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Thursday, December 6, 2018

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• (1035)

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): This meeting of the Board of Internal Economy is called to order. Good morning, everybody.

The first thing on the agenda is the minutes of the previous meeting. Are there any issues with those minutes?

Seeing none, I will consider those minutes approved.

Then we go to business arising from the previous meeting. Is there any business arising that isn't on the agenda?

Seeing none, we'll go on to number 3, the report from the Joint Interparliamentary Council on the governance of parliamentary associations.

As presenters we have Bruce Stanton, member of Parliament and co-chair of the Joint Interparliamentary Council, and Colette Labrecque-Riel, Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Co-Chair, Joint Interparliamentary Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning, everyone.

I feel sometimes that I'm here way too often, but I appreciate all the good work you're doing on this. I'm pleased to be back in respect to a matter arising from the NATO Parliamentary Association meeting that was held on October 30.

In responding to your board's request on this matter arising out of your last meeting, the JIC met yesterday afternoon at a public meeting. It considered potential responses and, frankly, resolutions to the concerns that were raised here. With the help of our clerks—Colette and her team—we were able to put forward and ultimately agree to a resolution that we hope will meet that test. We'll circulate it in a moment.

Essentially, it does two things.

First, it addresses the issue of a motion having been put forward by the association that involves non-confidence in the chair of the association. There would be a neutral chairperson—i.e., one of the two JIC co-chairs would chair that meeting and the deliberations on that particular motion.

Second, it provides a process of appeal. Should a specific number of members feel that there was a contravention of the constitution as it pertained to that particular meeting, within a certain number of

days, if they wished to, they could give notice of appeal and have that process taken up by the JIC itself.

If possible, we'll circulate the motion and go through it briefly, and then I'll be happy to take any questions.

While those are being circulated, I should say that the JIC adopted this motion at its meeting yesterday, and it is prepared to follow through with it.

The motion is as follows:

That, notwithstanding any provision in association constitutions or usual practice, effective upon the adoption of this motion, when a matter relating to the confidence in the Chair of an Association arises at an association general meeting, the following procedure shall apply:

a. One of the JIC Co-Chairs shall preside over the meeting during the consideration of the matter;

b. Ten (10) percent of the membership but no less than ten (10) members of the association may appeal a decision of the general assembly relating to the confidence in the Chair to the Joint Interparliamentary Council, by notifying the Clerk of the Council in writing within 10 sitting days following the meeting of the general assembly; and such notice shall cite which provision of the association's constitution has been breached;

(c) The Council shall meet to consider the appeal within 15 sitting days following receipt of this notice;

(d) The general assembly's decision which is the subject of the appeal will take effect unless the JIC co-chairs, upon receipt of the notice of appeal, instruct that it be suspended until the appeal is resolved definitively by the JIC.

That all associations be informed of this new procedure.

That's essentially it, in a nutshell. It achieves the two things.

As a final point, I'll make a brief comment.

There was considerable discussion about the notion of suspending the decision of the general assembly. As a compromise, we were able to come to an agreement that there would be a stopgap provision there. For example, if the decision taken by the general assembly was aggrieved by the given number of members, and if the infractions of the constitution were sufficiently egregious, the co-chairs could effectively suspend that decision. They would take a look at that. The appeal would still go through, one way or the other, but there was considerable discussion on whether a decision taken involving the confidence of a co-chair and subsequently appealed should require that the association's decision be suspended until the appeal had taken place.

I think we resolved that by putting that interim step in place as an option. The JIC chairs would simply review what the appeal was about, look at the substantive aspects of it, and then make a decision as to whether that decision should be suspended or not pending the appeal.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chief Opposition Whip): I would like to thank you, Mr. Stanton, for your leadership on this issue.

I think this is something that our members were looking for, and I believe that it dovetails very nicely with the Speaker's ruling on this matter in the House of Commons. From my perspective, this gives us the assurance that we need that the rights of all members will be taken into account.

I understand that the JIC, like this body, operates on a consensus basis, so it wouldn't simply be the case that the majority would have the ability to take a decision that doesn't respect the minority, which I think is, from our perspective, what this has been about from the outset.

I want to thank you and the team for coming forward with a compromise that I think will allow us to move forward in a good way.

•(1040)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you for that.

You're right. This was discussed yesterday as well. In the same way that this board functions, the JIC also does.

The Speakers' rulings—particularly the House Speaker's ruling—were incredibly informative in terms of strengthening, underlining, and stating to what degree the JIC is given authority, frankly, by the two boards here in Parliament, and the responsibility it has to be the regulator should the constitutions of the association fail to provide the kind of fairness that those constitutions should. We're there as a secondary stop for that.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Go ahead, Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you as well, Mr. Stanton and Ms. Riel, for the work that you've done on this issue.

My concern, as I articulated a week ago, is that I think these associations have by and large served the purpose for which they have been created. They have been non-partisan and a very positive part of what we do here in Parliament for many, many years. I think this is good.

I don't anticipate that we'll see what we saw happen at the end of October, which was disgraceful. I don't think we will see that happen again—hopefully—because we're going to be able to operate as we always have in these situations, and not in a partisan way. That doesn't mean that we won't see chairs moved out because the party they represent is not the party that's in government. We all understand that happens. However, there are rules around that, and they should be respected.

When we're in government after the next election, it will be a different makeup of JIC. That will be a check and a balance for us, to ensure that even though we are in government and we will maybe have the majority on some of these committees, we can't use that to lord it or enact tyranny over the group.

I think this is good. This was created, unfortunately, for an extreme circumstance that is not the norm, but it has given us all the assurance that this won't happen again.

My only regret is that we can't go back and right the wrong that was done. This obviously isn't retroactive, and I understand that, but at least we know it won't happen again, and I'm happy for that.

Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Those are good points, all.

It should be noted that once the associations are provided with this mechanism, of course they still have the tools that are given to them in their constitution and can still in fact request special general meetings. That tool is still available for them. Nothing in here impugns that ability for the associations.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Go ahead, Mr. Holland.

Hon. Mark Holland (Chief Government Whip): Very briefly, obviously we view events as they transpired differently, but I'm glad that we were able to find an accommodation that allows us to move forward.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

Seeing nothing further on this, we can I think move on to the next item, which is item 3.B., the 65th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Halifax in January 2021.

We had the submission last time.

Are there any comments from members on this proposal, this request from the JIC?

Go ahead, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: For both issues, I am unsure of what percentage of the budget is related directly to hospitality. Do we have that information?

Obviously when we host, we want to do that well, but I just would like to know, considering the taxpayers who are paying for this, what exactly the portion is, outside of renting space, etc., for meals and beverages and all the rest of it. I would like to get some idea of that.

•(1045)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: For the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, on that particular conference the total budget is \$1.5 million. The total hospitality on that is roughly 30%. That involves a welcoming dinner reception, lunches, a second dinner reception and a farewell dinner. It's mostly food—health breaks and that kind of thing—but it represents about 30%. I am given to understand that it's the usual kind of proportionate aspect of a budget for this kind of conference.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Go ahead, Ms. Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you.

We like having you here, Mr. Stanton.

I asked last week if there was historical data, because we think that if we keep some of that kind of information, we should be able to be better informed future ones. I know that the information has not been received, so although I said last week that I would like to see this move forward, I would like some of that information to be provided so I can see what kind of records we keep and that it's in line.

Thank you.

Ms. Colette Labrecque-Riel (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs, House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, we are doing that comparison as we speak. I can, however, share that the previous conference in 2004 for the CPA, for example, which is a slightly different type of conference, was actually twice the price.

Again, that would speak to the difference in the parameters that Ms. Ratansi referred to in terms of the host country no longer being fully responsible for the accommodation or the meals, so there are significant savings to the host country.

We will provide a detailed analysis with respect to the previous CPA conference, as you requested, as well as the OSCE one. The comparison will be slightly difficult because it was in 1995, but we will be able to do that.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I recognize that it's hard to compare it with 1995, but I think we should recognize that, yes, there are increased costs, and we understand that. That's exactly why those comparisons take place. It should be line by line, and we should be able to see what.... If we're taking out the hospitality, the rooms and whatever else that we no longer have to cover, it should not be.... I think Excel existed in 1995, so to take those lines out and to be able to deal with that, and then....

Ms. Colette Labrecque-Riel: Yes, absolutely. The difficulty is actually finding the records of 30 years ago. That's my difficulty.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: That's unfortunate.

Ms. Colette Labrecque-Riel: We could also provide you with a comparison for these two conferences as compared to comparable recent conferences that we've held in the past year.

Hon. Geoff Regan: If there was Excel in 1995, it was based on Windows 3.1, DOS, which is a very different animal, I suppose, from today. You had to have Winsock and connect to the Internet and all that stuff.

Shall we start with proposal B, here, the 65th CPA Conference? Is that proposal approved?

It's agreed.

Is the OSCE proposal approved? It is. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

We now move to item 4 on the agenda: "Services to members—office supplies and stationery."

Here to tell us about that are Daniel Paquette, the Chief Financial Officer, and Benoit Giroux, the Chief Operations Officer.

[*English*]

While we're waiting for them to get ready, we'll go to Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Perhaps as a matter for the agenda today, which is extremely full, I am hoping that perhaps—I know these are numbered items—the matters that must be completed today should take priority. I don't anticipate that we will go super-long, but we do have several items. I just want to make sure that the ones that require our sign-off today are given priority. I don't know if we can jump around a bit, but that would be our preference for both the public and the in camera portions: that we concentrate first on those that we must complete today.

• (1050)

Hon. Geoff Regan: We will monitor the time and do our best to accommodate that request.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, sir.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Monsieur Paquette, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is my pleasure to present a submission seeking the Board's approval to modernize certain policies in the Members' Allowances and Services Manual on office supplies and personalized stationery.

[*English*]

As has already been mentioned at the last board meeting, we're making many efforts to ensure that the House will be able to keep the cost of its operations within its existing overall budget. In order to do so, as we change how we do our business, we must ensure that we balance the utilization of the various individual budget envelopes.

As decided at the last board meeting, the cost of certain computers and printers will now be charged to a centrally managed budget instead of to the member's office budget, which is referred to as the MOB. In order to help balance this decision, we are proposing changes to certain other policies and practices that affect how certain costs are charged centrally or to the MOB—that is, an opportunity to balance the cost savings of the member's office budget resulting from the previous provisions.

This submission is also part of the House administration's ongoing commitment to ensuring excellence in the delivery of services to members. It is an opportunity to update and streamline the current policies on office supplies and stationery so that they are in line with today's business practices.

Our objective with the submissions is to ensure discretionary spending incurred by a member is applied against the member's office budget, to remove ineffective or restrictive limits and thereby reduce some of the administrative burden for members, and to simplify the purchasing process of office supplies and stationery for members.

I'll start with the discretionary expenses, which we are proposing should be charged to the member's office budget.

[Translation]

Currently, members are provided with paper and envelopes up to pre-set limits, as a charge against the central administration budget.

Members may, however, buy additional quantities, charged to their office budgets, if they so wish.

[English]

In addition, members wishing to purchase office supplies must currently choose among four different price lists in the House of Commons stationery catalogue, since some basic items are charged to the House administration's central budgets and others are charged to the MOB. This creates an administrative burden for members and their employees in the procurement of day-to-day supplies. Members select supplies for their daily office operations at their own discretion and based on their preferences, so these costs are most appropriately charged to their MOB. Streamlining the number of price lists and budgets for office supplies will simplify the procurement process and allow members to continue to benefit from House-negotiated prices for those office supplies.

It is proposed that the cost of non-standard size envelopes for parliamentary offices be charged to the MOB. The cost of paper and envelopes for constituency offices will be charged also to the MOB, and all costs associated with purchasing all office supplies will be charged to the MOB.

Another proposal in this submission relates to copying charges.

[Translation]

In 2013, the Board approved the replacement of the existing, single-purpose printers, copiers, scanners and fax machines in Members' offices by one networked, multi-functional device and one backup desktop printer.

The maintenance and support services for those multi-functional devices were authorized as a charge against the central administration budget.

[English]

Similar to office supplies, multi-function device copying usage charges are considered discretionary in nature. Therefore, the proposals to standardize the approach for delivering and managing computer and printing equipment in constituency offices would see these utilization charges applied against the MOB. The proposal to also apply the copy usage charge for the parliamentary office against the MOB would align the practice between the parliamentary and constituency offices.

In turn, we would like to propose the elimination of certain limits on some of the items that are provided centrally by the House.

The House administration currently provides members with established limits of a variety of goods and services to support their daily office operations and then to enable them to communicate with their constituents.

[Translation]

The House administration has observed that some limits are ineffective and too strict, specifically those dealing with paper, envelopes, letterhead and wish cards.

However, members may exceed those limits by using their office budgets to buy more supplies, if it becomes necessary.

● (1055)

[English]

To reduce the administrative burden to members and their employees associated with managing these limits and to modernize the business practice in light of the declining usage, the House administration is proposing to remove the applicable limits around paper, envelopes, letterhead and wish cards.

As well, as part of the printing and mailing modernization project and in line with current office technology, we are proposing to centrally provide to members a reasonable quantity of paper and standard personalized printed envelopes in letter and legal formats for their parliamentary offices, and an electronic letterhead template as an alternative to hard-copy letterhead, while still providing reasonable on-demand printing of letterheads when required and a reasonable on-demand printing of wish cards with the envelopes.

To align the timing of these proposals, we recommend that the recommendations come into effect after the next election, which is in line with the managed computing proposal that was approved at the last meeting.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my presentation for this submission. We're ready to answer any of the questions the board members may have.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

Are there any questions?

Mr. Mark Strahl: You might end up having 338 different ideas of what is reasonable, and my question would be, who is making those determinations? Obviously, how the process generally would work is that the House financial management would say that it was unreasonable, and then the member could challenge whether it was reasonable, and we'd just get into a runaround.

This, I assume, for 90% or higher of members, is not an issue. I don't think I've ever come close to reaching any of my established limits, but some go over. Perhaps you can explain the decision to go from a hard cap to a reasonable standard, which may involve a lot more work for your office and mine.

Mr. Benoit Giroux (Chief Operations Officer, Parliamentary Precinct Operations, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Strahl. I'll answer that question.

The limits we currently have are not exceeded in most cases. Our removing those limits would make it easier for everybody to order. Some of those limits were very prescriptive—for example, you could not order more than 2,500 envelopes at a time. We're removing that limit.

In terms of what we would consider reasonable, as we mentioned, we have not seen many excesses in the last year. We have averages, and we're going to monitor that.

If, for instance, a member submits something that's way over what we would consider the average, then we would have discussions with the member's office to better understand their requirements and find a solution to meet their requirements.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Obviously when we're bringing this to our members, we can sell it as, "Yes, you're going to pay more for stationery, but you're going to be relieved of the burden for computers." Do you have any idea what the net is? Is it a net zero? I would assume that I spend more on computing equipment than I do on paper. Have you done the analysis for an average member? What is the net effect on their budget for these two changes in concert?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: If we look globally overall, all the MPs combined, there is a gain of almost half a million dollars from more flexibility within the MOBs. Now, individually, the utilization of these various products or limits vary. We did the analysis for one point in time for one fiscal year. There was a handful of MPs who would have been a little short for that particular year.

Computers are usually not bought as one computer per year; they're bought in bulk. If we look at a full Parliament of about four years, we expect that the majority, if not all, would be as well off financially, if not better off.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think you mean half a million dollars for the aggregate of the members' offices.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: It's the aggregate, yes, not individual MPs, yes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

• (1100)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Ms. Bergen is next.

Hon. Candice Bergen: I Just have one question.

If an MP, though, just recently spent a portion of their MOB to upgrade or purchase new printing equipment, is there a little bit of leeway for them? Is there going to be a problem with some who have spent, and now that they've spent that money, they don't need another printer? Are they going to be short?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: That's why the coming into force of these recommendations is after the next election.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Right.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: As we discussed at the last meeting, the computers have a life cycle of about four or five years. Sometime during the next Parliament they will be needing those computers. That's where the savings over that period of time will come for them.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Good. Thanks.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Is there anyone else?

Thank you.

Does the board wish to approve this proposal?

That is agreed. Thank you.

The next item we have is a rather important and vital one. That would be the main estimates for 2019-20.

Mr. Paquette, we'll go back to you, sir.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Again, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I will now present the proposed 2019-20 interim and main estimates and seek approval from the board.

First I would like to point out that these estimates summarize all of the funding requests that relate to items previously approved by the board. As such, there is no new request for funding in this presentation.

The total proposed 2019-20 main estimates being sought for the House of Commons amount to \$503.4 million, which does represent an increase compared to last year's main estimates.

[*Translation*]

The main estimates of the Government of Canada are tabled annually in Parliament. They represent the estimated spending plans for the upcoming fiscal year. In accordance with the Parliament of Canada Act, the House of Commons must compile its expenditure estimates for the upcoming fiscal year and submit them to Treasury Board for tabling along with the main estimates of the Government of Canada.

It is very likely that the government will table interim estimates for the 2019-2020 year at the end of January, as it did last year. The interim estimates contain the financial requirements for the first three months of this financial year, because the interim estimates form a sub-category of the main estimates. I emphasize that my presentation today is focused on the full main estimates for the 2019-2020 year.

The main estimates of the House include an estimate for statutory and voted expenditures. Voted expenditures are estimated at \$350 million and they mostly include expenses for Members and House Officers, committees, parliamentary associations and exchanges, and the administration. The statutory expenditures are estimated at \$154 million. They include salaries and allowances for Members and House Officers, contributions to retirement funds, and contributions to employee benefit programs for all.

[*English*]

Although the overall budget request is lower, there are various elements making up the main estimates that do fluctuate.

In terms of new funding requests that were approved during the fiscal year, these include the cost-of-living increase, based on previously approved policies and existing legislation. For example, the office budgets and supplements for members and House officers, as well as the travel status expenses accounts, have been increased by 1.5%, for a total of \$2.4 million. This is in accordance with the adjusted consumer price index.

In addition, the sessional allowance and additional salaries for members and House officers have been increased by 1.7%, or \$1 million, as provided by the Parliament of Canada Act.

The economic increases for House administration employees amount to \$1.5 million, which is included in these estimates. These were approved earlier during the year by the board.

As for major initiatives, the funding includes \$1 million for managed computing in the constituency, which was approved at the last board meeting. This is offset by \$400,000 from planned variances of previously approved year-over-year changes in the funding profiles for such initiatives as digital content dissemination and our long-term vision and plan.

The main estimates also include a \$9.3-million decrease in contributions to the members' pension plan due to the revised contribution rates for those members. It also includes a decrease of \$1.4 million related to funding for conferences, associations and assemblies held earlier this year.

• (1105)

[Translation]

In conclusion, it is recommended that the Board approve the main estimates for the House proposed for the 2019-2020 year in the amount of \$503.4 million. The proposed funds will be divided between two programs, \$302 million for the Members and House Officers program and \$201 million for the administration program. It is also recommended that an amount of \$87.5 million be included in the interim estimates proposed for the same financial year.

[English]

I can now answer questions relating to these main estimates, and I can also take any questions that you may have about the in-year second quarter report on our financial activities for the current year, which is also provided in your package.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Go ahead, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: In looking at spending in a fiscal year and year over year, I think we've certainly seen the numbers since 2014-15. By my calculation it looks as if it's gone up about \$80 million over that time. I'm sure some of that had to do with an increased number of members, and then there was also a very large increase in the members' operating budgets, as I recall.

I am wondering if the House of Commons has ever been required to undergo the dreaded strategic and operating review. If so, when was the last time that was done?

I just want to make sure there is some effort on some sort of schedule to find efficiencies within the \$500-million-a-year operation. I just wanted to get your thoughts on that. Is that done, and if not, when would it be done next?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: The last time it was officially done was around the 2011-12 time frame, and significant adjustments were done at that point. I think reaching that threshold of \$500 million opened everybody's eyes. As we're coming to the various submissions going forward, we rechallenge ourselves in making sure what incremental capacity is needed. If you notice, the submissions we came through over the last year always made sure to address the full cost of that new initiative and what incremental cost we're truly asking for and what we can absorb within existing capacities. We are keeping that in mind item by item and making

sure we can go forward and justify the size of our current budget and operations.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Go ahead, Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Thank you.

I was going to ask the same thing. I think right now, with the renovations going on and finishing at West Block and starting here at Centre Block very soon, it's interesting how many times, when people tour they ask about the cost and how things cost so much and seem to always cost more here in government than they do in the private sector. Thinking about these numbers, I think it would be really helpful if at some point we could come up with a plan. What is the best way to incentivize savings?

It's a little more difficult here because we aren't the private sector, where profit matters, whether we have shareholders to pay or we have to make a profit for our own benefit. That's not what's driving us here. We don't have that. What we have to think about is that our shareholders, the people we're accountable to, are taxpayers.

I'm sure this is a question that all governments ask themselves. My comments are in line with what Mr. Strahl was talking about. Maybe it would be beneficial at some point, when we don't have a full agenda as we do today, to have a discussion around what we did in 2011 and 2012; where that took us; where we are today and what we could do to ensure we are being the most prudent and efficient as possible in using these taxpayers' dollars most wisely.

I also want to say thank you. You did come back with a much more detailed report. Thank you for the work you did on that. I know we all appreciate that.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Are there any further questions or concerns about these two reports?

Go ahead, Madam Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: In the main estimates, I see the House administration is higher for 2019-20 than the previous year, and then the main estimates funding for members and House officers is lower year over year. I'm just wondering why that might be, or what's anticipated—what you see that we might not know.

•(1110)

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: In the case of the administration, there have been the cost-of-living increases and some of the costs related to the move and the increase in various services we're offering. When we look at the members' side, we see the adjustment of \$9.3 million for the pension contribution. If I were to reverse out that one-time reduction, we're probably in a similar growth pattern because of the indexing and cost-of-living increases that we are all having.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Are there any further questions or concerns?

Are the two reports on the main estimates accepted, adopted? I see they are.

I think we're doing quite well with the time so far. I suggest we carry on to number 6, the modernization of members' policies.

Mr. Paquette, you're taking this one too. You have a busy day. We'll go over to you.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker.

In May of this year, I appeared before the board to propose several amendments relating to our travel policy, and I did get the board's approval. In our continuous effort to modernize some of our policies to better support the members in doing their parliamentary functions, we're bringing to you today more topics to help us on that path.

The House administration recognizes that the challenges faced by members are becoming more and more complex with modern business practices, in particular in the characteristics of each of the constituencies, which require forward-looking, integrated and more flexible policies to move forward. Today's presentation follows up on requests that were made here to the board by members representing large, remote and sparsely populated constituencies to review their policies and recognize the high cost to serve and represent constituencies with their specific needs.

This is to help discharge some of their functions in those great distances between their borders, atypical or irregular population distribution, and the geographical challenges that limit their transportation alternatives. This is a complex matter for which we have been doing extensive consultation with members. This submission highlights the steps we have already taken to address some of these particular matters, as well as new ones we are proposing today. We'd like to get the board's support on a way forward.

I will ask José Fernandez to highlight some of the items in the submission. Then we'll be open to questions.

Mr. José Fernandez (Deputy Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Following up on these requests, the House administration undertook a series of consultations with these members, as well as additional members, to ensure a more complete representation of the various realities within Canada.

In total, 21 members from all recognized parties were consulted to understand their needs and challenges in carrying out their parliamentary functions. Last May, as Daniel mentioned, the House administration presented several recommendations resulting from the consultation process for the board's consideration, to provide additional flexibility to members in the use of travel resources and to be more responsive to personal circumstances.

One particular change that the board approved was to broaden the definition of "regular trip" to include trips within the constituency and to the provincial and territorial capitals. This provided members representing large constituencies access to the full travel points allocation to meet and stay connected with their constituents.

Building on these recommendations, the House administration is proposing further amendments for the board's consideration to better enable members to carry out their parliamentary functions. These proposals are meant to recognize the current challenges of members representing large, remote and sparsely populated constituencies and to ensure equity in the resource allocation for all members.

The first proposal relates to accommodation and per diem expenses. Currently when members travel in the discharge of their parliamentary functions, they may charge accommodation and per diem meals to the travel status expense account or their member's office budget. The transportation expenses are charged to the travel points system, which is a House central budget.

The current policies also allow for the reimbursement of accommodation expenses for necessary stops during a trip because of external factors outside the control of the member, such as weather-related problems. These are involuntary stopovers.

To reach some remote, rural or northern constituencies, members must deal with long plane trips, often with connecting flights, followed by road travel, as some members live far away from the airport. The current policy does not extend the reimbursement of accommodation and per diem expenses for voluntary stopovers that they may incur during these long trips.

To foster safe travel practices without putting unnecessary pressure on the resources provided to members for the discharge of their parliamentary functions, the House administration proposes to allow, regardless of whether the member is in travel status or not, accommodation and per diem expenses incurred the day before or after a regular trip, under special circumstances, for the safety and well-being of the member. We propose that these accommodation and per diem expenses be charged against the travel points system, which is a House central budget.

Our next proposal is related to accommodation in the constituency. For members representing northern or remote constituencies, commercial accommodation is often a sporadic commodity. With so few options, members are often unable to secure commercial accommodation in smaller communities and must resort to private accommodations that are offered by residents of those communities, other than the family of the member.

The cost charged to members sometimes exceeds the current reimbursement rate for private accommodations, which is set at \$50 per night. In addition, members visiting these remote areas are required to stay at one hotel or private accommodation for at least a week. They use it as a hub and they take the opportunity to visit other smaller communities where lodging is not available. However, the current policy limits members staying in one location to four consecutive nights.

In order to ensure that all members have access to the same resources regardless of where the constituency is located, the House administration proposes to amend the current policy to allow members, when in travel status, to claim accommodation expenses up to seven consecutive nights in each location and to be reimbursed a reasonable rate for non-commercial accommodation when commercial accommodations are non-existent and receipts are provided.

•(1115)

[*Translation*]

There are also expenses within the constituency. When Members are in travel status, that is, more than 100 km from their primary residence, they can claim meal expenses.

However, under the current policy, when Members attend an event taking place in their constituency, but, say, 75 km from their primary residence, they cannot claim meal expenses.

But employees can claim meal expenses when they travel more than 16 km from their normal place of work, which is the constituency office.

The proposal, therefore, is that Members may claim meal expenses when they are travelling within their constituency and are more than 16 km from their primary residence. However, that would not apply to daily commuting trips to and from their constituency office.

Our final proposal is about satellite telephones. Some Members and their employees sometimes have to travel in communities where stretches of road may have no cellular network. The inability to call for help in an emergency may therefore put their safety at risk.

Unpredictable and rapidly changing weather may also create additional pressure on them.

[*English*]

In order to ensure the necessary means to secure assistance when it is needed, the House administration proposes to, and I quote:

amend the policy to allow the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), in consultation with the Chief Information Officer (CIO), to review, assess and provide for the purchase of satellite phones, supported by a written justification from the Member, as an eligible expense to the House Administration central budget.

The monthly costs—the data plans, airtime and long-distance calls—as well as the cost of standard accessories would be charged to the member's office budget.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: In addition to these proposals, the House administration is also seeking the board's support to undertake a review of the budget and supplements, taking into consideration the evolving needs and requirements of members and the various challenges in particular ridings in order to carry out their parliamentary functions.

We will validate the scope of this review with your respective offices before we get started. The House administration will report back to the board on the results of this study and make recommendations that may include modification to the member's office budget supplements to ensure their relevance and appropriateness while continuing to meet the evolving needs of members. Such recommendations are intended to be brought forward only following the next general election, given the time we would need to do this assessment.

Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to answer any questions the members may have relating to this proposal.

•(1120)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

There are really two parts to this. One is the proposed adjustments to the current rules, and the second is to have approval to go ahead with the review that you're proposing.

Go ahead, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

I have a couple of things. You mentioned non-commercial accommodations, and I believe I heard you say "other than family". That's already prescribed in the by-laws currently.

Mr. José Fernandez: Yes, you're right.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Is there anything in this proposal...?

I have some members who have, for instance, a travel trailer that they might use to get around their very large constituency, especially in the summer. Obviously there are additional costs to that. I'm not sure this measure would capture that. Non-commercial accommodations, I assume, cannot be something that are a member's own asset. I guess I'm trying to find a way.... This has been brought to my attention before. This is simply for people staying in homes or bed and breakfasts.

What are we talking about here? What is included, and what would not be?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: Usually it is bed and breakfasts, homes, private residences, places of that nature.

In terms of this scenario, I guess the accommodation would be the fee for the campsite and the kilometres, because they are travelling with their personal vehicle. On incremental costs relating to the usage of those assets, we've heard of the situation, but at this point we haven't a recommendation to bring forward to the board to adapt that policy for this circumstance.

Mr. Mark Strahl: When this is happening, when someone is staying at a friend's place or something like that, is there a paper trail there, or does the member simply say, "I wasn't at home. I wasn't at a hotel. I'd like \$80, please."?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: We do ask for supporting documentation.

Mr. Mark Strahl: And if the friend got the money, not the member...

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: That's right.

I assume that all members are honest—

Mr. Mark Strahl: Absolutely.

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: —and want to make sure that they do this.

We're looking at it right now. The situation is we have on file about 300 cases. That's why we are bringing it forward. The members are currently out of pocket. They're actually providing us evidence, signed by the people where they resided, for what they paid as a reasonable rate. We're at this point making sure that the members personally are not out of pocket for delivery of their parliamentary function.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Wasn't it Ronald Reagan who said, "Trust, but verify"?

Mr. Mark Strahl: Your quoting Ronald Reagan, Mr. Speaker, is a good day for me.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Go ahead, Ms. Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Thank you for your work, as always.

In regard to the satellite phones, because you have a little bit of a sample size, how many are you anticipating? How many members will need to be considered for that, and do we have an idea of the overall expense?

Then, where did the 16 kilometres come from?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: We get that last question quite often. I'll start with that one.

It is a very common practice. Right now, we use it for employees across various public services. When you are outside of your office and more than 16 kilometres away, you are allowed to collect a per diem, so that's where we got a reasonable number of kilometres. We used something that was already in common practice. That's where the number comes from.

As for the satellite phone, our assessment is that there are about 21 constituencies that could probably qualify for this, if the member identifies a need, but that depends on how they are travelling within their constituency. It's not a large proportion of members in terms of current cellphone coverage and where the population resides.

• (1125)

Hon. Bardish Chagger: What is the approximate cost?

Mr. Daniel G. Paquette: The phone itself is about \$1,200, which will be paid centrally, and then the usage will come out of the member's office budget.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Is there anyone else?

There is not. In that case, is the proposal approved?

I see that it is.

Before we go in camera, I think that we should note that this appears to be our last Board of Internal Economy meeting in this building—for us, at least. I suppose that future Boards of Internal Economy will be meeting here in some years. It's going to be an interesting time and a sad moment to leave, although I know that we're looking forward to the interesting experience of being in West Block, but we'll miss this building. That's for sure.

Now we will take a little break while we go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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