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• (1205)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia (Chair of the Board of Internal Economy): Good afternoon.

We only have an hour this afternoon.

We will begin with the minutes of the previous meeting. Is it your pleasure to accept them without any amendments?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: So, they are adopted.

We will therefore move on to business arising from previous meetings.

Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

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

I would like to return to the visit we received from Minister Lightbound and Mr. Lymburner. I won't take up much time, rest assured, because I know we only have an hour, but I do have a few further points to make.

Firstly, we greatly appreciated the minister's willingness to engage and his open-mindedness. However, some of the information provided to us contained a few inaccuracies, including when I was told that I had already been informed that the external assessor did not have 50% of the votes. I took the trouble to review all the minutes of previous meetings, and this was the first time I'd heard of it. I didn't want us to get bogged down in justifications or start asking questions. Instead, I wanted to make the most of the minister's presence, so I let it go. I did, however, check the facts on this. Without picking a fight with anyone, I just want to clarify this point.

I receive a lot of information and emails on this subject from people within the system, and I try to weigh things up. That explains why, at times, I asked questions based on information I had that may not have been accurate. The aim was to clarify it. I just want to clarify that as well.

As for the review, I would like a follow-up on the 50% issue. I asked a few people for clarification on this and inquired to find out what the situation really was, how it worked, and so on. However, no one was able to give me any answers. Could we ask for the documents that confirm this, for example, how the last accreditation examination was conducted and what relative weighting was given to each of the assessors? That would be the first request I would put to my colleagues.

I have a second point to raise. I'll just mention this briefly, so please don't worry. I receive a lot of correspondence from people raising concerns. These are people who are in the loop, who are involved in the process, who have written directly to the minister and who have forwarded the correspondence to me. You have all witnessed Minister Lightbound's rather extraordinary openness. I thank him again for that. I assure you, I am committing to the Board of Internal Economy to personally follow up with the minister, because he has opened the door to this for me. I will keep you informed of how this develops.

I see that, amongst other things, there are requests for availability that are proving very difficult to fulfill. So, there is currently a severe shortage. I know that many requests for services sent to the translation bureau are being turned down. So here is the second request I am putting to you: Can we find out how many of the requests made to the translation bureau—whether by departments, caucuses or organizations—have been refused since January? It's just to get an idea of how things are going, because this has been in place since January. That would give us more comprehensive information for the next steps.

Those are the two requests I would like to put to my colleagues this morning.

There is one other thing I want to tell you. I may seem a bit tiresome for raising this matter again, but it is truly something close to our hearts. Just this morning, the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage experienced technical difficulties, so that English could be heard at the same time as French on the French channel.

I personally had to stop a committee meeting—I believe it was the Standing Committee on National Defence—a few weeks ago due to the same problem. We are told it is a technical problem and that they are unable to fix it.

I am emphasizing this because all the other MPs and most people do not use the French channel. Proceedings are in English, so they have less need for it. It is always the MPs from our party who have the unenviable task of having to say that the sitting must be suspended in front of important witnesses. One of the MPs from my party told me this morning that this was an important study on important issues and that it was a nuisance to suspend the meeting. Do you understand? That is why we are so committed to this cause.

I shall reiterate my two requests, and then I will have finished speaking. Firstly, can we have the details of the weighting for the latest accreditation examination? We've heard a lot about transparency, so I don't think that should be a problem. Secondly, can we find out how many service requests have been refused since January?

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: I see.

So, what you're proposing, as I understand it, is that we write a letter containing two additional questions—

Yves Perron: Yes. We would send it to the translation bureau.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Yes.

As for the channels that were mixed up, I don't know if that falls under the purview of the translation bureau, or rather—

Yves Perron: These are technical problems. I gave you the example of what happened this morning. From an outsider's perspective, it may seem like I'm not letting go of my bone, but that's because we face these issues on a daily basis and we need to ensure the sustainability of these services. It was just an example.

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

Jeffrey LeBlanc (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): If I may, Mr. Chair, I would like to address the issue raised regarding the channels where both the floor and the interpretation could be heard.

Indeed, this happened twice, once in the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage and once in the Standing Committee on National Defence. This is unfortunate, and we deeply regret the situation. From what I understand, this was human error. It is the kind of thing we are working to correct. I am not saying that all incidents are due to human error. Sometimes there are technical issues, and sometimes more fundamental problems. In these cases, however, they were human errors. We will seek to eliminate this type of error as much as possible.

Yves Perron: If it helps with your research, I would add that these are also recurring issues when interpreting is done remotely. This is an issue I have raised before.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: That is an interesting fact.

Do you agree to send a letter to the translation bureau to obtain answers to the two questions raised by Mr. Perron?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are there any other matters arising from previous meetings to discuss?

Mr. Scheer, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Not on this topic, but on....

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Okay, that's what I'm getting at. Is there anything else under this rubric?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I have a letter in our binder from Michael Barrett, flagging that Liberal MP Lori Idlout appears to use her MOB to expense items for a business she owns.

I take note of the letter that's in the board package, but I was wondering if, perhaps at a future meeting, the House administration could brief us. There are some reports that the Liberal MP has reimbursed it, but I'd just like to get confirmation of that.

Also, the board has studied the matter, at the very least, in the past, to see if additional penalties are to be applied. We did that with former Speaker Fergus. Sometimes the board accepts straight reimbursement, and sometimes there are additional things. I thought we would benefit from an update as to what actually happened and whether there are any next steps.

• (1210)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We'll prepare something for the next meeting.

Is there anything else under business arising from previous meetings? No.

You'll allow me to invite Ms. Christa Dickenson, president and CEO of CPAC, to the front.

Go ahead, please.

Christa Dickenson (President and Chief Executive Officer, Cable Public Affairs Channel): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Board of Internal Economy members.

My name is Christa Dickenson, as you mentioned. I am the president and CEO of CPAC, the Cable Public Affairs Channel.

Thank you very much for this meeting and for inviting me at this critical juncture for CPAC.

I want to begin by acknowledging that this appearance truly is unprecedented, and I'm here out of necessity.

[*Translation*]

I know you are familiar with CPAC. Since its creation in 1992, at a time when CBC/Radio-Canada had decided to stop broadcasting its parliamentary programming, CPAC has been a non-profit, ad-free, bilingual media organization dedicated exclusively to Canadian politics and public affairs.

CPAC's primary mission is to broadcast the proceedings of the House of Commons and the Senate, as well as their committee hearings. Over the years, however, we have expanded our programming in a way that makes CPAC unique on a global scale, offering Canadians an exceptionally comprehensive view of how our democracy works.

[English]

As viewing habits have changed, we have expanded our offering beyond linear television. Today we are able to offer up to 14 simultaneous livestreams on our website, including live coverage of media avails, news conferences, scrums, caucus ins and outs, and the Bank of Canada rate announcement, in addition to the televised parliamentary programming.

At a time when legacy media companies continue to cut back their news operations and increasingly substitute opinion-driven journalism for in-depth reporting, CPAC is alone among Canadian broadcasters in providing live, uncut, neutral and unfiltered coverage.

Why am I here in front of you at this Board of Internal Economy? It is because it is a critical moment for CPAC and the service we provide to Canadians, and for our shared priority of ensuring Canadians have access to watch what happens in the House of Commons.

What I'd like to do is unpack for you CPAC's financial situation. I should mention that I am able to provide some more sensitive details, should we go in camera, around efficiencies and things like that.

CPAC's only meaningful source of ongoing revenue is the CRTC-mandated wholesale fee, which we receive from cable and satellite subscribers. While we have received some recent capital and stopgap funding and project-specific grants, CPAC does not receive an appropriation or regular funding from the federal government. In addition, to be able to preserve our neutrality, our broadcasting licence expressly prohibits the sale of advertising. There's no commercial income.

Since 2018, our CRTC-approved fee has been 13 cents per subscriber per month. Since then, the industry has experienced a pronounced subscriber decline as Canadians have cut the cord and moved away from traditional cable and satellite services. When you add inflation in that 13-cent fee, it means that CPAC is working today with budgets that are at the level we had in 2006.

CPAC finds itself under incredible financial strain. Recognizing this strain, just this week, the CRTC approved a three-cent rate increase for CPAC, which will come into effect this coming September.

This rate increase is critical to CPAC, but only in the short term. We know that without a long-term solution.... As the industry changes, CPAC changes along with it. This provides only short-term cover.

For clarity, we operate with an annual budget of \$15 million. When we compare ourselves to our peers like APTN or TVOntario, we are operating with less than a quarter of their annual budgets.

As Canadians change how they watch TV and how they access news content, subscriber losses are starving this organization, and it's going to continue.

• (1215)

The compounded cost of subscriber loss since our last licence renewal, through to 2029, amounts to \$25 million.

Of course, we continue to seek and implement efficiencies, but that is not enough. We need to find a new, more diversified funding model, one that reflects how more and more Canadians are seeing CPAC. They're consuming it digitally. That will take time.

To maintain service for Canadians requires an incremental \$5 million in operating funding annually over the next three years. Meanwhile, the pace of change does not slow, and the demands and expectations of CPAC as a neutral and comprehensive source for Canada's political and civil life, accessible on TV and online, are so high—and rightly so.

The CRTC's ongoing implementation of the Online Streaming Act could be part of a solution. CPAC and others have advocated to the CRTC to establish a “service of exceptional importance” fund. The fund would see streaming services contributing to supporting public interest services, like CPAC, in a way that is similar to what cable and satellite providers do today. However, even if the CRTC does take this step—and we are hopeful it will—it could be a question of several years until it has an impact, and that may be optimistic.

The harsh financial reality is that CPAC cannot wait that long. We're out of time. This is why we need incremental funding of \$5 million annually to bridge the gap—and we hope it is just a gap.

It is incumbent upon CPAC to explore every funding avenue, including discussing temporary, limited support from the House of Commons, given our respective roles in providing Canadians with crucial access to democratic processes. Democratic sovereignty—and that's what we're talking about—relies upon Canadians having access to what happens in this place.

[Translation]

CPAC is fully committed to providing reliable and independent coverage, and takes this responsibility very seriously. This essential public service is at risk of disappearing, which is why I am here before you today.

I would be very happy to answer your questions at this time. Thank you.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you, Ms. Dickenson.

I assume there are questions for Ms. Dickenson.

We'll start with Mr. Scheer.

[English]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you very much.

I really appreciate your remarks, especially highlighting the approach that CPAC takes to covering public affairs being unfiltered and unaltered. I've always appreciated that you cover entire press conferences, all the scrums, where you don't cherry-pick half an answer here and there. I think Canada's public broadcaster could probably learn a thing or two about sticking to covering what actually happened—the state broadcaster, I should say—versus adding, as you say, opinion-driven journalism. I think CPAC really could teach a lesson or two about objectivity when it comes to covering public affairs.

I just want to commend you for maintaining that approach. I know it's been a long-standing directive of CPAC to hold the lens up to what is happening and let Canadians decide what to believe or think about.

For a point of clarity, I think you highlighted the fact that just recently, there was an approval to increase the fee. How long did it take, from the time CPAC made that request to when it was granted by the CRTC?

• (1220)

Christa Dickenson: Thank you, Mr. Scheer, for this question. It's an important one, because we've waited nearly two years. We put up what we called a “part one” in the summer of 2024. We asked if we could get a 12-month window of knowing in advance of the decision, so that we could plan our business accordingly. We're getting very close to our broadcast licence expiring on August 31. This increase actually will take place on September 1, in a few months.

For clarity, in 2024, when we put that request in, the subscriber loss we had seen was 11%. That's over five years. Now, we are adding on another 12.5%, so we're nearly at 25%. It basically fills a gap that's already existing, but we're still in that scenario of absolute dire straits.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Are there any fees you have to pay or any costs associated with the work you do that come from Parliament itself? Are there any licensing fees that the House or Senate charge you? Are there any costs? I'm trying to think of revenue side, but there's also the expenditure side and things that we could look at as parliamentarians that would help you spend less.

Christa Dickenson: No. Primarily, there aren't any additional direct costs. There are some fees and things like that, but this is not where the heavy lift really is. It is around the wraparound that we do. On caucuses' ins and outs, those are boots on the ground, in the field.

We are the only ones.... I'm sure all of you from all parties will recognize that since last January we have covered three party political conventions in their entirety. My aunt is in her mid-80s. I got a text from her yesterday—from Aunt Ruth in Tillsonburg—and she saw the Liberal convention on YouTube, the fulsome package that CPAC was providing. There are real costs involved with that.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I have one other quick question about the level of support and sources of revenue. I believe you said in your remarks that the nature of your licence prohibits you from running ads. There are definitely some pros that come along with that, but what about on the online site? As you point out, there's definitely a loss of subscribers on cable and satellite packages, but I would

imagine that there's an explosion on new media and YouTube channels.

CPAC does create a lot of content that ends up on my channel as a member of Parliament, and on those of the parties. Is there anything preventing you from trying to commercialize that type of content or at least bring in revenue from web access or other types of platforms? Are you prohibited in that as well? Or is that something that CPAC can do?

Christa Dickenson: It's a bit of a grey area. We call that “colouring outside the lines”. We do a tiny bit of ad pre-rolls on YouTube. We turn them off absolutely when it comes to an election period. We want to preserve that neutrality. We never want to have the wrong ad associated with CPAC. It would just be devastating. That represents, truthfully, beer and pizza money.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Warkentin is next.

Chris Warkentin (Chief Opposition Whip): The legacy media has had government-subsidized support over the last number of years in terms of helping to support reporters and payroll. I guess that's the explanation. Is CPAC receiving that funding?

Christa Dickenson: Are you talking about subsidies during the pandemic, for instance, or the collective journalism...?

Okay. Thank you for the clarity, and thank you, Mr. Warkentin, for the question.

We do receive some, and it's based on a formula. That is the CJC. Our envelope of that—we're on the second year—is more or less \$400,000.

• (1225)

Chris Warkentin: It's \$400,000.

Christa Dickenson: It's \$400,000.

Chris Warkentin: You're not allowed to advertise, and you're not government-supported per se. CBC is allowed advertising, and they also get the subsidy in addition to any additional broad support the industry gets.

Has there ever been a suggestion that government would support CPAC in the same way that it supports CBC?

It seems that CBC's mandate has traditionally been to tell the Canadian story to Canadians. Unfortunately, I think that what has happened over the years, when I turn on the evening news, is that I'm inundated by American news, things happening in the U.S. I can often listen to the entire broadcast and not see anything that happens in the Canadian Parliament. It seems like there's a disconnect between them and what their original mandate was, and you're filling in the gaps, but you're not getting the support they are getting to do exactly what you're now doing.

Has there been a request or a suggestion?

Christa Dickenson: I'm going to unpack that by looking at two things: first about the CBC's and CPAC's mandates, and then the request for additional support from government.

First, I have an origin story for CPAC. In 1991, there were federal cuts to CBC/Radio-Canada's budget. I think they were to the tune of \$5 million, more or less. At the time, management at CBC/Radio-Canada decided they would no longer carry parliamentary proceedings. That is when the coalition of cable companies came together and applied for a must-carry application licence for CPAC. That's the origin story, and I think it's interesting that we are here today.

As far as us making asks is concerned, 100%.... I joined CPAC in 2022, just as we were getting to the tail end of our five-year licence. Along with all broadcasters, we were expecting a one-year administrative renewal. Bill C-10, which became Bill C-11, was about to be launched and birthed, and there was this expectation that it would take that long. Lo and behold, that turned into a three-year administrative renewal, which freezes our budgets.

In that situation, we immediately started to advocate to the ministry of heritage. Over years and years, along with our peers, we had some luck in 2024, when we received \$5 million towards a capital infrastructure rebuild, which is a multi-year rebuild. Normally, CPAC would be saving year over year to be able to fund it. However, with the pandemic and the very high cost of SI with the amount of work we did, minority government after minority government, a lot of that reserve money went to election coverage and things like that. We were in a pickle, and the government helped us with a first round of funding of \$5 million towards our capital rebuild, which is a total of \$13 million, so we have an \$8-million hole.

We have been knocking on the door of Heritage. We are triangulating with the ministry of finance and the PMO. We're hoping that, maybe, something will come of this. We have not had a direct answer to our ask.

It's so important, because broadcast facilities have gone from, historically, analogue to digital, HD and now the cloud. We are operating with pieces of equipment that are 20 years old and at their end of life. One of them is a media asset management system. It takes on every piece of audio-visual content—it is the pipeline—and then from there, it gets redistributed, no matter what platform it is. If that breaks, I can no longer avoid being selective in terms of what CPAC can provide to Canadians—I just can't.

At the same time, we have also been asking for operational gap financing on behalf of ourselves and our peers, the other must-carry

9.1(1)(h) groups: APTN, Accessible Media, etc. In 2024, we received the equivalent of \$10 million over two years, but that was distributed through six channels. The formula was based on the rate, the tariff and our wholesale fee, with ours being the absolute lowest. Based on that, we receive \$500,000 to \$600,000 each year. There's nothing going forward.

We have been asking—and it's what has been asked of you as well—for help from one form or shape of government for the next three years for our capital ask, as well as \$5 million operationally annually so that we do not “fragilize” to the point that we are being selective, to Mr. Scheer's point. We are never selective. We provide the whole picture.

• (1230)

Chris Warkentin: Finally, I see the importance of CPAC for our democratic sovereignty.

I'll give an opinion. I don't believe the CBC is fulfilling that mandate. It isn't fulfilling that need in Canada. At a time when we have the challenges to the south and the voices around the world that are oftentimes filtered through a whole host of different ways—it could be online, but they're unreliable sources, I would say—I think CPAC presents the most unfiltered and most relevant information for Canadian democracy.

Therefore, I would call on the government to act. I don't believe Parliament has a fund that can be allocated for this—I'm not aware of any—but I certainly believe the government has a responsibility. This is an opportunity for it to make some of the rhetoric into a reality and give CPAC the funding that's essential for the carriage of the information.

Christa Dickenson: Thank you, sir.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Ms. Kayabaga, go ahead.

[Translation]

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga (Deputy House Leader of the Government): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Ms. Dickenson.

First of all, I would like to echo the comments my colleagues have already made, saying that we greatly appreciate the work CPAC does. Your work is truly unique, particularly your programming and the access you provide to Canadians regarding the House of Commons, above all. I know my family loves being able to sit down and watch what we do in the House of Commons at any time of day. So, we greatly appreciate the work you do.

I think the question has already been asked, but I could ask it a bit more directly: Are there other sources of revenue that you are currently exploring or have already explored to fund your activities?

Christa Dickenson: Indeed, let's look at the various revenue models we could consider.

Since we are a non-profit organization, even if there were a refundable tax credit as is the case for publications, it would not apply to us.

Many other broadcasters have access to funding from the CMF, or the Canada Media Fund, because they hire production teams and tons of people to make their shows. As for us, once again, we don't have access to the CMF's automatic funding stream.

Others receive provincial grants, but, once again, that's not for us.

Every time there's an opportunity we could look into, it doesn't work out. CPAC is truly in a completely unique situation, unlike that of other broadcasters.

However, we have applied for project funding. These are one-time funds, available on a per-project basis. We've made good progress on that front. We currently have two grants, amounting to a few hundred thousand dollars, which are used for special projects, such as the documentary on the restoration of the Centre Block and the project for the 150th anniversary of the Supreme Court of Canada. That's what these funds are for. However, it's not for our equipment or for our day-to-day operations.

For example, we're currently setting up simultaneous digital networks. Every day, we add 20 to 24 hours of recordings to our archives. These archives contain 70,000 hours of content. That takes up space in the cloud. Every year, it gets more and more expensive. But we can't just give that up, though. It's Canada's democratic memory.

I hope I've answered your question.

• (1235)

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Yes, to a degree.

You also mentioned that it took you two years to obtain the last grant you received. Now, you are requesting a three-year grant. What is your plan for after those three years?

Christa Dickenson: We're not trying to be stingy. We're trying to win a little time and have enough to survive.

Why are we talking about three years? It is because we believe that the creation of a fund for public services of exceptional importance, which should result from Bill C-11, should happen. We don't know the amount, the timeline, or the logistics. We don't know who

will govern or administer this fund. You know how it is—it's the CRTC; if it takes nearly two years to get approval for a grant as simple as the one we just received, for something new and extraordinary, it's going to take three years. I think it's as simple as that.

Furthermore, this should be a new model. We are therefore moving toward a system that will be a mix of private funds and grants from multimedia broadcasters, for example.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

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

Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Dickenson. Thank you for joining us today.

Several points have already been raised, so I will try not to repeat them. I had a series of questions to ask, but I have fewer now than I did at the start.

First, I'd still like to reiterate that we appreciate the services you provide to the House, your neutrality, and the comprehensive nature of your coverage. This allows for the dissemination of information in a more neutral, accurate and complete manner, and it is appreciated by everyone.

I just want to make sure I understand one thing correctly. Did you say that you had already received \$10 million over two years, in 2024, or was it \$5 million?

Christa Dickenson: The \$10 million that was awarded in 2024 was spread over two years and distributed amongst six of us. In our case, we received \$539,000 in the first year and \$605,000 in the second year. That is approximately \$1 million over two years.

Yves Perron: That is what I understood, but I just wanted to make sure.

The first time you contacted us by letter, you were awaiting a response from the CRTC. I understand you have finally received it. The request was justified because the CRTC was not responding. Do you still require the sum of \$5 million that you requested?

Christa Dickenson: More than that, yes. We've done all our calculations, with and without that famous \$0.03 increase, and we're in a real bind.

Yves Perron: My next question is the least pleasant of my questions. I imagine you conducted a rationalization exercise to determine in which type of service the cuts would have the least impact on what I would describe as democratic information for the public.

Christa Dickenson: We implemented efficiency measures in 2024, which brought us to where we are now. We implemented a voluntary departure program, made cuts, increased efficiency in our programs, and so on. In fact, we're doing it again right now.

To answer your question more directly, we'd need to go into closed session.

Yves Perron: I understand that perfectly.

I have one last question. In one of your previous remarks, you said that measures stemming from Bill C-11 are expected. Could you elaborate on that point?

Christa Dickenson: Yes. Right now, we are awaiting the results of the dynamic market study, which will include tools. One of these tools that has been conceived and will come to fruition, as we understand it, will be a new fund for public service broadcasters and media, such as CPAC or APTN. The details of all this will take roughly three years to be finalized, in our view. That is why we need a bridge, ultimately.

• (1240)

Yves Perron: Thank you very much.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

Are there any other questions for Ms. Dickenson, or have we more or less covered the topic?

It seems that's all.

Ms. Dickenson, I would like to thank you for your very interesting and detailed presentation, which paints a picture of the situation CPAC finds itself in.

I would just like to come back to one point you raised. You have video archives of the debates dating back to 1977, correct?

Christa Dickenson: Since 1977, yes.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: So they belong to you.

Christa Dickenson: Yes, they belong to us. There are parts that are in our physical archives, and we are currently trying to put them online. So there is work to be done for the years behind us, but also for the years to come.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: No one wants this, but if CPAC were to go bankrupt, what would happen to these archives?

Christa Dickenson: Someone should then take them and continue the work, otherwise they would be lost.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: They would be lost. Okay.

We'll stop there, because we need to go into closed session to address another item on the agenda.

Thank you very much, Ms. Dickenson, for testifying before us today.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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