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• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I call the meeting to order.

First on the agenda we have the minutes of the previous meeting.

[*English*]

Are there any questions or comments on item number one? No.

On item number two, business arising from previous meetings, are there any questions? No.

Item number three concerns the translation bureau and resource utilization for simultaneous interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Presenting on that topic are Nathalie Laliberté and Matthew Ball.

[*English*]

I'll let you do your presentation, and I'm sure we'll have a few questions once you've finished.

Thank you.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté (Acting Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the acting chief executive officer of the translation bureau, I am happy to be here along with Matthew Ball, vice-president of service to Parliament and interpretation.

Please note that the new CEO will be appointed in the coming weeks.

Honourable members of the board, I would like to begin by assuring you that we fully understand how important the availability of quality interpretation is for Parliament to run smoothly, and how the shortage of interpreters not only impedes your meetings but makes it difficult to respect language rights.

The bureau is proud to have been able to provide essential services since the beginning of the pandemic. Our on-site interpreters responded to a 20% increase in demand for interpretation services in the House of Commons despite a 25% reduction in capacity due to a decrease in the number of suppliers.

That said, we're making every effort to cover more events. We're looking at every possible option to address the labour shortage, and we're continuing to take decisive action to ensure that we will have

more interpreters available by the beginning of the next parliamentary session.

Given the varying availability and the services they must also provide to the Senate, the Privy Council Office and other clients such as the Public Order Emergency Commission, our complement of approximately 70 staff and 60 freelance interpreters assigned to Parliament concurrently cover 57 House committee meetings per week.

[*Translation*]

We will know the results of our recent accreditation exam by the holidays and will offer a job or a contract to all successful candidates. We are currently in discussions with procurement and security screening authorities to expedite the onboarding process, so that these new interpreters can begin serving the House as soon as the new session begins on January 30.

In addition, we are working with the House administration to enable interpreters located outside parliamentary facilities to provide interpretation. As this is a new service, there are contractual and operational details to be ironed out, but by the next session, we expect that we'll be able to provide off-site interpretation for two events per day, as requested by the House administration.

While increasing our capacity, we continue to improve occupational health and safety for our interpreters, which remains our priority. Still, the best way to protect interpreters is to ensure that all meeting participants use proper microphones, a precaution that also reduces service interruptions. To this end, we request your co-operation in making the use of proper microphones mandatory.

Working conditions for interpreters are difficult, as incident reports from the last two years show. The more we improve conditions together, the better interpreters will be able to meet the needs of Parliament by providing the quality interpretation services that you have come to expect, and that you and the Canadian public deserve.

Thank you again for your support, your understanding and your patience.

Thank you, as well, to the interpreters providing today's interpretation services, Claire, Sharon and Tara.

Mr. Ball and I are now available to answer your questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

[English]

Are there questions or comments?

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Laliberté. Welcome to the Board of Internal Economy.

I have a few questions for you.

Can you refresh my memory as to when you sent your last letter to the board? I don't have it in front of me.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: The letter was signed on November 30, 2022.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I actually wanted to point out that you didn't date the letter you sent us. I don't know whether that's something you usually do.

You're saying that November 30 was the date of the letter.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: We use an electronic signature, so the letter is date-stamped when it's signed. We usually add the date as well, so it was really an oversight in this case. I take full responsibility. It's not standard practice, I assure you.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: All right.

My fellow Board of Internal Economy members know what I'm like, and they know me to be a pretty candid person. I must tell you how disappointed I was that it took you as long as it did to reply to the letter we sent the translation bureau in late September. The Board of Internal Economy has been discussing this issue for months and months. The issue is a top priority for us, one that requires urgent attention, so it's hard to understand why it took you so long to reply and, above all, to provide answers.

To this day, the interpretation capacity needed to serve a hybrid Parliament—with more than 57 events per week—is a big question mark, because we don't have a needs analysis. We wanted to understand how you go about your human resource planning, but I, personally, am still not satisfied with your answers.

Now, having heard your opening remarks, I am optimistic that you will be able to shed more light on the issue for us.

According to your written statement, you expect to have enough interpretation capacity to provide services for 59 events, up from 57, by January 30, thanks to new interpreters who will have passed the accreditation exam. Is that correct?

• (1615)

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: You asked about a number of things.

In terms of how long it took us to reply to the Board's letter, I will say that we took the time to examine the situation carefully and provide adequate answers.

Keep in mind that the translation bureau has a number of priorities. As we speak, our top two priorities are service continuity, so continuing to provide the interpretation and translation services you

are entitled to, and, of course, the health and safety of our interpreters.

At the same time, we are working on other initiatives, including increasing the number of new interpreters and carrying out research to enhance interpreter health and safety.

In light of that, we replied to the board's letter as soon as we could.

Sorry, but I forgot the rest of your question.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: In your speaking notes, it says that you are confident you will be able to provide services for two additional events per day, as requested by the House of Commons, taking into account the results of the accreditation exam, security checks for the new interpreters and so forth. That's something you commit to. Currently, you provide services for 57 events, and you are pledging that you will have interpretation capacity to cover 59 events as of January 30.

Is that correct?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Our ability to cover two more events is actually thanks to the fact that interpreters outside the parliamentary precinct will be able to provide services.

With respect to the accreditation process, we will have additional resources available to serve Parliament beginning on January 30. We will have the capacity to cover at least 59 events, but we are talking about 57 committees. We will be sharing our service availability with the House and Senate administrations, and they will determine what the priorities are, committee meetings, caucus meetings or whatever else. We will be providing our service availability to you at that time.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm not sure I understand.

Are you committing to providing coverage for 59 events thanks to new interpreters? You don't know the results of the exam yet and you don't know whether those new interpreters will choose to work at the House of Commons, committees or elsewhere. You are nevertheless committing to covering two additional events per day. Is that right?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: I'd like to clarify something, if I may.

Coverage for the two additional events will be provided by interpreters who already have bureau accreditation but do not currently work at Parliament, because they live outside the national capital region and don't want to travel to Ottawa. Those interpreters are already accredited.

Coverage for the 59 events does not include interpreters whose exams are currently being marked and who are working towards accreditation.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I see. That clears things up a bit.

The Board of Internal Economy asked for a pilot project back in the spring. In your November 30 letter, however, you say this: “Should the House decide to go forward”. I take that to mean you didn't understand the House administration's request and you are just starting to set up the pilot project. We approved the pilot project for off-site interpretation back in May, to allow accredited interpreters to provide services remotely. Your November letter makes it sound as though you are still waiting for the request. There seems to be some confusion. We have been waiting a long time to have off-site interpreters provide coverage for more events.

Why isn't it already in place? We instructed the House administration in the spring to work with the translation bureau to set that up.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: We worked with the House administration to set up the pilot. We had to conduct testing.

To your point about the confusion or miscommunication, if I can call it that, I would say that the administration wanted to know how many interpreters we could provide and we were waiting for the administration to tell us how many interpreters it needed. All of that has been clarified.

We put out a call for interest, and we have started to receive responses from interested freelancers. I can confirm that we will be able to meet the House's needs. We were asked to provide coverage for two additional events per day, from Monday to Thursday, once Parliament returns until it rises in June.

• (1620)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's great.

I have one last question.

When committees meet informally, for example, when we host international delegations, the committee clerks or chairs are often unable to get interpretation coverage, but the meetings usually take place anyways.

With your additional resources—whether off-site interpreters or new interpreters—will you have enough capacity to meet all the needs of the House and committees, including informal meetings?

Besides the two additional events you will be covering, how much extra interpretation capacity do you expect to have? I'm talking about the new interpreters who passed the exam and are in the process of being hired.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: To answer your question about how many more interpreters we will have, I would say that we are almost finished marking the accreditation exams. We should be done by the end of next week.

The accreditation exam is a pretty complex test. It's a 30-minute recording for each candidate, and we have to assess the candidate's fluency and vocabulary, the clarity of the message and other factors.

It's important to manage expectations. A total of 69 candidates took the exam—21 of them are from other countries and eight are already working for the translation bureau as interns. That means 40 new Canadian candidates took the accreditation exam, and those exams have been marked. I wouldn't want to give you any numbers

today, because I want to wait until we've finished all the marking and grading. I will say, though, that we will have more interpreters who will be able to provide coverage by the time Parliament resumes.

Successful candidates who obtain their accreditation will be offered a contract and will hopefully want to work for us. As I said in my opening remarks, we are conducting the necessary security checks and following the contracting process, but we are confident that it's going to happen. We are also planning onboarding sessions for new employees, to show them the parliamentary facilities where they will be working.

Basically, those efforts are under way, and we expect to welcome more interpreters. That said, it will be up to the House and Senate administrations to decide on the types of events to which those new interpreters will be assigned.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Excellent. Thank you.

I'll follow up during my next turn, if need be, Mr. Chair.

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

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

Thank you, Ms. Laliberté. The work you're doing is extremely important. The dedication and professionalism of the interpreters who work at the House of Commons is quite impressive. Of course, we want to ensure that their health and safety is always protected. We also want to figure out a way to address the lack of interpretation capacity we are currently facing. The fact that interpreters are being overworked is something else we are concerned about.

I want to follow up on the exam candidates. You said that 21 of them were from other countries. Did you seek out those candidates? Did you encourage them to take the exam?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: We did a lot of advertising leading up to the accreditation exam, namely through the associations and on social media. The answer to your question is yes, we did seek out the candidates.

Their exams will be marked. We are working with our colleagues in other departments to figure out how we can hire or contract people who are outside the country. As you probably know, it's an arduous process. We have to go through a lot of steps before those successful candidates can come here, so the process won't be done before Parliament resumes. It can take up to a year to hire or contract people who are abroad. That's why we marked the exams of the other candidates first.

• (1625)

Mr. Peter Julian: How many of your current interpreters are from other countries?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: I'm going to ask Mr. Ball whether he knows the answer.

Mr. Matthew Ball (Vice-President, Services to Parliament and Interpretation Sector, Translation Bureau): I couldn't say with any accuracy. I'd have to look at our personnel files to know how many exactly.

Do you mean staff interpreters?

Mr. Peter Julian: I assume you have to go through the same process as any other business. If the candidate is successful, you request a labour market impact assessment. Then, an immigration application is duly filed. You have to go through the same steps as any other business or organization dealing with a lack of skilled labour. That's why it takes at least a year before those successful candidates can start working here. Do I have that right?

Mr. Matthew Ball: Yes, it's a complex process. Hiring people who are outside the country is a complex endeavour, and many of the factors are not within the translation bureau's mandate or control. As Ms. Laliberté just said, we are working with other departments, but the fact remains, it's a long and complicated process.

Mr. Peter Julian: If I understand correctly, 40 of the candidates do not work for the translation bureau currently but are in Canada, and 33 of them passed the exam.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: No, no.

Mr. Peter Julian: You mentioned the numbers 33 and 40

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: I want to be especially careful when it comes to numbers.

I did not say how many candidates had passed the accreditation exam. I'm not in a position to get into those numbers yet.

This is what I said. Of the 69 candidates who took the accreditation exam, eight are already working for the bureau as interns—which means they are in training—and 40 live in Canada. In other words, the maximum number of prospective new Canadian interpreters is 40. However, I did not say how many of those 40 candidates passed the exam.

Mr. Peter Julian: So far, 33 of the exams have been marked.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: No. The exams of the candidates who live in Canada have been marked. The exams of the interpreters working for the bureau as interns have also been marked. We are in the process of marking the exams of the candidates who live in other countries, and we are almost done, in fact.

Mr. Peter Julian: All right. I understand why you're reluctant to give us any numbers, but it would really help with our planning.

Can I assume that the 33 candidates whose exams were marked all passed the exam?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: No.

Mr. Peter Julian: What percentage of the candidates did not pass the exam?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Right now, I am relying on my team and the panel who are in the process of marking the accreditation exams. By next week, I should be able to say exactly how many candidates were successful.

Currently, we have three pools of candidates. The candidates we already know have passed the exam make up the first pool. The candidates who did poorly on the exam make up the second pool.

The candidates in the third pool are the ones who fall in the middle, and we are assessing things to determine where exactly the quality standard should be. We don't want you to call us back next year or the year after to tell us that the interpretation quality isn't where it should be. We need to make sure that the interpreters who obtain their accreditation have all the skills they need to do the job and to provide the service you are entitled to receive.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, I understand. Thank you very much.

I'm sure you can appreciate, however, that it's a bigger problem if three of the 33 candidates passed the exam than if 25 of the 33 passed it.

Right now, we are aiming to have more interpretation capacity by the end of January, because that's when demand will be much greater. I don't think we understand all the steps in the process at this time. We realize that the evaluation process isn't straightforward and that you then have to deal with the security element. Obviously, the process is quite complicated for a candidate who lives in another country.

You mentioned two additional events per week. How many more interpreters are you evaluating to meet that demand?

• (1630)

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: As I said, the two additional events will be covered by off-site interpreters. They are already accredited, so the accreditation exam process has no impact whatsoever on service coverage for the two additional events.

How many more events will we be able to cover following the accreditation process? It will be another week or two before we know how many interpreters we're going to have.

The rule of thumb is that, in order to cover a two-hour committee meeting, we need three interpreters. Generally, interpreters provide services for two committee meetings a day, and that of course depends on the length of the committee meeting, caucus meeting or whatever the event may be. In general, though, we need to have three interpreters per committee meeting, and one interpreter can interpret for two committee meetings per day. In order to cover two additional meetings per day, we need three interpreters per meeting.

Once candidates obtain their accreditation, we will try to bring them on board and offer them contracts, but everything will depend on their availability. Will they want to work for us full time, Monday to Friday, or just a few days a week? We'll have to see. That's what we will be working on in the next few weeks.

Mr. Peter Julian: I understand all that.

We are nevertheless still in need of answers. We are in the process of figuring out what our options are starting at the end of January, but we still don't know when the interpreters will be available. We need to know what percentage of candidates passed the exam and how long it will be before the new interpreters start working. I look at this, and it's all interesting information, but I'm still in the dark as to how many new interpreters we will have at the end of January.

The sooner we have the information to better estimate how many new interpreters we could have at the end of January, the better it will be. Much of the Board of Internal Economy's attention has been focused on this issue for months. We still have unanswered questions.

Thank you for trying to answer our questions today.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We now go to Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the translation bureau officials, Ms. Laliberté and Mr. Ball.

I certainly won't rehash all of the good points raised by my fellow members.

At the end of the day, we are trying to meet the needs of the Parliament of Canada, which, admittedly, are growing. Let's face it, the translation bureau has struggled to meet that demand because of working conditions and the current labour shortage. Occupational health and safety is another concern. Those are the reasons why we are in this boat today.

Are you confident that you will be able to meet the Parliament of Canada's ever-growing demand for services? Given the other requirements and demands that the bureau has to contend with, will you have the capacity to meet the growing needs of Parliament?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Yes, we are confident that we will have new interpreters for the end of January. Will we have enough to satisfy all the requirements? Probably not. Canada is suffering from a serious shortage of interpreters. Only two universities offer master's programs in interpretation, so the number of interpretation graduates every year is very small.

That doesn't mean we are giving up. Those who do not pass the accreditation exam will be offered skills training to help them pass the exam. That will happen in the summer. Naturally, when Parliament is sitting, we want our interpreters to be interpreting.

In addition, we may have prospective interpreters among our existing translators. In January, we will be holding an open house to encourage translators to apply to the master's program.

We are still keeping up our efforts to recruit as many interpreters as possible. We will have more interpreters in January, but we'll have to see whether they are enough to meet the demand. It's important to be realistic, given the labour shortage affecting the sector.

• (1635)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: The initiatives you just mentioned are new recruitment efforts, are they not?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: That's correct.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You said there were two universities offering master's programs in interpretation. Might other institutions be interested in catering to the need for more trained professionals? Is there enough demand for other universities to follow suit and provide interpretation programs?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: That's a great question.

There is actually a group of universities looking into that. They're trying to determine whether Canada needs more programs. Naturally, the professional associations and others are pushing the institutions to develop the next generation and build new interpretation capacity. We'll have to see what happens. We, on our end, engage collaboratively and take part in meetings.

We genuinely hope to have a larger pool of interpreters so that we can serve you better. I think we all want the same thing. The more interpreters we have, the better we can serve you.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Without sacrificing quality, of course.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Quality remains our number one requirement.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You won't be lowering your quality standards, then.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: We won't be lowering our quality standards.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Ms. Laliberté, I think what the board is looking for is some reassurance. We want to be sure that you have a plan that you are following to meet the Parliament of Canada's needs as well as your other requirements. We trust you, but know that we are keeping a very close eye on the situation.

In no way, shape or form can the services provided to the Parliament of Canada to ensure the equality of both official languages be compromised. I think it would really reassure the committee if you could say for certain that the translation bureau is paying careful attention to the matter, that the issue is high on the bureau's list of priorities and that the bureau is confident its efforts will be successful.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Yes, we are confident that we will be able to increase our service capacity. As I already pointed out, quality remains one of our most important requirements. We are making every possible effort to cultivate the next generation of interpreters and convince people to enrol in the programs.

I'll give you an example. For this year's accreditation exam, we wanted as many candidates as possible to be successful. Taking an exam is never easy. We worked with York University's Glendon Campus, in Toronto, to deliver two workshops to help candidates prepare for the exam. We hope the workshops helped candidates pass the exam.

We are always looking for ways to grow our capacity so we can serve you effectively.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You're stepping up your efforts.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Exactly. I can assure you that this is one of our top priorities.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Do you have any comments on off-site interpretation? Is it possible to provide off-site interpretation services without compromising quality?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Off-site interpretation carries risks from a sound quality standpoint. That's why it's imperative that virtual meeting participants use the recommended equipment for those types of meetings, namely a microphone or a headset with the right microphone. That goes a long way towards minimizing service interruptions, and ensuring the health and safety of interpreters.

We work closely with the House administration to create the best possible environment, so things run smoothly both for interpreters and for meeting participants.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You are giving us some news today that we can take comfort in, as far as the beginning of next year goes. We are asking you to keep up your efforts. We will be keeping a very close eye on the situation as the year goes on.

Thank you for your efforts.

• (1640)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

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

To wrap up, I have two questions for Ms. Laliberté.

The House administration, with the help of all the party whips, has gone to great lengths to educate members on the importance of wearing a headset. I think we've been able to make a difference. Now, most members wear their headsets, as do the witnesses. We use a dashboard to track the situation closely. We are very diligent about how we inform witnesses and members of the importance of wearing their headsets. That is really the key to protecting the health and safety of interpreters.

I recently learned that the same pool of interpreters serves both the House and the Senate. In the course of our study, we found out that the Senate didn't follow the same practices we did, in terms of requiring people to wear headsets and conducting pre-meeting sound checks. We are very diligent on our side. At the beginning of every meeting, we ask the committee chair whether the sound checks have been conducted successfully for all the participants. We don't want witnesses appearing without the proper equipment, because, if they do, it could lead to serious injury for the interpreters.

What sorts of discussions are you having with the Senate administration, so that the Senate follows the same practices as the House, thereby ensuring the health and safety of interpreters?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: We have an excellent relationship with the Senate administration. We work in a spirit of co-operation. We hold the same types of meetings with the Senate administration as we do with the House administration. In fact, we often meet with both administrations together.

We communicate our requirements and best practices to the Senate administration as well. It's up to the clerks and senators to follow them, in accordance with their practices.

I would say that we have a very good relationship with Senate administration.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's great.

Ms. Laliberté, clearly, people need to be encouraged to wear the proper equipment and follow good practice. Otherwise, they tend to forget in the heat of the moment. That's why we have to be diligent and work together as a team to make sure the staff who work with the interpreters do their part and stand behind the decisions we make.

As you know, the Board of Internal Economy wrote to the Senate urging it to follow the House's lead in order to protect interpreters in the performance of their duties.

I didn't quite catch something earlier. I don't want to get lost in a maze of numbers, because every time we talk numbers with translation bureau officials, confusion ensues. I'm going to tell you what I heard, and you tell me whether I've got it wrong.

My understanding is that you are making significant efforts so you can provide coverage for more events. Basically, the pilot project we approved will mean that two additional meetings can be held per day as of January 30, thanks to the services of accredited interpreters working off-site. It will be up to the House administration to determine which two additional events those interpreters will be assigned to.

Do I have that right?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Very good.

As we speak, you are making arrangements to provide service coverage for two additional events per day, but you haven't yet been told where those interpreters will be assigned. You don't know whether they will be covering parliamentary committee meetings, caucus meetings or other types of meetings. The House administration has not formally submitted any such request to you.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: I don't believe so, but I'm going to ask Mr. Ball to confirm.

Mr. Matthew Ball: The Translation Bureau works in tandem with the House Administration. The bureau doesn't determine where interpreters will be assigned. We respond to demand as defined by the House Administration. As always, the bureau will send its interpreters to work wherever the need arises.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's fine. I will have other opportunities to ask questions of the House Administration to understand why they determined that it would be two more meetings and what choices it will make. For now, I will focus on you, since you're here.

I have one last question to ask you.

I share my colleague Mr. MacKinnon's positive outlook. However, as you've explained to us, I do understand that a number of candidates who have taken the exam simply didn't pass it, while others came very close to passing it and, if given a helping hand, will be able to pass next time. In the end, a small pool of candidates will have passed the exam.

In addition, we have no guarantee that after the new interpreters receive their official accreditation, they will want to work for parliamentary committees or debates. They may choose to practice in other places.

Is it a faux pas for me to say that?

• (1645)

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: No, you're absolutely right. The freelancers may choose to work in Parliament or elsewhere. In addition, they will give us their availability based on what they prefer to do. So we will know more in early January.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: So, let's say that at the first Board of Internal Economy meeting in early January, you're asked a question about the Translation Bureau's service capacity. That's what we've been trying to find out for the past few months. At that time, will you be able to tell us that you can cover two more events using remote interpretation and specify what services you will be able to offer us once you know the exact number of interpreters who have passed the exam and chosen to work for Parliament? Will you be able to provide that kind of answer?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Yes.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: To that end, should the House Administration submit a very specific request to you so that you respond just as specifically regarding your capacity?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Based on how we currently operate, we provide the capacity we have. We work with both the House Administration and the Senate Administration at the same time. We inform them of our interpreting capacity and then they decide what events will be held with interpretation.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Perfect.

I don't know if you're aware, but we asked the House Administration to do some requirements modelling for a hybrid Parliament that would sit until midnight, in addition to committees. We want to know what capacity would be needed to cover all the events, without having to cancel any.

Have you started thinking about a model that could work that way?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Mr. Ball, can you answer this question?

Mr. Matthew Ball: Some problems arise for us when it comes to determining the number of resources available. As you mentioned earlier, once a candidate has passed the accreditation exam, they are eligible to provide services to parliamentarians. However, we don't know how many hours or days a week the individual will want to work, or if it will be full-time. We will have conversations with all candidates who pass the exam to see if they want to come work for us as interpreters on a permanent basis.

Still, there are many factors that are beyond the Translation Bureau's control, but we do everything we can to encourage and in-

centivize interpreters to work in Parliament. People in this field are aware of the pressing needs of Parliament. We hope we can encourage them to provide as much service as possible, whether as freelancers or as permanent staff members.

We don't have specific numbers at this time, but we will have those conversations with candidates.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Actually, my question is quite specific, Mr. Ball.

For example, today, a take-note debate is planned for the House, so members will be sitting later than usual. Committee meetings are also planned. How many interpreters are needed to finish the day without having to cancel any events?

The question is quite mathematical in nature. I'd like to know how we can avoid cancelling committee meetings when the government decides that the House will sit until midnight. I'm looking for that magic number, how many interpreters required each day to keep us from having to cancel any events.

Today, the House will be holding a take-note debate and it will sit until 10 p.m., and there will also be committee meetings. How many interpreters do we require to meet needs for the entire day, right now?

If you don't know the answer off the cuff, it's no big deal. However, I would like that information in writing.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Demand varies from day to day, based on what's happening in Parliament.

The availability of our freelancers also varies from day to day. We ask that our freelancers give us their availability for a six-month period. Some do, while others prefer to let us know when they're available on a monthly basis.

Where our staff is concerned, there have been workplace health and safety incidents. When our staff members obtain a medical certificate, we're required to reduce their hours or assign them to other duties. That can also vary from week to week.

Therefore, it's impossible for us to give you a magic number representing needs on a regular basis. On the one hand, demand in Parliament varies from day to day. For example, Mondays are quite different from Wednesdays. On the other, the availability of our resources varies each day.

• (1650)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have any other questions, Mrs. DeBellefeuille?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I will try one last time, and stop there.

I don't understand what you're saying, Ms. Laliberté. You can tell me how many interpreters are on duty today, can you not?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: I can tell you for today, yes, and probably for the rest of the week as well. However, if you ask me how many interpreters will be available on any given day a month from now, it will be hard to say. We'll have to see which interpreters are available on that specific day.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay, thank you.

I will stop here, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

Maybe I'll ask a couple of questions, if that's okay. I'll take the prerogative of the chair.

I'm really uncomfortable asking this question, because it's almost a question that would be asked of management if we were running the organization. We're receiving a service. I'd like to say we're purchasing the service, but the service is paid for by Procurement Canada. You're responsible for providing that service, so you're responsible for the employees.

We're here asking for translation. By law, we're entitled to it. It's something that has to be given to us so that people can, basically, do the job they have to do. Technically, we're indirectly buying a service from your organization. We're not employing individual translators. Is that correct?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: That's correct.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. I just want to make sure everybody's clear on that. It's not the House of Commons or the Senate that is hiring translators and then this isn't working.

The questions I have pertain to management/employees. When I'm buying a service, it's not for me to say to Bell Canada, "I don't like the way you're installing the fibre in this neighbourhood." What I can say is, "I won't buy your service, but I'll go to another." We don't have that luxury right now—or maybe we do. I don't know. We looked at different options, but we didn't find that.

My question to you is about your employees, about the employees who are, basically, the service we're buying. I understand that they've cut back. They've reduced their hours on a daily basis. I understand there's extra stress. In interpreting, the capacity is a challenge that I think we all have to face with a lot of things, not only the members but the interpreters.

What criteria need to be met or what has to be done so that we can resume the hours of operation for the service that we're indirectly purchasing from you? What is missing, other than interpreters?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: We need more interpreters. I need a baby factory of interpreters.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Again, the reduced hours that the interpreters are working is something we look at. I don't want to burn anyone out, but on the other hand, we need that service.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: In terms of hours of interpretation, if Parliament was in person—if members of committees or members of the board, if everyone was in person, including witnesses—we could go back to pre-pandemic hours. The reality is that now we're

living with a hybrid mode, so it's very rare that you have a meeting where everyone is in person.

The definition of a hybrid meeting, from an interpretation point of view, is being debated now. We're presently negotiating the new collective agreement. We're in mediation right now. I cannot talk about the details, but I'm sure you can appreciate that the terms and conditions for interpreters and the definition of a hybrid meeting are part of those negotiations.

The contract for freelancers is expiring at the end of June. The definition of a hybrid meeting and how many hours and how many interpreters per session are also the subjects of negotiations.

In the coming weeks we'll have more information. For a hybrid meeting, we'll set whether that means one person is not in the room or maybe 50% are in the room. We'll set that and then the number of hours. We'll be able to assess capacity and plan our schedule accordingly.

• (1655)

Hon. Anthony Rota: How many hours would you be working a day if you were an interpreter?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: It's a complex question.

For a committee, for regular committee meetings, where we need three interpreters, the interpreters, pre-pandemic, were doing about six hours of interpretation per day. Because of the connective load associated with remote interpretation, and having looked at what was happening around the world, we've reduced the six hours to four hours. It varies. In general, let's say it's a committee meeting, there would be three interpreters and they would do six hours per meeting. It's been reduced to four hours, so there's been a reduction of capacity by 20%.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is that 20% or 30%? Anyway, it's down considerably.

That is going to be maintained at four hours for how long? You don't know.

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Thank you, Mr. Chair. At the moment I cannot talk about details, because the employer is the Treasury Board Secretariat and it's in mediation right now. We have to wait and see how it's going to conclude before we can really talk about it more publicly.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Someone also came up with the idea of creating some sort of dashboard that could be used by our staff and yours, and it would provide a snapshot and an idea of what resources are available on any given day. That would help us do some planning, maybe not a month in advance, as you say, but at least a few days in advance.

Would you be willing to work with us on that?

Ms. Nathalie Laliberté: Yes, Mr. Chair. We could create that in tandem with our colleagues in the House Administration.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Excellent.

Are there any other questions?

Thank you, Mr. Ball and Ms. Laliberté.

[English]

We'll now go on to item number four, an increase to the parliamentary exchange budget.

I believe, Mr. Scheer, you had something on this one.

Oh, I'm sorry.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, we have had some short discussions about this agenda item. I would ask you to suspend the meeting so we can talk.

Hon. Anthony Rota: All right. How long do you need?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I believe five minutes should do it.

Hon. Anthony Rota: All right. We'll suspend the meeting until 5:05 p.m.

• (1710)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll reconvene the discussion on item four, which we suspended. Rather than going to a presentation, I believe Mr. MacKinnon has a proposal for us, and then we'll go from there.

Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Mr. Chair, we're very conscious of the need for the Parliament of Canada to engage diplomatically. We certainly don't want to see any diplomatic opportunity go unaddressed. Bearing in mind that we also want to be responsible with the dollars available, I would like to suggest a "no net new funds" way of doing that. That would be to authorize you, Mr. Chair, to find funds internally—to reallocate funds, if necessary—to address the diplomatic needs of visiting delegations and other important meetings that may be coming up between now and the end of the year, and at the same time invite the administration to come back with a new proposal for next year's budget, keeping in mind all the factors that have been highlighted with respect to the challenges that are being faced.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments?

[English]

Mr. Scheer, are you okay with that?

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Yes.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I just want to make sure everybody is fine. We have consensus, then, on that proposal. Very good.

Now we go to item five, the proposed 2023-24 main estimates. We have Mr. St George, who is the chief financial officer, along with Sylvie Lafontaine, director, decision support and financial planning.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul St George (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am submitting the proposed 2023–24 main estimates for the House of Commons for your approval.

In accordance with the Parliament of Canada Act, the House of Commons must complete its expenditure estimates for the coming year and submit them to the Treasury Board for tabling along with the main estimates of the Government of Canada. The main estimates are to be submitted to the Treasury Board by December 15, 2022.

The total proposed main estimates are \$597.1 million, which represents an increase of \$34.1 million over the 2022–23 main estimates, which were \$562.9 million in total.

It should be noted that the estimates do not include funding for parliamentary exchanges.

The budget adjustment of \$34.1 million is divided into three main line item categories, as shown in the table on the screen. The first relates to initiatives previously approved by the board, for a total of \$4.2 million. The second is for cost of living and inflationary increases, totalling \$27.1 million. The third amounts to \$2.7 million for other items.

• (1715)

[English]

With respect to the first category, the board approved several initiatives, found in rows a through e, totalling \$4.2 million. For example, last month you were presented with the 2023-25 House of Commons accessibility plan, for which funding of \$749,000 was approved. You will find this initiative under 1d.

The second category, cost of living and inflationary increases, represents an overall adjustment of \$27.1 million.

As shown in 2a, an annual adjustment to the members' and House officers' office budgets and travel status expense account has been made based on the adjusted CPI. This is in accordance with a December 2015 board decision.

Under category 2b is an additional item approved by the board for the impact of charging centrally the costs related to members' constituency office leases. The last two items are outlined in 2c and 2d and pertain to the members' sessional allowance and House administration salary adjustments.

The third category, which represents an increase of \$2.7 million, relates to employee benefit plans and an actuarial evaluation adjustment to the pension plans.

Mr. Chair, the administration recommends that the board approve the proposed 2023-24 main estimates in the amount of \$597.1 million.

This concludes my presentation. I welcome any questions the board may have.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any comments? I don't see any. Is everyone fine with this recommendation? I see heads nodding.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Mr. St George.

[English]

We have Mr. Robert, who would like to make a statement to us.

Go ahead, Mr. Robert.

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to address the members of the Board of Internal Economy.

Five and a half years ago, I was honoured to be appointed to the office of clerk of the House of Commons, the 13th to be appointed since Confederation.

Since I took up my duties as clerk, I have made it a central part of my mandate to ensure that the House Administration provides the best possible service to all members of Parliament.

My primary objective has been to restructure the House Administration to better support members of Parliament in their evolving roles as both legislators and independent employers. After the Board of Internal Economy approved the required adjustments, the House Administration developed a strategic plan to establish a centralized, cohesive service hub focused on meeting the needs of members. This plan has been our roadmap and is the basis for several milestones over the past several years.

The move to the historic Centre Block went smoothly, with no major hitches.

The members orientation program has been extensively reviewed to better assist new members and, more recently, to provide more tailored transition services for departing members.

In response to the constraints imposed by the pandemic, flash innovations allowed for hybrid sittings and electronic voting.

Physical and computer-based changes to the security system improved the protection and safety of members as new risks arose in the workplace.

The Sourceplus and customer service teams were trained to facilitate access to quality support.

In addition, we've adjusted our relationship with you through regular briefings to better serve the Board of Internal Economy as it fulfills its oversight responsibility.

All these initiatives and several others were made possible through the efforts of the House Administration, whose employees are fully engaged and proud of the work they do on your behalf.

• (1720)

[English]

Building on the many successes of this strategic plan, we are about to launch the next one, which will guide us into the coming years. This new plan has as its vision “one House, one team”. This simple yet powerful vision reinforces our focus on client service and solidifies the administration's dedication to this goal.

To further ensure its success, I believe the new strategic plan should be championed by someone who can carry it through from its beginning to its end. Given this reality, I feel that it is an appropriate time for me to step away. I am announcing today that I will retire from the service of the House early in the new year, on Friday, January 13.

Though it has not been without its challenges, serving as your Clerk has been an extraordinary privilege. I am most proud to have been part of such a remarkable multidisciplinary team of colleagues in the administration who embody our values of integrity, excellence, collaboration and inclusion. Their steadfast dedication to supporting the House and the work of members, particularly in times of exceptional uncertainty, has driven our shared success.

[Translation]

I'm confident that by working under the “One House, One Team” vision, the House Administration will maintain this success.

[English]

Let me reiterate what a great privilege it has been to serve you all, both individually and collectively, as Clerk of the House of Commons.

It would be hard to imagine a better way for me to end my 42-year career on the Hill, which started in the Library before I went to the House and then the Senate and finally returned to the House as Clerk.

It has been quite a journey, one that has reinforced my admiration for the amazing parliamentary system at the heart of our democracy.

Thank you for allowing me to make this decision public by announcing it to you first.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[Applause]

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you. I don't think those are the right words. Thank you for your years of service, not thank you for leaving us.

I believe, Mr. Holland, you have a few words to say.

Hon. Mark Holland (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me say that 42 years of service to this place is an extraordinary accomplishment, and that we and indeed our democracy owe you a tremendous debt for your service. You started in the Library of Parliament, then went to the House of Commons and then moved to the Senate, where you were the Senate Clerk. Since 2017 you have been the Clerk here, serving us admirably as we have looked to modernize the administration, and you have led that charge. I want to express my sincere appreciation on behalf of government and, I'm certain, on behalf of all parliamentarians, for what you brought to the bricks and mortar of this place. You served something that's bigger than all of us, which is the spirit of democracy, and that is something that takes a lot of effort to hold up every day. I really cannot express my thanks in strong enough terms.

I want to say that just even over the last couple of years, as we have gone through the pandemic, having an administration respond so nimbly to changing circumstances, to having to deal with a pandemic and to utilizing new technology and finding new solutions speaks to your capable leadership. Forty-two years, Mr. Chair, as was just stated: I don't think there are any doubts that could do proper justice to that level of service, but for all your dedication to this place that we collectively so love, I want to express my deepest and most sincere thanks and gratitude.

I know you, and I know you're going to continue serving this place in a different way as you continue to offer your perspective on how we can all do better and all better serve this place that we love.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and certainly thank you, Mr. Clerk.

• (1725)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments?

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Honestly, I'm a bit shocked, I didn't expect this.

Mr. Robert, I want to join my colleagues in thanking you for your work in the House of Commons. The clerk plays such a pivotal role in managing the overall affairs of our democracy. We're very grateful for the efforts and the work of the clerks and the House Administration, day and night.

Mr. Chair, I know we will have an opportunity to talk more about this in the coming days. Right now, I am kind of in shock.

I, too, wanted to thank you for your years of service and your work, Mr. Robert.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: On behalf of the official opposition, I would like to recognize the years of service that you have given to both houses of Parliament. You have served in very high office in an administrative position, and have seen the work that both senators and members of the House of Commons do on behalf of Canadians. That is no easy task, I'm sure, on either side of the hall or on either side of O'Connor Street, now that the two chambers are sepa-

rated. We recognize the contributions you have made and certainly wish you all the very best in your retirement.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

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

Mr. Robert, I join my colleagues in thanking you. You have devoted 42 years of your life to public service. That's a huge investment and you've made many sacrifices. That is to your credit.

You've seen Parliament evolve and, more recently, you helped make history. You're leaving your position, but you made history, because we're designing a new Parliament and you've been part of that. So I wanted to thank you for that.

I know this isn't easy for you. I could feel the emotion in your voice. When you leave after giving so much, deep down, you don't really want to leave. However, there comes a day when you have to leave, because you have to think about yourself. You have to travel, you have to have time for yourself and you have to be able to have your coffee in the morning without thinking about a meeting you need to go to later. You have to be able to live stress-free. You deserve the good years you have ahead of you. You deserve to take care of yourself and your loved ones and treat yourself a little.

You have a considerable number of achievements behind you. It's quite something to devote your life to public service. Few people around us know what personal sacrifices it involves. It has a major impact on your personal life. There are all sorts of obstacles and pitfalls in a great career like yours, and I have to hand it to you that you finished it with an intensity you could not have anticipated, in the context of the pandemic.

So now it's my turn to thank you. What I wish for you, right after you leave us on January 13, is that you treat yourself and have some fun, because you truly deserve to take care of yourself.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Does anyone else wish to speak?

I'd like to say a few words myself.

[*English*]

I had the opportunity to work very closely with you, Charles, and it's a sad day for Parliament. It's a sad day not only for the House, but for the Senate as well. The commitment you've shown over the years has been outstanding.

[*Translation*]

The interest I've seen you show for members and the institution goes beyond what people can even imagine.

• (1730)

[*English*]

You have served individual members to make sure they were able to do their jobs; you wanted to see the process work. What was most important in the institution was to make sure that it worked well. There's a kind of commitment there that I don't know if anyone else has, even MPs. They are committed to what they are doing, but you were part of the institution and I think that's something that will live on indefinitely because it is part of what it is right now, and you're there. I know that COVID-19 really gave us a different perspective on things, but you were very open and very supportive of staff and the MPs to make sure we could keep our democracy working.

That's something I think we should all be very appreciative of.

[*Translation*]

Even when times were tough, your door was always open. You were there to talk to us, direct us and give us advice. We didn't always follow it, but most of the time we did because it was good advice and good direction, not only for the members and the Speaker, but for the institution itself.

[*English*]

I just want to say that you've been here for 42 years. I've been working for you for just the last three years now, and it's been an honour. It really has been an honour and a privilege working with you. You're going away, and I'm not just losing a colleague; I'm losing a friend, but I'm sure we'll see each other quite often. I just won't see you as often, I don't think, so I just want to wish you all the best in your retirement.

It's interesting that you've chosen Friday, January 13 as your departure date.

Mr. Charles Robert: I was the 13th Clerk.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The 13th Clerk on Friday the 13th—well, that makes a lot of sense now. Thank you for your 42 years of service, and especially your years here at the House and the time I had to spend working side by side with you.

Thank you.

We are going to switch over and go in camera now.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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