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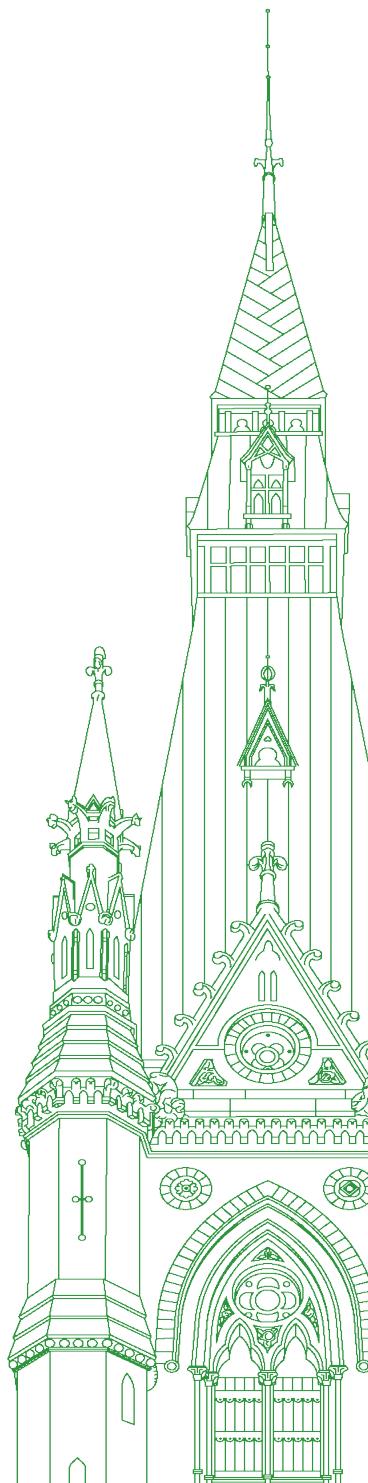
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Board of Internal Economy

TRANSCRIPT

NUMBER 025

Thursday, December 7, 2023



Board of Internal Economy

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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Speaker of the House of Commons): Good morning.

Welcome to meeting number 25 of the Board of Internal Economy.

[*English*]

We have a good schedule today, so let's move through it.

The first thing is the minutes from previous meetings.

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions about that?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

I read the minutes carefully and I am satisfied with them. I do have a comment, but I'm not sure what it falls under.

You will recall the discussion we had on the renovations to Centre Block at our last meeting. We had four decisions to make, one of which was to designate a room for Qulliq lighting and smudging ceremonies. On that point, we decided to compromise and not decide on the final function of this room created in honour of indigenous peoples.

So, shortly after our meeting on November 26, I was surprised to receive an email from the Centre Block rehabilitation working group describing the Board of Internal Economy's decision by talking about an inclusive space devoted to ceremonial cultural practices, but the word "indigenous" was nowhere to be seen.

I believe that the information provided to the House administration as a whole does not reflect the decision of the Board of Internal Economy. I've informed the House administration, but I'd like you to decide what we're going to do about it, Mr. Chair. Are we going to ask for a correction, given the decision we made at the last meeting?

I don't know if all the members of the Board of Internal Economy have seen this mailing. I received it on November 26 at 8:32 a.m. from my chief of staff, but the original letter was sent on Thursday, November 23 at 3:58 p.m.

I'd like to know what follow-up you plan to do. The minutes clearly reflect what was said and I'm satisfied with that, but there is follow-up to be done on this document.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much for raising that point, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Aubé has a short answer for you.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Acting Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, after the minutes of the previous meeting are approved today, we will update the document and send a correction.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): I'd like to speak to another part of the minutes, Mr. Chair.

With respect to the appointment of external auditors, yes, the minutes do reflect our approval to engage KPMG. However, I thought there was consensus that this would be the auditor's final mandate, and I feel the minutes should reflect that.

Hon. Greg Fergus: You're right, Mr. MacKinnon. We will make sure that we make the necessary changes.

Are there any further questions on the minutes of the previous meeting?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Let's now move on to the second item on the agenda, which is business arising from previous meetings. Actually, I think we just discussed it.

We will move to the third item on the agenda, then, which is the quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2023-24.

I'm going to ask Paul St George and José Fernandez to speak briefly on this.

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

I am presenting the unaudited quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2023-24.

I attest to the accuracy and reliability of the information therein.

As of September 30, 2023, the cumulative net operating costs of the House were \$341.4 million. This represents an increase of \$22 million over the same quarter of the previous fiscal year.

[English]

The \$22-million variance reflects inflation as well as initiatives, salaries and other adjustments approved by the board in 2023-24.

As of September 30, the House was operating within its approved authorities.

I welcome any questions the board may have.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Are there any questions or comments?

I see none.

(Motion agreed to)

[English]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. St George.

You're on to the next matter, which is regarding the proposed 2024 main estimates.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul St George: I am now presenting, for approval, the proposed main estimates for the House of Commons for 2024-25.

It should be noted that these estimates reflect initiatives and methodology approved by the Board of Internal Economy, legislation, and adjustments prescribed by the Treasury Board.

The House of Commons must prepare its estimates and forward them to the Treasury Board for tabling with the main estimates of the Government of Canada. It was agreed that the budget would be presented to the Treasury Board no later than December 14, 2023.

The budget is \$623.6 million. This represents an increase of \$26.5 million over the 2023-24 main estimates, an increase of 2.4% before salary adjustments for previous years.

The table breaks down into four main categories of budget items.

In the first category, the Board of Internal Economy has approved initiatives totalling \$3.9 million. These initiatives are listed in lines 1a to 1c. For example, \$3.6 million in funding was approved for the lifecycle management initiative, which was presented to the Board of Internal Economy in November. You'll find that in line 1a.

The second category, which is inflation, represents an overall adjustment of \$10.8 million.

• (1110)

[English]

As shown in 2a., in accordance with board-approved methodology, annual adjustments to the office budgets of members and House officers, the constituency office budget and the travel expenses account have been made based on the adjusted consumer price index.

In terms of items 2b. and c., they respectively pertain to the adjustments to the 2023 members' sessional allowance and the 2024-25 salary increases for certain House administration employees.

The final category concerns retroactive salary increases for House administration employees in the amount of \$11.7 million.

As annually reported in the audited financial statements, services received without charge in the amount of \$107 million are included for reporting purposes only, and this is to provide transparency on the cost of doing business. This amount does not impact the House appropriation and will not be included to the Treasury Board, but will be included in future quarterly and annual reporting. Services received without charge mainly include accommodation expenses paid by Public Services and Procurement Canada.

The administration recommends that the board approve the 2024-25 main estimates in the amount of \$623.6 million to be submitted to Treasury Board, and that the board take note of services received without charge in the amount of \$107 million.

This concludes my presentation. I welcome any questions you may have.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thanks very much.

Could you help with the comparison between last year and this year? Unless I read this wrong—and please correct me if I did—last year's budget referred to the number of employees, and I understand that this year's presentation refers to the number of full-time equivalents. I know that's obviously not the same thing.

I was just wondering if you could you provide more of an apples-to-apples number of employees versus the number of employees or number of FTEs versus the number of FTEs? If you don't have that at your fingertips, perhaps you can provide that to the board at a later time.

Mr. Paul St George: When we look back at 2023, to compare apples to apples, the FTEs in the last year were 1,838 and the FTEs this year are 1,860, which reflects an increase of 37. That increase is mainly attributable to the initiative or the submission that was included in the budget, 35 of which are within the DSRP, and the remaining two, I believe, are adjustments that were made, again because of other submissions.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: When was the last time the House administration conducted a program review or an expenditure review?

We've been in the middle of a crisis for the last couple of years with inflation. There's more and more evidence that government spending and borrowing add to that inflation and cause that inflation.

Economy can begin at home. I'm wondering when the last time was that the administration took out the calculators and pencils and did an in-depth review of where the administration spends money.

Mr. Paul St George: It has been several years since we performed a complete operational review. We are in that process again, so finance with administration, as well as service heads. We're currently looking at the cost structure of the organization. In the next quarter of next year, we'll be identifying opportunities.

I ask that you also take note that we never include in our mains the inflation on non-salary goods. We absorb those through mitigation strategies and initiatives annually, either through our process improvement team or through those initiatives that we identify within the submission.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Would you consider that a formal expenditure review process?

Mr. Paul St George: Absolutely. Yes.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: When do you expect that to begin?

Mr. Paul St George: It would be the first quarter of 2024.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Minister Gould.

Hon. Karina Gould (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

First of all, I want to say how exceptional the services are that the Parliament of Canada provides to us as members of Parliament. I think it's something that all Canadians can be really proud of. This place runs incredibly smoothly, operates at an extremely high level and, I think, serves Canadians and our democracy extremely well.

I do not have any questions with regard to the main estimates, because, having been here for eight years, I really appreciate how much support you provide to members of Parliament who are here on behalf of Canadians to serve them every day, and I fully support the proposal.

Thank you.

• (1115)

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any other questions or comments?

[English]

I see none.

Thank you very much, Mr. St George.

I'm assuming, seeing the nodding of heads around the table, that there are no objections to adopting this.

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Great. Thank you.

Number five is the interim budget for the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying. I'm going to ask Mr. Lemoine to lead us here today.

Mr. Scott Lemoine (Principal Clerk, Committees, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The submission to the board is for the approval of an interim budget for the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying.

The House and the Senate both adopted orders in October this year to reappoint the special joint committee in accordance with recommendation 13 that appeared in the second report of the special joint committee, which was in existence earlier this year.

Special joint committees do not automatically receive funding. They are funded by the Board of Internal Economy, not through the global envelope for standing committees. This request would grant funding in the standard amount of \$50,000 in an interim budget to the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying, following the usual formula of splitting the cost between the Senate and House: 70% to the House and 30% to the Senate. The funding would be taken from the 2023-24 global budget envelopes for our standing committees.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Lemoine.

Are there any questions? I see none.

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

[Translation]

We are now on the sixth item on the agenda, the progress report on the House of Commons accessibility plan for 2023.

Mr. LaPerrière-Marcoux, you have the floor.

Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux (Director, Accessibility Implementation, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm here to briefly present the progress report on the implementation of the House of Commons accessibility plan and to answer any questions you may have.

The Board of Internal Economy adopted the House of Commons' first accessibility plan in November 2022. Under the Accessible Canada Act and its regulations, a progress report must be published by the end of December 2023.

[English]

The progress report described the work accomplished in 2023, including the consultation that took place and the feedback received by the accessibility secretariat.

I'm happy to report that the House will be able to complete the 14 initiatives planned for this year as well as advance the work scheduled for 2024. Some highlights of these accomplishments include the deployment and testing of a live-captioning solution for visitors in the gallery; the development and launch of two training modules for MPs, their staff and House employees, one on general accessibility awareness and the other on accessibility customer service; and improvement to the accessibility of the House of Commons website, including almost 300 days of development dedicated to this effort.

[*Translation*]

In partnership with the Department of Public Works and Government Services, we've continued to make accessibility a priority in the rehabilitation projects on the Hill, especially with regard to Centre Block.

Finally, I'd like to mention the launch of a centralized call centre for members and their staff, extended hours of service, in-person appointments and the online application portal.

[*English*]

Thank you for your attention. I welcome any questions.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mr. LaPerrière-Marcoux.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Mr. LaPerrière-Marcoux, thank you very much for the work you are doing.

I have a couple of questions.

First, I'd like to know how many House administration employees are disabled and in need of accessibility measures. I've asked this question before, but we didn't know the answer. I hope we'll get a better idea of that this year.

Second, do we know approximately how many people visiting the House of Commons and Parliament Hill have accessibility needs?

Third, it's one thing to have an accessibility plan in place, but it's another to inform people with disabilities across the country that you have one. Several years ago, the site was not accessible to these individuals. We remember that members with disabilities even had trouble travelling between their offices and the House of Commons.

We're paying more attention to accessibility and we're making progress, but how is that communicated to associations across the country for people who are blind, deaf or paraplegic? It's important that these individuals know that we're doing this work, especially since their visits are an opportunity to tell us how we can improve accessibility on Parliament Hill even further.

In short, how are we sharing this information across the country?

• (1120)

Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: Thank you for the question, Mr. Julian.

First of all, with respect to the associations that represent persons with disabilities and sharing what we've done with them, I must say that we're working in partnership with them to develop the plan. This year, we met with people from Disability Without Poverty, Inclusion Canada and Spinal Cord Injury Canada. This is a way for us to discuss with them our progress and the challenges they've encountered. For example, members of Disability Without Poverty have come to the Hill several times and we've had the opportunity to discuss the problems they've encountered with them. This helped us identify the barriers that needed to be addressed as a priority.

Second, in terms of visitors to the Hill, we don't have any data for you. We can check with the Library of Parliament, which oversees visits. That said, as you can see in our plan, we're working hard to ensure that our built environment is accessible.

With respect to the percentage of the House administration workforce who self-identify as disabled, we've launched a new self-identification questionnaire to try to get a better picture of the situation.

This year, as part of the plan, we also hired people with disabilities with lived experience to help us with technology.

I don't know if the numbers we have now have been distributed or not. I would have to check. The percentage of employees with disabilities would be around 3% or slightly below that. I would have to validate the information before giving you the exact answer.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for those answers.

It would be important to have an idea of what the situation is for visitors. It should be noted that 15% to 20% of Canadians are living with a disability. If we don't have the appropriate accessibility measures and the percentage of people with disabilities among visitors is well below that number, it will show that we still have work to do.

I also note that the vast majority of people who are homeless in this country are people with disabilities. That should be a priority.

Thank you very much for the progress report. I would very much like to know about the number of visitors we have received in the past year and, more specifically, about accessibility on Parliament Hill.

Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

[*English*]

Ms. Findlay.

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

[Translation]

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. LaPerrière-Marcoux.

[English]

Stephanie Cadieux was named as Canada's first chief accessibility officer in May 2022. I'm wondering to what extent she has been consulted or has been involved in your work.

• (1125)

Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: I met with her in March 2023. We had a good discussion on the plan. She had positive feedback for us, and we committed to work together and keep that connection going.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: You've had one meeting—

Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: Yes.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: —in a year and a half of her tenure.

Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: We started in February. Last year, the plan was adopted, so it's been a year now. She was in Ottawa in February, so we had a meeting with her. We presented the plan and had some discussion. I think it's part of our work of continuing consultations with different actors, in order to get feedback and work with her.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Canada appointed a chief accessibility officer—someone who is herself in a wheelchair and had a distinguished career in British Columbia, politically. She is someone who deals with a disability.

I would think that continuing a more robust dialogue with the person designated for that purpose might be in order.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Ms. Findlay.

I'd like to use my prerogative as chair to ask a question as a follow-up to Mr. Julian's.

A survey will be conducted of House administration employees so they can self-identify as persons with special needs or persons with disabilities. I know that in other situations involving equity, there's always a concern about whether people are actually going to self-identify as this or that. Can we be assured that every possible means will be taken to encourage all employees with disabilities to self-identify?

Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

In fact, it is a self-identification questionnaire for employees that covers all types of diversity. It's really a priority for us to make sure people are aware. We have a campaign to promote self-identification. We just launched this new questionnaire in November. There used to be one in place, but the new questionnaire follows best practices, and there are considerably more categories and descriptions, generally speaking. So I want to make it clear that it's not just for accessibility issues.

In short, a promotional campaign is indeed underway.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

Are there any other questions?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Actually, Mr. Chair, I have no questions. However, before we go in camera, I have a brief statement to make.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Before we do that, we still have the seventh item on the agenda, which is the budget for the OSCE conference.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: In that case, I'll wait.

Would it be possible to let me have the floor again just before we go in camera? I have a quick message.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Okay.

Thank you very much, Mr. LaPerrière-Marcoux.

Is everyone in agreement with adopting this report?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I will now turn the floor over to Mr. LeBlanc, who will give us an update on the budget for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE, conference.

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

[English]

In July, the Parliament of Canada hosted the 30th annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Vancouver. Delegates from 49 countries attended to debate and pass resolutions on a variety of topics ranging from Russia's war against Ukraine, migration and plastic pollution to artificial intelligence.

While the conference itself was a success, several factors contributed to the total budget approved by the board and its equivalent in the Senate being exceeded. I want to note that this is a very unusual occurrence, since the conferences that we host are always delivered within the funding provided. Indeed, the typical budget utilization rate for conferences is around 80%, with surpluses returned to the consolidated revenue fund. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly annual session faced a few unique and unprecedented challenges that have resulted in a substantial deficit in the conference budget.

[Translation]

As is the case for any conference organized by Parliament, we had an obligation to reserve blocks of rooms for participants at various hotels near the meeting place. To keep these rooms, the House administration has signed contracts with five hotels, guaranteeing them a certain level of revenue. As is often the case for bookings of this size, the contracts provided for certain penalties to compensate hotels if a certain number of rooms weren't used. The responsibility for those accommodations is transferred to the conference participants as they book their room.

The budget for each conference that we present includes an amount for attrition penalties, which are generally between \$15,000 and \$20,000, in case the agreed-upon occupancy thresholds aren't met. In this case, the attrition penalties were much higher than the usual amounts. This is partly due to lower-than-expected attendance at the conference, but also because many delegates chose to stay at other hotels further away.

• (1130)

[*English*]

In relation to attendance, based on past sessions, the agreement that we signed with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly secretariat required us to make arrangements for 700 participants, but only 365 delegates attended alongside 163 others for a total of 528. Already, this is 25% lower than what we were expecting.

Compounding this was a decision by about a third of those participants to stay at other hotels some distance from the convention centre and not in the hotels we had negotiated for the conference. This is a phenomenon that we've never encountered before. Perhaps it could be explained by other parliaments feeling similar pressures to our own associations, where they're attempting to stretch limited budgets further in the face of rising travel costs. This may be especially true in the case of delegations to the OSCE PA, where travelling to Vancouver is significantly farther than would be typical for this conference, which is usually held in Europe.

[*Translation*]

Our experience in hosting the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Halifax in August 2022, where attendance was higher than expected and where hotel room blocks had completely sold out, led us to believe that attendance at conferences had returned to pre-pandemic levels. This hasn't been the case for the annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. As a result, Parliament was unable to meet the contractual threshold for hotel occupancy in four of the five cases.

While we were able to take a number of steps to reduce our overall liability—these measures are explained in your briefing note—the combined penalties in those hotels were 1,400 nights, valued at \$596,000.

[*English*]

On top of this, the costs associated with technical and audiovisual support at the Vancouver Convention Centre were higher than forecast. As has been noted previously in relation to conference budgets, consolidation in this industry has led to increased costs for event support at all conferences. This was the second factor contributing to the high cost of hosting the annual session.

There were, however, cost savings in other areas of the budget, including large categories like salaries, meals and hospitality. These were not significant enough to erase the uniquely high level of attrition penalties and the additional audiovisual costs. Thus, the conference finished with a deficit of \$649,000, which we anticipate being able to absorb from within existing funding. As within all inter-parliamentary budgets, the House of Commons is responsible for 70%, and the Senate is responsible for 30% of this.

I want to emphasize that my team and I and our partners recognize the seriousness of these cost overruns. I want to reassure the board that steps are being taken to avoid incurring significant deficits in the future when the Parliament of Canada hosts conferences. While our room to manoeuvre and negotiate more favourable contracts with major hotel chains in popular markets at peak times of the year is perhaps somewhat limited, we're working closely with our materiel and contract management staff to identify areas where improvements can be made.

We're also being much more conservative in projecting the participation at conferences, given the vastly different experience we have seen in the last two that we have hosted.

While we have always selected a range of hotels at varying levels to offer to delegates, we will be more sensitive to the fact that many participants may put cost ahead of convenience in making their selection.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the opportunity to explain these circumstances.

I look forward to your questions.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Monsieur LeBlanc.

We have three questions so far starting with Mrs. Findlay.

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

I think this is a disastrous waste of money, quite frankly. It's hundreds of thousands of dollars wasted. I have three questions.

With the Vancouver conference, has the parliamentary wing of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ever met this far away from Europe before?

• (1135)

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: They met in Toronto the last time we hosted, which is closer.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: That's still 4,000 kilometres away. I know, because I go back and forth every week, how far it is.

This was an exceptional thing to hold this particular conference in Vancouver. I understand that Dr. Fry was the chair, but I also note that Dr. Fry appeared before this board in 2018 and 2021 to request approvals to host this conference. I'm wondering was she not available today to appear here to answer to the outcomes because she was able to come here to ask to host it in the first place.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: That's a decision that we made. The cost overruns aren't the fault of the association. They are due to the contracts the administration negotiated and so for the administration I'm here to respond to those questions.

I didn't ask Dr. Fry, but, certainly, if you would like to follow up with Dr. Fry we can arrange to have her appear.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: This is my last question. Obviously, are talking about lessons learned for the future, but I'm not clear exactly what lessons you have learned from your presentation other than you said you would be more conservative in your estimates and understand that some delegates would put cost ahead of convenience.

I would have thought that's something that could have been determined before this conference, particularly as you related to the last two conferences. Is there some mechanism, some survey of delegates, or some way you intend to determine further ahead the participation levels, the location, that would be most attractive for these purposes and also what their preferences would be?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: We haven't undertaken a survey of the delegates who attended this conference, but in the planning of future conferences that's something we're more conscious of.

Vancouver is a particular market. You understand how expensive real estate and hotels in downtown Vancouver are. There weren't a large number of other options very close to the venue that would have been more cost efficient for delegates, which is why we were surprised that delegates chose to stay some distance from the convention centre.

In terms of future things we are looking at, there are a number of measures we're taking in relation to conferences we're hosting next year in Montreal, which include making sure that conference participants have greater liability for rooms they may reserve and then cancel. A number of delegates had planned on attending the conference in Vancouver and didn't show up. The liability for their rooms under the terms of the contract remained with us rather than being transferred to them. That's something we're changing for future conferences.

We're working with the hotel chains and our contracting teams to be able to negotiate more favourable attrition rates and more favourable ways of calculating that attrition in the future. We're also looking at tiered cancellation clauses, which provide more flexible lead time so that should give us more ability in the future to avoid problems like this.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Minister Gould.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you.

I don't have any questions. I appreciate your explanation. I read through the document and note there are a number of lessons learned.

I think I only have disappointment to express in this regard because I think this is a large sum that was not well spent. I would really like for the record to show that, quite frankly, we expect better of the management of House resources.

I think when we have previous presentations that come forward asking for additional resources to go towards parliamentary delegations and parliamentary associations, this is an unacceptable situation to be in so I would encourage this area of House administration to learn those lessons and to do better next time.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Minister. That's well noted.

Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: On page 2 of the briefing note in the middle paragraph, it says, "Meanwhile a large delegation selected one of the recommended hotels while negotiating their own contract to include meeting rooms in addition to their rooms." I just want a little bit of clarification. Were we on the hook for those extra meeting rooms, or are you telling us that they basically took their whole delegation on a separate track? Did they cover all their costs; therefore, did those nights just not count against what you had negotiated, or did they bind us to something where we ended up having to cover extra costs for meeting rooms that weren't originally part of what was planned?

• (1140)

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It's the first explanation. They signed their own contract, so the room nights they used were not counted against our contract.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm really disturbed by this. This is a massive deficit. I just think, at a time when Canadians are really struggling, I can't see it being justified.

You mentioned earlier, Mr. LeBlanc, that there were rooms where the reservation was booked and the person or their delegation did not show up. How many rooms were there where we basically paid for that reservation?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: I don't think I have the exact number at my fingertips. Maybe one of my aides has it. I think the total cost of rooms that were reserved by delegates and then were subsequently cancelled is in the area of \$100,000 of that \$596,000 in penalties.

Mr. Peter Julian: Those were subsequently cancelled, but are you saying it's in terms of us picking up the tab for people who didn't show? Okay.

Then, most of the other \$600,000 came from not meeting the thresholds that were part of the contract and having to pay the minimum.

The OSCE is a very well-financed organization with over \$210 million annually; it has a huge budget. What is their responsibility when Canada is asked to take on an event like this? What do they contribute, and how do they provide supports when things go wrong, as clearly happened in this case?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: There's an agreement that we sign with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly prior to hosting a conference, which sets out the responsibilities of each side. In those responsibilities, the host country is responsible for making the arrangements around the accommodations.

I take the point that there should perhaps be a discussion with those international secretariats about how to share potential liability in situations where, for whatever reason, delegates choose to not show up in the numbers that are expected and agreed upon.

The agreement we have with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is clear that the host nation is the one responsible for making the arrangements around accommodations.

Mr. Peter Julian: Then we get the liability for the fact that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly didn't show up. Half of the projected numbers didn't show up. I don't find it acceptable for us to be contributing to an international organization in such a significant way, and they simply have no liability for what was clearly, I think it's fair to say, a request made of us that we accepted and that they didn't follow through on when half of the delegates did not come.

There is a major problem. I would stress that in any future international conference, particularly with a well-endowed international organization like the OSCE, the liability should not go to Canadians. They need to make sure they are meeting their obligations. Their obligations, I believe, were to send the 700 delegates and to make sure that the delegate contingent who went was in the order of what it should be.

I do think, on our side, we should never be taking on cancelled hotel rooms. If somebody doesn't follow through, it should be on their dime. They make the reservation with their credit card, and if they decide not to show up, it's on them.

My final question is around the Senate division. This has come up before with the GIC. Senators participate far beyond that 30% number that is the common division between the House of Commons resources and the Senate resources. I believe strongly, given that senators participate in these international events far more than their contribution warrants, that either there should be a cap on Senate participation or they should start carrying their full weight and paying a much greater percentage.

Is that something the House administration is exploring now with the Senate?

• (1145)

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: In response to your comment about the liability of the international secretariat, one point I would make is this: Ultimately, each country makes its own decision about participation, rather than the international secretariat. In the same way that Canada wasn't forced to attend the conference that just occurred in Armenia a while ago, the Armenians weren't forced to attend. Armenia, Greece, Spain, Portugal and all those countries make their own decisions, rather than the international secretariat making the decision for them.

In terms of cost sharing between the House of Commons and the Senate, part of the reason the percentage of participation among senators is higher, quite honestly, is that a number of members are

not participating. In all the delegations we organize, we respect that same formula of 70% from the House of Commons and 30% from the Senate. For reasons related to a minority Parliament, obligations of pairing and other reasons like that, there are situations where members aren't able to participate fully, or their participation is planned and cancelled at the last minute because of parliamentary obligations.

However, if there were a desire to renegotiate the terms of the funding around international affairs, I think that's a discussion that would, first, most appropriately occur at the Joint Interparliamentary Council, which makes the decisions for parliamentary associations, and makes financial policy decisions around the management of budgets and the activities of associations. Ultimately, the internal economy committee in the Senate and this board would make the decisions about how the funding is shared.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that comment.

I'll come back to your previous comment about the international secretariat's responsibility.

I would suggest that, when the international secretariat asks Canada to take on something like this, they have a responsibility to ensure member countries are participating. If it's very clear to the secretariat that a number of countries have chosen not to participate, this should be flagged well in advance, so we can avoid the kind of situation that happened here. That is my point.

I don't think we disagree. The question of responsibility is still something the secretariat needs to consider. In this case, given how well financed the OSCE is, I suggest that, in a normal situation, they should be willing to look at the situation and provide some support, as well.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

I'd like to thank all members for their participation. All of your comments on this have been noted, and we will continue to go forward.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. LeBlanc.

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you had a point you wanted to raise before we go in camera, so the floor is yours.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, can we consider today's meeting to be the last one in 2023 and that we will meet again in January 2024, or is another Board of Internal Economy meeting scheduled before the Christmas break?

Hon. Greg Fergus: So far, unless I hear otherwise, this is our last meeting before the holidays.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

I didn't want us to get carried away without even wishing each other a merry Christmas and a good start to 2024.

On behalf of the Bloc Québécois, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the new clerk of the House, who was appointed last week. We'll team up with Mr. Janse. We wanted to publicly congratulate him here at this meeting of the Board of Internal Economy.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the entire team that supports the members, be it the procedure team or the administration's general team, not to mention the interpreters, of course, who support us and who have worked hard over the past year. As whip, I am very pleased to be able to count on the co-operation of all sectors of the House administration. I feel that they are very present. They are committed to supporting us so that we can do our job properly. I wanted to thank them publicly today.

So I wish Mr. Janse the best of luck. I imagine that the deputy clerk of procedure and deputy clerk of administration will soon round out his team.

I would also like to acknowledge the exceptional work of the clerks, who don't have an easy job these days. Last night, I was filled with admiration for the fine work done by the clerks. I think that Mr. McDonald's team has been nimble in providing the Standing Committee on Natural Resources with experienced clerks who have been able to provide excellent support to the members and the chair.

In short, I wish everyone a happy holiday season and a happy rest. I hope we will be in good shape in 2024.

On behalf of the Bloc Québécois, I would like to extend our congratulations to everyone.

• (1150)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much for those wishes, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. That's very generous of you.

As Speaker of the House, I too would like to thank all MPs and all members of the Board of Internal Economy and wish everyone a

happy holiday, merry Christmas or happy Hanukkah. I hope to see you in good health in 2024.

Ms. Gould, you have the floor.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

I have a couple of points.

First, Mr. Gerretsen asked me to raise at a future BOIE meeting the potential discussion item of how to differentiate the mileage for EV and combustion vehicles for members, and their travel to and from Ottawa. I want to formally ask that we put that on the record.

This will be my last BOIE meeting before I go on maternity leave. I would also like to echo Madame DeBellefeuille's comments, and really express, on behalf of the Liberal Party of Canada and Liberal members of Parliament, our appreciation for House administration, and the incredible work that all of the employees of the House of Commons and Parliament do in supporting us day in and day out.

I would also like to wish everybody happy holidays, and some good rest. I'll see you in the new year, but not in January, because I will probably have a days-old baby with me. It's been a short tenure on BOIE, so far, but I look forward to returning later on in the new year.

Thank you very much.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Minister Gould.

All the best on the delivery of your young child. I hope that everyone will be healthy and happy. Blessings for you in 2024.

We will now go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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