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Thursday, December 7, 2017

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Chair

The Honourable Geoff Regan

Board of Internal Economy

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• (1120)

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): The meeting is called to order. Welcome, colleagues. Good morning.

We have before us the minutes of the previous meeting. Are there any issues from those minutes? I'm hearing none.

Is there any business arising from the previous meeting?

Seeing none, we'll go on to the first item before us this morning: Joint Interparliamentary Council, enhanced support for parliamentary associations.

I'm delighted to welcome the excellent Deputy Speaker, as well as the excellent Madame Labrecque-Riel.

Mr. Stanton.

[Translation]

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Co-Chair, Joint Interparliamentary Council): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Good morning, colleagues.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to once again make a presentation on the Joint Interparliamentary Council's request for three additional employees to better support the work of the 13 parliamentary associations.

[English]

I'm going to start by briefly summarizing how we got to today. I will present most of my comments in English. We'll be happy to take questions after that time.

At its September 27 meeting, JIC received a request from IIA, international and interparliamentary affairs, for an approval to go forward to the two boards for a permanent increase in funding to support the growing demand of interparliamentary activities. Those three employees would be one association clerk, one admin assistant, and one new position of communications coordinator. This would increase to 10 the current complement of nine clerks and nine admin assistants for 13 associations.

JIC agreed at that time that these resources were necessary in light of the strain on existing staff, the amount of absenteeism, growth in the compensatory leave banks, usage of sick leave, decrease in annual leave, and the lack of time to work on other corporate

projects. This is why JIC essentially agreed to go forward with the request to your board and to the Senate internal economy committee.

Director General Colette Labrecque-Riel appeared here on November 2, as you know, to present that request. At its November 22 meeting, subsequent to her appearance here, Colette reported back to us on the thoughtful comments and suggestions that you provided at that time. I have also reviewed the transcript of that meeting and noted the concerns with respect to the funding request but also several other issues that arose during that meeting.

One of those issues came up on November 2. JIC was asked to review or create a policy regarding the denial of visitors visas for members of Canadian delegations outbound on international missions, which would apply to its 13 associations. I'll come back to that momentarily.

I would summarize by saying there seemed to be a general agreement at your board for the additional funding for administrative staff, however, that we, JIC, should look to find a better balance between the activity levels and additional staffing levels to fit within our current budgetary envelope. You opined that the increase in the JIC envelope that occurred last year, that took the total envelope from roughly \$3.5 million to \$4.5 million, represented a considerable increase and that it should be sufficient to not only give a considerable increase in activities for the association but also accommodate any additional administrative needs, effectively saying, "You have \$1 million extra; take your additional administrative needs out of that."

At your meeting on November 2 you didn't make a final determination.

[Translation]

At that time, you did not make a final decision on our request, but you made several suggestions to the Joint Interparliamentary Council to consider other possibilities, suggestions that were very helpful.

• (1125)

[English]

Today, I am here to follow up on your comments with a view to finding a way forward that will, first, be a prudent use of public funds, but also ensure that the resources of IIA are not as overly strained as they appear to be now.

Let me first go to the visa issue. JIC met yesterday on this very question. I think members brought attention to this issue at your November 2 meeting. JIC discussed it yesterday and was in agreement that there does need to be a more sound and clear policy with respect to these occasions when, often at the eleventh hour before a trip is heading out, the visa application for a member gets denied by the host country for the mission. So we agreed on the following. I should mention that this has not been sent out to the associations as we just met yesterday, but this will be going out to all 13 associations and it is as follows:

That when a delegate is denied a travel visa for an upcoming association mission, the association's executive committee must consider the circumstances of the denial, and decide whether to: identify a substitute delegate, reduce the delegation accordingly, or cancel the activity. There are essentially three options, with the key point being that the association, as constituted, must take up that consideration if there is a denial of the current association. That's the new policy. It's going to head out to the associations. We'll be happy to take questions when I finish my remarks.

On the funding request, let me just briefly...because questions did come up at your November 2 meeting. I won't belabour the point, but suffice it to say that the value of interparliamentary travel, interparliamentary diplomacy, that is deployed and taken up by parliamentarians in both houses across the year does represent an activity that is very much pertinent to the work of parliamentarians. It allows them to gain insight and perspective on global issues, governance, and institutions, all of which reinforce the performance and capacity of Canada's parliamentarians to meet their obligations to their constituents or fulfill their role as members and senators. It allows them to form ties and relationships with their counterparts in other countries, with a direct and tangible consequence for Canadian foreign relations. No better example exists than the current one with regard to Canadian relationships across the border with the United States as members have sought and, frankly, used their sound relationships with their counterparts in Congress to help reinforce Canada's position with respect to NAFTA negotiations.

The other is the benefit to Parliament itself as an institution. The people-to-people ties between parliaments, national assemblies, and Congress can reinforce Canada's diplomatic missions, hence advancing Canada's interests in trade, security, economic development, and global issues that compel the kind of cross-border, cross-boundary issues around the environment, migration, and health, to name a few.

It's worth noting that last year's increase in the JIC envelope from \$3.5 million to \$4.5 million represented only a 3.2% increase from JIC's stable budget, back as late as 2007. That's a 3.2% increase in the space of 10 years. This is with a larger House of Commons, 40 or more new senators, and of course the usual increases in costs, air travel in particular. Air travel represents about 70% of the cost of activities across the year.

The other key point is that the associations are rarely known—in fact, have not been known—to spend all of the money they have been allocated. I brought a chart with me. You can have a look. You'll see the top line is the allocated budget for the 13 associations. The bottom line is the red line that you'll see represents, if you will, the shortfall. The difference between the two lines effectively

represents the lapsed funding in each year. There are a number of reasons that the associations don't use all the funding that they've been allocated. You'll notice the two dips, for example, in 2011 and 2015. They represent election years. In an election year, bilateral travel can't even occur during writ periods, so this kind of spending is much less. The bottom line is across 10 years; \$5.6 million of spending that was allocated to the associations was not used.

Even in the last five years, when the spending envelope was less, on an average, the associations lapsed approximately \$322,000 a year over the last five years up until the current year.

What this tells JIC is that we have some work to do with the associations in helping them to better utilize the dollars they have been allocated. One could make a very strong argument that, because they're only using, essentially, 85% of what they're being allocated, we have the ability to work with them more closely to find efficiencies and better planning that might help them utilize the existing funds that have been committed to them. That's an exercise that we're prepared to undertake.

I'd also add that, during this past year, JIC has completed a thorough five-year review. Under its mandate, we have to review JIC's operations every five years. Scott Simms headed the subcommittee to do just that. It was very thorough and consensus-based, reaching out to all stakeholders to put a very thorough analysis of what JIC should look to do to improve its operations, accountability, efficiencies, and so on. We'll be in a better position to talk about some of those measures when we report to your board in the fall of next year.

Accordingly, we arrive at the spot where we would like to finalize by saying that we would still request that your board approve the permanent funding for IIA, the three full-time equivalents, the \$313,145 effective April 1, 2018, and that of course will be with the 70-30 split with the Senate. That's the ratio around which that \$313,145 would be split, subject to the following conditions:

The first is that the JIC envelope for next year, 2018-19, be reduced by the same amount, effectively representing a transfer, if you will, from the JIC envelope to IIA to support those dollars.

The second is that, upon completion of our current 2017-18 fiscal year and when we have our annual report ready mid-year in 2019, we'd like to come back to the board and essentially give a full synopsis of how that year went with the larger funding envelope. We will be in a better position to speak to the kind of things that were realized, the number of activities that were increased, the number of delegations, any efficiencies realized, and also any of the measures we have taken to improve some of those operations as well.

• (1130)

With that, I would be delighted to take your questions.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much, Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

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

Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

I am very pleased to see that the Joint Interparliamentary Council will actually use the money it has already been given to carry out administrative tasks. Although we are fully aware that the workload of employees is heavy and that additional positions are needed, we don't see how the employer would pay additional amounts when funding has already been increased. That was our concern at the last meeting.

I think this is important. I am pleased that you are not looking at spending a cent more, but at us having an administrative framework for those travel issues, a more effective and less demanding framework for the few employees assigned to this area.

Congratulations on the proposal to use the existing money to improve the administrative framework.

[*English*]

The other issue that you raised is an important one. I think JIC has handled half of the question. What you've done is talk about a mandatory process with the committee, that parliamentary group, to look at options around identifying alternative delegates, reducing the size of the delegation, or cancelling the trip. That is the process, and it's welcome. However, it doesn't deal with, I think, the heart of the problem, which is having a foreign government determine what the delegation is that is coming from Canada. That is something which I think JIC needs to deal with.

I think that, in principle, there has to be a belief that the delegations that we send abroad are delegations that represent Canada, and that they should not be subject to a veto by a foreign government. That's the problem here. I don't think that JIC has dealt with that. Now you could say that the process means that there is that one-off consideration. However, I think there'll be some inconsistencies, and that will lead to similar kinds of problems as we've seen in the past.

My point is that I think that JIC needs to seriously consider that, as a principle, Canadian delegations going abroad are chosen by Canadian parliamentarians and by Canadian groups and should not be subject to veto by any foreign government. In a sense, it's a question of privilege. If it means when we're going abroad, criticizing—justly—another government for human rights abuses or other issues that come up, that that government then has the ability to determine which parliamentarians go, what it does is it circumscribes our ability to represent our country and represent our constituents. It's a serious issue. I don't believe that JIC has fully dealt with it yet. This is an important step, but it hasn't fully dealt with the issue.

● (1135)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Mr. Julian, and for your earlier comments as well.

With regard to the visa issue, you may know that, of course, for countries that are visiting Canada and require a visa, Canada also denies visa applications, denies visas for intended visitors coming on inbound trips. So, in a fashion, we do the same as some foreign destinations or foreign missions might do to Canadian delegates intending to travel there. It's not that that solves the problem, but it is the nature of the work.

There are a number of reasons why an application may be denied. It's up to the country how it designs its visa application and what kind of information it requires. If there are problems or shortfalls in the application, for example, that may result in a denial that might be readily addressed in time to allow this to go forward. The difficulty is that one can't anticipate what the circumstances may be that result in a visa denial. That's why we're suggesting that, first things first, the executive committee, as a whole of that association, has to respond, take up the matter, and decide based on the circumstances what option it should deploy.

However, I do appreciate your thoughtful comments on this. This is something that we would be happy to take up further with the associations. It is something that we would need to speak with the associations collaboratively on. They ultimately are the organizations that take responsibility for these missions.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

Mr. Rodriguez.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Chief Government Whip): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

I understand that additional resources are absolutely necessary. That's why you are here before us once again. We agree on that.

We also appreciate the fact that you are showing flexibility within the budget, which has already been increased. What I did not understand is the impact it will have. Do you already know how you will be reducing your expenses by \$300,000? Will it be by cutting programs, travel or support to associations?

[*English*]

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Essentially, what we have now are nine clerks and administrative assistants who cover 13 associations. We have no one on the team who manages communications for the 13 associations, that is to say, the external communications, website, and other resources that are needed. Parliamentarians themselves have asked that we step up our game in terms of giving the members and senators who participate in these activities the chance to communicate that externally. There's very little to it. That would be the one person who would be additional to the two clerks.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I apologize, I may have misspoken.

I agree about the resources. I don't doubt that. We trust you.

I just want to know what you will be cutting to free up \$300,000 from your budget.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I'm sorry, I did not understand your question.

[English]

Frankly, the specific reason to grow the number of staff in this area is really to address the difficulties with overtime costs. Compensatory leave numbers are higher than they should be in this department. There is considerable strain on the existing staff to be able to keep up with the demands of this department, leaving them in some cases unable to even address some of their work in other corporate projects across the team at IIA.

By adding these three staff, we'll get communications, and we'll have additional support for activities. It should be noted, as I think you saw in our last meeting, that even in this current fiscal year, activities, in terms of the number of trips going outbound, are up by 27%, with the same crew managing all of that work.

Because of that additional strain, we're seeing some negative impacts on staffing, and these additional staff would be helpful in addressing that.

• (1140)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Madam Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you very much.

Oh, sorry, were you not finished?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I had another question. He didn't answer my question.

Hon. Candice Bergen: What's your question?

Hon. Geoff Regan: We have some discussion about whether Mr. Rodriguez had finished.

[Translation]

Mr. Rodriguez, do you have anything else to add?

[English]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Here's my question. In the request for supplementary funds, you know exactly what you wanted that million for. Now you have to take \$300,000 out of that. Where?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you for that.

Yes, you're right. The total envelope will fall from \$4.5 million down to \$4.2 million. What it will mean initially is that when we allocate funds to the associations, we'll have \$300,000 less to allocate initially. JIC has decided to take that matter forward with the associations.

I spoke earlier about the amount of lapsed funding. They've only been able to spend 85% of what they're given already, so we have some room to work with them to see that they meet their objectives. Perhaps with some better planning, better utilization of booking flights earlier, and other other things we can do, we can effectively give them the same amount of activity by better utilizing the full envelope, the full allocation that they have been given.

We'll make that case. We believe that the room is still there to allow them to meet their needs. I should say that they always ask for about 70% more than what we can give them, so the demand is always higher than what we allocate. This is normal. But even with what we do finalize for their funding envelope, there is room to be able to see the full utilization of their budget, if you will.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: My apologies for not understanding the direction—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, no. It's fine. We're clear. Thank you very much.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Okay, now I can move on.

Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen: We want to make sure Pablo's happy.

Thank you very much for that presentation. I was one of the members. I think we were all concerned about additional money being provided when the increase had already been so substantial. After hearing your presentation and the option that you've given to us, I would be very supportive of that. That way, we're not seeing additional money spent, and the money that has already been given to JIC will be used to help with the additional staff.

On the visa issue, I'm wondering if it would be considered that the three options that each association is going to be asked to consider might be a little bit more prescribed. My concern, based on my personal experience, is that when you have a country that doesn't allow its own citizens to express dissent, when you have a country—in this case it is China—that abuses human rights, that doesn't have freedom of the press and the freedoms that many of the other countries that we visit do espouse, I would say that these associations have a greater responsibility to look at the reason that a visa might be denied and to take that into consideration.

To Peter's point that a certain MP may be targeted because the MP spoke out against that country's human rights violations, that may be part of the consideration for sending a strong signal and cancelling the trip altogether as opposed to a situation where, due to an administrative error, for example, the member himself or herself felt that the denial was justified, that, I think, should be taken into consideration. However, when the member, a duly elected member of Parliament who is elected to that association and chosen for that trip, feels that his or her rights were denied and privileges breached, I would think that should then be part of the decision.

Maybe the instructions to the association should be a little more prescribed and more direct, so that there is no room for interpretation. I think that those factors need to be taken into consideration.

• (1145)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I couldn't agree more. To be honest, this is exactly the kind of conversation that we, as JIC, would expect to be had between those delegates affected by a denial and the executive itself. That's exactly where that discussion needs to take place. We'll take your and Mr. Julian's comments under advisement on this and go back and work that into.... Part of our work in the next several months is going to be strengthening our financial and operating guidelines for all of these matters, frankly. It will be the most thorough, rigorous look at these guidelines since about 2005.

We have our work cut out for us, and your comments today will be helpful in getting this in the right direction. We'll be able to report back on that next fall.

Hon. Geoff Regan: This has been an important, valuable, and worthwhile conversation, Mr. Stanton. Thank you very much, Madame Labrecque-Riel.

Before I let you go, I will ask the board if it is the will of the board to approve these estimates on the conditions expressed.

Mr. Peter Julian: Certainly from my standpoint, Mr. Speaker, we don't actually have anything written. It would be helpful to have a written motion to that effect. Mr. Stanton talked about approving funding within the original allocation and about coming back to the BOIE at some point next fall, but it would be helpful to be clear about what we're approving.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Let me read to you what we're being asked to approve and get your reaction and your will: That the Board of Internal Economy approve a permanent transfer of \$219,201 from the parliamentary associations funding envelope to the House administration program activity. This transfer would be used to fund human resources with the international and interparliamentary affairs directorate. This represents the House of Commons' share as per the 70%-30% formula for the 2018-19 fiscal year and subsequent years.

Is that the only thing you are actually looking for today?

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons):

That would be for the funding portion.

Hon. Geoff Regan: In terms of the request we saw previously, that's not really before us now. Is that correct?

Mr. Michel Patrice: That's right.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

Is it the will of the board to accept this?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan: We will now welcome Daniel Paquette, Chief Financial Officer, and José Fernandez, Deputy Chief Financial Officer, to discuss the proposed 2018-2019 main estimates.

[English]

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm here today to look to obtain the approval of the board for the proposed 2018-19 main estimates.

The main estimates of the Government of Canada are tabled annually in Parliament and present the estimates of spending plans for the upcoming fiscal year. According to the Parliament of Canada Act, the House of Commons must compile its expenditure estimates for the upcoming fiscal year and submit these items to the Treasury Board for their tabling along with the main estimates of the Government of Canada.

The main estimates for the House of Commons include estimates for the statutory and voted expenditures. The statutory expenditures relate to the salaries and allowances of members and House officers, contributions to the members of Parliament retirement allowances, as well as some of the related contributions to the employee benefits plan.

The voted expenditures relate mainly to the expenditures of members and House officers, committees, parliamentary associations, as well as the expenditures for the administration, which is in support of the members and House officers.

The total proposed 2018-19 main estimates for the House of Commons that are being sought is \$507 million, which represents a net decrease of \$4 million over the 2017-18 total appropriation to date.

If I look at the larger portion of this variation, it is mainly due to a decrease of \$4.8 million, and the proposed items that are included in this list have all been approved and discussed here at the board at different times. The in-year portion of these projects for certain of the items had also been proposed last month and discussed during our supplementary estimates.

To highlight some of these, there was the investments and expenditures required for the long-term vision and plan relating to the facilities, assets, campus-wide resource impact, and the information technology systems relating to that major project. There's also the food service modernization and optimization of their services. There's the digital strategy to modernize the delivery of parliamentary information.

These large investments were offset by some of the in-year temporary funding for particular projects, such as our security enhancement and our 2016-17 carry-forward.

In addition, in this submission, we are also looking for the approval to include the amount of \$900,000 to support the office of the new deputy clerk, administration.

Finally, there's a technical adjustment that is included in the proposed main estimates to reflect the revised Treasury Board mandated rate for the employee benefits program, which is a reduction of about \$1.6 million.

If you look at page 3 of your submission, we do have the main estimates allocated between two program activities. It's just to reiterate the decision that has just been made by the board will be reflected in these two subtotals, the transfer from members and House officers program activity to the House administration, that we will transfer the \$219,000, but the total request of main estimates will remain the same. When we do our submission to the Treasury Board, it will reflect the decision that the board has just taken.

It is recommended that the board approve the 2018-19 main estimates for the House of Commons in the amount of \$507 million. I am open to any questions you may have relating to this submission.

• (1150)

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Rodriguez.

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

I'm not comfortable, and I'm going to make a general comment again. With all due respect, Mr. Paquette, you did not speak French at all.

I understand that the amount of \$925,000 must really be used to create a new Office of the Deputy Clerk, Administration, and for some employees. So we are creating the Office of the Deputy Clerk. Is that correct?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Yes.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Why exactly do we have to create it?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: I will let—

[*English*]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Let me just say that given my role as Speaker and head of the administration, the Clerk consulted with me on this matter. This would be a typical approach with a change of this nature, for him to consult with me. I approved the modified structure and the appointment of the deputy clerk, administration. I believe this will allow the administration to continue to provide excellent service to members and to enhance that service. Of course, when I'm talking to groups that come to Parliament, I talk about the fact that the reason the administration provides services to members is so that they can serve their constituents and Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: So we're talking about five people, including the deputy clerk.

With respect to the 2017-2018 appropriations, we are talking about \$511,000,000. Is that correct?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Yes.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Considering where we are for this year, I would like to know whether you are going to spend all those funds. Will you carry some over?

Can you give me an overview of the situation?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: We are realistic. We will not be spending all the funds. Given the nature and number of parliamentary activities of the MPs we must support as an administration, they vary from year to year. We must also take into consideration the number of members sitting in the House for some time. As a result of the recent by-elections, we did not have to provide support to all the MPs and offices for a certain period of time. We always end up with a surplus because of reductions, or activities that did not take place.

Having said that, I think it's very important that the funding be available to support the activities and members as if the entire House sat for the entire period. We have systems and practices in place to ensure that our funds are used to support parliamentary activities and that, if there is a surplus, it is returned to the central account. In some cases, a small portion of up to 5% of our voted appropriations may be transferred to the subsequent year.

• (1155)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

[*English*]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to pick up on the point that Mr. Rodriguez made. As we know, our administration is bilingual and the presentations must

be in both official languages. I think that goes without saying, and Mr. Rodriguez and I will continue to raise this point at the BOIE, although we hope that today will be the last time.

I would like to talk about the negotiations being held with our parliamentary protective service. Those people have been without a contract since last March. A budget may have been established before I became a member of the Board of Internal Economy, but no budget seems to have been projected in the main estimates to settle those negotiations. Could you tell me what is happening with those negotiations, which hopefully will end soon?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Since 2015-2016, the security organization has been a completely separate entity. The portions of the budget earmarked for this purpose have been transferred to the new entity, which is accountable for its budgets, operations and activities related to the security of the organization. That group is no longer part of the House of Commons administration.

Mr. Peter Julian: Where does the budget for protective services come from?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: They have their own budget, their own powers and their own parliamentary appropriations.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Who is the boss?

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Rodriguez asked the question I had in mind.

Who is the supervisor? Who is responsible for those services?

[*English*]

Hon. Geoff Regan: The director of PPS is the person responsible. PPS reports to Parliament and gets funding from Parliament. As you know, a couple of years ago, legislation created it as a separate entity under the director of PPS. She is responsible for those negotiations. You will recall that she appeared before the procedure and House affairs committee earlier this fall and talked about that fact. Perhaps you weren't aware of it, but that took place here in this room as a matter of fact.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It is much like the Library of Parliament which doesn't report to the Board of Internal Economy but to Parliament. It reports to the two Speakers, and so does she, but it gets its funding from Parliament.

Mr. Peter Julian: She reports to the two Speakers.

Hon. Geoff Regan: You recall the legislation. She reports on operational day-to-day method to the RCMP, and she also reports on general policy direction to the two Speakers. As to who is responsible for running the operation and negotiations, it is the director of PPS.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that clarification. I do feel very strongly, as I think a lot of parliamentarians do, that we need to have a contract and a resolution. It's been since the month of March that Parliamentary Protective Services has not had a contract. We recall the bravery. Some people were in this room; we were across the hall on October 22, 2014.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I appreciate that, but the important point is that it's not within the purview of this board. That's an absolutely vital point to understand.

Mr. Peter Julian: I do understand. I did want to make the comment just the same. Since we're in a public meeting, I think it's important to stress the importance of resolving that negotiation. I think all parliamentarians would welcome that resolution.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Thank you.

I have a brief question, but before that, I guess I want to be the contrarian.

Thank you for your presentation, and I reiterate that we are a bilingual country and that you have the right to present in English, French, or both. I appreciate that. I wanted you to know that's how I feel.

My question has to do with the new position, the deputy clerk. Thank you for your explanation. Absolutely, the service that is provided helps us to do our jobs.

Are there additional responsibilities that were newly undertaken? I'm still not quite clear why this position had to be created with an additional, it looks like, \$1 million. I'm just wondering if there was something—

• (1200)

Hon. Geoff Regan: The key is to have—

Hon. Candice Bergen: Sorry. Clearly, it was done before. Everything was done previously without that position.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I guess what I can say is that the key, from my perspective, was to ensure we had a very good administrative process.

Perhaps the Clerk would like to add to that.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): When I first came here, it was clear that procedural services were operating properly, because they had a deputy clerk of procedure who was coordinating all of the activities within the procedural service.

I wanted to see, and thought it was necessary to have, the same kind of supervision and coordination built into the corporate services that provide support to the members. It seemed to me that creating the position of deputy clerk of administration was one effective way to ensure that would be done.

We have now an operation that becomes more complex. We have 338 members. We're coordinating the LTVP. We're introducing new computer systems to enhance the kinds of services we can provide to members. It seems to me that, if we're going to be effective, we have to coordinate that work.

To coordinate that work, we need to have somebody who is more involved at a supervisory level, overarching all of the corporate services, in the same way that we do for the procedural services, to enhance, as I say, their coordination and the harmony of the work they do. For me, it seemed pretty clear-cut that having a deputy clerk of administration would be an effective way to better ensure that coordination.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Thank you very much for that explanation.

I have one other question. Can you anticipate that there's going to be additional money asked for later on in the year, more carry-forward?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: At this point, there are no projects in the queue looking to come forward to ask for additional money. There will be, obviously, as I've already mentioned—not spending the full money—a carry-forward brought into the next fiscal year. We'll be at the point, when we do the supplementary estimates (B) next year, of asking for that authority to transfer those.

Given the trend over the last couple of years, the significance and magnitude of the projects that we have put on the block and need to manage and the move to the West Block, we're also really trying to focus on those initiatives so that we're successful at them and don't have to keep coming back for additional end growth. We're going to be limiting, as much as possible, the need to come back here, and we're going to focus on those very large initiatives that you approved in the last couple of meetings.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. LeBlanc, go ahead.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I will ask the following question because it is important for everyone to understand.

The budgets of members and House officers have gone up very slightly. Does the increase correspond to the consumer price index you have previously set?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Yes.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: So it's fixed. The index was discretionary and it was the best way to go. I remember other discussions with colleagues, saying that this was the best way to ensure that the staff working for us, both in our ridings and in Ottawa, benefit from a salary increase commensurate with that index. It was a way to give this opportunity to members.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: That's right. In terms of members' allowances, the purpose of the index is to ensure stability, whereas the salaries of employees in your constituency offices are at your discretion.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Had the budgets not increased according to the index, theoretically, it would not have been possible to find the money to increase employees' salaries.

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

• (1205)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Paquette and Mr. Fernandez, thank you very much for being here.

Is it the pleasure of the board to approve the proposed 2018-2019 main estimates?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

Mr. Paquette and Mr. Fernandez, we will now continue our discussion with you about the modernization of policies in the Members' Allowances and Services Manual and the By-Laws of the Board of Internal Economy.

I see that Mr. Parent has joined you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Parent.

Mr. Paquette, the floor is yours.

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

[*English*]

I'm pleased to be here today to present a submission on behalf of the House administration seeking the board's approval to modernize certain policies in the "Members' Allowances and Services Manual". Prior to elaborating on the submission, I'd like to make a few comments to provide a brief overview of the three elements that provide that authority for the financial administrative matters related to members, House officers, and the House of Commons.

The Parliament of Canada Act grants the board the authority for the financial administrative matters with respect to members and the House of Commons, its premises, its service, and the staff. Under the authority of the act, the governance and administrative bylaws and the members' bylaw govern the use of funds, goods, services, and premises made available to members to carry out their parliamentary function. To serve as a foundation for the members, the "Members' Allowances and Services Manual" is made available to Canadians on the House of Commons website. The "Members' Allowances and Services Manual", commonly known as the MAS, is a comprehensive guide to policies approved by the board relating to the budgets, the allowances, and the services for members, House officers, and research, in support of their parliamentary function.

As part of the ongoing commitment to ensure excellence in the delivery of services to members, the House administration periodically reviews the MAS and the members' bylaws to respond to feedback received regarding evolving requirements in the discharge of their parliamentary function. The proposed changes included in the submission aim to create greater flexibility to meet the members' requirements in fulfilling their parliamentary functions and reduce some of that administrative burden for members and House officers in managing the resources that are provided to them.

[*Translation*]

I am convinced that these changes will positively impact the way in which members provide services to their constituents in the discharge of their parliamentary functions and the ability of House officers to support their caucuses.

We recognize that issues faced by members are becoming more complex with the advancement of the technology and the particularities that characterize each constituency, requiring forward-looking, integrated and flexible policy alternatives.

[*English*]

With this in mind, the submission aims to reflect some of the current business realities and changing needs for members, ensuring that the "Members' Allowances and Services Manual" remains relevant. Furthermore, I want to add that we continue to work on

assessing other aspects of the manual to make sure that it does stay relevant going forward.

[*Translation*]

I would like to take only a few minutes to present the recommendations outlined in the brief, in order to allow BOIE members to ask questions.

In terms of the special accommodations for members, it is recommended that the current policy be amended to allow for an enhanced consideration of requests related to special circumstances that may affect members' ability to fulfill their parliamentary functions. The scope of this amendment would not be limited to medical cases. It would also take into account each member's specific personal circumstances.

The Chief Human Resources Officer will continue to report annually on the funding provided to address members' needs.

[*English*]

Next, to improve the current support offered to families of deceased members, it is recommended that the policy be amended to include two round trips to Ottawa for each of the spouse, children, and two additional travellers; allow for the reimbursement of accommodation, meals, incidental expenses for the period not exceeding five days per trip; increase the time period for the employee assistance program for the former member's spouse and dependants from six to 12 months; and to quickly adapt to particular situations under these unique circumstances, allow the chief human resources officer to be provided with the ability to use the funds established for the special accommodation for members to reimburse additional reasonable expenses incurred in relation to the death of the member. These amendments would improve the existing support offered in order to better recognize the needs of a member's bereaved family to relocate the former member's household and personal effects following the death of a member.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

The third recommendation in the presentation is to clarify the policy on interpretation services, specifically simultaneous interpretation for national caucus meetings.

Those expenses recognize the fundamental right to communicate in both official languages and are charged to a House central budget. Although those services are mainly provided by the translation bureau, we propose changing the policy when the services of external or contractual interpreters are used.

In particular, when meetings are held outside the National Capital Region, we suggest that travel expenses incurred by external interpreters be charged to the House officer's office budget.

[English]

The fourth recommendation relates to the sign language interpretation service required by members to communicate with hearing-impaired constituents. We've proposed to amend the policy to recognize that these expenses are related to the member's parliamentary function and as such should only be an allowable expense against the member's office budget.

[Translation]

With respect to the use of an official vehicle, we recognize that, rather than using two vehicles, it may be more practical for House officers provided with an official vehicle by the House for their parliamentary functions, to use that vehicle for personal purposes when it is not required for official business.

To this end, the proposal is to introduce a policy ensuring that the costs associated with the personal use of vehicles are reimbursed, using the kilometre rate set by the board and adjusted to take into consideration direct costs related to maintaining and using that vehicle.

[English]

The next recommendation is for the point of contact information on the member's advertisement. It is recommended that the mandatory requirement for a member to include their points of contact on ads be eliminated, but that the member clearly still indicate that the advertisement is done in their capacity as a member of Parliament.

These amendments recognize that members' means and purpose for communicating with constituents have evolved over time and that technology allows them to easily use search engines to find members' points of contact. Therefore, a more flexible approach is to allow the members to determine at their own discretion when it is necessary to provide their contact information in their advertisement, whether to serve the purpose of announcing a town hall, for example, or to promote the support they provide to their constituents, or even to issue congratulatory messages.

The next recommendation is for the small token items, which are items of minimal value provided in their capacity as a member of Parliament, such as pens or magnets. It is recommended that the advertising and hospitality policy be amended to allow for the purchase of these small token items solely to be eligible to be charged against their advertising limit rather than being charged to their hospitality limit.

These changes are intended to be effective as of April 1, 2018, to allow us to make the necessary changes for the members' expenditure reports, which are published each quarter on the Parliament of Canada website, and the associated systems and processes that we'll need to adapt.

This amendment will better reflect the intended purpose of the hospitality policy, as it relates to the use of parliamentary resources for courtesy and protocol functions.

[Translation]

In terms of meal tickets, some members participate in events in their communities, which allows them to communicate with many

constituents in the same place. However, in the event that food is provided, there are often costs associated with those events that result in the members purchasing meal tickets.

With this in mind, it is recommended that the board formally introduce a limit for the purchase of meal tickets. This amendment confirms a practice that has been used by the House administration for many years and currently applies a limit of \$125 per ticket. This limit will be reviewed periodically by the Chief Financial Officer, using the dinner per diem approved by the board. We will adjust our multiplying factor to take into consideration the protocol nature of the events.

[English]

Next, on the limits of the purchase of assets, it is proposed to amend the policy to allow the CFO to adjust the maximum allowable purchase price, quantity, or type of assets based on elements such as the members' office equipment standard, technology evolution, and market value. For example, we will continue to apply the board's decision from 2006 that had us adjust the kilometre rate and per diems based on the Treasury Board rates without needing to come back to the board to do this. That means this type of approach will be now integrated with our bylaws instead of having to be revisited every time.

● (1215)

In addition, we propose to amend the policy to allow the CFO to assess and permit the purchase of assets beyond these limits, where members have demonstrated reasonable and justifiable needs supported by written justification. Decisions in this regard will be made by applying the guiding principles previously approved by the board to manage assets and may include factors such as regional or special circumstances and availability of assets within the member's constituency. The CFO will provide annually to the board members a summary of the reports of the rates and limits set by the CFO as well as circumstances under which they have been applied.

These amendments recognize that the limits currently specified for the assets no longer respond to today's reality and that needs are changing rapidly and greater flexibility is necessary to support the members' parliamentary function in a timely manner.

[Translation]

Finally, with respect to the maximum rate of annual remuneration for members' employees, it is proposed that the policy be amended to allow the Chief Human Resources Officer to change the maximum rate of annual remuneration for members' employees based on major wage settlements reached by major groups across Canada. The same index is used to establish members' allowances.

The purpose of this proposal is to take a consistent and fair approach to changing the limit and to assist members in attracting and retaining skilled employees to support them in carrying out their parliamentary functions.

[English]

I hope this brief explanation of the submission provides an overview of the recommendations of the House administration, which aim to better support evolving requirements of members and House officers in the discharge of their parliamentary functions by creating greater flexibility and by reducing some of the administrative burden.

I trust that these proposed modifications address some of the feedback received from members and House officers. The House administration is now seeking the board's approval of these recommendations and the modification of the 10 policies within the submissions that are in our "Members' Allowances and Services Manual" and in the related bylaws.

We are open to taking any questions you may have on these topics.

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you, Mr. Paquette.

Mr. Rodriguez, the floor is yours.

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

That seems like common sense to me. You are basically doing some tweaking and making some changes. Once again, I think it's perfectly reasonable.

I would like to ask you two quick questions.

When will it take effect? For example, when I go to caucus, I will tell my colleagues that they no longer need to include as much detail about the advertising budget.

Is there a financial impact or not? Basically, money within the budget is being reallocated.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: There is no financial impact right now. It is included in existing envelopes, be they central funds or specific funds related to the operating budgets for each item.

Everything will come into effect as soon as you approve the changes, with the exception of minor changes to our disclosure system.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: So it could be done today.

Okay, thank you.

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Overall, I also think this makes sense in the event of the death of a member. I was first elected 13 years ago. Unfortunately, several members have died since.

It is unfortunate that it has been difficult to support the families of the members to date. I think this is important. Changing the policy is a sign of respect for the members and their families.

There are also special accommodations for members. Some members sometimes have problems, and I think it's important to help them, especially when it comes to addiction issues. It's better than always bringing these issues back to the Board of Internal Economy.

Those are important aspects, but I would like to voice a concern.

[English]

It is on the question of sign language interpretation services. Having worked with the deaf community before I was elected, I think this is really a question of accessibility. I have events all the time with sign language interpreters, and I find this to be an essential question of accessibility for deaf Canadians, which is a responsibility of all members of Parliament.

This would actually reduce access to sign language interpretation. I don't see that as a positive thing. I see that as a negative. We should be talking about expanding accessibility so that deaf Canadians can attend these events. By limiting it to the MOB, as opposed to having the option of going through House officers as well, it will mean ultimately that fewer members will provide sign language interpretation at their events, which means less accessibility. I have real difficulties with that.

I don't have any difficulties with any of the other changes. If we could set that one aside and consider it at a future BOIE, I would feel much more comfortable. That issue probably needs to be discussed at the BOIE, but I would suggest taking a different tack so that we are encouraging sign language interpretation for our deaf constituents.

• (1220)

Hon. Geoff Regan: To be clear, as I understand it, until now if members wanted to have sign language interpretation, they had to get approval from their whip to do so. That's what I've been advised.

Maybe, Monsieur Paquette, you could explain.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: There were two options. One of them was to go to their whip and have the whip cover it out of the House officer budget, and the other was to pay it right now out of their MOB.

Often when we look at some of these, there are principles behind them to make sure that it is equitable and fair for all MPs. Having had that extra step, for some MPs maybe having access to the whip's budget, or not, was not necessarily fair for all the MPs in the House. It was a question of trying to come up...and having that comment and addressing that, and then clarifying that it is there and it is an allowable expense. That was one of the big clarifications we were adding, that incurring these costs is part of your parliamentary function and it is okay to charge it to the MOB.

Sometimes charging it or needing to talk to your whip created confusion: was it or was it not an allowable expense?

Hon. Geoff Regan: Clearly the intent of the administration is to make it easier, but you still see a challenge here for members, so why don't you go ahead because I think we could potentially look to putting it aside.

Mr. Peter Julian: Since I started here as a member of Parliament I have regularly been using sign language interpretation coming out of my MOB. A neighbouring member of Parliament who might not do that then has a larger budget, so I have been able to go to my whip on occasion and say, "Look, in terms of the budget, I still want to provide accessibility. Are you able to provide funding?" This reduces the pool.

I understand the argument of being fair to all members of Parliament. This is a question of being fair to all Canadians, and deaf Canadians are often excluded from the kinds of events that they should have accessibility to. That is why we have the principle of having QSL as part of our parliamentary television broadcasting. The idea is to provide accessibility to deaf Canadians.

This reduces accessibility and that's why I'd suggest that we set it aside and we can come back to it at a future BOIE, but I would suggest a different approach that would actually enhance and encourage, hopefully, accessibility for members of Parliament to the deaf community as opposed to reducing it, which is what this does.

Hon. Geoff Regan: That's a valuable experience for us to have before us so if members agree, we can set this aspect of your question aside, and the administration will look at this and come back with another proposal in relation to this matter if necessary.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: And the rest is approved.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Before we come to the conclusion that Monsieur LeBlanc suggests, why don't I go to Ms. Bergen?

Hon. Candice Bergen: I have just a very quick question, and I've actually had this for a while.

It's around designated travellers. Is that something you would have some flexibility on when you want to be able to have these special accommodations for members? I think one of the examples I'd heard was if a member has some small children and needed to have additional people travelling with them.

Overall can you just explain to me the whole policy that you can only change your designated traveller once a year? I'm thinking specifically for members who don't have a spouse and they have grown family members—children, for example, or a parent. They are not able to have those family members come to see them because they obviously aren't covered under dependants' travel points. They can't actually have them as a designated traveller because they can only make that happen once a year.

Can you explain to me the whole policy around that?

•(1225)

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Okay, correct me if I go.... José is a lot more familiar with the policy than I am.

The intent of the designated traveller was to be able to have somebody who could travel for you and represent you, not just to come back to see you. We do have the other abilities when we come to the flexibility for family reunification for dependent children and for your spouse to come to join you at your secondary residence, and they are covered under the current point system, so the flexibility is to come up....

Hon. Geoff Regan: If Ms. Bergen will allow, we'll go to Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Yes, because I have caused more questions because I don't think we ever.... I never understood that someone...to represent me and to be travelling someplace I wasn't able to be.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: I will get to the exact definition and we'll make sure that we avoid the confusion that we're creating here.

Hon. Candice Bergen: That's a big shift.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: The flexibility. There was a reason.... I'd have to go back and actually look at the assessment and why the parameters were put in that strictly. We always come back and look at why they are in the MAS, why there are parameters there. There was an intent. I don't have those off the top of my head right now.

If we look at it right now, members may designate one person, other than one of their employees or another member who is not their spouse.

It is confusing, so I guess—

Hon. Geoff Regan: Excuse me.

Order. This is very—

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Yes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: That is odd; that is strange wording.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Yes.

An hon. member: We should have a bit more discussion around

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think we had better have a list.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: We can come back and consult with the members of the board and really understand who you are looking for, what is the profile, to make sure that we properly define what the role of this is and how it can be used, so that we adjust it to suit your needs. I mean, that's what the guide is here for; it's to help the administration support you in your parliamentary functions.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I have to admit that it's a surprise to me that the designated traveller part isn't originally about spouse, and so forth. At any rate, I think we can set this aside.

Mr. Paquette, I would ask you to come back with a full brief on this issue.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Yes, I'll come back with that.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Two issues are being put aside.

Is there anything else, other than the sign language and the designated traveller, which isn't included on the list on the slide in front of us, but it was part of the presentation? Those two issues we'll put aside.

Other than that, is the request for modernization of these policies approved—the other aspects?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, sir.

I also thank the members of the Board of Internal Economy.

[*English*]

This meeting is adjourned.

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