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Board of Internal Economy

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• (1105)

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): We have everyone here, so we'll get this meeting started. The agenda is before you.

This is meeting number 16 of the Board of Internal Economy. Welcome.

We'll start with the minutes of the previous meeting. Is everything in order? Are there any comments?

If everything is fine and we're all in accordance, we'll move on to item number 2.

[*Translation*]

Item number 2 is called "Business arising from previous meeting." Are there any comments or changes to be made?

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): I just want to follow up briefly on the minutes, the appendix of which deals with the statistics for pre-testing of parliamentary committee meetings and all the efforts that are being made by the House of Commons Administration to make our meetings more acceptable in terms of interpretation in both languages, whether it is from English into French or from French into English.

On the one hand, I would like to thank the Administration for keeping this dashboard, which is very revealing for me. I am really happy to see that the pre-testing is leading to improvements. Over the months, thanks to the dashboard, we have been able to see that the Administration has achieved a very interesting degree of efficiency in facilitating the interpretation and the participation of witnesses, so that they are heard in both languages. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Administration for providing us with this data, which allows us to see the improvements.

On the other hand, since these improvements are so interesting, I would like us to be able to communicate them to the Liaison Committee so that the chairs are also aware of all the efforts that are being made, particularly with regard to the percentages of incidents or events that result in meetings being extended. All committee chairs must be made particularly aware of this fact. If the Board of Internal Economy agrees, I would propose that we make these documents accessible to the chairs of all parliamentary committees.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is everyone in agreement?

No one tells me otherwise.

[*English*]

Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

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

I fully agree with sharing this data. We have indeed put in place some arrangements that have greatly improved the situation. There is still work to be done, of course, but I think it is important that this information is passed on to the chairs of the committees and the Liaison Committee. Indeed, this information is important.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip): Thanks.

With the sort of analysis that was done, I noted that it was focused on instances and some of the numbers. I have two questions. First of all, I notice that the largest category was "not significant" as a reason. I'm not sure what would fall into that category. I'm curious what would fall under that category.

Secondly, I think the issue is more about the use of resources in terms of the amount of time that's used, rather than the number of instances. In many cases, when you're talking about an extended bit of debate, what you're talking about is maybe that you accommodated the full round of questioning, so the meeting went over by a few minutes. I don't think that's really what we're talking about that stretches the resources. We're talking about when there are filibusters or things like that, which drag a meeting on for hours beyond its end.

I would be really curious to see these categories broken down, rather than by instances where they have occurred, by the number of hours for which they've occurred. I think that would be far more telling in terms of what is actually a drag on the resources.

Is that something you could go back and do, to provide that information? I think that would be far more useful to both us as the board and to the committee chairs as well.

• (1110)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Who can answer that?

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): I can perhaps answer that, Mr. Speaker, and Stéphan can jump in if he likes.

Absolutely, we could provide that information. It will take a little bit of time, but certainly we could by the next board meeting, Mr. Richards. It's not something that we can generate from the system. It's something we have to do manually, but absolutely, we could.

In terms of your other question, the other category, you're right. Even though we had provided to our clerks a number of categories they could check off as to why a given committee went beyond its two-hour expected adjournment time, in many, many cases, other reasons were given.

You're right. All totalled, it came up to a significant number—24%, I believe. There were things like the time it took to transition from one panel to the other and things of that nature. Each one of those was less than 1%, but we didn't put it in the chart or the chart would have had too many bars.

Again, in terms of your other question, providing stats as to the time, we can certainly provide that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you. That would be much appreciated.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If there are no other comments or questions, we'll move on to item number 4.

Number 4 is for reimbursement of accommodations, meals and incidental expenses for self-isolation. Our presenter here will be Mr. Paquette.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Certainly, Mr. Richards, go ahead on a point of order.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just on item number 3, I know it was removed. I just wondered why. I believe it was one party that asked. I don't know if someone could provide us an update, whoever it was who asked for it to be removed, as to why it was removed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Certainly. I'll just pass it on to Mr. Patrice, who can comment on that.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): Yes, there was a request by one party, the members of the Liberal Party, to remove the item because they were not ready to proceed. After discussion with the chair of the working group, Mr. Stanton, he agreed to defer the matter to subsequent meetings.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions on number 3?

We'll move back to number 4.

[Translation]

Mr. Paquette, Ms. Laframboise, you have the floor.

[English]

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

With this submission, I am seeking the board's directions about the request made by a member for temporary exceptions to the board's bylaws and policies. The member is requesting that you temporarily allow for reimbursement of members' accommodations, meals and incidental expenses for voluntary self-isolation due

to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically when travelling between the national capital region and the constituency.

[Translation]

Existing board regulations and policies do not generally allow for members to be reimbursed for the costs they incur in quarantining themselves near their homes. Guidelines issued by provincial and territorial public health authorities generally indicate that alternative accommodation is not necessary. However, guidelines can vary considerably from one province or territory to another and tend to change very quickly. For this reason, we are consulting with you to determine if a temporary exception would be appropriate during this exceptional period.

This concludes my presentation. We can answer questions from members.

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

Mr. Rodriguez, you have the floor.

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

I have not analyzed this for hours, although I have talked to several people, but instinctively, I am opposed to this. I don't feel comfortable. It's like saying that someone can come to Ottawa, go home, rent a hotel room for a fortnight, come back to Ottawa, go home, and again, get a paid hotel room for a fortnight.

We are trying to discourage travel, that is, we are trying to limit the presence of members in the House. I think we are setting an example ourselves by limiting this presence to those who live in or around the national capital region.

I don't feel comfortable with that at all.

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

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

• (1115)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, I agree with Mr. Rodriguez on this issue. I agree with his motives and I will tell you another reason why I, for one, feel uncomfortable.

In every riding, essential workers, including nurses and orderlies, leave their homes, husbands and children to work in a hospital, a long-term care centre or a health and social service centre, and return home at the end of the day. These people are at risk because they are helping potentially sick people. They can be contaminated.

I'm not comfortable with the idea that a member of Parliament has the privilege of sparing his family by quarantining himself in a hotel room for which he'll be reimbursed when thousands of essential workers do not have that privilege. That sort of adds to my refusal to support this request and to Mr. Rodriguez's arguments. I think it's a difficult situation for everyone, both for essential workers and for members of Parliament. It is not easy to do our jobs right now. It is difficult for all our families.

So I would be quite uncomfortable to respond favourably to this request and to be granted special status.

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

From what I hear, this request is not approved. So we're going to set it aside.

Let's move on to item number 5, the reimbursement of voluntary carbon offset credits.

Mr. Paquette, you have the floor.

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

I am making a submission to obtain direction from the board on a request that has been submitted by three members of Parliament regarding the reimbursement of voluntary carbon offset credits.

Last month, the board received a letter stating that the new regulations of the Assemblée nationale du Québec allowed for the reimbursement of carbon offset credits purchased for travel between the constituency and the Assemblée nationale as well as for the energy consumption of their premises related to constituency office activities.

In their letter, the members ask the board to consider adopting similar practices for members of the House of Commons.

[English]

Under the current board bylaws and policies, members and their authorized travellers may only use travel resources provided to them in the fulfillment of their parliamentary functions. Although travel is necessary to carry out these functions, the purchase of carbon offset continues to be a voluntary measure that is not imposed by any legislation or regulation and is considered to be a traveller's personal choice.

Also, current bylaws and policies do not allow members to use goods and services provided by the House to donate to any cause or benefit, or support a third party. In 2015, the board considered a similar request at which time it determined that the purchase of carbon offsets for travel did not constitute an auditable use of House resources and would be deemed a donation. The House administration has been applying this decision since then.

Following this recent request, we are seeking the board's direction on this matter. Should the board direct the administration to consider the reimbursement of voluntary carbon emission offsets purchased by the members, then the administration would perform the needed analysis and consultation and come back to the board with the appropriate recommendation to be able to do so.

[Translation]

This concludes my presentation. We are ready to answer questions from members.

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

Are there any questions?

[English]

Are there any comments?

We have Mr. Julian and Madame DeBellefeuille.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

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

It is worthwhile, I believe, for these issues to be considered and recommendations to be made within the Board of Internal Economy. The climate crisis affects everyone. So far, I think we have not addressed the way in which members travel. This travel will likely start again later this year, once the third wave has passed.

It would be a question of determining how we can improve our policies on these issues. I think it would be important to do that analysis and to discuss it in the next few weeks or months.

• (1120)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mrs. DeBellefeuille, followed by Mr. Rodriguez.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I agree with Mr. Julian's intervention on this subject.

Today is Earth Day. What a great day to discuss a project like this! I understand the arguments and I have read the documentation. I think it is worthwhile. Between 2015 and today, the climate change situation has evolved a lot, and I think we should allow ourselves to analyze it a little more thoroughly.

For example, the members who wrote the letter mention the decision of the Assemblée nationale du Québec to certify, through a call for tenders, two or three credible organizations, within well-defined limits, to allow for the reimbursement of carbon offset credits for all travel in ridings and on Parliament Hill.

You know that the current government has promised to plant trees as a way of offsetting greenhouse gas emissions. This is just one of many ways. Many organizations can currently offset their greenhouse gas emissions by planting trees.

I know that for today, we did not have any expectations, and I do not think that members expected us to settle the debate, but rather to start a discussion to come to a good decision in future Board of Internal Economy meetings, to see how everyone can do, as a member of Parliament, to also participate individually. One way is to offset our greenhouse gas emissions. The Assemblée nationale du Québec has made a decision. We could study it carefully. There may also be other models among Five Eyes members.

I am therefore in favour of continuing our reflection on this issue.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Mr. Rodriguez, you have the floor.

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

I'm going to be a bit of a killjoy today, but at the outset, I have to say that I'm uncomfortable with this. The act of buying voluntary carbon credits is beautiful and noble, but I have always seen it as a personal sacrifice, that is, a personal initiative.

I decide to buy carbon credits because I believe in the environment, and I do. There are a lot of things that each of us does. That said, passing the bill on to the government is a bit odd. I decide to do it, I take all the credit, but it's the government that foots the bill. Do you understand what I mean?

I'm sure there are many members of the NDP, the Bloc Québécois, and the Conservative Party who take various measures. I think it's a very personal commitment. For this gesture to have value and really count, it has to mean something; there has to be money coming out of our own pocket.

Right now, we are looking at flying the flag for fighting climate change, while passing the bill on to Canadians. That is what makes me uncomfortable, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments?

So how do you want us to proceed? Opinions are divided. Since we don't have a consensus, do we leave it or do we ask for a little more information?

I see shrugs, but no more than that.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I believe that doing an analysis and gathering more information is not making a decision. It is a search for information. I think that is normal in this case.

All our decisions are taken by consensus. I fully agree with this. It is up to the administration to seek more information. I personally would like to have more information on this.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

Thank you very much for your guidance.

So we'll wait to get a little more information for next time.

Thank you very much, Mr. Julian.

We will now go in camera.

● (1125)

[*English*]

We will take five minutes for a break, and then at 11:30 we'll start again in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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