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Board of Internal Economy

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• (1105)

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Speaker of the House of Commons): Hello, everyone.

[English]

I call the meeting to order. We're starting our 32nd meeting of the Board of Internal Economy.

[Translation]

The first part of the meeting will be public, and then we will go in camera for two items on the agenda. The last part of the meeting will then be in public.

Let's start right away with the first item on the agenda: adopting the minutes of the previous meeting.

Do the members of the Board of Internal Economy wish to adopt them?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Very well.

Let's move on to the second item on the agenda: business arising from previous meetings.

[English]

Are there any items that people would like to raise from the minutes of the last meeting?

Go ahead, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip): No, I'm sorry.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Very good. Do we have approval?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

Next, I invite Mr. St George up to the table to give us the 2023-2024 annual financial report and request for approval of budget carryforward to the following fiscal year.

Mr. St George, the floor is yours.

[Translation]

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

Today I will be presenting the House of Commons financial report for the fiscal year that ended on March 31, 2024. This report includes the financial statements audited by KPMG. In addition, I am requesting that the Board of Internal Economy authorize funds to be carried forward from the operating budget.

As to the financial results, the adjusted budget is \$782.2 million. That includes \$641.2 million in authorizations approved by the Board of Internal Economy, the year-end financial adjustments for legislative authorizations, and services received free of charge.

As of March 31, 2024, total expenditures were \$751.8 million, leaving a surplus of \$30.4 million.

[English]

The surplus represents 7.2% of the main estimates and is mainly the result of strong stewardship by members and House officers of their office budgets, lower-than-anticipated travel expenses and delays in certain operational projects.

Annually, with the board's approval, the House carries forward lapsed amounts of up to 5% of the main estimates, and for 2023-2024, this equates to \$21.2 million. From this amount, \$7.9 million will be allocated back to the office budgets of members and House officers. The remaining \$13.3 million will be allocated to the administration, mainly to fund member-related projects, such as the implementation of the expense management system as a solution to support the accessibility plan approved by the BOIE, the life-cycling of IT equipment and infrastructure, and enhancement to the members' orientation programs. The administration is therefore seeking the board's approval to include a budget carry-forward of \$21.2 million in the 2024-2025 supplementary estimates.

I will now ask Mr. Newman, KPMG audit partner, to present their audit summary.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Go ahead, Mr. Newman.

[English]

Mr. Andrew Newman (Audit Partner and Office Manager, KPMG): Thank you for this opportunity to present our audit opinion on the 2024 financial statements and to provide a brief summary of the conduct of our audit.

I would like to introduce my colleague, Jonathan Généreux, audit senior manager for the audit.

The chief financial officer has presented the 2024 financial statements, which management 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 a 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 2024 financial statement audit began with the development of our audit plan, which was based on multiple discussions with management. 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 received, and all issues were satisfactorily resolved.

We have completed our audit and we issued our audit opinion on June 5, 2024, in our independent auditor's report. That opinion states that the financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of the House of Commons as at March 31, 2024, 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.

This is the second year that these audit financial statements were published in early June. I want to commend the House administration for implementing the ongoing financial reporting processes and controls required to achieve this state.

I also thank this board for scheduling this presentation prior to your summer recess during what is a very busy legislative agenda.

That concludes my report.

• (1110)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mr. Newman.

One moment, please.

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions?

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

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

I am just looking at the breakdown of the carryforward. The lapsed funding from MOBs was about \$26 million, but only about half of that will be available to members in the coming fiscal year.

Mr. Paul St George: To answer that question, probably most of it will be going to the members.

Per the mass, there is actually a calculation that determines the gap or the surpluses within each member's budget at year end, which is equal to the \$7.9 million that I referenced. Then the difference between that gap goes back to administration, and, as I men-

tioned, goes back to the members in terms of system-level projects that benefit all parties and all members. That is correct.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Of the \$26 million, roughly \$8 million will be going to the members directly, themselves, and the rest goes through the House administration.

Mr. Paul St George: That is correct. Yes.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Did you list the projects that had lapsed? Are those the ones that are here—the transformation of parliamentary proceedings, life-cycling of IT infrastructure?

Mr. Paul St George: Exactly.

For the transformation of parliamentary proceedings, we have the expense management solutions, and that's about \$2.3 million. The accessibility plan is about \$1.6 million. The life-cycling of IT equipment is about \$1.3 million. We have the MOB, as I mentioned in the speech, as well as corporate health and safety case management solutions, and that's about \$600,000.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Okay.

I think you also said that a component of the increase in operational costs was changes to the actuarial adjustment for the MP pension plan. Of the \$110 million, how much of that is related to the MP pension plan, and how much of it would be other increases to salaries in the House administration?

I don't think I have that breakdown.

Mr. Paul St George: For the salaries, the actual adjustment was \$32.8 million, which was an expense charged to the member portion of the House budget. There was another \$32 million that was related to economic increases within the administrative component. Then we had various other increases, which are included in the report as well.

Those are your two main adjustments.

The actuarial adjustment is a legislative requirement by the House in order to do the evaluation, which is done every three years at year-end, and it becomes an adjustment within our books. The liability side affects the Treasury Board's balance sheet, as opposed to our balance sheet.

[*Translation*]

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

Are there any more questions?

[*English*]

Colleagues, do I see approval of the audited annual financial report?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

Before we go in camera, first of all, I would like to make sure we have consent around the table, as I said, to approve the proposed budget carryforward for fiscal year 2024-25.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Before we go in camera, I understand it is normal and good governance practice for independent auditors to have a discussion in camera with board members regarding the preparation of year-end audited financial statements.

I therefore would like to propose to board members we hold a short in camera session without the House administration officials to allow board members to have this discussion.

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

We will take a short break to go in camera.

I would ask the House of Commons Administration officials to leave the room, both physically and virtually. Once the discussion is over, the people attending in person will be invited back into the room, and those participating virtually will receive an email inviting them to return to the meeting via Zoom.

Is everyone agreed?

Okay.

[*English*]

Thank you very much.

We will now move in camera.

[*Translation*]

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

• (1115)

(Pause)

• (1125)

[*Public proceedings resume*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Dear colleagues, we will now resume the meeting in public.

[*English*]

We're going to go to item 5 and hear an update on the interpretation resources. I imagine this is due to current events.

[*Translation*]

I know everyone around the table will be very interested in this issue. I will manage the speaking time to ensure we have a good discussion, bearing in mind that we have to finish our work before the summer break. I want to make sure we cover all the agenda items.

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner is with us today to talk about this issue.

Welcome, Mr. Lyburner. We had the opportunity to work with you when you had another role at Public Services and Procurement

Canada. Your new role is as chief executive officer of the translation bureau.

You have the floor.

• (1130)

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner (Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of my colleagues Matthew Ball, vice-president, services to parliament and interpretation, and Annie Trépanier, vice-president, policy and corporate services.

We are pleased to appear today with our partners from the House of Commons Administration.

I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

I would also like to take the opportunity to wish the translation bureau's 1,300 employees a wonderful National Public Service Week.

Mr. Chair, honourable members of the Board of Internal Economy, thank you for inviting me to discuss with you the quality of linguistic services provided by the translation bureau to the House of Commons.

As you pointed out, this is a new role for me. I joined the translation bureau in January, and every day I'm impressed by the hundreds of language professionals who work hard to help you conduct your work in English, French, indigenous languages, sign languages and foreign languages.

We've been doing this essential work since 1934, that is, for 90 years now! Yes, this year, the Bureau is celebrating—

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Lyburner, but I have to ask you to slow down.

Mr. Peter Julian (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): The interpreters are excellent, but you are speaking very quickly for them.

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: Of course, I will start over.

We've been doing this essential work since 1934, that is, for 90 years now! And we're even celebrating a double anniversary this year, as 2024 marks 65 years of simultaneous interpretation in the Parliament of Canada.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Claudette, Hélène and Cécilia, who are in the booth today to support the work of the Board of Internal Economy.

[*English*]

Parliamentary interpretation has been a hot topic recently. The Translation Bureau has discussed it with the Board of Internal Economy on several occasions, most recently in November 2023, and the situation continues to develop.

You'll recall that in February 2023, following a complaint from the interpreters' union, Labour Canada directed the Translation Bureau to interpret virtual participants only when they use an ISO microphone, and to test the audio system in committee rooms. In cooperation with our House administration partner, we responded quickly to these directions, which were completed in August of 2023.

In April of this year, following an acoustic incident during a House standing committee session, the Labour Canada gave us a new direction to protect interpreters from repeated exposure to feedback, also known as the Larsen effect.

Once again, with the help of our colleagues in the House of Commons administration, we were able to respond quickly to this directive. In a matter of days, a number of new measures that you know very well were put in place, which Labour Canada deemed satisfactory.

I would take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Chair, for the communication you sent to your colleagues on April 29 to make them aware of the new protection measures to be followed. I would also like to thank you for the way you handled the incident that occurred Monday afternoon during the question period. Thank you for taking the time to repeat the safety guidelines for handling earpieces. Compliance with these guidelines is extremely important to prevent incidents. The incidents that still occur are mainly due to human behaviour at this point.

[*Translation*]

That being said, Monday's incident is the only case of the Larsen effect reported since the new measures were put in place. Although each incident is one too many, the figures show that our efforts over the past few years are paying off. While 128 reports of acoustic incidents were received in 2022, there were 74 reports in 2023, and 22 so far in 2024.

I would like to thank the House of Commons Administration, which is responsible for technical support for interpretation, and without which we wouldn't have been able to achieve such convincing results. I'd also like to thank each and every one of the honourable Members of Parliament, who agreed to change their work methods to protect interpreters, including with regard to earpieces.

Mr. Chair, honourable members of the Board of Internal Economy, it is probably impossible to completely eliminate the risk of acoustic incidents. Sound is a highly complex thing that is difficult to control perfectly. Nevertheless, we're determined to continue working as a team with the administration, the Canada Labour Program and experts in the field to find new protective measures that might be implemented and minimize that risk.

Among other efforts, we will receive this year the results of three new studies: two on the sound transmitted to interpreters, and one on changes in their hearing. These sustained efforts will help us not only improve the well-being of our interpreters, but also avoid service interruptions and maintain a healthy workforce to serve Parliament well. Protecting our interpreters also means protecting our interpretation capacity.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair and honourable members, I know that our capacity to serve Parliament is a top priority for you, and we are continuing our efforts to enhance it.

In budget 2024, the Translation Bureau was allocated \$32 million over five years. This funding echoes the temporary two-year funding of \$18 million that we received in 2021. This money will be used to further strengthen interpretation capacity, amongst other things.

Indeed, while we're able to meet the House's routine needs, including returning to the prepandemic schedule as planned for the fall, we're still having difficulties responding to last-minute requests. Compared to November 2023, our pool of interpreters has remained stable, with around 100 freelancers and some 70 staff interpreters. That's why we're continuing with our various capacity initiatives.

In our effort to tackle the labour shortage and foster the next generation of interpreters, I've met with Canadian universities myself. Some of them have shown interest in creating new interpretation programs in 2025. We are also setting up scholarships for future interpreters, because in budget 2024, the government has authorized us to allocate \$1 million over five years for scholarships.

● (1135)

We are continuing to implement our remote interpretation services, which you may be familiar with. It is also known as "dispersed" interpretation. This enables us to use freelancers outside of Ottawa to meet Parliament's needs. We are working to establish new contracts to maintain this service in the fall.

[*Translation*]

In terms of our translation capacity, in 2023–2024 we translated more than 58 million words for the House of Commons, compared with 38 million the previous year. That is an increase of roughly 40% in the number of words translated.

To be able to absorb these high volumes of urgent translations, we are continuing to invest in translation support technologies. You have no doubt seen a lot of interest in artificial intelligence and its use by the translation bureau. I want to reassure you though: The translation bureau has been using machine translation since 1977, for weather reports, and we adopted new technologies in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, as well as the latest advances in technology. We use new artificial intelligence tools to speed up translation when documents lend themselves to that. Of course, this all happens under the watchful eye of our language professionals, who ensure the quality of the output.

Indeed, being able to read, understand and compare text while ensuring the meaning and quality in English and French are key skills of the translation bureau's language professionals. They are trained and qualified for that work, which is so important to the Parliament of Canada.

Mr. Chair, honourable members of the Board of Internal Economy, I hope I've given you a thorough overview of the translation bureau's efforts to continue offering you excellent linguistic services.

We are now available to answer your questions.

Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Some members of the Board of Internal Economy have already said that they have questions, but first I would like to ask you something myself, if my colleagues don't mind.

Mr. Lyburner, we are certainly very concerned about our interpreters' safety. I am so pleased that the interpreters were not hurt by what happened on Monday, not yet, in any case. I am also very pleased to hear that the number of incidents has dropped significantly. We would certainly like to get that number to zero, but we will do our best to reduce it as much as possible. That means making sure that we use the latest technology to protect our interpreters, but users and MPs also have to change their habits in order to protect the interpreters.

I would like to talk about capacity first. You talked about it. Before the pandemic, I know that interpreters had six-hour shifts of live interpretation. As a result of switching to Zoom and all the problems we have encountered, their shifts have been cut to four hours. Do you know when they might go back to six-hour shifts? Right now, the number of newly hired and trained interpreters is nearly the same as the number of interpreters retiring, so the number of interpreters is not really increasing. Demand for interpretation is very high though, for MPs and for various caucus special events. We have talked about the lack of resources many times at this table, both publicly and in camera.

Do you know when the interpreters will go back to six-hour shifts? That would greatly increase their ability to meet the needs of the House of Commons.

• (1140)

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: That's an excellent question, Mr. Chair.

The number of acoustic incidents has indeed decreased. I would note that they were not all the Larsen effect. We still have more work to do to address the situation. The latest incidents that have not yet been addressed are primarily caused by handling errors, human error. They were not deliberate of course, but they are the most difficult to eliminate. The instructions from the Labour Program were quite clear. The most recent incident reports from April indicated that the Larsen effect is dangerous if it occurs repeatedly. So we still have some work to do, and we intend to return to pre-pandemic measures on the basis of the results obtained.

Returning to six-hour shifts from four-hour shifts doesn't depend on staff only. It is also a question of cost. Our budgets are limited.

We also have to show that it is safe to do so. That's why I also referred to the acoustic studies we conducted with the University of Ottawa and those related to interpreters' health. Demonstrating all our good work and relying on the good results obtained will enable us to gradually return to six-hour shifts. That is our goal. We are also working with other administrations internationally to ensure that Canada is really in a good position to do so.

Incidents such as the one on Monday are of course still occurring. We are continuing our work every week with our Labour Program colleagues to ensure the safety of interpreters. We will also be working over the summer with our colleagues here. Further, we have not dropped the various measures that were imposed. They were taken on a weekend to make sure you had service on the Monday. We are now examining each of those measures to make any adjustments in order to limit interference during your meetings.

So in addition to moving from four-hour shifts to six-hour shifts, technology might also help us reduce the number of incidents such as the recent ones. That is our goal. I hear your concerns.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

It is said very often that interpreters are the very foundation of our bilingual Parliament. I want to take a moment just to pay tribute to one of those interpreters, Cindy Runzer, who is retiring next Friday after 31 years of service with the Translation Bureau as a parliamentary interpreter.

All of us who listen to the English channel—including my parents, who have now passed, but who often preferred the voices of Cindy and the interpreters to the original when I was speaking in French in the House—have heard how effective the interpreters are and how effective Cindy was. She was so confident as she wound herself through the ups and downs of Parliament and the House of Commons procedures, despite the loud background noise that we often hear in question period. With her knowledge of parliamentary procedure, she could literally be a House leader or a whip. She really has a knowledge that's second to none.

She also did exceptional work as an interpreter for the national defence committee and even hosted end-of-year barbecues for committee members at her home. She's a cancer survivor, as we all know, with two grown-up daughters. Cindy's really a force of nature. She'll be sorely missed by her colleagues and indeed all of Parliament, and I know that all members of BOIE and all parliamentarians would join me in wishing her the very best in her retirement and in thanking her for her contributions to the country.

Voices: Hear, hear!

● (1145)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Now I have some questions for you.

We received an open letter regarding the new group of interpreters. What concerns me is that the recruits have apparently not been trained as they are supposed to be. According to the letter, the recruits are not being trained by the translation bureau in order to prepare for and pass the exam. It says they will not receive coaching from accredited colleagues with much more experience. The letter also says that the recruits are not being well trained and that it is hard to know where they will be assigned.

I would like to recall how important high-quality interpretation is. Recruits must be properly trained and supported in order to pass their exam and interpret for Parliament, which is extremely difficult. I don't understand why all the necessary resources are not in place to support the recruits.

What is your answer to that important and entirely legitimate question?

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: That's an excellent question.

When my predecessor, Dominic Laporte, appeared before you in November 2023, the translation bureau's capacity was in fact discussed. There was even a question about the accreditation exam for parliamentary interpreters. That exam is extremely difficult and the pass rate has been extremely low for a number of years.

The number of students enrolled in university interpretation programs has also fallen. We see that trend not only in interpretation, but in all language programs. In light of this, the translation bureau has to take action to identify individuals who have potential and want to pursue language studies. There are a number of factors at play. For example, we have all heard about the future use of artificial intelligence in the field, which might put people off. To counter that, potential candidates have to be identified as early as possible.

The program we discussed in November and that is being implemented now is intended to better identify individuals who were close to the passing mark even though they failed the exam, but who have interpretation skills and could be assigned to the bureau, where they would be trained. Mr. Ball, who is himself an interpreter, could tell you more about that. You have to remember that the translation bureau also offers a lot of services outside Parliament. That might give future recruits the opportunity to work alongside the best interpreters in the world. Our interpreters in Canada are in fact among the best in the world, and I am not afraid to say so. So those people would be ready when the next exam comes around.

The bureau holds two exams per year. In the past, there was just one. The pool of participants is of course quite limited. In Canada, two universities offer the interpretation training program. In my opening remarks, I said we are working with two other universities to expand that pool. For our part, we are trying to identify individuals who have potential and show an interest in interpretation.

The same thing applies for individuals going into translation. They are often children who already read a lot at the age of 10. If they develop an interest after that age, it is increasingly less likely that they will pursue a career in languages. Those individuals have to be identified as early as possible, offered a career at the translation bureau, in the federal government, and told there is a job for them. That said, the pool of candidates is decreasing. Our strategy is to identify candidates and to help them along.

I will hand it over to Mr. Ball so he can tell you more about the skill level of the interpreters in training.

Mr. Matthew Ball (Vice-President, Services to Parliament and Interpretation Sector, Translation Bureau): If I may, Mr. Chair, I would be delighted to talk about the pilot project under consideration and reassure you by explaining the parameters for this pilot project.

First, it's a pilot project. It isn't yet a full-fledged program. We've consulted extensively with our team of permanent employees and senior interpreters, with the International Association of Conference Interpreters and with stakeholders in the language industry.

None of these candidates would work on Parliament Hill. As Mr. Lymburner just explained, we also serve other Government of Canada clients. However, since the Translation Bureau Act states that we must prioritize our services to Parliament, we've somewhat neglected certain Government of Canada clients. As a result, they must hire their own interpreters, without the benefit of the supervision, expertise, quality and contracts provided by the translation bureau. We believe that this pilot project will help us to better serve our clients outside Parliament. These interpreters won't be on Parliament Hill.

[*English*]

I also want to reassure members of the board that we have a lot of experience in training new interpreters. Our senior interpreters teach at the university. I taught for many years. We have many years of experience in supervising and monitoring new interpreters, and that will be the case with this new private project as well.

[*Translation*]

As I was saying, it's a good way for us to meet the needs of our other Government of Canada clients.

I want to reassure you that parameters will remain in place and that our expertise will be leveraged to ensure the quality of the services provided to our clients as part of this pilot project. I believe that our other Government of Canada clients will be better served as a result of this pilot project.

Again, this is just a pilot project. We'll be reviewing the project and assessing the experience along the way.

• (1150)

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

Do you have anything to add, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian: I know that other people want to ask questions too, but I have one last question.

Which two universities are you currently working with?

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: Currently, the two post-secondary institutions that provide conference interpretation programs are the University of Ottawa and York University's Glendon campus. We have also started discussions with two universities in Quebec. These institutions are the Université Laval and the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

Before I put my questions to Mr. Lyburner, I just want to remind you, Mr. Chair, that the virtual committees dashboard is also an item on the agenda. We should save some time for it because I have questions about this topic. I don't want to interrupt the conversation with the people from the translation bureau. I just want to bring this item to your attention.

Welcome, Mr. Lyburner. We're delighted to see you. You have been in your position for six months. I gather from your opening remarks that you have done the rounds, identified the priority issues and implemented an action plan.

As you know, we're concerned about both quantity and quality. First, I can tell you that, as a francophone, I wear an earpiece all day long to take part in parliamentary business. The reason is that 95% of the business is conducted in English. As a francophone who doesn't have enough of a working knowledge of English to keep up with the business in English, I must rely on the interpreters. Over the past few weeks, I've received a few complaints from members of my party about the quality of the interpretation. It may not be good enough for us to take an active part in the business. In fact, I've also seen this myself. We could have a quick meeting so that you can help us identify the slightly weaker interpreters who could benefit from more support.

I've also been on the Board of Internal Economy for five years. We're used to seeing the House administration and the members of the procedures team share the same goal of providing good service to members of Parliament. They give their all so that we can do our job as well as possible. They're always looking for solutions so that we can do our job well.

Your appointment is certainly welcome. However, I'm quite curious about whether you're on the same page. How would you describe your relationship with the House administration? How do you feel about the services provided to help us do our job as parliamentarians?

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: Good question.

My background is in quality management. I completely understand your concerns about quality, efficiency and continuity of service.

We're considered an essential service. My other colleagues at Public Services and Procurement Canada also have a mandate to provide services. It's a constant effort. We want to ensure continuity of service for all your work.

I spoke earlier about the volume of texts translated. The translation bureau is the 20th largest language organization in the world. The translation bureau translated a record 376 million words this year. Obviously, the deadlines are getting longer and longer. That said, people expect to have documents translated as quickly as possible. We need to find ways to become more efficient.

You spoke about my 90-day plan when I first arrived. I think that we can make progress simply by improving our approach to handling documents. You have also often heard about the format of documents. Many motions have been moved. We receive documents in all sorts of formats. We're improving both our translation skills and our ability to manage projects, which are becoming larger and larger. Artificial intelligence is here to help us, just as it can also help you. For example, it offers to send emails for you. My point is that the amount of work is increasing across the board. To keep up, we really need to adjust.

I'll now answer the question about our relationship with the House of Commons. For our outside services, we work with other groups that help us on the audiovisual front. This isn't unique to the House. However, I must say that I'm really impressed by the team of Mr. McDonald, Mr. Dicaire and Mr. Aubé. We work hand in hand. I told Mr. Janse earlier that this was a team sport. I really feel that we work together every step of the way to provide the service.

I can also understand that, initially, the main goal is to quickly get a committee up and running again. We're also receiving information about the situation in the interpretation booth. We certainly want to ensure employee safety. We meet regularly and even quite often to ensure the continuity of service. We communicate very well. If necessary, translation bureau staff can come to meetings with House colleagues to hear their comments on the quality issues noted. I've come to understand the situation with translation. Sometimes, it's a volume issue. Sometimes, it's the interpreters' tone of voice. Sometimes, it's a pacing issue. For example, at the start of my remarks earlier, I received notice that I was speaking a bit too quickly. A number of factors can influence the quality of the interpretation. The same applies to translation. If you have any comments, we would be pleased to take them into account.

• (1155)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm glad to hear it. That said, finding a solution that ensures the availability of enough interpreters and the quality of the interpretation requires more than working hand in hand with the House administration. You need to keep one basic value in mind: Parliamentarians rely on you to do their work. I know that you may have mixed feelings, because you represent a group of employees with collective agreements. However, you need to remember that any potential solution must ultimately enable parliamentarians to do their job. In a way, you work for parliamentarians. I'm pleased to see that your relationship with the administration staff is going well and that you're going to work together more closely to get on the same page to ensure parliamentarians are well served.

Now I want to tell you about a major concern I have. As Mr. Julian mentioned, all parliamentarians were sent the open letter through their work email. We also had access to your presentation on the pilot project, which is intended for people who were trained in conference interpreting but didn't pass the translation bureau's accreditation exam. You are proposing to hire the candidates with potential and help them acquire other types of experience in the hope that they may one day pass the accreditation exam.

I find it a bit worrisome that a staggering number of interpreters will be retiring in three or four years. I'm sure you know that. If I were a manager, I might be very tempted to expand the pool of interpreters and include those who didn't pass the exam. I would put them in a position where they could gain experience, hoping that it would help them pass the exam later. That would replenish the ranks and make up for the loss of interpreters. I believe that has been done for the last five years, has it not, Mr. Lymburner? A lot of effort has been made, even by your predecessor, but more interpreters are leaving than joining the bureau. You explained the reasons for that.

As a francophone who needs interpretation in order to work, I am aware that you need a significant number of staff, but I'm not prepared to sacrifice quality. If you lower the quality of interpretation services, I will directly experience the downside as a parliamentarian. I wouldn't go so far as to say that it would be a breach of my privilege, but if my remarks or those of others are not subject to high-quality interpretation, I will not be able to participate fully in the proceedings.

I printed out your little chart where you use green, yellow and red to show the quality index for interpretation. I was shocked to see that you were willing to rely on the following level of service for conference interpreting:

The interpretation contains many inaccuracies or omissions OR the inaccuracies and omissions are more serious and affect the meaning OR linguistic mistakes and clumsiness are serious or frequent enough to distract the listener. The performance does not meet some or all of the Interpretation Technique Requirements.

You say this is the way it's going to be. You're going to lower the quality standards for interpretation, you're going to hire a bunch of interpreters whose quality of work meets the yellow standard and you're going to assign them to conferences first.

By the way, I would like you to tell me what conferences you are referring to specifically.

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: First of all, I would say that the current crisis stemming from a lack of interpreters is worldwide. Canada is not the only country affected by it. The shortage of interpreters is being felt everywhere.

In addition, the opportunities afforded by new technology are changing interpreters' working conditions. Interpreters can now work more and more remotely, for example. We are limited in that regard. Right now, our interpreters work on site with you or in the parliamentary precinct. There is competition, since other groups are also looking for interpreters and can offer different working conditions.

I want to come back to the issue of work quality and draw a parallel with the documents we translate. They include bills, court decisions and memoranda to cabinet. In short, these documents are extremely important. Naturally, we assign our best language professionals to translate them. We do, however, have clients with different needs. A client may ask us to translate a menu for a barbecue being held during National Public Service Week. We get those kinds of requests. In those cases, clients agree to be more lenient, given the availability of translation tools that are increasingly easy to use. We classify the work in order of importance.

We have something similar for interpretation. For certain types of events, we do not compromise on quality. That is especially true for events that take place here, in Parliament. However, we receive other requests, from people organizing staff meetings and things like that. In that case, they may be willing to accept a slightly lower quality of interpretation. At least they have interpretation. There is no real alternative: It's either that or no interpretation at all.

I'll go back to what I said in the beginning. You just talked about attrition at the translation bureau and the need to consider the staffing curve, given the age of the interpreters. Now more than ever, we need to target candidates who are interested and have potential. We are confident that, if they are surrounded by the best, they'll be able to develop their potential. I repeat, they will be assigned to tasks that may be a little less important.

I'll ask Mr. Ball to tell you more about the pilot project.

• (1200)

Mr. Matthew Ball: Thank you.

You've been talking about the demographic curve, and Mr. Lymburner just mentioned the importance of bringing in new blood. I want to reassure the members of the Board of Internal Economy that we have a lot of experience in this area. I myself was an interpreter trainee in 1999, and I went through the same process. We often hire people as trainees, people who have not yet reached the level of quality needed to serve Parliament. We would do the same thing under this pilot project, except that the new candidates would be assigned not to Parliament but to general federal government meetings and conferences.

As I said, we have a lot of experience doing this. We follow the same process for our trainees. These young interpreters would be freelancers, rather than translation bureau employees. However, we feel that we could give them the experience and guidance they need to improve the quality of their work. Hopefully, one day, they'll be able to serve Parliament, once they have shown that they meet the necessary level of quality through our own accreditation exam.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That is what I'm wondering. I have supervised trainees, so I know that it takes time and that they need support and guidance. However, what the interpreters are telling us is that the shortage is so acute right now that there's no time for support or coaching, either for trainees or for potential new hires who failed the accreditation exam.

Mr. Lymburner, I wonder how you are going to achieve your goals when you don't have the staff to provide the necessary support to the new interpreters. You can't afford to assign an experienced interpreter to coach a trainee or help a candidate who failed their accreditation exam improve their skills. You're short-staffed. Are you going to leave the trainees with no coaching and no support? The same is true of your pilot project. You're getting ready to open up your pool of interpreters to candidates who didn't pass the accreditation exam.

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: That's another very good question.

First, I would like to reassure everyone here about the staffing challenges. In recent months, there has been additional health and safety training. That somewhat reduced our ability to provide interpreters, because we had to add that to their duties to make sure they understood all the health and safety issues.

Our interpreters also teach courses. I mentioned the two existing programs at the University of Ottawa and at York University's Glendon campus. The translation bureau is to some extent the backbone of the language sector in Canada. We have the best interpreters. We provide assistance with the booths and computer sys-

tems, so hands-on professional experience is available to master's students. Becoming an interpreter requires many years of study.

There is a lot of scheduling involved. We have finite capacity, so it takes a great deal of effort. I have colleagues behind me who work on assigning interpreters to all the teams, and they are very skilled at what they do. That said, there are times of the year when we are a little less busy and can focus more on training. The interpreters are already training people.

I would point out that the interpreters who would be part of the pilot project would be hired by other people whatever happens. If a department cannot get interpreters from the bureau, it will find them elsewhere. We want to be able to identify the right candidates to increase our workforce and meet the needs in this time of shortage. You talked about a shortage, and that's exactly the right word. In the current context, attracting language professionals remains a challenge, given everything that's going on.

• (1205)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I have one last question.

I want you to understand where I'm coming from and why I'm asking so many questions about quality. Supposedly, Parliament is bilingual and all parliamentary work is done in both languages. In actual fact, three-quarters of the work is done in English. That's why the interpretation quality in French is so important to francophones. We appreciate that there is a shortage of interpreters, but I get worried when I see what's going on in departments. Senior officials are less and less bilingual, and the briefings we get from departments on things like legislation are either not bilingual or not of equal quality in both official languages. The anglicization of the public service is a real phenomenon, and at the same time, interpreters are in short supply.

You can understand, then, why a francophone who needs interpretation services like me is not convinced that you're on the right track. Mr. Lymburner, in three years' time, when all your seasoned interpreters are retired, who will be left? A group of interpreters who haven't passed their accreditation exams, a group of interpreters with little to no support or coaching to help them improve their skills and eventually become accredited. When you're back here again, you might tell me that it's this or nothing. I'm discouraged because I know that is what we're in for. You just said it: For the government and departments, it's this or nothing. That is what's coming. I see what's on the horizon, and it is discouraging. You don't have a long-term solution.

I still have many questions, but I will leave it there, so my colleagues can ask questions. However, I do hope you see why I'm so interested in potential solutions, the possibilities ahead and further improvements that can be made. What you're proposing is the lesser evil, and that really troubles me.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

We go to Ms. Findlay.

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

I have a couple of questions. My first one is a corollary to what the chair raised on the four versus six hours.

It's my understanding—so I want to understand it better—that interpreters are already working six-hour shifts, but four hours are spent interpreting and the other two in translation. I'm wondering whether that is correct, because your answer made it sound like you haven't gone to the six hours. I think you have. It's about allocation.

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: Mr. Chair, the six hours is really the number of hours that they're doing interpretation. That's now been reduced to four hours since the hybrid Parliament came on board. As an interpreter, in terms of their classification, they can do other duties as well, including translation, but the six hours are specifically for interpretation hours.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: What I'm trying to get to is if they're already doing six-hour shifts, what is the barrier between their going from four hours interpreting and two hours of translation to six hours of interpretation at this point in time?

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: Maybe I didn't make myself clear, Mr. Chair.

The six hours are for interpretation only, so that's the number of hours that we're tracking very closely. That now is limited to four hours a day. Our goal, as we discussed in the opening statement, is to try to go back to previous to the pandemic, when they could do interpretation for six hours in a row. During the workweek there are other functions that these interpreters can do as well, but that's not calculated. The six hours are solely for interpretation within a day of work.

• (1210)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I think we're miscommunicating here a bit. I understand that, but what is the barrier, or why are they not currently using that whole six-hour shift for interpretation?

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: I'll turn to Mr. Ball in a few seconds, but from what I recall and have read and from everything that I was briefed on, with the number of incidents I spoke about at the beginning—128-plus that happened in 2022—there were measures, and at that time it was very different.

Now we have people online. I can see the members who are online. We're mastering the technology—you, probably, also. Everybody now has good headsets. I think behaviour across Canada has improved tremendously, but back in those days in 2022, in the middle of the pandemic, there were a lot of uncertainties, and the numbers were clearly going up, so in order to protect and to make sure that we were not exposing our interpreters, the number of hours was reduced in order for us to understand what was going on.

Technology was a component of that. A component of that was the sound quality of people who were online. All those measures were put in place. As I said, now we see that the number of incidents is going back down, setting the stage to go back to the conditions that were in place before the pandemic. You will understand that if the numbers were going up and we were still not able to provide a safe environment, that would be reduced.

Matthew, do you want to add anything on the four to six hours?

Mr. Matthew Ball: If I may, Mr. Chair, the work programming, the parliamentary program, is complex. We don't go into great details here. Interpreters actually are on 12-hour shifts, for which they are on standby serving Parliament. Of those 12 hours, prior to the pandemic, six of them were at the microphone. When I say six of them, there were days when there was a bit more than six hours, days when there was a bit less. When there was less work in interpreting, they would do translation.

Mr. Lymburner referred to the major shift when the pandemic hit everyone. Like other workplaces around the world, there was a whole sea change in interpreting. We had two parliamentary committees that resumed in the weeks following the outbreak of the pandemic, HESA and FINA. They were all run over the telephone with audio conferences only. Our staff was reduced.

There was an explosion in health and safety incidents, so the management team took the decision to reduce the hours to four at the microphone, because the conditions were such that the number of health and safety incidents was alarming, to say the least.

Since then, things have gotten much better. Members and witnesses who are appearing virtually are using ISO-compliant microphones. The working conditions have gotten much better. Parliamentarians and our colleagues with the House administration have done an excellent job in improving the workplace conditions.

There are still some incidents, as we saw last week, but we do feel that we're making great progress. I'm confident that in the future we will be able to return to prepandemic working conditions, which means that interpreters will be on 12-hour shifts. We're hoping to be able to get back to full six-hour microphone duties.

We are also being cautious, because, as you know, capacity is dependent on the health and safety of interpreters. If we have interpreters who are injured or on workplace accommodation, it does negatively affect our capacity.

We're confident that the situation is improving. We have mentioned to the House administration that we're confident that we will be able to provide services as they were provided prior to the pandemic in terms of the work schedule, so I think this augurs quite well.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

I think we're all very familiar with the history and how we got here. I think what all parliamentarians are interested in and wondering about, now that we are here—postpandemic, fully hybrid, and incidents are down—is of course capacity. Therefore, when you say you're being cautious, I understand why, but we're looking to some sense of timelines, because we're not in 2022 now, and all these things that you just listed very accurately are in place, so it's a pressing imperative from parliamentarians.

The second question is about Monday, which was unfortunate. I don't even think it was the person speaking; it may have been the person next to him, because there was more than one microphone on. I know that I and Madame DeBellefeuille, and I'm sure others, all spoke to our caucuses yesterday morning again about this issue and about being as careful as possible.

My recommendation is to put the headset in your desk, because then you're pretty sure.... These stickers help, for sure, but if it's in the desk, there never seems to be a problem.

However, there was confusion as to why it took us over 45 minutes to resume on Monday, because we were being told there were no injuries. What we were hearing through our headsets was from the interpreters, saying there'd been an incident in the interpretation room. We didn't know whether that meant the incident we all knew about, the feedback, or whether someone was hurt, but we were being told that. Then, when we knew that no one was hurt, it seemed to take a long time for us to resume.

I'm wondering if you can give me some understanding of why it took that long.

• (1215)

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: We all have TVs in our offices, so we were all switching to the question period to see what was going on. It was a lively debate happening at the time. We could hear the first question.

We received an instruction from the Labour Canada as recently as April, as we were striving to get back to prepandemic conditions. It was a very fresh one that was specifically targeting the Larsen effect.

The first order of business was to identify exactly what happened. We were able to understand that about seven seconds of the Larsen effect happened on that day. For us, the first thing is to find out what type of incident has occurred. There could be other sound incidents, such as issues with the bandwidth, or sometimes the volume is not adequate for people online. Were we within the zone of the Larsen effect? It was confirmed to us fairly quickly, so Mr. Ball and his team then executed the protocol.

I'll let Ms. Trépanier mention our interaction with the Labour Canada on that day as well. We have a protocol that we had to put in place. That protocol is to make sure, first of all, that it is the

Larsen effect. Then, if the room is back to normal, there are some tests we need to do to make sure that this is not still happening. You can imagine if we sent interpreters and that Larsen effect was still there; then we're just going to continuously send people.

All those confirmations were done, and a new crew was dispatched as quickly as possible.

I understand that there are probably better ways to work. Maybe over the summer we can have a creative thinking session and maybe have people being ready to step in remotely a lot quicker when something like that happens. There are tests that are going to have to be conducted.

As I said, there had been no Larsen effect since the instruction, and this time it happened in the question period. This is probably the area where there's the most people, and the people are close to one another. I want to reassure you that we wanted to make sure that we understood what had happened, and it was done quickly. Our team conducted tests. They identified the cause. We've identified the time it took. For us, it was a decision to remove the team based on the length of the incident in order to be in line with the protocol that we've agreed to with the Labour Canada.

I would like to ask Ms. Trépanier to discuss the relationship we have with Labour Canada related to those type of incidents and to explain to you why we have to follow that protocol very carefully.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. Trépanier, please keep it brief. We have a second translation bureau-related item on the agenda, so I want to make sure we have time to ask about that as well.

Ms. Annie Trépanier (Vice-President, Policy and Corporate Services, Translation Bureau): That's no problem.

We do indeed work closely with the labour program people. We came up with a list of steps we have to follow when a Larsen effect incident occurs. We work very closely with our House administration colleagues and the on-site technicians to make sure every precaution has been taken to avoid another incident. That involves a number of steps, of course, so it can take a bit of time.

I can assure you that this was the first Larsen effect incident since the protocol was put in place. Naturally, we will make improvements to the protocol. Ultimately, I hope we don't have many incidents where the system will be put to the test. This was the first such incident, so we're looking at the lessons we can learn while hoping something like this doesn't happen again. If another Larsen effect incident occurs, I think we'll be able to put other measures in place.

• (1220)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

[*English*]

We're coming to the end of this first round of questioning.

We have Ms. Sahota, and then we have a second round with Mr. Julian and Madame DeBellefeuille.

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

I wanted to confirm, to Ms. Findlay's comments, that I too did raise this issue with the Liberal caucus on Wednesday. I'm pleased that there were no injuries. I'm glad that there's been an effective protocol put in place after the incident that happened in April.

You mentioned that the incidents had increased during the pandemic due to the various factors that were in place. The last two incidents—the one before the Easter break, and now this one that's been a Larsen effect—have been created through in-person work.

My curiosity goes goes back to our incident levels before the pandemic. Now, at this time, how do they compare?

Mr. Jean-François Lymburner: I'll turn to my colleagues in the House of Commons for the situation before the pandemic.

I hope I was clear that we're tracking any sound-related incidents. That's a family of incidents that are important for us behind the door. I'm sure my colleagues have other types of issues related to the technical support when they conduct meetings. Obviously the attention or the number of incidents was not that high before. It's a little bit like concussions in football, for those of you who follow that. A few years ago not as much was known about them. Now there is a protocol for kids and others playing, because injuries can happen.

A Larsen effect is very similar to a concussion. Symptoms can appear between 24 and 48 hours afterwards. That's why we are careful around that. The level of attention has obviously risen. We're tracking them more closely. I think that's one part.

Maybe I'll ask Benoit and others for the number of incidents prior, and everything else that they track, because I know they're tracking other types of incidents in their business.

Mr. Benoit Dicaire (Acting Chief Information Officer, Digital Services and Real Property, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Sahota, there were incidents before the pandemic. You see the stickers you have on there. Those stickers have been in place for at least 15 years or at least 10 years. We don't have the exact numbers, but I can confirm that there were some incidents prior to the pandemic. It is a normal problem that we had to deal with, even prior to hybrid meetings.

I don't know if the clerk wants to add anything to that.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Ian McDonald): Through you, Mr. Chair, I would just add, as Benoit said, that in the House, a you know, on the console where the buttons are, there's a little plate that's been there since, I believe, 2008 or 2009. There have been incidents in the House going back to even before that. That's one of the reasons those little engraved plates are there. They're similar to the ones that were put in place in, I believe, in 2016 or 2017. We added these when there were incidents.

The Larsen effect, or the feedback, is caused when there is an earpiece from an adjacent console that's close to a microphone.

I'm not a technical expert, but I've been spending a lot of time with all of my colleagues looking at these questions quite seriously over the course of the last few months. When a very loud earpiece from an adjacent console is close to a live microphone, or even a nearby earpiece that's connected to the live microphone, the system automatically reduces the volume. There are little things that are already built into the system that reduce the risk.

We've still had problems, but some things, such as changing the earpieces, which have been scientifically demonstrated by our technical folks, have made a remarkable difference in terms of the sensitivity of the microphone and earpieces.

Hon. Ruby Sahota: If I may, I have a quick follow-up question, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Please go ahead.

Hon. Ruby Sahota: Thank you for that. That was a good analogy.

Now that we are more aware of health and safety issues and want to make this a safer workplace, I think it's good that we're tracking it.

My assumption would then be that we're probably somewhere lower than we might have been in the past when we weren't even entertaining the fact that we should be tracking these incidents and have a protocol in place. I'm glad it's been put in place.

I did mention to caucus that these incidents that have been occurring are in large part due to human behaviour and how we're using our earpieces. It's interesting that you noted that it's the adjacent earpiece that causes the impact.

You talked about more improvements to technology. When on Monday a seven-second Larsen effect occurred but didn't cause an actual injury, were you able to identify whether the technology in place may have reduced the risk, or was it just because the person was not wearing their headpiece? What have we implemented at the House of Commons that perhaps mitigated that risk, or was it just good luck?

● (1225)

Mr. Benoit Dicaire: Through you, Mr. Chair, I'll talk briefly but then pass it on to Yassine, who's our technical expert.

Definitely as part of the protocol.... There are a variety of reasons. Because our systems are very compliant—and Yassine can add to that—thresholds are already built into our standards, so there are already protection mechanisms.

As Annie from the Translation Bureau mentioned, the protocol is that as soon as the incident begins, the headset should be removed. We would have to verify with the interpreters affected, but their natural behaviour would have been to remove their headset right away and not to wait for the seven seconds on that.

On the technical side, maybe Yassine can add something.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yassine Aouididi (Senior Digital Product Manager, House of Commons): Thank you for your question.

Yes, our systems do have hearing protections built in.

[*English*]

Essentially, there are two types of protection. One is a warning sign if the levels are sustained over a certain threshold, in which case a beep would be heard by the interpreter, indicating that we cannot operate at that level for a very long time.

The second one is for sudden peaks of sound, including an acoustic incident like a Larsen effect. There's a threshold that's mandated by the ISO standards, which our systems comply with. The reason acoustic incidents are still happening is that the threshold identified by the ISO standards has not been reached. That's the current situation for why that happened.

Hon. Ruby Sahota: Okay. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: We are now beginning the second round. Mr. Julian will go first, followed by Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

If we can get through your questions and the answers by 12:35 p.m., we'll have enough time for the second part of the presentation, the virtual committees dashboard.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

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

My question is about the pilot project. Something is not clear to me. Do you acknowledge that the work of the new recruits will not meet the same quality standards as that of professional interpreters? Mrs. DeBellefeuille is absolutely right about that point.

How will you monitor the work of new interpreters under the pilot? What coaching will they receive? How many hours per week are we talking? If you can give us more information, it will help us understand how significant the challenge is.

We are very grateful for the work the interpreters and the translation bureau do, but it's not clear to me how the bureau will be able to provide quality interpretation services—the cornerstone of our bilingual Parliament. I don't have a clear understanding as to how the translation bureau will make sure it has enough new interpreters when people like Cindy Runzer retire. I'm wondering how the bureau will manage to provide the same calibre of service when new interpreters replace those veteran interpreters.

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: Our goal is to maintain the translation bureau's current quality standards, which we take great pride in.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, we also have to make sure that we select interpreters with potential and support them. As Mr. Ball explained, we have personnel, both interpreters and former interpreters who are now managers, and they will help to train the recruits under the pilot. That will ensure that the recruits are well supported. We'll be able to measure the results of the pilot,

specifically, whether the recruits went on to obtain full accreditation.

We will make every necessary effort. Our goal is to identify future interpreters as early as possible, and make sure that we keep them. Interpreters are also available outside Canada, but we want to be better at identifying candidates in Canada who have training and potential. The idea is to bring them on board, and give them support and guidance.

• (1230)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, but I don't want a political answer. I want details on the pilot project. I want to know what kind of coaching and support recruits will receive, and how you will monitor their progress weekly. Those are the details I want. If you don't have them with you, you can get back to the Board of Internal Economy with the information in the next few days. I think it would help to reassure us. At this point, we don't have any details on the pilot. I'm not optimistic that there will be monitoring, because we were told quite clearly that no monitoring is happening now, apparently. We'll feel better once we have detailed information on the pilot.

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: We'd be glad to provide that.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Do you have the information with you?

Mr. Jean-François Lyburner: Mr. Ball is very familiar with the program, so, if you'd like, I can ask him to explain how it works if there's time. If not, we can follow up with the information in writing.

[*English*]

Mr. Matthew Ball: I would like to reassure members of the board that we have a lot of experience monitoring and training new interpreters. There are many methods to ensure they receive the feedback and experience they need. Anyone who starts in a position in a new job is learning.

[*Translation*]

As the saying goes, practice makes perfect.

[*English*]

We're responsible for ensuring that we have the capacity and the quality. The organizations that may have shared information with you and that we have consulted with are not responsible for the service; we are responsible for the service. We have more than 30 years of experience in training and teaching and in monitoring the work of our staff and our freelancers. We can use recordings of an interpreter's performance to provide them with feedback after the fact.

For events that we deem important or significant, we always have someone with these interpreters who is ready to take over the microphone should their performance not meet the quality standards. There are a lot of ways we can do this.

We can send both freelance and staff interpreters to monitor, supervise and provide feedback for these new recruits. This is nothing new. I was hired in 1999 as a recruit, and I would have met the exact same quality standards that were shared with you.

I'm quite confident that we'll be able to do this successfully. We've heard loud and clear from members of Parliament and senators about the need for more interpreters and for quality service, and that's what we're acting on. I'm quite hopeful that we can do this, and I'd like to reassure members of the board that this is part of our regular operations.

In many respects, this is nothing new. It's new in the sense that the pilot project would be to hire people as freelancers rather than as staff; that's the big difference. Otherwise, it's pretty much the same.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Do you have a training guide, manual or step-by-step process you can share with us?

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: We're going to ask you to come back or to provide us with written information on that front.

[*Translation*]

We will pass the information along to the members of the Board of Internal Economy. You can put the information together as you see fit and provide it to us in an accessible format.

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

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

Mr. Lymburner, I hope you understand why Mr. Julian and I are so adamant about this. We are having trouble seeing how you'll be able to provide new interpreters or those who failed their accreditation exams with the support they need to pass the next time. I realize that practice makes perfect, but if you're going to become an interpreter, you have to spend enough time with a professional. We have doubts on that front, but if you can reassure us with a training plan that we can follow, great.

I want to follow up on what Ms. Findlay said. As I understand it, Mr. Lymburner, you use both freelance and unionized interpreters. The freelancers have a contract, signed by the Department of Public Services and Procurement. Their contract specifies that they work four-hour interpretation shifts, whereas unionized interpreters work six-hour shifts, according to their collective agreement.

I gather that, with the pandemic and everything that ensued, the introduction of the hybrid Parliament and so on, it was decided that an interpreter's maximum cognitive load was equivalent to a four-hour interpretation shift. That has been proven. Accordingly, freelance contracts set out four-hour interpretation shifts. For unionized interpreters, you opted to play it safe and bring their working conditions in line with those of freelancers. As a result, unionized interpreters also interpret for no more than four hours.

That is what I've learned in my efforts to understand the issue.

Basically, you're still not confident that the previously determined maximum cognitive load for interpreters is suited to the hybrid

Parliament working environment, which relies on the use of technological equipment. You're waiting for the results of your three studies to confirm whether that's the case. Until you have that confirmation, you won't be able to ask interpreters to work six-hour shifts. You brought their conditions in line with those in freelance contracts, which you're about to renew for another year, with the same conditions in place.

When the incident occurred, that weekend, the House administration and translation bureau were ordered by Canada's labour program to take a variety of measures to address the problem and, above all, avoid a situation where Parliament can't sit. That's when we realized that Parliament wouldn't have been able to sit if the labour program people had not been satisfied with the measures taken. That is no joke. That is exactly what would've happened. We would have lost one or two sitting days, maybe more.

During all that, actions were taken swiftly. I know the House administration worked very hard with your team to put the necessary measures in place. I do question some of them, though, because they introduce even more risk to the situation. For example, Mr. Ball and Ms. Trépanier are sitting at the same desk, sharing the same microphone. They aren't using earpieces because they understand both official languages. Let's say I share a desk and a microphone with a fellow member, but both of us are wearing our earpieces. The earpieces would have to be moved around. In Mr. Ball and Ms. Trépanier's case, the earpieces don't have to be moved around, because they aren't using any. The situation is quite safe. In real life, though, that isn't always the case in a committee room. The bureau decided to have one microphone and one earpiece at each desk, but two members of the same party could end up sitting next to one another. They would have to share a single microphone and they wouldn't each have an earpiece. That means the earpieces would have to be moved around, which raises the risk level significantly.

Health and safety officers can order that measures be put in place, but they also need to trust the experience of the people affected by the measures. What I'm telling you, Mr. Lymburner, is that this measure creates a greater risk than when each desk had two microphones with earpieces. Right now, the earpieces are being moved around, which increases the risk, instead of lowering it.

I don't know whether that observation is something you will be discussing, but the point I wanted to make is this: When you're trying to prevent an incident, you really should consult the people using the equipment, the people who are actually involved.

Right now, Mr. Ball and Ms. Trépanier are speaking without earpieces. That's the proof, right there.

• (1235)

Therefore, I'm asking you to please consult us, the parliamentarians, for our feedback, if possible. We certainly don't want to see the interpreters injured. We want to make sure that the measures make sense and do what they're supposed to, protect the interpreters. That means trusting the House administration staff and MPs. You can check with the whips' offices, if you prefer. Many of the current measures may not have been the same had we had a say in the decision. I say this because I want things to keep getting better. If you had it to do over again, it would be a good idea to consult us. Yes, you received an order, but the people who issue the order need to understand the context we're working in and make decisions informed by the experience of those using the equipment.

Although I'm passionate about the issue, I do agree that we need to wrap this up, Mr. Chair. If you'll allow Mr. Lymburner to share his training plan for the pilot project with the committee, we can revisit the discussion afterwards.

To conclude, I have a few comments on the dashboard. That'll be my last comment, but I don't know how you want to handle that.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. That's very kind.

Perhaps we can let Mr. Lymburner, Mr. Ball and Ms. Trépanier take their leave, and then discuss it. They might want to stay. I'm not sure.

Mr. McDonald, the dashboard is a document we're familiar with, so instead of having you give us a presentation, I suggest we proceed directly to questions.

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

• (1240)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

First, Mr. Chair, I want to thank everyone on the team that sees to the collection of these data. It's helpful to see how things are changing according to the indicators we've established. I'm not someone who likes to make work when it's no longer necessary, so I think we could get rid of some of the indicators the dashboard is measuring. The time and energy it takes to collect that information could be put towards other indicators. I'll give you some examples.

We now know that 80% of the minutes spoken in committee are in person. That means we've hit the target. I think it's reasonable. I want to commend all of us for keeping our requirements in place and encouraging the House administration to find inventive and creative solutions. All the measures you and the IT team have put in place are fantastic, Mr. McDonald. However, just because we've hit our target and we're satisfied with how things are going, we shouldn't discontinue all the measures we introduced to make that happen.

I assume, then, Mr. Chair, that all the measures put in place to achieve that level of in-person participation, which is the best way to protect the interpreters, will remain in place, and we can focus on other indicators.

For instance, I'd be very interested in taking a closer look at the interpretation in dispersed mode pilot. I'll let the House administra-

tion determine which indicators to propose. When it comes to our goal of maintaining the level of quality and in-person participation, what kinds of things would be helpful to monitor? What can we improve? What information can the House administration track more closely and share with us on a regular basis? We could then monitor that progress. The pilot project is one element I'm interested in, but Mr. McDonald may be able to suggest other indicators that would further our goal of constant improvement. I'm talking about things that would help us determine whether we are making progress or not.

I'm not sure whether everyone will agree on this, but I propose getting rid of the indicator for in-person participation minutes and collecting other data on the technical and interpretation issues. Currently, those of us in the Bloc Québécois take notes for all the committee meetings we attend. We've given the House administration a summary of the technical issues we've observed, which aren't always system-related. They can involve coordination, interpretation or interpretation quality. My thinking was that the information we provided could help the House administration come up with new indicators.

Mr. Chair, the dashboard is a management tool that gives the Board of Internal Economy the ability not to micromanage but to better understand the work the House administration is doing to ensure that things keep getting better.

That's what I propose.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

I think you're right. We've put standards in place, which we're going to maintain, so there may be ways we can make the dashboard better, to focus on areas where we always want to see progress.

Mr. McDonald, please go ahead.

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

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, that's already part of our plan for the summer. I again want to thank you for the information you and your team shared with us. We've followed up with our partners at the translation bureau to address certain aspects or to convey key messages. We are going to look at what indicators we can come up with and get back to you in the fall with some recommendations.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any other questions or comments on the virtual committees dashboard?

Seeing none, I'm going to move on to the next item on our agenda.

Again, I want to thank the people at the translation bureau and the House administration for the work they're doing and for being here to answer our questions. We'll wait for you to provide more information in the days or weeks to come.

We'll now hear from Mr. Dicaire on the electric vehicle charging stations.

• (1245)

Mr. Benoit Dicaire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm here today to provide a general update on the installation of a pay-per-use system for charging stations, as promised when I appeared before the Board of Internal Economy on April 11.

We launched a pilot project on May 29, and we have 10 MPs from every party participating. We're still figuring things out, but everything seems to be going well so far. I'm confident that the pilot will go smoothly and work as hoped.

I am here to seek the Board of Internal Economy's approval for the charging rates, which are in line with market rates, and for the widespread deployment planned for late July.

I'd be happy to answer your questions.

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

Personally, I have just one comment. It's very important to clearly communicate how the rates work to MPs and parliamentary employees with charging station cards. As you noted in the report, the first four hours are charged at a certain rate, but if people leave their vehicles plugged in past those four hours, the rate goes up. I think it's very important for MPs and employees to understand that they have to unplug their vehicles after four hours of charging. Otherwise, they're going to be hit with a big bill.

Mr. Benoit Dicaire: I'd like to clarify something. The same rate applies to the first five hours of charging. During that time, the rate is \$1.50.

[English]

The standby period after that will then be four dollars per hour following the first five hours. We are committed to communicating, as we always do, to members and every permit holder about the change.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: The charging rates you've proposed are identical to those outside the parliamentary precinct, so I commend you for that.

Are there any other questions or comments?

Seeing none, I propose we adopt the recommended changes to make the pilot project a more permanent arrangement.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

We're now moving on to the next item on the agenda.

Go ahead, Mr. Janse.

[English]

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk of the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the House of Commons' "Report to Canadians 2024".

As you may already know, this report allows Canadians to better understand their parliamentary system and the important work that members undertake in the chamber, in committees, in constituencies and abroad on behalf of Canadians. It also includes details on the efforts made by the House of Commons administration to support parliamentary activities with impartiality and service excellence.

[Translation]

"The report to Canadians 2024" is available in both a printable version and an accessible HTML format. The report contains the following sections: messages from the Speaker and the Clerk, which are also available in audio versions; highlights from the Hill; a members' snapshot; a summary of members' activities; an overview of the House administration's structure and results; as well as financial information pertaining to members and the House administration for 2023-24.

A main focus in the highlights from the Hill section is the development and integration of the administration's new strategic plan. The plan is based on the key values underlying our commitment to members, their staff and House employees. Those values are integrity and impartiality, service excellence, collaboration and inclusion.

[English]

We've also been making progress in recognizing and removing barriers, such as those restricting access to our physical spaces or others limiting access to the work of the House. A good example would be how we have adapted some seats in the chamber galleries with a live transcription system so that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can better follow what's being said in the chamber in the official language of their choice.

Further to the theme of accessibility, we continue to work closely with Public Services and Procurement Canada and others, including members of Parliament from all recognized parties, to ensure that the new spaces in the renovated Centre Block will meet the needs of all parliamentarians, employees and visitors.

• (1250)

[Translation]

If the board approves the report, it will be tabled in both official languages in the House as soon as possible. It will also be posted on the House of Commons' public website in printable, mobile-friendly and accessible HTML formats.

[English]

It will also be shared through our social media channels and with our parliamentary partners and legislative counterparts. Members of Parliament are welcome to use our social media posts or a short video that will be made available to them soon to share and discuss the "Report to Canadians 2024" with their constituents and followers.

I am, of course, available to answer any questions.

Thank you very much.

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

We have two people on our list.

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you very much.

One of the bullet points in the slides was building an inclusive workspace.

I know Parliament has recognized many heritage days and heritage months. Does the House administration mark those types of official days, either by initiating events or other types of things, or by encouraging staff to lead those types of events, gatherings or days of celebrating culture or language?

Mr. Eric Janse: Through you, Mr. Chair, we do, through different channels.

On social media, either through the Speaker's accounts or the House administration's accounts, there are a lot of messages that go out on X or on Instagram with respect to a whole host of days, weeks and months, as you alluded to.

Internally, we have seen—we see it as a very positive thing—a lot of movement on the inclusion and diversity front. We have a very active diversity council, made up of employees of the House of Commons. We have seen the Black employee network being created over the last few months. We also have one now for disabled employees. We have a very active women's leadership network. There are other employees, presumably, who might wish to develop groups. It's very much a grassroots initiative.

In light of this and in light of the large number of different heritage days, months and so on that exist, we are actually in the process of kind of taking a step back and looking at how we can do this ideally and equitably, so that by January 1 of next year, we hope, we'll have a plan for how we will internally communicate these things and for when we will organize events, or have these individual employee-led groups organize events, to celebrate these days, because again, there are a good number of them, and we want to be fair and equitable to all.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: The House administration officially puts out messages from its main social media accounts or from corporate email accounts to the employees.

Mr. Eric Janse: That's correct.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: In terms of initiating events, would there be administration-led lunches or receptions?

When I was the Speaker, there were often opportunities for staff to celebrate some of those types of months or weeks or days.

Mr. Eric Janse: Perhaps a very good example is that we had the Black employee network put together, in conjunction with Black History Month, an event that was open, of course, to all employees. The Speaker participated. It was a very well-received and well-attended event. That would be an example.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: We've just had some informal anecdotal communications from staff saying that in May, Jewish Heritage

Month wasn't marked. I just wanted to fact-check that because, as I said, it's anecdotal. We haven't had a chance to do that.

Was Jewish Heritage Month marked, celebrated or recognized by the House administration?

Mr. Eric Janse: It was, in the external communications. It wasn't recognized internally, and we haven't in the past.

Part of the rationale, as I just mentioned, was to take two steps back and look at a strategy to do this equitably. If not, we would be looking at almost an email per day in every employee's inbox.

We said that what we'll do for the remainder of this year is just continue to communicate what we've communicated in the past, and in this interim period, we'll look together at putting together a strategy for how we can go forward starting January 1.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: So some are marked internally, with a corporate—

Mr. Eric Janse: Well, for instance, Pride, which is the month of June, is something we've done in the past, so it was done again this year, but again, going forward for the quite long list of things that could be celebrated and commemorated, we're looking at having some kind of strategy in place for next year.

• (1255)

Hon. Andrew Scheer: The Pride celebration was marked, but Jewish Heritage Month wasn't, because in the past it also wasn't.

Mr. Eric Janse: That's correct.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Was there a rationale in the past for not marking Jewish Heritage Month internally?

Mr. Eric Janse: It's a good question. I wasn't directly involved in the past.

Sometimes things stem from the diversity council and not necessarily from the corporate House of Commons. I think this is something we're trying to look at, again, to be equitable to all the different groups and heritage groups, etc., but also to not necessarily inundate people's inboxes.

Also, if there are going to be events associated with certain days, months and weeks, how can we be equitable with that? It takes resources to put together these events. People are attending events, and they're not necessarily at their desks. It's all these factors that we're going to take into consideration to put together a plan for next year.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian is next.

Mr. Peter Julian: Just briefly, I think it's an excellent report, and I approve its distribution.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there any other comments?

[*Translation*]

Does the Board of Internal Economy wish to approve the publication of the report as soon as possible?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

Honourable members, that brings us to the last item on today's agenda, the 2023-24 annual report on committee activities.

With us to speak to the report are Ms. Cadieux and Mr. McDonald.

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

As the members of the Board of Internal Economy already know, the Standing Orders of the House of Commons require the board to table an annual financial report on committee expenditures. Since 2012, the Liaison Committee has prepared a report for the Board of Internal Economy's review. The report is then tabled in the House by the Speaker.

[*English*]

I will ask Suzie just to highlight a couple of the numbers from this year's report, and I have one last thing to mention as well.

Ms. Suzie Cadieux (Principal Clerk, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's been another very busy year at the committees directorate. We've heard just over 4,700 witnesses. The committees have held over 1,200 meetings. We've received over 4,000 briefs. There have been over 180 reports presented to the House.

The activity levels remain very high compared to long-term historical averages, and this reflects very much the very high numbers we saw last year. Everything is just a tiny smidgen under what the record levels of last year were.

[*Translation*]

Things are still very busy when it comes to all House committees and their activities.

Mr. Ian McDonald: I'd like to say one last thing, if I may, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Liaison Committee has already approved our intention to have a new format for the report for next year, which will streamline the preparation of the report and will make it more timely to prepare as well. The next time the board is seized with this matter, it will see a slightly different format to the report. We believe, and the Liaison Committee members agreed, that it is an improvement to the overall format.

We just wanted to share that with board members as well.

Hon. Greg Fergus: It's always good to have improvements. Thanks very much.

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions or comments?

[*English*]

Shall we adopt it so that we can publish this report, everyone?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much.

With that, we've come in under time on a very busy day.

In case I do not have another occasion to do so, I would like to express to you how wonderful it has been to serve as your chair. Thank you for this.

I wish you all a very good summer. Let us hope that no incidents happen between now and then that will require us to meet before the fall. Enjoy the time in your constituencies.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: You're an optimist.

Hon. Greg Fergus: The meeting is adjourned.

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