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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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**Tuesday, December 2, 2008**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Joe Preston**

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Tuesday, December 2, 2008

•(1115)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)):** I call this meeting to order. We are now in public.

We thank the Speaker and the Clerk of the House for coming to visit with us today. We'll start off with a statement from them.

**Hon. Peter Milliken (Speaker of the House of Commons):** *Merci, monsieur le président.*

Good morning, all members of the committee. It is an honour and a privilege to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

[Translation]

Today I will be presenting the House of Commons Supplementary Estimates (B) for fiscal year 2008-2009.

[English]

The proposed supplementary estimates (B) for the House of Commons total \$3,981,912. I would like to stress at the outset of this discussion that all items in the House of Commons supplementary estimates (B) were previously approved by the Board of Internal Economy.

[Translation]

To facilitate our discussion, I will provide a brief overview of the items in the House of Commons' Supplementary Estimates (b), along three main headings: Members' and House Officers' salaries, Compensation for collective agreements; and Operational requirements.

[English]

With regard to members' and House officers' salaries, the supplementary estimates (B) allocate \$1,403,000 in funding for salary adjustments in accordance with the Parliament of Canada Act. This adjustment is based on the index of the average percentage increase in base rate wages for a calendar year resulting from major settlements negotiated in the Canadian private sector. As a result, members' and House officers' salaries were increased by 3.1%, effective on April 1 of this year.

[Translation]

First of all, the Supplementary Estimates (B) provide \$1,602,000 in funding for collective agreements for House of Commons employees. These collective agreements are for employees in the Operational Group, Technical Group, Procedural Clerks, Analysis and Reference bargaining unit and the Reporting and Text Processing Sub-group. The terms of each of the collective

agreements were 2.5% per year for two years as of their effective date. There are approximately 550 employees represented by these groups, and their varied occupations include procedural clerks, editors, messengers and television technicians.

[English]

Under the theme of operational requirements, the supplementary estimates (B) provide \$688,000 for information and technology needs. Funding for two projects was originally approved by the board in 2007-08. Following a change in the projects' timelines, the unused portion of the funding from 2007-08 was realigned to the supplementary estimates (B) for 2008-09 in order to complete these projects.

The first project is a computer system replacement and software upgrade for members and House officers. Funding for this project is essential, as members' and House officers' computers had reached the end of their life cycle. The project also funded the installation of the latest operating system and upgraded software for our computers.

I'd like to highlight that the Information Services group scheduled the timing of the system replacement and software upgrade for the most convenient time possible for members.

•(1120)

[Translation]

The second project is the upgrade of the House of Commons' Financial Management System. An upgrade was required in order to take advantage of the improved functionalities of the software and to help facilitate the House Administration's provision of high quality financial services to Members.

Additionally, the Board approved \$298,000 for accommodation services and specialized equipment in order to support Members in fulfilling their parliamentary functions, and this amount is reflected in the Supplementary Estimates (B).

[English]

That is the conclusion of my opening remarks. The clerk and I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have arising out of these estimates.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Proulx.

[Translation]

**Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Ms. O'Brien, for accepting our invitation to appear before the committee and provide us with some explanations.

I would simply like to verify certain expressions. In the next-to-last paragraph, you noted the following in French: “De plus, le Bureau a aussi approuvé 298,000 \$ pour les services de logement et d'équipements spécialisés [...]”. Are you referring to accommodation for Members? The English version refers to “*accommodation services and specialized equipment*” which is not exactly the same thing as “services de logement”.

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** These services apply mostly to Mr. Fletcher. This figure represents some of our expenses in this area.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** I believe the reference in English to “accommodation services” is correct. However, the expression “services de logement” in French is not quite accurate. Would you agree with me?

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons):** You are right. I should have reviewed the translation yesterday. I also see that the expression “cahier de classement” was used instead of “cahier d'information”. I think the person responsible for the translation may have been new.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** I understand. I'd like to come back to the computer system replacement program.

As you know, the Hill is a prime breeding ground for rumours. I'm wondering if you could tell us if the system replacement will bring about some changes at our constituency offices. Does this mean that computers in the 308 constituency offices will need to be changed, or will only the equipment on the Hill be replaced?

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** Only the equipment on the Hill, because Members are responsible for purchasing the computers for their constituency offices. This policy will continue to apply, at least for the time being.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** I see. As for the increases in compensation and salaries, have these increases already taken effect?

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** Yes. The agreements were for 2008.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** So then, these increases cannot be changed or adjusted retroactively by the Conservative government?

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** I have not seen the bill that the government is planning on introducing, but I would imagine that it would be apply to the upcoming fiscal year beginning on April 1, 2009.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** I see. Thank you.

[English]

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

Monsieur Guimond.

[Translation]

**Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Speaker, on page 4 of your notes, you talk about operational requirements. In the second paragraph, mention is made of a computer system replacement and software upgrade project. You indicated that “funding for this project is essential as Members' and House Officers' computers had reached the end of their life cycle.”

I don't know if either you and Mr. Bard can answer this question, but could you explain to me the meaning of “the end of their life cycle”? My knowledge of computers is quite limited, even though

my BlackBerry and I are joined at the hip, so to speak. According to some of our assistants or colleagues who are far more computer savvy than I am, even though our computers are perfectly adequate, we get a call informing us that a decision has been made to replace them. I've already talked with Mr. Bard, who attended a seminar at the Corel Centre outlining the changes we could expect to see in the BlackBerry over the next three years. Every six months, new changes are being introduced. I realize that this technology evolves rapidly, but I am curious about the life cycle of our computers on the Hill. I'm not trying to stump you with this question, Mr. Speaker.

• (1125)

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** I'm like you, Mr. Guimond, in that I don't have an exact opinion about all of this. I don't know the specifics. However, I have to say that my computer stopped working recently. I received a new one a week ago. Someone is setting it up for me because I have no idea how to go about it. So then, I'd be delighted if the experts could answer your question.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** So would I, because with all due respect, Mr. Speaker, I'm not satisfied with that answer. I could swear we are in the middle of Question Period. You must not enjoy presiding over Question Period, because now you are answering question like the ministers do.

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** Well, yes.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I'm kidding, of course.

**A voice:** Of course.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I wasn't trying to be sarcastic. I was kidding.

**Mr. Louis Bard (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons):** Mr. Chairman, I want to thank Mr. Guimond for his question.

The life cycle of a computer is normally the same as the life cycle of a Parliament. As a rule, we make plans to replace the computers every three and a half or four years. Therefore, every three and a half or four years, we include in the Main Estimates an item to replace the computers over a period of six to twelve months. This includes the computers of all Members and House Officers. We were scheduled to replace these computers last year between January and March, but given everything that was going on in Parliament, the caucuses asked us to postpone the work. For that reason, a portion of the installation and training budget was carried forward to this year.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** If I have any time left, Mrs. DeBellefeuille would like to have it when her turn comes up.

[English]

**The Chair:** Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ):** In fact, my question is for Mr. Bard, Mr. Chairman.

My understanding was that the computers were replaced in order to provide more memory for the new Vista software. The old computers were not Vista-compatible. I noticed that our computers were changed, or upgraded, and that the new Vista software was installed.

Since we do network, will Vista also be installed in our constituency offices? Or will it be installed only on the Hill?

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Mr. Speaker, when equipment nears the end of its life cycle, we always replace it with the most up to date software. Whether it was going to be Vista or some other software, it was the right time to take the plunge. All constituency offices are now coming to the point where they will have to upgrade and this software has been very successful. We have also received many compliments from the caucuses.

When we sold the Board on the idea last year, we also supplied all constituency offices with three copies of the software and with the necessary support for installation. However, the software is not mandatory, and you can continue to use XP and your current equipment. Members can use their constituency office replacement budget if they wish to replace their own computers. Training and installation programs are available. All Members have to do is ask for them.

• (1130)

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Excellent. Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Monsieur Godin.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** We have no choice but to co-exist with computers, even if we don't know much about them. When decisions are made in Ottawa, is anyone thinking about the riding? For instance, if Vista does not work on our computers, we are forced to replace them if we want to keep up with technology and not fall behind.

Today, we network. You're saying that our equipment in Ottawa, even with all of the changes that have come about with the installation of Vista, is still compatible with the computers in our constituency offices, even if they do run on XP.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Absolutely, Mr. Godin. The equipment is all compatible and works well together.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** And yet, when we took the database that came with Vista and tried to consult it on the computer at our riding office which runs on XP, it did not work.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Each time a migration is done, whether for a riding office or for a Hill office, we analyse the environment and applications specific to that office. Then, we work with the Member to develop a transition plan and we indicate the steps to follow. We also do whatever we can to help the Member out with his constituency office. As a rule, we stay until the Member's computer is up and running. We also provide personalized transition plans for the Members' offices.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I see.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Do you want to adjourn?

Ms. Jennings.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.):** I have a question for you, Mr. Speaker. You mentioned that

you had just gotten a new computer because the new software could not be installed on your old computer. So then, replacing the system did entail some costs.

[*English*]

Did I understand correctly that you said your own computer had been recently changed?

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** Because it broke.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Oh, because it broke. I had understood it was because of the new system.

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** It just exploded; it broke down completely. They had to send it away to get the hard drive copied onto something else. It wouldn't work. It was junk.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** But my question is this. In some cases, even with the explanation Mr. Bard has given, when new software is being purchased for the Hill to assist the different personalized plans for the riding offices to ensure that their system there will be compatible, in the event that all or some of the computers in the riding offices are not able to take these new software systems and it requires the purchase of a new computer... My question is on the automatic increases that are voted on to increase our MOBs. There's a section for equipment that's permitted to use for our ridings. Does it take into account the plan, for instance, of the House of Commons to upgrade the computers on the Hill, the software on the Hill, and that in that particular year some members may have equipment in their offices that will not be compatible and may have to make capital expenses to upgrade?

My question is, as MPs, does our budget for riding equipment take into account plans of the House of Commons that may cause capital expenses that may not have been envisaged? We were not aware that you were going to, in 2009, make these expenditures and allow us to determine whether or not our equipment is compatible. And if it isn't, does our budget take that into account?

That's my question. It's quite long, but I think everyone understands it.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Louis Bard:** That's an excellent question, Mr. Chairman.

The replacement programs that we propose have components that are destined for Members' Offices on the Hill, for senior House officials and for constituency offices. I'm referring to the software programs.

We stress training and transparency, to ease the migration process. The only step that is the Member's responsibility is the actual replacement of the computers, if necessary. Under the program, which we run every four years, we block off the rest of the current fiscal year, the following year and the start of the year after that to complete the replacements. The program runs over three budget periods. However, we don't have an exact figure for you in terms of equipment replacement. Each Member has access to a central equipment upgrade fund of \$5,000 per year. The money is earmarked for the replacement or purchase of computer equipment.

We believe this environment affords Members enough flexibility to make enlightened decisions about equipment replacement. It is important to us to allow the Member to choose the moment when he wishes to replace his computer. We really try to respect the Member's wishes.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Thank you very much.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Albrecht.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just noticed on page 176 of the supplementary estimates, about three-quarters of the way down, in 10(b), capital expenditures for \$8 million. That was in the main estimates, and now the \$8 million has been removed in these estimates. I'm wondering if there are no capital expenditures planned and what these funds will now be apportioned for.

It's on page 176, about three-quarters of the way down, 10(b): capital expenditures, \$8.093 million, and then the corresponding figure in the adjacent column.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Mr. Chairman, through you to Mr. Albrecht, Treasury Board has a reporting requirement that a separate capital vote must be established only when the capital expenditures exceed \$5 million. Our House capital expenditures total approximately \$3 million, so a separate capital vote is no longer required, which is why that adjustment comes out to zero.

**The Chair:** Madame DeBellefeuille?

Mr. Godin, is there anything else from you? No?

Mr. Cuzner.

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** First let me tell my colleagues, especially Michel, that I have a roommate, a colleague from Cape Breton, who thinks the yellow Post-it notes are high-tech, so you don't have to apologize for your discomfort with new technology.

Marlene's question answered what I was looking at, but let me ask this, Mr. Speaker. Does your budget look after the physical aspect of the Hill as well? What I'm getting at is this. Are we showing leadership on some of the environmental initiatives, energy efficiencies, those types of things? Are there some things you can share with the committee as to where we are with that? I think there is an onus on everybody, and I don't think we should be any different from anybody else. Are we showing leadership in those areas?

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** The ones I can tell you about off the top of my head are things like the buses, where we are working on making more energy-efficient buses. Some of them are hydrogen buses now. We are moving in that direction. Whether they are all going to switch, I couldn't tell you, but there have been moves there. We have also moved to more energy-efficient light bulbs in many cases around the Hill. I think we are replacing the light bulbs in some of the fixtures here and there. Certainly, when renovations to this building take place, if and when that ever happens—we've been working on it for 20 years or so—then there will be changes in that respect as well.

Those are areas where we are working. We have certainly moved on the use of more environmentally friendly paper than we used to use. Certainly there has been a substantial increase in documentation being sent online rather than by paper.

I'd say we are moving in that direction. Those are the general comments I'd make. I'm not an expert in this area, of course, but those are areas in which I notice changes that are taking place.

• (1140)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** If I might also add, Mr. Speaker and Mr. Chairman, through you to Mr. Cuzner, through the Partners for a Green Hill, working with the Senate and the Library of Parliament, the three administrations have banded together to raise awareness among our employees, so the whole question of recycling is something that's very much looked after. You might see on some of the messages you get on e-mail, "Do you really need to print this? Save paper!"—that kind of thing.

I think every little bit helps. Certainly, one of the things we have been very proud of is the work that has been done through great partnership and great leadership by the team at the printing plant, where they are using now—again, my scientific background fails me—environmentally friendly inks and that kind of thing, so there is less harm in the waste that comes from that. They have won prizes for the work they have done relative to printing.

We are very aware of that, and at the same time we're trying to work within the limits we have, because we are tenants of the building and not the actual landlords. So things like energy efficiency are sometimes difficult to gauge. Nonetheless, as the Speaker said, we do what we can.

**The Chair:** Is there anything further, Mr. Cuzner?

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner:** No, that's fine.

**The Chair:** Great.

Mr. Lukiwski.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

I want to go back, if I can. I might have to get Monsieur Bard back up at the witness table. I need some clarification on the issue that's been discussed by Michel, Marlene, Yvon, and others on the compatibility between Hill and constituency software and hardware.

I have to challenge Michel: I think I'm far more computer illiterate than he, even more illiterate than your Post-it ex-roommate. I'm back in the eight-tracks. I haven't progressed past eight-tracks yet, which tells you where I'm coming from.

But I know there have been some problems at the constituency office level. Just to give you a brief example, this summer when we were back in our constituencies, my constituency office was having a lot of difficulty just getting calendar items into my BlackBerry. For some reason—they said it was because of a compatibility issue—they had to eventually send all of my local appointments to Ottawa and then they had to put it into my calendar. For some reason, the software program, I guess it was, wasn't compatible. I don't know if it was Vista or whatever. I don't understand that. I just know that we had some problems.

You mentioned that you're going to be providing, as I think I heard you say, personal tutelage to members and the like. Is there some way we can get a calendar so that I can get my constituency office people to speak with your office to try to get a better sense of what they may need to do in terms of upgrading or changing software? If I went to a seminar on this, it would be over my head so fast I couldn't tell you. It's the people in my office who deal with these things on a daily basis whom I would want to be able to get the proper instruction.

So how would we go about getting my constituency office people to contact your people to make sure we're on the right track?

**Mr. Louis Bard:** We're always there to help you, sir. As you know, we offer 24/7 support. If there was an issue with your BlackBerry in synchronizing your calendar function, I don't think it would have been a Vista or software issue. It must have been something very particular at that time. But we'd be very pleased to go back and look at exactly what it was.

We have a good track record. We have a profile for each member of Parliament. We understand your environment and what you need in your offices. At the same time, what I will do for you is ask if we can contact your office to do a follow-up to this morning's discussion.

• (1145)

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** I would appreciate that very much.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** At the same time, maybe you're not aware, but for every constituency we have developed a complete package of information on what to do, how to do it, who to call, and on the things to be looking for concerning the migration to Vista for constituency offices. Maybe we should redistribute that package to all offices. It may have been lost during the election period. That is something I will also take care of immediately.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** I would appreciate that. Again, the information package may have gone out to the constituency office, but I know that my people there said that they were trying to contact IT to fix this little problem we had and they got no resolution to it. If you could forward that to my office, that would be great. I just want to make sure that my constituency office has the proper coordinates to talk to the people they need to talk to when they have a problem.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** I will follow up with you on that later on.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** Okay. Thank you for that.

**The Chair:** Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Chairman, I want to congratulate you for pronouncing my name correctly.

[English]

**The Chair:** I practised all weekend.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** Mr. Chairman, my question is for Mr. Bard, unless of course the Speaker can give me an answer.

What I'm about to say might answer Mr. Lukiwski's question. For the past two and a half years, I've been taking part in a pilot project in which my BlackBerry agenda is linked to the work stations of my staff in my constituency and parliamentary offices. It's really quite

ingenious. Each time I schedule something in my agenda, all of my staff are notified at the same time. That way, the schedule is always up to date. This pilot project was launched two and a half years ago and it has really proven to be quite successful.

Do you expect that everyone will soon be... Perhaps it has already been done. I wasn't informed that the pilot project was over.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Mr. Chairman, Mr. Guimond was the one who asked us to go forward with this pilot project, because he was experiencing some serious problems with synchronizing his schedule. He was the first to sign on to the pilot project and it allowed us to experiment with possible solutions. Two or three months later, the project was expanded to include all Members.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille:** You are saying then that it is available to everyone?

**Mr. Louis Bard:** It has been for at least two years now.

We will take a closer look at Mr. Lukiwski's problem and rectify it, if possible.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Godin.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I'm not sure if this is the right place to ask this question, but I will put it anyway. If it's not relevant, then I can always raise it again in another forum.

We are discussing the situation of employees of Parliament. I believe this falls within the budget and decisions can be made. I don't know if you are the one who makes these decisions.

Consider, for example, the employees of the parliamentary restaurant on the sixth floor. I know that staff does not always have access to this facility when they want. When Parliament shuts down, so too does the restaurant. Should we not consider the idea of keeping the restaurant open even when Parliament is not in session, so that Hill employees can access this facility? That way, they could enjoy the restaurant and pay for their meals just like anyone else. At the same time, it would solve the problem of having to lay the staff off when Parliament is not in session.

I'd like to know if this option could be explored. I'm not asking you to decide right away, but merely to consider the idea. Maybe this would be one way of helping the Hill restaurant workers. If the restaurant stayed open, all staff could use the facility.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** To answer Mr. Godin's question, through you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate that Members are very concerned about Hill workers, and they appreciate that concern, especially the restaurant staff who don't necessarily work part time, but rather for set periods of time, as you pointed out.

Obviously, we are exploring all kinds of options to ease their situation. For example, with the holidays fast approaching, the restaurant will remain open with a special buffet offering, and all employees can make reservations and dine at the restaurant with their colleagues, family or friends.

We would certainly be prepared to revisit the situation, to see if circumstances have changed. However, when we did consider this solution in the past, a problem arose. The shortfall that would be incurred would be unacceptable, given the efforts being made pretty much across the board to save money and operate more efficiently.

During the holiday season, many people will be around and the restaurant will probably be full. However, if the restaurant stays open during the summer when the House recesses for a fairly long period of time, then it will probably be empty.

• (1150)

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Do we know that for a fact, or are these merely assumptions?

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** We haven't attempted to keep the restaurant open, for one very simple reason: at the time, there was every indication that it would not result in any major changes for the workers. Also, we would have been in an embarrassing position, given the restaurant's economic situation.

In any event, Mr. Godin, we will certainly revisit the situation of these workers. As I said, we have to consider many different things. When we return to discuss our main estimates, we will probably be able to discuss some specifics with you.

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

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We'll have Mr. Proulx first.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Before I put my questions, I would like to ask you this, Ms. O'Brien. When you check into this, could you possibly take into consideration the potential number of tourists during the summer months? Many tourists visit Parliament.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Yes, but with tourists, there is security to consider.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Yes, but once they are inside the building, that isn't an issue. In summer, busloads of tourists visit Parliament. Once they enter the building, they have cleared security.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Yes, but they tour the building as a group and then leave.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Yes, I see the problem. All right.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Security is nonetheless an important consideration. I know for a fact that the parliamentary restaurant at the Quebec National Assembly is open to outside visitors.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** But you have to admit that access to that restaurant is a different matter.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Indeed, and that's where we have problems.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** So then, from what you're saying, you are considering all of your options in order to keep as many employees as possible on staff and not be forced to lay them off...

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** That's right. And while we are on the subject, I believe I appeared before the same committee at an earlier meeting. We have made special arrangements with the casino and

with the Château Laurier to hire on employees when the restaurant closes. We do our best to...

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Your efforts have not proven very successful.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Well, we've been somewhat successful in that agreements have been reached. It may not be the kind of success that we were hoping for, because some employees are more interested in making their own arrangements than they are in taking advantage of existing options.

• (1155)

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Thank you.

I have a question for Mr. Bard. I'll come back to you later, Mr. Speaker, Madam Clerk.

Mr. Bard, you're familiar with my love of third party software. No doubt you remember that I was in love with my Palm Pilot system because I could easily incorporate into the system software supplied by companies other than the manufacturer of the Palm Pilot. The same is true of BlackBerry devices. It's quite an industry. Software is developed by third parties and there are all kinds of benefits to this.

Yet, on the Hill, we do not appear to be treated like private sector companies or other governments. You do not allow users of BlackBerry devices to add software other than the software supplied by BlackBerry. I'm not calling into question your staff's expertise, but in this modern age, we are just about the only ones who cannot add software to our devices.

Is there any hope at all that sometime in the not-too-distant future, this decision might be reversed, Mr. Bard?

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Thank you for your question, Mr. Proulx. Again, I know how passionate you are about this technology. I'm always encouraged to see a Member ask these kinds of questions. However, this is something the Board of Internal Economy discussed last year. The question was raised at the time and we had promised to present a strategy for activating third party software in the fall.

These environments do present some problems. There are in fact approximately 2,000 or 2,500 different software programs on the market. When a Member experiences a problem with his BlackBerry, he wants the problem corrected right away. Often Members ask us to meet them either in the lobby, in the hallway or in their office and to resolve the problem immediately. We receive requests from people who are using GPS software, for example, and the associated costs can be quite high. We've received requests for assistance with all types of software, ranging from software to manage one's weight to software to manage personal finances. We need to be sure that we can provide software support, without adversely affecting our current level of service. At present, Members and their staff have 1,000 BlackBerry devices. They are the biggest users of these devices. They rely on them even more than they do on laptop computers. In any case, we will be formulating a strategy to allow users to download third party software onto these devices.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Thank you, Mr. Bard. I don't expect you to arrange for 2,500 or 3,500 different software programs to be accepted. However, perhaps a few, within limits.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Absolutely.



**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Thank you. I look forward to sitting on the Board of Internal Economy and to seeing your report.

**Hon. Peter Milliken:** Perhaps you have a Christmas software wish list.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** I'd be delighted to make some timely suggestions, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Ms. O'Brien, according to the estimates, an additional \$8,093,000 is being allocated for operational requirements. However, according to our researchers, no breakdown of this amount is provided. This is an enormous sum of money and I would like to have some idea of how the costs break down. More than likely we are talking about an additional \$8 million for improvements.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Are you referring to the \$8,093,000?

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Yes.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Mr. Albrecht asked the very same question. It's a matter of a Treasury Board reporting requirement whereby there must be a separate capital vote, but only when capital expenditures exceed \$5 million. Since House capital expenditures total about \$3 million, a separate capital vote is not required. As a result, we have this technical adjustment.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** You say that this is merely a technical adjustment and that there is no real increase. That is what I failed to understand when you answered Mr. Albrecht's question.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** No, it's zero, because there was a capital input, and then a capital output.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** I understand. Thank you.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** These are some of the technical mysteries of Treasury Board.

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Yes, it's quite a mysterious department.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Indeed!

**Mr. Marcel Proulx:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Kelly Block.

**Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As a new member not only to this committee but to the House as well, I'm on a bit of a steep learning curve, so I hope you'll humour me with regard to my question.

I read the briefing notes. On page 2 you indicated that there was an intention to spend the \$8 million on capital expenditures, and then there was no longer a plan to spend the money. Can you tell me what these expenditures were to be and whether they fit into a longer-term capital management plan for Parliament?

• (1200)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** This goes back to the \$8,093,000. As I said, there was no plan to spend \$8 million. Our capital expenditures total only about \$3 million. Therefore we don't need a capital expenditure vote.

I could perhaps ask the chief financial officer, Claire Kennedy, to elaborate.

**Ms. Claire Kennedy (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons):** There is a Treasury Board reporting requirement whereby when we look at the expenditures of the House that are \$50,000 or more, if they total over \$5 million we must show them separately. However, in the case of the \$8 million, there is only \$3 million that falls under this particular category. Therefore, the House is no longer obliged to show this \$8 million separately, so it's strictly an accounting entry, if you wish.

Part of the \$8 million, for instance, has to do with the purchase of chairs and the replacement of furniture, equipment, and so on, which we do on a regular basis, of course. However, following the reporting requirements of Treasury Board, since we do not have \$5 million of expenditures of over \$50,000—it's a threshold, if you wish—we will just do a realignment. We do not spend any more or any less; it is just displayed differently in our estimates to be consistent with the rest of the departments.

**The Chair:** Have you further questions?

Monsieur Guimond.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I see that Mr. Bard may not be sworn in when he appears before the Board of Internal Economy. As a member of the Board, I swear an oath and I cannot disclose the delicate issues discussed in this forum. Earlier, in response to a question, Mr. Bard replied that some options had been discussed by the Board of Internal Economy. I don't wish to get on his case, but perhaps he should not have been so forthcoming. In any event, that is beside the point.

I have a question for you, Mr. Bard. Better-performing computers have been installed in Members' offices. However, it seems that the House systems and servers are not equipped to support this new technology. Basically, the new computers are slower than the old ones.

Have you set aside any funds in your budgets to upgrade the IT infrastructure of the House of Commons?

I also have two additional questions about the restaurant.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Guimond, as far as all of the infrastructure is concerned, we have capital replacement plans in place. We replace approximately one third of the fleet of servers each year. It can take us anywhere from three to four years to replace a server. The program to replace the computer inventory is cyclical. We used the elections as an opportunity to upgrade the e-mail system and change the environment. They go together. If you have solid evidence that operations are slower, I would appreciate it if you could give me more details. I would really like to do some specific follow ups.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I would simply like to repeat what I said at the training session for new Members. Since this is a public meeting, I want to praise the professionalism of Mr. Bard and of the members of the support team who report to him. They are true professionals and they do an excellent job.

**Mr. Louis Bard:** Thank you, Mr. Guimond.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I would now like to talk about the restaurant.

Madam Clerk, I have a question for you, but I already know the answer to it. However, my legal background compels me to ask you anyway.

You stated that an agreement had been worked out with the casino and area restaurants to hire the laid off employees of the parliamentary restaurant. You probably do not have the figures at hand, but could you check and see how many employees were hired on?

Assuming that the restaurant, cafeteria and kitchen employees are professional enough to work at the House of Commons, in my estimation, they should be qualified enough to work at the casino or at area restaurants. I'd like to know how many of them have been hired on as a result of your agreements.

•(1205)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** As you pointed out, I don't have the figures with me, but I will be happy to get them to you.

Let me clarify one thing. As far as I know, the agreements were with the casino and the Château Laurier. I don't want to imply that various area restaurants signed on. These two facilities were prepared to sign an agreement with our restaurant services because, as you stated, our workers are very professional and very well trained and people who dealt with them at the casino as well as at the Château Laurier were extremely satisfied with their work.

Let me emphasize that all management can do is open the door. If workers decide not to seek employment or not to work, then that is their choice. In any case, I will report back to you on the number of workers who were hired.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I believe the number is not far off from zero.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** That may be so, because...

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** It's not far off from zero. In any event, we'll discuss this matter further another time and have you back.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** During discussions between management and the union, we discussed this possibility and possible solutions to help them out. We were told that in accordance with certain specific provisions, women on maternity leave, for example, receive employment insurance, as well as an additional sum from the House of Commons. Workers wanted this kind of agreement at the time they were laid off. If they prefer to receive employment insurance benefits, then we do not have much say in the matter.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I believe my last question was broached either by my colleague Mr. Proulx or by Mr. Godin.

You mentioned that keeping the restaurant open as long as possible in order to welcome visitors presents some security concerns. Have you checked out how things are done at the Quebec National Assembly? Ever since the Lortie incident when gunfire erupted on the floor of the Assembly chamber, surely security at the National Assembly must be as tight as it is here in Ottawa. The situation is likely no different at other provincial legislative assemblies. However, I did visit the legislative assembly of Prince Edward Island, which is about the same size as this room and which

totals 24 members. I saw how people moved about. Despite the events at the Quebec National Assembly, officials decided to make the operations of the parliamentary restaurant as cost-effective as possible. They offer regional and theme brunches as well as a lobster and oyster festival, to mention just a few events which generate revenues. The restaurant is open to the general public. They have established a solid business. Has anyone met with the chef or the women in charge of restaurant services? I believe the woman's name is Violette. Has anyone looked at how the National Assembly's restaurant managed to turn the situation around and become a profitable venture? You can understand that keeping the restaurant open to the public will allow our employees to work longer, even when Parliament is not in session.

•(1210)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** You've raised a whole other issue here. The question is whether we should keep the restaurant open for the use of parliamentarians, as is now the case, or open it up to the general public and change its mission, in order to make operations cost effective. Access to the facility is a problem for the simple reason that the restaurant is located on the 6th floor. People must use the elevators, which provide access to all of the other floors. Over the years, a number of studies have been done on the restaurant, but never have they returned a finding that it would be a good idea to turn this facility into a commercial venture. Of course, we can always reconsider this whole issue.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** I think it would be a good idea to reconsider this decision, at least for the weeks that the House is in recess. Many Members return to Ottawa. Perhaps we could allow some of our assistants to use the restaurant. I was deliberately thinking on a large scale when I said it should be open to the general public. I'm not an expert in elevators, but surely the elevator that is closest to the parliamentary restaurant could stop only at the ground floor and 6th floor. It's possible to arrange for an elevator not to stop at certain floors. There are fire doors located just about everywhere. Of course, it's possible to cite many reasons why this solution is not feasible and to make everything really complicated. Forget the idea of opening up the restaurant to the general public during break weeks. According to our calendar, Parliament shuts down for one week out of every four weeks. Would it be possible, or feasible, to keep the restaurant open during the break weeks so that our staff could use the facility in addition to Members and senators, instead of being limited to patronizing the restaurant only during the holiday season?

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** We could always try out your suggestion during the break weeks. Perhaps this is something that we could consider, for the simple reason that during these break weeks, assistants and parliamentary staff are here. As for the summer months, that's another story. I will broach the subject with the Sergeant at Arms and get back to you.

**Mr. Michel Guimond:** Thank you very much.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I'm very concerned about the restaurant situation. Staff is also talking about the situation. You maintain that the restaurant must not operate at a deficit, but when staff is laid off, that's a loss as well.

Many seasonal workers are being laid off in the regions. Many Canadians don't realize that Parliament also employs seasonal workers, so to speak. It may be, as you said, that restaurant staff have no desire to work at area restaurants. Michel was pretty adamant that the number of people working at area restaurants was close to zero. You're well acquainted with the problem: some say they want to be paid the difference between the wages paid by Parliament and the wages they would earn at another restaurant that paid minimum wage. Maybe that's the issue, but I'm not sure. There has to be a difference somewhere.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** No, the problem is not the discrepancy between the wages they would earn working at a restaurant and what they are paid at Parliament, but rather the difference between employment insurance and the wages they earn while working at the parliamentary restaurant. I'm very certain about this.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I understand.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** And the number of hours of work.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Ms. O'Brien, it wasn't clear from your statement because you mentioned persons on maternity leave. I don't know that they have to do with all of this.

• (1215)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** They are the workers who raised this particular issue.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** You've already said that you are open to suggestions. When Parliament and the restaurant shut down, we could find alternative employment for parliamentary workers. They could work for the library or for other departments. Perhaps departments need additional personnel. We could work out some arrangements with them for those times when Parliament is not sitting. These employees could work at all kinds of jobs. I recall having made some similar suggestions.

Has a study ever been done to look into this possibility? Has the government ever considered other employment opportunities for a number of workers who would have priority when Parliament is not in session and who could be assigned to work in a department?

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** The problem is that restaurant workers have a fairly specific skills set. We are looking at training opportunities. Nevertheless, the skills of a sous-chef or of a pastry chef working at the restaurant are not necessarily in demand elsewhere at the House.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** In the case of a sous-chef or chef, we're talking about two or maybe four individuals who work shifts. However, the waiters have other skills or could be trained to perform other duties. In today's working world, we'd like all Canadians to have enough varied training to secure employment. We don't want people to collect employment insurance. Yet, Parliament seems to find it totally acceptable to lay off these workers and have them collect employment insurance benefits. That appears to be the ideal

situation. Everywhere else, the emphasis is on providing training programs.

Mr. Chairman, I believe we need to provide training to ensure ongoing employment. There's no shame in that.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Absolutely not, and I would not want to give you the impression that we are not doing our utmost to encourage people to retrain, in some cases.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Are there any training programs that are subsidized by Parliament? Currently, through the employment insurance program, members of the public can take advantage of phase two of employment insurance and benefit from specific training programs which allow them to have a second job.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** The House is prepared to reimburse tuition fees when individuals want to improve their skills or retrain. However, the initiative must come from them.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** However, they must have some assurances that the skills needed for a second job... They don't want to lose their job at Parliament. The job is important to them. If an employee acquires some new skills and accepts a job elsewhere, then the same problem arises with the new employee who is hired. The aim is to give these workers skills and some flexibility in terms of their training, but at the same time, enable them to keep their job at Parliament. Could this option be explored, if it hasn't already been?

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Yes, of course. One of the things that we are trying to do at this time is invest in our employees at all levels and services, to give them as much flexibility as possible from a professional skills standpoint, while rewarding them at the same time for the work they do right now. We're trying to give everyone more choices. As you said, it's not a question of retraining workers so that they move on to other jobs and of finding ourselves grappling with the same problem. We are taking a good hard look at the situation of restaurant workers who get laid off, which I'm sure is difficult for everyone.

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

**The Chair:** Ms. Jennings.

[*English*]

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Thank you, Ms. O'Brien.

I would like to continue on the issue of how to best ensure that employees of the House of Parliament—particularly those who work in the restaurant, but there are other areas where they also see the cyclical nature of their employment—are provided with as much employment as possible within the House.

With regards to the restaurant itself, you've raised a couple of issues that would need to be addressed, were the service or the operations of the restaurant to exist outside of the weeks when the Parliament is in session. I wonder what are some of the options being looked at in addition to doing maybe a pilot project to see, if it was kept open during the short adjournments, whether it would be able to operate and not be in a deficit position; whether or not there's the possibility of bringing in some experts to actually look at what would be the value of having the restaurant open in terms of it becoming a *marque* of commerce. You actually do advertising. Right now, nobody knows anything about the restaurant; it's by word of mouth, etc. The average person who lives in Canada, even if they're coming to Ottawa to visit the Gatineau Hills or to visit family or friends, would not know that there's a parliamentary restaurant and that it is accessible right now for very limited....

So would it be reasonable to look at the possibility of actually developing a plan where it would be branded, where it would become an attraction whereby people who do come to Ottawa would have that on their agenda in the same way as they might have *Domus* or some other restaurant, and say, "That's a restaurant I have to go to; everybody says that's *the* restaurant", etc. I'm suggesting that may be one of the options looked at, but you would probably need to bring in some experts, both in branding and in restoration, to determine whether or not it's feasible. If it is, you will have to invest money, which means you're going to have to come back and ask for money to put it into place.

●(1220)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Yes, I certainly take your point. I think there again, though, if that means obviously this is with a view to attracting the public to it, you first have to settle the security issue to the satisfaction of everyone.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Yes, but that would be part of it: to look at whether or not such a project is feasible; and two, what are the chances, an actual business plan that would determine.... It would have to be part of it. That means you would also have to have your security experts examine what is the infrastructure here, what are the security needs, how can access be provided on an ongoing basis and still assure the level of security that's required. The cost may be phenomenal, in which case the restaurant would never be able to do it. You'd have to charge \$500 a plate, something like that, to be able to cover that. But look at that as a whole piece and see if a business case can actually be built for that.

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Certainly there have been some extremely interesting suggestions made this morning, and they will be part of the discussion that I have with the Sergeant-at-Arms about how we might begin to address these outstanding issues.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Thank you.

Do I have any more time? I just want to address another point.

**The Chair:** I'm being flexible today.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe it was Mr. Godin, or possibly Mr. Guimond, who raised the issue of the agreement with Château Laurier and the casino, but the union raised the issue that the difference between the employment insurance and the benefits—

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** In fairness, I think in the discussion we were addressing how management was trying to deal with these layoffs and saying to them, "We have worked out an agreement so that you could be priority in these cases." But in these cases, of course, the thing is that they don't have the hours of work that are attractive to them. One of the things they didn't like is that they thought, well, if you can top up maternity benefits on EI, you should be able to top up our EI as well instead of our working.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Yes, but that wasn't the point I was getting to, because I understood that particular point in your explanation very clearly. It was the question of skills training.

I think there was some confusion because when the issue of skills training was raised to you it was raised in the context of employment insurance. Your response, which was an excellent response, was that, yes, there is a program or a policy where we do reimburse the cost of continuing education courses, etc. But that implies the person is actually at work. It is completely different from skills training for someone who is actually receiving employment insurance benefits. Under that case, it's the employer—and they may not be employees of yours.... A company or an organization is prepared to put into place a program of skills training for unemployed people who are eligible and receiving unemployment benefits, and while they're collecting their employment insurance they are receiving this training.

I'm sure that every single MP here has companies and organizations in his or her riding that provide those kinds of services. What they basically do is look at the landscape of who the people are within a particular geographical area—for instance, it could be a sectoral area—who are unemployed. Chances are they will come off their unemployment and still not be able to get a job, for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons may be skills. Programs are actually put into place. In some cases, funding is received from the provincial government, from the federal government, in order to provide that training. The person is receiving employment insurance.

That is something you might wish to look into as well.

●(1225)

**Ms. Audrey O'Brien:** Absolutely. Thank you for that. I hadn't realized that program existed. I will pursue both of those avenues.

**Hon. Marlene Jennings:** Right, thank you.

**The Chair:** I have no one else on my speaking list. Is there anything further on the supplementary estimates for the Speaker or Ms. O'Brien?

We thank you for coming today to answer our questions. It's been great to have you here. You may be excused.

I always feel bad excusing people.

We have completed the work of the committee for today. We have passed the agenda.

For Thursday it appears we will have Madam Dawson, the Ethics Commissioner, here with us.

Could we have a motion to adjourn?

**Mr. Harold Albrecht:** I so move.

**The Chair:** Is it agreed?

**The Chair:** Thank you. It was a great meeting.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

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