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• (1205)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia (Speaker of the House of Commons): Good afternoon, colleagues.

As always, we'll start by adopting the minutes of the previous meeting.

Are there any points to add or amendments to make?

It seems there are none, so can we adopt the minutes as is?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We'll now move on to the business arising from previous meetings.

Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Yves Perron (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll be brief, as I promised.

This is an important topic. We had discussed some issues pertaining to the translation bureau and simultaneous interpretation services for the House of Commons. You will recall that we issued a polite invitation to officials from the translation bureau administration who are responsible for this service.

Additionally, although I need to go quickly, I'd like to point out one important issue. The letter I sent to all the members of the committee has a small mistake. I spoke about the House administration, but in fact, I meant the translation bureau administration, obviously. I want to point that out to make sure we're talking about the right people.

With that out of the way, members will recall the brief that was submitted to the committee, which did not contain much, and the few answers we received. The main answer from the translation bureau officials when they testified consisted in telling us not to worry. I can't recall how many times they told us not to worry since the accreditation exam was the key to everything. They said it was very hard to pass the exam. Often, no one passes the exam, and sometimes, a few people pass. It's somewhat a minimum guarantee: the exam is so difficult that only a skilled person can pass it.

However, a few weeks later, I found out that the accreditation exam had been changed significantly and no one had been told about that. Traditionally, the exam was administered by four interpreters with significant experience working in the House of Commons and they issue a joint verdict. I was told that an external examiner had

now been added to the four. However, this examiner has never worked in the House of Commons and is therefore not very familiar with how this specific environment works and how demanding it is. We all know that this work is very demanding. I won't repeat my presentation from a few days ago, but I would remind members that this work is more demanding due to the complex nature of debates, the technical level of subjects, the prior knowledge required, and so forth. This is already a problematic issue.

Furthermore, the external examiner has taught a number of the candidates. I think this raises an ethical issue. I can't say for sure, but this could create a potential conflict of interest.

This individual also has 50% of votes during the accreditation process. In my opinion, this is the crux of the issue. There are five examiners, but one of them has half the votes. This individual can vote in the opposite direction from the other four examiners. That would be a 50-50 tie. At that point, the translation bureau would decide whether the candidate has passed or failed. We can guess the outcome easily.

I will tell you what I don't want to happen and what I want to prevent from the outset. I'm not doing this to attack anyone, far from it. My goal is to maintain the quality of interpretation services and the parliamentary privileges of French speakers. Quality interpretation also gives all French-speaking Canadians access to knowledge and information. I'm very concerned about that.

That is why I wrote to the minister. That is the letter I sent you. I told the minister that this doesn't make sense, that it has to stop and that the situation needed to be reassessed.

The change to the accreditation exam follows other changes that have already taken place, such as the use of the lowest bidder, the end of periodic evaluations and a colour-coded quality rating. Basically, it was decided that making all candidates pass would resolve labour shortage issues and these interpreters would provide their services at a lower cost. That's what I don't want to see happen. We support fiscal restraint, but some things should not have a price tag.

That is why I sent you that letter to bring you up to speed. I have not heard back from the minister. I raised this issue with my colleagues and very respectfully suggested that members of the Board of Internal Economy share their concerns with the minister. We'll see what his answer will be and if he can give us some reassurance. I don't want to take a populist approach because this is not the proper place for that, but it is a bit tempting to do so given the data we have provided. I have therefore consulted with my colleagues, and I believe there would be consensus for us to write a polite letter to the minister informing him that members of the Board of Internal Economy are concerned about these developments and they would like to get a response to their concerns.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Perron, with respect to the letter, would you like us to wait for the minister to respond before we send him the letter or would you like this to be done concurrently?

Yves Perron: I'd like us to do that now. My letter to the minister was sent on December 2 and today is December 11.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Great, we're going—

Yves Perron: I can hear my colleagues asking me questions off mike to ensure the letter will be polite. There is no cause for concern. In fact, that's what I said in my statement. That is the goal of this process. However, I think it's important for us to get some answers because things are starting to add up.

• (1210)

[English]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Gerretsen.

Hon. Mark Gerretsen (Chief Government Whip): I was just going to say that, as Mr. Scheer just said off mic, as long as it's a very polite letter to the minister, I would agree with that.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Just for the record, I was being sarcastic.

Hon. Mark Gerretsen: Oh.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I'm not terribly concerned about how polite it is.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: It will be clear, firm and respectful. Let's put it that way.

[Translation]

Okay, agreed.

Mr. Perron, I think you have a second item to raise.

Yves Perron: Yes, absolutely.

My colleagues have not received any documentation on that item, but in short, members of Parliament had started collecting signatures to see whether the House of Commons could set different tariffs for charging electric vehicles on Parliament Hill. Members will recall that the initial goal was to give everyone access to this service. However, a number of elected representatives who live nearby would like to leave their electric vehicles charging overnight. Right now, when they do, it costs more than \$60. It's pretty expensive.

I respectfully submit this request to my colleagues, but I would ask the House Administration to consider changing the tariffs and reverting to \$1.50 an hour after 8:00 p.m., for instance, and for billing to stop once the vehicle is fully charged or for members to pay a night rate, depending on available options. This would give elected representatives who use electric vehicles the opportunity to fully charge their vehicles overnight.

Everybody understands the initial idea, which is to tailor pricing during the day to prevent people from parking their cars at the same location all day and to make the service accessible to everyone. However, a different way to tailor pricing would have to be identified so that people can charge their vehicles overnight.

That is the gist of the request. I think we can submit it, and if it's accepted, so much the better.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are we in agreement?

Mr. Perron, we'll start by sending the letter you sent out to all the members of the Board of Internal Economy. I'd also suggest we analyze the situation and discuss it again within the Board of Internal Economy after the new year to see where things stand and we can take action as needed.

Is everyone in agreement?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: That's perfect.

[English]

Hon. Mark Gerretsen: That's on the second issue.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Yes.

Number 3 is the JIC's annual report, "2024-2025: Parliamentary Associations' Activities and Expenditures".

You have before you a letter from the co-chairs of the Joint Interparliamentary Council, presenting the JIC's annual report on parliamentary associations' activities and expenditures for 2024-25. The co-chairs submit this report to the board for information.

[Translation]

If you have any questions, the clerk of the Joint Interparliamentary Council is at your disposal today. Mr. Kmiec can also attend another meeting if members wish.

Are there any questions?

Yves Perron: I have a question, but I think it's more in line with the fourth item of the agenda because it's about proportions for the distribution of expenditures.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Okay.

We are proceeding to the interim budget for the Special Joint Committee on the Exercise of Powers Under the Building Canada Act and proposed changes to the Committees By-law.

We have before us Mr. Ian McDonald, who is the clerk assistant, committees and legislative directorate.

Is Ms. Suzie Cadieux, who is the principal clerk, committees and legislative directorate, here as well?

Ian McDonald (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): She has stepped out to answer a call. She'll be back when she is done.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Okay. She'll join us shortly.

Mr. McDonald, you have the floor.

Ian McDonald: Apparently, there has been an emergency in committee, and Ms. Cadieux is looking into that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are here this evening to present two points related to committees.

The first point concerns a request for approval of an interim budget for the Special Joint Committee on the Exercise of Powers Under the Building Canada Act, which was established recently.

When special joint committees are established under the Committees By-law, they must make a request for an interim budget to the Board of Internal Economy. This money is used to cover expenses incurred by the special joint committee, including reimbursement of fees related to the appearance of witnesses and support for committee work.

The amount set by the Board of Internal Economy is currently \$50,000. If a committee wishes to exceed its interim budget for travel or to hire consultants, it must request funds from the Board of Internal Economy. For special joint committees, the Committees By-law provides for sharing between the House and the Senate as per the usual formula of 70% for the House and 30% for the Senate.

For many years, the Board of Internal Economy has received requests to use funds from the Liaison Committee's global budgetary envelope as a source of funding. That's what we're proposing today.

• (1215)

[English]

The second item is that in preparing the submission in relation to the special joint committee, it became apparent that there was an opportunity to align several of the provisions in relation to the initial interim budgets for special, special joint and legislative committees and to streamline the administrative processes related to them.

Therefore, the second part of the submission relates to some proposed modifications to the bylaws that the board may wish to consider. Should the board accept them, the bylaws for all special, special joint and legislative committees would be aligned, making them clearer to users and therefore easier to work with. This would help streamline the supporting administrative processes for both the board and the House administration.

These modifications also propose codifying the now long-standing practice of the board directing that the funds for the interim budgets for these types of committees would automatically come from the Liaison Committee's global budgetary envelope, instead of having to make a request to the board each time one of these types of committees is created.

As a result, upon their creation, all special, special joint and legislative committees would receive interim funding from the global budgetary envelope for committees without such a request needing to come to the board. There would, however, be no change in cases where a committee wishes to go beyond its interim budget to travel or engage consultants, as these requests would still need to be brought before the board for approval.

Finally, there's also one small related consequential change in relation to the reinstatement of budgets between fiscal years. Again, this is to ensure alignment and streamline the related administrative processes.

[Translation]

I am now ready to answer your questions.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are there any questions?

Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Yves Perron: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. McDonald.

I have a question. I think I have already brought it to your attention, but if not, I'll do so now. It's about the distribution of costs, the infamous "30% for the Senate and 70% for the House of Commons" formula.

I have questioned this cost distribution in the past. I understand it's like a tradition and it has been that way for I don't know how many years and that initially, it was based on the size of both chambers, with one chamber being approximately one third the size of the other one.

However, when it comes to joint committees, expenses or travel, what I have seen and what I have heard is that often, it's half-and-half when it comes to representation abroad or things of that nature. Sometimes, the Senate has a bigger delegation than the House of Commons. I think the Senate also has lots of resources.

I'm saying this in the context of fiscal restraint. We're asking the House Administration to be diligent and to limit expenses and, at the same time, we're paying for the Senate Administration, for which we're not responsible, at a ratio that seems disproportionate to me. I just want to bring this up.

Obviously, my goal is not to block voting this morning. I understand we have to approve these budgets and that that is how it's always been done. That's beside the point.

That said, I don't know whether anyone here can answer my question: How can we re-evaluate this and bring it more in line with a user-pay principle as a general rule for all joint bodies, be they joint committees, parliamentary associations and so forth?

My question is really broad in scope. I hope I've explained it clearly. I look forward to your answers.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Would you like to answer the question, Mr. McDonald? Someone else can also chime in.

Ian McDonald: When it comes to joint committees or special joint committees, generally speaking, there are few expenses and very few trips. This is especially the case for special joint committees, which rarely travel. I don't have a recent example of such a scenario in mind. Perhaps that would mostly apply to elements of parliamentarians' activities other than committees.

This distribution of spending is in line with the Committees By-law. It is already there. In contrast, if the Board of Internal Economy and parliamentarians wish to look into the issue, that is possible.

I will turn it over to my colleagues for more details.

• (1220)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: First, I think Mr. Perron would like to add something.

Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to clarify something. I gave the example of travel, but I was not only talking about that. Even if the expenses are fairly reasonable, I think a fairness or user-pay principle should apply. If a joint committee has the same number of members from each chamber, I think that the fact that the original chamber is bigger than the other chamber does not justify an unequal division of costs. I'd be curious to see the resources at the Senate's disposal.

I am concerned about this issue. I know that I am a new member of the Board of Internal Economy and here I am questioning things that have existed for a long time, but rest assured, at some point, I will be an old hand. I have been a whip for almost a year. I am bothered by this as a matter of principle. My concern is not about the size of expenses, but the overall way things are done going forward.

Ian McDonald: I'd like to clarify that the special joint committee being discussed comprises 11 members of Parliament and 5 senators. That gives you an idea of the proportions.

Generally, that is how it works. That said, there may be a different approach for other activities.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Would anyone like to add something?

Eric Janse (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): We can ask my colleague Jeremy LeBlanc, who's responsible for international and interparliamentary affairs, for his insight. When we talk about delegations that travel abroad, these are mostly parliamentary associations.

Mr. LeBlanc, I think you've reviewed the figures to see the distribution of costs between both chambers.

Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs): That's right.

For parliamentary associations, the formula is that delegations consist of 30% senators and 70% members of Parliament, since the funding formula follows that distribution. That said, sometimes, there are not enough members of Parliament available to travel abroad. That has mostly been the case in recent years given the situation with the minority government and pairing requirements. Some members of Parliament could not travel, and in that case, more senators were able to travel.

Historically, I would say that for certain years, the distribution of costs has almost mirrored the 30-70 formula. However, the historic average is perhaps close to 66-33. Election years—when only senators travel while the House is dissolved—or minority government contexts—where fewer members of Parliament travel abroad—are the times when this traditional distribution is not reflected closely.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Warkentin would like to say something, but first, I'll let Mr. Perron finish his remarks if this is agreeable to everyone.

[English]

Chris Warkentin (Chief Opposition Whip): That's fine.

[Translation]

Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. LeBlanc, you answered my question very clearly. Thank you.

However, that's exactly what I'm questioning. If members of Parliament can't take part in such trips due to their responsibilities as elected representatives and the fact that they can't be absent when there is a vote, the spots they would normally take should simply be left vacant, and the trip would cost less. That's my question. I don't understand why the House of Commons pays for senators. That's one of the things I want to question.

Regarding joint committees, I have the impression that it's more reasonable and it is a better reflection of established proportions. I have done the calculation and I came up with just about the same number.

Nevertheless, I still have one concern. For purposes of rationality and resource utilization, my basic question is as follows: If we want this to change, what would be the process? This may not be the right place to talk about that.

[English]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Warkentin.

Chris Warkentin: This is interesting. It's obviously new to me as well. I have from time to time lessened the number of Conservative members heading on a trip, simply because we wanted to save money. To hear that those spots are just being filled by senators now, using the global budget, is concerning. I mean, it isn't just because we're busy. Sometimes we actually believe there's a program that doesn't warrant the number of people being allocated. To understand that now these are being offered to senators to fill those spots and use budgets that were allocated by the House is of concern.

I don't know if you can answer the question. There may be programs for which you have determined that we need to send a certain number of Canadians, and I appreciate that. Maybe we need to have more dialogue about that. I'd like to have a review of this in the future and determine how we can ensure that budgets being allocated by the House are being utilized by House members, and that if the Senate wants to make up additional spots, it would throw in some reimbursement for those spots that would have been designated for the House otherwise.

• (1225)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: I'll turn it over to our clerk, who might have some insight on this.

Eric Janse: Without telling tales out of school, at the last meeting of the subcommittee, a letter was received, sent to the Speaker from the equivalent body from the Senate, requesting a meeting of the two to discuss budgetary issues. That might be an ideal occasion or opportunity to raise this question.

[Translation]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We can address that issue at that meeting and make the necessary changes. Indeed, we can ask why senators take slots designated for House members. We need to know the rationale for that.

Mr. LeBlanc, go ahead.

Jeremy LeBlanc: I'd just like to stress that decisions on the composition of delegates are made by each association's executive committee. I would like to clarify that, as officials, we don't make these decisions. To answer Mr. Warkentin's question, the composition of delegations and the number of delegates going on each trip is decided by the executive committees. Again, these executive committees comprise 70% members of the House of Commons and 30% senators.

[English]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Gerretsen.

Hon. Mark Gerretsen: Although I understand and I concur with that, if the Conservatives have two spots but they send only one person, we normally would mirror that. I think what Mr. Warkentin is saying is correct. If those spots end up being taken by senators, then the effect of what he's trying to do is moot, and we end up copying that. I know that there are times when we can send four Liberals but we end up sending only two, because the Conservatives are sending only two, or whatever it might be.

I'm interested to hear the outcome of this and to see how we can resolve it. Certainly, to Mr. Perron's point about the funding and how it's being funded, I think that should be addressed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We can have a meeting on that at some point.

[Translation]

Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank members of the Board of Internal Economy for their willingness to look into this issue.

I alluded to this before, but I will reiterate it: As you will understand, my intention today is not to block a vote on this issue. However, before we vote, I wanted to raise the issue of the 30% and 70% distribution and to ask how to call this formula into question.

And we've now been told about a letter in which the Senate asked for a meeting, so we can start there. That's perfect, as long as we don't consider the matter settled.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We'll come back to this issue later. Meanwhile, can we adopt the interim budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: That is perfect. Adopted.

Eric Janse: That also includes changes that will be made in future proceedings.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Indeed, the element that has just been adopted includes proposed changes to the Committees By-law.

Do you have anything to add, Mr. Perron?

Yves Perron: Obviously, we can get back to this later if necessary. We're in agreement on that, aren't we?

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: That's right. We're masters of our own proceedings.

[English]

Item five is the House of Commons accessibility plan for 2026-28. I would invite Mr. Guillaume LaPerrière, director, accessibility program and strategy, to come before us.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Today I'm here to present the proposed "House of Commons Accessibility Plan 2026-2028" and to seek the board's approval. As required under the Accessible Canada Act, the plan must be published no later than December 31 of this year.

Since publishing its first plan in 2022, the House has made meaningful and tangible progress. We have increased awareness of accessibility, delivered training and improved the usability of both our website and our built environment. This effort continues as the House moves forward with its second plan.

[Translation]

Like the previous plan, the strategy is based on consultations with people living with disabilities, including members of Parliament and their staff, House of Commons administration employees, and representatives of organizations and external experts.

The House of Commons accessibility plan 2026-2028 has some 30 or so initiatives and builds on progress achieved over the past three years. Its priorities include ensuring all external and internal websites comply with Canadian standards on digital accessibility, increasing the availability of live captioning to support parliamentarians' work, piloting an on-demand virtual sign language interpretation service for members' offices, and continuing to prioritize accessibility in the Centre Block rehabilitation and Block 2 redevelopment.

• (1230)

[English]

Recognizing that accessibility is not a one-time initiative, the new plan builds on the progress we have already achieved.

Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Warkentin.

Chris Warkentin: Thank you for coming and presenting this. This is the first I'm seeing of any of this. Is this the first time it's been presented?

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: We presented a first plan and then a progress report each year, but this plan, yes, we're presenting for the first time.

Chris Warkentin: I started going through it, and it is quite extensive. I should probably start with the first question, which is, what is the total budget, and what are the additional budget requests to undertake this plan?

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: We're not asking for any new money today. The plan is funded internally with the budget already allocated at the House.

Chris Warkentin: That concerns me, because I've been part of the subcommittee, and this is the first I'm hearing about it. I'm not sure where we're making this up.

Eric Janse: This is the second plan.

Chris Warkentin: I understand that this is the second plan, but there are additional initiatives, and I've been around government long enough to know that there are no programs that are ever free. Where is the money coming from?

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: For the first plan, the approach we took was to seek funding year after year through an internal budget. After those three years, we have a good sense of the money we need to fund all those initiatives. At the beginning, when we first presented the first accessibility plan, there was an ask for permanent funding to ensure the small team in charge of preparing

the report and making sure that all the requirements by law are fulfilled.

After that, year after year, we allocated internal resources to fund those initiatives. In terms of resources, 70% of our work is targeting the web and making the web accessible. Then there's an audit and a remediation tool for our technical team. That process needs to be sustained, so we can ensure that our full website, internal and external, meets the standard. That's a big chunk of what we do in terms of resources—70% of it. We'll say that 15% of our internal budget goes to the built environment improvement. We partner with PSPC, so a lot of the funding there comes from PSPC, but we do project management. Then there are more punctual initiatives that we fund. For example, if we're piloting a new service, we don't know if it's going to be a cost that is going to go forever, so the approach was to look year after year.

Chris Warkentin: I noticed that there's an audit provision for members of Parliament websites. Can you explain exactly what's entailed there, what's expected from members of Parliament, or what burden members of Parliament might now bear because of this audit provision?

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: In our approach, we want to protect members by making sure they have access to or if they need or want to know about an accessibility issue on their parliamentary website. We're equipping ourselves to be able to provide that information to all members.

We're not doing an audit per se and giving them a result. It's really to assist members, to help them. For example, if there are five items that should be improved in terms of accessibility on their website, we can say, "Here is a list for you to consider."

Chris Warkentin: You already told us that the majority of your budget goes to web services for the House.

• (1235)

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: Yes, that's including for members.

Chris Warkentin: That causes some concern, because members often don't have a lot of money in their budgets. If there's now going to be an additional requirement of accessibility provisions on their websites, I don't know whether there's room for members to absorb that. If it is that substantial a lift you're encountering on the House side, I'm not sure members could afford that on the MOB side.

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: For example, in the new Parliament, we started helping members by saying, "If you don't have a website already, it's cheaper to build it with accessibility in mind." That's the first thing. That's part of our communication.

The second part is this: We went to see the research bureau in order to assist them with their template. If they renew their template, it's a good idea to renew it following those best practices. I think that's also the approach we want to be taking with members.

We are taking the responsibility of funding a service to identify accessibility issues. There are accessibility standards out there, but there's no obligation to meet those standards, outside of legal risk or legal access. At this point, we're not in a mode to force members to meet those standards. It's really to assist them and say, "If you're renewing your website and if you want to improve it, here's how you could do it."

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are we good?

Chris Warkentin: That's an answer. I don't know if I'm—

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Do you have further questions?

Chris Warkentin: I don't in this second, no.

[Translation]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Yves Perron: I do have a question, Mr. Chair.

First, thank you very much for your presentation, Mr. LaPerrière-Marcoux. Looking at this, we can't be against virtue. It is interesting. I think improving accessibility in the House of Commons for everyone is an ongoing commitment.

My question is on the overall cost. You have said you get money internally, but as I said earlier, we are going through an expenditure rationalization process.

Is there anything in there that can be put on hold until things get better, without compromising accessibility? I want to be careful not to come across as someone who doesn't want accessibility. It's very interesting to give access to content to people who are deaf and mute. However, will this resource be there all the time waiting to work, or will they do something else and be available on demand? Earlier, I spoke about the issue of simultaneous interpretation. I know these are not the same budgets, but ultimately, it's all taxpayer dollars.

I'd like you to shed a light on that, please.

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: Thank you for the question.

To be clear, the budgets we use haven't changed for the last three years. We're really basing this on actual costs over the past three years. These budgets are earmarked for accessibility initiatives. They are part of a review and prioritization process. We just want to keep using the same budgets going forward.

Regarding your question on simultaneous interpretation, it's really a pilot project to test needs and usage. This is an external service that is already provided to other businesses. This is being done virtually. You call this service through an app to have access to an interpreter, who also provides services to other businesses. We're not talking about having interpreters that are fully dedicated to the House. The service is already available on the market. We purchase a certain number of hours at a fairly reasonable rate.

Over the next six months, we will test the usage and the need. We have had requests from a member of Parliament's office. We

want to try this service with this office first and eventually provide it to other members' offices to see what the demand is. After six months of the pilot project, we will see whether we want to provide this service on a permanent basis. That is why the costs are low.

• (1240)

Yves Perron: That is very interesting.

Thank you very much for that answer.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Please note that we have 20 minutes left and we are only halfway through.

[English]

Mr. Warkentin.

Chris Warkentin: I see in the written submission that we do have confirmation that, yes, you're going to try to absorb the new initiatives within the existing budget, but you can't ensure that it will happen. Are there any provisions within this plan that could be scaled down as budgetary constraints present themselves?

Guillaume LaPerrière-Marcoux: Yes, sir. The extent of the work we do on the web could certainly be scaled down. In that way, we've been moving on the most visited websites, the most public websites, so we could scale that work, for sure. As we said, 70% of the investment is there, so there's room to scale down, for sure.

Chris Warkentin: I'd like to just let you know that the idea that you'd come back in a few months and say you tried but you can't because the budgets don't allow for... I'd be reluctant to provide additional dollars at that point. I just want it to be clear that I believe, during this time of belt tightening, we have to be very careful. I understand that your intention will be to fit within existing budgets, so I'd strenuously encourage the administration to do that.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Our law clerk would like to jump in.

Michel Bédard (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): Just very briefly, the Accessible Canada Act provides a regime whereby we have to prepare a plan every three years, with the upcoming work. For years two and three, there's a need for a progress report to be prepared. These may be opportunities to have other discussions on the progress that has been made on the report and on the initiatives that are listed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Warkentin.

Chris Warkentin: I will just highlight another frustration on that. This is the last meeting that we're having. It's a truncated meeting. We're not able to actually go into this.

The idea that we have a legal requirement to have it in place by the end of the year and that we're getting 20 minutes to review this at the last possible moment, I think, is a failure of the process. We don't like to be considered just a rubber-stamp operation here, and I think there's a level of disrespect to members in the process if that happens in the future.

As these progress reports come forward, we want to be partners. We don't want to be a rubber-stamp machine here. I am actually quite frustrated about the fact that we're being rushed through this at the last possible moment before the legal requirement that it be in place.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: That's noted.

[*Translation*]

There is a deadline of December 31 to adopt the strategy. Unless we want to meet during the holidays, are we in agreement to adopt the strategy now?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*English*]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Item number six is the first report of the SIAO subcommittee.

[*Translation*]

During its meeting on December 5 2024, the Board of Internal Economy adopted a recommendation from the House administration to develop a framework for the strategic internal assessment of operations, or SIAO. The goal of the SIAO is to support excellence in services and operational alignment with the House of Commons as a whole.

The board also approved the creation of a subcommittee comprising of the Speaker as chair and another member of the board from each recognized party to support the House of Commons administration with the implementation of the SIAO.

[*English*]

Since then, the House administration has been working diligently on a multi-year plan. The subcommittee met on two occasions this fall, and as part of its discussions, it engaged with the House administration on a proposal for a three-year target to see efficiencies, given the current fiscal environment. The proposed phased approach is intended to allow for responsible planning, operational continuity and strategic alignment throughout the implementation.

[*Translation*]

You have before you a copy of the first report of the subcommittee, which is being recommended for your approval.

● (1245)

[*English*]

The report contains two specific motions that the subcommittee unanimously adopted.

The first reads as follows:

That the board approve a net budget reduction of 5% to the House administration's reference budget level, calculated against the 2025–26 main estimates of \$194.4 million, to be phased in over three fiscal years starting in 2026–27. The reductions would be applied on a prorated basis as follows:

You have the numbers in front of you: 2026-27 is a 2% reduction, which represents \$3.9 million; 2027-28 is a 1% reduction, representing \$1.9 million; and 2028-29 is a 2% reduction, representing \$3.9 million.

The second motion takes into account historic amounts lapsed in the budget for committees. It reads as follows:

That the global envelope for committees be reduced from the current \$4 million to \$3 million.

This is the Liaison Committee envelope, in other words.

Is everyone in agreement with adopting the report and the motions contained therein?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. That's good.

We go now to item number seven, which is very important. It's our submission to the main estimates.

We have with us Paul St George, chief financial officer; and Mélissa Côté, deputy director, resource management.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor, Mr. St George.

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

I am here to present the proposed 2026-2027 main estimates for the House of Commons for the Board of Internal Economy's approval.

The budget is \$669 million, an increase of 1.9% compared to the previous fiscal year. The proposed plan limits the growth and expenditures while fulfilling commitments with regard to the board's effectiveness and protecting essential services for members of Parliament.

Of the \$669 million, \$399 million will be allocated to the members' and senior officer's program and \$270 million will be allocated to the House of Commons administration program.

In addition, for transparency purposes, an amount of \$120.9 million has been reported for services that have been received for free, primarily related to facilities and insurance premiums. This amount is not part of House authorizations.

The total increase of 1.9% is due to measures to maintain the lifecycle of post-disaster recovery technologies and installation services; office budget and salary cost of living adjustments for members of Parliament and senior officers; salary increases for certain House administration employees; increased costs for employee benefit plans and contributions to pension plans for members of Parliament; and a strategic allocation of \$297,000 and 4.75 full-time equivalents to increase the staff at the Visitor Welcome Centre.

[English]

In line with the board-approved three-year SIAO framework, the main estimates implement the year one efficiency targets, which are a 2% net reduction to the administration's budget and a separate reduction to the committees budget. These targets were identified in collaboration with the SIAO subcommittee. The efficiency targets have been applied across the administration, with security explicitly exempted in recognition of its role in safeguarding parliamentary operations.

In summary, the House of Commons budget for 2026-27 reflects an overall increase of 1.9%. This increase captures the combined impact of identified cost pressures, partially offset by post-election budget adjustments, and the implementation of the SIAO efficiency targets.

With respect to the post-election adjustments, the shift from four recognized parties to three resulted in a \$4-million reduction to the House officers' budgets, as well as a \$1.2-million increase to member operating budgets for electoral supplements.

Mr. Speaker, the budget before you maintains moderate spending growth at 1.9% and delivers the year one SIAO efficiency targets aligned with the SIAO framework.

This concludes the presentation. I'm prepared to answer any questions.

• (1250)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are there any questions?

Yes, Mr. Warkentin.

Chris Warkentin: Obviously, this is the first of three years. I don't see a lot of information as to what we've discussed, probably privately, with regard to the second and third years.

Is there a reason that it's not included, or are we keeping that secret, to surprise everyone later on?

Paul St George: Thank you for the question, Mr. Warkentin.

The plan for the third SIAO subcommittee is to begin those discussions for year two. They have not been developed yet, so they're not, I would say, kept secret. The intent is to have open communication with the board through the SIAO subcommittee on what those look like.

We have three intake systems into that. One we'd be looking at is those areas or services that the board has interest in us looking at in terms of service reviews. We're also considering benchmarking using a third party to evaluate gaps against industry best practice. For the third, we also want to look at cross-service opportunities in terms of the types of support services that we provide across the organization.

Chris Warkentin: I think it's important for us to keep... I was surprised that we didn't have at least the discussions that we've had with regard to the second and third year presented here. There seems to be a commitment that we're going to pursue that. I just want to ensure that it's on everyone's radar. The board has been keen to make sure we get this job done.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are there any questions?

[Translation]

Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Yves Perron: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. St George and Ms. Côté.

Your presentation indicates that an amount of \$297,000 has been added for the Visitor Welcome Centre. It seems to me that we could change the way visitors are welcomed.

Are these expenses not currently covered by the Parliamentary Protection Service?

Am I getting things mixed up? Does it come from the same budget?

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Perhaps we can invite the Sergeant-at-Arms to explain what is behind this initiative.

Pat McDonell (Sergeant-at-Arms, House of Commons): Up until last week, the PPS, or the Parliamentary Protective Service, was taking care of this, but it can no longer meet the demand.

Since September, we have received a number of complaints from members of Parliament and from the Speaker's office that visitors who are here on business could not get into the Visitor Centre quickly enough to be on time. Most visitors are guests of members of Parliament. We receive complaints every day.

The people in charge of welcoming members of the public who report to me can meet the demand more quickly at a much lower cost than the Parliamentary Protective Service.

At some point, we had to make some decisions. I raised the issue with my boss and the Speaker's office and proposed a solution to solve the problem. We can provide this service at a much lower cost than the PPS. I understand the PPS has made budget cuts other than in this program. In reality, we work together and we are saving money, regardless of whether the service is provided by the administration or the PPS.

Yves Perron: Thank you. That answers my question.

Essentially, my understanding is that new functions will be created to provide a more effective service at a lower cost.

Pat McDonell: Yes, exactly.

Yves Perron: It's hard to be against virtue and security.

Thank you.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Sometimes, fairly large groups come to attend committee sessions, or groups of students come to meet members of Parliament, for example. I have personally experienced a lot of frustration in a couple of specific cases because people get to security in time, but they don't make it to meetings in time because it takes too long to process them through the system.

Are we in agreement to adopt this budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

● (1255)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We will now go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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