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Board of Internal Economy

Thursday, January 28, 2021

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Let us start the meeting.

The first item on the agenda is to adopt the minutes of the previous meeting. Are there any comments about the minutes? Shall we adopt the minutes?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We now move to business arising from the previous meeting.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, did you want to make a comment? You have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc québécois): Great.

Is the raise hand button working? Can you see it?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, I can see your hand is raised.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

I can hear an echo of my voice. I can hear myself speaking. I don't know whether it is supposed to be like that.

I hear myself with a delay, like an echo. I am probably hearing the sound in the meeting room.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, we're having that issue today, but I believe it has been resolved here.

It happens to me a lot. When it does, I remove my headset and hold it in my hand to speak into the microphone. Then I put my headset back on. It is a bit of a chore, but until the issue is resolved, that is what we can do.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Is that better now?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: No, it's not working.

So I will try to concentrate.

Mr. Chair, I would like to ask you a few questions to follow up on business arising from the previous meeting.

At the last Board of Internal Economy meeting in December, we closed the meeting with a recommendation that [*Technical difficulty*].

Hon. Anthony Rota: Excuse me, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, but we are having trouble hearing you. I don't know what is wrong.

Am I the only one hearing the sound cut in and out? The interpreters appear to be hearing that too. So we have a problem.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Would you like me to try removing the headset, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Apparently, the problem is on Parliament's end. The problem is over here.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

Should I go on?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe we will have to suspend the meeting. I don't know what else to do until the issue is resolved.

Could you continue speaking, please?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

I wanted to ask you something about Mr. Janse's appearance. The Board of Internal Economy authorized the letter to be sent to the Liaison Committee, that is, to Ms. Sgro, who was then to forward the letter to all chairs of [*Technical difficulty*].

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's very hard to understand what you are saying. We will therefore suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I will try without the headset, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I don't think the problem is on your end. It is here in the room.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Is that better, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Anthony Rota: It is still the same.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): It is not on your end, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We will suspend the meeting temporarily. I don't know how long it will be, but please wait. We will see what happens.

We will leave it in the hands of the technicians.

• (1110)

(Pause)

• (1120)

Hon. Anthony Rota: We will pick up where we left off.

We dealt with the first item on the agenda. We were on the second item, business arising from the previous meeting.

We will proceed with Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

• (1125)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I can still hear the echo of myself, but I hope the sound is clear on your end.

Mr. Chair, I was referring to the letter that the clerk assistant, Mr. Janse, was authorized to send in your name on behalf of the Board of Internal Economy to the chair of the Liaison Committee, Ms. Sgro. The purpose of the letter was to communicate certain recommendations and observations with respect to interpretation.

The observations were that interpretation into French is hard to do at the moment because of issues with the technology. From the time committees began to meet until the end of September, 86% of witnesses testified in English. That put pressure on the technology to make high-quality interpretation available to francophone members.

Ms. Sgro forwarded the letter to all committee chairs on December 8. How many committee chairs sent the letter to the other members of their committee?

Was the letter well received, Mr. Janse?

Did the chair of the Liaison Committee feel committed to a mission of awareness and promotion with the other committee chairs? Did she impress upon them just how significant the proposals were to ensuring quality interpretation for francophone members?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Janse, you have the floor.

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Ms. Sgro's office sent the letter to the chairs of all other standing committees. Most chairs forwarded it to all members of their committee. A few did not, but we are following up with them to urge them to send the letter to the other members.

Because the letter went out in mid-December, not many committee meetings were left before the House adjourned for the holidays. Committees are starting to sit again this week. So we are hoping to obtain some feedback to find out whether things are better now than they were before the holidays.

We are planning to hold a Liaison Committee meeting in the coming weeks. All committee chairs, including Ms. Sgro, will be able to discuss it.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Perfect.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have a question, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My question is on the same subject.

If the letter has not been forwarded to all committee members, it's important that it be sent to them right away. We must ensure that Parliament works well in both official languages and that high-quality interpretation services are available to everyone. I am a little concerned to find that some committees have not yet discussed it.

It is really important that the letter be sent to all members so that steps can be taken to ensure that the two official languages are on equal footing during virtual sittings of the House and the committees.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Janse, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Eric Janse: We will urge committee chairs who have not forwarded the letter to do so in the coming days. We hope that all members sitting on committees will have received the letter within the next few days.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments or questions?

[*English*]

We'll go on to number 3, the printing and mailing services program enhancement proposals, and we'll turn it over to Ms. Rebekah Kletke, chief operations officer.

Ms. Kletke.

• (1130)

Ms. Rebekah Kletke (Chief Operations Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the board, as you know, the current operating environment resulting from the pandemic has required the House administration to adapt and find solutions to ensure that members of Parliament and their teams are able to continue to perform their parliamentary functions. One such example has been in the area of printing and mailing services.

[*Translation*]

On April 17, 2020, the Board approved that, from April 17 to July 30, 2020, members be authorized to provide their constituents with information on COVID-19 using external printing services, with costs to be charged to the central House administration budget.

[*English*]

A report distributed to board members on December 14, 2020, provided an assessment of the way access to external suppliers worked this past spring. This report showed that costs for the initiative were higher compared to in-house equivalents, that the level of service varied across Canada and that the external production time frames were the same or longer than in-house production time frames.

I am here today with a submission seeking direction from the board on initiatives to enhance and improve the printing and mailing services available to members of Parliament. These areas for improvement are aligned with the discussion held at the previous board meeting and the feedback we have received during this challenging period. With these objectives in mind, the House administration recommends that we proceed to examine the following aspects as prioritized by the Board of Internal Economy, with a view to identifying potential changes to our printing and mailing services.

We would look at internal processes and tools to determine the measures needed to decrease the current average internal production timeline of 12 days. We would look at the possibility of setting up framework agreements with printing facilities across Canada in consultation with Canada Post so that internal production time frames can be supplemented and enhanced with external search capacity during peak periods, and we would also look at access to broader external services through existing mechanisms, building on the lessons learned from the spring of 2020.

[*Translation*]

Our goal is to gain approval in the spring for a comprehensive analysis, with proposals aligned with the priorities set by the Board.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have and take note of any improvements you suggest.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. We'll continue.

I believe Mr. Richards has a question or a comment.

Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip): I suppose it's probably more of a comment.

I'm hearing that you're going to come back with a proposal, and that's great. I think that's wonderful. I have had a number of caucus members come forward to me with issues that they've had. I guess one thing I want to make clear for when proposals are being developed is that, although there have been some issues that have developed in terms of the length of time it's taking to get things printed, I don't know that it should be the singular focus of the efforts to make improvements.

The focus that I think I've heard more from members who have spoken to me has been more about lack of certainty in terms of the production times. I understand that there are fluctuating levels, so addressing that is important. I like the suggestion you're making about having some ability to have arrangements with outside suppliers where there are higher periods of time.... Obviously just before Christmas would be one of those examples. I think that's a great idea.

However, the other issues that arise, in the same vein, are more the inconsistency. Sometimes there have been issues where people are told to get something out for a certain date. You have to have it in.... I'll choose some dates out of the hat. Let's say they're told that in order to have it out by mid-December, it has to be in by the end of October. The member is intending to have it go out mid-December, but then things are ahead of schedule and it goes out mid-

November and it's not an appropriate message to be going out in the middle of November, for example.

It's working with members to ensure that the service is provided as stated. That might mean needing to ensure that the production timeline is respected and hasn't gone over, because maybe if it goes over, now the member is sending something that's no longer appropriate to send. In other cases, it might be putting it out at an inappropriate time, too soon, because production was ahead of schedule.

It's really working with the member to ensure they're given a date for when their piece would go out, when it goes to production, and that date is respected and adhered to, whether that means rushing the process or whether that means, in some cases, storing it for a few weeks because it's been produced ahead of schedule. It's really about meeting those service schedules.

I'll give you one other similar example, and I'm talking about my own example. I've had times where we have requested certain folds on a product—I've gone so far as to ask that I see the folds as part of the proof—and then they still go out with a different fold.

Those are service standards that aren't related to length of printing, but it's an expectation by a client, and the member of Parliament, I would believe, should be seen as the client. If they're asking for a certain fold on a product, or they're asking for a certain date that they want the product to go out, we should seek to do that. It's making that clear.

Those are some of the issues that I've had raised in my caucus. I like some of the suggestions you're making, but to make it clear, it's looking at ways to improve those service standards and have more of a customer service focus model that is being sought.

I appreciate your taking this back and looking at ways that we can make improvements.

• (1135)

Ms. Rebekah Kletke: Thank you very much, Mr. Richards, for your comments.

Certainly the three items that we brought today require some potential investment.

Further to your comments regarding the planning process, we started following our holiday card and peak period this past December, looking at making some changes to our planning process to get exactly at some of the issues you raised today. We're already working on that. They are internal process changes. The team has some really great ideas in that respect, and to bring that flexibility around planning to the table and more clarity around when products will be going out.

We'll certainly take back your other comments, and we'll work internally to meet what you're asking for.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you. That's appreciated.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go to Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

He will be followed by Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

There are some laudable suggestions in the document. My own experience, anecdotally, with the external suppliers, the local suppliers, was that what made the difference, and why we were able to get things out more quickly—during a pandemic, of course, it's vital to get information in the hands of my constituents—was the mailing delay that came from Ottawa.

We have very talented staff in Ottawa, they do a terrific job in the printing centre, but often, it's a two-week delay getting it from Ottawa to New Westminster—Burnaby. For the external suppliers, in our case, even though it's correct to point out that they may not be as efficient and may not understand the Canada Post preparation as well as staff in Ottawa, the reality is that, once it's actually dropped at the post office, it's a one- or two-day delay, as opposed to a one- or two-week delay.

That needs to be taken into consideration. We have a vast geography, and the mailing times add complexity to mailings that are particularly tied to specific events. It makes a difference to be able to use local suppliers for certain types of mailings.

I agree with enhancing the printing team in Ottawa. There's absolutely no doubt that would mean that things could be produced more quickly for our constituents, but I also believe local suppliers definitely have a place. In the case of a British Columbia MP, it means that the overall length of time is quicker, even if it takes twice as long to produce the printing, because it takes 10% of the time to actually do the mailing and get it into the riding.

I wanted to give you that feedback, because that needs to be taken into consideration as well when we're looking at the overall proposal that comes to the BOIE.

● (1140)

Ms. Rebekah Kletke: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

We certainly appreciate your comments and will take that into consideration. We're also looking at adjusting our planning practices, as I mentioned following Mr. Richards' comments, so that instead of first in, first out, we would plan according to the location of the constituency, so that those that might be farther from Ottawa would get done sooner rather than later in our planning process, to hopefully shorten the time frame.

We'll certainly take that into account. Thank you for your comments.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We will continue with Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Good morning, Ms. Kletke.

First, I would like to acknowledge the fact that, within your department, you directed two of your managers to consult the whips of all caucuses on what could be improved and therefore to gather information from all recognized parties in the House.

I want to thank you for that because it shows me that you are committed to improving your department and better serving members in the House of Commons. I also want to thank you for the fact that I felt I was heard. I know that the two managers I met with last week accepted and even appreciated some of the recommendations, the improvements, that I wanted to see. I am therefore very grateful to you for that good practice that other departments will hopefully choose to adopt.

I fully agree with your recommendation. I don't know if it is the fact that we are close to Ottawa, but we noticed that the 12-day service standard was often exceeded. The average was about nine days. We are quite satisfied with the timeframes. Of course, we would like to bring them down from 12 to nine or even between five and nine, as you suggest. In the age of social media, we often want to communicate quickly with our constituents about situations or activities, or even about information related to the pandemic. Everything moves so quickly these days. I feel that, while maintaining its quality, its thoroughness and its professionalism, our printing service must do the best it can to reduce its turnaround time throughout the process, from submission to mockups, production and mailing to the public.

I want to thank you because I'm sure we will be pleased with your proposals and those that you will make in the spring, since you have understood how important it is for members to send out quality information [*Technical difficulty*] and that meets the need for more urgent communications.

I also noticed that you paid special attention to publications of 5,000 copies or less, which are perhaps not being used optimally. Members may benefit from becoming more familiar with this type of publication since it is a much shorter process. If you opened it up to local businesses, we might be able to use this parliamentary tool more often for more urgent publications. It's a tool that may be underused, at least by my caucus.

So I thank you once again, and I agree with the recommendation you have submitted to us today.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments?

[English]

Are we okay to go ahead with the recommendation presented in the report?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We're going to suspend temporarily to go in camera. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes. I want everybody to stand by if you don't mind, as we make sure everything goes in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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