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—
Chair

The Honourable Don Boudria

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.)): Order, please.

Colleagues, the order of reference this morning is that pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), we're considering the main estimates, 2005-2006, vote 5, House of Commons, under Parliament, referred to the committee on Friday, February 25, 2005.

Our witness this morning is, of course, our Speaker, the Honourable Peter Milliken.

Mr. Speaker, welcome. I don't often get to chair a meeting where the Speaker actually does speak and I'm the one chairing. As a matter of fact, I think in my case it has never happened before. Welcome to you, our clerk and clerk assistant, and of course Mr. Desroches and all the others who are with you.

Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Peter Milliken (Speaker, House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to appear. I haven't appeared before a committee in quite some time, so it's also a treat for me.

I have some remarks prepared to introduce the estimates, since that's the subject of the discussion. It's all a bit technical, and my head for figures isn't a great one, so if you don't mind I'll stick with the prepared remarks and give you an overview of the estimates, which I hope will be helpful for you, sir, and all the members of the committee.

We're here today to discuss the 2005-06 main estimates for the House of Commons. On November 22, 2004, the Board of Internal Economy approved the main estimates for 2005-06 in the amount of \$383,220,690, which represents an increase of 10.6% over the fiscal year 2004-05. They were tabled on February 25, 2005.

The breakdown of expenditures for the next fiscal year includes \$233,904,510 for expenses related to members and House officers, and \$149,316,180 for House administration services. The approved increases total \$43,177,917 in funding for 2005-06. I'd now like to explain briefly some of the approved increases for the upcoming year.

[Translation]

The general election resulted in a need for additional funds of \$4,816,521 for 2005-2006. After the last election, the Chamber opened its doors to 308 members for the first time. Additional funds were required for the salary of these seven new members, as well as

for their Member's Office Budget. These funds will also cover travel under the travel points system, and additional costs related to increased support to Members. Another result of the election was an increase in the number of constituencies eligible for elector supplements.

As you know, there have been adjustments made to the Members' Office Budgets and the budgets of House Officers and Presiding Officers. The budgetary increases account for \$15,250,726 in funding for 2005-2006. The increases to Members' Office Budgets are required to absorb additional operating expenses related to occupancy costs, as well as costs incurred to hire more staff to respond to the ever increasing needs of constituents. The increase in House Officers' budgets results from the budgetary adjustments approved by the Board and agreed to by political parties for Research Offices, Party Leaders' Offices and other House Officers. The sessional allowance and salaries of Members and House Officers were also adjusted, representing a 1.3 per cent increase.

• (1110)

[English]

The House administration continually improves the services it provides to members, and the 2005-06 financial year will be no exception in that regard.

Members' work evolves, as does the technology that is required to sustain it. As constituency demands increase, so does the need that additional constituency offices be connected to our network. A high-speed communications network for additional constituency offices will meet this need, at a cost of \$504,000. The House administration will require \$716,633 to continue to implement a mobile hand-held data access program, using Blackberry technology for members.

Also on the technology front, \$473,600 will be required to replace servers, and \$585,990 is needed for the ongoing costs of operating and maintaining the renewed technology infrastructure that was implemented in the Chamber and in committee rooms, as well as in the new facilities at 181 Queen Street.

[*Translation*]

The House Administration is faced with the challenge of supporting members in all aspects of their duties. This also involves supporting the institution as a whole. For example, the House Administration must respond to the changing environment in which it works, in order to continually provide an appropriate and objective level of assurance to the Board, allowing the organization to attain its objectives and adequately manage risks. The House Administration will invest \$499,229 in additional funds in the areas of evaluation and audit, as well as quality assurance review of financial transactions and statements.

The work of committees and associations continues to expand, which results in a requirement for additional funds of \$5,405,200. The creation of the Canada-Africa Parliamentary Association and an increase in the Parliamentary Exchanges Budget are examples of the increase in association activity. As well, \$1,179,600 is required to support new standing committees, an increased level of interparliamentary activities, and the implementation of the Modernization Committee's recommendations.

Since 2002, three new standing committees have been created: the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, and the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. These three committees, as well as the specific workload of two major standing committees, require additional procedural clerks, committee assistants, and increased logistical support.

To further support committee work, additional funds of \$2,750,000 are required for the Liaison Committee. As well, \$1 million will be used to establish, as a two-year pilot project, a centre of expertise to provide non-partisan assistance to committees wishing to conduct an in-depth review of departmental estimates, Reports on Plans and Priorities, and Performance Reports.

[*English*]

The role of the House administration is to respond effectively to the requests and requirements of members. We all rely on the professionalism of the House administration on a daily basis. It is the responsibility of the House, as an employer, to compensate its employees in an equitable manner.

The House administration implemented a modern classification system that ensures this. By measuring positions against the same standards, those with the same relative value can be paid at the same compensation rate. The board also ratified several collective agreements that included conversion to the new classification system. The cost of collective bargaining and the classification renewal program totalled \$14,724,010 for 2005-06 and past years.

There are also several reductions identified in the main estimates that total \$6,520,071. These reductions are mainly due to initiatives that have been completed, such as the replacement of computer systems and equipment. Reductions also include adjustments in the cost of employee benefit plans and members' pensions plans.

The items I've presented give a brief outline of the expenditure increases and decreases for the upcoming year. In the next year and beyond, we will continue to see our roles as members of Parliament

evolve, and the House administration will continue to plan for and respond to this evolution.

The House administration has shown once again in this year's main estimates its commitment to the members and to sustaining our institution, and for this I thank you.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for that overview of the Estimates.

Who would like to open the question period? I have one question myself, but I don't want to ask it until colleagues have had a chance to ask their own.

Mr. Nicholson.

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Milliken, and you, Mr. Corbett, and all those who work so hard on our behalf. Thank you for appearing before this committee.

I guess we've come a long way. I was listening to your comments about the advances in technology. The chairman will remember when we didn't even have fax machines in our offices, when we first came here in 1984. We've come a long way, and I think that certainly has helped members of Parliament.

In the section on technology you said some of the costs would be going for new facilities at 181 Queen Street. Which building is that? I should know. Perhaps you can tell me that to begin with.

Mr. William Corbett (Clerk of the House): Mr. Nicholson, 181 Queen Street is the building that's perhaps better known on the Sparks Street side as the CBC building, of which we occupy a number of floors above the CBC.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: There will be renovations, of course, resulting from the movement of members and facilities out of the West Block. I've heard there will be committee rooms available in La Promenade. Is that correct?

Hon. Peter Milliken: I think that's anticipated. I don't think the final drawings have been set on that, but I believe there should be. I think the plan was to maintain committee space in the West Block in any event.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Do any of your estimates cover any of the costs of movements associated with any changes that might take place at West Block or any movement into La Promenade?

Hon. Peter Milliken: No.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: They don't.

Hon. Peter Milliken: Most of those would be paid by the Department of Public Works in any event, because they are the owners of the buildings. We're merely tenants.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Are the little green buses that move us around under Public Works, or does that service come under this?

Hon. Peter Milliken: That's ours.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: That comes out of these estimates?

I notice we've been getting new buses, new technology. Is that part of your budget as well?

Hon. Peter Milliken: Yes.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Have you had any comments or any feedback that we might be able to use an extra bus or so on the circuit? It seems to me the circuit is a little longer now than it used to be, the last time I was here. I'm wondering if there's been a corresponding increase in the number of buses, or is it just that I'm becoming a little more impatient waiting for the buses?

Hon. Peter Milliken: There might be more buses. They might not all be running.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien (Deputy Clerk, House of Commons): No, there has not been a recent increase in the number of buses doing the circuit, but we're certainly prepared to look at the current load. One of the things that appears to be a Murphy's law governing the buses is that you wait and wait and then two appear. That is a bit like life. We're looking at that to make sure, because of the addition of the Justice Building, that there was careful calibration of it. We felt the current fleet was sufficient, but we can certainly keep an eye out to see whether or not that's actually meeting the needs of members.

• (1120)

Hon. Rob Nicholson: I often wondered if you might be someday moving towards a system that was similar to one in which I used to participate. I used to be on tour buses through the Niagara Falls park, and we used to coordinate by means of walkie-talkies so that they were generally spaced out as well as we could. I would imagine some day that will come as well.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes, there is a coordination system in place. I dare say it is perhaps less than perfect, and we're constantly looking to ameliorate.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: That's great. I appreciate it.

As one last thing—I know my other colleagues have comments—I'll raise something that has always stuck in my mind a little bit, and that concerns the television lights in the House of Commons. They were sort of bolted on to this very beautiful chamber. Twenty years ago, when I asked why we don't we have beautiful lights that fit into this, I was told these are the television lights. It seemed to me in 1984 it was almost still viewed as a bit of an experiment from, I believe, the late seventies. I hope that under your watch, Mr. Speaker, some day the tenders will go out to have beautiful lights that will look as though they belong, since television is now a permanent part of the Chamber, and the lights should fit in. It's just a suggestion to you.

Thank you for all that you do for us, and thank you, Mr. Corbett, and all those who work with you.

Hon. Peter Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Nicholson. It's a pleasure working with you on the board.

The Chair: Madam Longfield.

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to follow up on the new buses. They're very short in terms of head space, and while some might not experience the difficulties of others of us who have little bruises and some other marks, such

that... Also, you will find, if you ride the bus, they've actually put a bit of padding along the rails at the top, which softens the blow for some. I would like someone to have a look at that when you're ordering new buses, because rushing in first thing in the morning and hitting that thing square on just sets the day off on a bad tone.

Also, picking up on Mr. Nicholson's comments about inside the Chamber, some have likened it to a bit of a sports arena. It's interesting play. In most arenas and places I'm in, there's a clock up at the front, so that those who are participating know how many seconds or minutes they have left. I've always thought it's something we should look at. I know the Speaker is very diligent in watching the time, but it might also help keep everybody else on track if they knew they had to make their point and the clock was—

The Chair: Madam Longfield, that's something our committee would need to recommend to the Speaker, and we haven't done so.

Hon. Judi Longfield: I appreciate that, but I guess I'm just putting it out so that perhaps this committee would recommend it, now that it's there.

The Chair: Do you have anything else for the Speaker?

Hon. Judi Longfield: No, I think at this point those were the issues I wanted to raise.

Hon. Peter Milliken: I hadn't experienced this problem on the buses, but perhaps I seem vertically challenged; that explains why I haven't. I don't ride them all that often. Occasionally I've taken one. I was in a new one the other day and asked the driver why the handle was different, and he told me it was a new bus. I didn't even know they were getting new buses. I don't pay a lot of attention to that aspect, I guess, and I'm sorry I didn't realize this. But I appreciate the comments; I'm sure this will be looked at by the people—

Hon. Judi Longfield: On the other thing you raised from talking to the driver, some of the drivers have explained that the handle also.... They are challenged in terms of their arms not being long enough to reach it out; there was some problem with that as well. I have had a number of drivers mention it to me.

Hon. Peter Milliken: It wasn't mentioned, but it was a new one. Apparently, they are supposed to be safer.

On the second thing, though, on a clock in the House, this has been discussed. When I was on this committee years ago, we talked about it and decided against putting these clocks up. The fear was that members might use the clock as an excuse for counting down on the person who had the floor: instead of yelling "time", they'd yell "five, four, three...". We didn't think it would be helpful to order in the House.

I try to give members signals, and I think my fellow chair occupants often do the same, to indicate that time is running out. If members are watching, they get the signals; if they're not, tough luck—they don't.

I'm sympathetic to the problem. Some chambers I've visited had clocks, with seconds and everything ticking away, and they're quite visible. They don't have a problem. Whether our chamber, with its disorderly conduct, which is relatively standard here compared with some others, where there's almost no other talk going on when members are speaking, would react differently to having them there is another question. If the committee made a recommendation, I have a feeling you'd find it was acted on very quickly.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Laframboise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Is the Ethics Commissioner's budget included in Parliament's estimates, or is that a completely separate budget?

Hon. Peter Milliken: At the present time, I do not believe that budget comes under the House of Commons' votes. However, budget proposals are submitted to me, as Speaker of the House, and I pass them on to the Treasury Board.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: This morning, when I was in conversation with someone, we were saying that there had been a staff turnover at the Ethics Commissioner's Office because employees working for that office, since they report to Parliament, are not entitled to the same wages or benefits as public servants. I see that you want to update your collective agreements and reclassify your staff.

Mr. William Corbett: Mr. Laframboise, from the very outset, employees with the Office of the Ethics Commissioner have been governed by the same legislation as people working for Parliament, not by the Public Service Employment Act. However, the Ethics Commissioner's Office has asked a private company to review its classification structure, and it has implemented a classification structure similar, but not identical, to our own for its employees.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: So, these employees do not fall within your responsibility, even though the Ethics Commissioner's budget comes under Parliament. You have no authority, then, to review the operations of the Office of the Ethics Commissioner.

Mr. William Corbett: No, it is independent.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: It is completely independent. So, you are only concerned with the budget.

Mr. William Corbett: Mr. Laframboise, we provide to the Commissioner a number of services provided to members of Parliament and the House Administration, particularly a postal service. We are currently working out the details of an agreement with the Commissioner under which he will be able to use the House of Commons' computer system. All of that is billed to the Commissioner. We provide that service to the Commissioner, but he pays for it.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: As regards updating your collective agreements, you say that you will be proceeding with job reclassification and that you have set aside money for that purpose.

Mr. William Corbett: That has already been done. It was done last year, but the increase resulting from job reclassification and the negotiation of new collective agreements under the renewed classification system is charged to this year's budget.

• (1130)

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Great.

Moving to another area now, you mentioned in your opening statement, Mr. Speaker, that there are additional expenses relating to the number of constituencies now eligible for elector supplements. Have you already had to defray these additional expenses or are you expecting to for ridings that are now larger as a result of the redistribution?

Hon. Peter Milliken: There have been changes made to the amounts paid to all members of Parliament—in other words, to the base amount, the amount related to the size of the riding, and the amount provided for the riding population. All three amounts have been increased. The increase was approved by the Board of Internal Economy some months ago. I believe it came into effect on April 1, at which time there was another increase.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: You are probably aware that there are still requests pending, particularly one in Quebec for the North Shore region. Will you reconsider that request, or is that process over now?

Hon. Peter Milliken: The Board of Internal Economy often receives requests regarding rate changes. You should ask your representative on the Board of Internal Economy to raise this matter. If he does raise it, we will consider it.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: But there is no provision for that in the budget we are reviewing today.

Hon. Peter Milliken: The amount requested reflects the changes we have already made. If other changes occur during the year, there will be supplementary estimates.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, Mr. Speaker.

You mentioned the West Block earlier. I would like to know whether any action has been taken. The situation is unclear. Is work going to be done? Is there going to be an election? Some people are moving out of that building because they don't think it's safe. Others don't want to leave. Is the building safe or not? When it comes to health and safety, there is no room for uncertainty. Is that building safe or not? If it is not safe, why not take action now? Work has been done on the second floor of the Wellington building, where we were previously. I believe that floor has been cleaned up and repaired, and that MPs' offices could be moved there.

We're hearing all kinds of rumours. Are we moving? Will this be happening in September? Since we're talking about health and safety matters, if there is a problem in that building, action has to be taken.

Hon. Peter Milliken: There are always rumours circulating.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But you are here to dispel those rumours, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Peter Milliken: The Board of Internal Economy will soon be making an announcement about this. We are in the process of planning those changes. We have to obtain the approval of other authorities with respect to what we have discussed. When we are able to make an announcement, we will do so. I am pretty certain that we will be able to do that before the end of this session, in June. I hope it will be possible to do so in June. Discussions are ongoing. There is much to be done and a lot of things to consider, including health and safety issues. We have decided that no one will move in 2005. That is for certain.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Not in 2005. So, it will be up to us to bring people in to tell us what the status of the building is, because we should be informed. If that building wasn't safe a month ago, why should people not be moved out in 2005? Quite frankly, what's the problem?

Mr. William Corbett: Mr. Godin, there are a lot of rumours and discussions, but we have engineering reports saying that the building is safe now and poses no risk to members of Parliament and staff. Public Works and Government Services Canada tests the air in the building every day. We have plans in place to ensure that operations can continue if the slightest problem arises.

•(1135)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

My other question relates to the buses. Unlike Ms. Longfield, the clearance is not a problem for me. Don't worry: my hair didn't get left behind on the ceiling of the bus. However, I am quite concerned about the driver sitting there all day long. It's too bad, because I believe that almost the entire fleet has been purchased. Drivers have told me that they weren't consulted. That's too bad. We should have thought to consult the people who have to sit on those seats all day long before we bought these buses. The seating is not appropriate. In fact, the adjustable air seat there previously was removed, when in fact it was more comfortable.

Mr. Speaker, you talked about opening the door. Before it was easier for them to close the door. But now they have to twist and turn in order to pull it closed. There are constant complaints about those buses. I think it's unfortunate that in 2005, when we talk a lot about openness and working together in the industry, that no consideration was given, before those buses were purchased...

Personally, I have no complaint. I board the bus in front of the Justice building and it takes me five minutes to get to Parliament. I certainly have no cause for complaint. But I am making this complaint on behalf of those who work in the buses and spend their entire day in them. The drivers are not comfortable at all working in those buses. They were not consulted. They should have been invited to go and try them out on the manufacturer's premises. Now we're stuck with buses that we've just bought. Adjustments have to be made.

I worked in the industry for a long time, in health and safety. Let me give you an example. In New Brunswick, we worked in the mine, underground. We didn't drive Cadillacs, but we did drive scoop trams. We made sure there were good seats installed in the

trams so that drivers wouldn't get home at the end of the day feeling as though their back was broken.

So, I am asking you to take a serious look at this. This is a formal complaint that I am making, because practically all the bus drivers are complaining about this. They really aren't comfortable working in those new buses. I think something has to be done about it.

The Chair: Mr. Speaker or Ms. O'Brien, would you like to respond?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Mr. Chairman, Mr. Godin raises important questions. As you know, we take a very serious interest in the health and safety of our workers in everything we do. As far as we are concerned, it is a priority.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Well, you really missed the boat this time.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, please let Ms. O'Brien answer.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I'm not prepared to say that we missed the boat in this case. I know for a fact that some problems have been raised. I am thinking here in particular of what Ms. Longfield was saying about the ceiling height. It is quite true that there has been a change. This is a new issue for me, but I think it's important to point out that before they were purchased, one of these buses was used on the Hill for almost a year, to give drivers an opportunity to test certain aspects of the vehicle. That wasn't a ghost behind the wheel driving it.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But there were complaints back then. At the time, they were already complaining about these buses.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I must admit that I hadn't heard any such complaints. However, we will take a look at this with the people responsible for health and safety. I know for a fact that these buses meet provincial health and safety standards. Is everyone satisfied with them? Obviously not. But I do know that they meet the standards. There is no doubt about that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll come back to this.

•(1140)

Mr. Yvon Godin: We'll come back to the discussion about buses.

The Chair: Yes, we'll come back to it. We have all heard complaints with respect to the problems mentioned.

Mr. William Corbett: Mr. Chairman, allow me to make one last comment. Our Health and Safety Department can certainly conduct an ergonomic study. Rest assured that we will do that.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, that's what I'd like to see. Adjustments can be made.

The Chair: Thank you.

A letter of confirmation from the Speaker to the Committee would be appreciated. Thank you.

Hon. Peter Milliken: Yes, I will send you a letter.

The Chair: I would like to ask two questions, and then we will move on.

You talked about the issue surrounding the West Block. I heard yesterday, contrary to what Public Works and Government Services had said, that we would not be moving before the middle of 2006. Apparently the building on Sparks Street would no longer be available, and we could not move in there in June of this year. Is that true?

Hon. Peter Milliken: The Board of Internal Economy has looked at this issue. We have not yet adopted a plan that we want to make public at this time. We had decided to wait to hear from the other project partners before announcing our plans. If we were to make announcements now, it would cause problems if changes had to be made subsequently.

So, we want to remain silent on this, probably until the end of May. If all the other authorities agree, we will announce the dates. Everything will be properly arranged, in my view. That's the idea. We have not yet secured everyone else's permission. Once we have, we will be able to provide answers to your questions, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You've already given us some good news, which is that we won't be moving in 2005. That's already a tremendous improvement. I was really not satisfied with the abrupt manner in which they initially tried to do this. I'm very happy that the move has been postponed. That is more reasonable.

I have a question with respect to members' riding offices. We all have one and we all pay insurance premiums. Has the House ever considered buying insurance for our riding offices and deducting the applicable amount from each of our budgets? I believe it costs me 1 400 \$ a year. If we negotiated insurance coverage as a package, for all 308 riding offices across Canada, it might only cost us 200 \$ each, and we would all pay the same premium. At the present time, we all pay different premiums, depending on the mood of the insurance company we're dealing with, I suppose. I'm sure we can save money doing this as a group. If we negotiated a package for all parliamentarians with everyone paying their share, wouldn't that be easier?

Hon. Peter Milliken: Mr. Chairman, two clarifications are in order. First of all, with respect to your comments about a possible move out of the West Block, there is no doubt that once the decision is ready to be announced, the occupants of that building will be the first to be informed.

The Chair: That will be the case this time, but that is not the way it worked the last time.

Hon. Peter Milliken: Yes, you're absolutely right. We will have an opportunity to meet together. I hope I can be present. In my opinion, this announcement is very important, and we will make all of the proper arrangements. At this time, we can tell you there will be no move in 2005, unless a disaster occurs in the West Block.

Now with respect to MPs' riding offices, the situation varies considerably depending on the MP. Some are insured by the owner of the building. In some cases, insurance costs are minimal and are included in the lease. It would thus be difficult for the House to do what you are suggesting, but if your representatives on the Board of Internal Economy raise this matter, we will certainly take it into consideration and make inquiries. However, it would be rather difficult, given the wide variety of situations that prevail across the country.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Picard.

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I read here that the House Administration will be investing almost \$500,000 in additional funds in the areas of evaluation and audit, as well as quality assurance review of financial transactions and statements.

Does that mean that you will be hiring additional human resources? Does this involve administering MPs' budgets?

Mr. William Corbett: Indeed, Ms. Picard, we have decided to hire four additional staff, not only for the Account Auditing Section, but also for the group responsible for financial review and control. They perform risk assessments and carry out other such activities with respect to our projects. Our computer project is an example of that.

In the wake of the 1995 Program Review, we lost some staff assigned to financial control. They took early retirement, and we were not able to replace them. Given the current atmosphere, we have proposed a staff increase in this area. We believe we will thus be in a position to assure the Board of Internal Economy that everything is working as it should.

Ms. Pauline Picard: I would like to come back to the matter raised earlier by Mr. Laframboise with respect to the budget for the Ethics Commissioner.

If I understood correctly, the budget he is provided for the purposes of administering his office and carrying out his work comes from the Treasury Board.

Mr. William Corbett: The arrangement is not that clear, but I will try to explain it to you. Amendments to the Parliament of Canada Act, under which the position of Ethics Commissioner was created, provide for the Commissioner and his Office to develop a budget, and for that operating budget to be submitted to the Speaker of the House on a yearly basis. The legislation does not provide for approval of that budget by the Speaker. The Speaker of the House only acts as an intermediary: he passes the budget on directly to the Treasury Board, which includes it in the Big Blue Book—in other words, the government's Main Estimates. It is included in the "Parliament of Canada" section. In fact, it's the fourth budget: first you have the budget for the Senate, then for the House of Commons, and then, the Library of Parliament. The fourth one is for the Ethics Commissioner.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Who is responsible for auditing the Office of the Ethics Commissioners's financial statements?

Mr. William Corbett: The Office has its own accounting department and is required to hire a private auditor.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Are his services paid for under the Office's budget?

Mr. William Corbett: Yes.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Longfield, please.

• (1150)

[English]

Hon. Judi Longfield: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the technology section, you indicate an amount of \$473,600 will be required to replace servers. How often are the servers and the monitors in members' offices changed? How often are they updated and upgraded?

The Chair: Can we get any technical experts for that to approach the—

Mr. William Corbett: Basically, those things are on the four- to five-year life cycle. That is the life expectancy, and we anticipate replacement every four to five years. But there are no servers in members' offices. Servers are large-enterprise computers that run our e-mail systems, etc. There are some servers; they're located centrally, in a server room in the new 181 Queen Street building.

Hon. Judi Longfield: Okay, so we're only talking \$473,000, and it includes that as well? Does that include the software upgrades, or is that someplace else?

Mr. William Corbett: Perhaps we can get Monsieur Bard to answer.

Mr. Louis Bard (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Monsieur le président, there's no doubt we're talking about members' offices and the PCs you have in your offices. Those are replaced mainly on a two- to three-year basis. We've tried to get a cycle of replacing all the equipment at each Parliament; we did it last year.

As for the servers mentioned, the budgets are more to support Parliament's activities—financial systems, dedicated services. The House today has a bank of around 400 of those enterprise servers in two locations on Parliament Hill. We established this year a capital replacement plan; every year we replace a portion of those servers on a four-year life cycle.

Hon. Judi Longfield: Okay, so the PCs and the software in those are not included in this. Where would we find that?

Mr. Louis Bard: The software for members' offices is part of an assurance program. It is being maintained annually, and funds exist in the base budget to replace that and to support that.

Hon. Judi Longfield: But under whose budget does it fall? In what estimates would I see it?

Mr. Louis Bard: It's under the information services budget.

Mr. William Corbett: Could I just clarify here, Mr. Chairman? What we've been talking about this morning are the increases to the budget for 2005-2006—

Hon. Judi Longfield: So there are no increases in that section.

Mr. William Corbett: —and what Louis Bard is talking about is a base budget that exists already in the main budget of the House of Commons to support a two- to three-year life cycle replacement of computers, screens, etc., in members' offices, which is already there.

Hon. Judi Longfield: Okay; that helps.

The other thing comes under committees and associations. Again, I know these are increases to the base budget. They talk about

additional funds of \$5,000...no, it's not \$5,000. It's \$5,405,200 for additional funds, and that's for committees and associations. Does that include all of the addition of the other ones? I mean the \$1,790,000 for new committees, the additional amount given to the liaison, and the \$1 million for the pilot project for the departmental reviews, the estimates. That's not all-inclusive? These are....

The first figure is the \$5,405,000. That's committees and associations, over and above what they already have, but does that include the amount given to the liaison committee—on the next page, on your...?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: No, it doesn't.

Hon. Judi Longfield: Okay, so what would that \$5,405,000 have been for? It's not the increase you've given the liaison committee.

Hon. Peter Milliken: It's the Joint Interparliamentary Council. The JIC got an increase.

Hon. Judi Longfield: How much did they get, Mr. Speaker, of that \$5 million?

Hon. Peter Milliken: We'll have to find the breakdown on that one.

• (1155)

Mr. William Corbett: We increased funds to the liaison committee and we increased funds to the Joint Interparliamentary Council.

The Chair: Can we hear that? I am not sure when you're briefing the Speaker and when you're informing us.

Mr. William Corbett: That \$5.4 million contained in the Speaker's notes, which he read, contains both the increase in funds to the liaison—

Hon. Judi Longfield: The \$2.7 million.

Mr. William Corbett: —and increased funds to the Joint Interparliamentary Council for support of additional associations.

Hon. Judi Longfield: So that would be approximately—

Mr. William Corbett: And the Speaker's budget for parliamentary exchanges.

Hon. Judi Longfield: So \$2.7 million of that is directly to the liaison committee for the operation of standing committees, and another \$2.7 million is for interparliamentary associations and the Speaker's budget?

Perhaps, so that you're not trying to do it here, you would give us a breakdown.

Mr. William Corbett: What we will do is try to bring back to the committee in writing a breakdown of this amount. I suspect there may be one small part missing here, which is that we may be talking about additional funds to the committees directorate to support the three new committees, which may well be contained in that figure, but I can't verify that right now.

Hon. Judi Longfield: It would be helpful when we're looking at that.

The Chair: All right, on that note then we'll change questions.

Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Peter Milliken: I can give some figures, Mr. Chair. The liaison committee is getting \$3,750,000 extra, or that's the amount.

Hon. Judi Longfield: That's the \$2.7 million, and they want—

Hon. Peter Milliken: And the \$1 million. Yes.

Then the parliamentary exchanges budget is getting an extra \$468,600. Then the Canada-Africa, the JIC is getting an additional \$7,000 for that.

I'm just checking; there's a list here. Oh yes, and then supporting new standing committees is \$1,179,600.

The Chair: Okay. In any case, we'll be receiving that note from you, Mr. Speaker.

Okay, Monsieur Laframboise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Let's talk about the millions of additional dollars you want to invest in a pilot project involving the establishment of a centre of expertise to provide non-partisan assistance. Are we talking about consultants? How will that work?

Mr. William Corbett: I am going to ask the Deputy Clerk to answer, as she is responsible for this project.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Laframboise, we want to establish a centre of expertise in order to provide better assistance to committees in their review of departmental and agency budgets. In addition, we want to ensure that committees can use the Internet to conduct research using electronic networks if they wish to conduct such reviews. Also, the Secretariat has prepared the journals. We have had to hire people to be in a position to send the notices electronically.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: But, you talk here about providing non-partisan assistance. Are we talking about staff already in your employ?

Mr. William Corbett: Initially, the idea was to hire high-level consultants through the Library of Parliament, and to sign an agreement with the Office of the Auditor General of Canada under which people would be seconded to us from the OAG.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: As well, we have had to hire three new committee clerks and three new assistants to provide service to these people. This is additional staff that has been hired by the Committees Directorate.

• (1200)

Mr. Mario Laframboise: So, this has already been done. We are already spending that \$1 million. Is that correct?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: And what you have put in place will ensure that this is non-partisan.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes, just as we have always done for committees. However, the number of sub-committees is increasing, and both committees and sub-committees travel a great deal. Staff whose job it is to support the actual work of those committees have to be able to respond to those new needs.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Corbett talked about consultants being assigned to the Library of Parliament. Have they been hired?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: We have entered into discussions with the Library of Parliament and the Office of the Auditor General with respect to providing support to committees interested in conducting an in-depth review of departmental and agency estimates, for example. That is done by securing the secondment of someone from the Office of the Auditor General to the Library of Parliament. As House of Commons staff, we do not act as experts on matters of substance; rather, our area of expertise is process and procedure.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: So, this is a consultancy contract you are giving the Office of the Auditor General.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes, exactly. We pay the salaries, because those people are on assignment. We thought this was a good arrangement to make, because these individuals working at the Office of the Auditor General have credibility; their non-partisanship is already well established, by the very nature of the work they do. That's what distinguishes their work from the research carried out by the different parties in this area.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: What that means is that any committee could request independent advice from someone working in the Office of the Auditor General for the purposes of an in-depth review of estimates.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Exactly.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Let's come back to the buses. I want to thank you for adding the bus that continues to operate until 11 o'clock. I have heard positive comments from people with a disability. This is very much appreciated. You acted quickly. So, I want to thank you for that.

I would like to move on to another topic. The truck drivers who make deliveries to our offices in the Heritage building, for example, and are ticketed by the City of Ottawa have to pay the tickets themselves. That isn't right, in my opinion. I don't think ministers' drivers have to pay their own tickets when they are improperly parked in Ottawa.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes, that matter was raised by your House Leader, and I have answered. I have been trying to see you or this other lady for a few days to discuss it.

The policy is quite simple. We rely on drivers not to put themselves in a position where they can be ticketed. If they do receive a ticket when using a House vehicle, they are required to pay that ticket. The reason for that is that they are the ones who have violated the law.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am not sure you understand the nature of the problem. There is no place to park in front of the Heritage building, for the purposes of making deliveries. That's what I am told. Does that mean we should stop making deliveries to the Heritage building?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I don't believe the information you've been given with respect to the Heritage building is completely accurate. If someone decides to cut corners, to drive a little faster or to park in front of a building, he runs the risk of getting a ticket. There are other options, and there is in fact a place for parking. If the driver parks there, there is no problem.

•(1205)

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to get all the details. I had understood that there was no place to park there.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I will provide those details.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The people who work for Purolator and other companies don't get tickets, but the ones who work for the House of Commons do.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Based on my information, it is possible to avoid getting a ticket. If someone decides to drive a little faster to save five minutes here or there, then he is taking a chance.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to see you look into this further, because I don't think that's the real problem.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I will make inquiries with respect to that and a number of other things, and I will get back to you with the results of those inquiries.

Mr. Yvon Godin: There is also the matter of having a clock in the House of Commons. I know we will probably be discussing this again in committee and I want the Speaker of the House to be aware of my concern. I don't think any of us, when we have the floor in the House of Commons for 35 seconds in Question Period, want to hear people counting down: "Five, four, three, two, one". On the other hand, when we're making a ten- or twenty-minute speech, it would be nice to know how much time we have left, and even who the next speaker is going to be.

As you know, we have visited the legislatures of a number of other countries that do have such a system. It doesn't seem to be a problem. On the contrary, I think it would be advantageous. A recommendation could be made in this regard.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, I'm going to ask that this be put on the agenda. Then colleagues will have an opportunity to discuss it.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But Mr. Chairman, we've been discussing it for two or three years now.

The Chair: Yes, and the idea was rejected two or three years ago: I was there when it happened.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We didn't complete our report.

The Chair: I remember being there at least once when this option was rejected.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We're just going to pretend you weren't there.

The Chair: No, I don't think so. If we have finished, I would like to know whether you're ready to carry these votes.

Does Vote 5, under PARLIAMENT, less the amount of \$60,398,835 for interim supply, carry?

Ms. Pauline Picard: We don't have that sheet of paper, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You have the votes in front of you.

Ms. Pauline Picard: No. We have the Speaker's notes, but we don't have anything else.

The Chair: If we don't have those documents, I can postpone that part of our work until the next meeting. In fact, it appears on the document.

Ms. Pauline Picard: But we don't have it.

The Chair: Excuse me, but while that document is being distributed, I would like to draw your attention to one thing. We had asked the Chief Electoral Officer to appear before the Committee next week. But he will not be appearing. The following week, we will not be here. That means the next date that he could appear would be May 3. Is that all right?

•(1210)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I don't know how we could let the Chief Electoral Officer know that we have not received our refunds from Elections Canada.

The Chair: That has already been done. At the last meeting, we asked him to appear for the very purpose of discussing that. So, that meeting will take place on May 3. In theory, we are supposed to discuss electoral reform on Tuesdays. We had already postponed that discussion to Thursday, but we're going to put it back on Tuesday's schedule, since that is the usual way we proceed, and also, the Chief Electoral Officer cannot be with us that day.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Mr. Chairman, is he out of the country?

The Chair: That's what we're told.

Mr. Clerk, can you provide any details in this regard?

The Clerk of the Committee: I was told he would be out of town, not out of the country.

Ms. Pauline Picard: I think there is an urgent need for him to come before the Committee to explain what is happening with the refunds of our expenses. You know what could happen in the near future. So, we need those refunds. By postponing the meeting to May 3, it's possible, if we don't bring pressure to bear, that we will only receive those refunds in June or in the fall.

The Chair: That doesn't mean there won't be any refunds. We're talking about having the Chief Electoral Officer here before the Committee. I'm not defending him. I could tell our clerk, if you think it's a good idea, that we would like to receive a letter from Elections Canada before next week telling us exactly how many cheques have been sent, how many have not, and how much time is needed to finalize this work. Do you think it would be a good idea to receive such a letter in advance of Tuesday's meeting?

Ms. Pauline Picard: Mr. Chairman, I would like to know whether my colleagues agree with me that we should ask Mr. Jean-Pierre Kingsley to appear at our meeting next Tuesday. This is urgent. We have questions to put to him and we cannot wait until May.

If my colleagues agree, acting through the Chair, the Committee could ask Mr. Kingsley to appear before the Committee next Tuesday, unless his commitment is more important than hearing what members of Parliament have to say to him.

The Chair: Are you moving a motion?

Ms. Pauline Picard: Yes, that is my motion.

The Chair: Could you please repeat the wording?

Ms. Pauline Picard: I move that the Committee summon the Chief Electoral Officer to appear before the Committee next Tuesday, at the Committee's usual meeting time.

The Chair: Very well.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, please inform Mr. Kingsley of this. If he has a very special reason...

Mr. Yvon Godin: The same thing happened last year. He was out of the country, and we said he didn't have to come. But he came anyway. He must have a good reason for not appearing.

I agree with my colleague, Ms. Picard. There may be an election soon. Money is supposed to be refunded to the political parties. That has not happened. We want to know why.

The Chair: Since we've concluded our debate and voted, we can now carry the votes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for appearing before the Committee. I'd also like to thank the Clerk, the Deputy Clerk and the other witnesses.

Does Vote 5, under PARLIAMENT, less the amount of \$60,398,835 for interim supply, carry?

PARLIAMENT

House of Commons

Vote 5 — Program Spending..... \$241,595,000

(Vote 5 is carried)

The Chair: Should I report the Main Estimates to the House?

Hon. members: Yes.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next Tuesday, I won't put anything else on the agenda. I want to come back to this. I have no explanation. He may be on vacation. Perhaps he is taking some time to rest before a possible election. He may be far away from here, in another country. I just don't know. I didn't ask the question. I'm not saying that's the case. I will try to seek clarification from colleagues. Would you like someone else from Elections Canada to appear instead?

Hon. members: Fine.

The Chair: So, if he is away, someone else could represent him.

Ms. Pauline Picard: But he would have to have a very good reason.

The Chair: Yes, we agree on that. We want him to appear before the Committee, but if it is absolutely impossible for him to do so, for a good reason, another person mandated to answer our questions could appear instead.

Hon. members: Yes, agreed.

The Chair: Ms. Longfield, please.

[English]

Hon. Judi Longfield: On this particular one, I want to raise an issue with rebates, and all of that. I know this has been a subject... I'm very disappointed we have this delay.

My CFO called Elections Canada. They told him they were only halfway through. When he asked what this meant, they said that's all they were told to say, and they would not put him through to the finance department. That is the kind of thing I think don't think we should be putting up with. He said they were extremely abrupt, and he is a lawyer of some standing in the community. He is known for his tact and, and he was quite offended.

The Chair: Okay. Members can prepare accordingly, then, for the next meeting.

Monsieur LeBlanc.

• (1215)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, this is for the benefit of colleagues as well. As in Judi's case, my official agent is a former law partner of mine, and made the same call. It was not only about the return; we have a bizarre, fortunate situation of having a very considerable surplus in his account. He, as the official agent, is sitting on, I think, some \$40,000 in surplus, which he legally—and it has nothing to do with the refund coming—can't give back to the Liberal association, by law, until he gets a directive from Elections Canada, and he can't get the directive. So there's a double problem.

[Translation]

It's doubly ridiculous. He has to retain that amount. It makes no sense! We might have an election...

[English]

The Chair: I think we're all giving evidence today that we will need next week, which of course I don't think—

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): If I might suggest for the next time, do you want us to focus upon our own individual problems, or will we have the opportunity to actually ask, as a matter of policy, why Elections Canada has chosen to interpret the relevant legislation in the way it has? I don't regard this as a relevant policy question. It may not be relevant to the particular concerns of—

The Chair: I don't usually dictate to colleagues how to ask their questions, but given the nature of the work of this committee, when you discuss the individual, you almost always discuss the aggregate simultaneously, because of course each one of us is an example, in one way, shape, or form, of the whole. Anyway, members can bear that in mind. They may even want to consult their own colleagues about specific problems, and ask whatever they would like.

If someone will propose the adjournment—

Hon. Judi Longfield: I move we adjourn.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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