



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

OGGO • NUMBER 039 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, May 19, 2005

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Chair

Mr. Leon Benoit

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the committee meeting today.

We have two groups of business to deal with, one being the estimates and voting on the estimates, and we certainly need a quorum for that. The other is committee business. Because it is a Thursday afternoon and we have a vote this afternoon—I've heard—we will deal with the motions first, while everyone's here, and then go to the estimates.

If we could, we'll go to the motion by Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): May I defer to Mr. Poilievre?

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre. That's actually right, yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): This motion concerns the rental charges imposed on the Queensway Carleton Hospital. I have some documents that give some background on the issue. For those members who are not familiar with this situation, the Queensway Carleton Hospital sits on crown land owned by the National Capital Commission, and it is forced to pay annual rent. It also experiences restrictions on the degree of development it can do on its own property.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Pardon me, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

[English]

The Chair: On a point of order, Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I apologize to my colleague.

Earlier I agreed that you could give me the document so that I could examine it, but we agreed in this committee that only bilingual documents would be tabled. So I must object to the fact that a unilingual document is being distributed to my colleagues in the context of a meeting of this committee.

This is a subject that we discussed together. We agreed on this rule, and I expect it to be complied with.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, and I'm just asking the clerk to have a look at the material and make sure it is in order. I appreciate the comment.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I apologize for not providing the document in French as well. It was an accident, and I'm sorry.

I will therefore explain the situation as best I can.

[English]

The reason for this motion is that within the current planning cycle of the hospital, the rent could increase dramatically, with a cost to the hospital of as many as 40 nurses, according to the chairman of the Queensway Carleton Hospital. In this document, to which the honourable member referred earlier on, I have quotations from the current chair, the current president, and the very hospital official who signed the original lease in the first place. All of them agree that there needs to be a change, in particular that the hospital needs to be given full control of the land with the ability to generate revenue on it for the price of \$1 in rent.

I'm proposing that as a modest compromise. My original position was that the land should actually be sold to the hospital. The NCC did not respond to that very favourably, so I consider they should be willing to allow the hospital to rent the land for the price of \$1 and to be given full control over the land so they can develop other structures. These would then be used to rent to family doctors and other health care practitioners, generating revenue for the hospital and bringing specialists to the heart of our community.

Normally this would not be an issue for the hospitals in most of your ridings because the cities you represent probably do not have the federal government as the largest landholder. In my community it is a problem, and it is the responsibility of the Treasury Board, not Canadian Heritage and not even the NCC, to resolve it. Legally it's the Treasury Board that has to make this decision, and this committee has jurisdiction over the Treasury Board.

As a result, I'm calling on this committee to take the following step, which is to commit to charging only \$1 per year in rent as long as the hospital is on the property, and then the hospital will have full control over that property.

I have spoken to the NCC at length about this, and they indicate to me that they believe their hands are tied by the guidelines of the Treasury Board. I don't believe that to be the case, but if they did follow through with what they are telling me, they would be charging full market value in rent to the hospital. For a hospital that operates within a tight budget already, that would be an extraordinary amount of money to have to pick up to pay another level of government.

Just consider for a second the absurdity of such a prospect. The federal government transfers dollars to the provinces for health care. The province gives funding to this hospital to deliver that care. Then the hospital would return a good portion of that money back to the federal government in the form of rent at the expense of patient care. It seems to me that would be an egregious outcome.

We could bring stability to the situation if the NCC and the Treasury Board would, when this current lease expires, simply commit to imposing a \$1 a year obligation on the hospital.

Now, the current lease obligation expires in just over eight years. A hospital's planning cycle is 15 years. They need to know their financial situation well in advance of a decade so they can make long-term strategic decisions. That's the way hospitals operate; they plan for the long term.

There's no reason the federal government should provide any threat to a community hospital. A hospital should not be a revenue-generating opportunity for the Government of Canada. It should be meant for community service, and that's what this hospital is trying to do. We could put partisanship aside today, as many members did at the last meeting, and agree to support a very common-sense, modest position that would benefit the people of west Ottawa and all of the national capital region.

So I turn it over to the chair, and if there are any questions on the specifics, I'd be delighted to answer them.

• (1540)

The Chair: Just for those of you who maybe weren't here last meeting, I'll explain that we did have some discussion on this, we went to the vote, and then we lost the quorum partway through the vote.

Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.): That's right. There was a quorum.

The Chair: Madam Marleau, then Monsieur Godbout.

Hon. Diane Marleau: I think as members of Parliament we have a duty of responsibility. It's fine—I understand where you're coming from—but there is a policy in place, and I think we should do a full study of the policy regarding how federal lands are dealt with. The Government of Canada owns a lot of land across the country; let's look at this policy, at how it came about and why, and make recommendations to change it.

I have no objections to that. I think it would only be fair. But to recommend the abrogation of a contract, which was signed in the 1970s and doesn't come up for renewal until 2013...let's find out why rent is being charged. Is it a policy that impacts other areas of the city? Does it impact other areas of the country? I'm sure it does. Let's find out what the ramifications are of doing that kind of thing. And, hey, let's open the whole policy right up and discuss it and debate it. But you cannot do a one-off thing without having more information about the effects of what would happen across the country.

The City of Ottawa benefits greatly from the federal government; there's no doubt about that. On the other hand, if this is creating too much hardship for them, and perhaps for others, we should reconsider it. But we don't just do it for one, at the expense of everybody else. We need to know what the fiscal impact would be and whether we are prepared to have that impact across the

country—because it's not just Ottawa. There might be land in Montreal; there might be land in Quebec City; there might be land all over the place, and we need to know, before we make that kind of a recommendation, just what the impact is.

I think this committee can very well choose to study that and have the different officials come before us to explain how the decision was taken and why the policy was set up in the first place.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Marleau.

Before I go to Mr. Scarpaleggia, I would just note that this committee in fact has agreed, as part of our long-term plan, to examine the real estate in the federal government next fall. So in fact we've agreed to do that.

Hon. Diane Marleau: That's what we should do.

The Chair: Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I was away for a couple of weeks, so I wasn't aware that we were going to look at the whole issue of the disposal of surplus crown lands. I guess that's what we're going to do.

I find the issue very intriguing. In fact, I have a federal hospital in my riding with some surplus land attached to it. There's a group that would like to create a non-profit housing project for seniors on that land. I've been working on the issue of disposal of crown lands and how to try to ensure that the disposal works for the benefit of the community, so I'm intrigued by the issue that Mr. Poilievre raises. I would like to look at it further, and I look forward to doing a study of the crown lands issue. I think it would be very productive for me personally.

So basically what I'm doing is expressing an interest in the issue. I don't think we should deal with specific cases at the moment. I'm just basically confirming what Ms. Marleau said, which is that there are other ridings that could be affected by the broader issue. But I appreciate that Mr. Poilievre has brought it up, and I think it's worth studying in detail.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

I believe Mr. Godbout is next, and then Mr. Preston and Madam Thibault.

Go ahead, Mr. Godbout.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, in theory, I see no objection to us considering the question of government lands and buildings that we would want to lease, sell or make available to non-profit organizations.

If there is one praiseworthy organization, it is the Queensway Carleton Hospital. However, we're not here to resolve individual issues, but to propose statutory or regulatory solutions to these major problems.

I was Director General of the Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est in Ottawa. Some of our schools belonged to the National Capital Commission, to which we had to pay rent. We didn't do it with a light heart, but an agreement had been signed.

We're told that the agreement will be renewed in 2013, so there's no real hurry for the moment. I'd like us to study this matter together. If, after debating the question, the committee feels that we should recommend what Mr. Poilievre is recommending to us for all non-profit organizations, so be it. However, I can tell you that several thousands of people will be lining up here in Ottawa, and across Canada, because the Government of Canada leases a lot of properties to all kinds of non-profit groups.

If this has a budgetary impact, I would like the people at the Treasury Board of Canada to come and explain to us the reason for their regulations and their budgetary impact so that we can decide in full knowledge of the facts. I'm surprised the Conservatives aren't interested in the budgetary impact because they usually are. I'd like to have all the facts in front of me before making a decision.

There's no urgent need to make a decision in this isolated case because the lease won't be renewed until 2013. There are not a lot of organizations at this time that need that kind of long-term planning to know where they're headed. Everyone would like to know what will happen in 10 years, but a lot of things can happen in the meantime.

Let's take the time to study this matter, and let's make recommendations regarding the Treasury Board regulations if we have to, but not for an individual case. I know that the member would like to resolve the matter of this specific case concerning the hospital, but that would set a precedent that would have an impact on a number of groups. I know of groups in British Columbia that want to have surplus lands from the military bases, in Vancouver, for example, where those lands are worth a fortune. How many cases are there like this one? We would have to know whether this type of rental is common across Canada and what its financial impact would be on the government.

• (1550)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Godbout.

We have Mr. Preston, followed by Madam Thibault and Mr. Martin, and then hopefully we can have Mr. Poilievre make a short closing comment and vote on this.

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you.

If indeed this would be precedent-setting for any place for where there is a hospital being charged rent by the federal government, I would hope it would be.

The Chair: And school boards?

Mr. Joe Preston: This vote is about a hospital, sir, so any place where that is the case.... I have no problem with studying the federal lands issue. I think that's great.

Hon. Diane Marleau: But we should—

Mr. Joe Preston: This is a recommendation to the Treasury Board, and if they have problems they will come forward here and tell the committee they do, and we would certainly handle the questions with them at that time.

Hon. Diane Marleau: Then we don't pass a motion before we find out.

Mr. Joe Preston: We are recommending this to the Treasury Board, and they would certainly come forward. We need a little more action and a little less study. Let's go ahead and pass this motion, and if the Treasury Board has a problem they'll come forward and tell us.

The Chair: Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I think we can understand our colleague's concern. We hear that this renegotiation won't take place until 2013. I can say that the situation regarding health care in Quebec is a concern. In the context of fiscal imbalance, if we continue paying until 2013, that means that these amounts won't be available for care delivery. However, in a spirit of fairness, I believe we should inquire about certain simple matters. A study might enable us to do that. I'm not talking about a major study by a royal commission that would take five years to complete, but simply a study conducted by this group.

I'd like to propose that my colleague amend his motion in order to save it, in a way. We would ask that a study be conducted. Beyond what our excellent research service provides us, witnesses from the National Capital Commission or the Treasury Board Secretariat, for example, could occasionally inform us of simple matters such as the number of similar situations that exist in Canada. I've done my own research concerning Quebec. It would be quite limited. We could set a program and a schedule.

Following that study, a decision would be made on the particular case raised by my colleague. I think this would be an instructive exercise. We all have a responsibility to taxpayers. So, in this case, we would ensure that the manner in which the funds are or are not spent is appropriate.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

To Mr. Martin, and then Mr. Poilievre, you could wrap up.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be brief.

I simply wanted to intervene and say that I think it's absolutely fitting and appropriate that this committee express its opinion about this issue in this way. If anything, the member should be complimented for being an advocate on behalf of the groups in his riding, in this case a hospital.

I don't accept that there's any danger of setting a dangerous precedent here. First of all, the NCC is unique in the country. There is no other National Capital Commission other than here. So I'm not worried about this having some kind of a domino, complication effect. It's a one-off situation. But if there was an apprehension that way, we could solve that by simply stating that we recommend this motion without prejudice or precedent so that we don't complicate school divisions or other buildings within the National Capital Commission.

There is a relationship. When federal buildings are in municipalities, for instance, they don't pay taxes. They enjoy a unique status, because it's silly for one arm of government to be paying taxes to another arm of government.

An hon member: They pay taxes.

Mr. Pat Martin: No, they're paid a fee in lieu of taxes.

• (1555)

Hon. Diane Marleau: It's in lieu of, yes, but they're based on actual tax brackets.

Mr. Pat Martin: It's a unique status because the precedent has been made that it's plain goofy to pay taxes to ourselves. There's only one taxpayer. So the levels of government don't do that. They accommodate some kind of a transfer of money in lieu of taxes.

We just went through a bill like that in the House of Commons. I think it was in the last Parliament. We had a bill that clarified the payment in lieu of taxes for municipalities when there are federal properties like airports, etc.

So I think there's absolutely nothing untoward about this committee expressing its opinion by recommending this very simple, straightforward initiative to the Treasury Board Secretariat. All it is, is a recommendation. I don't think people should get their shorts in a knot about recommending something. We're simply saying that in the opinion of this group of members of Parliament, we think it's crazy to charge this ridiculous fee from one arm of government to another. Just eliminate it.

I'm going to vote in favour of the motion. Again, I think the member should be complimented, not criticized, for bringing this forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Lauzon has asked to speak on this too.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): I want to build on what Mr. Martin said. He stole my thunder, but I'm a little familiar with the NCC. Where there's profit-making...the NCC rents to private individuals or businesses. They charge rent. That would make sense. I don't see a problem with that. I think this is a very unique case. As a number of people have suggested, this is a recommendation.

We realize the problems with health care now. If we can't be cognizant of that and sensitive to that, they're going to be looking at millions of dollars. I think hospitals are planning 15 years, 20 years out in many cases. They have to know where they're going.

So like Mr. Martin, I'm going to be supporting the motion for that reason. I don't think it's doing anything to the NCC. They rent lots of land. This is probably a unique situation. Nowhere in the country does the government own this much land. They have thousands of acres of land.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Gagnon.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Gagnon (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I too would like to congratulate the author of the motion. I think it's interesting that he should propose this discussion today.

However, I'm afraid we're setting a precedent that we might regret. This is not to delay this matter, but rather to examine it more clearly. If it urgently needs to be settled, I'd like it to be done as soon as possible, and I'd also like to know how many cases of this kind there are.

I congratulate the author of this motion, and I would like to offer my assistance in settling the matter of this hospital as soon as possible, but after further study. We can't make a decision in one afternoon after a single discussion.

We said this is probably the only case in Canada. It would be easy to settle if that were true. However, I would like to see whether it is, so that we can head in the direction you wish. However, I wouldn't want us to pass this motion immediately.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur Gagnon.

Mr. Boshcoff has asked to make a comment as well.

• (1600)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, when we see these things coming forward, on the surface, of course, it looks like something that would be wonderful to do. Our job as policy-makers here is to ensure that we don't make decisions casually and quickly without proper information. It would be very difficult for anyone to say they're opposed to any type of hospital, or to that type of funding situation, in any case. Having dealt with these kinds of situations for many years in my previous life as a mayor, I know that when you do things like this without proper information, without a proper debate, without hearing the other side, without knowing that information, as opposed to being intelligent policy-makers, we end up having to backtrack. Yes, we've made a statement perhaps to Treasury Board that we feel, on the surface, that this is something worthwhile, but we don't know that for sure. I don't know that for sure. I don't know the whole story here.

If we're going to do something of this nature, where we recommend what the funding level is and what the operational costing process is going to be, then it should be something that is applied nationally, because this is a national committee. The types of recommendations we make can apply to the entire country, as opposed to each one of us coming up, as individuals, with individual concerns from our ridings for different types of things, whether it be any type of operation, and saying this is something we should not consider.

In fairness to ourselves, and due to the fact that we are trying to be a committee that represents the entire nation, I would think the proper way we approach this is by asking Treasury Board or...what the other suggestion was, for these people to come forward and tell us what we can do for a national policy in terms of similar types of situations.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Poilievre, for a closing comment.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I just want to note right off the bat that originally the Liberals on this committee did not want to discuss this matter at all. They tried to have it ruled out of order. When it was ruled back in order they then claimed they didn't have enough information, despite having had 10 days with the motion in hand to do their research. Then in the last meeting they walked out to deprive the committee of quorum and put the issue to rest.

Now they claim they want a national policy to resolve this very particular case, realizing full well that the formation of a national policy on federal lands would take years and years to develop, which means this matter would not be dealt with for a very long time.

I want to discuss very quickly the immediacy of this matter. It's not just the expiry of the current lease that's the problem. It's that the hospital wants to construct cancer care facilities and other structures that it would rent to family doctors and eye care specialists, which would generate revenue for the hospital and bring specialists to my community and create synergies between those practitioners and the hospital itself.

They tell me, and they are absolutely convinced as a board at the hospital, that this cannot happen under the present circumstance because their interpretation of the lease—and the NCC has refused to disabuse them of that interpretation—is that all revenues coming from such an arrangement would go to the NCC and not to the hospital, making the entire enterprise totally unaffordable. That is an immediate concern. It is not a concern with which they will be confronted eight years from now. They want to start planning these things immediately to have them in place to serve our community within the next several years.

So the lease expiration of eight years off is one problem. The other problem, of course, is the immediate concern about expanding the care they can provide on site through building new structures for the purposes of rental to other health care specialists. That needs to be dealt with immediately.

Furthermore, they do want to know roughly what their obligations are going to be eight years from now when this thing expires. Eight years is not a long time in a hospital's 15-year planning cycle. In order to do that, they need some assurances in the relatively near future that they are not going to experience what the chairman of the hospital fears will be a multi-million-dollar rent increase. None of this can wait for a full review of crown land policy.

And finally, I can understand what the honourable members are saying when they make a legitimate argument that we can't deal with all issues on a case-by-case basis. I understand where they're coming from. But what they need to understand—and I know Mr. Godbout does understand this—is that in the case of the national capital region, I am the only democratic representation my community has with respect to the NCC, because there is no other federal representative who represents my constituents in the House of Commons and therefore has any influence or authority whatsoever with respect to the National Capital Commission.

So it is necessary for me to bring forward these items on behalf of my constituency. Their municipal councillor cannot do that. Their provincial representative cannot do that, because the NCC has a federal mandate. Their federal representative must do that. And for

their federal representative to do that, he must bring it forward to the relevant committee, and that's exactly what I have done.

Finally, Bloc members have pointed out that we have to understand the precedents. We debated in the House of Commons the issue of Mirabel Airport, which was a very specific case. We did not need to review the entire national policy on the expropriation of private property in order to deal with Mirabel. We were able to deal with that specific case without having to review the entire policy, nationwide, of property expropriation, though I believe that issue needs to be dealt with nationwide. We were able, as opposition members, to deal with that case in particular on the floor of the House of Commons. I don't know why we can't with respect to a hospital.

Finally, I would be willing to entertain Mr. Martin's suggestion that perhaps we could add “without prejudice” or “without creating a precedent” in order to allay some of the concerns that members have put forward.

So with that I will conclude, and I would invite a friendly amendment to the effect that Mr. Martin has suggested, if he or someone else wishes to put it forward, and I urge you all to support the hospital.

•(1605)

The Chair: All right. After I've gone to the closing comments of the mover of the motion, I hesitate to go back to debate, but I will.

Mr. Scarpaleggia and Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Joe Preston: Hesitate more.

The Chair: Make it quick, gentlemen, please.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Chair, I take the honourable member's points, but I also take the point by Madam Thibault, which is that we need a minimum of rigour before making a decision like this. I agree; we don't need to have a royal commission on crown lands, but one month is not going to change the fate of the hospital. I just think we should have some witnesses in to talk about his, even if it's for one session.

In terms of the Mirabel land issue, I sit on the transport committee, and we dealt with that issue at the transport committee. We had a full one or two hearings from interested parties. Let's invite the hospital and have them appear. I just don't feel comfortable voting on something on which I have not even a modicum of background. And it's a technical issue. Mr. Martin brought up grants in lieu of taxes. That, in itself, is a complicated matter. I don't know why it has to be dealt with today. I think we could put it off for a couple of weeks, three weeks, and have a minimum of rigour in looking at the issue, that's all.

The Chair: Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Thank you. I just wanted to clarify. During this debate, as we discussed this matter, I went to great lengths to confine myself to the policy discussion here. I wasn't throwing partisan shots. Mr. Chair, normally when you change the order of the items, you ask for concurrence. I didn't challenge the chair. I just wanted this to be heard fairly, so I'm not really pleased when someone wants to make those kinds of comments.

When the matter was raised last time after 5:30.... We all have schedules, so to go on.... There's lots of debate we could have about the wonderful things we could do for health if we had extra money. When I address this question, I address it because I'm concerned about the policy implications, so let it be shown as to what the reasons were.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Szabo.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): I'd like to move an amendment, Mr. Chair. I move that after the word "committee" we delete the word "recommend" and add the phrase "subject to hearing appropriate witnesses, consider recommending".

• (1610)

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, do I see you indicating that you would consider that a friendly amendment?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I would consider that a friendly amendment.

Mr. Joe Preston: However, it's my motion, so I will consider it a friendly amendment.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Preston.

Is it agreed that it is a friendly amendment?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Can we go to the question on the motion? The amendment is first. Well, if it's a friendly amendment we don't—

Mr. Paul Szabo: Well, just so it's clear that the motion—

The Chair: Okay. Let's vote on the amendment then.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: I believe that's unanimous. We go now to the motion as amended.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It's unanimous. Thank you very much.

Now we'll get to the estimates.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Godbout: I'd like to check Mr. Poilievre's statement that he's the only democratic representation with respect to the National Capital Commission.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: That's not true. That's not what I said.

Mr. Marc Godbout: I simply want to verify whether that's what you said.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, it wasn't that. That's the way it is for my constituents. They don't have any other representation. There's no councillor or provincial member.

Mr. Marc Godbout: I would like to remind him...

[English]

The Chair: Order, please. This isn't discussion for the committee. Let's go to the estimates.

You all have an agenda in front of you. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), we will then proceed with the main estimates 2005-06,

vote 10, under Canada Customs and Revenue Agency; votes 95, 100, and 105 under Canadian Heritage; vote 1 under the Governor General; vote 1 under Parliament; votes 1, 5, and 10 under Privy Council; votes 1, 5, and 10 under Public Works and Government Services; and votes 1, 5, 10, 20, 25, 30, and 35 under the Treasury Board.

We'll just do them in order.

Under the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency, shall vote 10, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

Mr. Joe Preston: May I ask questions of the witnesses?

The Chair: Did you have a question, Mr. Preston?

Mr. Joe Preston: No, I don't.

CANADA CUSTOMS AND REVENUE AGENCY

Canada Post Corporation

Vote 10—Payments to the Canada Post Corporation for special purposes.....
\$172,210,000

(Vote 10 agreed to)

The Chair: Under Canadian Heritage, shall vote 95, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Public Service Commission

Vote 95—Program expenditures.....\$76,791,000

(Vote 95 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall vote 100 under Canadian Heritage, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Public Service Staff Relations Board

Vote 100—Program expenditures.....\$9,269,000

(Vote 100 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall vote 105, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Public Service Staffing Tribunal

Vote 105—Program expenditures.....\$3,776,000

(Vote 105 agreed to)

The Chair: Under the Governor General, shall vote 1, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: With your permission, I'm going to make a motion for my colleagues. I move that Vote 1, under GOVERNOR GENERAL, of the Main Estimates 2005-2006, less the amount voted in Interim Supply, be reduced by \$334,040 to \$16,367,960.

I also have a few comments to make. This is merely a highly symbolic two percent cut. It is symbolic because it only amounts to \$18,000 in the Estimates and cuts that have been made. The efforts are very minor relative to the message this committee sent out in the fall. In the context of the government's budget rationalization exercise, it would be important for the head of state to do her share, and that's why I'm introducing this motion.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Thibault.

[English]

Is there debate on the motion?

Mr. Godbout.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Godbout: I have a question for Ms. Thibault. Has there already been a cut in the government expenditure review exercise?

Ms. Louise Thibault: In the official documents, in Vote 1, there was \$16,684,000 last year, and it was increased to \$16,702,000, which represents an increase of \$18,000. I don't believe there was a cut last year, except the one we made. It amounted to a few thousand dollars at the time. That's what Ms. Uteck told us.

What fascinated me this year is that the people — it's their privilege to bring the Secretary of the Treasury Board with them — were unable to discuss the budget of the Office of the Governor General; I think that provides some food for thought. Since 1993, in the past 11 or 12 years, there has been a sharp increase in revenue of more than 100 percent. Even after this, there will have been a 90 percent increase in 10 years. We have to react very clearly, even though a two percent reduction is very minor. It's symbolic.

•(1615)

[English]

The Chair: Merci, Madame Thibault.

Are there other comments or debate?

Mr. Szabo.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I've heard the arguments. Quite frankly, the same argument was made the last time around with regard to comparatives.

I'm going to wait until Madam Thibault hears this.

The Chair: She's listening with one ear, Mr. Szabo. We all do that.

Mr. Szabo, do you have comments to make?

Mr. Paul Szabo: Yes, I do.

Madame Thibault, s'il vous plaît.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Pardon me, a colleague was speaking to me. I was trying to understand. I'm listening to you.

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo: Madam, the last time we dealt with this there was a discussion about the increase over a period of time in comparison with the previous Governor General. Everyone understands that the prior Governor General, in his last couple of years in office, was very inactive due to illness, and in fact he terminated his term of office a year early as a consequence of that.

The current Governor General has been much more active. There has been substantive evidence provided to the committee about the

volume of activity that relates primarily to the honours, awards, and grants program.

I think in view of the fact that the activities of the Governor General have not been criticized in terms of what has been happening under this Governor General, to basically take the approach that some sort of symbolic reduction should be made really is.... I would prefer that it refer to some specific activity, or certain things, because there is not a lot of discretion here. Those activities are planned. As a consequence of the last time, when we reduced the budget, there were in fact real cutbacks that had to do with training people and with the scheduling of awards programs. I'm not sure this is a good optic, and I would simply request that your motion be reconsidered from the standpoint of being symbolic only, but be articulated in terms of what specific areas you suggest the Governor General's operations would be cut back to accommodate such cuts.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Szabo.

I'd just like to point out some information that the researcher has reminded me of, and that is that under the expenditure review, in fact this budget would be cut by about \$300,000 this year, which is not out of line with what Madam Thibault is suggesting. I just want to point that out, but I'm in no way trying to influence the discussion.

Is there someone else?

Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you.

Mr. Szabo, I appreciate your question, but I must say that it wouldn't really occur to me to tell the Office of the Governor General where to apply the cutbacks.

As a result of the majority decision that we made, the Office of the Governor General issued a news release concerning the cutbacks in late December or early January, if my memory serves me. According to that press release, the cuts had caused a dramatic situation. However, the Bloc Québécois really believes that it is up to the Office of the Governor General and to the Governor General herself and her team to decide in what areas they will apply the cutbacks.

Mr. Szabo, I have serious reservations about establishing a link with the volume of activity: carrying out activities, whatever they might be, does not automatically imply that those activities are warranted. The same is true of the manner in which they are carried out. We talked about the honours program and about the people who are awarded medals for their efforts, as they should be. Everyone may be in favour of the program as such, but that does not prevent us from checking the way things are done.

For example, people are transported from the Atlantic to Vancouver, then to another place, so their medals can be awarded to them. They obviously travel with their families, that is to say with their loved ones, since the idea here is to recognize an act of bravery that has a great deal of significance. However, things could be done differently. The fact remains that it is not up to me to say that, out of \$16 million, a given cutback has to be applied to travel, to medal winners or to anyone else. It's up to these people to decide that.

As to my use of the word “symbolic”, it was related to the amount. It can only be a symbolic amount: two percent is not a major challenge. Last year, when I asked Ms. Uteck questions on performance, she gave me the same answer, that thousands of visitors and other factors were involved. So I asked Ms. Uteck whether there was a point to all that and whether it was absolutely necessary to do things in that way.

We must move on to other things before five o'clock, and that's why I'm going to close with the following comment. When it comes to suggesting cutbacks, I will never tell the people responsible where they should apply. It's up to the managers to decide that. It's up to them to see how they can manage their affairs differently so that Canadian, and more particularly Quebec, taxpayers save money.

• (1620)

[English]

The Chair: Merci, Madame Thibault.

GOVERNOR GENERAL
Governor General
Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$16,702,000

We're voting to reduce vote 1 under the Governor General by \$300,000. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: The amount is \$334,040.

[English]

The Chair: Right, it's \$334,040; that's corrected.

(Motion negated)

The Chair: Now we'll go to the main motion. Shall vote 1, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Under Parliament, shall vote 1, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

PARLIAMENT
The Senate
Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$50,951,000

(Vote 1 agreed to)

The Chair: Under Privy Council, shall vote 1, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

PRIVY COUNCIL
Department
Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$125,413,000

(Vote 1 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall vote 5, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

PRIVY COUNCIL
Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat
Vote 5—Program expenditures.....\$5,893,000

(Vote 5 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall vote 10, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

PRIVY COUNCIL

Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation and Safety Board
Vote 10—Program expenditures.....\$24,039,000

(Vote 10 agreed to)

The Chair: Under Public Works and Government Services, shall vote 1, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES
Public Works and Government Services
Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$2,078,348,000

Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston: I move that vote 1 for the Department of Public Works and Government Services, for operating expenses in the amount of \$2,078,348,000, be reduced by \$296,699.97, a mere 0.01% of the total; that the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates report to the House the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Mr. Brison's failure to appear before this committee for the second time upon this committee's request; and that as a consequence the committee recommends the reduction of the amount of \$296,699.97, which represents the amount of the minister's salary, travel, and hospitality expenses.

When Mr. Brison was here last year he told us he would work diligently to follow the expressed cuts in the expenditure review program, and indeed he's returned a main estimate under this account of \$44 million more than it was last year. I think we need to help him do his work a little bit. His promise of a 5% reduction has actually, if my math is correct, and it may not be, turned into an increase of 0.2% over last year. We need to help him do his work just a little bit.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Preston.

Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Then I'll comment, but first I'd like to ask you whether this motion is admissible in view of the number of details it involves.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Preston, your motions would have to be two separate motions.

Could we deal with the first motion now?

Mr. Joe Preston: Certainly. It's that vote 1 for the Department of Public Works and Government Services, for operating expenses in the amount of \$2,078,348,000, be reduced by \$296,699.97.

• (1625)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Do you have the motion in French? I need to motion in French.

[English]

The Chair: Have you heard the motion?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Should it not be in both languages?

The Chair: It doesn't matter. We're moving it as a result of the study of the votes on the estimates, so we don't have to have the motions written at all. We have it in both languages, actually, for your convenience—or the member does.

Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: It isn't numbered. These are numbers 1 and 2, in English and in French. We currently have numbers 1 and 2 for the English version and 3 and 4 for the French version. We also have to use numbers 1 and 2 in French.

[English]

The Chair: Could you just make the corrections, Madam Thibault?

For clarity, Madam Thibault, Mr. Preston is only moving vote 1, and if you could renumber 3 as 1, then they should be the same in English and French.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Okay.

The Chair: Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: If I understand correctly, we needed 48 hours' notice for the second part.

[English]

The Chair: No, Madam Thibault. We're voting on the estimates. No written motion is required.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Are you completely deleting number 2?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: What page is it on?

[English]

The Chair: No. He's only moving vote 1 right now. He may or may not choose to move the other. Understood?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Good.

Mr. Szabo.

Mr. Paul Szabo: I was under the impression that we agreed at the last meeting that because of the scheduling problem of the minister for today, the parliamentary secretary was to be invited to be here, along with officials, to respond to any matters that came forward.

Did that happen?

The Chair: Mr. Szabo, the parliamentary secretary was invited and he declined to come.

An hon. member: What about officials?

The Chair: We never agreed to invite officials.

Mr. Paul Szabo: I spoke with him and he was not aware. He told me he was not aware of the invitation.

Mr. Joe Preston: We'll have to ask him.

Mr. Pat Martin: It's outrageous.

The Chair: If you could just wait a minute, please, I'll talk to the clerk.

Mr. Szabo, I have discussed this with the clerk. The clerk went through the normal procedure, contacted the appropriate person, and

that person said the parliamentary secretary wasn't properly versed on this issue to come and therefore would not attend.

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Marleau: There's no motion.

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo: I'm not sure.... The parliamentary secretary is briefed on every matter every day and is responsible for coming to committee.

• (1630)

The Chair: Mr. Szabo—

Mr. Paul Szabo: Listen, I don't think it's going to help us to get to where we want to go.

The Chair: Yes. If you could deal with the problems on your side and....

Mr. Paul Szabo: Okay, but I wanted to find out. I can follow up. That's a separate matter.

With regard to the proposed cut, again, there are some principles here that I hope members would keep in mind. Number one, having been the parliamentary secretary myself for a couple of years, Public Works and Government Services is a service department that is providing the support services in terms of procurement and other administration, such as real property management, etc., to other departments of the government. They have no special initiatives that you would consider to be delivering a service to the public.

Effectively, a cut to their budget is basically saying to them that you're going to have to cut services to other departments. I think to the extent that we decided we were going to look at Service Canada specifically, and we had people here—many, many witnesses—to answer questions on that matter, and we had agreed that we would look, on a focused basis, at the two elements of Public Works and Government Services.... We did not really identify, to the best of my knowledge, any areas in which specific cuts should be made.

The member described the proposed amendment as dealing with the fact that the minister was not here on two occasions and that as a consequence his salary, travel, and hospitality would be eliminated. Mr. Chair, it is a creative way to put the number together, but in reality, the burden of those cuts will go against—

The Chair: Mr. Szabo, just for your information, that's not the motion we're dealing with.

Could I have a copy of the motion, please?

We're dealing with a motion that says vote 1 for the Department of Public Works and Government Services, for operating expenses in the amount of \$2,078,348,000, be reduced by \$296,699.97. In that motion there's no specified reason for the cut.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Well, sorry, but that's what I heard the member say when he read the motion into the record.

The Chair: We will be dealing with that motion probably later, should it be moved.

Mr. Paul Szabo: That's with regard to the \$296,699.97. He also referred to the salary. He said, "being salary, travel, and hospitality equivalency".

This concerns me because I don't think it reflects the posture that a committee should take with regard to the estimates. If there are areas in which meaningful reductions can be made without disrupting a department in the discharge of its direct responsibilities, or in the support of its indirect responsibilities, we can suggest them. Generally speaking, about two-thirds to three-quarters of the budget are human resources. They're real people's jobs. I believe this cut is unwarranted.

I think the committee's reputation is still in pretty good shape. Based on the testimony, the witnesses, the programs we reviewed, and the questions we asked, we should be able to articulate exactly where these efficiencies should be achieved. Reductions for punitive purposes damage the committee's integrity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Szabo.

Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I don't have any comment on the first one, sir. Everything's fine with me.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I'm going to be able to vote.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston: Was there someone else before I finish?

The Chair: Yes. Mr. Godbout.

Mr. Marc Godbout: Mr. Chair, there doesn't seem to be any specific areas where we're cutting. Is that the case? I just want to verify that.

The Chair: We're cutting from the vote. We're dealing with vote 1 under the Privy Council.

Hon. Diane Marleau: Which is operating expenses. But it's not Privy Council.

The Chair: Pardon me. It's Public Works, vote 1.

• (1635)

Mr. Marc Godbout: We're not saying where these cuts should be effected. Am I right in understanding that the result of these cuts could be job cuts? I just want to clarify that, because if that's the case, I have to vote against.

Mr. Joe Preston: The Minister of Public Works is one of the main leaders in the expenditure review process. I would expect that his department would be showing leadership in the goal of losing 5% over five years. When he sat here as a witness in front of this committee, he said he would make every effort to do so, that 5% over five years was an achievable thing.

In fact, his budget has gone up by \$44 million this year, which means he has that much more to find. We're talking about a symbolic 0.01% this year to help him along in the expenditure review. If he's going to be the lead on this, he best take the lead, take the horse by the reins, and try to lower some of this amount. Five per cent over five years is going to be an awful lot harder if you keep going up by \$44 million in each of the first years.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Preston.

Are you ready for the question?

(Amendment negated)

The Chair: Shall the amount in vote 1 be reduced by \$296,699.97?

(Motion negated)

Mr. Joe Preston: I would then move the second amendment and see what happens with it.

The Chair: Mr. Preston, you can bring that motion up later, if you wish.

Shall vote 1, less the amount granted in interim supply, carry?

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall votes 5 and 10 under Public Works and Government Services, less the amount voted in interim supply, carry?

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Department

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$327,924,000

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$7,632,000

(Votes 5 and 10 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall votes 1, 5, 10, 20, 25, 30, and 35 under Treasury Board, less the amount granted in interim supply, carry?

TREASURY BOARD

Secretariat

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$140,551,000

Vote 5—Government Contingencies.....\$750,000,000

Vote 10—Government-Wide Initiatives.....\$16,050,000

Vote 20—Public Service Insurance.....\$1,653,700,000

Canada School of Public Service

Vote 25—Program expenditures.....\$48,670,000

Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada

Vote 30—Operating expenditures.....\$62,084,000

Vote 35—Contributions.....\$16,200,000

(Votes 1, 5, 10, 20, 25, 30, and 35 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall the chair report the estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We are finished with the estimates.

Mr. Preston, you have a motion.

Mr. Joe Preston: I'm not certain it's of too much value to us now, but I'll try it.

Mr. Paul Szabo: We've been told by our whip's office that we have to go shortly.

Mr. Joe Preston: Then just vote yes for this and we'll be right out of here.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Make it quick.

The Chair: Mr. Preston, go ahead.

Mr. Joe Preston: I move that the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates report to the House the Minister of Public Works Mr. Scott Brison's failure to appear before this committee for the second time upon this committee's request—and apparently again today—

Hon. Diane Marleau: We need 48 hours for that.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Let him read the rest of the motion.

Carry on. Read it.

The Chair: Finish the motion, please, Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston: Okay.

As a consequence, the committee recommends the reduction in the amount of \$296,699.97, and this represents the minister's salary, travel, and hospitality expenses.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

• (1640)

Mr. Paul Szabo: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, according to the rules, a matter that is not on the orders of the day that are to be dealt with at a committee meeting must receive the unanimous consent of the committee members. I decline consent.

The Chair: Except, Mr. Szabo, that this is dealing with business that is properly with notice before the committee, so it's in order.

Mr. Paul Szabo: No, this is a new motion that didn't have the 48 hours' notice.

The Chair: It's dealing with the business before the committee, Mr. Szabo. It's in order.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The chair has ruled.

Mr. Paul Szabo: It's not on the orders of the day.

The Chair: Is there any debate on the motion?

Hon. Diane Marleau: It's not on the—

Mr. Paul Szabo: Okay. Let's go.

Hon. Diane Marleau: Okay. We're out of here.

The Chair: Any debate on the motion?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Do we have a quorum, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: We still have quorum.

Hon. Diane Marleau: No, you don't.

The Chair: Yes, we do.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: We're not in our chairs.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: It doesn't matter, even if you're not in your chairs.

The Chair: I'll go to the question. No discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I will have the clerk prepare that and we'll report that to the House at the earliest opportunity.

Is there any other business before the committee?

We have quorum.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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