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Thursday, May 30, 2019

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• (1120)

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): The Board of Internal Economy is called to order.

First of all on our agenda, we have the minutes of the previous meeting. Are they approved?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Is there any business arising from the previous meeting?

[Translation]

With Mr. Rodriguez's arrival, a Board of Internal Economy spokesperson must be designated for the government.

Do you have anyone to nominate?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism): I nominate Mr. Holland.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Okay.

[English]

In the absence of an objection, it will be recorded in the minutes that Mr. Holland has been selected as one of the spokespersons for the Board of Internal Economy, along with Mr. Strahl.

I'd like to take a few moments to update the board on the members' working group and the LTVP, the long-term vision plan. You'll recall that at our meeting on February 28, we discussed the governance of the Centre Block rehabilitation project and agreed to establish a working group that would report back to the board. This is a topic that members of the procedure and House affairs committee have expressed concern about. They are anxious that members of Parliament be involved in this process.

The working group has now been established and is composed of the following members: the Honourable Judy Sgro, Kelly Block, and Peter Julian.

[Translation]

The group will provide a forum to consult members and guide the administration on the needs of parliamentarians, while taking into account financial requirements, concepts and considerations. It will meet next week and will report to the board at our next meeting.

[English]

Peter, I guess this means that you folks will get the blame if there are any problems in 10 years' time.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): We're hoping to paint the Centre Block orange.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Geoff Regan: That will be interesting.

All right, is there any other business arising from the previous meeting?

Seeing none, let's go on to number three, the 2018-19 year-end financial report.

Presenting on behalf of the administration, we have Monsieur Daniel Paquette with Madame Elaine Valiquette.

[Translation]

Mr. Paquette, go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

I am pleased to be here today to present to you the 2018-19 year-end financial report, and to obtain your approval to include the operational budget carry forward in the 2019-20 supplementary estimates.

[English]

This financial report has been prepared using the expenditure basis of accounting, consistent to the Public Accounts of Canada that will be published in the fall. It provides the final authorities and expenditures for 2018-19, along with comparative information from the previous fiscal year.

[Translation]

Parliament provides the House with authorities to enable it to support members according to the normal parliamentary calendar. The authorities for 2018-19, totalling \$506 million, are \$6.7 million or 1.3 % lower than the authorities for 2017-18.

The most significant changes are the \$25-million decrease for members' pension plans, and the \$10.6-million increase for continued investments in our LTVP project.

In 2018-19, expenditures totalled \$487 million, compared with \$490 million in 2017-18. That decrease of \$3 million, or 0.6 %, is consistent with a decrease in authorities for 2018-19.

[English]

The expenditures are also presented by type of cost. Compared with previous years, salaries and benefits increased by \$1.8 million. This is due to the one-time adjustment of \$25 million made in 2017-18, as directed by the actuarial report of the pension plans for the members of Parliament.

This reduction was offset by significant investments made in staffing in support of major initiatives, such as the food modernization and optimization of services, the House officer expenditure disclosure, digital strategies to modernize the delivery of parliamentary information and the long-term vision plan.

Other factors that also contributed to the increase in personnel costs are the cost-of-living increase for House administration, along with increasing staffing action for members' staff.

[Translation]

In addition, expenditures related to rentals and licences decreased compared with 2017-18. That decrease is mainly attributed to changes associated with payment periods owing to the renewal of various licences to meet the terms of our agreements.

In addition, the decrease related to repairs and maintenance in 2018-19, compared with the 2017-18 expenditures, is mainly attributed to investments made in 2017-18 in security measures and resources.

Moreover, 2018-19 revenues increased modestly over the previous year's revenues. In total, our revenues increased by \$1.8 million owing to services provided to federal government departments and organizations, and other parliamentary institutions, based on our cost-recovery system.

[English]

Finally, the report also provides comparisons of the utilization of our authorities between the two fiscal years. This does show a slight increase of 0.7% over the previous year.

It's important to note that the House of Commons promotes the efficient use of resources, and continuously strives to minimize requests for incremental funding, whenever possible. For example, the surpluses generated by the delay in the move to the West Block were reallocated to offset costs associated with other initiatives, such as our retroactive payment for the economic increase of House administration staff.

As mentioned, our authorities for 2018-19 were \$506 million, while expenditures amounted to \$487 million. This leaves us with a surplus of \$19 million. This amount will correspond to the lapse that will be reported in the public accounts this fall.

Note that the surplus reflects the fact that the authorities received are intended to support 338 members. Due to the fact that by-elections were held in five constituencies during the past year, there were fewer MPs, and therefore less support was required, resulting in reduced spending overall.

This surplus represents 5.5% of the 2018-19 main estimates voted authorities. The House of Commons typically follows the government's practice of carrying forward any lapsed funds, up to a maximum of 5% of our voted main estimates. I'm seeking your approval today to include in our 2019-20 supplementary estimates a carry-forward of \$17.4 million, representing that 5% of our last year's voted main estimates.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my presentation.

• (1125)

[Translation]

I am ready to answer your questions.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

Mr. Rodriguez, the floor is yours.

We will then continue with Mr. Strahl.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Paquette. It's a pleasure to see you again.

[English]

I tried everything I could to get away from this place, but I'm back.

[Translation]

You say that you provide money to other departments. Is that correct? Does that explain part of the increases? Will the recovery of those funds be faster in that case?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: That's right.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What kinds of services do you provide?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: We play a support role in parliamentary precinct extension and renovation projects. Funding for those projects comes from Public Services and Procurement Canada. We support them, and they refund us for some of those projects, as well as for the tasks we carry out.

Our other services are provided by our information technology group, which manages the computer platform used by our parliamentary precinct partners. We collect their contributions—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That was budgeted, and the money has come in.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: It was budgeted, and we have agreements to recover those contributions.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Okay.

I haven't been here in a while. Are there still collective agreement negotiations that could have an impact on the increases requested in the coming years?

I will also put my last question to you right away. I presume that this report will become public at some point. If so, when will it be made public?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: I think our collective agreements expired in 2017 or 2018. We are currently negotiating their renewal, and they could in fact reflect the normal cost of life increase, thereby influencing our future funding request.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: When will the report be made public?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: It will be public once the negotiations are completed.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I was talking about this report, the year-end financial report.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: This report will be published at the end of the day.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Okay.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chief Opposition Whip): Yes, I've noted a couple of things. Our members usually get excited when they see anything referring to transfer payments, so I thought maybe you could address what that relates to.

Secondly, with regard to the large surplus.... Obviously, during the electoral cycle, different costs are expected to be incurred. Are there funds already in place for the transition? There are members not running again, and those of us who are trying to get re-elected don't know if we'll be successful or not. Several who are not running again, including many under the age of 55, are entitled to severance pay.

Is that built into this, or is it a separate pool of funds? Will that be included in a different set of financials?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: To address your first question, the transfer costs are the transfers of money that we pay to fund the activities of the various associations that Parliament is a member of. It's very specific to those particular items.

As for what we call the "election-related costs", there are transition pieces here. The coming year is one in which various activities are reduced, because we're in election mode. Others increase, because of those transfers, and onboarding. We keep track of those very specifically. We don't have specific funding for that.

Looking at how we offset the surplus that may be created as a result of the incremental cost of the reduction of some activities, as I just mentioned, we do have a significant carry-forward that's going to remain. We will make sure to earmark part of that to cover some of these items, such as transition support and the onboarding program that we all know are part of that transition from the election.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. This has been very informative.

You mentioned a \$17.4-million amount for this fiscal year. You also talked about negotiations for renewing collective agreements. However, my understanding is that we still have no collective agreement with the Parliamentary Protection Service officers. We see them every day, and they are extremely dedicated people. Will this surplus that is supposed to be carried over into the current fiscal year also be used to conclude an agreement with the Parliamentary Protective Service?

• (1130)

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: The Parliamentary Protective Service is an independent entity that has its own sources of funding. Its activities and the expenditures associated with its services or the collective agreements it applies stopped appearing in our authorities when the service was created in 2015.

Mr. Peter Julian: So where does the service's funding come from? Unless I am mistaken, the House and the Senate contribute to it.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: The Parliamentary Protective Service has its own budget, which is approved by the Speakers of both houses. We do not manage that budget, as the service reports to the Speakers of both houses.

[*English*]

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's a distinct budget that goes before the procedure and House affairs committee, of course, and then back to the House as part of the estimates.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: If a collective agreement had to be signed with the Parliamentary Protective Service, a request for funding could likely be submitted to the Board of Internal Economy, right?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: It would be up to the Parliamentary Protective Service managers to submit that request for funding to pay for those agreements.

Mr. Peter Julian: It is good to know that the possibility exists.

Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Okay.

[*English*]

Is there anybody else who wants to speak on this topic?

Okay, we'll go to the next topic.

Thank you very much.

As we go on to the next topic, I'll ask Madam Bergen to chair the meeting as I have to leave for the official ceremony to welcome the Vice-President of the United States, Mr. Pence.

Madam Bergen, please.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): We are going on to the next item, the regulations respecting the non-attendance of members of Parliament by reasons of maternity or care of a newborn or newly adopted child.

We have some presenters here, and I will give the floor to you, Monsieur Dufresne.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Philippe Dufresne (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): Thank you very much, Ms. Bergen and members of the Board of Internal Economy.

We are here at the board's request to talk to you about potential regulations that would enable us to justify the non-attendance of members by reason of maternity or care for a newborn or a newly adopted child.

[English]

Under the Parliament of Canada Act, a deduction is made to the members' sessional allowance for days of absence in excess of 21 days if the member is absent for no acceptable reason. The acceptable reasons set out in the act currently are illness, being on official or public business, or absence due to service in the armed forces.

In amendments to the Parliament of Canada Act, a new section 59.1 was added to provide the House with the authority to make regulations for the non-attendance of members by reasons of maternity or care for a newborn or newly adopted child. This provision was preceded by studies from the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, where a recommendation was made to consider the family and parental obligations of members so that they would not be penalized for such reasons.

At the same time, questions were raised about the situation of members with respect to ordinary employees.

[Translation]

We have considered what is being done in other legislative assemblies.

• (1135)

The situation of members is different from that of employees, as members hold public office they are always responsible for, even if they have children. What must be determined is whether non-attendance of members in the House to care for their children or by reason of maternity should be treated more seriously than other types of non-attendance covered in the legislation, such as for reasons of illness, public duties or service in the armed forces.

[English]

We've looked at other assemblies. Most of the legislative assemblies do not financially penalize members who are absent from the sittings for such reasons. Some will include periods and some will not. Indeed, some assemblies have looked at issues such as proxy voting in some such situations.

We have brought a proposal for the board's consideration that could consider as valid reasons for the absence from the chamber the period before the due date, given that the act talks about maternity for a pregnant member. That could be a period of four weeks or it could be a different period. In terms of care for a newborn child or care for a newly adopted child, consideration could be given to a period of 12 months or another period.

In any case, these would be decisions for the House to make. Options for this board could be to refer the matter to the procedure and House affairs committee or to have agreement that a member would put forward a motion proposing the regulations.

With that, I would open it to questions.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you for those comments, Mr. Dufresne.

I think that we are certainly supportive of making the regulations, such that pregnant or new parents are....

Just to be clear, we're talking about mothers here—primarily pregnant women, in this case. We're not talking about parental leave. This is more of a maternity situation, as I understand it. I just want some clarification on that.

Could you address that right off the top? Does this also apply if a father wants to take some time for paternity leave or is this just for mothers?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Mr. Strahl, if we are talking about the four weeks before the due date, that would be only for the mother. The 12 months after the birth or after the date of adoption could be for any parent.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay. You've done some analysis here. With the employment insurance maternity and parental benefits, there are a maximum number of weeks that an individual is covered. We're looking at 13 months, with what you've put on the table. Unless there's a medical component to someone's maternity leave, I don't believe they would get the same number of weeks.

Did you do that analysis? Can you speak to that?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: They would not. In terms of employment insurance, the supplementary report that was made in the procedure and House affairs mentioned 55% of income protection for such employees. There are some other employees with different regimes where it's a higher percentage.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Obviously, in this case we're talking about retaining 100% of pay and benefits, which is perhaps different from what our constituents would receive in most jobs.

For one of our constituents who works at a restaurant and pays into EI and goes on maternity and parental, I believe the maximum is 50 weeks, with a two-week.... I just want that knowledge for us. What number of weeks are we proposing here in addition to what someone would get if EI were the only support available to them?

• (1140)

Ms. Robyn Daigle (Director, Members HR Services, House of Commons): I'll take that question. Thank you.

In terms of EI as the comparator, currently what's available to them through EI would be up to 12 months at 55%, or up to 18 months at 33%. I think one of the nuances we want to make here is that in the cases of EI, those employees are actually leaving the workforce. They're not employed during that period—they have no function—whereas here we're simply talking about reasonable reasons for non-attendance in the sitting. There are still functions that are very much current for the MPs at that time.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Right.

What is the vision for how this would be recorded? Would it simply be recorded on the attendance form that we currently use, or is that a decision that has to be made? Right now, there's travelling, official business, illness, etc. Will there simply be another box there that will say “pregnancy” or “parental leave”? What's the mechanism for reporting?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Assuming that the House were to agree to adopt this regulation, the mechanism would be put in place and it would be recorded to say, “this is the reason for the absence”. In addition to having all of this, like service in the armed forces and public business, those absences would be justified, as it were—

Mr. Mark Strahl: —captured on that current reporting mechanism.

Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Rodriguez.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I just have two general questions.

You said you have looked at what is being done elsewhere in other parliaments.

Can you tell me which ones? I assume they are mostly parliaments of industrialized countries?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: We have looked at legislative assemblies in Canada—those of the provinces and territories—as well those in Great Britain and Australia. A number of those assemblies had no deductions. For instance, in Quebec, there are no deductions in terms of income, but there is an issue concerning the ethics code—in other words, members have an obligation to attend the National Assembly. If a member is not at the National Assembly, they must provide a justification. Many assemblies operate like that.

Some assemblies say they want to do it, with the permission of their speaker, or allow it for personal or exceptional situations. We were wondering whether pregnancies were among those situations.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Have you seen any cases where non-attendance is allowed for paternity, for a period of time?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Yes. There are examples where there was —

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: How much time were they given?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: It varies. In some cases, it was one year. In other cases, there was a recommendation of four months. Sometimes, there was no deduction.

I would say that there is definitely a general trend where members continue to be paid for the entire year. However, in some cases, certain legislative assemblies may reduce their salary because they are not in attendance. That situation is different for employees who go on parental leave because those employees will be away from their duties. They will often be replaced, which is not the case for members.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That could be the case.

I want to bring up a very rare hypothetical case. What would happen if a member became a parent one month before the end of their term?

That individual would not run in the election and would not return afterwards.

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Our proposal for consideration includes regulations stipulating that non-attendance in the House for those reasons will not count toward deductions from sessional allowance.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Let's say we are talking about four months. That individual becomes a father or a mother one month before the end of the electoral term. They would not return afterwards.

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: After the electoral term, there would be no more sitting days in the House.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It would strictly concern sitting days. Okay.

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Yes. It would become obsolete or hypothetical.

[*English*]

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Madam Chair.

I want to underscore the work of Nycole Turmel, a former whip of the NDP, and Christine Moore, the member of Parliament for Abitibi—Témiscamingue. They have really been leaders—I think pioneers—in pushing for an end to what is a pretty strange situation in which members of Parliament are penalized for caring for their children. That is our current policy, and that's what I think we need to keep in perspective. We're currently penalizing parents for doing their work.

It seems to me that this is a very reasonable approach. What it allows parents to do is to take their time with their children, but the reality is—as you've spelled out very well, Ms. Daigle and Mr. Dufresne—that voters in any event are still going to require members of Parliament in their riding. What this does is ensure that there's not a financial penalty on top of that. There are still obligations that come. I have many friends in this Parliament who have gone through being new parents. They still have obligations. They still have to attend to things in the riding—there's no doubt. But what this does is end the penalty that members are currently subjected to when they do that. I think, for those reasons, this is a very responsible and appropriate approach.

• (1145)

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Thank you.

I'll go to Mr. Holland then Mr. Strahl.

Hon. Mark Holland (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): I do think that the situation that was identified was very unusual, in that the job continues whether or not you're a parent. There's an expectation that you will continue to represent the riding. There are not really a lot of analogous situations where somebody has a child and is on maternity leave, but then is still expected to work. There isn't an apples to apples type of comparison that can be made here.

In a general sense, I think that the comments that we shouldn't have anything that would be seen to be greater than what would be available to our constituents are ones that I'm moved by. I don't know what exactly that number is. I'm open to proposals. I think Madam Chagger perhaps has an idea.

I think that we have to be careful about expectations. You can imagine that a minority government may only sit 18 months, and if you say that somebody has 13 months during which they can be absent from the chamber, that could be quite challenging in establishing an expectation. The numbers as they are, I think, are a little generous. I think we have to come up with something perhaps a little different than what's on the table.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I don't know if it's in the note here, but if a new parent—a member of Parliament—decided to take the full 12 months and didn't tick any of the boxes, but simply filled out that they weren't here and they weren't pretending to be ill but just looking after their child, what is the financial penalty? It's \$120 after a certain number of days away, but say they did not come to Ottawa for that entire 12-month period. Of course, we don't sit every week. What is estimated reduction in pay they would incur as a result of doing that on their own and accurately reporting their attendance?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: If there were one year of unjustifiable absences in a given year and there had been 21 days in the previous year, the penalty would be about 8% of the member's salary. The member would still have 92% of their salary in that scenario.

Mr. Mark Strahl: That number is exactly what people who work for members of Parliament receive in compensation. My understanding is that if a staff member of a member of Parliament goes on maternity leave, they're topped up above the EI to 92%. Currently, a member who reports accurately receives the exact same benefit as the person who works for them. That's very interesting to me.

I understand what we're trying to do here, but I think we should have those numbers on the table. Even at that, the member is receiving 38% more in benefit than their constituents and exactly the same benefit as their employees, or those people who work for the public service. I throw that out there. It's a very interesting statistic and I think we need to bear in mind what we're proposing here.

We are already thought to be very well-compensated, with very generous benefits, and this is another step in that direction. I think we just have to be careful that we don't do anything that unintentionally puts our members in a bad light. I'll leave it at that.

• (1150)

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Thank you.

Ms. Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): Thank you for the comments and the work you've done in making your proposal.

I do know that in Ontario, the average working person who is paying into EI would receive their EI benefit at 55% or 60%—whatever it is. I know that we've now extended benefits so that the secondary parent, or however you want to refer to them, can also take up to six months.

I do believe that if we want to adhere to the logic—which I think is well received—that members of Parliament not be better off than our constituents, perhaps offering a time that is proportionate to that benefit would be suitable.

I know Minister Gould has written a letter with a recommendation of four months. I'd even be comfortable with five months, or five and a half months, less than six months, just on the point that Mr. Holland has made as well.

I would like to throw some numbers out, because I think it would be important for us to offer a recommendation in response to what PROC has asked for. I think that would allow us to take a step in the right direction. Currently, there are no benefits when it comes to paternity leave, which is not okay if we're really trying to change the dynamics of the House of Commons and so forth.

I really do like Mr. Strahl's idea of having a box added, regardless. I think that if it's additional time, they should be able to say that it's paternity leave. If somebody is needing to take a day off because of a sick child, they should be able to say that, because you're not ill when you're taking care of your children.

It is really important, and we do need to shed some positive light in that world. So, I will throw out a number that's closer to Minister Gould's recommendation. I would be more comfortable with a period of between four and five and half months, but less than six months.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Thank you.

Mr. Holland.

Hon. Mark Holland: I completely concur with that timeline. I'd just make the observation that—because I also agree with Mr. Strahl—on the surface of it, you could leave the policy as was and it would seem as though the policy would be equal to what employees have today. In other words, the penalty is not all that large—8% is not that significant.

The real issue is what we're broadcasting as acceptable. When you're charged, it isn't necessarily about the fact that you are having a reduction; it's kind of broadcasting that you're doing something wrong—that you're not attending the House and, therefore, you're being penalized.

Conversely, if we say that you can have a year, then people are going to think that it is—excuse me, it's not a year; we're talking about 13 months.... People are going to come into the job, become pregnant and then say now they can disappear for 13 months—if we put the policy in—and I don't think that's appropriate, given the nature of the work and the demands of the House, particularly if there's a minority government time frame.

I think having that period of four to six months—which is recommended as a minimum by international labour standards—is appropriate. It broadcasts that we do want to encourage members to be able to have children and families while they conduct this work. But it gives some parameters around what those expectations are, so that if somebody decides to take on this employment, then they will know what they're facing and what those expectations would be.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Thank you.

I'd like to weigh into the discussion. I may actually be on a completely different side from all of my colleagues in a few of the areas.

I think it's important that we recognize that this is not at all like a maternity benefit, and that we not try to compare it to such. We could very well have female members of Parliament who have a baby and literally a week later have events in their riding they feel they must attend, since not doing so could affect their chances of being re-elected. They don't have the opportunity to take a year off and just enjoy their child with no pressure: they know they'll either get their 66% or, in the case of a federal employee, a topped-up amount. These members of Parliament have to be working in their ridings. If they don't, they will be penalized and not be rehired for their jobs. I personally don't think we should be trying to compare the two.

That said, I don't think that members of Parliament should then get less time when they are having that time with their child. I like the 12-month approach, because I think that members of Parliament should not be penalized because they're members of Parliament, and they will already have to be working in their constituencies. We're just talking about the work they're doing away from their families and their newborns.

I would also suggest that fathers play a vital role. I think that male MPs whose wives are ready to have babies need those four weeks. Maybe they need those four weeks before that child is born; maybe they need to be at home. Maybe that baby's going to be born early. They don't know when that baby's going to be born. I think we should give some consideration to new dads who may need a bit of time before the child is born.

I think that maybe we should look at sending this to PROC, because there are a lot of questions that need to be discussed and that more fulsome conversations need to be had.

Mr. Holland, you brought up a good topic, which is minority Parliaments. If we're in a minority Parliament.... We haven't even discussed this scenario. Maybe this is not part of the conversation, but I'm going to throw it out there. Imagine that we're in a minority Parliament and one of the parties, either the opposition or the government, happens to have more females are getting ready to deliver babies during that particular time. What if the scenario is that one of the parties now has four or five women who are on their maternity time and not able to be in the House? Are we actually going to ask that there be a pairing? Is that something we'd just leave up to the whips and to the goodwill of each of the parties?

You know, in politics, we could actually be talking about a government being defeated. I think there should be some discussion on that if we want to encourage not only females but also young people who might be at that age when they are having families.

I think we're having a very good discussion. I like the idea of the box. What we're doing is giving members of Parliament a legitimate reason to be at home. You don't have to just say, "Oh, I'm just at home doing constituency work", or, "I'm not feeling well", when in fact you're not sick, but looking after your newborn child. I really think it's important that we give it that validity, value, and credibility that it should have.

I think there are a lot of questions. I'm suggesting that we take the matter to PROC.

Mr. Holland, you have something more to add, and then it will be Mr. Julian.

• (1155)

Hon. Mark Holland: I think you raise an excellent point with respect to the position that a party could be in, and not only in a minority situation. You could have a very thin majority situation where the numbers would be impacted by members' having families. Therefore, as much as we have a policy in place, the policy effectively becomes irrelevant because the party's going to exert enormous pressure on those individuals to come back and be present for votes that might precipitate an election.

I don't know, and maybe it's a question I could ask, because I don't think we can force pairing. You could have a sort of gentleman's agreement or an agreement in principle, but I don't believe there's any way to compel parties to observe that. For example, I think it would be entirely appropriate to have mandatory pairing, but I don't think there's any way of enforcing that. Am I correct in that?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Currently, there isn't. I want to point out that in the United Kingdom they did adopt a temporary standing order that allowed for proxy voting in situations in which members have parental obligations, which allows them to identify a substitute for the vote. It's a detailed standing order, and they've done that on a temporary basis.

Hon. Mark Holland: The point that would make, first of all, is there's an expectation at PROC that we're going to give them some sort of direction. I think that's important.

I'm very sensitive, Ms. Bergen, to the points you're raising. I think that the issue of pairing, of being able to assure that you're not creating a precarious situation in the chamber as a result of these policies, has to be considered. In its absence, it would frankly render this policy irrelevant, because it doesn't matter whether or not we say that somebody can be on maternity leave if there is a circumstance where their vote is demanded or there's going to be an election. We know what's going to happen.

I don't think that any policy we recommend...There has to be something, and if we can make it in such a way that we can be assured that it would be enforced, I think we should look at it.

• (1200)

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): All right.

I have Mr. Julian and then Ms. Chagger.

Mr. Peter Julian: I think you pointed out, Madam Chair, that what we're actually talking about is two workplaces. There are two workplaces that every member of Parliament has. One is here, and currently, if you come here to Ottawa or if you miss that session, you're penalized by not being present in the House of Commons, but in no way does that have an impact on the constituency work that members of Parliament continue to do.

There's no mythical MP who doesn't do work in the constituency, because somebody who doesn't do work in their constituency doesn't get re-elected. Members of Parliament are still working during this period. These parental obligations have to be balanced with that constituency work. All that's being suggested by this policy is that we stop penalizing them in the second workplace. The first workplace continues.

With those considerations, I find this a very reasonable policy, and if we provided PROC with direction, then we could seek to get things implemented if we continue to talk about what this should actually mean and we compared it with other workplaces. I believe very strongly that we need to be raising parental leave provisions. I'm certainly sympathetic to raising those provisions in this country, but in the two workplaces right now, the first workplace continues and in the second workplace, hopefully, we would end the penalties.

I think that's a very reasonable proposal. For all the members of Parliament from all parties whom I have seen working and going through the birth of a new child, they're all still working. Some of them hope not to have to come to Ottawa for a certain period of time, but currently they're being penalized if they do that. I think it's reasonable for us to adopt this policy and provide that direction to PROC so we can move on.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Thank you.

Madam Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Just to confirm, Mr. Julian, you're stating that you're comfortable with this recommendation in its entirety.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I think that's great as well, then.

I just want to say that I do think this work has been done. PROC has studied this matter. They've asked this table, this board, for a recommendation. I think a unanimous recommendation should be offered to members of PROC. Then they would be able to table their report and it could be concurred in with all-party support and we would have movement.

I think we're recognizing that this is definitely a conversation that has many different layers, and those conversations have to start somewhere. This is a step that I think needs to be taken. I think it speaks volumes. Those other conversations can definitely take place. I would totally support Mr. Julian's comments in saying that this should be the recommendation that we offer to PROC.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Could you enlighten us on whether there is a limit for illness, for instance? Essentially, we had members in the last Parliament who were elected and who found they had very serious diseases. Unfortunately, in those cases, they've since passed away, but sometimes a battle with cancer or something like that could go on for years, right? We've had those tragic cases here.

I think what Ms. Bergen has reminded us of is that this is simply a way to justify your absence; it's not leave. Leave for someone in the private sector is just that; you see it all the time with maternity leave placements and things like that. They go away. They pack up their desk and they're gone for 12 months if they choose to do that. This is different, and obviously our constituents will be the judges, as they

always are, of whether or not we have been away from this place too much. That's a reality. They don't care what box we tick. They might say, well, you missed too many important discussions, you missed too many... We all make those choices when we travel each week, quite frankly.

To let you answer my question, could you be on any of those three things—I always forget the middle one—the public or official business, the illness and...?

•(1205)

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Service in the armed forces.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Could you essentially be deployed for four years, be ill for four years or be on official business for four years and not have a single dollar deducted from your paycheque?

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: The short answer is yes. There's no time limit, and we are talking about valid justifications for absences from the chamber. In presenting this, it's not so much about leave but justification for an absence. There are no time limits provided for the categories of illness, public business and service in the armed forces.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I'd suggest that's already more generous than any private sector arrangement.

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: Again, it's difficult to compare, because it's a different—

Mr. Mark Strahl: It is, so perhaps I started a bad trend there. I'm comfortable with this, but in terms of what we need, even though we have given our stamp of approval of it, I think PROC should be the body that sets regulation and deals with standing orders, regulation and legislation regarding the Parliament of Canada. I would be happy to concur with Ms. Chagger and Mr. Julian's comments.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Holland, you had something else you wanted to add.

Hon. Mark Holland: Yes, I concur with that. I'm comfortable moving forward on that basis.

I don't want to slow this down because I understand the need to make a recommendation to PROC and that it can make a decision quickly, and that we have a limited amount of time in our calendar. Perhaps in the future, however, I'd like to be able to address the issue of pairing and gaining assurance that there's actually a means to protect that leave. That also is in a situation of serious illness, right? We've seen this before when somebody is in very poor condition and they're being brought back into the chamber to vote because otherwise it would precipitate an election. To me that seems to me an unfair circumstance, and it's certainly unfair that somebody would be pulled. It makes sense that they're going to be doing work in their riding and are continuing to be in the riding, but to be pulled back in that period, I think, is problematic. I think if we could have that looked at and perhaps have something come back to us, then we could make a recommendation to PROC—

Hon. Bardish Chagger: We should make the recommendation now.

Hon. Mark Holland: Okay. My problem is that I don't know what that mechanism is. I don't necessarily want to slow this process down, but I would be interested in understanding what tools would be at our disposal to be able to effect that—so that people who are on a serious medical leave are not in a situation where they're being dragged out of a hospital bed and into the chamber. If we could have something that assured that pairing were present.... I think it's a good time to have that conversation, frankly, because we're not in a heightened situation at the immediate moment with a minority government where there could be a very tight vote.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I would think that that would be more appropriate for PROC to consider in a more comprehensive review of the Standing Orders. I know there have been members of our caucus who have believed that the whip should not have a role in pairing, for instance. That matter has been brought forward—that two members should be able to make that arrangement. I think we could, in looking at exactly what that meant.... I'm uncomfortable with any suggestion that we would start to erode the value or the

importance of a member being present to vote in the House. I think you'd open Pandora's box there: "Well, if it's okay because I'm on maternity leave, then it's okay because I'm ill, and then it's okay because I need to be at home because I have a family emergency." You would open it up to interpretation: "Why is your emergency or situation more valid than mine for having an automatic paired vote or an automatic proxy vote?" I think, if we're going to entertain it at all, it's a very, very serious discussion that members need a lot more time to consider than the 17 sitting days we have left in this Parliament.

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): All right.

I would add that I do agree with Mr. Strahl. I know I'm the one who brought the issue forward, but I think we should keep it separate from this particular issue.

I do think, though, that PROC should be looking at this. I would still like them to look at the issue I brought forward with respect to MPs who are fathers possibly being able to access that four weeks before the due date.

I think there is consensus, then, that we refer this to PROC and let them look at it in greater detail.

• (1210)

Mr. Peter Julian: To clarify, Madam Chair, so we are supportive of the policy as written and referring it back to PROC?

The Acting Chair (Hon. Candice Bergen): Yes, we're supportive of the report and the proposal, and we'd like to send it to PROC. Is that correct?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: All right, good. Thank you.

We're going to suspend. We'll be going in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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