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—
Chair

Mr. Gary Goodyear

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•(1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC)): Let's bring the meeting to order, please.

I remind you that the meeting this morning is being held in public.

I would like to welcome all members back from the break. If you feel the way I do, it's good to be back, but it seems sometimes the break is not a break; I'm sure it was very busy in all members' cases.

Members, I would like to advise you that we will be dealing with a draft report right off the bat and with private members' business that Mr. Preston wants to table. However, given that we have witnesses, I would request that we simply circulate that report and deal with it either at the end of this meeting, if there is time, or at our earliest convenience. Perhaps, Mr. Preston, the first thing we can do is ask if that's okay with you.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): That's perfectly fine.

The Chair: Are there any objections? That report has already been circulated to members.

As well, I would like to advise members that in front of them are two documents. One is a chart of year-over-year changes that all members should have received in both official languages. Please raise your hands if you have not received it; I will make sure you have it.

As well, the 2007-08 estimates, parts I and II, are also in front of you, for members to refer to at this meeting. Members are also probably aware that we're expecting bells to ring. We will wait for those bells. We will proceed with the meeting, and when we hear those bells we will deal with it at that time.

I would like to introduce the Speaker of the House, the Honourable Peter Milliken, and welcome him to the meeting. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for attending this morning. We welcome as well the Clerk of the House, Ms. Audrey O'Brien. We appreciate your presence very much. It's always good to see you here.

I understand, Mr. Milliken, you have a brief opening statement. Then we'll open the usual round of questioning.

Go ahead, Mr. Speaker, please.

Hon. Peter Milliken (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

It's a pleasure to make this appearance before the committee. I'm always glad to have a chance to get some questions from colleagues.

Today I'll be presenting the main estimates of the House of Commons for 2007-08. For reference purposes, you've been given a document showing the year-over-year changes to the main estimates from 2006-07 to 2007-08.

I hope you'll agree that the main estimates reflect a wide range of initiatives and services that support members in their roles as parliamentarians and represent a strategic investment in the future of the House of Commons as a parliamentary institution.

On November 8, 2006, the Board of Internal Economy approved the main estimates in the amount of \$410,530,912, and this represents an increase of \$10.2 million, or 2.6%, over the fiscal year 2006-07.

To facilitate our discussion, I'll give an overview of the budget increases and reductions along six major themes: budgets for members and House officers, services for members, security, infrastructure, salaries, and committees and parliamentary associations.

[Translation]

Let me begin with a discussion of the budgets for Members and House Officers where the Board of Internal Economy approved several adjustments.

First of all, the Main Estimates allocate a \$3 M increase to Members' Office Budgets. This is a three-part increase. First, it includes a \$2,5000 increase to the basic budget made to respond to concerns about constituency office rental costs and other financial pressures, such as higher travelling costs and salaries for long-term employees. This represents a total increase in funding of \$770,000.

[English]

There's also additional funding for members' office budgets, representing an economic increase of 2%, based on the consumer price index established by the Bank of Canada. This represents a permanent funding increase of \$2 million.

Third, members' office budgets were increased to cover the funding required to finance the elector supplement for the 25 ridings that became eligible, following the 2006 general election, for a new or revised electoral supplement. This represents an increase in funding of \$230,000.

•(1115)

[Translation]

The Board also approved a \$4,000 increase to Members' Travel Status Expenses Accounts, which is in addition to the economic increase of 2% based on the Consumer Price Index. As a result, an increase of almost \$1.4 M was approved for the Members' Travel Status Expenses Accounts.

[English]

In the case of budgets for House officers, the main estimates assign a total of \$2.3 million. This funding includes an increase of \$1.8 million, based on an agreement among the parties after the last election. This funding has been allocated according to party representation, to the research offices, party leaders, and other House officers, and as of April 2007, it has been increased by \$440,000, representing a 2% economic increase based on the CPI.

[Translation]

You will note that the Main Estimates provide for a budgetary allocation of \$149,000 for the former Prime Minister. In keeping with past practice, this budget is allocated for the duration of the 39th Parliament or until the end of his term as Member of the House of Commons, whichever occurs first.

[English]

Similar to the review of the budgets of House officers, the presiding officers' budgets were increased by \$45,000 after the last election, and they received an additional economic increase of \$32,000 in April 2007, or 2%, based on the consumer price index.

Let's now move to the funding of services for members. The board has allocated \$442,000 for language training services, to provide enhanced services, to meet additional personnel needs, and to take advantage of new technology. In recent years, language training services have been dealing with a constant and significant increase in their clientele's needs and they have been facing certain issues such as succession planning, professional development for their teachers, modernization of services, and development of teaching tools and individualized training methods.

The main estimates allocate \$186,000 in temporary funding to provide cleaning and custodial services to the newly renovated main library in the Centre Block, which reopened in June 2006. This temporary funding will help to support the preservation of the historical assets of the main library, which is a treasured component of our Canadian parliamentary heritage.

[Translation]

The Board approved one-time funding of \$33,000 to the Telecommunication Information Management System which was developed to support the centralized management of constituency and wireless telephone services. Through this System, Members can now be provided with a complete inventory of telecommunications services and hardware for both their Ottawa and constituency offices, an integration which is a useful tool for validating invoices and records.

[English]

Furthermore, in 2006-07 the board provided temporary funding of \$48,000 for a one-year pilot project that provided retirement planning workshops for members' and House officers' full-time employees and their spouses. This mirrored what was already being offered to House administration employees. While the number of retirement planning seminars was doubled to accommodate the new clientele throughout the year, an evaluation of the pilot project resulted in the recommendation that the increase would not be warranted permanently until the level of participation increases significantly. Consequently, the funding is reduced for 2007-08. Funding for sustaining and improving information management investments was reduced by \$476,000 for 2007-08, due to reductions in professional services, equipment, and training.

[Translation]

I want to turn now to security, a topic which you no doubt agree continues to be a high priority for Members.

In order to maintain a safe working environment, while ensuring secure and open access to Parliament and parliamentarians, Security Services needs to standardize the service delivery of scanning operations. To do so, it is necessary to make a transition to a service delivery model that is provided by House of Commons employees only, rather than continuing with the previous model which used part-time on-call employees and private contractors. Accordingly, the Main Estimates allocate \$655,000 to ensure that professional scanning services are provided for Members, their staff and their visitors.

•(1120)

[English]

The main estimates also reflect the importance of ensuring a sound and up-to-date technological infrastructure. To this effect, funding has been allocated for the ongoing life-cycle management plan and support costs necessary to manage the House of Commons digital audio and video assets, technologies, and services. The Board of Internal Economy approved funding of \$1.7 million for the planned replacement of its analog broadcasting facilities, with facilities that meet the industry digital broadcasting standard.

This provides the necessary technological infrastructure to meet the evolving distribution needs of audio and video assets throughout the parliamentary precinct and with external broadcasters. This will also ensure services to members, their staff, and the House administration throughout the transition period to these new technologies.

Secondly, as you are probably aware, the use of technology requires the allocation of funding to the development and maintenance of the information management applications. For this reason, the main estimates assign \$373,000 to the upgrade of the financial management system software. By conducting this upgrade, the institution will be able to protect the investment it has made to date, while also maintaining supplier support and taking advantage of technological improvements.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to focus on the funding that is assigned to salaries. The Board of Internal Economy approved \$2 million to cover the economic and step increases for House Administration employees. This includes salary increases for senior executives, Governor-in-Council appointees and pages, as well as Administration employees.

[*English*]

As you know, the salaries and benefits paid to members and House officers were increased in accordance with the Parliament of Canada Act, which provides for an adjustment to salaries and benefits based on the average adjustments to the base salary rates in the private sector in Canada. The main estimates allocate \$1.1 million to cover the 2.4% increase, which came into effect on April 1, 2006.

Additionally, the main estimates reflect Treasury Board's correction to the annual rate of employer contributions to the employee benefits plan. For 2007-08, the rate of contribution was reduced from 19% to 18.5%, which resulted in an \$813,000 reduction in our contributions.

[*Translation*]

Finally, the Main Estimates also assign funding to support the work of committees and parliamentary associations. The Main Estimates allocate \$758,000 for the four new standing committees created in April 2006. These new committees required the House hiring four new procedural clerks, four administrative assistants and one logistics officer to meet the needs and requirement of Committee Members.

[*English*]

Three very successful conferences were hosted by the Parliament of Canada last year, namely the 44th regional conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians' Conference on Environment and Development, and the 52nd annual session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. This year's budget is therefore reduced by the \$1.5 million in funding that had been required for those three events.

There's also been a \$1 million reduction in funding for the liaison committee. The purpose of this contingency fund was to finance committee requests for e-consultation and other specialized experts. The board has, however, approved \$250,000 in permanent funding per fiscal year, which will allow the liaison committee to hire experts and other services.

[*Translation*]

This was a brief overview of the 2007-2008 Main Estimates that were approved by the Board of Internal Economy.

[*English*]

I'm confident you'll agree with me that the funding outlined in the main estimates will support members in their parliamentary functions by continuing to provide high-quality services and will anticipate members' future needs in the context of our constantly evolving environment.

[*Translation*]

I would be pleased to answer, with a considerable amount of help, any questions that you may have.

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Colleagues, the division bells are ringing. I'm watching the time. Unless anybody objects, I think we can continue for 10 minutes. These are 30-minute bells, so we can continue. We have plenty of time. I'm going to encourage us to continue.

We will begin our first round of questions—seven-minute rounds—with Monsieur Proulx.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Milliken and Ms. O'Brien. I would also like to acknowledge you, Mr. Milliken, for all your help. You are right, you are well prepared this morning. In principle, we should be able to get straight answers to straight questions. Thank you.

I have four questions for you, Mr. Milliken. The first has to do with information technology services. I see that the budget has been reduced. Mr. Bard is smiling because he knows exactly what I am about to say. I want to know at what point we can expect to services other than those offered by BlackBerrys.

My second question is about security. You are right to say that the committee is very worried about the level of security on Parliament Hill. You are aware of this as you have already testified before the committee on this issue. The additional money will be used to standardize scanning operations. I would like to hear about all of the other recommendations that have already been addressed. Perhaps you are going to tell me that this money comes from the budgets of the RCMP, the Prime Minister's Office or Public Works and Government Services.

Third, I would like to know how the employee benefit plans for House of Commons employees compare with those of public service employees. Are they the same now? I see that they will be reduced from 19% to 18.5%. What does this mean?

Finally, has the policy applicable to the House of Commons temporary and term employees been changed to include technical employees or temporary employees working on committees or in messenger services?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Speaker, we have about four and a half minutes on that round.

Hon. Peter Milliken: On service technology, I'll let Monsieur Bard answer. I don't claim to be an expert on that one, so I'll invite him to come forward in a second to do that.

On security, we are continuing to work with the joint committee, which includes the sergeant-at-arms and the clerk. They are meeting with Senate counterparts and the RCMP to try to come up with a security plan for the Hill. We're expecting a report from that group later this month. It's anticipated the board will act on the report when they receive it. We've been waiting for it, and this is being actively pursued.

On employee benefits, I'll turn that over to the clerk.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The employee benefits rate is set by the Treasury Board. It's uniform for the public service.

[*Translation*]

In terms of parity between benefit plans for House employees and public servants, I can assure you that House employees are entitled to the same benefits as public servants. As our institution is much smaller than the public service, in some cases we can also offer our employees more flexibility when it comes to adjustments to work hours for family reasons, and so on.

House employees are certainly entitled to the same benefits as public service employees. Also, as a result of an amendment to the Public Service Act, and of changes to staffing procedures, House employees can now apply for public service jobs, which was not the case in the past. At least that's something.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: What does this mean for temporary employees?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: With respect to temporary employees, the question still remains. There is always the possibility of using temporary staff. However, we are currently in the process of looking at which temporary jobs should be formalized.

For example, for jobs where the work is mainly carried out when the House is sitting, we have created a job classification that in some way accounts for temporary employees. The classification is referred to in English as Sessional Employees, or employees that return regularly. These employees usually work 700 hours per year. Last year, the temporary employees were not able to work 700 hours as a result of the elections, which created some problems. In principle, however, we feel that we have made some progress on this point.

•(1130)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Bard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Bard (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you for your question. We began this discussion a long time ago.

The popularity of BlackBerrys has most certainly grown. There are more than 1,600 of them in use in the House of Commons. Therefore, the services offered center around BlackBerrys. This thing we call a Pocket PC, that you have so often used, is not in high demand. As a result, we will still make our best effort to support the member, however, we obviously will not dedicate as much effort to this as we will for BlackBerrys.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

There are only about 10 seconds left. Are there questions from the government side, please?

Mr. Lukiwski, you have seven minutes, but if you don't need it all, that's fine.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): I think we also have about three minutes left before—

The Chair: We have five minutes left before I'm going to discuss the bells.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I have just a couple of quick questions, out of my curiosity more than anything else. On the additional funding for the former Prime Minister of approximately \$150,000, is that a one-time cost or is it going to be annual? What was the reason for that, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Peter Milliken: It's annual until he leaves the House or until the next election, whichever comes first. I believe that's the arrangement. It's based on past practice. It was done for former prime ministers consistently.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: On the additional funding for MOBs, members' office budgets, am I right in remembering there's a 2% increase or a 2.5% increase?

Hon. Peter Milliken: There is one as of April 1.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: That's an annualized thing, is it not?

Hon. Peter Milliken: The board decides on the amount on an annual basis.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Okay, so it's not a standard thing. Every year you decide, and sometimes there may be no increase and sometimes it may be more than 2%.

Hon. Peter Milliken: Yes. There was in fact a vigorous discussion on how much it should be. Salaries are fixed because of external changes in salaries, and this is not. This is fixed by the board based on what it decides is best for the members. There was an increase in 2006 after the election, retroactive to April 1 of that year. That of course was after the election, in any event, but there was an increase given then of \$2,500.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you for that.

That's it for now, Mr. Chair. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Rather than interrupt the next member on a round, I propose we suspend this meeting to deal with the matters of the division bells and reconvene following the completion of those matters. However, if the matters of the division bells are not dealt with and there is less than 20 minutes left for this meeting—the matter goes beyond 12:40 on the clock—the meeting will be deemed adjourned at that point and not suspended.

Are there any objections? Seeing none, the meeting is therefore suspended.

Thank you.

- _____ (Pause) _____
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- (1215)

The Chair: I will reconvene the meeting for a moment. The division bells are ringing again.

Our witnesses are obviously tied up with government business in the House. I would therefore ask for a motion to adjourn this meeting.

It is moved by Mr. Preston and seconded by Monsieur Proulx. Thank you. Therefore, we will adjourn this meeting and reschedule the witnesses at the earliest future date.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Lucile McGregor): Hopefully it will be Tuesday the 24th.

The Chair: Is there any other business? Seeing none, the meeting is adjourned.

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