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Thursday, November 23, 2017

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Chair

The Honourable Geoff Regan

Board of Internal Economy

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• (1120)

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): This meeting of the Board of Internal Economy will come to order. The first thing we have, of course, is the minutes of the previous meeting.

Are they approved, Madam Chagger?

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, before we continue, I want to share some information on the outdoor rink. There has been a tremendous response to that outdoor rink, and our government is really excited about this initiative. What's more, Canadians are going for a skate on Parliament Hill. We believe it will provide people with a great opportunity to celebrate Canada's heritage while they get some exercise. We have heard the feedback on our plan. We have listened and heard the excitement and we are looking to keep the rink open for longer. I just wanted to state on the record that we have listened to the desire to keep the rink open longer, and the government is working to make that happen.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Personally, I would be delighted if it were open all winter. Thank you.

Let's carry on with business arising from the previous meeting. When we left a few weeks ago, we were on the parliamentary precinct long-term vision and plan, sustaining information technology systems, and facility assets. Mr. Aubé was leading a presentation on that topic.

[Translation]

I give the floor to Mr. Aubé.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for giving me an opportunity to continue the presentation we started at the last meeting.

Before I begin the presentation, I would like to introduce Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer at the House of Commons. He will be able to answer your questions specifically relating to finance. Also joining us are Jean-Marc Lundy, deputy director, as well as Darrin Neil, senior program manager. Mr. Neil is replacing Susan Kulba, who was at the last meeting and could not join us today. He is a member of management in charge of spaces and components, which are related to a large portion of requests submitted today. If

you have any specific questions about that, Mr. Neil could be of assistance.

[English]

Having said that, sir, we'll go back. I want to reiterate why we're here today. We're here to obtain the approval of the board for the funding to operate, sustain, and maintain the life cycle of the building components and connectivity elements that were implemented as part of the long-term vision and plan. If approved by the board, this will allow the HoC administration to fulfill the requirements of their roles and responsibilities documented for the House as part of the MOU between the House and PSPC that was signed in 2003. It will also serve to re-baseline our budget that was approved by the board for these elements in 2014-15. The elements that were approved at that time were for \$12 million. It will also sustain the original decision by the members of this board to implement these facilities as per the requirements that were approved in 2003.

[Translation]

We have to meet contractual and budgetary obligations, but I first want to reassure the committee members with regard to our requests: they all seek to provide parliamentarians with a number of benefits in the context of their daily work in terms of facilities. Since we implemented those services, the facilities used for public hearings provided to Canadians have been better equipped. Members' offices and administration offices parliamentarians use to communicate with their constituents and the general public are also better equipped.

Those investments have helped resolve occupational health and safety issues. In addition, we have had to increase security over the past few years in order to comply with the requirements of parliamentarians, staff and visitors.

I have brought a few visual aids to help the members better understand what we are talking about. Those investments have been made to make previously temporary facilities permanent. On this slide, you can see that all master controls for broadcasting to Canadians were located outside our buildings. In addition to the fact that this was causing disharmony in the character of all our buildings, we had to operate in temporary buildings.

On the next slide, you can see that all the wiring was installed on a temporary basis, and that also caused occupational health and safety issues. Having been set up over 20 years ago, our facilities had become outdated. That is why we have replaced them.

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan: It looks as though the duct tape industry is doing well.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I just want to show some visuals. These are pictures from the West Block before the renovation started. I just want to give a sense of the perspective on why we did this. We're here seeking funding for two major areas of investments.

[Translation]

The first element is component assets, which include furniture, arts and artefacts, general lighting and broadcasting equipment, as well as specialized air conditioning, lighting and water treatment systems for the House. So we are talking about any components not part of those provided and under the responsibility of the House. We have to maintain those systems in order to support the services we provide to parliamentarians.

The second element is connectivity. That includes interpretation systems installed in rooms, as well as presentation systems, which help with better visualisation during discussions. The video conference systems make it possible to communicate with those who cannot attend our meetings.

There are also capture and control systems that enable us to communicate inside our buildings, and the system used to broadcast debates to Canadians and people within the organization.

So those are the specific systems that are part of the request presented today.

[English]

If you look at the investments that were made since 2000, between 2001 and 2016, \$128 million was transferred to the House of Commons for these investments, and then from 2017 to 2019, an extra \$74 million will be transferred to the House. This is to support the move from 12 buildings in 2000 to 27 buildings that we have to support on the precinct now.

Most of these investments—45% of these investments—were made directly for the chamber and committees. Thirty-two per cent were made for the campus connectivity to link the 27 buildings that are there. Twenty-one per cent was for security. This is where the actual funding is going, as it relates to the close to \$200 million in three years.

Specifically, what you're seeing on this slide is what was approved by the board in 2014-2015. In 2017-2018, we are currently spending \$9 million for supporting, maintaining, and operating the connectivity elements. We're seeking an additional \$2 million next year. If you look at the distribution of the costs, 48% of these costs are directly related to maintaining and supporting these investments. It's 37% for the life cycling, and salaries represent 12% of the costs that are required to operate the systems and facilities we have put in place.

●(1125)

[Translation]

More specifically with respect to the maintenance of spaces and buildings, the Board of Internal Economy approved expenditures of approximately \$3 million in 2014-15. Today, we are asking for \$6 million. The reason behind the request is simple: a number of the investments approved over 20 years ago will expire in the next few years.

If we use the Justice Building as an example, its life cycle will reach 17 years this year. So a number of floors will have to be renovated in the coming years. We are asking for funding in order to replace two floors per year, on average, in some buildings. In the Justice Building's case, nearly 20 floors will have to be renovated. As you can see, these are investments we will have to make over the next 10 or 15 years simply to meet those buildings' maintenance needs.

[English]

The recommendation we made to the board at the last meeting was to seek the initial investments again that were approved by the board in 2014 of \$9 million for connectivity assets and \$3 million for component assets. We're also seeking additional funding yearly, as per the layout schedule, for both the components and the connectivity assets.

This is the presentation we made. We've added some visuals, and we'd like to open it up for questions as we didn't have time for questions last time.

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much, Mr. Aubé.

I will first give the floor to Mr. Rodriguez and then, Mr. Julian.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Chief Government Whip): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Welcome and thank you for joining us today.

I have two questions, one of which is of a general nature. I will put them to you right away.

My first question is about maintenance, life cycle and support. I'm not sure I understand the difference between them or how those notions differ from one another.

The second question is about your request for an additional \$8 million. Is that correct?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes. We are asking for an additional \$8 million for next year.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Okay.

I don't seem to be able to reconcile the data presented in the tables. Can you please tell me how the major funding items are distributed?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Okay.

To answer your first question, what we mean by maintenance encompasses estimates and support. I will explain what we mean by life cycle. Let's take for example a piece of equipment whose life cycle is seven years, as is the case for most networking equipment. After seven years, the equipment we purchased has to be replaced. As a result, we have to reinvest in order to be able to replace that equipment, which is no longer maintained by the suppliers we bought it from. That is what we call a life cycle.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: So what would be the capital cost?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: If we use the example of the capital cost of networking, we asked for \$3.3 million last year to replace the equipment we purchased seven years ago.

In terms of components, such as connectivity, the cost was \$3 million. We need about \$937,000 for this year.

In addition, maintenance encompasses costs we have to pay annually—mainly those related to licences. When we purchase pieces of equipment, such as networking equipment, we have to pay for additional support provided by suppliers when those services are used. Those costs account for just under 48% of our expenditures this year. The costs related to licences and contractual obligations we pay to suppliers represent nearly 50% of the \$9 million for all the equipment we use.

• (1130)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's a lot.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It is in line with industry standards. The figures provided today have been validated by accounting and consulting firms outside the government.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The percentage allocated for those expenditures is probably higher than it has been traditionally if we take into account what used to happen, right?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): With time, I think that providers of information services, tools and technology licences have evolved. In the past, when buying a licence, we paid a set price and kept the licence until we had to replace it. Now, as soon as we buy a licence, we have to pay annual fees to use it. That means we have to adjust and pay those annual fees to have the right to use the licences we bought, year after year.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Of that 48%, about 30% goes to maintenance and 18% to support. We are talking about additional support because we are not equipped, we don't have all the people needed to take care of that equipment when something breaks. As a result, we use support services provided by outside firms. That accounts for about 18% of the costs. Those are the costs we currently have to pay.

As I was saying earlier, the distribution in terms of capital translates in the way I just described.

Am I answering your question?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, basically.

My second question is the following. How is that \$8 million broken down? Can you give us details on that?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: For 2018-19, the additional \$8 million we are requesting is broken down as follows: \$239,000 for networking; \$974,000 for anything related to broadcasting, audio systems and

audiovisual systems; and \$911,000 for anything related to telephony and communications. In addition, we are reducing by \$150,000 the costs related to security, and we are requesting \$6 million for the maintenance and renovations that must be done to some buildings, including two floors of the Justice Building that will cost about \$3 million, or \$1.5 million each.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you very much for your presentation and for the tables you provided in your document.

[English]

I have some pretty specific questions. I'll start with the overall amount, and I just want you to confirm.

Over the three-year period, the actual request is for \$31,744,987. Those are the cumulative costs for connectivity, components, and facilities. Is that the total amount?

I'm taking this from the various requests, and I have pooled them together. It would be helpful, for requests of this nature, if we actually had the full amount over the three-year period, rather than having to calculate it on our own.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The annual amount will be \$20 million next year, \$22 million in 2019 and \$24 million in 2020. The cumulative total is about \$30 million.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian: The increase would be \$31,744,987?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes, that's cumulative.

Mr. Peter Julian: That's the increase over the three-year period?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for clarifying that. The questions I have will follow up on Mr. Rodriguez's questions.

First, in terms of connectivity, annex D is a very helpful table, which talks about total capital costs. The connectivity costs for 131 Queen Street were \$5.8 million. For Valour it was \$7.8 million, and for the Sir John A. Macdonald building it was \$6.2 million. Those are the connectivity costs.

How are the connectivity costs calculated? I assume there is a difference between connectivity costs when we're looking at a building that has as its primary function meeting rooms as opposed to offices.

Is there an overall benchmark we use to calculate the connectivity costs?

• (1135)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The costs that you see in appendix D are the actual costs that were transferred from PSPC to the House for each of these initiatives. These are the actual invoices for the different services that were purchased.

The reason the costs for some other buildings are higher is that some of the facilities hold multi-purpose rooms or committee rooms. If you look at the connectivity costs, the average connectivity cost for a committee room is around \$1 million. If you have broadcasting facilities, it's around \$1.5 million per room. Having 19 rooms, you can do the math for the actual total cost.

That's why in some of the buildings where there's only office space, the costs are actually lower. They represent networking and telephone costs. They don't include some of the audio-visual and broadcasting costs that are included in buildings that hold these facilities, such as Valour, 131 Queen, and West Block. These are specific facilities that have all the costs.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that, but what I'm actually getting to is that we're looking at an increase in connectivity costs of about \$11.6 million over three years. I'm interested in knowing how that is calculated. We had an initial budget that was set by the BOIE. I understand that it is changing and that this is why you're coming before us today, but how is that \$11.4 million calculated?

That's why I referenced the actual costs. You're absolutely right to say that when we're talking about the John A. Macdonald or Valour Buildings, that those are actual costs.

In terms of the estimates, I'm interested in knowing
[Translation]

the type of form used to assess those costs.

[English]

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We have, sir, first catalogued all the assets and assigned a depreciation cycle. Most of the assets that touch upon connectivity have around a seven-year life cycle. We take the seven-year life cycle for each of these assets and spread the depreciation across the seven years to indicate where investments need to be undertaken.

These numbers, sir, are taken from benchmarks; we're using North American industry-government standards to benchmark them. We distributed these costs over the seven years in order to create a reasonable cost.

The reason you're seeing some increases in some years as compared with others is that some of the buildings are coming to the end of their life-cycle period. For example, Valour was built seven years ago. A majority of the facilities over the next year will need to be revamped from a technology perspective. There are two rooms we're planning to do, at a cost of \$1.7 million over the next two years.

That's how it's done, sir. We're taking industry benchmarks related to the life-cycle period and distributing them across the various years. We're leveraging industry standards to establish these benchmarks.

Does that answer your question, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian: It does, and it leads me to my last question, which is around life-cycle estimates. A considerable portion of the \$20 million over three years for components and facilities is part of an increase in life-cycle estimates. You've alluded a couple of times, Monsieur Aubé to the life cycle being seven years. I assume that's not for all components. I assume there's a table of components that differ according to whether we're talking about tables and chairs or electronic components.

What table do you base the overall life-cycle evaluation on?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: For the components, we use a different life-cycle period, sir. For the shell of the facilities we use a 15-year life cycle. For example, the costs that you're seeing in 2018-19 are for the replacement of facilities that were built 17 years ago.

For the Justice Building, for example, we're using a 15-year life cycle. We're going to be looking at two floors in that facility. One of the floors is expected to cost \$1.2 million. Another floor, at 235 Queen Street, is expected to cost \$2.4 million. These are the average costs and average life-cycle time frames we're looking at.

For components, we use different life-cycle durations. Again we're using benchmarks with the accounting firms. With furniture you certainly don't have 15 years, but different kinds of furniture have different life-cycle periods. For the building shells themselves and the floors and the facilities on the floor for which we need the life cycle, however, we're using 15 years. For components, the major elements include starting renovation of specific floors that were done more than 12 years ago now.

• (1140)

Mr. Peter Julian: Is it possible to let us have copies of your life cycle tables?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We'll certainly bring them back to you.

Mr. Peter Julian: I think that's helpful both for this analysis and for future analyses.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: If you look, sir, in appendix C, you will find the distribution of investments made related to components. The major elements are outlined there for 2018. You'll see the duration of these facilities. These represent \$6 million. They represent about \$4.6 million for 2019-20. It represents the \$6 million itself. You will see that we are touching facilities that are 15 plus years.

We'll certainly provide the life cycling for all the components tables we're using.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Julian, do you mind if I...? I don't know whether you were going to, but I wanted to follow up to clarify something or ask Mr. Aubé to just explain for us in a little more detail.

When you're talking about "doing a floor" in the Justice Building, for example, it is about doing what, exactly? I don't mean everything, but let us understand what you mean.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: If you look, you'll see that the MOU states basically, sir, that the PSPC is accountable for the shell, the mechanical system, and the electrical systems that are specific to the buildings.

When we need to reconfigure the floors, for example, for bringing in ministers, the reconstruction of the floors and the cabling that is required and any specific systems that we require within the floor, such as battery systems, are all specific components that we are accountable for.

In the Justice Building, we are taking on the responsibility, for example, for redoing some of the floors. We're going to relook at the configuration, so we have to tear down some walls, redo the walls, redo the carpeting, redo the painting, and revamp some of the furniture, if required, within these floors.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Would you not be responsible for that if it weren't for the fact that there were technology aspects required?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The reason I'm responsible for it is that I was also the person responsible, sir, for the long-term renovation and the allocation of space.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Okay.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: This is why I'm serving both roles, as the CIO and also as the person doing assignment of the facilities, sir.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chief Opposition Whip): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Just briefly on the issue that was raised by the government House leader at the outset, I would say that if the Board of Internal Economy does have some oversight for the \$5.6 million temporary ice surface, I think Conservatives would certainly welcome the opportunity to talk about whether having that within a stone's throw of the longest uninterrupted ice surface in the world....

I see you shaking your head. That is perhaps a Canadian Heritage function.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your presentation.

My question is about the video conference system for committees.

Are committee meetings currently being cancelled or affected by a lack of equipment or a shortage of employees assigned to that function? Could that become a problem?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It has been a problem in the past. We actually did not have enough equipment to provide video conferences in a number of rooms. In 2014-15, only seven committee rooms had the equipment needed to provide video conferences.

Today, in 2017-18, 13 rooms have that equipment. In 2018-19, with the addition of the West Block, there will be five more rooms. In other words, 18 rooms will have the equipment needed to provide video conferences, and that will make it possible to communicate with people outside the city who cannot come to Parliament Hill.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Strahl: I assume that's why not only do you need upgraded equipment but also there's a request for full-time equivalents. How many are we looking at to provide that function for parliamentarians?

• (1145)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: In 2014, sir, we sought two video conference resources to support the requirements at that time. We were also using temporary resources to support us.

Now that the demand has grown so much—we're seeing an increase of over 65% in committees using video conferencing—we're seeking two additional FTEs to provide the video conferencing requirements that are there, based on the number of new facilities that will be supporting this.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Are there any other questions or comments?

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Aubé.

[*English*]

Is it the pleasure of the board to adopt the estimates?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Geoff Regan: We'll go on now to the 2016-2017 annual report on committee activities and expenditures, and in a moment as the space becomes available, we will welcome Ms. Sgro, along with Mr. Eric Janse, the clerk assistant for committees and legislative services directorate; and Ian McDonald, principal clerk, committees and legislative services.

Ian's another technology guru, as some of you may know, although he may not be here to talk about that.

Ms. Sgro, welcome. The floor is yours.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and to the board. It's my first opportunity to come before you, so I thank you for the opportunity.

My presentation today will be relatively short, knowing how busy an agenda you all have. I'll be pleased to answer questions following the presentation.

I'm pleased to be here as the chair of the liaison committee and I am supported, of course, by Eric Janse, the clerk assistant responsible for the directorate, and Ian McDonald, the principal clerk in the directorate and clerk of the Liaison Committee which you all know very well.

As members of the board are all well aware, committees are a well-established part of how the House of Commons functions and are an important part of the day-to-day work of many members of Parliament. As a result, the board provides resources for committees to accomplish their activities, and the board delegates to the liaison committee the responsibility to allocate the resources made available amongst the various committees.

The report before you today is the fiscal year-end report for 2016-17 from the liaison committee, which was presented in the House on June 16. The Liaison Committee generally tables three such reports over the course of a fiscal year, roughly following the parliamentary calendar, with reports generally presented a few weeks after the summer recess and after the winter recess, with the final report in June each year.

In this report that you have, there's a short narrative description of the activities of each committee; a series of tables, which includes a breakdown of related expenditures, including expenditures by study and expenditures related to travel, if any; and a summary of the number and hours of meetings, the number of witnesses, and the number of reports presented to the House covering the period of the report. The final stages of this report contain summaries across committees, and some comparison between fiscal years.

Members of the board will undoubtedly be interested in the information contained in the report in order to get a sense of the level of committee activity during the last fiscal year, which, you will see, was a busy one. However, this report is also on your agenda today because of a practice that began in 2013-14, such that the annual report of the liaison committee will be reviewed by the board and, if agreed to, tabled again by the Speaker in order to meet the requirements of the standing order. The standing order requires the board to table an annual comprehensive financial report outlining the individual expenditures of every standing, special, and legislative committee. Having a single report that meets the requirement of both the liaison committee and the board means the process of preparing these two reports has been made more efficient, which is a goal of all of us at this table.

Members will see that in 2016-17, committees held 1,385 meetings, met for nearly 2,584 hours, heard from 6,192 witnesses, and presented 172 reports to the House. As you will see in the last bullet in your report, there's a bit more detail in the graphs that are on the following slides.

The expenditures approved by committees for all of their activities totalled \$3.26 million in 2016-17.

In addition to the standing committees, this report also includes expenses related to special committees that do not fall under the liaison committee, specifically the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, and the Special Committee on Pay Equity. This information is also included so that all committee activities are included in one location to facilitate access and to ensure transparency.

To complete the presentation, I will simply go through the remaining slides, each of which has information from the Liaison report that compares information in different categories over the last five years.

First, the board will note that the number of meetings is more than 240 meetings higher than the next-highest year, which was 2012-13. On the next slide, we can see that these 240 meetings mean that committees actually met for nearly 750 hours more than they did in 2012-13. Committees have all been extremely busy.

The last slide in the presentation does contain a statistic that you may find very interesting. The number of witnesses in 2016-17 was significantly higher than in any other recent year. There are several

likely reasons for this increase. In part, this is likely due to the level of committee travel over the past year. An approach that many committees have adopted while on the road is to reserve time for audience participation, which has proven to be very much appreciated. This, in addition to the generally high level of activity, including two special committees, would appear to have influenced the number of witnesses in the last year.

• (1150)

This concludes my brief presentation, Mr. Speaker and to the board. If you have any questions, we would be pleased to answer them.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. LeBlanc, go ahead.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Sgro.

I would like to talk about the report you submitted.

[*English*]

I think, Judy, you correctly identified... If you look on page 74 of the English version of what you submitted, it shows a significant increase in 2016-17 as compared to previous years. I do recognize that in the first year of a new Parliament and in an election year it necessarily will be different. That's why I thought the 2013-14 comparison was a better one, and that was the one that you referred to in your presentation.

Maybe you could elaborate, for people who would wonder about this, as to whether an increase in special committees... It is a privilege of the House to set up a special committee. That, obviously, is done pursuant to a process in the House of Commons, and for perfectly worthy initiatives, such as the two that you mentioned. If you want to add something to what you said about the number of hours the committees met or more importantly the travel, go ahead.

I remember in previous Parliaments, for a bunch of reasons, including in a majority Parliament—and I understand in a minority government it's always more complicated for committees to travel in some cases—committees, as I have seen and heard, have made decisions, approved by the House, to travel more outside of Ottawa to hear from Canadians in communities that are often not accessible or that are even expensive to get to, if you're thinking of northern or remote communities. The cost of travelling there would be different from the cost of travelling to a large urban centre. I'm wondering if you would elaborate on why the number on the chart appears to have gone up. Am I correct that it shows, as does one of the other pie charts, travel having a significant increase?

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: Thank you very much, Mr. LeBlanc, for the question.

Yes, there was an immense amount of interest in travelling. It was a new Parliament. Many of our colleagues were excited in their jobs, and to do the very best job, they needed to do the travel in order for them to become familiar with the issues they were asked to report on.

I must say to you, because we had so many requests coming in, that we did look at ways in which we could tighten up the system. When different committees are coming before us, we now ask them to come to the committee for an overview of whether or not the committee will be receptive to their request, rather than have them come with a budget prepared and all of the work that goes into that when sometimes there's limited.... Finances are always limited, and you have to make the appropriate decisions.

We have the committee chairs come before us with an overview, and if the committee members feel it's an appropriate request, they're then directed to go back and to come forth with an actual budget for approval, so that we can gauge on a regular basis just how much is being spent.

There has been a huge interest in travel over and above that by the special committees. Of course, electoral reform being one of them and pay equity being a second one, that was required.

Mr. Janse, do you want to add anything to that?

• (1155)

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Perhaps to reiterate, as Ms. Sgro just mentioned, there has been a desire by a good number of committees to consult Canadians, sometimes even outside of Canada. There is, in fact, a four-step process before a committee is authorized to travel.

The first step is for the committee, all the committee members, all parties represented on the committee, to decide that they would like to embark on travel. That request then has to make its way through the liaison committee. Thereafter, the whips have a say in it, and finally it requires a House order. It's a pretty stringent process.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: We have a reputation for being a pretty intimidating bunch. They don't come looking for authorization unless they're pretty confident in what they're going to be doing.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you. That's certainly my understanding as well.

Perhaps as a final quick question, am I correct in understanding that a number of committees also undertook travel in the United States? There's no doubt that that relationship is important to Canada and that the relationship between parliamentarians and American legislators, both at the national and arguably at the state level, can be important as well. Am I correct in understanding that some of that increase would be due to committees deciding, with the approval of the House of course, to travel to the United States for their work?

Finally, I know, just from members of Parliament travelling over the last number of years, that there have been significant efforts that have reduced the cost of travel by members of Parliament rather dramatically in some years through the use of, for example, flight passes and so on. I assume that there are fairly rigorous efforts to keep.... Once the decision is made to travel on a certain itinerary, perhaps you can give us a sense of what efforts are made to ensure that the costs are as modest as can be, reflecting the itinerary that the House would have approved.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: A cap has been put on the membership at seven. Many committees come in and ask that 10 members be able to travel. Everyone knows now to come in and ask for seven. If you

come in and ask for 10, it's not going to happen. We're doing everything possible to try to allow the committees to achieve their goals, but while always keeping costs in mind. I would guess that about half of the committee travel was to the U.S., and to Washington in particular, for the committees to be able to do really important work on behalf of the government's agenda.

Mr. Janse, do you want to comment?

Mr. Eric Janse: I have one thing to add to that.

The new process to allow committees to seek a budget, which has been put in place—and Ms. Sgro just described the two-phase process—in most cases is to be made earlier than perhaps it was in the past, which results in the decision as to whether a committee travels. Of course, the earlier we have that authority, the earlier we can book flights and make arrangements. The earlier we can do that, the cheaper the flights are, so that has an impact then on the budget.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Next we have Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Ms. Sgro.

It was actually a report that I enjoyed reading, having sat on a number of these different committees.

My question will be around the process the liaison committee uses to vet requests from committees. You've mentioned some of the aspects.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

I would like to bring up a point I find extremely interesting. When we look at the number of hours of work for committees, it usually corresponds to the money they spend. I will explain what I mean. The Standing Committee on Finance is of course at the top of the list, with 157 hours of work last year. In second place, we have the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, with 147 hours of work. The Standing Committee on International Trade had 127 hours of work under its belt. Those are the committees that meet the most often.

I think it is important to look at all the figures. In terms of expenditures, the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates is first. It spent \$340,000. The Standing Committee on International Trade spent \$278,000. The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and the Standing Committee on Finance spent about \$250,000.

A lot of money is spent, but there are also a lot of hours of work.

What screening method does the Liaison Committee use? If a committee is not very active, I hope it will not have the permission to spend more money. Is that included in the calculations? Is it part of the process?

You may not have an answer to my second question, but Mr. Janse may have one. Have you calculated the operating costs of a committee that does not travel, does not hold any special meetings and does not hear from witnesses?

When it comes to meetings held during the year, we have to take into consideration interpretation services, services provided by clerks and the wages of everyone participating in committees' work. When all that is taken into account, what is the cost to taxpayers? I have never seen a cost estimate for those meetings. That may not be the responsibility of the Liaison Committee, but I think it would be worthwhile to find out what the cost is for a committee that only meets.

[English]

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: To answer your second question first, we'll probably ask the clerks if they'll get that information for you. I'm not sure that's something we have access to today.

On your first question, we have a schedule worked out and a layout of all the different committees that come before us. When the committee is making a decision, they know how many times different committees have travelled and the ones that have not travelled at all. That's taken into consideration along with the requests, in an effort to be as fair as possible, so that all committees that want to travel will have that opportunity. When we have our meetings, the committee before us has that schedule in front of them showing exactly how much was spent, how many meetings were held, and so on.

Foreign Affairs is before us a lot, as part of their job is to travel. They're probably before us more than any other committee is, but that's part of their job.

Mr. Janse, would you like to add anything?

Mr. Eric Janse: Sure.

Mr. Julian, the committees you listed are indeed the ones that embarked upon some very extensive consultations in the last Parliament. For instance, the finance committee, on an annual basis, undertakes its pre-budget consultation process during which it divides in two, travels literally all across Canada, and meets with many, many witnesses. The government operations committee, of course, undertook a very large study on Canada Post. There, too, they were meeting with a lot of witnesses. More witnesses means more witness expenses, etc. and the associated travel to meet people in their communities.

In terms of the cost of the average vanilla committee meeting, it's very difficult to calculate because it depends on what you include in the sandbox. There are the immediate costs for the room set-up, the clerk, and so on, but then you have, of course, staff from the Library of Parliament who are assigned. You have all the back-of-the-room people who are involved and the IT people. Trying to ascertain how much or what percentage of all that falls into part of it is a bit of a challenge.

Mr. Peter Julian: I understand. Has that ever been done? I've been here for 13 years, and I've never seen an estimate of what a standard committee meeting costs. I know a lot of money goes into that, because there are a variety of factors. There's interpretation and even the presentation of the agenda. All of that takes work. There are people working very diligently behind the scenes.

Have we ever done, on the Hill, an estimate of what it costs for a committee meeting?

• (1205)

Mr. Eric Janse: Not that I'm aware of. We could certainly have a go at it. It would be an interesting exercise, and we could submit that information in due course.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's not really the liaison committee, but I'm glad you asked the question.

Mr. Strahl, go ahead.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, Ms. Sgro, for your presentation.

I noticed a change last year in advance of what I assume was a pre-budget ask. You were actually asking committee chairs on the committees I was a part of to basically tell you any trip they'd like to take—"Just think of a trip that you'd like to take." At least this was the case in the committees I was on. I thought it was an effort by the liaison committee rather than the other way around—"Here's a trip we'd like to take. What do you think?" There was an effort to kind of flush out what the appetite was for travel by each committee. I believe you asked the chairs that.

Can you speak to why that was done? Why was there that effort to encourage committees to travel more or to consider doing it more than they had in the past?

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: Clearly, we recognized the importance of what committee travel would benefit. For every committee that I have ever been on, any of the travel that I have done, I have come back from that travel—which is, as you know, not pleasure travel when you travel with committees. It's a lot of work. You come back to the House pretty exhausted from whatever travel experience you were doing. I think it was encouraged that committees take that opportunity. Plus, part of the commitment from the government is for us to be reaching out and communicating and giving people that opportunity.

More importantly, Mr. Strahl, the issue here was to try to get an idea of the expenses and where we were heading. As you know, we came back to the board, and the board was kind enough to recognize the work of the committees and how important...because there just was not enough money. In a planning program, the earlier you know what committees are planning to study, and where they might want to travel...that helps the liaison committee deal with the finances. As Mr. Janse indicated, the earlier a committee knows it's going to do some travel, the better prices you get on hotels and on flights. It was in an effort to be more efficient with everybody's time and to watch the dollars more carefully.

Mr. Mark Strahl: On the dollars, on pages 74 and 75, as has been referenced, there is talk of 240 more meetings. I think you were referring to 240 more than 2012-13, at a cost of \$1.77 million—more so, there was an extra \$7,400 for each of those meetings, so there was a big increase in costs for those.

I think it's not directly related to what Mr. Julian said, but just based on some quick calculations. In 2012-13, the cost per meeting, if we want to compare the two tables, was \$1,305. In 2013-14, the cost was \$1,158. In 2016-17, the cost was \$2,359—over \$1,000 per meeting more based on the information we've been provided.

What do you attribute that additional \$1,000 per meeting to, on average? I'll let you go to that one first before I go to my next question.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: I will let Mr. Janse deal with it, but I would suggest that having the audience participation is an important factor that has really shown tremendous results. You don't just have designated witnesses. You actually encourage people to come out and talk to committee members. I think that might be one of the parts that has increased. Part of our job as parliamentarians is doing that outreach, giving people the opportunity to comment, whether you're talking about finance or any of the other ones.

I'll let Mr. Janse respond further.

Mr. Eric Janse: Mr. Strahl, some committees embark on site visits, which aren't official committee meetings on the road. There are costs included but if you try to link them with a meeting, the math maybe doesn't quite work out, because that's not a meeting of the committee. It's an important evidence-seeking exercise the committee undertakes, but it's not linked to a meeting per se. We've seen more site visits, more travel recently, as the tables indicate, but not necessarily in direct correlation with meetings.

● (1210)

Mr. Mark Strahl: It is interesting that at a time when committee memberships actually went down from 12 to 10 MPs in three years—and I know the government has driven this largely—there's been, from 2013 to 2016, a doubling of the cost per meeting. I would suggest that's not insignificant. I want to flag that. Committees do important work, yes, but we've doubled the cost of committees.

We heard in the previous presentation about the need to significantly increase the technology and the staff for video conferencing so that we reduce those costs. I guess I'm trying to figure out how we.... The cost in government is always getting higher, but it has doubled in three years, and there is an additional requirement for systems, which are supposed to reduce the cost of meetings.

Committees are encouraged, wherever possible, to hold a video conference instead of travelling or instead of flying in witnesses at great cost. I just want to flag that. It is of concern to me that the costs have escalated, and they are escalating not only on travel but on the side of technology. I think we have to be mindful of that.

Mr. Eric Janse: To add one more thing, there have been increases in travel, including international travel. Internationally, a committee can't even hold a meeting for all sorts of privilege and constitutional jurisdiction reasons, so you kind of have to take all of those costs out of the equation when you're calculating per meeting cost, because in the last few years, there was very little committee travel within Canada or internationally.

Another way you could perhaps do the math is to look at it as a per report or per study amount of money, as opposed to a per meeting, but your point is well taken.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you, Ms. Sgro.

Do you have any comments on the estimates?

I'm going to hand it over to the clerk, Mr. Robert.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Thank you.

Mr. Speaker

[*English*]

and honourable members,

[*Translation*]

I have the honour to present the “Report to Canadians 2017” to the Board of Internal Economy. As you will be able to see, the elements of the report's table of contents can be broken down roughly into two themes: members and the House administration.

The “Report to Canadians” is an annual report that provides information and statistics on members and their various parliamentary activities. In this case, we are talking about the 2016-17 fiscal year. The report also includes information on the activities of the House administration. In order to reduce the use of paper, once the report has been approved by the Board of Internal Economy, it will be available in electronic format on the House website.

[*English*]

That's a paper cost saving, which is minor.

[*Translation*]

The section on members contains information on the characteristics of members as a group—in other words demographic and geographic characteristics, as well as the breakdown by political party. That information includes the gender ratio and the number of members born outside the country, which reflect our inclusiveness.

● (1215)

[*English*]

With respect to members' activities, the focus is on parliamentary work. There's information on sitting days of the House, as well as on the number of bills introduced by the government and private members. The report also provides statistics on committee meetings, witnesses heard, and reports presented. Finally, there are general figures about activities related to parliamentary diplomacy, carried out through the various associations.

The second part of the report focuses on the administration and what it accomplished over the last fiscal year, and among the highlights are the deployment of a new financial management system, the reopening of the Wellington building with offices for 70 members and 10 committee rooms, and the launch of a renewed House of Commons website, including a social media presence that encompasses Twitter and Instagram accounts. The administration is also proud of the fact that it has a 2017 designation as a top employer for young people.

Once this report is approved by the board, it will be made public and tabled in the House.

If you have any questions, I'm happy to try to answer them.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Ms. Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Thank you.

I found the report quite interesting, and I like the fact that we shared the diversity. Being on Parliament Hill, what I've seen is that this government has really been about engaging with younger people so they can see themselves in the chairs in the House of Commons, which I think is part of the strength of our country. As you know very well, our Prime Minister says that diversity is our strength, not just the shells we occupy, but the perspectives we bring and so forth.

I know that it often turns into cost savings. I think we have a responsibility to the public to ensure that they know what's happening on Parliament Hill. I know it is exclusively available online, as you were saying. I would love to know what's behind that decision. Is it just cost savings or was there just no appetite to have it distributed? I'll ask you a couple of questions and then you can share with me.

Are there opportunities to make sure we are making this report available to schools, let's say, or a way to work better with provinces, territories, and municipalities? Grade 5 students in Ontario learn about government. I've been visiting many schools. I would definitely be sharing this with them, so it's an opportunity for them to see themselves reflected in the work that happens on Parliament Hill. I think sometimes people believe that it is just two sides going at each other, but often, and I think members would agree, we work very well together to ensure that we are delivering for Canadians.

I also think about the fact that it's the end of the year, and that as we end one year we look at the opportunities and challenges of the next. Is there an opportunity, perhaps, for us to continue learning so we can be proactive rather than reactive? We know about committee travel. We know we are not only engaging with Canadians in Canada but also with the world. Are we looking at some constructive ideas as to what the government and members should be considering so that we're preparing for future years and so forth?

Thank you.

Mr. Charles Robert: I'm not sure I'll be able to provide you a very meaningful answer with respect to the last point you raised.

Whether the report should be available in paper as opposed to electronically I think is just part of a general drive by administration to reduce paper utilization. However, when there is a demand that expresses a need and a preference, I think we'll be quite prepared to make copies available.

It's certainly going to be available to schools if they access the House of Commons website. Both the House of Commons and the Senate try to maintain a very close relationship with school groups through what was Encounters with Canada, the forum for young Canadians. Just a few weeks ago we had our annual Teachers Institute, and there we build up relationships. I'm going to be having meetings with the Association of Former Parliamentarians to see if we can work at building alliances with them across the country so they can become recruiters as well as informers to school groups. That includes the students themselves as well as the teachers, so the relationship between Parliament and our future citizens and the teachers of those future citizens becomes stronger.

• (1220)

Hon. Geoff Regan: I just want to point out that many of the materials that are available for schools are from the Library of

Parliament. It has excellent materials that are attuned to different age and grade levels.

Mr. Charles Robert: In terms of the changing composition of Parliament, which is highlighted in this report, I think that reflects a reality that we increasingly appreciate.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Excellent.

I've asked this question about other things in the past. I wonder if we have statistics and data about how many people are viewing the report to see how many people we are actually engaging with. Do we have the numbers?

Mr. Charles Robert: We do have some statistics. In general numbers it seems to have been about 5,000 hits on the last report to Canadians. We hope we can improve that. Again, there's no compulsion. The access to the House of Commons website is perfectly voluntary.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Your enthusiasm lets me know we are in good hands, so we look forward to building on that together.

Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

A couple of numbers popped out at me. On page 8, the numbers are no longer accurate. I'm just wondering—because this is going online and I assume you'll pick a date and launch it, for all of these statistics I don't think it would take a lot of graphic design to change a few numbers.

Mr. Charles Robert: No.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Yes, it is a snapshot from March 31, 2017, but if it's going to be an online product, why wouldn't we just update those numbers so that they're accurate on the day it's posted?

Mr. Charles Robert: I think if you go to other sources, you can update the figures. However, this is actually based on the fiscal year, so it goes from April 1 of the previous year to March 31 of the current year. If we no longer want it to be an annual report, and we want it to be more of a dynamic document, it would be possible to do that, but I think we would probably want to do it on another site.

It's the same thing with, for example, LEGISinfo, which the library produces. That is constantly being updated because of the activities both in the House and in the Senate with respect to the consideration of legislation.

It just depends on what kind of document you want to call it. If it's going to be an annual report, I think it's going to be fairly static. If it's meant to be an ongoing document, then we could do that. We'll also have to change the numbers of the birth years of the youngest and the oldest MPs.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: If it's a requirement for this to be in this format, it could be an annual report. I think, quite frankly, the fact that we're no longer printing these shows you that the era of the annual report is probably passing us by, and we may want to look at that. I assume this is a requirement. I don't have a major problem with it. I think that, again, if we're going to online versions of things, there'd be some value in just keeping it all up to date.

That's it.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I can see an argument for having, on an annual basis, a report like this. If you look at the inside front cover across from the table of contents, you see it says that the period of this report is April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017. I take your point, but I also think there's an argument for having that annual process of having to be accountable, in the way that this is doing, in relation to a fiscal year.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Fair enough.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's long been the practice. The thing is, if there is a direction to change that, then that's something to be discussed, obviously. That's my point.

Mr. Charles Robert: The point also matters in terms of how you calculate the number of meetings of a committee. If it's during the course of a parliamentary session, and the session lasts two years, then you're going to have a number that will accumulate until the new session. Then you would just ratchet it back to zero or one.

I guess, as the speaker pointed out, it's within this fixed period of time that there have been these many meetings and this much activity.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

I really like the report. I think that much remains to be done to achieve equality in the House. As Ms. Chagger just said, the reality in the House should reflect the Canadian reality. I think that should encourage us to make efforts to achieve gender equality and ensure that Canada's diversity is represented. We should all be motivated by seeing in the report that, despite the progress made, we still have a long way to go.

●(1225)

[*English*]

I wanted to come to the financial statements at the end. I think they are very useful, but only if we have them in the context of

previous years. We are spending half a billion dollars of Canadians' money, with \$167 million in terms of House administration. I honestly don't know what the totals were for last year, or the year before that, or the year before that.

Of course, there is an inflation component that we have to keep in mind, so in terms of constant dollars you could actually see an increase that isn't an increase. We know that, but it would be helpful for Canadians to actually know what we are spending of their money in terms of House administration, and what the costs of democratic government are. The amounts are considerable, which is understandable given the work that we do, but it would be helpful to have those for previous years.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Julian, do you think that...? It seems to me that a chart showing the previous five years, for example, would be a great idea. That should be helpful, and I think we can do that after the end of this fiscal year for the next report.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'd like to make a brief suggestion on that idea, which I thought was interesting.

If we do that, we should note in an election year that it is an election year, because Canadians will look at a five-year time frame. Necessarily, an election year has some increased costs for new members, but it also has committees travelling less during a writ period, clearly. If we are going to do it, let's be as descriptive as we can, to reflect the reality of those time periods.

Mr. Charles Robert: We will provide that information, and we will contextualize it so that it is not misunderstood.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Is there anyone else?

In that case.... There is no number six, so thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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