sorry, Mr. d'Entremont. Did you want to respond to Ms. Sahota's comments?

**Mr. Chris d'Entremont:** Yes, just a quick idea is that we just got a request at the board, and it's going to be discussed at our next meeting. To give you an idea, it's a Canada-NATO surplus request, so that they can attend a number of different events over the next year. It was for \$150,000.

That's just one request we have received in the recent days. Many of the associations that are looking at their calendars and trying to find ways to have Canadian members of Parliament participate in those are well over \$100,000 if not more in their requests for the next year to be able to meet their calendars going forward.

That's just to give you an idea that the size of the requests we're actually getting at JIC are substantial over the last year or so.

• (1120)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Holland.

**Hon. Mark Holland:** I think there are a couple of issues at play here. First, what I'm hearing is that there's an attempt to be strategic in the reallocation of dollars to expand impact and to use a savings—

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I'm sorry. I'm going to have to interrupt. I understand the translation is not working. Is it working now?

**Hon. Mark Holland:** Yes, it's better that I speak English to verify that.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I'm sorry, Mr. Holland. Maybe start from the top.

**Hon. Mark Holland:** Let's start with the first premise: Do we agree that the work that is being done is important and should be continued?

If the answer is no, then that's a different conversation and I think we should be direct about that.

If we agree that the work being done is important, then it's a well-founded principle of management that a “use it or lose it” strategy is disastrous. I remember when I was heading Heart and Stroke and having a conversation about a prior leader there—I won't mention who it was—who had a “use it or lose it” strategy. What happened was.... By the way, in every area that this strategy is ever applied, it encourages people to spend. They get close to the year's end of budget, and they say they have to spend it or they're going to lose it. It actually encourages spending more and saving less.

The strategy that's the most effective is to see whether you believe in the strategic area of business that is being conducted. If you believe in it, then you trust the people who lead it. If they save the money, they can strategically repurpose it to expand the impact. That not only encourages savings. It encourages innovation and it encourages the repurposing of dollars, which means expanding impact and reducing costs.

Now if you don't believe in the area of business, then you should fund it appropriately for how much you believe in it. If you believe it should innovate, change and expand its impact, then you should encourage that by allowing it the opportunity to do so.

I think we have to have a direct conversation. Do we believe that the parliamentary exchanges that we engage on are important? Do we believe that it's an area of business that we should continue? If so, I think that when we allocate budgets, if savings are found, we should trust the organization to repurpose it to expand its impact.

I think that we should have an honest conversation, though, because if we take a “use it or lose it” approach, as we don't do in our MOB, in our travel status account or in other places, the difference is that we're going to encourage the exact opposite of what we're trying to do. This is a well-demonstrated fact in management. I very strongly support this. There are a lot of areas members from all parties talked about where they'd like to be able to expand impact. I think the fact that they've used these savings and they're trying to repurpose them strategically encourages best practices.

If we want to do less of it, then let's just have a straight-up conversation about it and either cut the budget entirely or cut it to whatever proportion you want to.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any comments on that?

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** I want to make sure I'm crystal clear on the original allotment. The original allotment, based on my understanding of the briefing note, was an extra payment. The board allocated funds over and above what the JIC envelope normally receives. Is that correct?

I think that's an important point, because it's not as if, at the end of the year, the JIC had extra money left over because of any number of things from prudent management to events being downscaled or cancelled, and then they were going to lose it. This was over and above the original allotment for a very specific purpose that came in under budget.

I've already made my larger points and I really do respect my colleague's desire not to turn this into a partisan issue, but I don't think it's a question of not believing in the work or the validity of some of the outcomes of the JIC and its various associations. It's a matter of prioritizing. Yes, absolutely, I believe the priority right now should be trying to find every cent of savings we can find. If we can be trusted on small things, we can be trusted on big things. This might not be a lot of money when it comes to the entire budget of the federal government, but it is a very important signal.

If we want to have a discussion on the overall funding envelope of the JIC, I absolutely agree that we should perhaps have that, and there are times in the regular financial cycle when that would be appropriate. This, to me, looks like a backdoor enlargement of the JIC funding.

Anyway, I'll end my comments there. I don't feel as though I need to say anything else. I can't support the recommendation.

• (1125)

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

Do we have consent? I don't believe we do.

We don't. Okay. Very good. I'm afraid we're going to have to turn it down.

Thank you for your presentation. We appreciate it.

[Translation]

We will now move on to the fourth item on the agenda, interpretation resources.

The presenters will be Dominic Laporte, chief executive officer, translation bureau, Public Services and Procurement Canada; and Matthew Ball, vice-president, services to Parliament and interpretation, translation bureau, Public Services and Procurement Canada.

[English]

Ian McDonald, clerk assistant, committees and legislative services directorate; and Scott Lemoine, principal clerk, committees and legislative services directorate.

[Translation]

Finally, we have Stéphan Aubé, chief information officer.

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Laporte, the floor is yours.

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

As we are gathered in Ottawa, I would first like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Cécilia, Dagmar and Claudette, who are interpreting this meeting.

I am joined today by Matthew Ball, vice-president of services to Parliament and interpretation. I'd also like to highlight the presence in the audience of Martin Montreuil, our first ever director of parliamentary affairs and interpreter well-being, and Justine Bret, director of interpretation and Canada's chief interpreter.

[English]

Honourable board members, I'm here to provide an update on the situation with our interpretation services. I know you remain very concerned about it, and I want to assure you we are tirelessly working on improvements.

As we have made clear in our previous appearances, the issues related to interpretation are of key importance to our department. Since my arrival in January, I have devoted more time to this than to any other issue at the translation bureau. I'm serious when I say this is our top priority.

If the issues persist, it is simply because there is no miracle solution. I have just returned from a meeting at the European Parliament, at which interpretation services are facing very similar difficulties. This situation is not unique to Canada, and here, as elsewhere, there is no easy way to fix things.

I'm proud of the efforts the translation bureau has made with its partners. Indeed, over the past six months, we have made more

progress than ever, and today it is my pleasure to give you an overview of our accomplishments.

As you know, there are two aspects to the issue of interpretation, which are both discrete and closely linked. I will talk first about health and safety, and then I will give an update on capacity.

[Translation]

As for the protection of interpreters, I want to first thank you, Mr. Speaker, for standing in the House and giving a reminder on headset usage rules. Awareness is still a key ingredient in decreasing the number of incidents. Meeting attendants must be attentive at all times, when they are attending remotely, of course, but also when they are there in person. Indeed, even if in-person meetings offer the best working conditions for interpreters, we recently had feedback cases most likely caused by in-person participants who brought their earpieces too close to their microphone. Audio equipment is very sensitive; it needs to be used carefully.

As a result, there continue to be incidents. The good news is that these incidents seem to lead to fewer injuries than before. Nevertheless, each incident is a cause for concern. Of course, as is the case for construction workers or peace officers, where it is impossible to eliminate risks, in a similar way, it is unrealistic to think that we can completely eliminate sound-related incidents for interpreters. However, we must continue to focus on preventing them.

On this topic, the House administration informed you about the new sound checks that were carried out in April and May. We called on leaders in audiology and acoustics to review the results, report any hazards to interpreters and recommend any measures we should take. We will take advantage of the summer recess to carefully study their recommendations and establish a renewed and detailed action plan in consultation with all key stakeholders.

In doing so, we are fulfilling the commitment we made toward the labour program following the instructions we were given in February. We are also establishing the environment of continuous improvement that we need to deal with this situation in the long term, not only because we genuinely care about the well-being of our interpreters, but also because by improving their working conditions, we are decreasing the risk of service disruptions. We are making the profession more attractive to future interpreters and we are ensuring that we have the healthy interpreters we need to meet Parliament's needs.

● (1130)

[English]

Talking about capacity now, honourable board members, you can rest assured that meeting your interpretation needs is one of our top priorities. We are fully aware of the difficulties you're facing because of our limited capacity. Still, we are making progress.

In 2022–23, our interpreters collectively worked 15,000 hours for the House of Commons, which surpassed our previous peak of 14,000 hours in 2017–18. Unfortunately, given a number of factors, such as the need to expand our teams for the sake of health and safety, or the frequent session extensions, this did not lead to an increase in the number of sessions we could cover. That is why we indicated in our May 17 letter that our capacity for the fall would remain at around 160 hours of interpretation per sitting week, which usually covers House proceedings, 57 committee sessions and three caucus meetings.

With regard to remote simultaneous interpretation, we have participated in the pilot project since January 2023, and we will continue to collaborate this fall as the House administration's careful implementation approach unfolds and according to the whips' priorities.

Honourable board members, know that we are continuing to do everything we can to increase our capacity.

I have already spoken to you about our collaborations with universities to foster the next generation of interpreters. I, myself, have met with Concordia University, McGill University, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and Université de Montréal to encourage them to create interpretation programs in order to increase the number of graduates. We are also seeking the services of a recruitment agency to help us find more interpreters who are willing to join the translation bureau.

With regard to our other recruitment path, the accreditation exam, we have decided to hold it twice a year in order to reach as many candidates as possible. The next exam will take place on June 26. We also hold workshops for candidates to help them become accredited.

[*Translation*]

Despite all these efforts, it is still impossible for us to predict how much our capacity will increase, even in the short term. We are dealing with a number of uncertainties, including how many people will pass the exam in June, the renewal of our freelance interpreters' open contract and the implementation of the new collective agreement for our staff interpreters.

Among other things, duration of work is a core topic in our current discussions with our interpreters. On one hand, exposure time to virtual sound has greatly decreased, but on the other hand, some interpreters still have entirely legitimate concerns about their health and safety.

Fortunately, our weekly planning meetings with the administrations of the House of Commons and the Senate make it possible for us to react quickly to fluctuations in our capacity. Once the uncertainty disappears, if the number of interpretation hours that we can provide surpasses the current 160 hours, you can rest assured that this increase will have an immediate impact on the planning of parliamentary sessions and that you will be quickly informed.

In closing, honourable members of the Board of Internal Economy, and you as well, colleagues in the House of Commons administration, thank you for your support in our efforts to protect inter-

preters and ensure the delivery of quality interpretation services to Parliament.

Mr. Ball and I will now be happy to take your questions.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Julian has the floor.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Mr. Speaker, I was wondering if we could hear all three presentations before we begin asking our questions because we are going to have a lot of questions. I am wondering whether my colleagues would agree to that.

This is an issue that we are concerned about, so I think it would be a good idea to hear Mr. McDonald's and Mr. Aubé's presentations.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Does everyone agree? Great.

Mr. McDonald, you have the floor.

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

Today, we just want to inform the Board of Internal Economy that we have provided it with the most recent dashboard and to point out that this is the first dashboard since the Speaker's statement in early March.

Things have improved. There are now fewer interruptions. As for the things that we are monitoring, we have seen improvements in all categories. As per the Board of Internal Economy's request at the last meeting and in the letter it sent to us, we provided the board with more comprehensive information.

The other items to note have to do with sound testing.

I will turn the time over to Mr. Aubé to tell you more about that.

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons):** Hello, Mr. Speaker.

I want to confirm that, as part of our continuous improvement program with the translation bureau, we have continued to conduct tests on our audio systems. We did tests to confirm that the systems that are being used in committee are ISO compliant, and they are.

We also conducted tests with the translation bureau under the labour program. We were asked to conduct tests in real work conditions, where MPs would be meeting. We mainly focused on two locations. First, we tested frequencies. We were asked to confirm that we had all of the frequencies needed for interpretation activities and to show that the audiovisual systems have the capacity to provide the necessary frequencies. That was demonstrated and confirmed.

The audiologists also indicated that, given the information provided, they could not determine whether there was a health and safety risk because frequencies alone do not provide sufficient data to draw conclusions in that regard.

We also conducted acoustic pressure tests.



• (1135)

[English]

We moved forward with some pressure tests with the NRC. The initial reports were submitted yesterday, and they will be submitted to the audiologist over the next.... We will get reports from them over the next couple of weeks to validate whether there is a health and safety risk as it relates to sound pressure. However, I can say the initial data we've seen seems to indicate that we are within the ISO norms, and we will let the audiologist state whether it's a risk from a health and safety perspective.

We are continuing to work with them on protocols as they relate to exceptions.

Those are basically the tests we've been working on over the last couple of weeks.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Good.

Are there any further presentations before we go to questions?

Okay.

[Translation]

We will start with Mr. Julian.

[English]

Ms. Findlay and Madame DeBellefeuille will follow.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

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

We appreciate you presenting your reports today.

The health and safety of the House of Commons interpreters is vital. The Board of Internal Economy has already ruled on it many times. We definitely want the situation to be safe. Without our interpreters, we do not have a Parliament. I think that we all feel the same way. For that reason, I think that we are going to have a lot of questions today.

Before I begin asking my questions, I want to point out the progress that has been made. We haven't reached zero-tolerance yet, but when I look at figure 2 on the dashboard for April and May 2023, we see that the House-approved headsets with microphones were used 99% of the time in April and 98% of the time in May. I think that shows that, even though we have not yet reached the point where there is no chance of an accident, we are making progress, which is a good thing.

Mr. Laporte, last year, we got an update on the number of candidates who did the interpretation exam and the number of people who were being trained. I don't think we've gotten an update for several months.

Can you tell us about last year? How many candidates did the interpretation exam? How many passed it? How many interpreters were hired and trained? How many interpreters started working for us during that period?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** I would be happy to.

A total of 71 candidates took the last accreditation test, which was held in November 2022. Of those who passed the exam, 10 were Canadian candidates who were not already Translation Bureau employees, four were foreign candidates and three were Translation Bureau employees who wanted to become accredited. We are very happy about that.

We were then able to offer these people freelance contracts because they chose to become freelancers. They did not choose to become salaried employees. We therefore added 10 new freelancers to our team.

Those are the results of the November 2022 test. It always takes some time to correct the exam.

• (1140)

**Mr. Peter Julian:** If I understood you correctly, 71 people took the exam.

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** Yes, exactly.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** How many of them passed?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** Seventeen people passed.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Of those 17 people, 10 were hired as freelancers.

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** Yes, that's the best information that I have. After doing security clearances and all that, we were able to hire 10 people as freelancers.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Have you held another exam since then?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** Another exam will be held on June 27.

This is the first time that we are administering two exams in the same year. To date, about 40 people have expressed an interest in taking the exam.

It's possible that some of them may drop out at the last minute. It is also very difficult to speculate on how many will pass and how many we will be able to hire as a result of the process. I wouldn't want to hazard a guess, but we are nonetheless confident that this measure should help us and bring in new interpreters who can then decide whether to work as freelancers or join our team of salaried employees.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you.

I know my colleagues also have questions that they want to ask, so I will just ask you one last one and then come back to this later, if necessary.

We received a letter from the International Association of Conference Interpreters that spoke about the situation of freelancers. Are those freelancers with more limited availability somehow penalized? If not, are all freelancers, regardless of their availability, welcomed into the Translation Bureau?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** I really want to be clear about freelancers. There is no discrimination against freelancers who are available for four hours a day and those who are available for six. We think it is very important to give our contract employees a choice. They can bid on work at varying rates per day.

The shortage of interpreters is so critical that we need every resource. I therefore want to reassure all of our freelance interpreters that we need them in Parliament. The demand is there, as we are often told. There will be work for all freelancers.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you. I will come back to that later.

[English]

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Now we'll continue with Ms. Findlay.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of requests and comments as well.

Firstly, thank you. You're doing a lot of very good work, so I want to thank you for that. It's difficult.

Thank you for providing us with the data showing that at least 70 committee meetings have been cancelled since September. I asked for that and you provided that. I thank you.

However, I'm asking, again—ancillary to that—whether you would be able to provide us with similar data for past years, because seeing those cancellations in isolation means I have no way of understanding whether it's an increase or normal. I need data from at least a couple of years back. That would be very helpful.

I've also been informed that we have lost 57 hours of committee time since the April break. That is an awful lot of committee time lost. The reason given is resources. I'm concerned about that and I'm concerned about that trend. We are currently debating a proposal to make hybrid Parliament a permanent thing, and that may in fact happen. We all know a lot of our issues with resources have to do with hybrid Parliament. There are good reasons, perhaps, to have some hybrid aspects to our Parliament, but it means we rely ever more heavily on our interpretation resources. I'm interested to know how you see the impact on those resources, should we be in a full hybrid Parliament.

Also, you made reference, Monsieur Laporte, to four- and six-hour shifts. I am wondering what percentage of interpreters are continuing to work four-hour shifts? Is there a move to six-hour shifts? If there is a move to that, how is it being received? Would there be a risk of an offsetting reduction in employee retirements or freelancers' availability, in your opinion? We have to understand the actual environment we're working in.

My last question is this. How often is the minister briefed? Is she regularly instructed? Is she alive to these issues? It seems to me, particularly with the potential move to a full hybrid Parliament permanently, that this board needs to hear from the minister on these issues.

I've raised several things. I'll let you decide who is answering me.

• (1145)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** The first one would go to Mr. McDonald, I believe.

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

Through you to Ms. Findlay, we would be absolutely pleased to see what we have in our system in terms of data from previous years. We'll provide that to the board.

[Translation]

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Laporte, you have the floor.

[English]

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** I'm going to try to address all your questions. Just let me know if I skip some.

In terms of the loss of committee time, this is something that we take very seriously, so we appreciate that this is a deficiency that we need to address. I am confident that all the measures we're putting in will be adding to this capacity, but we know that there have been, basically, difficult choices that have needed to be made. For example, when we had committee extensions, it meant that some committees sometimes had to be cancelled or rescheduled, so we appreciate and are very mindful of that. This is one of our top priorities that we want to fix in terms of the requirements of the House.

Your next question dealt with whether we should have a hybrid Parliament. The translation bureau provides services to its clients, so it's not necessarily for me—or for the bureau, basically—to provide my view on that. We provide the services in the way they are requested by Parliament, and since the pandemic, we've been providing those on a hybrid basis. We'll continue to provide the services on the basis that Parliament decides.

Your next question dealt with six-hour shifts and four-hour shifts. Since the start of the pandemic, our interpreters have been working four-hour shifts. We never went back to six-hour shifts, so we never went back to a full on-site presence. Is there a risk of a sitting reduction? We do have people who are set to retire after a career in the public service. Right now, we anticipate that up to seven interpreters may decide to make that decision this year. Of course, part of the new resources would offset those departures. I would say that we are, nevertheless, cautiously optimistic that, with all the measures that are being taken, we should be able to have a net increase in resources. However, again, there are a lot of unknowns associated with that. It's only when we get the results of, for example, our June exam that we're going to be able to have a true sense of how many additional resources we can add to our pool of interpreters.

You did touch also on the minister being briefed. I have to say that she is very well aware of the interpreters' situation. I did have the opportunity to brief the minister myself. She is briefed on a regular basis by our deputy minister. She is paying a lot of attention to that file. As a doctor herself, it is something that is of much importance to her. Those challenges and also the measures we are taking to improve the situation are being brought to her attention on a weekly basis.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** As a follow-up, just on these four-hour to six-hour shifts, is there a barrier to returning to at least some people doing six-hour shifts? You're saying that you haven't really entertained that. However, is that not one area where, if someone is available or willing to do six-hour shifts, we could add to our resource pool?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** This is something we're going to be exploring with the next open contract. This is why we want to give the choice to freelancers to be on four-hour days or six-hour days. We'll see what we're going to get. Are we going to get people who are interested in six hours? It depends.

I know that we were talking about the audiologist's report and the NRC reports, so the House administration has been working tirelessly with us on that. We also need to make sure that our interpreters are aware of the results, so we don't want to rush things. The last thing I want to do is impose six hours without having proper discussions, without basically being able to talk to our interpreters and let them know all of the measures that have been taken to make sure that, if they were to go back to six hours, it is safe to do that. This is why we anticipate a lot of discussion. We also want to involve the key players—the AIIC and our union—to make sure that they are involved in those discussions.

The approach is slightly different between our staff employees and the freelancers.

• (1150)

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** I have just a final comment.

We are very concerned that, with a fully hybrid Parliament, we're just not going to have the resources to do our work. So much of our work is done at the committee level by members of Parliament, and it's very important work to move legislation through and to do the studies we're tasked with doing. We know that, with the loss of 57 hours just in this last short while since April, we're not even talking about other parliamentary associations where there should be simultaneous translation and about other venues where we need these resources.

I, personally, am of the view that all committee chairs should be in person and that all witnesses should be encouraged to be in person. Certainly, ministers or senior administrators should be in person. All of this will make it a little easier on resources, and we're all concerned about the health and welfare of our interpreters.

It's a difficult job to do. Those who do it do it extremely well—thank you. However, it is of concern that this is going to increase pressure on your work to staff us and their work to do what they do.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any comments on that? No. Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

Before I begin, I want to thank an extraordinary person who has been my voice since I got elected. English speakers have the pleasure of hearing what I have to say through Dagmar Rathjen, who is celebrating 30 years as an interpreter and who is retiring next week. Dagmar is my voice. If the English speakers around the table hear a soft voice accurately conveying my remarks in their language, that is her. I wanted to thank her since this is the last time she will be interpreting for the Board of Internal Economy. Unfortunately, you will no longer be hearing Dagmar's voice. I want to congratulate her on her 30 years of service. Another interpreter will be taking her place.

I now want to ask several quick questions.

Mr. McDonald, could you tell us how many committee meetings were cancelled in this Parliament because of a lack of resources? It is written in the Virtual Committees Dashboard report, but I would like you to tell us for those who are watching today.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Thank you for your question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Our system does not track all of the information, but we looked at the number of meetings that were cancelled for which a notice of meeting had already been published, and there were 70. It is likely not an exact figure, but it is a good estimate. We provided the list to the Board of Internal Economy for the meeting today.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** So we can say that at least 70 meetings have been cancelled owing to a lack of interpretation resources, either because sitting hours in the House have been extended or for other reasons. We know that, when the translation bureau and the administration have discussions, they have decisions to make. Since resources are limited, they give priority to the work of the House of Commons, and it's parliamentary committees that end up being affected most of the time.

In addition, all informal meetings on the Hill are currently held only in English because there are not enough interpreters. This includes all parliamentary association meetings, but also the many activities that take place on the Hill to which unilingual francophones and anglophones do not have access in both official languages because there are not enough interpreters.

As a result, at least 70 committee meetings have been cancelled. I think the translation bureau said it had enough resources to provide 160 hours of interpretation a week, which was not enough to meet the minimum needs—you could say—of the House of Commons and parliamentary committees. That's my understanding.

I looked at the graphs of your dashboard, as I think it's important to measure our progress, and I do think there has been an improvement. However, I'm going to share my conclusions with you and you can tell me if I have understood.

First of all, despite improvements, the number of speaking minutes from in-person participants has been stagnant since January, and we haven't managed to exceed this plateau to guarantee greater in-person presence. This applies mainly to committee meetings, as there are no concerns in this area at House of Commons meetings. Have I understood correctly that we've reached a plateau?

● (1155)

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** You could say that, yes. According to the statistics in the dashboard, around 82% of meeting participants attend in person, and 18% are still participating remotely. Those percentages have remained fairly constant since January.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** In the debates on the motion to make Parliament's current hybrid mode permanent, I've often heard misleading or incorrectly interpreted statistics to the effect that we're back to pre-pandemic levels, with some witnesses appearing by video conference. One could indeed interpret the data in this way.

However, you've worked hard to provide us with tables, which attracted me and for which I thank you. When making comparisons, we have to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges. In one of the tables, you compared the minutes spoken in person before the pandemic to the minutes spoken in person since we've been in hybrid mode. I see that there are three times as many minutes spoken remotely now as there were before the pandemic. So, even though I've heard that we're at levels comparable to those before the pandemic, when I look at the figures you've given us and compare the number of minutes spoken, I see that there's a lot more time spent talking remotely than in person. Have I understood your table correctly?

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** Yes, the main reason is that we now have more meetings with video conference or meetings where people can participate remotely. In the past, we had limits on the number of video conferences we could offer and the number of witnesses per meeting. Now we have fewer restrictions, since it's possible for anyone to participate remotely.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** In the old days—you could say that—before the pandemic, no parliamentarian could participate in committee meetings remotely. Only witnesses or guests were entitled to video conferencing, which excluded parliamentarians, ministers and all public servants.

Thank you, Mr. McDonald.

Mr. Speaker, the motion to make Parliament's current hybrid mode permanent will be passed later today using the gag order. Therefore, as of tomorrow morning, Parliament will be in hybrid mode permanently. Despite this, and even though it's a lot of work,

I think it's important for the Board of Internal Economy to continue collecting data to better understand and monitor what will happen, in order to encourage the administration to take steps to reduce the impact of the translation bureau's lack of capacity. We need, as MPs from each party, to be able to see what we can do and use our political leadership to facilitate the work of interpreters, but above all to protect their health and safety.

If my colleagues agree, even though Parliament's hybrid mode will undoubtedly become permanent as of tomorrow morning, I propose that we continue this work for at least another year in order to monitor developments and continue to document this issue.

Before you ask for the opinion of my colleagues, Mr. Chair, I have a couple of questions for Mr. Laporte, if I may.

● (1200)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Please go ahead.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Laporte, I'd like to thank you for sending us your presentation in advance, even though it was just before the meeting, as it enabled me to read it before your appearance.

What explains your use of a recruitment agency from now on? I don't understand the advantages of this strategy, nor why you would spend money on the services of this agency. What will it do that you can't do right now?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** I feel that there are currently many excellent interpreters working, for example, for international organizations, particularly in Europe, who don't really have the translation bureau on their radar, but who would be interested in freelancing for it.

We won't be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, since we're talking about a small-scale contract. If we could go out and get a dozen people interested in joining us, that would be a huge return on investment. We're in contact with a number of international organizations, but there are others we're perhaps less familiar with. So a recruitment agency can ensure that we have access to all the possibilities.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Laporte, neither Parliament Hill nor parliamentary committees have a good reputation when it comes to the working conditions they offer interpreters. People hear that it's not very exciting to come and work there. This is, of course, because of the hybrid nature of the meetings, which can lead to hearing damage. If I'm not mistaken, four people have suffered hearing injuries in the last month, one of whom had to be absent for at least six weeks, with her injury being deemed serious enough to warrant such an absence.

Are you concerned about the international repercussions of Parliament's reputation for not appearing to provide good working conditions for its interpreters?

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** It is important to note that, over the last month, many of the injuries occurred during in-person meetings. Indeed, even if auditory injuries are automatically associated with remote participation, I want to be clear that feedback happens during virtual and in-person meetings, unfortunately. As the consequences are still very serious, safety measures must apply at all times.

I won't hide from you that the last three years, since the start of the pandemic, were very difficult for the translation bureau, which undermined its reputation. I take comfort, however, in seeing all the improvements made and all the work done with our House Administration colleagues, audiologists and the National Research Council of Canada.

I have high hopes that, once we can reassure our interpreters that the consoles have been tested and the workplace is safe, people will indeed come knock on the government's door; it offers very good working conditions. The translation bureau remains, in my opinion, an employer of choice. In fact, 40 people already registered for our next accreditation exam. It means that, in spite of the shortage of interpreters, there is still interest to come and work here and offer services to the translation bureau.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** I won't get into a debate on the numbers, since we all starred in that movie last year. We don't have a table showing the exact number of your employees, because in human resources management, you have to count new employees, those leaving for retirement or those on sick leave, for example. I've given up on that table, because we rarely succeed in getting the right number. I also know that recruitment is not keeping up with the need created by departures.

You talked about your strategy for doubling the number of accreditation exams, which seems like a new approach. Why did you wait to double the number? You could have done that two years ago. What prevented you doing it? I'm rather surprised you didn't, because it seems to me like a magic solution to double your staff. In fact, why not triple or quadruple the number of exams to achieve a recruitment rate that far surpasses the attrition rate?

• (1205)

**Mr. Dominic Laporte:** First, we can't create new interpreters. Only two universities offer the Master's program in interpretation in Canada: the University of Ottawa and York University's Glendon campus. That means we are limited by the number of graduates from those programs, who are in fact all hired by the translation bureau.

However, when I started working at the translation bureau, I said to myself that we had graduates finishing at the end of April, and we could give them the opportunity to pass the exam in June. I can't tell you why that wasn't done in the past. We'll see if that's the magic formula. I also expect fewer people to register for the next exam scheduled in November, but it's a solution I wanted to explore. I wanted to see how many candidates would register for an exam in June.

I don't think we can step up the pace, because we're talking about accredited interpreters, and we don't want to compromise on the quality of their work. Every time we run an exam, our interpreters are the ones who correct it. It's not something that can be done in

five minutes; it requires many hours of preparation at the translation bureau. That's why we're limiting it to twice a year.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** To summarize, based on what I understood, the hybrid Parliament we're experiencing now—it could have been different—, and that we're going to experience starting Friday morning requires many hours of interpretation.

In the past, there were no committee meetings on Monday mornings and there were no committee meetings at all on Fridays. We focused on the few weekdays when meetings were held. Now, you're telling me it's hard to recruit interpreters and you have to use your own resources to correct exams, which creates a vicious cycle. As a unilingual Francophone, when I see what's happening and hear what you're saying, I'm not at all reassured when I think ahead to the month of September.

If the translation bureau's resources don't increase in September, it will be like collectively deciding that it's acceptable for parliamentary activities and committees not to happen, because your bureau is unable to recruit, train and accredit the interpreters we need to do our work. That's the impression I'm left with.

In spite of everything you and the House Administration are doing, we come to the same conclusion: in September, there won't be more than 160 hours of interpretation per week, which is the equivalent of 57 events. That's what you said in your letter and your testimony. So, no matter who forms the government, as soon as it increases working hours at Parliament, we have to reduce working hours at committee. Honestly, Mr. Laporte and Mr. McDonald, I find that unacceptable.

What solution do we have left, Mr. McDonald? It's increasing the amount of in-person participation, in spite of the motion being rammed through today under closure. What's at stake is the political leadership of whips and every party leader, because we will have to discipline our party members to make them sit in person, as well as ask your team, Mr. McDonald, to encourage witnesses to participate in person more often than not.

The overall goal is to limit interpreter injuries. Mr. Aubé told us that audiologists and experts are conducting studies. We know that House Administration made significant efforts, and so did the rest of you. In spite of all that, interpreters are still getting hurt. When they get hurt, regardless of the reason or the location, that means fewer of them can serve parliamentarians. You do not have enough staff and that worries me.

In spite of that state of affairs, documented for two years now, we are going to hit a wall in September. Mr. Laporte, I hope the prediction made by the union or the interpreters' association isn't accurate. They expect interpreters won't sign a new contract asking them to choose between four and six hours, because they want to protect themselves.

Having worked in the field of human resources management, I know that to retain your staff, you must apply the precautionary principle. In this case, it's about preserving our resources: the interpreters. For members to access both official languages, they need healthy interpreters, and many of them.

To conclude, I honestly get the impression that the issue of interpretation resources and interpreter health and safety doesn't interest many parliamentarians. Sometimes, I talk about it and members or other people don't put their earpiece on. I speak French, and 85% of what happens here is in English. That means I need interpretation. I think I'm interesting and have a lot of things to say. I don't know if the Liberal whip shares my opinion. People can use their earpiece to hear me, but they don't always put it on.

• (1210)

Personally, I hope a miracle happens in June, so that interpretation resources increase in September.

I also hope that my colleagues around the table, who are very passionate about this subject, can discipline their party members, so that the fewest number of them participate in meetings virtually. That would protect your resources, Mr. Laporte.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thank you.

[*English*]

Are there any other questions?

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Mr. Chair, I just want to make a comment.

I think it's extremely important to discipline ourselves. I myself have often filibustered; it's a tool often used at committee. That said, I understand that we don't know exactly how many times it happened. We haven't talked about the consequences, but all parties filibuster. I'm not pointing out anyone specifically.

However, parliamentarians' right to filibuster is coming up against the fact that there aren't enough interpreters. We have to make sure that interpreters work in a healthy environment in terms of health and safety. However, filibustering has had significant impacts over the last year. As you know, Mr. Chair, in many committees, filibustering went on for weeks. If parliamentarians disciplined themselves and didn't filibuster, almost no committees would be cancelled. That responsibility falls on parliamentarians. I am nonetheless worried about the insufficient number of interpreters and their working conditions.

Mr. Laporte, when you talk with unions and freelancer associations, I think it will be extremely important not to limit them to a choice between four and six working hours. Freelancers must be offered the opportunity to choose the schedule that suits them.

That's extremely important for health and safety. I think you thoroughly understand the message sent by all members of the Board of Internal Economy. It's important not to impose obligations on interpreters. Rather, we have to make sure everyone can work. We don't want the number of interpreters to go down; on the contrary, we want it to go up.

I also get the impression that we have to increase resources to recruit more interpreters. The number of candidates went from 71 to 41 for the next exam. That worries me because, in November 2022, only a quarter of the candidates passed the exam. If there are about 40 candidates for the next exam, we can suppose that about a dozen of them will pass, if that trend holds. More people have to sit the exam. Finding other modalities is extremely important.

Mr. Aubé, could we use new technologies to prevent feedback? Is there a type of system that automatically cuts any sudden increase in sound? Is House of Commons administration actively looking into this type of technology?

• (1215)

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé:** Thank you for your question.

Mr. Julian, I can tell you that existing systems immediately or almost immediately deal with feedback events for interpreters. In the reports coming out over the next few weeks, you'll see that our system's response time to feedback to protect interpreters meets the standard and surpasses it.

If you're asking me if we found anything, I would say no. However, we're always doing research. We don't just assess the systems to deal with feedback. We're looking for all kinds of systems to help the interpreters. That way, if those events occur, they can keep working.

We are therefore looking into different solutions to help and protect the interpreters. We will propose those solutions to them by the fall.

Claiming to have a solution to completely prevent feedback would be false. That is not the case. We are still looking into it.

We have to work on what we call awareness, as well as the systems. Currently, the majority of incidents, including those over the summer, happened because users were using the system in a certain way. They may have put their earpiece too close to the microphone.

As you know, every microphone has a note telling people to be careful. We will focus on this educational aspect to raise awareness and try to prevent feedback events. When they happen, most of the time, it's because of the way the system is being used. That's what we're trying to reduce. We're looking at it from both a technological and educational point of view.

**Mr. Peter Julian:** Thank you.

[English]

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

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Thank you.

I do think there is an education piece for all members of Parliament. For instance, in our most recent caucus, we were told it would be very helpful if we lowered the microphones when we have active question-and-answer periods, because the mike too close to the speaker causes problems. That seemed to help a lot, but we just didn't know that was a thing before and that was something we could do to help. Continuing education will help either through just communications or letting the whips and House leaders know what we can say to our respective caucuses.

My friend, the House leader of the NDP, raised filibustering. Filibustering is something that all parties engage in at committees. It is a function of Parliament. It's a parliamentary tool that is used. I doubt that filibustering is going to end.

We have the other issue of sitting until midnight every night, and that requires both the government's initiation and another party House leader agreeing to that. That cuts into committee time. We have lots of reasons committee time is cut into, but this is a very fluid place. Anything that is within the purview of parliamentarians doing their work or the government getting through its legislation, these are parts of our rules and we have to cope with that.

We all understand that, and we understand the strain our interpreters are under. Our main purpose here.... I might mention to Madam DeBellefeuille that I had my earpiece on the whole time she was talking as I usually do. We need to respect this workplace and all that we do. We need to respect those who support us, but we are just not sufficiently supported, let's face it, in the work we have to do here.

With the hybrid functioning the way it is, and, particularly, if we move to it being a full-on hybrid, we are going to continue to be seized with this issue at every meeting, as we have been since I've been on this board, because we're straining between workplace injury, which we all want to avoid, and the necessities of interpretation in a bilingual country and a bilingual Parliament.

We have to do everything we can, collectively, to support further recruitment, more recruitment and a good workplace environment for those doing this important work.

Thank you.

• (1220)

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

I'd like to ask a couple of questions myself.

My first question is for Mr. McDonald. We're supplying 160 hours a week of interpretation. There are 70 meetings that are not being covered in a year.

How many hours a week would we need to, say, cover everything we need?

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

It's a very difficult question to answer, because there are some variations in terms of the number of hours of meetings that are required per week.

I would just perhaps add—and it has been covered several times already in the meeting today—that there are other activities that are taking place that are outside of committees, as you know well, that are not being supported by interpretation. Even beyond the allotment that committees require—and it is falling short today—there would be other hours of interpretation that would be required to support many other activities.

It's very difficult. There's a lot of variation from one week to another, but if we look back at it historically, committees are accustomed to being able to meet when they need to without any interruptions, and that's what's been missing, I think, since the start of the pandemic.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Let me rephrase that question, then. In an ideal world, where we cover committees, how many would we need, and for other ancillary meetings, how many would we need? I'm looking for two numbers. I want a clear vision of where we have to be compared to where we are.

**Mr. Ian McDonald:** I don't have specific numbers for you today. What we know is that there is certainly an ebb and flow when committees get busier. For example, in May, June, November and December, the number of cancellations goes up, and 57 may be a number that is closer to the mark. It's probably a little bit low, but it's closer to the mark—57 committee events, that is.

At some times of the year, when it gets busier, it's clearly not sufficient, and that's based on the number of cancellations of some committees in order to allow other committees to keep meeting and that sort of thing. In the past, that wasn't always the case.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Just to give me an idea, and I understand it's very difficult, could you come up with an ideal situation? Then, once I have that answer, I could go to Mr. Laporte and ask him how many people we'd need to fill those hours.

I'll leave it at that, and I won't ask for anything more.

I believe Mr. Holland has a question.

**Hon. Mark Holland:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, thank you to everyone. I think there's been a great improvement in this area, and it's important to us all.

I'm wondering if maybe we should create a subcommittee of the BOIE committee. We seem to be spending about an hour every meeting over the last two or three months on this, and it's starting to get difficult to get to other matters. Perhaps we should be considering a subcommittee of BOIE that could report back to BOIE.

I certainly agree that this is incredibly important, but an hour every meeting now for many months is making it difficult to get other work done, and perhaps there's another way to do these deep dives that allows BOIE to do the rest of its work as well.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Do we have consensus for that? No, we don't have consensus for that, so we'll move on.

I want to thank you all for coming out.

• (1225)

I'm going to ask for a bit of a change in the schedule. We have Mr. McDonald who's already up here, and he's going to be speaking to number 6.

[*Translation*]

Can we move on to the sixth item and deal with it? It won't take long. Then we can come back to the fifth item.

Do we have a consensus on that?

Yes? Agreed.

I now have a short text to read out.

[*English*]

The text report for this committee is the annual report at tab 6. You have before you a letter from the chair of the liaison committee, Ms. Sgro, who wishes to inform the board that the Liaison Committee recently adopted and presented to the House its latest annual report on committee activities and expenditures for the 2022-23 fiscal year. Ms. Sgro submitted a copy of the report to the board and has indicated that she would be available to meet with us at a future date, if the board desires.

Pursuant to Standing Order 121.(4):

The Board of Internal Economy shall cause to be tabled in the House an annual comprehensive financial report, outlining the individual expenditures of every...committee....

The established practice since 2014 has been for the Liaison Committee's annual report to be approved by the board and tabled by the Speaker in order to comply with the requirements of the standing order. Consequently, if all members are in agreement, I will submit the report as attached to the House as the board's report, pursuant to the standing order.

Are there any questions or comments about the report or the process? Does everyone agree with that, that I submit the report to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**Hon Anthony Rota:** Thank you, colleagues. That was quick, and it's out of the way.

Now we can go on to number 5, the "Report to Canadians", and we have Mr. Janse, acting clerk of the House of Commons.

**Mr. Eric Janse (Acting Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given the time, I'll reduce my notes.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the House of Commons "Report to Canadians 2023".

As you may already know, this report allows Canadians to learn more about their members of Parliament's work and functions, and keeps them also informed about projects that were completed by the House administration over the past year.

We were proud to include in this report the fact that, after a long hiatus due to the pandemic, the House of Commons resumed some of its activities, reopened its doors to visitors and once again allowed the public to attend House of Commons debates and committee meetings.

[*Translation*]

As well as offering services to members, House of Commons Administration is working hard to make Parliament more accessible to a greater number of people.

Two online resources were launched for people who can't participate in guided tours. The first one is a webpage called "History, Art and Architecture". The second is a portal called "ProceduralInfo".

[*English*]

Also in this report are details of the House's work to better understand accessibility issues and information about its plan for ensuring a barrier-free environment for all. This work is in line with the House administration's commitment to promoting an inclusive, diverse and engaged workforce.

[*Translation*]

It's also in the interest of inclusivity that we changed the title of this report: "Rapport aux Canadiens" is now called "Rapport à la population canadienne".

Inclusive writing in both official languages is a subject we're hearing about more and more, and it's part of a broader accessibility issue.

[*English*]

With the board's approval, the report will be tabled in both official languages in the House and made available on ourcommons.ca in a printable, mobile-friendly and accessible HTML format. It will also be shared through our social media channels and with our parliamentary partners and legislative counterparts. Tweets highlighting various elements of the report will be posted throughout the year.

Members of Parliament, of course, are welcome to use our social media posts to share and discuss the "Report to Canadians" with their constituents.

I'm available to answer any questions.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We'll go to questions and comments. We have Ms. Findlay.

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

I was curious. Do you have any stats on web readership of last year's edition of this report? What kind of take-up are we getting?

**Mr. Eric Janse:** Maybe not quite viral but—

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** It doesn't have to do that, but I'm curious.



**Mr. Eric Janse:** No, but it is well used. I would say that last year's report between the English and French versions received about 3,000 hits.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** I recognize you don't rely on any external resources to prepare the document, but it is quite comprehensive.

Could you give us a sense of how many employees, internal resources, are tasked with contributing to producing this report?

● (1230)

**Mr. Eric Janse:** That's a very good question, Ms. Findlay.

Indeed a lot of people are involved with assembling the information for the report, and then of course the formatting of that. It's all done in-house. There's nothing that's done outside, and it's not published so there's no cost related to that.

In terms of the number of people involved, we'd have to go back and come back to the board with that number.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Thank you.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any questions?

Are we agreed?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Very good.

[Translation]

We will now move on to the seventh item, the *2022-2023 Annual Financial Report* and Request for Approval of Budget Carry-forward to 2023-2024.

[English]

The presenters today will be Monsieur St George, chief financial officer; José Fernandez, deputy chief financial officer; Ms. Lafontaine, senior director, decision support and financial planning; Andrew Newman, audit partner and officer manager, Ottawa, KPMG; as well as Jonathan Génereux, audit manager, KPMG.

[Translation]

Mr. St George, you have the floor.

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

Today, I'm presenting the *2022-2023 Annual Financial Report* for the House of Commons, which includes the audited financial statements. I'm asking the Board to authorize the operating budget carry-forward.

Sections 1 to 3 of the report provide an overview of the House's financial results for the year ended March 31, 2023.

Section 4 presents audited financial statements for that same period.

Every year, financial statements are audited by an independent external auditor, specifically KPMG. I'm pleased to point out that the audit resulted in an unqualified opinion.

We are seeing an overall increase in expenditures from \$33 million compared to the previous financial year, 2022-2023. This increase is due mainly to three budget items.

The first budget item increased by \$17.3 million, which represents over half of the overall increase. This is due to increased travel costs after public health restrictions were lifted.

The second budget item increased by \$5.9 million, due to the lifecycle of members' computer equipment, the Long-Term Vision and Plan, as well as licenses and IT projects in support of members.

The third item increased by \$5.3 million, due to higher salary costs and cost of living increases within the Members and House Officers program.

[English]

I turn your attention to the year-end financial results. The 2022-23 budget amounted to \$558.5 million. Total net operating expenses were \$537.6 million, and this left a surplus of \$20.9 million.

Fifty-one per cent of the surplus pertains to the House office budgets of members and House officers, which reflects typical spending trends. Thirteen per cent relates to the budgets of committees, associations and exchanges, mainly due to lower travel costs and witness expenses than before the pandemic. Finally, 36% pertains to the House administration, mainly attributable to job vacancies and recruitment challenges.

The \$20.9-million surplus represents 5.3% of the 2022-23 budget. It also corresponds to the lapse that will be reported in the Public Accounts of Canada.

Annually, with the board's approval, the House carries forward lapsed amounts of up to 5%, which corresponds to \$19.8 million for 2022-23. Of that, \$7.5 million would be allocated to the office budgets of members and House officers, and the \$12.3 million remaining would be allocated to House administration to support various member-related projects and initiatives.

The administration is therefore seeking the board's approval to include a budget carry-forward of \$19.8 million to fund mainly member-related projects and initiatives, such as member security, the accessibility plan, life cycling of IT, members' orientation and other various initiatives. This \$19.8 million carry-forward would be included in the 2023-24 supplementary estimates that will be tabled in the fall.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my presentation. I'll now pass the floor to Mr. Newman, KPMG audit partner. The board will then have the opportunity to ask questions and speak to the auditors in camera.

● (1235)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there questions or comments on that?

Ms. Findlay.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** I do have some questions, but I'm thinking maybe we should hear from everyone first.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Once we're done with this, we're going to move in camera, and that will allow us to be more open. If the members want to keep their questions for then, they can ask then.

Would you like to ask your questions?

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** I can ask them now.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I apologize. We have Mr. Newman. If we have other public ones, maybe we'll go ahead.

Thank you, Ms. Findlay. I'm glad you brought that up.

Please go ahead, Mr. Newman.

**Mr. Andrew Newman (Audit Partner, KPMG):** Thank you for the opportunity to present our audit opinion on the 2023 financial statements and provide a brief summary of the conduct of our audit.

I would like to introduce my colleague, Jonathan Génereux, audit manager for the audit. In the audience is Ines Grubestic, senior accountant.

The chief financial officer has presented the 2023 financial statements, which House administration has prepared using public sector accounting standards. Public sector accounting standards are used by all governments in Canada and are issued by the Public Sector Accounting Board, upon which I served as member and vice-chair for 12 years ending in 2020.

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

The 2023 financial statement audit began with the development of our audit plan, which was based on multiple decisions with House administration. Our year-end audit was executed in accordance with that plan. During our audit, we received full participation from your House administration. All of our questions were answered. All of the required supporting documentation was provided and all issues were satisfactorily resolved.

We have completed our audit and issued our audit opinion on June 6, 2023, in our independent auditor's report. The opinion states that the "financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of the [House of Commons] as at March 31, 2023, and its results of operation", its accumulated surplus "and its cash flows for the year then ended in accordance with Canadian public sector accounting standards."

June 6, 2023 is the earliest date of issuance of the financial statements of the House of Commons in its history. I want to commend the House administration for implementing the financial reporting processes required to achieve this date. I also thank the board for scheduling this presentation prior to the summer recess during what is a very busy legislative agenda.

Mr. Speaker, that concludes my report.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Now we'll answer questions. Are there any questions or comments?

Ms. Findlay.

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

Mr. St George, if I understand what you were saying, I see that MPs lapsed \$23.3 million in their office budgets and still have access to only \$7.5 million of that.

Am I correct that you're saying that you want to put that carry-over of approximately \$19.8 million towards—I think you said—security, accessibility, etc. Am I talking about the same coverage there? Is that correct?

**Mr. Paul St George:** Absolutely, that is correct. It's broken up into two portions based on our math. There is a calculation. The carry-forward for the administrative component goes back into all those projects that are essentially member related, such as those that I mentioned in my speech.

That is correct.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Through you, Mr. Chair, has there been an uptake on the need for the funding of more security? I think we have been making a push to make sure that constituency offices in particular come up to a certain standard on security.

**Mr. Paul St George:** We have. We've seen a considerable increase in the investment in security since 2000-21. That is correct.

• (1240)

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Thank you.

I know I'm relatively new here, but I note that in note 7 on page 39 under accounts receivable, there is "Allowance for doubtful accounts on external receivables". It's quite sizable at \$1.65 million. That seems up from \$39,000 from the year prior.

Can you explain what that relates to?

**Mr. Paul St George:** That allowance was set up last year in 2021-22. It was a past decision of the board, essentially, to set up that allowance on our books. It remains on our books until such time we deem it uncollectable.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** What is it about?

**Mr. Paul St George:** I can't reveal the details in the room here.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** All right. Thank you.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I believe that's something we can cover once we go in camera.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** Yes, I understood that. Thank you.

Page 17 of the financial report outlines the costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. I note that there was actually a very small decline year over year despite, I hope, really turning the corner on the pandemic. It seems it's chalked up to hybrid Parliament costs.

How much of the \$2.6 million listed there are extra costs driven by hybrid Parliament?

**Mr. Paul St George:** Based on our calculations, approximately \$2.3 million of the \$2.6 million is hybrid-related. That is incremental, and we expect that will remain a part of our costs until such time as hybrid is no longer an event.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** I have one last question.

I understand—perhaps Mr. Newman may be the one to answer this—the materiality threshold increased sharply from \$5 million to \$9 million. I'm wondering what that jump is about. Am I correct that materiality means that, if you see any issues or irregularities that are below that threshold, they're basically not worth commenting on? Am I correct in that materiality definition?

If that is the case, is there anything spotted during the audit that would have met that \$5-million materiality threshold but not the new \$9-million threshold?

**Mr. Andrew Newman:** Through you, Mr. Chair, I'll do them in reverse.

In our report, it also says we did not identify any uncorrected misstatements or misstatements that required to be corrected during our audit. What that means is that the books and records that were provided to us by your House administration were not changed by the results of our audit. This sort of answers no. There's nothing over \$5 million or \$9 million that would come to your attention.

Materiality is—and I don't want to give an accounting and auditing lesson here—basically through the eyes of the user or the reader of the financial statements. It is an estimate of the.... Because financial statements are not audited to perfection or prepared to perfection, it is an estimate of the amount of differential that would

change the user's perspective based on the results of those financial statements on accountability.

The House expenses, as Mr. St George talked about, were \$566 million of total operating. Would it fundamentally change a user's decision if it was \$9 million higher or \$9 million lower? That does impact our audit work slightly around statistical sampling but not to a great effect for the House.

I hope I answered all three of the questions there.

**Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay:** It was very clear. Thank you.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** We're going to suspend for a few minutes and go in camera.

Mr. Newman, do you have something?

**Mr. Andrew Newman:** You may want to keep Mr. St George, because I think the question that's coming is more appropriate for him than me.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** I believe he's one of the ones staying.

We're going to suspend right now and, hopefully in a few minutes, we'll take this up again.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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