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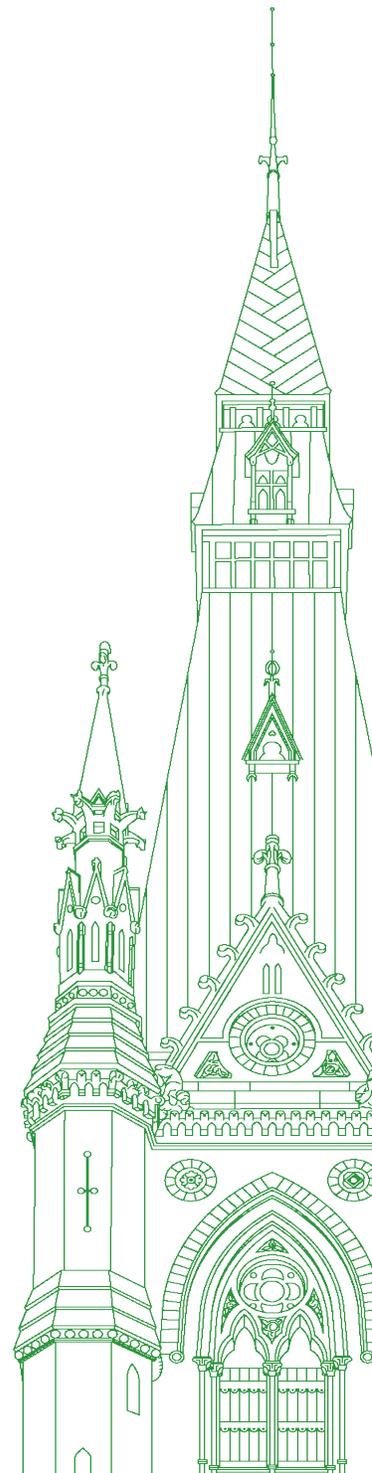
Board of Internal Economy

TRANSCRIPT

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Thursday, November 19, 2020



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• (1105)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Welcome to the 10th meeting of the Board of Internal Economy.

[English]

We'll start off with the minutes of the previous meeting.

Everything is acceptable. Does anybody have any comments to make on that?

[Translation]

I see that there are no comments about the minutes.

Are there any comments about business arising from the previous meeting?

Okay. Everything is clear.

[English]

Item three is on sustaining the information technology systems and facility assets from the long-term vision and plan, LTVP.

We'll have Stéphan Aubé, chief information officer, and Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer, present to us this morning.

Before we continue, I want to remind everyone that we do have a lot of material to cover this morning. I want to make sure you keep your questions concise, very thorough but very concise, if possible.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

Mr. Aubé, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and members of the board.

We're here to obtain approval for permanent funding for the operations, maintenance, support and life-cycling of building connectivity assets that are transferred from PSPC to the House as part of the long-term renovations.

This business case is not a new business case. It's actually an update to a previous approval that was made by the board. The House administration came to this board in 2014 to seek approval for connectivity assets. It came back in 2015 to seek approval for components assets. It also came back in 2017 to seek approval for both connectivity and components assets.

The board had approved \$24.6 million in temporary funding at that time. In addition to the \$24.6 million that we're now seeking as permanent funding, we've also updated the life-cycling plan to include the assets of \$6.7 million that have been transferred since 2017 to the House. The \$6.7 million represents the budgeting that is required to sustain \$77 million of assets that were transferred from the renovations to the House.

I would like to give you a bit of the history of the funding and the approvals that were previously received, because some members of this board might not have been here at that time.

[Translation]

The 2014-2015 submission to the Board of Internal Economy primarily involved assets transferred in connection with the renovations, which you see in yellow on the diagram.

After 2007, the goal of the long-term renovations was to get people out of the Wellington Building, the Valour Building and the Sir John A. Macdonald Building in order to renovate those buildings. So we renovated the Justice Building and, through Public Works, we acquired space on Queen Street so that we could relocate the House Administration people there.

The first submission focused on those buildings and some of the BCC projects, the building components and connectivity program, that we had put in place. Because we knew that Parliament Hill was growing at that time, we had plans to network all those buildings together, like a campus. We had projects like the massive conduit work on Sparks Street. A multimedia operations centre was also established for all broadcasting requirements.

In 2017, we returned to the Board of Internal Economy to request the necessary funds to support the renovations to the Wellington Building. The building at 180 Wellington Street houses 60 members of Parliament, and has about 10 committee rooms. We had also requested funds to support assets related to the Sir John A. Macdonald Building and the Valour Building. We also needed two other buildings so we could relocate House Administration staff.

Today, when we say \$6.6 million, we are mainly referring to assets associated with the operation of the West Block. As you know, that's the building currently in use. We also have the Visitor Welcome Centre.

These primarily make up the requests for permanent funding we are presenting today to the Board of Internal Economy.

[English]

When we talk about assets throughout this presentation, we are basically talking about two different categories of assets. We talk about connectivity assets, such as the cable TV network that's on the Hill, the integrated security system, the networking aspects and all the multimedia aspects. We also talk about component assets. These are assets that are linked to the facilities, but they are basically mobile within the facilities, such as the furniture, the art and artifacts and any specialized equipment such as broadcast lighting and air conditioning that are related to technologies. These are the particular assets we're talking about that are under the responsibility of the House.

This chart depicts the amount of assets that have been transferred as part of the renovations to the House. As you can see, there are \$205 million of assets that have been transferred since 2000. Over the last four years, since 2016, the \$77 million basically represents the assets that weren't part of the 2017 approval that we sought from the board. What you're seeing through this chart is a depiction of the changes. The changes that we're seeking through this business case are basically linked to connectivity. You see the variances. We've demonstrated the variances across the different areas of investments, which total up to \$6.6 million.

From a components perspective, as I said, for the assets that are linked to the buildings, we're not seeking any additional funding. The reason for this is we believe with the funding that we have, and also based on the current situation due to COVID, we'd like to defer any changes to that element of the funding that we received in the past because there could be possible changes in the future. We just want to focus on the connectivity assets because this is where we actually have an understanding of what possible funding requirements we'll have in the future.

Lastly, I'll give you a bit of the history. Why are we responsible for this? When the long-term renovations were launched in the late 1990s, there was an agreement between all partners, the parliamentary partners being the Senate and the House, and PSPC, which outlined the roles and responsibilities. Basically, for these projects, such as the West Block, Public Works is accountable for the overall project scope and delivery of them, but they're also responsible for the capital funding. They provide the funding when we need to actually acquire these assets, but we are accountable for the operational funding, so the maintenance, the support and also the life cycle of it. This is a key element of why we're here today, because we are accountable for making this happen, so it is our obligation to actually fund these assets.

I just wanted to outline some of the benefits of why it's important for the House to actually receive this funding. I put these pictures there and some of you might remember these facilities. As you see, the picture in the middle is an actual committee room pre-renovation. This was a committee room in the Valour Building. I have pic-

tures also of the West Block. They're very similar. You can see the tables, the layout of the facilities and the amount of technology that was in these facilities. The picture on the right is actually the broadcasting facilities that we've had to provide services to the chamber and to the committees from a television perspective. There are many temporary facilities. These buildings weren't equipped with the equipment that we had to put forward to actually offer 21st century meetings. I just wanted to give you guys a bit of history from a benefit perspective.

You'll also see the cabling arrangement in these facilities. This is actually a picture of Centre Block. It shows the security systems, how they were actually installed because we didn't have the infrastructure to support them. Basically now, with these renovations, we've allowed members to have facilities that enable them to interact and have proper meeting facilities for the caucuses, the committees and the chamber.

Finally, there's been a lot of investments in order to enable parliamentarians to better communicate and serve their constituents in the chamber, as well as from an infrastructure perspective behind the walls.

Having said that, the final recommendation is that we're here to recommend that the board move forward with the investment required, and also that we move forward with the permanent funding as of 2023-24 of nearly \$30 million for these assets that have been transferred to the House.

Mr. Speaker, I'll just open it up for questions.

• (1110)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. Are there any questions?

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thanks very much. I appreciate the detail that is in the documents.

I want to be sure that this allows for the transition and acquisition of both the capital and staffing required and that there won't be further funds required in coming years. This issue, as you've mentioned, Mr. Aubé, has come back repeatedly to the BOIE over the last few years. I think that certainly Canadians want to know that we're actually putting into place a plan that works for the long term and that is sustainable.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Thank you, Mr. Julian, for the question.

There are two parts to your question. We have come back every three years because in 2014 we made a commitment to the board that we would come back every three years. We had recognized that there were a lot of renovations under way and we weren't ready to actually commit to permanent funding because we didn't have the clear picture at that time. This is why we came back every three years. I can attest, sir, that we feel with a high level of confidence there won't be requirements for the existing assets we have.

Having said that, there are facilities that will need to be onboarded in the future, sir, such as at Centre Block. We're starting the renovations of Centre Block. We're also starting the renovations of the Confederation Building. We're in planning. We're also looking at the renovations on Sparks. These would be separate elements, sir, but for all the elements that I've shown you, we are not planning to come back to the board. We feel that we have a very sure understanding of the requirements of the funding for the assets that we've transferred. We feel very confident.

I would ask my colleague Dan, the CFO, to comment on that. We've done our due diligence, sir, from a financial planning perspective on all these assets.

• (1115)

Mr. Daniel Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): I want to comment on that also.

We've done our homework. We've done due diligence on best practice for this kind of technology and the pieces here. That's why we were coming back every three years. We wanted things to be stabilized. As Stéphan outlined in his presentation, we have had oversight and control of some of these buildings in their renovated state for a couple of years or more. We're able now to actually sit down and do those estimates with some level of assurance.

Obviously, none of us have a crystal ball. Unless some really unusual event occurs or changes occur in how Parliament wants to do business, for these buildings and these assets, this is our best estimate of what we feel is needed long term.

Mr. Peter Julian: There will be additional funding in the coming year or two, on Centre Block and Sparks Street, potentially.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: That would be in the long run, sir. We don't see that over the next six years, at least. We see that in a longer time period.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

I'll just follow on Mr. Julian's question, if I can. It's the prerogative of the chair to ask a question.

Just to clarify, I think we're mixing hard assets and operations here. They're two separate issues. What we have here is operations, correct? Salaries? That has nothing to do with purchasing new assets.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It's not only salaries, sir. It's the ability to maintain and support the assets, such as the cameras in this facility. We have to life-cycle them over the years. What we're seeking is the money to life-cycle them whenever the end of life will come to them. We're also seeking the money to support them and maintain them during their expected life cycle. We had sought some original money for salaries in the previous periods. We're not seeking any additional funding for salaries.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

There are two recommendations. Are we okay with those recommendations?

Very good, we're in accordance.

[*Translation*]

We are moving on to item 4.

[*English*]

It concerns funding stabilization.

[*Translation*]

The first witnesses will be Mr. Paquette and Ms. Laframboise.

You have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm here today on behalf of the administration to present two submissions. They're both seeking the board's approval for funding to stabilize the capacity that is needed to maintain certain initiatives that have been undertaken to support members in the fulfillment of their parliamentary function.

The first request is for funding to stabilize enhanced services provided by financial services and human resource services to support legislative and policy changes or to improve our service delivery.

The second request is for funding to stabilize resources following the implementation of a comprehensive enterprise resource planning and business renewal initiative that was undertaken to replace the outdated financial and human resource platform.

I'd like to provide a bit of context here. There have been several legislative and policy amendments over the last few years that have driven changes in the area of finance and human resources. These include the coming into force of Bill C-44 and Bill C-65, in addition to many bylaws and policy amendments. In addition to this, we've been making significant investments to better assist members in the fulfillment of their parliamentary functions, including but not limited to the LTVP that we've just finished talking about, which changed how we do business on the precinct. It modernized and enhanced our technology and telecommunications. We also need to manage the sustainability of those various assets across facilities.

There have also been the investments around the security enhancements, the increase in broadcasting and webcasting for committees, the modernization of our food services, the HR services for members as employers and the managing of computing in the constituency that has been going on for the last couple of years. That's just to name a few of the investments that have been going on.

These changes and investments have led to increased complexity in the management of budgets and have increased the need to enhance our financial analysis and planning. This means there's an expanded role for the financial planning and resource management team, including addressing the challenging administrative funding requests; working with partners to ensure that all business cases and related financial requirements are accurate and thoroughly documented; and providing accurate and timely financial information and analysis to allow senior management to make the appropriate decisions around the budgets, reallocation and use of the internal resources. This is also the team that's been developing the new reports that we've been bringing here to the board, which are then made public on the website. Sustaining this increased capacity is required to maintain the initial workload associated with the new reporting requirements and the strengthening of our financial advisory services.

The funding request here is for four FTEs, for a total amount of \$518,000. Also, the establishment of the constituency office lease services has allowed the administration to better support members in the management of office leases. The board approved a policy change where constituency office leases would be assigned to the administration if a member was not seeking to be re-elected or was not re-elected. Taking effect with the 2019 general election, the new assignment clause allows assets to remain in offices and newly elected members to occupy those offices as soon as the former member vacates those premises.

To address operational needs, a team with the appropriate knowledge and skill sets was created to develop the tools and processes to manage this new responsibility. Following the lessons learned in previous and past elections, this three-person team now actively provides the members and the House administration with the various tools, guidance and support needed for constituency office tenancy.

In addition to supporting members in quickly becoming operational in their constituency offices, this team has also achieved savings through facilitating the transition after an election and the ongoing relationships between members and their landlords. Given the success in assisting members in managing their complex commercial leases, we are seeking approval to retain this team and asking for the annual cost of \$273,000 to fund these three FTEs.

The next piece is the increased resources needed to respond to the coming into force of Bill C-65, the act that amended the Canada Labour Code, the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act and the Budget Implementation Act. The act extends the health and safety obligations under part II of the Canada Labour Code to parliamentary entities, including the House administration and members as employers. This program requires the development and maintenance of policies and programs to ensure that both members and House administration meet their legal obligations under the

code and that members are helped to meet their obligations as employers.

• (1120)

Resources are also needed to support the 17 different corporate prevention and compliance programs related to this initiative. These resources will contribute to the safety and well-being of House administration and member employees, the development of resources and tools for members, and the cost savings that could be incurred in relation to work injuries. To accomplish this, we are seeking the permanent funding for the 4 FTEs at a total annual cost of \$318,000.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: I was not finished. I am simply going to switch languages.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I am sorry.

Go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: With respect to the second submission, the House Administration replaced the organization's outdated enterprise resource planning systems with a more modern and sustainable client-focused platform that consolidates financial and human resource management. Implementing the HR management model resulted in significant changes to the business process and to the organization's practices, roles and responsibilities. Because of this, a core team was established to support the new platform, and the Human Resources Service Centre was created.

The core team was created in January 2020. It manages the products, the system and the related maintenance support, in addition to the lifecycle of the new platform. The Human Resources Service Centre is a centre of expertise that brings together the many HR services and operations for members of Parliament, their employees and House Administration employees.

The two teams were created from existing resources out of various House Administration teams, but a few new additional positions had to be created. To date, funding has been obtained through budget surpluses, but that solution is temporary and needs to be stabilized. To ensure funding for these essential positions, we are requesting permanent funding to support the teams over the longer term.

As a result, funding of \$866,000 is requested to support the four FTEs of the enterprise resource planning team and the five FTEs on the human resources team.

That concludes my presentation. The other members of the management team and I are available to answer your questions.

• (1125)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Are there any questions?

Mr. Rodriguez, you have the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would just like to go back to the funding request of nearly \$273,000 for the three full-time employees and the office rental service.

It seems necessary, since you're asking for it, but three full-time employees to work in this department between two elections seems like a lot to me. I'd just like to understand the value of the service and how essential it could be between elections, since generally there are few transactions or changes.

Could you tell us more about it?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Actually, the service was introduced several months after the last election and calls are still coming in, as it is a point of contact for members of Parliament in their constituency offices. The various leases contain somewhat special clauses, which sometimes require payment of shared fees and the annual calculation of changes in costs.

We also have the renovations. It's important to ensure that the fees an owner can charge for needed renovations are fair. So one of the employees on this team has building renovation appraisal skills.

Our calls have decreased since the election, but during the election campaign, we had six people managing this transition. We are down to three, and the calls and support continue.

In addition, since we now have people well versed in understanding leases, we have employees who can help House Administration ensure that the right amounts are being paid. We realized that some of these clauses were more complex and, as a result, we even went back to recover expenses that had been overpaid or to pay expenses that had been forgotten.

We have a few cases like these where service has continued. So, given the type of requests we have here, we feel that this team should be maintained, because there is as much demand for support from House Administration for these agreements as for members of Parliament.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I now give the floor to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): I have something to say about point 4 of your request, that is, the full-time equivalent position for the Members' Orientation Program. I can tell you that this program is very important, as I myself first went through the orientation almost a year ago. However, I feel it would be appropriate to change the name of the program, because the individual who is going to join the team will be doing more than just orientation.

The work actually involves ongoing training and support for the development of skills and knowledge for members and their staff, so that they are better supported in their work.

Do you intend to do justice to your work by changing the name of the program, which is more than just an orientation program?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons): I can answer the question, if I may.

Thank you for the question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

The Members' Orientation Program is mandated to provide ongoing training. We could certainly look at the program name and review the description. It's not just about onboarding, as it provides ongoing training, development and so on. So I totally agree with you.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Since a large number of people are watching us on television, could you describe some of the major ongoing training programs that you provide to members and their staff?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: I would ask Robyn Daigle, the director of these programs, to talk to you about them. I believe she is in a better position than I to give you more information.

Ms. Daigle, if you would like to take the floor.

• (1130)

Ms. Robyn Daigle (Director, Members HR Services, House of Commons): Good morning.

Thank you, Ms. Laframboise and Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

These programs are more than just post-election orientation programs for members and their staff. They are also transition programs provided in the event of departure or resignation.

As I said before, the programs are not only for members; they are also for their staff. A new program was introduced in September, in fact. As you know, we sometimes experience turnover in constituency offices or on the Hill, and this program helps to better integrate employees into their workplace.

As for ongoing training, we have programs in workplace harassment prevention and workplace health and safety. For example, when we implemented the disclosure process, a lot of training was provided to members and their staff.

Training is really provided on demand, but we also offer it when major programs are introduced or when legislation comes into force.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip): Thank you.

If I'm counting correctly, I think we're being asked for 12 new permanent positions here. My understanding is that in 2019 there was an approval here for 22 additional HR staff with a similar type of proposal.

At that time, Ms. Daigle was asked about this, and she indicated, "If we ever came back to the board to either reduce or increase those resources, it would be with quite a rationale associated with it." I guess I'm not entirely seeing the rationale.

Obviously, when there's that kind of an increase and a year and a bit later we're looking for an additional increase, and it was indicated at that time there would be quite a rationale that would need to be associated with it, I'm just trying to understand what that rationale is. I'm not sure I'm entirely hearing that here.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Ms. Laframboise, you have the floor.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you.

[*English*]

Yes, last February there were 22 resources approved. Those resources were for overall services in human resources and not specific to occupational health and safety, which is one of the areas we are talking about today.

Some of those resources were non-HR. There were a few finance and some legal assistants as well. Others were deployed within the HR team to a variety of functional areas. The remainder of them do form up the team that Ms. Daigle leads, which is member HR services.

Over the last two years, so since that time.... In occupational health and safety, as you know, the changes to the legislation are quite significant. They are in two parts. The first part of it was the onboarding of the House and the members to the general labour code provisions. These included significant increases in reporting, tracking, monitoring, training, awareness, the creation of health and safety reps and so on. We've had COVID, of course, which has definitely brought forward the importance of health and safety as well. Now we continue to move forward with the second part of the bill, which is the changes for the harassment and violence in the workplace program and having them included into the health and safety framework. That in and of itself is also quite an endeavour. It requires significant modification to policies, processes and training to ensure that we all meet our obligations as employers.

That second part of it is where the focus of these resources will be. We do have staff doing this work now on a temporary basis, but we definitely know that we're going to need those resources longer term to ensure that those obligations continue to be met. Occupational health and safety in and of itself has increased so significantly in complexity. We're not talking about only physical health anymore; we are including mental health issues. The worker safety boards and compensation organizations now are recognizing more of the mental health, anxiety and stress issues as well.

It is quite a large basket of obligations. We want to make sure that we are fully positioned to support the members and the House in their obligations.

Mr. Blake Richards: In terms of follow-up, you mentioned COVID and dealing with it as part of the rationale there. I understand it wasn't all of it. Certainly mental health issues were mentioned and other things. Obviously, coming out of COVID, I understand that those issues probably will increase. But you mentioned COVID as part of the rationale. We're talking about permanent positions here.

You mentioned having already brought some on temporarily. I do understand why there would be a need for that during the pandem-

ic, but if COVID is part of what we're responding to here, why would there be a requirement for those positions to become permanent? Why would they not remain temporary positions?

● (1135)

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: When I referred to COVID, it was more just sort of an understanding of the importance and complexity of occupational health and safety and where it's going as a function. You're right that there are some COVID pieces that might seem shorter term, but the anxiety and the mental health components that are resulting from COVID we will definitely be seeing long term.

The other thing is that it really flagged for us the importance of being prepared, trained and set up, and having the infrastructure in place. I'm not saying they are COVID support positions. I'm saying that it absolutely flagged for us where we may have had some gaps, to make sure that we are able to meet any other challenges or health and safety issues that come forward.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you. I appreciate the clarification.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

Seeing none,

[*Translation*]

We have two recommendations.

Do you all agree?

Let's continue.

For the next two items on the agenda, no presentations are planned. You were sent two reports in advance.

[*English*]

The first one, under tab five, is the annual report on the activities and expenditures of parliamentary associations for 2019-20.

The co-chairs of the Joint Interparliamentary Council sent a letter noting that the JIC adopted this report late last month and submitted it to the board for your information. It is in a form similar to reports for previous years. If there are any questions about the report itself, the clerk of the JIC is available today, or we can invite the House co-chair, Mr. Stanton, to appear at subsequent meetings.

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions?

[*English*]

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: I have no questions. For last year, it's very clear. For this year, I don't think we had any activities. Our activities on Parliament Hill were suspended as of March 13.

I just want to know where there are any expenditures by parliamentary associations for this financial year, and to what an extent our costs were reduced.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Yes, indeed, there has been a moratorium on association activities and travel since March, which means that expenditures for activities are essentially zero. With the income from membership fees, that is to say the dues that members must pay to belong to those associations, the account balance is even negative, in the sense that more came in than went out.

However, from the envelope for the Joint Interparliamentary Council, or JIC, we have to pay fees to the international associations. To belong to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, or APF, we have to pay annual fees. Those contributions are ongoing. Expenditures of about \$400,000 have already been made to cover a part of those fees, which normally amount to about \$1.4 million each year.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are we good?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes. Thanks.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Let's move on.

[*English*]

Mr. Richards, you are next.

Mr. Blake Richards: This summer, the board approved—and it was part of a package related to former Bill C-58 and the financial disclosure—an additional staff position that was associated with helping to process travel expenses for the associations. At that time, my predecessor in this role, Mr. Strahl, had expressed some reservations about that because, obviously, international travel was grounded at the time. Given that this has obviously continued to persist and probably will for some time to come, has the hiring for that position gone ahead, or is it delayed because there actually hasn't been a need for travel?

• (1140)

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: Yes, we did staff that position, because there is a fair amount of preparatory work that is required in order to have us set-up to properly disclose, so all kinds of systems testing, processes to develop, templates of reports to be validated, and training to be given to various staff members. The resource that was hired has been occupied in doing that, even though there haven't been activities ongoing at the time.

Mr. Blake Richards: Related to that, is the funding envelope for the interparliamentary associations approved as part of the annual budgeting process? This is something I'm not sure of. That is? Okay.

I believe this would be at our next meeting for 2021, so it will be part of the discussions at that meeting. Is that right? Okay.

There is one last thing I wanted to touch on. Later on our agenda we have an item regarding Ms. Ratansi. I understand she's been the president of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Is she still the president of that, or what's the situation there?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: She is still the president of the Canadian Branch of the CPA, yes.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I want to remind honourable members that when something is in camera, we don't normally refer to it. We can refer to the person unrelated to the agenda.

Mr. Blake Richards: My apologies.

That's all I had.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Let's move on.

[*English*]

The next report is the committee activities annual report at tab six, which you have before you. There is a letter from the chair of the liaison committee, Ms. Sgro, who wishes to inform the board that the liaison committee recently adopted and presented to the House its latest annual report on committee activities and expenditures for the 2019-20 fiscal year.

Ms. Sgro submitted a copy of the report to the board, and also indicated that she would be available to meet at a future date if the board so desires.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 121(4), the Board of Internal Economy shall cause to be tabled in the House an annual comprehensive financial report outlining the individual expenditures of each committee. The established practice since 2014 has been for the Liaison Committee's annual report to be approved by the Board and tabled by the Chair in order to comply with the requirements of the Standing Order. Consequently, if all members are in agreement, I will submit the report as attached to the House as the Board's report, pursuant to the Standing Order.

Are there any questions or comments about the report or the process?

Shall I report it to the House?

Since there are no questions, all is in order.

We will continue the meeting in camera. We will take a few minutes to prepare.

Mr. Richards, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: With regard to the committee activities, I do have a couple of quick questions.

I didn't realize you were moving on quite as quickly as you were.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. Please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: With regard to the reporting, a decade or two ago, I understand we used to just see reports that were 10 pages long, apparently. Now it's a 139-page report.

Obviously, I'm not one to necessarily criticize more accountability by any means, but I'm just curious. Obviously, there's a lot of work that goes into creating those reports. Do we have any statistics on the readership of those reports?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Janse, do you have an answer? Are you responding to this?

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Yes, I'm responding, but I'm not quite sure I have an answer, Mr. Richards, in terms of the readership.

You are absolutely right, though, that the report has evolved considerably over the last few years. It used to be just done once a year. Now there are two other reports done mid-year and, indeed, the content of the report is considerably beefed up compared to the past with a lot more information, statistics, etc., included.

I can try to see with perhaps our IT folks how many hits these reports receive on the parliamentary website. Years ago we stopped producing any paper copies, so it's hard to tell how many are distributed, but we can look into your question.

• (1145)

Mr. Blake Richards: That would be appreciated. That would be good to know. I understand that things are mostly on the web now. I'm sure statistics should be easy to come by as a result of that web readership.

I have one other thing, just quickly. I wonder if we have any insight into the current year and how expenses are shaping up there.

Obviously, a lot of things should have brought those expenses down, I would suspect, this year. First of all, during the first wave of the pandemic, the Liberal government essentially barred most of the committees from meeting. Then Parliament was prorogued for a time. Now, while committees are meeting, first of all they were sort of reduced. Now we are near full capacity. They are still practically all meeting by video conference, and I guess we expect that to continue for some time to come.

I am wondering if we have any analysis at this point of what kind of impact that's had on spending.

Mr. Eric Janse: That's an excellent question, Mr. Richards.

Indeed, committees, certainly for the last little bit, have been quite active, with a good number of meetings and lots of witnesses being heard, but further to the motion that was adopted in the House, all witnesses are being heard virtually, so that obviously has an impact on witness expenses.

We're not reimbursing witnesses to fly them to Ottawa, and the bulk of committee expenses are, of course, when the committees themselves travel either within Canada or abroad. Of course, no committee travel has taken place since April 1, so the costs are very minimal.

There is some reimbursement of some witness expenses. For instance, we send out headsets to all witnesses to facilitate their par-

ticipation and to make things easier for the interpreters, but there are very minimal expenses to date.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Deltell, the floor is yours.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Leader of the Official Opposition in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Janse.

I will stay with the same subject.

As you said yourself, there are almost no expenditures. If we count the number of headsets that have been sent, the cost probably comes to less than \$100. That's a very modest expenditure.

Could you compare the committee expenditures in a so-called normal year, after an election, to the expenditures this year?

That would give us a figure showing how much has not been spent and an idea of what could be spent elsewhere from the amounts that have been saved.

Mr. Eric Janse: Those are excellent questions, Mr. Deltell.

The envelope for all the committees is \$4 million. In a so-called normal year, we spend between \$2 million and \$2.5 million. Last year was an election year and we also saw the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the report before you shows, only \$700,000 were spent.

However, last year, the Board of Internal Economy passed a motion according to which \$1.5 million of the anticipated surplus for the financial year would be used to fund an online broadcasting system for parliamentary committees. That was done. This is why the amount of \$1.5 million comes from the \$4 million, but the committee expenditures as such come to only \$700,000 for last year.

As I said to Mr. Richards, we really have not spent a lot of money this year. We can try to have a more specific figure, but, unless things change all of a sudden and the committees resume their activities at a more normal pace, we should actually have quite a considerable surplus in the committee budgets when March 31 comes along.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You may continue, Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Janse, we are talking about 24 committees with a budget of \$4 million. However, you are telling us that, year in year out, we spend about \$2.5 million. With a quick calculation, I can see that we are talking about almost \$60 million in total. You said that we have spent \$700,000 and \$1.5 million for the broadcasting system.

If I subtract the \$700,000 and the \$1.5 million from the total, would I be out of line to conclude that we have not spent \$57.8 million because of the pandemic?

• (1150)

Mr. Eric Janse: The reduced expenditures last year were actually because of the election, because the pandemic began only in mid-March and the financial year ended on March 31. This year, certainly, committees are not travelling because of the pandemic. So the committees really have no significant expenditures.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Going by the normal figures, we have not spent \$57.8 million.

Mr. Eric Janse: Excuse me, Mr. Deltell. Could you repeat that, please?

Mr. Gérard Deltell: You told us that the committees spend \$2.5 million, year in and year out. There are 24 committees, so we are spending about \$60 million on committees.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Excuse me, Mr. Deltell, Mr. Patrice would like to answer that.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): I just like to make it clear that the total envelope is \$4 million. That's the budget for all committees.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Great. That's what I was thinking. I thought it was a little excessive.

Thank you, Mr. Patrice.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You have the floor, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I would like to speak to Mr. Janse. However, before I do, I would like to clarify something.

Mr. Richards said that the committees are virtual. Actually, they are hybrid. This was a very significant request and I feel that it is good to tell the public about it. Members of Parliament can be physically present in rooms arranged for that purpose. However, they can also participate remotely through videoconference platforms. I don't want people to understand that the committees are being held entirely by videoconference. More and more, members of Parliament prefer to be physically present, while still observing health rules. I wanted to clarify that.

What caught my attention in your testimony is that you mentioned that one of the expenditures was to send headsets to all the witnesses. I don't want to cast doubt on that statement, but I can tell you that, we in the Bloc Québécois are experiencing a lot of difficulties. Some witnesses have no headsets and that limits the interpretation. I have no statistics and I will not ask you to provide us with any, but I believe that it is fair to say that 90% of the witnesses give their testimony in English. That means that the witnesses need interpretation. In a lot of cases, and we in the Bloc Québécois have documented it fairly well, we have problems because the witnesses do not have the necessary equipment.

I understand that it is difficult for the witnesses to receive them, because often, they are invited at the last minute. The fact remains that witnesses having no access to the equipment that they need and that would provide them with good interpretation, is still a major problem. In that sense, Mr. Janse, I can tell you that francophone members feel some discrimination. The fact that witnesses do not understand the interpretation in their own language means that important seconds are lost, during which members could be asking questions.

I am talking about members of the Bloc, but there are also other French-speaking members in other parties. All this is to tell you that I thought that the expenditure on headsets was the responsibility of the IT team, headed by Mr. Aubé, not of the committees. That's something I learned today. I therefore want you to make you aware that there is a real problem. I hope that, in the short term, all witnesses will have the equipment they need for adequate interpretation, which will allow francophone members who need the interpretation to participate more fully.

Mr. Eric Janse: Those are good comments, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. Thank you.

Yes, the committees are meeting as hybrids. However, following the motion passed by the House on September 23, all witnesses must testify virtually. We do indeed try as much as possible to send headsets to all the witnesses who need them. As you so rightly pointed out, if a witness is invited at the last moment, it is simply not possible, even with the process we have established to send them by private couriers. That process allows us to send headsets to about 90% of the locations in the country in 24 to 48 hours. Yes, it does happen that we may not be able to send headsets before the meeting.

Your comments are duly noted.

• (1155)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Are there any further questions or comments?

As there are none, do you agree that I should submit this report to the House?

Voices: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Agreed.

We will continue the meeting in camera. So we will take a few minutes to move a little and to make sure that everything is in place.

[Proceedings continue in camera.]

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