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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia (Speaker of the House of Commons): Fellow members, good morning and welcome to meeting number nine of the Board of Internal Economy.

As usual, we'll start by adopting the minutes of the previous meeting. Do we wish to adopt the minutes from the previous meeting as written?

The answer appears to be yes, so we'll 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'd like to say two things.

First, I sent you some correspondence on April 29, because a member told me they had concerns regarding an event that took place in Mirabel and the use of House resources. It's not mentioned anywhere in the materials. I was expecting it to be raised this morning, so I'd like to know where things stand on that.

I'm not accusing anyone without proof, of course. However, I think there is reason to take a serious look at how House resources were used for what seems to be a fairly partisan event.

I'd like to know where that situation stands and whether we'll be discussing it at the next meeting. I would assume so.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Now we'll hear from the clerk.

Eric Janse (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Perron, we received your letter, and we're in the process of examining the situation. If necessary, we will follow up at the board's next meeting.

Yves Perron: Very good. That's reassuring to hear. Thank you.

Now I will turn to my second point, unless someone would like the floor first. It doesn't look like it.

The second thing I want to discuss is the letter the Board of Internal Economy wrote to the translation bureau. In the April 21 letter, we asked the bureau to provide more information on two items. We requested details and supporting information regarding the weighting of decisions or votes in relation to the accreditation examination. We also requested information on the total number of

parliamentarian requests for the services of accredited interpreters. We wanted to know how many requests had been refused.

I was a bit surprised to see that we still haven't gotten a response. Have they gotten back to you or not?

Eric Janse: We hope to have the answers for the next meeting.

We will press the translation bureau for a response.

Yves Perron: All right.

They weren't complicated questions. I would think the information was fairly easy to get a hold of. I find that a bit concerning.

I also told you that I'd keep you abreast of our efforts to work with the minister, who said he was open to co-operation. I want to let the board members know that a meeting has officially been set for when we get back from break. Personally, I have high hopes. I'll keep you informed.

In the meantime, obviously, time goes by between the board's meetings, and new challenges always arise. I want to share that information with my colleagues, if only to show how important it is to keep talking about this issue.

Again recently, there was an issue with the in-person appearance of witnesses before parliamentary committees. The allocation doesn't seem to be even. There are other places to ask questions. These were in camera meetings, so I won't discuss them this morning. I just wanted to tell you that I've asked about it, because we are concerned. Something seems uneven there. I think the administration is looking into it, so I wanted my colleagues to know.

Of course, time is always an issue when delays arise because of interpretation. It was also brought to my attention that the translation bureau cancelled some TR-03 accreditation exams to be held in the spring. That is rather deplorable, given that these people have been preparing for a long time, and it's a very hard exam. They expect to have a certain number of opportunities to pass the exam. Apparently, the exam was cancelled with little explanation, so obviously that raises the same fear we had regarding the general accreditation exam. We're worried that the reason is to make the exam easier. Again, I'm asking the questions. I'm not saying anything for sure, since I don't have the details, but I still wanted to share that with my colleagues.

In addition, with respect to talks with the group of unionized interpreters who work at the House of Commons, I know that staff interpreters decided overwhelmingly to retain the right to strike in the upcoming negotiations. Rest assured, that doesn't mean that a strike is imminent. It's part of the routine process. Bargaining hasn't started yet, but it will in a few months. If a labour dispute did arise, it probably wouldn't be for a year. Nevertheless, that's an indication of where things are headed, so the situation mustn't be that great when it comes to working conditions.

There is something else, something a bit more serious. It was again brought to my attention that the requests for proposals, the parallel clauses, the clauses pertaining to working conditions, contain discrepancies between the English and French versions yet again. That's unbelievable, as far as I'm concerned. I've talked about that here, at the Board of Internal Economy. The people who noticed it are in contact with the House administration and the translation bureau. Correspondence was also sent to the minister, but the issue has apparently not been fixed yet. The problem originated with the translation bureau, so this doesn't look good for the institution's credibility. I will say it again. This needs to be rectified quickly.

I wanted to share one last thing.

I was informed that at the April 29 meeting of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, an issue was raised regarding the lack of consistency between English and French provisions. The person in the clerk's position at the time said that, according to their practice, the English version always takes precedence. I know I may be sensitive about this, but I don't think that was the right answer. I think a provision should be drafted in the original language. I will raise it face to face with the person in charge of the clerks, but I did want to mention it. I can provide you with the excerpt, if you like, but this isn't about pointing fingers. It's about being vigilant and acting in good faith.

I hope this isn't poorly received, Mr. Chair. I'm not trying to cause trouble. I want to protect French and the equal status of both official languages. That's very important to us.

• (1110)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Bédard has something to say on the matter.

Yves Perron: I'll finish what I was saying afterwards, then.

Michel Bédard (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): Mr. Perron, I want to say something quickly about one official language taking precedence over the other. I want to assure you that that isn't the case. Sometimes conflicts arise when amendments are being drafted, but they are line conflicts or conflicts related to the manner in which the amendment was drafted.

The issue may have been explained to you as a conflict where the English version, having been adopted first, impacted another amendment. However, generally speaking, the English does not take precedence over the French.

Yves Perron: That's what I thought too. Thank you for reassuring me. I can send you the excerpt of the transcript. That's what it suggested. I'll stop talking soon, don't worry.

In short, we are waiting for answers to our questions, and we look forward to reading them. As you can tell, I'm keeping a very close eye on the matter, and I don't plan to stop. Of course, we want things to be done right.

Thank you for the time, Mr. Chair.

• (1115)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Perron, I spoke highly of you when I appeared before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs last week.

Yves Perron: That's nice. No one sent me the transcript of that.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: I spoke of your vigilance in ensuring quality French.

Yves Perron: I appreciate that.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: I believe that brings us to the third item on the agenda, the request for exception. Is that correct? We don't have anything else for business arising from previous meetings.

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. St George and Mr. am Rhyn, director of member financial advisory and policy services.

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

The administration is seeking a decision from the board regarding a member's request for exception. It pertains to the reimbursement of \$9,577, which would be charged to his member's office budget for the current fiscal year.

Charges totalling \$17,155 for constituency office phone and Internet services between 2022 and 2026 were not paid.

The administration negotiated an agreement with the service provider to close the account following the closure of the constituency office in July 2024 because of vandalism. Under the agreement, the amount owing was reduced by roughly half.

[English]

An exception is requested, as the bylaw does not permit reimbursements of expenses that are two years or older. As such, the outstanding amount of \$9,577 of expenses incurred for the years 2022-23 and 2023-24 is not aligned with the bylaw.

In previous similar cases, the board has generally supported exceptions where the expenses were legitimate and the circumstances were beyond the member's control.

A decision on the member's request is therefore sought from the board.

This concludes my presentation. I welcome any questions.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): I understand that the rationale for the missed invoices was because there was relocation of an office because of protests. Did those protests last for two years?

The invoices are from July 2022 to July 2024. Was he unable to use his constituency office that entire time?

Paul St George: That assumption is understood in the letter written by the member.

However, in terms of whether or not that is fact, I do not know.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I think the standard practice is that you can go back into previous fiscal years as long as there would have been adequate funds in a member's budget to cover it.

Is that the case here as well? Would he have had enough resources to cover this had he not missed them?

Paul St George: Absolutely.

When we look at the 2025-26 fiscal year, it's closed. If the board does approve this, that is essentially why we'd be charging it to the 2026-27 fiscal year.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Yves Perron.

[Translation]

Yves Perron: Of course, we always try to be accommodating, but I just want to understand the situation. The office closed because it was vandalized, and the Bell invoice was forgotten about in the meantime. Is that what happened?

Stéphane am Rhyn (Director, Member Financial Advisory and Policy Services, House of Commons): The office closed because of vandalism, according to the member's letter.

Yves Perron: Does the billing period in question start when the vandalism occurred? I'm not sure the dates line up. Can you provide some information on that?

Stéphane am Rhyn: The administration worked with the member and was able to negotiate a reduced amount, taking into account the period up to the date of the relocation.

Yves Perron: I see.

The amount owing, then, is \$9,577.38, instead of \$17,155, which is what Bell was asking for. You're good at negotiating with Bell. I hope you'll tell me your secret. Bell never reduces my bill like that.

• (1120)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: What we need to decide, then, is whether we are authorizing Mr. Miller to pay the bill out of his 2026-27 budget. Is that right? The issue is whether expenses going back a few years can be reimbursed, or applied against the current budget.

Do we have agreement? I see that everyone is in agreement, so the request is approved.

That brings us to item number four, the use of House of Commons resources. Again, Mr. St George and Mr. am Rhyn will speak to the matter on behalf of the House administration.

[English]

Mr. Warkentin, is this the issue that the Conservatives wish to raise?

Chris Warkentin (Chief Opposition Whip): Yes, there was an issue I did want to raise, and it was with regard to the allocations that were provided to—

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Who's raising this issue?

Eric Janse: It was at the request of...

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: It was the Conservatives, okay.

Eric Janse: Maybe they can explain the issue.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Okay, that's good.

Chris Warkentin: Oh, pardon me, this was....

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: This is item 4.

Chris Warkentin: Yes, that's right. This was with regard to the request for information with regard to Ms. Idlout's expenses that seemed to be to a business that she owned. I just wanted to confirm that she herself had reimbursed these funds.

Paul St George: That is correct. The delegation in the system identifies the account of the member as approving the purchases.

Chris Warkentin: Okay, but in terms of the reimbursement to the House, she herself reimbursed—

Paul St George: That is correct, through a personal credit card.

Chris Warkentin: Okay. I don't think that our body here has investigative powers to figure out exactly what went on there, but I suspect that.... There are a lot of questions with regard to this. It seems bizarre, but as long as it's been reimbursed, I don't think we as a body here have any further deliberations.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We'll move on to item 5, internal audit charter, plan and annual report.

I will ask Ms. Ruff to come to the table.

I'd like to share with the board that this will be Jennifer's last presentation to us, as she will soon be retiring. Therefore, I would like to thank her for her many years of loyal service to the House of Commons.

[Translation]

Jennifer Ruff (Chief Audit Executive, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today, I am presenting the internal audit charter and assurance engagements plan for 2026-29, for the board's approval.

The internal audit function carries out the impartial review of House administration controls, processes and procedures to help the organization operate in a responsible manner. The internal audit charter lays out the authority and responsibilities that guide the function. The clerk and I support the charter and will sign it as soon as it receives the board's approval.

[English]

This year we have combined our annual report and our plan in an effort to streamline review and reduce duplication of information. The annual report section, which covers the 2025-26 fiscal year, summarizes the results of engagements completed in the past year and follows up on management actions to address previously completed engagements.

The engagements outlined in the plan section of the document are selected through a risk analysis and are aligned with organizational priorities. Several key projects are scheduled for this year, including a review of project management and a compliance audit of administration travel.

Given the results outlined in the report and the commitment from management to undertake the projects as outlined in the plan, I see no significant issues or risks at this time that require the attention of the board.

I'm happy to answer any questions the board may have.

Thank you.

• (1125)

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are there any questions or comments?

[Translation]

Mr. Perron, you may go ahead.

Yves Perron: Ms. Ruff, I have a quick question, similar to the one I asked last time. This may have to do with the fact that I'm not familiar with all these processes. As I understand it, the internal audit charter is an audit that's done in-house, so how do you make sure it's independent of the administration? It seems to me the process is missing a step, a final review by an outside person or organization.

Can you provide any information on that?

Jennifer Ruff: Thank you for that very good question about the audit process.

According to the Global Internal Audit Standards, independence is determined by the reporting structure and the ability to operate, and perform activities, in an impartial manner, free from the influence of management.

At the administration, this is reflected by the fact that the chief audit executive reports directly to the clerk, with a functional reporting requirement to the Board of Internal Economy. That structure, and the roles and responsibilities of all those involved are confirmed annually when the board approves the internal audit charter.

Furthermore, by approving the planned assurance engagements, the board confirms management's commitment to participate in the proposed engagements. While the internal audit function works with House administration management, final approval of audit activities comes from the board. That way, the board ensures the internal audit function's ability to operate independently vis-à-vis management. In practice, the board preserves the independence of the internal audit.

Yves Perron: That means we—

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Go ahead, Mr. Clerk.

Eric Janse: I would just like to add two quick things, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Perron, your question is a good one.

Most organizations of a certain size have an internal audit function, and it is very important to maintain that group's independence. As my colleague mentioned, she reports directly to me, but, if necessary, she may communicate with the board directly. That is set out in the charter.

In addition, the internal audit office adheres to conventional audit standards. The auditors are all certified and must abide by a code of ethics. Some organizations delegate that function to a company, an outside third party. I think that's more expensive than doing it in-house. An outside company may be less familiar with how things work internally. Although the function is being provided by an outside company, independence is still an issue since the company is being paid by the organization. Certainly, the company would want to hold on to the contract, so that approach is not without challenges either. I just wanted to point that out.

Yves Perron: Basically, we are doing the work as an in-house outside body, so to speak. That answers my question.

Thank you very much, Ms. Ruff. We wish you a happy retirement.

Jennifer Ruff: Thank you.

[English]

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Before we go in camera, I believe Mr. Gerretsen and Mr. Warkentin have matters they want to raise.

We'll start with you, Mr. Gerretsen.

Hon. Mark Gerretsen (Chief Government Whip): Thanks, Chair.

We had an issue with the voting on Monday, when the dashboard went down. As you can imagine, from our perspective, this is very worrisome. We rely on that dashboard to continually feed information back to my office so that we can track who's voting. We were literally flying blind until that came back on. Then there was some time given to the whips' desks to look at the lists and whatnot. I wanted to ask about this at BOIE.

Through discussions with Mr. Aubé, I know that part of the revitalization of Centre Block will include an opportunity to have more advanced notification systems with respect to when votes occur, although that's not supposed to come online until Centre Block is up and running again. If the rest of the board agrees, I would like to get an update from Mr. Aubé, perhaps at our next meeting, on what it would entail to expedite that feature.

What I'm picturing is something very similar to the bells that go off here, which happens on any phone that installs the notification system. I don't see it as being connected to the voting app itself but more of a notification. It could be another way to make sure that each member of all political parties—every member in the House—is aware of a vote happening.

People are relying more on voting with the app. When you're in your constituency, if you're travelling for business or whatever it might be, making sure that people are aware of a vote.... I realize an email goes out, but the more ways to do it, the better it is.

Mr. Aubé, could you come back to us at a future meeting and provide us with the impacts of this and perhaps an assessment of what it would require to bring this online sooner, rather than waiting until 2030 or 2032?

• (1130)

Stéphan Aubé (Acting Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Gerretsen, for the question.

If there's support from the board to provide such an evaluation, we will. We're seeking support from everyone.

[*Translation*]

Yves Perron: I understand that the member got a bit worked up during the last vote, so we could look into options. That's all.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: All right.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Warkentin.

Chris Warkentin: Thank you.

I want to draw the board members' attention to the fact that there seems to have been a report from JIC that there has been a lopsided reduction in the budget for the Canada-U.S. association parliamentary diplomacy work that has been done by that organization. There seems to have been a 40% cut to that budget, while other associations have received increases in their budgets. That's a report I have received.

With the Canada-U.S. relationship now being of paramount importance as we try to resolve the trade conflict, I'm not sure if there's a way there could be a review of that. I've heard reports from members of several parties, and they believe this will have a negative impact on the work being undertaken in terms of building a relationship with our counterparts south of the border.

Eric Janse: Thank you for raising that issue, Mr. Warkentin. I'll hand it over in a moment to my colleague, Jeffrey, who can give a breakdown as to what the different associations received for the upcoming fiscal year.

As it happens, the House co-chair of the JIC will be appearing at the next board meeting on JIC-related matters. That might be an ideal opportunity to raise this issue.

Jeffrey, you might have some details for us.

Jeffrey LeBlanc (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): Thank you.

I can confirm indeed that many associations saw rather significant reductions in their budget allocations. There were a couple of reasons. The envelope had about an extra \$300,000 spent this year, both for international contributions and for the hosting of some small conferences, which meant there was less money to allocate overall.

You are correct, though, that a couple of associations saw increases, according to the formula that the JIC observed. However, it is correct to say that many associations also saw reductions. When the JIC co-chair comes to the next meeting, I suspect this will be a topic of discussion.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: Is that good?

Chris Warkentin: It's good. Thank you.

Hon. Francis Scarpaleggia: We'll move in camera now.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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