



House of Commons  
CANADA

**Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with  
Disabilities of the Standing Committee on Human  
Resources, Skills Development, Social  
Development and the Status of Persons with  
Disabilities**

---

SPER • NUMBER 005 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

---

EVIDENCE

**Wednesday, February 16, 2005**

—  
**Chair**

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff**

All parliamentary publications are available on the  
"Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire" at the following address:

**<http://www.parl.gc.ca>**

## Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Wednesday, February 16, 2005

• (1535)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.)):** We'll begin.

[English]

Welcome, Mr. Corbett. Without further ado, please introduce your team. Then we'll commence.

**Mr. William Corbett (Clerk of the House of Commons):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have with me Marie-Andrée Lajoie, who is a clerk assistant and has exercised a coordinating role in recent months with regard to the whole question of accessibility of the precinct.

Claude Charbonneau is an architect working with precinct services on questions of accessibility. Elaine Diguier is with our multimedia unit and will be able to address questions of website accessibility. Benoit Giroux is our manager of health, safety and environment for the administration of the House of Commons. I'm the Clerk. I'm here at your disposal, sir.

I have a short presentation, if you want to hear it. If you want to go straight to questions we'd be happy to do that.

**The Chair:** Please go ahead then, Mr. Corbett.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. William Corbett:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

It's a pleasure to be here today to outline the efforts of the House administration to support accessibility and accommodation of persons with disabilities. As a national institution, we strive to be representative of the diversity that exists amongst Canadians.

[Translation]

The Administration fully supports the principles behind employment equity and work place accommodation and is committed to ensuring that it permeates our daily operations.

We are taking steps to implement best practices and our initiatives reflect revised standards and state-of-the-art technology. As well, we are developing a policy on work place accommodation that will provide the framework for all our related programs and initiatives.

[English]

I'd like to share with you some of the progress that has been made over recent years to make the parliamentary precinct more accessible, to remove barriers for persons with disabilities, and to integrate workplace accommodation into our day-to-day operations.

I would like to first address the area of physical access to the precinct. All main entrances to our buildings are wheelchair accessible. Washrooms and food services facilities have also been modified to accommodate individuals with special needs. All new design work takes into account the accessibility factor for persons with disabilities, as defined by Treasury Board guidelines.

The visitors' welcome centre, located in the Centre Block, meets all applicable standards. To ensure that parliamentary activities are accessible to disabled Canadians, designated wheelchair-accessible areas are available in the House public galleries. Also, the press conference room in the Centre Block is fully accessible to disabled persons.

[Translation]

Other elements have been installed to facilitate access to our buildings, such as electronic card readers for disabled employees and push-button automatic door openers for the general public.

This past summer, retro-fitting of some committee and meeting rooms was completed, bringing them up to a high standard of accessibility. All rooms can now accommodate Committee members, witnesses and visitors with disabilities.

[English]

We must note, however, that wheelchair access to room 269 West Block is possible only by going through room 209. Access to room 269 is currently being managed administratively. Last summer, modifications were also made to the chamber to accommodate the special needs of a newly elected member of Parliament.

The subject of emergency and evacuation procedures within the buildings is also one of prime importance. The security services are trained to react to all emergencies within the Parliament Buildings and to assist in evacuating mobility-impaired persons. Evacuation chairs are placed strategically throughout the buildings, including the Peace Tower. A specific emergency response protocol, in anticipation of evacuation requirements, has been developed for physically challenged MPs and employees.

[Translation]

Next, I want to speak about initiatives related to transportation on the Hill.

One of the six green buses has been modified and adapted to allow for wheelchair accessibility. This modified bus is being used on regular, daily scheduled routes.

In addition to this bus, a van which has been modified for disabled persons and the latest generation of wheelchairs acts as a back-up should there be a need for additional service.

Designated parking spaces are available for persons with disabilities at the Centre Block, the West Block and the Confederation Building, at a number which exceeds the minimum legal requirements.

[English]

If I may, I would now like to turn to products and applications in the area of telecommunications and information technology.

The House offers several products and services to members and employees, such as a door announcer or floor mat, voice command, and specialized adapted telephones for the visually impaired. For the hearing impaired, the House supports products such as teletype-writers, hard-of-hearing handsets, loud telephone ringers, strobe lights, amplified cordless or corded telephones, and cell phones.

In the area of special applications, the House can obtain special voice recognition software integrated to computers and telephones, as well as wireless devices with auto-answer features, or voice prompt commands.

• (1540)

[Translation]

Special software and hardware products are available which include: computer-based telephones; voice recognition systems; head-activated mouse and tracking devices; and aids for the visually impaired.

Let me now turn to the accessibility of parliamentary information.

Since the 1980s, we have provided real-time English closed captioning for Question Period and we are currently working at providing closed captioning in French. However, since the televising of Question Period began, sign-language interpretation in French has been provided.

[English]

The parliamentary website provides full access to information about Parliament and the work of parliamentarians. However, the website does not currently fully comply with the World Wide Web Consortium guidelines on accessibility established for Government of Canada websites. New web content is being developed in accordance with those guidelines, and a program is in place to address the deficiencies of content that was developed before the guidelines were established.

If I may, I'll now say a few words about the work we've been doing relating to workplace accommodation.

The House of Commons seeks to accommodate employees who have special needs through a variety of means. These include flexible work hours, modified job duties and/or work sites, modified transportation arrangements, work at home arrangements, and special job aids or equipment. We have a comprehensive office ergonomics program that provides methods, tools, and standards to assess workplace design in order to accommodate individual needs. We also have processes in place to assess the functional capabilities of injured or disabled employees, to ensure they are reinstated or accommodated in suitable functions.

[Translation]

In the area of recruitment practices, we solicit applications, in open competitions, from three target organizations that represent disabled people. All competition documents are available in alternate formats such as Braille, audio cassette or large print.

We have implemented policies and conducted information sessions on Prevention and Resolution of Harassment in the Work Place, Life Threatening Illnesses and Employee Assistance.

Furthermore, we recently conducted a self-identification process on employment equity objectives and principles, which included information sessions for all employees.

[English]

We have a cooperative venture with Ridgemont High School called the buddies program, to train students with an intellectual disability in skills and behaviours that will help them find work in the future.

To conclude, there are opportunities ahead of us in which I feel we can really make a difference. These are the upcoming major renovations to the Parliament Buildings, the employment equity program, and the development of a workplace accommodation policy. The House of Commons administration is taking concrete steps to continue to be a workplace of choice, where employees value and respect the abilities of persons in the designated groups and embrace their differences. I'm very proud of the work we have been doing in this regard and believe we've created a solid foundation.

Thank you for this opportunity to put this before you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. We'd be pleased to take your questions.

• (1545)

**The Chair:** On the first round, we go to Ms. Skelton.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

After question period today, I think I need a hearing aid.

I want to know if all the buildings in the precinct meet the standards we would like them to have.

**Mr. William Corbett:** I'll ask Claude Charbonneau to answer.

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau (Major Projects Coordinator, Parliamentary Precinct Services, Long-Term Architectural Planning Office, House of Commons):** All the buildings in the precinct have an accessible entrance. Because of the heritage character of these buildings, it is not necessarily the main entrance that is accessible, as you can imagine. For example, the main entrance to Confederation Building has several steps up to it, and it's the same for the main entrance to the Justice Building, which is actually the west entrance on Kent Street. Those buildings have what we call 24/7 entrances. They're the main entrances that are open 24/7, and those are accessible. In the case of both these buildings, these are the entrances on Victoria Way, to the north.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** As Mr. Corbett said, with the reconstruction and the new library, you've made sure that all the rules and regulations have been met.

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** Absolutely, by code. Because these are going to be major renovations, of course, these buildings will have to comply with the current codes. Current codes all have accessibility provisions in there. The challenge we'll have with the Parliament Buildings, especially the Centre, East, and West Blocks—which are all classified as federal heritage buildings with the highest designation in the land for heritage, as you can imagine—will be to integrate those accessibility provisions while respecting the heritage character of the buildings.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Have you conducted a complete audit on all of the precinct, all the committee rooms, the rooms we use every day?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Absolutely, Ms. Skelton, we have done that. Not only have we done it initially, of our own initiative, but when we were informed that there would be a quadriplegic member of Parliament as a result of the election, we put in place a special staff committee within 24 hours of the election. It was chaired by Marie-Andrée and was to re-examine absolutely every one of our buildings, every service, every facility that we provide to members of Parliament, to ensure that there would be no question of access for the new member of Parliament.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** How many parking spaces on the Hill are reserved for persons with disabilities?

**Mr. William Corbett:** I'll ask Benoit to answer that.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux (Manager, Corporate Services, Health, Safety and Environment, House of Commons):** Approximately twenty spaces.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Do you know offhand how many of them are used continually?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** I don't know offhand.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Through you to Ms. Skelton, Mr. Chairman, that's probably the kind of detailed information we can get to the committee through the clerk.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I would appreciate that on how many we have for members of Parliament and how many are reserved for staff. Are they close to the buildings? Are they in a safe place, where they're easily accessible in the evening or for someone who is working late?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** I can answer some of those questions.

I don't know if they are all given out to people as we speak, but there are about 20 parking spaces for "disabled parking". They are all located close to buildings, at the Centre Block, West Block, and Confederation Building. Those are the three buildings where those 20 spaces are located.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** There was an occasion two weeks ago when we found a government building with a wheelchair button that didn't work. How often are the buttons for the automatic door openers checked?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** This is done by Public Works and Government Services. I know they have a maintenance program in place. I cannot answer on the frequency of the current inspections, but I know they are being regularly tested.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I've noticed the shuttle buses are equipped with wheelchair lifts. Have the bus drivers all been trained to use those?

• (1550)

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Yes. They recently purchased new buses; as the clerk mentioned, one of them is accessible. As well, there is an Activan, a special purpose van. All the bus drivers have been trained, actually about two or three weeks ago, on the proper use of those devices.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I wondered why those buses.... They don't go to La Promenade or the Wellington Building, do they?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Not under normal circumstances, Ms. Skelton. They are for use on the parliamentary precinct. It's more to do with matters of liability insurance for operating on the public streets, as opposed to operating within the parliamentary precinct. But we could get further information for you—

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** It's a challenge, because we usually, as Mr. Boshcoff and I did today.... We were going over to 701. It's one of those things that I would like to have considered.

**Mr. William Corbett:** The general bus service has not operated off the precinct, with the exception of a quick run during non-peak hours along Wellington Street that passes by the front door of the Wellington Building and the Victoria Building, which is used by the Senate.

We've had a great deal of difficulty with the city; they are not comfortable with our stopping buses at peak hours on one of the main downtown streets. And how can we get service to La Promenade, which is on a pedestrian street, and a one-way grid system? If the bus were to go down to the side door of La Promenade, it's on Metcalfe Street; it's going to have to go down a number of blocks, and get lost in the traffic, before coming back on Metcalfe. It's a problem we've looked at for years and not been able to solve.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I've just got time for a quick one.

I know one night Mr. Fletcher had to drive home in his wheelchair, because he worked late, and the accessible van is only available until 4:30. Why is that?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** It was mainly due to the shift work of the transportation people. However, I believe alternative arrangements have been made since then with Mr. Fletcher to accommodate his special needs.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** But for other employees of the House, too, because we do have some who...?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** The Activan could go off the precinct, and—just to build on what Mr. Corbett said—we also have a shuttle bus, operated by the Senate, that stops at the Wellington Building and the Victoria Building. It is fully accessible per standard.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** But we don't have any van that's accessible after 4:30 p.m., other than if you make a special arrangement for it?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** I would have to double-check the exact schedule.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Please do that for me, because I think we should have one available when needed and necessary. I'm assuming that should be done, because not everyone works until 4:30 in the afternoon.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Is that for transportation to someone's residence? I have to say, Mrs. Skelton, that at the beginning, certain considerations were taken in terms of accommodating Mr. Fletcher. Certain decisions were taken by the Board of Internal Economy, in collaboration with Mr. Fletcher. In essence, at one point he made it quite clear to us that he didn't want to be treated unlike other members, and we do not transport other members to their homes. And he indicated he was prepared to use the OC Transpo Para Transpo service or the Blue Line taxi service insofar as possible. There have been occasions when that has simply not worked, and decisions have been taken, with administrative discretion, to try to facilitate Mr. Fletcher's travel to his home, rather than leave him—

• (1555)

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I guess it's not totally about Mr. Fletcher. I want to make sure that anyone who does need accessibility to the buildings or to a suitable place, or to their home or something, someone who does have problems getting transportation, has it available from the House. That's my concern.

**Mr. William Corbett:** It's certainly something we'll look into, and we'll get back to the committee on it.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I assume that was my 10 minutes, sir.

**The Chair:** It was a shade over.

Monsieur.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ):** Congratulations, Mr. Corbett. I believe you've addressed all the questions contained in the document we have in hand. However, I saw nothing in the document about pages.

Are any of the page positions reserved for persons with disabilities? Is there something on that?

**Mr. William Corbett:** We've had disabled pages. I don't know whether we've done any special recruiting, but we have had pages with disabilities.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie (Clerk Assistant, House Proceedings, House of Commons):** To my knowledge, we've never had pages in wheelchairs. If that were necessary, retrofits would obviously be made for that purpose. There are certain problems involved in moving around in a wheelchair in the House because of

steps, as we've seen. There are things that could be done in this regard.

A few years ago, we had a page with cystic fibrosis, I believe. We didn't do any tests at that time.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Would it be possible to reserve one of those positions for persons with disabilities? I'm not just talking about someone in a wheelchair; that might be a person who is hearing impaired or has another disability.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** That's something that could be taken into consideration.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Earlier you referred to health and safety. You told me that Mr. Giroux handled that.

Can you tell us anymore about this subject? What are you doing about health and safety? What does that entail on the Hill?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** We're doing a lot of things.

Do you want more specific answers on questions regarding accessibility and retrofits?

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** No, we've dealt with the question. I want to know whether you have any health and safety programs for employees on Parliament Hill.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** We have fairly elaborate programs covering the areas of health, safety and the environment. There are nurses and health services on the Hill. There are health offices in the Centre Block and Wellington Block, with nurses on site who offer health consultations, but also proactive health prevention programs. We're doing a lot of awareness these days on various health-related themes.

With regard to health and safety more specifically, we have a number of established programs to manage health and safety risks on the hill in the context of our operations, programs relating to the use of chemicals, the issue of asbestos control in the buildings, accident prevention, work place inspections and so on. We have a range of programs covering those various aspects.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** You undoubtedly have a comprehensive program in the area.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Yes. Moreover, you can consult the "House Administration" section on the Intraparl site. There you'll find a section called "Health, Safety and Environment", describing available programs, including health programs and employee assistance programs.

As regards the environment, we have a fairly comprehensive program on the Hill, in partnership with the Senate, the Library of Parliament and Public Works and Government Services Canada, which is called Partners for a Green Hill. The program was originally called Greening the Hill. It's a very comprehensive program for managing our environmental initiatives such as recycling, resource consumption and green purchasing. We also have a Web site on Parliament's Intraparl site, which is an integrated site with the Library of Parliament, the House and Public Works on the Greening the Hill program.

• (1600)

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Can the entire prevention program be found on Intraparl?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Yes. All our programs are on Intraparl.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Benoit forgot to say one thing. If there are accidents in the work place, Benoit and his staff investigate each accident that occurs on Parliament Hill.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Are those accident investigations conducted in cooperation with another group, or are they done solely by the employer? Are they tripartite investigations?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Absolutely. We have a very active joint occupational health and safety committee, with representatives from each union on the Hill, which examines health and safety issues in the House of Commons, including accidents in the work place and all the programs developed for administrative employees and members. All that's done in consultation with the joint occupational health and safety committee, which includes representatives from the unions, obviously, and from management.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Do you have a back to work program for accident victims?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Yes. As the Clerk mentioned, we are developing a work place accommodation policy. We also have a back to work and work place reintegration process, which enables us to identify various factors. The idea is to evaluate and respond to people's limits. We're studying changes that should be made to the work place. We can also consider reassignment, if necessary.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** All right. Is that done through your service?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** It's done through our...

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Is it done through your nurses, physicians?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** That's correct. Absolutely.

We also have access to qualified suppliers who can conduct functional assessments for us. We can precisely determine people's skills and abilities so that we can take those abilities into account in the work place.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Perfect. That answer my questions.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Ms. Lajoie.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** Briefly, perhaps I could come back to one of the questions.

[*Translation*]

I wanted to come back to the recruitment question. You referred to the page program.

We're currently conducting a fairly broad recruitment of procedural clerks. For the first time, we've worked in close cooperation with the House of Commons Employment Equity Coordinator. We wanted to ensure that the recruitment poster was sent to target groups, to all groups represented at the employment equity level. We're in the middle of the process. I'm anxious to see the results of this much more targeted approach.

As regards the recruitment of pages, it's being done through the schools. There may be some things we can do in association with the high schools and CEGEPs to reinforce this message. Since you asked the question, I want to tell you that we're also awaiting the results of a much more targeted approach.

I just wanted to add that.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** To your knowledge, how many persons with disabilities are working on Parliament Hill? What's the percentage?

**Mr. William Corbett:** The percentage is 4.2 percent.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** It's 4.2 percent?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Yes. That's just among administrative staff.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Yes.

**Mr. William Corbett:** We're just talking about the administration. We're not talking about staff who work for members.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** No. I understand that.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Yes. It's 4.2 percent for administrative staff.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** That includes both people who work in the cafeteria and those who work elsewhere.

**Mr. William Corbett:** From ordinary employees up to the Clerk of the House.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** All right.

**Mr. William Corbett:** The percentage is 4.2 percent.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Perfect.

**The Chair:** Mr. Godin, over to you.

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst):** Thank you. I'd like to welcome everyone as well.

I can't stay for long because I have to go to the residence of the Governor General. I'm going to take the green bus. It seems that the insurance pays for that.

**Mr. William Corbett:** No. It's a Senate bus.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Ha!

**Mr. William Corbett:** They're richer, Mr. Godin.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I thought it was a green bus.

**Mr. William Corbett:** They're richer.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Let's come back to our work. Honestly, I find that's an unacceptable comment or excuse. It's not up to you to attack, Mr. Clerk. The Parliament of Canada is concerned about the cost of insuring its buses for transporting persons with disabilities. That should be removed from the vocabulary of Parliament. That the Parliament of Canada is concerned about the cost of insurance it will have to pay for a vehicle that must be accessible for persons with disabilities is offensive, totally unacceptable. I recommend that you check to see whether there is a problem regarding insurance for the bus. Don't go looking for it in New Brunswick, because that's where it's the most expensive in Canada. There should be group insurance. The Wellington Building was built to house the Parliament of Canada. In fact, it belongs to the government. Ottawa should feel lucky to have Parliament. I'd like it to be in Bathurst, in New Brunswick. I would definitely promise you a street in front of Parliament where persons with disabilities could move about and have access to the Parliament buildings, like the Wellington Building or the Promenade Building. I'd ensure that persons with disabilities could have access to them.

●(1605)

**Mr. William Corbett:** I'll be pleased to pass your advice on to the Board of Internal Economy, Mr. Godin.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Thank you.

**Mr. William Corbett:** They're the ones who decide.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** They decide and they have a responsibility. I'd like my message to get directly to them. You can say it comes from me. This is 2005, and our Parliament should adapt to today's world.

If you check the back entrance to the Promenade Building, I don't believe there are any stairs. A person can enter there through automatic doors. I think the bus or the van may go there. A person can take the time to get out—there are automatic doors—and go to any floor. I'd also recommend looking into that situation.

The door to that room, Room 209, isn't automatic. I don't see any mechanism for opening it.

**Mr. William Corbett:** The interior doors aren't.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** It's a minor thing that could be improved in all the buildings. The doors to the meeting rooms should be automatic. Today we have two persons in wheelchairs. If we forget them when we leave here, they'll be locked in.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Mr. Godin, that may be something we could raise with the people concerned at Public Works and Government Services Canada. That's the department that handles that.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I know they have a problem with Canadian Heritage over certain buildings, among other things the old building in front of the Justice Building. It needs paint and they don't want to repaint because...

**Mr. William Corbett:** Unfortunately, that's not our responsibility.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I believe Parliament exercises control over its buildings. That should be looked in more closely.

**Mr. William Corbett:** We can raise the matter with the persons responsible at PWGSC.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** That's something that could be done very quickly. It would be an improvement not only in terms of accessibility, but also in terms of personal safety.

What mechanism have you put in place so that persons with disabilities can file a complaint? Parliament at times believes it's above complaints and human rights. I believe there are currently cases before the Supreme Court on this matter. I'd like to know your position on the question.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** There are collective agreements in the House of Commons, on the administrative side. A large percentage of employees are covered by collective agreements, which contain non-discrimination clauses. The disability question is recognized in a non-discrimination clause. So they can file a grievance. There is a grievance process for discrimination matters.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Mr. Fletcher will be coming in a moment, but I won't be here. In view of his experience with moving around, I'd like to know whether he has filed a lot of complaints since he's been here and whether there's been an improvement.

●(1610)

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** I can't answer for Mr. Fletcher.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Complaints from Mr. Fletcher? To my knowledge, there haven't been any. Since Mr. Fletcher has arrived, the most obvious barrier to his access to Parliament Hill has been the small elevator between the sixth floor and the dining room of the parliamentary restaurant. His wheelchair was too heavy for the elevator, but we made some temporary changes so that he could have access to the dining room through the kitchen. We've agreed with Public Works and Government Services Canada to issue a call to tender to replace the small elevator with a more modern elevator.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** That more modern elevator meets Mr. Fletcher's wheelchair needs. It was installed in early January.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I'm not just talking about Mr. Fletcher, but also about people who come to Parliament.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** There were specific needs for Mr. Fletcher's wheelchair, in view of the fact that it was not of a standard weight. The elevator was up to standard, but it didn't meet Mr. Fletcher's specific needs. So it had to be modified accordingly, reinstalled, and it was then tested by Mr. Fletcher two or three weeks ago.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** You said Mr. Fletcher had to go through the kitchen.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** It was a temporary agreement, in the absence of an elevator...

**Mr. William Corbett:** In the absence of an elevator that could accommodate him.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Is it now accessible to the general public as well?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Yes.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Can he go to the bathroom on the sixth floor?

**Mr. William Corbett:** It's on the same level.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** On the same level?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Yes, the elevator was the only barrier.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** We had identified certain locations, such as the library room of the Wellington Building. It also had an elevator that met accessibility standards, but it did not meet Mr. Fletcher's special needs. We discussed the matter with him and we agreed not to make any changes since the elevator was up to standard and Mr. Fletcher did not plan to go there.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Are there any people, employees, for example, who want to go to that library?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** It's up to standard, but doesn't meet the specific needs of the member's wheelchair.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I have no further questions.

[English]

**The Chair:** Does your office just deal with the Parliament Buildings themselves, or do you have any jurisdiction over riding or constituency offices and the decisions or policies made there?

**Mr. William Corbett:** No, those decisions are left entirely to members of Parliament.



Marie-Andrée worked on our electoral preparation committee, preparing the briefing binders that went out. I'm not sure that I know of anything in the binders that go to members of Parliament regarding accessibility. It certainly is something that we ought to be thinking of and something we'll take away from this meeting that hasn't been brought to our attention before.

**The Chair:** Certainly it would be the Speaker of the House and his committee that oversees the members' operating budgets.

**Mr. William Corbett:** The Board of Internal Economy.

**The Chair:** Right.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** I believe, in general, members are basically responsible for the office and rent, and for ensuring some kind of accessibility to those offices.

I will go back and look at the documentation we send to members right after an election to see if this is covered in the material we send. Without making them guidelines, maybe there is some information we could provide on these matters.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Godin raised the point about automatic doors, which are roughly \$5,000 to \$6,000 each. So for each member within their member operating budget... It's just something for you to keep in mind. We will certainly have representatives from the Board of Internal Economy here to answer those questions eventually, I'm sure.

Let me mention that in each member's office here, you would provide a whole list of things, from mats to telephone devices for the deaf and those kinds of things, and they would simply be on a request basis. That's for staffers or visitors here.

•(1615)

**Mr. William Corbett:** Indeed, and if, for example, members of this particular subcommittee might expect to receive visitors who would need those kinds of services, I'm sure we'd be prepared to provide them.

**The Chair:** I think that's talking about the members' offices. Is it the same situation in any administrative office, whether you're working directly for the House of Commons or in any of the peripheral support buildings? Would those things be available on demand?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Yes, to any employee who would need them, indeed.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Usually it's a matter of a case-by-case basis. We're looking at assessing special needs and looking at the available tools that would fulfill the need.

**The Chair:** That's quite fine for employees, because you can pretty much address it on an individual basis. In essence, as long-range renovation plans and building developments come on, these things are being done as just part of the norm. Now the future norm would be full accessibility and inclusiveness in accommodation. Could you say that's your goal?

**Mr. William Corbett:** Indeed I could, sir, but always, as Claude mentioned, I temper that against, insofar as is possible, the high level of heritage designation of the buildings. And sometimes it may result in a compromise that isn't spot on but is as close to spot on as we can get.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** Mr. Chairman, I'd like to add something with regard to standards, particularly for Mr. Godin.

The Treasury Board has a policy on building accessibility. That policy states roughly what must be accessible in a building: main entrances, elevators and stairways. With regard to stairways, we're talking about handrails, visibility, steps and so on. This Treasury Board policy refers to standard CAN/CSA-B651-F95 (C2001), issued by the Canadian Standards Association, the CSA. A 2004 version has been issued. That standard states how to make all this accessible, what, for example, constitutes an accessible toilet and all those details. In short, the political authorities decide what must be made accessible, and the standards makers state how to do it.

When a standard is developed, a group of people meet around a table. There are representatives from various levels of government, industry representatives, but there are also representatives of associations of persons with disabilities. These people agree on the width of an accessible door: 30, 32 or 34 inches. They agreed on 32 inches.

The elevator in the parliamentary dining room met the standards established by consensus in that CSA standard, but not Mr. Fletcher's specific needs.

The Treasury Board policy also encourages employers to do more and to respond to the specific needs of their employees. That's what we did in Mr. Fletcher's case. You have to establish standards by considering what will meet the requirements of 99 percent of people, but there will always be an exception for whom it won't be sufficient. So then you make the necessary modifications.

•(1620)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'll ask you about the protocol policies for both staff and events on the Hill in terms of meetings, training sessions, and interviews for staff and then receptions. Would any of these facilities ever be exclusive to any groups? The rooms here—

**Mr. William Corbett:** With the exception of Room 269, all other public rooms in which committee meetings are held, associations meet, receptions are convened, or training sessions are given are fully accessible.

**The Chair:** Henceforth, it will be known as room X.

**Mr. William Corbett:** The simple matter is that there is what is known as a porte cochère between and underneath the two wings of the building. It requires a climb up stairs, across, and back down to access that room from the far side of the building. It can only be accessed through this room on the same level.

**The Chair:** Ms. Diguier, I'd like to ask you, as our technical person, if you are happy with the progress that has been made. What do you feel should be our next set of priorities, not only in terms of internal communications for members and staff but for communicating to the public?

**Ms. Elaine Diguier (Director, Multimedia Services & ISD Business Planning, House of Commons):** Do you mean specifically the web?

**The Chair:** First of all on the web, and then in other formats, including print.

**Ms. Elaine Diguier:** I'll speak to you first about the web, and I'll certainly let Mr. Corbett join in on the rest.

It's great to be in front of this committee, because this committee in the last Parliament was the first to do the e-consultation. We learned a lot of things when we did the e-consultation, including the need to redo the committees' websites. The committees' websites have all been redesigned in consideration of W3C standards. The funny thing about the web is that because it's in digital format, it in essence makes everything accessible. So when you say it's not accessible according to guidelines, it is more accessible than it ever has been in terms of the content of the work that Parliament has done, because web technology is very accessible.

The W3C guidelines are guidelines with priority one, priority two, and priority three. Priority two is that you should adhere to these guidelines. Over the last couple of years, we have done an assessment. We're doing assessments on our website and are putting in place a program where we're not making the change, but all go-forward content that we bring to a site is meeting those guidelines.

With regard to printing, what specifically were you interested in?

**The Chair:** There are two things. The first is the business cards, for which we're getting great resistance from somebody in terms of the size of the print that we can use. I feel it should be in accordance with the CNIB guidelines in terms of the type of font and size of print. Of course, that would make for a pretty big business card, so we have to manage that somehow. And then I'm talking in terms of our correspondence and being able to produce replies by letter to those who may be impaired visually.

**Ms. Elaine Diguier:** I would feel remiss in giving you a detailed answer on the printing, because the printing group at the House of Commons is, just like the web.... If you'll permit me a little infomercial, then like the web, they're a leader. They really are sensitized to special needs, particularly with regard to printed matter. In fact, they're EcoLogo-certified, and we're leaders in that matter. So if you'll permit me, I'd like to come back to you with any details around what we do with regard to the printing of business cards rather than take a guess at it.

**Mr. William Corbett:** I could venture only a guess in response, but I've never heard this complaint before. I know members have always had business cards available in Braille for a good number of years, but this may be where we're running into a board policy that hasn't been brought to the board's attention and updated. It may simply be that no one has brought it to our attention before, but it has very much been brought to our attention now. We'll certainly look into it and get back to the committee.

• (1625)

**The Chair:** For the record, I was advised that my letterhead and my cards could not follow the CNIB recommendations because they just weren't able to do it in printing.

**Mr. William Corbett:** It may be a policy or it may be a technical difficulty that would have to be surmounted with some other equipment. The latter would require an investment, which would have to go to the board. I do find it surprising that you've been denied, but we'll look into it.

**Ms. Elaine Diguier:** Yes, I do too, actually. I find that surprising.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll continue on the second round.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I just have a couple of really quick questions.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Mr. Chairman, I, like Monsieur Godin, had a previous engagement with the Speaker and the Governor General that I have to go to in approximately three minutes.

**The Chair:** I can offer one minute each to the others.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Marie-Andrée can stay for a few minutes longer with the other officials.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** That's fine, if you're willing.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Before he goes, though, I'd like to take that one minute with him, because it will be the only question probably I'll have.

**The Chair:** Okay, I'll be flexible.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** It's just to bring up my point on how very important I believe it is.

When our friend here left to go, I think, to the washroom, if there was nobody outside to bring him back in, how would he come in? On the statement you made that everybody has access to those rooms, I say no, because the door stops them from coming through. I want to prove my point that we just experienced that.

[Translation]

**Mr. William Corbett:** You've proved that.

[English]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Thank you. They say when you prove your point, stop talking because you can lose it.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Point taken.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I would like to ask whether you have emergency plans for all the buildings on the precinct.

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** Evacuation plans. Yes, indeed, we do.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I would just like to note these these tables. Would it be hard for one table in every room to be made available for someone who wants to use a wheelchair, so they could go underneath that table?

Mr. Fletcher has a wheelchair. Chantal can't go underneath her table. Why would it be so hard to have a table made that a wheelchair could go under, so that it's suitable for that person in the wheelchair to have a decent place to put their books? Mr. Fletcher doesn't need that, but we have a prime example here, with Chantal sitting at the table.

**Mr. William Corbett:** We can certainly look into this, through you, Mr. Chairman. I'm an amateur carpenter and cabinetmaker myself, and I'm sure something can be done.

I'll do my own little infomercial. The little jump seat that exists in the chamber for Mr. Fletcher's attendant was my idea. I put that to the cabinetmakers who work for the House and they said, yes, they thought that was a can-do. It would have the attendant properly seated next to Mr. Fletcher, but not in a desk and chair that would make people think that he was a member of Parliament.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Well, we move tables around these buildings continually.

I don't know why we couldn't have had a table when we knew the committee was coming and we needed one.

**Mr. William Corbett:** It might simply be a question of the dynamics in the engineering of the tables, but that can be overcome. You could simply make the panel here removable on one or two of the tables to accommodate that.

**The Chair:** For the record, Mr. Corbett, even in the room that we usually use, the table still isn't adequate.

**Mr. William Corbett:** I'd start with a temporary solution of just raising it up.

**The Chair:** Okay, good. A saw would be far too traumatic.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Perhaps I may excuse myself now, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chair:** You may.

**Mr. William Corbett:** Thank you.

Thank you to members of the committee.

**The Chair:** Are there any further questions?

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** Again, it's a question of standards. These chairs are adequate for manual wheelchairs, but now there are more and more electric wheelchairs and of course they're much higher. So it's a question, again, of adapting the standards, and we could of course do that ourselves.

As far as the entrance is concerned, there's a simple thing. The standard says that there should be 600 millimetres or two feet beside the latch on the pull side of the door. That's so a person in a wheelchair can approach the door without being in front of it, open it, and leave. It's not to say that every single door that a person in a wheelchair uses has to have a power door operator. Many people can open doors. Paraplegics, in general, can open a door. So it's a question of being able to approach the door, open it, and leave.

In this case it would be a mere case of moving the table over a couple of feet. It could be acceptable, but again depending on whether the person could actually make that gesture or not.

•(1630)

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I want to clarify something for myself. We talked about the accessible vans and we talked about Mr. Fletcher. Now, are those accessible vans available to employees on the Hill?

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Yes, they are. We have an accessible bus that's part of the regular schedule.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** You're going to get us the schedule for when it runs and all that.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** Yes, we'll look into that.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I know even with Chantal, when the committee goes to 5:30 and the bus quits running at 4:30, if she needs that bus, it doesn't work.

**Mr. Benoit Giroux:** I will get back to you on that, but my understanding is that when the buses operate, and let's say they operate until 9:30 p.m., the disabled bus is available on that route. It may be on special request, but it's available.

Is that okay?

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

**The Chair:** Mr. Charbonneau, just before we finish, the weight of these doors may present some problem too. Is that a consideration in the way you do these things?

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** There is also a provision in the standard in terms of weight of doors. That usually is a big problem, and sometimes we have to put an automatic door opener simply because the door is too heavy. It's not because it's not wide enough or there's no maneuvering space, but simply because of the sheer weight of the door.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mr. Vincent.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** I have a final question to ask. Are riding offices required to be accessible to persons with disabilities? Are you up on that? Is there a House of Commons standard stating that all riding offices have to be accessible to persons with disabilities?

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** I believe it's up to the member's discretion. We don't give members any directives, but I'll check to see whether they're given any additional information. A riding office is the member's responsibility.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** I understand that, but couldn't Parliament decide that all riding offices in Canada must be accessible to persons with disabilities?

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** Yes.

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** Couldn't Parliament require members to lease offices only in accessible buildings? It's a matter of common sense. A member's office must be accessible...

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** To everyone.

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** ...to electors. All electors should have access to their member's office. In real properly holdings generally, an existing building must comply with the code that was in effect at the time it was built. It's only when major renovations are made to a building that it has to brought up to the current code. If the building housing a member's office dates from the 1960s and isn't accessible for persons with disabilities, the building's owner is required to make it accessible only if he's doing a major renovation. So it's up to the member not to choose that location and to lease an office that's accessible. That can be difficult in small towns.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Why would it be harder in small towns?

•(1635)

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** In small towns, there are often only two- or three-storey buildings. Those buildings don't usually have elevators. In those circumstances, a member should rent space on the ground floor and ensure that the ground floor is accessible.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** But shouldn't the fact that every member has to be accessible to these persons be part of Parliament's standards? It seems to me that the least a member can do, if he's renting a new office in his riding, is to ensure it is accessible for persons with disabilities. That should be the standard.

**Mr. Claude Charbonneau:** Absolutely, that should be a directive.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** Every member controls his or her individual budget for renting offices. That would be an obvious recommendation. If they want to be accessible to all electors, most members must take that into consideration when they rent their offices, without even being told. To what extent could the Board of Internal Economy facilitate that by issuing a very specific mandatory directive? I don't know. That's a discussion that should take place at another level. As for the service a member wants to render to the public, it's obvious that the more accessible the office is, the better the service will be. I'm going to check to see what information is being given to new members.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** There could also be subsidies, a subsidy from the House to the owner, without encroaching on the member's budget.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** That would be the responsibility of the Board of Internal Economy, which looks into those matters, but we'll of course take note of that suggestion.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** All right. Will we have follow-up to that?

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** Definitely.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Perfect.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, delegation. We really appreciate that. That was very illuminating. We look forward to the responses on those questions that remain researchable.

**Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. We were all very happy to come here today. Those are very interesting files for the House administration. Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll break for a few moments while we adjust the room.

•(1637) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

•(1640)

**The Chair:** Thank you for coming to the committee to share your thoughts on what has happened since June 28 here on the Hill, with barriers having been removed to make things more accessible.

You have the floor.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC):** Thank you for the invitation.

I'd like to begin by saying that the Hill staff, right from security up to the people responsible for making things more accessible, have been very helpful. I really appreciate all they have done. I understand that a lot of effort and resources have gone into it. I appreciate it a great deal. It's too bad it wasn't done 30 years ago. I think just as we're moving forward as a society, it's really important that Parliament Hill, as the centre of power and the symbol of our great country, is accessible. It sends a signal to all Canadians that Parliament is accessible to anyone who is elected to Parliament.

That's all I have to say in my opening statement.

**The Chair:** Ms. Skelton, do you want to interrogate the witness?

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** He takes notches out of the front of my desk, Mr. Chair.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Thank you very much, Steven, for coming today.

I hear your compliments and I've watched what the House has helped you do. But today we see here that an employee of the House of Commons doesn't have a table to write on because the wheelchair won't fit under it. Do you think there's a different standard for MPs than for employees of the House of Commons?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** That's an interesting question. I suspect that the resources put into accommodating me are over and above what would normally be encountered by a typical employee, unfortunately, and that's wrong. It's probably something that needs to be looked at.

I think it's also important to note that with things like tables, each disability—and in a way I hate using that term because it's so broad and has been turned into almost a throw-away term—from one person to the other... For example, if Rick Hansen rolled up to the table there would be no problem. If I rolled up there would be no problem because I don't use my arms—Melissa uses it. But I assume you're talking about the lady around the table, Chantal, and it is a problem.

Certainly having options available—be they tables, ramps, or elevators—benefits all people. There might be someone who has other mobility impairments. They might be vertically challenged, or too high or too low relative to the mean of the population, or left-handed. It's always nice to have options available, and it doesn't really cost that much. Unfortunately, it does depend on where you are and who you are in this context.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** It's really hard to say that, and I appreciate that. We were talking earlier about our MP offices. I think if the House of Commons is being held accountable, we as MPs should be held accountable in our offices in our ridings. It's really important that we make sure our offices are accessible to everyone; that every MP in the House of Commons understands that; and that we have clear direction on it too. Would you agree with that?

•(1645)

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I absolutely agree with you wholeheartedly, and I have raised this issue with MPs from various parties. The response is interesting. Some MPs, particularly in rural areas, say they can't find an accessible location, or it costs too much, and so on. Even with my office, there is additional cost associated with making the front doors accessible for me to go in and out. Those renovations still need to be made. So in that sense I understand the argument. I can get in if I have some help with the doors. If there's a flight of stairs going up to an MP's office, that's completely unacceptable, in my view, but there are also practical implications.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** We're sitting here, and I wish this whole table were full of members of Parliament, because I think this is extremely important. It's vitally important to our country to understand what's going on.

What would you tell us, as members of Parliament, we should be doing to help the disabled community?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I appreciate the question. It has been very interesting since my accident, which was in 1996, going through life and seeing how different people in different walks of life react to the situation I find myself in.

There are the standard arguments, but maybe I'll give you some examples that have happened right here in Parliament. These all make great anecdotes for the speeches I give around the country, by the way. In fact, I was in Halifax this past weekend at a Canadian Paraplegic Association meeting, and I told them this very story.

Melissa—she's my aid—my family and I were in the chamber during the summer. The House wasn't sitting, obviously. A senator, who I will not name, came in and was very happy to see me, and expressed it by patting me on the head. That isn't something I would have expected, and jaws were dropping in my family. And it wasn't just one pat. It was as if you were patting a dog—that kind of thing.

I look at it more philosophically now. I see that people in Parliament, and in the media—the media is culpable too—just have not been exposed to people with severe disabilities. And I find this very ironic, because these are the people who are (a) making the laws of the land, or (b) reporting on the people who are making the laws of the land, and they don't have the level of knowledge that one would expect people in these positions to have.

Awareness is really important. How do you create awareness? We can have meetings like this, which I think is helpful. We can have more people in a variety of physical situations elected to Parliament and remove the barriers to doing so. That's very helpful, because without my saying a single word, the awareness has gone up. I've only been patted on the head once, and I don't expect it to happen again.

The other classic example is the parliamentary restaurant. The service is excellent, as we all know. I remember the first couple of times the server came up to the table. The wait staff know that I'm a member of Parliament, but the waiter or waitress would ask Melissa what I wanted to eat. Melissa would politely say, you should ask the member of Parliament, and the server would ask again in a louder, slower voice if I wanted fries with that hamburger.

I think they now have the point, but it again underscores that a lot of the community hasn't had exposure to people with disabilities, and I will include myself in that category. As I am relating these anecdotes, I wouldn't be surprised if, before my accident, I had done the same thing. I probably wouldn't have patted someone on the head, but I could envision myself as the one asking the person next to the person in the wheelchair a question.

It's just interesting that there are undercurrents of stereotypes that exist. I saw all sorts of examples of people with disabilities when I was campaigning, of course. I'd talk to someone on the phone and the person would say, you don't sound disabled. What does that mean?

● (1650)

I could go on and on, but awareness is the most important thing, and creating a society where people have an opportunity to work, volunteer, and so on, and really become part of the community instead of having the institutional, hideaway attitude we've had in the past. That means everything from proper attendant care to get people out of bed, to accessible transportation and proper wheelchair equipment, to accessible workplaces...to bring you back to your opening comment.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Monsieur Vincent.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** In your opinion and based on your experience, is Parliament Hill readily accessible to persons like you who are in wheelchairs? Have you discovered any other problems, other things that should be changed or be more accessible? The only thing we were able to determine is that the elevator from the sixth floor up to the parliamentary restaurant on the eighth floor is a problem. But do you think that's something that should be changed?

[*English*]

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Well, the restaurant certainly got a lot of media exposure in that regard. But in a way, I'm a bad person to ask, because now I know all the routes and shortcuts. I think if I'd just come to the Hill, I would find stairs all over the place. I've learned now to avoid them; I wouldn't enter the Parliament Buildings at the Peace Tower, because I just can't. I can go down underneath, but I wouldn't go up the stairs into the Hall of Honour there.

I think the washroom facilities would be an issue. When I came here, it was not so much of an issue for me, but I think for other people it could be an issue.

On automatic doors, there are lots of examples where there aren't any. As a member of Parliament, I'm fortunate enough to have security open all the doors for me with a nice, "Mr. Fletcher, welcome". I'm not sure that everyone would receive such attention.

So there are examples.

Transportation is a big issue. You'd have to plan pretty well ahead how to get from Centre Block to Confederation Building. In fact, that's happened to me a couple of times. I've tried that route a couple times, and one night it was very cold and there were snowdrifts and I didn't know which door to go in. Maybe having markings of accessible entrances would be helpful, and so on.

I hope that answered at least part of your question.

[Translation]

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** I believe you're right. I know that, at the Confederation Building, persons in wheelchairs can enter from the rear. However, there's no indication in the front that they have to go round to the back or which way they should go. I don't think I've seen anything like that. I often enter the front and leave from the back. If I haven't seen it, if it hasn't struck me, that musn't strike others either. It's as though there's a distance between people who enter in the front and those who enter from the rear.

I don't know whether entranceways for persons with disabilities are more clearly indicated in other buildings on the Hill, the West Block, here or elsewhere. I haven't checked, but have you noticed?

• (1655)

[English]

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I'm fortunate to have my office in the Centre Block, so I spend almost all my time over there. All the committee meetings are over there. Unless there's a reception or the subcommittee on disability issues is meeting, I rarely venture out.

[Translation]

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** That's fine with me. If Ms. Skelton needs some time, I'll give her mine.

[English]

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Are you going to ask a question?

**The Chair:** Yes, I am.

We're comfortable for time, if that's okay with you, Mr. Fletcher.

I think all of us on the committee are very relieved to hear that you wouldn't have patted any disabled people on the head. That takes a lot of the pressure off us.

They call it "the Hill". In non-winter months, are you able to negotiate the Hill from the Confederation Building or any of those other buildings? Do you find it manageable?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** That's a really good question. Ironically—in this sense—because my injury is at such a high level, I require a power wheelchair. I don't even notice hills or whatever, because I'm not the one who's doing the work. And Melissa is not the one doing the work either, although she may lead you to believe she is.

So again, someone who is a paraplegic, someone who has the use of their arms and would propel themselves in a manual wheelchair, I think would either become really fit or would be frustrated with the Hill.

And tangential to that question, one thing that I did find difficult was just transportation to and from the Hill. I had to buy a condo—and I had to buy it, because I had to renovate it for the washroom facilities and so on. I had to get reasonably close, and accommodate Melissa and my evening aid. So there were a lot of additional costs there. But one of the problems I had was that when the weather turned, I couldn't walk to the Hill anymore; I had to get transportation. So I first relied on—I don't know if I'll get sued for this or not—Blue Line for accessible transportation, and it was just hopeless. They would say they were coming and then they wouldn't come, and so on. It was just very frustrating. So the last day of the last session, before the holidays, the Hill graciously offered for me to

use their vehicles. Now they pick me up and drop me off in the morning and evening and take me to functions off the Hill during the day, if need be. It's made a huge difference in my ability to function.

I'd just like to make that point, that I'm appreciative of that service.

**The Chair:** The people who design and take care of the Clerk's office, of course, were here before you. I notice that even I, and many people, have a very difficult time negotiating the slope—which is what it is, but I guess they call it the "Hill" for some bizarre reason. Do you think something in terms of sidewalk grips or handrails might be more appropriate for access for people who are coming to visit the Hill? With MPs, I guess, they want us to not exercise and just take the bus.

• (1700)

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I think there are some particularly steep spots along Wellington just where the gate is, where you used to be able to drive up in a car, and my chair always tends to pop a little bit of a wheelie there. I have wheels at the back to prevent me from actually flipping over. I think if someone weren't paying attention, that could be a safety issue, particularly in the winter. I didn't even think of that.

Yes, in a manual chair you could find yourself in a difficult situation. The one near East Block is the one I'm thinking of.

**The Chair:** There was an honourable member from the Conservative side who was going down the other day. I was all set to catch him, because he needs a double knee replacement and I didn't think he was going to make it.

Let's talk a bit about the automatic doors in constituency offices, because they have been mentioned. In Fort Francis, where I have a satellite office, I visited 22 ground floor places and I could not get one with any kind of reasonable rent for 350 or 400 square feet. The alternative I have is that we will go to whoever needs constituency services. I still don't feel very comfortable about that. There are some problems in communities.

I don't know whether it would be up to some kind of supplement to the member's operating budget, so they could cover that increase. How do we deal with it?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** As members of Parliament we have to set the standard, and part of that standard is having accessible offices. There are things like accessible websites, and my business cards are in Braille. There are little things at relatively little expense that can be done that really send a powerful message out to the greater community. Of course, everyone knows that whatever the MPs do is cool. If they see us doing it, a lot of other people will follow suit.

But there is a cost in some areas. In Fort Francis, a beautiful part of the world, it could be costly in some instances, but I'd rather spend it on that than on gun registries.

**The Chair:** I was with you at the reception at the British high commission, and I happened to notice that it wasn't very accessible in terms of where the breakfast was being served, so you had your bangers and mash out in the hallway.

Would it be appropriate for the House of Commons to have a protocol that would ensure that when we are invited as representatives of the country to receptions, meetings, interviews, and sessions of any type, the inviters are advised it should be in an accessible facility?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I think so. I always assume it is accessible, but every so often I'm surprised. It varies according to where you go in Canada. The west seems to be pretty good, but as you go further east it seems to deteriorate. I think it has more to do with historic buildings and so on.

Regarding the incident at the high commission, they did have a wheelchair lift for going upstairs but it didn't accommodate this type of wheelchair, which is quite heavy and a little bit larger than normal. The lift was something out of the early eighties, when these kinds of chairs didn't exist and would not have been thought of. Someone way back in the past had the best of intentions, but that's another problem, because our building codes haven't kept up with modern realities.

I did feel bad for those guys, because that day I happened to have a CBC news group following me around for a TV show they're putting together. That incident is going to make the show, and I think that after it airs the British high commission will be accessible.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

• (1705)

**The Chair:** This session is really about your experiences. As you come across these barriers, have you been finding the clerks and governmental departments responsive in terms of taking your suggestions in hand and acting?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Yes, absolutely. In some cases it may not occur immediately. For example, why can't I just take a taxi? There was a little hiccup there.

Finding a place to live was tricky, and so is just explaining the role Melissa and my other aid play. Without Melissa or someone in her position I can't get out of bed in the morning, never mind doing anything else. People may not have always thought about these things, but once it's explained, everyone's very helpful.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'll save my next questions for our five-minute round, so please go ahead.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Steven, you mentioned the buses, the accessibility to the special van. I asked this question before. Is there a difference for you as an MP? It should be the same for employees, correct? It should not be just totally for MPs; it should be for everyone on the Hill who needs access to a ramp, should it not?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** My understanding is that some of the green buses are accessible. I actually haven't used that particular bus, but I understand that if I needed to go somewhere on the Hill, that bus would be made available. I think there's one every hour, but if I call ahead, they'll make it available on short notice. The trick with this vehicle in my case is getting from the Hill to my home. They've made a special exemption, because if there were a vote, I would need to be able to get here, especially in a minority situation. We wouldn't want Blue Line to bring down the government, would we? Or to preserve it, thinking the other way.

**The Chair:** I prefer the first.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** My point is that I think it should be accessible for everyone, whether you work on the Hill or you're an MP. We all should have the same benefits.

You and I have talked about this. As MPs, we spend a lot of time on airplanes. We have asked to have the Minister of Transport come to committee. I'd like you to tell us about your commute.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I suspect the Minister of Transport would be reluctant to come to committee, because we have challenges in our transportation system. I could talk about VIA Rail and others, but you asked about air travel. There is a shift in the airline industry toward regional jets, which cannot accommodate a chair like this. It's very difficult to get someone in my position into the plane. You have to load it on and off the tarmac and so on. Between major centres, this is a big deal.

When I first became an MP, they had a direct flight that could accommodate the wheelchair, and I could fly from Winnipeg to Ottawa. Now that they've moved to these regional jets, I have to go through Toronto.

The process used to get into a jet, by the way, is that this chair goes to the gate, I am transferred from this chair to a chair that can go up and down the aisle, I'm then transferred to a regular airline seat, and this chair goes into the cargo hold. Because I now have to go through Toronto and there are more transfers and so on, a manual chair is stored at Pearson that can accommodate my size and shape, and if there's a delay, I won't get pressure sores. I'm also going to have a wheelchair in Ottawa. So I don't have to worry about the wear and tear the airlines put on the chair.

Not many people would have the resources to have three wheelchairs—one powered chair in Winnipeg, one in Ottawa, and a manual one in Toronto—to make the flight every time. I do it every week, so there's a justification there.

I think for people who are wheelchair-bound, particularly in power wheelchairs, and travel in Canada, the design of the aircraft is not conducive to the transfers that are required, getting on and off the tarmac and/or storage capacity for the wheelchair so that the person has some way to get around on the other side. It's a big problem.

• (1710)

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** You and I talked earlier today. I asked you what you would like to see this committee do for people. Tell them what you told me. I think it's a wonderful idea.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** The question was, if I had one suggestion for the committee, and actually this could be extended to every member of Parliament, it would be to rent a bunch of wheelchairs and spend a day going to work—trying to get from your home to your work in a wheelchair, trying to do your shopping, and get around the Hill—and see how it is. Or do this in your constituency and report back. I'd recommend that. Then, if you're really courageous, emulate being a quadriplegic, where you can't use your arms, and get a power wheelchair. Then throughout your day when you have to eat, you would have to have someone there to help you eat, or if you have an itch on your forehead, you need someone there to scratch that itch, and you have to ask. It's very humbling, actually, to have to ask to have someone scratch an itch, or open a door, or whatever. It's not the same, because you know it's going to end—it's not the day-in, day-out kind of thing—but just to do that I think would be a real eye opener, because you would realize that you have to watch out.

We hear about the infrastructure renewal, and potholes. Potholes mean a whole different thing when you're in a wheelchair. You get stuck if there's no one there to pull you out or whatever.

So I think that would be a great idea for the committee to do, and make it into a media event. It's non-partisan, all four parties, and it will create great awareness to the greater community. It will be a natural story, I would think. Then, when you're done and you're tired at the end of the day, we'll line up at the bottom of Parliament Hill and I'll race you up.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** All right.

Monsieur.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** First of all, in terms of your concerns about Blue Line, you have parliamentary privilege, so for any disparagements or compliments, you're protected. Is that fair enough, Madam Clerk?

I have a quick question about the Braille cards. Are all your business cards printed and then stamped with the Braille on them?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I don't actually know. I just say to my people that I want it in Braille, and it happens. I think there's a place that actually provides this service. I get a lot of compliments.

The other thing you should know about these business cards is that when you go in for a raffle and you put your business cards in, the Braille ones get to be picked because they stick to your fingers.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** So it's win-win. You can't lose with these things.

**The Chair:** My question is this. Three per cent of the Canadian population can read Braille. About another 47% have some kind of lengthening arm situation, or some sight impairment, which means that in Braille a card becomes unreadable to the other 47% who have seeing difficulties. So I'm wondering, from your experience, whether or not a blank card that is in Braille would be better than a card that is punched out, or that the size of print and the type of script follow

the CNIB guidelines, so someone who has some sight impairment would actually be able to read it.

This is pretty minuscule. I don't have a problem because I only wear one contact, so I do the bifocal automatically, but for many people, you can just see the length of their arm growing and growing as they try to read these things.

• (1715)

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Leave it to this parliamentary committee to make this complicated. I suppose we could argue that sometimes you don't want people to be able to read your card.

Actually, just looking at the card, I think the important information is not actually punched, so there must have been some consideration. I'd consider the important information my name.

I haven't come across it, and in fact that's the first time I've heard of that situation.

**The Chair:** It's my job. No, it has come up to me from representatives of CNIB and other organizations as such.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** But as for the card, I think I do it just out of symbolism more than as a practical.... I think it just sends a signal that, holy smokes, this guy is trying to do the right thing, as everyone should.

**The Chair:** Okay. If you have any closing comments, please go ahead. Otherwise I do believe we're finished with the grilling.

**Mrs. Carol Skelton:** I just have one more question. Mr. Julian isn't here today and it's too bad that he isn't, because he spoke to the committee last week about whether we should go out to visit communities. We discussed whether we should stay in Ottawa.

Do you feel that Canadians with disabilities have been heard enough and that we should stay here and bite the bullet and work really hard to try to make some definite changes, or should we go out and visit communities again? What do you think?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Okay. There are two parts to your question. Have Canadians with disabilities been heard enough? Well, I think it depends on what disability we're talking about, and my impression is that awareness is always good. Can that be done from Ottawa? Absolutely.

It's my experience that most of the disability organizations have an office for advocacy here in Ottawa. They have branch offices in their respective provinces. Given the nature of our current Parliament, if I were to spend time, I think I would spend it first following my initial suggestion, which was to rent a bunch of wheelchairs—I can give you the number of the place—and go around and actually experience the city. I'd spend two days doing it. First of all, do it without any plans, and don't get your staff to make the arrangements or anything, just try it on your own, and then the next time look for help.

But instead of travelling across Canada in this situation, and with the groups that are available, I think your valuable time could be better served experiencing the actual experience. I hope that helps.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Steven and Melissa. I appreciate it.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Could I make my closing remark?



•(1720)

**The Chair:** Please.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** All too often we talk about people with disability but we forget about the people who help the people with the disability. Melissa is just an example of the many people who, for reasons that are truly altruistic, help people like me and hundreds of thousands of other Canadians function, and millions of others in lesser ways—not lesser in meaning, but lesser just practically.

Whenever an opportunity like this comes up, I always like to say thank you to Melissa when she's here, and thank you to all those unsung heroes across the country who provide the services.

I'll just end on this point—on one hand, we as a society save people from car accidents or birth defects or we prolong their lives, but we don't provide the resources to allow those same people the opportunity to live meaningful, dignified lives. We have to work together across party lines to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to meet their full potential in Canada.

**The Chair:** That was well said. Thank you very much.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

---





**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**

**Also available on the Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire at the following address:  
Aussi disponible sur le réseau électronique « Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire » à l'adresse suivante :  
<http://www.parl.gc.ca>**

---

**The Speaker of the House hereby grants permission to reproduce this document, in whole or in part, for use in schools and for other purposes such as private study, research, criticism, review or newspaper summary. Any commercial or other use or reproduction of this publication requires the express prior written authorization of the Speaker of the House of Commons.**

**Le Président de la Chambre des communes accorde, par la présente, l'autorisation de reproduire la totalité ou une partie de ce document à des fins éducatives et à des fins d'étude privée, de recherche, de critique, de compte rendu ou en vue d'en préparer un résumé de journal. Toute reproduction de ce document à des fins commerciales ou autres nécessite l'obtention au préalable d'une autorisation écrite du Président.**