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Chair

Mr. Leon Benoit

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•(1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)):
Good morning, everyone.

Today, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), we are looking at the main estimates for 2004-05: votes 1, 5, and 10 under the Department of Public Works and Government Services. This was referred to the committee on October 8, 2004.

Appearing today, we have the Honourable Scott Brison, Minister of Public Works and Government Services, and the Honourable Walt Lastewka, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services.

Welcome, gentlemen. We will open with a 10-minute presentation, approximately. Go ahead and introduce your departmental officials, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It is a pleasure to be here this morning.

I would like to introduce David Marshall, our deputy minister, Lysanne Gauvin, and Yvette Aloïsi. We are also accompanied by other department officials on more specific areas of the department.

I am delighted to be here today to discuss this year's estimates for 2004-05. As you are aware, Mr. Chairman, I volunteered to come before your committee first thing. In fact, I believe I'm one of the first, if not the first, minister in this Parliament to actually meet with the committee to discuss estimates of the department.

We have distributed my remarks, but I would like to summarize those remarks and focus on some key areas. Hopefully, I will do so in less than 10 minutes so I can get into your questions more quickly.

As you can see, there has been an increase in our department's budget, mainly because of the December 2003 restructuring of the Government of Canada. As a result of that restructuring, our department became responsible for the Government On-Line initiative as well as the shared travel service initiative. We were transferred responsibility for many of the programs and services delivered by the former Communications Canada.

As such, there was not an actual increase in our budget beyond that which is commensurate with the growth in our mandates and our additional responsibilities as a result of that restructuring, and some additional demands for space for other departments. Both Government On-Line and shared travel services are exciting mandates, which have the capacity to achieve tremendous savings across the 98

departments and agencies of government resulting in better value for taxpayers' dollars, and at the same time, better services for Canadians.

We are also making a concerted effort to reduce expenditures this fiscal year. For example, the hiring of staff is being carefully monitored and our staff count has gone down by 360 full-time positions since the start of the year. Second, we've cut our contracting budget by some \$30 million, and the advertising budget has been cut by 15%. I'm confident that our department is in a good position to generate a substantial amount of savings in 2004-05, and even more so in the following years.

[Translation]

The October 5 Speech from the Throne announced several initiatives for Canada and Canadians.

[English]

One way or another our department is involved in most of them, either as a landlord, as a procurement agency, as the Government of Canada's banker—in fact, handling \$1.3 trillion transactions every year—as a leader in “greening” government operations and environmental remediation, in terms of the Translation Bureau, or as the lead agency for the federal information technology network, one of the largest in Canada. I'm very proud of the work that my department does.

Allow me to take a moment to tell you about our department's commitment to the environment.

Public Works is in the lead when it comes to designing and making buildings more energy efficient and reducing greenhouse gases by our strict standards in procurement; for instance, in buying alternative-fuel vehicles that reduce air pollution—we actually operate the largest hybrid vehicle fleet in Canada—in cleaning up contaminated sites such as the Sydney tar ponds or many of the abandoned mine sites in northern and western Canada. This is a growing area, and it's one that I'd actually like to come back to the committee on at some point to talk about the vision for Public Works and Government Services Canada in the future in terms of environmental remediation.

My predecessors, both Ministers Goodale and Owen, deserve a lot of credit for some of the positive changes and improvements that have occurred within our department.

I'd also like to mention the key role that our deputy minister, David Marshall, has played over the last 14 months working with the professionals in our department and achieving some very positive changes.

We have a rigorous new management structure at Public Works. Our advertising programs are better managed, our financial management and controls have been strengthened, and we're implementing an integrity plan, an ethics program that the Conference Board of Canada has rated as a best-practice model for both the public and private sector. Every contract we sign for more than \$10,000 is posted on the Web, as are the expense accounts of all senior department officials.

We intend to build on these and other positive initiatives by making fundamental reforms that will transform not only the way our department does business but the way the Government of Canada does business and, again, demonstrating consistent respect for tax dollars.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

I have travelled throughout Canada since I became minister in order to share my strategic vision. Today, I would like to take the time to present a summary of my vision.

[*English*]

Let me make it clear that our goal first and foremost is to find cost efficiencies while improving services to Canadians. In fact, we should be able to deliver the services we provide smarter and faster. I'm confident that we can improve services, reduce costs, and save hundreds of millions of dollars, perhaps even billions of dollars, over time by melding the best practice models from both the public and private sectors.

We have an important three-point strategy for doing exactly that. I'm going to mention it very briefly. Most of you will have the speech we gave in Toronto in September. It's actually posted on our department's website as well. I would like to come back and have a meeting specifically on the strategic direction for the department at some point, because that in and of itself represents good material for an entire meeting.

To briefly go over three of those elements, first, I believe smarter buying can make a huge contribution to the efficiency of government. Our department is responsible for the procurement of about \$10 billion worth of goods and services every year for the federal government. Our research indicates that economies of scale and better approaches can achieve savings in the 10% range. This would represent about \$1 billion more money every year that could be freed up for investing in the real priorities of Canadians.

We're working with IBM to implement the Government of Canada marketplace project, an innovative e-procurement portal that will ensure better and faster buying. Even more exciting are the ideas that have been brought forth through the work of our parliamentary secretary, the Honourable Walt Lastewka, who has completed the most comprehensive review of government procurement policies since 1963.

While we're implementing these significant changes for the future, I'd like to share a couple of success stories with you in terms of how we're procuring smarter, buying smarter, right now. In the IT area we've negotiated some \$40 million worth of software contracts, which has resulted in a 70% savings off the existing standing offers for each department. That represents the gross amount of the

contracts. The value is around \$120 million, and the savings were actually about \$80 million from those negotiations. In furniture, volume discounts have obtained a 16% discount off standing offer prices that existed previously. Our recent negotiations on other services are showing savings well north of 15% in contracts ranging in the \$6 billion range.

These are significant savings that we are achieving right now on behalf of the Canadian government in a broad range of departments. We're now engaging Canadians in a public discussion of these proposals for improving the procurement system, and I encourage the committee to become involved in that process.

The second element of the three-point strategy is to look for cost savings and better ways to handle our real estate portfolio. There's a real opportunity for savings here. The federal government is the largest administrator of office space in Canada, with some 6.7 million square metres of space. We are looking at a number of alternatives to achieve better value in that regard. We believe we can save 10% of the \$3 billion budget, which would result in about \$300 million in savings on a per annum basis, once we've determined and implemented the exact changes we want to proceed with.

The third element is on IT strategy. Again, there are a number of ways in which we as a government can do business better in the area of IT and Public Works and Government Services Canada can play a leadership role.

● (1120)

[*Translation*]

Its purpose is to change the way in which the federal government deals with Canadians.

[*English*]

We hope that by 2005 about one hundred government services will be available online. And we're moving toward 24/7 services for Canadians online.

I said at the outset that our strategic vision was a fairly simple one in some ways, but it's also a very ambitious one. I know it won't be easy. It will be important that we work with all stakeholders, particularly parliamentarians. That's why your committee and its engagement is so important to us. We look forward to a more granular discussion on some of these key areas in the future.

It's important to recognize as well the role our department plays in working with other departments and agencies. There has been a significant attitudinal shift in terms of the way our department looks at those other departments. In the past, the approach has been that other departments are the client departments, and we provide services to other departments. There has been a shift to where we look at other departments as colleague departments. We work with those other departments and agencies to serve the real client, and that is the citizen of Canada, the taxpayer of Canada.

We have set up a special MPs website to keep all MPs apprised of our progress and up-to-date on some of these changes. I do want to come back and discuss some of these issues and items and opportunities with the committee in the future, and in fact on an ongoing basis.

The public works department is really like the engine of government, in many ways, and of course it needs gas to move forward. To push the analogy even further, I want our department to be a more fuel-efficient engine, to help propel a more agile government. Lots of positive changes have occurred, and I want this committee to be a partner in progress with the Department of Public Works.

In closing, I do want to talk about some of the impressive savings that we have an opportunity to harvest in the coming years. This year's estimates reflect the current costs of providing departments and agencies with accommodation, supplies, and services that they need in order to provide their services to Canadians. As such, it's instrumental that we have your support in terms of this year's estimates in order to move forward to achieve the kind of cross-government savings that I really believe our department is capable of achieving.

I'm looking forward to the questions that the committee members have. Our officials are here to help respond on some of the more specific questions that I may be unable to respond to fully.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister, for your comments. I certainly do look forward to working with you in the future. I think we certainly can help you do your job of making these cuts that you've talked about.

We'll start with the first round of questioning, which is seven minutes each.

I would ask you to please give short answers.

I'll go first to Mr. Moore.

Mr. James Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam, CPC): Short answers, and the questions shouldn't be five minutes long and then "Do you agree?"

I appreciate the minister being here, but using the analogy he closed his presentation with, about the department needing gas to move forward...

Treasury Board's expenditure review sets a 5% cost-cutting target for each department. If you juxtapose the estimates for this year with those from last year, you'll find that the department's budget is increasing by 6.26%, and your operating costs are up 10% this year.

Why are you failing to meet the 5% cost-cutting target that your own government set?

• (1125)

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you, Mr. Moore, for your question.

I can in fact go through those variances. First, the most significant changes, as I described in my opening statement, are those that are commensurate with increases in our mandate—on the technology

side, Government On-Line, and on the travel side, the shared travel service mandate, which is a procurement issue.

The growth is commensurate with those changes. That's an increase in mandate. If you compare the numbers from one year to the next, and you extricate those numbers from there, actually there hasn't been a dramatic increase except on the real property side, where we have provided increased accommodation to colleague departments that have needed that space. So in fact it has not grown outside of those areas.

Mr. James Moore: But, the reality is... As a fiscal conservative—I would think you hopefully still are—you'd know the line that "there is only one taxpayer". The reality is, if you look at the responsibilities Public Works has taken over from Treasury Board, you would know that the Treasury Board's budget has increased as well.

In fact, if you look at the numbers, the Treasury Board has increased its spending by an average of 6.4% over the last three years, and they're continuing to increase. You've taken over some of the responsibilities from Treasury Board, and Public Works' spending has gone up—and not just commensurate with the responsibilities: the spending has gone up.

I don't mean to be too political here, but when you were in opposition you were very critical about government spending. You were one of the key fiscal hawks. Even with all the politics associated with your crossing the floor and becoming a Liberal cabinet minister, one had hoped you would have maintained your fiscal conservatism. I'm just wondering what happened?

Hon. Scott Brison: I don't think I've become terribly dove-like quite yet when it comes to fiscal matters, Mr. Moore. In terms of the substance of your question, if it is directed to Treasury Board spending, I suggest the President of the Treasury Board would be better able to respond to those questions than I am.

In our budget, our increase in spending has been commensurate with increases in our mandate and our responsibilities, which I can add very briefly have the capacity, if handled properly—and we are making significant changes both in shared travel services and Government On-Line—to harvest significant savings across the 98 departments and agencies. The fact is our spending has not grown dramatically outside of those areas.

David, do you have anything more?

Mr. David Marshall (Deputy Minister, Department of Public Works and Government Services): Yes. Mr. Moore, the increase, aside from the responsibilities transferred in, is coming from expanded space requirements from Health Canada, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, National Defence, the Communications Security Establishment, and that sort of thing. Those costs show up in our budget, as we pay for accommodations for them.

Mr. James Moore: I appreciate the answer, but from the taxpayer's perspective, and with regard to the government keeping its word, there are increased responsibilities from Treasury Board. The spending increases are commensurate with that and then some. The government is spending more, not less.

The government has made a commitment to cut 5%, and the minister's presentation here is very general. That's fine; I've seen much worse. It was very good, but there was nothing in there specifically. This committee, in a minority government, has the capacity to lower the spending estimates. Minister, you were very specific when you were in the opposition about the government needing to cut spending. If you're not prepared to do it, is the minister prepared to give us a list of things? We can cut the estimates, and we're quite prepared to cut them by 5% to meet the government's standard if the government isn't prepared to do it.

So to the minister again, where are you going to reduce 5%? You haven't outlined that yet, and time is clicking.

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you for your question, Mr. Moore.

First, we are cooperating, as are other departments, with the expenditure review committee to achieve a targeted \$12-billion saving over a five-year period. I think that's a very positive process and one we are fully committed to as a department in terms of achieving best value. That's across government.

I can assure you that we as a department and I myself as a member of the expenditure review committee are full participants in that process and will be contributing significantly to it. Part of it is over a five-year period.

The value we derive as a central procurer, as an example, or as the central landlord for the other departments, has the capacity to achieve value in savings far greater than would apply specifically to our department, because—speaking about there being only one taxpayer and all government departments effectively being paid for by that taxpayer—we can help drive savings in all 98 departments, and that's what we're committed to.

As for the strategic direction, we need a meeting to explore that part of it more fully. I think you would probably agree with and support a lot of the changes in that area. In fact, you said you did, which I appreciate.

• (1130)

Mr. James Moore: Well, I did, but the follow-through can be a hell of a thing for Liberals sometimes.

Another issue, a separate thing—and I believe I only have a minute and a half left here—concerns the whole issue of the sale and leaseback of government-owned buildings. You gave a very broadly publicized speech on this whole issue. We, the Conservative Party, don't disagree in principle with this idea, but we just hope the action matches the language and the heat you brought into the issue. That's all fine, but it has to be done in a diligent way, because the government and taxpayers could be taken to the cleaners on this if it's not done properly.

One question—I suppose as a lead-in to a broader expansion of it, if you wish it—is how many buildings have been sold and what the net gain is for taxpayers?

Hon. Scott Brison: In fact, we're currently designing a request for proposals, Mr. Moore, one broadly enough written to not preclude any options. We're not saying that divestiture is the only way to achieve better value. You can also achieve better value through other approaches to management—using a real estate investment trust is

another approach—but we want to look at a range of options, including both public and private ownership, and select the best possible one to achieve value.

Other governments have taken different approaches and are enjoying benefits. In fact, in the private sector there's a focus... But it's not a public sector versus private sector comparison we're talking about; it's more a question of general organization in the case of government, and a more core-focused organization on the private side.

Mr. James Moore: Well, I know—

The Chair: I'm sorry. Time's up. We've given you an extra minute, Mr. Moore.

Let me ask a question, Mr. Minister, just for clarification. You've said the increase in the estimates is due to the increased mandate of your department. I believe that's what you said.

Hon. Scott Brison: That's it in part.

The Chair: I believe it's what you said, yes. Where was the amount of this increase to your department? Where was it reduced in other departments?

It would be helpful to the committee if you could provide the numbers showing where other departments' budgets were decreased when that responsibility was taken away from them. Would you agree to providing that to the committee?

Hon. Scott Brison: Certainly we can provide that to the committee. I don't know whether the deputy would like to speak to it.

Mr. David Marshall: We do know, Mr. Chairman, the functions transferred in were from the Treasury Board—specifically about \$37 million from there—and then Communications Canada was disbanded and folded into Public Works. Then the other part of the increase in our budget is due to space demands by some of the departments I mentioned: Health Canada, and so on. We could give you information on where they were coming in from, if you wanted.

The Chair: Yes, and of course, through that we should be able to see where the savings have actually been.

I'm looking forward to that, then, if you could get it to this committee as soon as possible.

Hon. Scott Brison: Certainly. Thank you.

The Chair: Madame Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask three questions. I hope to have the time to ask all three of them.

The first is somewhat similar to the one put by our chairman. It deals with the supply and acquisitions policy. Although I don't want to raise the whole issue again, let's keep in mind as a background to the question the story of the logo on which I already asked two questions. You will see how they are related.

The total spending power per activity sector derives from the funds allocated, so from funds obtained from other departments and organizations. Your department, Minister, makes purchases. We heard the example of acquisitions which increased by \$37 million between 2003 and 2004. That is due in part, if I understand correctly, to the transfer of the Treasury Board Secretariat, and to shared service initiatives for government travel as well as to another sum, which I cannot recall.

What interests me is that certain sums are transferred. Public Works and Government Services Canada makes purchases for departments and organizations. Not necessarily the same people, but the same players, the same stakeholders are involved, as well as the same type of client-purchaser relationships.

I would like you to tell me who is accountable. When my colleagues and myself ask questions of one minister or another, who will be able to answer and who will be accountable? Allow me to say, with all due respect, that it is a bit too easy to say that one is the intermediary but that one is not responsible. And so, I am asking you, who is responsible?

Does the department that makes the purchases have mechanisms in place to ensure that at the end of the process the items that have been purchased have really been received, items on which some truly considerable sums are sometimes spent? If this was not done perfectly in the past, how will you be able to ensure that in the future all of this will be done in a totally suitable way, to the satisfaction of all citizens?

• (1135)

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you very much, Ms. Thibault, for your question.

[English]

First, there's a relationship between Treasury Board and Public Works on a lot of this work. We work with colleague departments that will identify a need for a good or service they want to acquire, and we will act on their behalf to acquire that good or service. Treasury Board plays a role in terms of approval and ensuring that in fact it is consistent with the overall government program.

In the past there have been issues around financial management. There have been significant changes in our department over the last 12 to 14 months in terms of strengthening financial management and ensuring we are assuring best value for tax dollars. I can go over some of those changes with you or table them and provide you with them. It sounds like a small thing, but the attitudinal shift from other departments being client departments to their being colleague departments is a very significant change.

In terms of the responsibility for procurement, we negotiate the deal, so we are responsible for getting the best possible value for the service or good identified. That means a competitive process; that means an open, transparent process and getting the best value for the good or service identified by the colleague department.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Madame Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I'd like to get back to the topic of accountability, since in my opinion you did not really answer my question. However, I am going to ask a second one about the government building inventory. As I said, the Bloc Québécois has concerns about the regions, and your strategic vision. Of course there are costs, and no one is against motherhood, nor saving money. However there are also costs related to the fact that whole regions, in all areas, are losing services, goods and jobs.

How are you going to take into consideration the fact that there are also human and regional costs?

Hon. Scott Brison: One of my priorities will be to ensure a federal government presence in all of the regions.

[English]

As a politician from the Maritimes, I'm sensitive to this. I believe that we can strengthen the presence of the federal government in the regions and that some of the changes we are proposing at this time for discussion on real property can in fact help in that regard. There will be no negative impact on the regions.

In fact, there is an inertia to the geographic centralization that exists now that I think could actually be diluted somewhat by not having the imposed inertia of owned real estate. It's better for ministers and departments to locate their people closer to those citizens being served. I'm actually a fan of a greater level of decentralization, not of centralization, so I would agree with your concern, and in fact I intend on it being reflected in what we do.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Madame Thibault, just a very short question—and a quick answer.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I have very little time left, but I am very happy to have heard you say that—those are your words—there will be no negative impact and that you are willing to see to it that jobs will stay in the regions. You would surely agree with me that one of the perverse effects of information technology is that almost anything can now be done remotely and even from a very great distance away.

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison: I think one of the benefits of IT can be that we can have public servants dispersed more so than is the case now. I think IT and real estate strategies ought to be... I agree with that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Seven minutes, Madame Marleau.

Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.): Thanks.

For starters I want to follow up on a question that was asked by Mr. Moore. I want to know, what would happen if we were to cut your budget this year by 5%? What would be the immediate impacts of that? I think that was a little bit of what you were saying and I don't think we got an answer on that. That's one question I want an answer on.

You talked about it being sometimes better to lease than to own a federal building; it may, but not always. I've been here a long time and I've seen the effects of leasing in the regions. What happened in many cases is that we had almost empty federal buildings. We weren't able to sell them, and we were paying top dollar for leases somewhere else. I'm not convinced that leasing is always the answer. I think that sometimes when you have a building, you should utilize it instead of leaving it half empty. There isn't much value to it if it's not well looked after. I want to know what you think about that.

The third one has to do with your capital expenditure. You have a line in there about capital expenditure. How much of that is already committed? How much will be committed to the parliamentary precinct project? I see you have a line for the Bank Street Building. I notice there's been a considerable amount of money spent to date, but we don't see anything on the ground and you are budgeting for this year. Can you address that Bank Street Building? Is it a Sparks Street or Bank Street building?

Hon. Scott Brison: It's Bank Street.

Hon. Diane Marleau: That's for starters.

Hon. Scott Brison: First, there's the question in terms of the reduction. It's important to recognize where we are in terms of the fiscal year 2004-05. A 5% reduction this year would represent a disproportionate reduction in the latter months, and in fact we have prepared something on the impact that would occur.

In terms of the specific impact of a 5% reduction, I think it's an excellent question, so we understand fully what we're talking about in terms of an impact on the workforce and on goods and services.

Hon. Diane Marleau: In other words, are you going to be able to heat the buildings and keep the lights on?

• (1145)

Hon. Scott Brison: David.

Mr. David Marshall: I'm afraid not, Madame Marleau.

In any event, the amount of discretionary spending we have is quite small; it's about \$600 million or so. Our expenses from our department consist of leases, heating and lighting bills, cleaning bills, and other long-term contracts. Clearly, to find that money we would have to lay off thousands of staff in the last quarter to achieve it, but even then you would have workforce adjustment costs, so it really wouldn't be very practical. But that doesn't mean to say it's not something one should look at very carefully.

What is happening today is that we are working through the impact of a 5% budget cut going forward in 2005-06 and the three years to follow, as we've been requested by the expenditure review committee to do.

Hon. Diane Marleau: In other words... you have how many years to find the 5%?

Mr. David Marshall: At the present time it's a three-year trajectory to find the 5% savings in our overall operating budget.

But I should also say that the largest part of our budget, which is our real property expense at about 73% of our budget, is the one we've specifically been working hard on to see how we can become more efficient. That's the one where the minister is talking about a potential for \$300 million a year over a five-year period, where we

can change the way we lease buildings, change the way we maintain them, and so on. And we have a very definite plan to do that; it will start in 2005-06 and go forward, so we would see that cut.

Hon. Scott Brison: I'll add to the deputy's comments.

I believe very strongly that Public Works can play a very important role in terms of achieving value across the 98 departments and agencies, but if we accept a premature or draconian cut that would effectively cripple our department this year, it would actually result in fewer savings across departments. We are capable of achieving savings across the 98 departments and agencies only if we are able to function, and clearly the estimates we've provided are designed to provide that.

The question of leasing versus ownership is a very important one. Some of the consideration has to be in terms of the nature of the negotiation of those leases and the process through which it is done. We have not made any final decisions on that, and I do want to come before the committee to discuss more thoroughly some of the options that we have in terms of real estate. As I mentioned, there's the potential of real estate income trusts, there's the potential of leasing, and there's the potential of outsourcing management, for instance.

Let's be clear on it, we have a \$1 billion deferred maintenance deficit that is growing every year. At some point, we have to consider whether it's a core function of government to be, effectively in this case, a commercial landlord, and if it is not, whether it makes sense for us to be doing it and whether or not we are good at it. Our cost structure is about 20% higher than some of the private sector comparisons, and at the same time we have some real deficits on the maintenance side that we want to address.

I do want to come back, Mr. Chair, before the committee to talk about that workplan and have a good and thorough debate and discussion on some of these.

As for the parliamentary precinct, we have a joint stewardship over it with the Board of Internal Economy. As you would recognize, madam, that is sometimes a complicated management structure, and it's one that we work with on an ongoing basis, a day-to-day basis in fact, in managing the parliamentary precinct as it ought to. We definitely recognize there are shortcomings and things that we want to do better, and we share that goal with the Board of Internal Economy. Part of that vision does include the Bank Street Building, which is currently part of the capital freeze. We are having discussions with the Board of Internal Economy and are prepared to talk to Treasury Board on an ongoing basis about that if there's a—

Hon. Diane Marleau: There's a freeze on the Bank Street Building, but there's an amount of \$8 million or \$9 million in your capital spending estimates for this year.

Hon. Scott Brison: Yes, we keep it there in anticipation... because we recognize a real need, particularly in terms of swing space, as we move toward renovating and upgrading and addressing some of the deficiencies in some of our currently occupied space on Parliament Hill, and recognize that it could be part of that. But we do keep it there in anticipation of a—

•(1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Madame Marleau's time is up.

Mr. Martin, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here.

I'll start off by saying that I think you're well aware I'm no big fan of your idea to privatize and sell off our public assets in terms of our public buildings. I'll simply echo Madame Thibault's comments in noting there's a second factor to my objections to this plan, and that is the presence of the federal government in the regions as a unity issue. I'm concerned that the only presence of the federal government in some parts of Canada is in the back of a 7-Eleven store, where there's a post office. It really is worrisome to me in the prairie region, and I know that Madame Thibault is talking about the Quebec region perhaps having similar problems.

In your speech in Toronto of September 21, which many of us took note of and commented on, you tried to use the analogy of your vision of the Department of Public Works as a well-oiled, fuel-efficient machine moving into the future. I'd have to tell you that the public perception of the Department of Public Works is that of a bloated and cumbersome behemoth, the antithesis of a fuel-efficient and streamlined machine. If it were to be personified or viewed as a vehicle, it would be a gas guzzling Hummer, out of tune and belching black smoke, etc.

Not to beat that to death, I would like to recommend a potential savings area to you and to ask your views on it. I think we could marry two things here: yesterday's announcement by the Department of the Environment and its support of green roofs on every public building and the Minister of Justice's introduction today of the bill to legalize marijuana. We could simply grow dope on the roof of all the buildings under your direction and control, and you could meet the Conservative's 5% target. Do you think that has merit?

Hon. Scott Brison: I think you're speaking of a higher calling. When I talk about harvesting some results from our changes, I'm not speaking about that. But thank you, Mr. Martin.

The substance of your question is actually very important. First, in terms of the regions, one of the reasons I do want to bring the work plan and the strategic direction back to the committee is that I want a thorough discussion of some of these issues. I am absolutely committed to defending and promoting the presence of the Government of Canada in the regions of the country. Again, as a product of a region it's important to me, and I don't see why, in any way, shape, or form, a change in the ownership structure for federal real estate would have a negative impact. To the contrary, it could actually free ministries to make decisions based more on where they ought to have their locations. I have a lot of confidence as well in the ability of the regions of our country to provide services.

Madame Thibault mentioned IT as one facilitator. With the death of distance as a determinant in the cost of telecommunications, there are fewer and fewer compelling reasons for the need for centralization all the time. We can be doing more in the regions. That's my personal philosophy, and one that I bring to cabinet.

Notwithstanding the question—which is a shared responsibility with Health, and I won't get into mowing another minister's grass, if you will—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Scott Brison: — on the green procurement side and on green building design, our department has played a leadership role and in fact has been recognized for green building design.

Mr. Pat Martin: To be fair, Mr. Minister, very few comprehensive energy retrofits have taken place, even though there's the federal building initiative. I'd like to hear what your plans are to realize more savings in energy conservation, etc.

•(1155)

Hon. Scott Brison: There are a couple of things. One, we've made our own operations 33% more energy efficient.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's 33%.

Hon. Scott Brison: Yes. From 1990 to 2003 it has been 33%, which has further reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 24%. I know you've been a proponent of saving money and at the same time—

Mr. Pat Martin: Meeting the targets, I agree.

Hon. Scott Brison: That's right. So we have achieved not only a reduction of 24% in greenhouse gas emissions, but at the same time we have saved \$16 million a year in operating expenditures.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's not a bad start, but you would agree that out of 68,000 buildings—many of which frankly weren't maintained well in the era of cutbacks—there are probably a lot more efficiencies to find in terms of energy conservation sitting out there, ready to be harvested, as it were, again.

Hon. Scott Brison: I agree with you. In fact, it's an imperative of design for projects that we're involved with on the environmental side.

You used the Hummer analogy, and on the vehicle side we operate the largest fleet of hybrid vehicles in the country.

Mr. Pat Martin: How many are there? I only know of one.

Hon. Scott Brison: How many hybrid vehicles do we have?

Ms. Yvette Aloïsi (Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services, Human Resources and Communications Branch, Department of Public Works and Government Services): For Public Works and Government Services Canada, the number of vehicles we use has decreased from about 600 to 200. First, we have decreased the number of vehicles we use, and then of that number we are increasing the number of fuel-efficient vehicles. I don't have the number with me right now, but we can provide it to the committee.

Hon. Scott Brison: We will get that for you.

Mr. Pat Martin: Yes.

Ms. Yvette Aloïsi: It's also the availability of the vehicles—

Hon. Scott Brison: But you're right in identifying that. It's not that if we're more environmentally responsible somehow we're going to be less fiscally responsible. In fact, to the contrary, the two can co-exist and dovetail as parallel initiatives. That's what we're committed to. I know you've been very involved in that discussion.

Mr. Pat Martin: Yes. I firmly believe there are huge savings to be realized.

On the beauty of the energy retrofit idea, my figures indicate you can reduce operating costs by as much as 40%. Your overall energy costs must be staggering, as a share of your overall building costs. Have you any estimate on that? Would it be \$1 billion or \$2 billion a year in energy costs?

The Chair: Could we have a very short answer, please? Mr. Martin's time is up.

Mr. David Marshall: Mr. Martin, I will get that for you and make sure you get that information.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marshall.

Mr. Preston, seven minutes.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and Mr. Minister and guests here today. Thank you for coming out to answer our questions.

You said in response to Mr. Moore that some of the increase in your department spending is commensurate with the new areas you've accumulated from other departments and that these contribute significantly to the overall target. Then I also heard you say that some of these cuts may be draconian in nature. With the directive in place to reduce expenditure by 5%, you then made the not-so-reassuring comment that your spending has not increased dramatically.

Are we attempting to decrease or are we trying to increase, not dramatically?

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you, Mr. Preston. The fact is there has been an increase on the real property side of our expenditures that is commensurate with the increased space requirements for other departments—Health Canada, Public Safety and—

Mr. Joe Preston: I recognize that, Mr. Minister. Does this mean they are also believing these cuts are draconian and increasing the sizes of their departments, and not following the directive to decrease spending? I understand a growth in need for space means that we've put new people in those spaces, or it was space that wasn't required before. So I recognize that increases the cost in your department when it gets transferred to you, but does it also mean it's across the board, then?

Hon. Scott Brison: You'll be very pleased, I think, with the work being done now by the expenditure review committee under the leadership of Minister McCallum, which is aimed at achieving \$12 billion of savings over a five-year period. We are an active participant and are totally committed to that department. Frankly, not only do we have a responsibility within our own department but we also play a really important role in terms of achieving savings across

the 98 departments and agencies through better procurement, through better approaches on real property.

Mr. Joe Preston: I understand that's what you're saying and I do understand that to be your mandate. But if indeed you're saying your budget increased this year because of new areas you took over, including increased real estate needs from other departments, does this not mean their cost has increased? Or yours? It follows again. The one taxpayer analogy certainly comes in.

Hon. Scott Brison: And I agree with that analogy. It's one of the reasons why we're working with provincial governments, in fact, to find areas of shared services so that we can cooperate to achieve that. I'm not going to comment on another ministry in terms of their spending.

In terms of expenditure review, that falls under Minister McCallum, but I will ask the deputy to—

• (1200)

Mr. David Marshall: Yes, Mr. Preston, I think I can help shed a little light on this. You see, as long as a program is approved and, of course, the estimates are voted on by the House, the public works department has to respond to house that department.

Now, I think your question is this. Is this an indicator of general growth in spending in the government? What is happening, of course, as you can see, is that there is a shift occurring to the higher-priority government programs—health and public security and so forth. Those are the places that are coming forward.

In providing this service, what we have done this year is to work with the expenditure review committee and the Treasury Board to impose certain standards on space utilization and on fit-up. What we found is that the average the government uses today is about 21 square metres per full-time equivalent employee, and we're working with the Treasury Board to bring that down to 18 square metres, because we think that's a space that can be adequately fitted up for office use.

As space is required and it's cycled over about an eight-year period, when people move or there are changes in the program, we think we can capture back about 15% of real property costs that way on space.

So we have to respond, but we're trying to make it so that it's efficient.

Mr. Joe Preston: I thank you for that answer, but it goes back to a point that Ms. Marleau made. If we do decrease from a 21-square-metre space to an 18-square-metre space, do we end up with excess space if we're in fact now accumulating new space while we're in that cycle?

I have another question. You talked about a strategy of going into online procurement and new ways of doing business with your colleague departments instead of client departments. And I understand that new business strategies come forward all the time, and this tends to work. Back to the instance of trying to reduce expenditures by 5%, if we have found new strategies and new ways of doing business, have we actually taken out the old ways, or have we now just added another layer of new online procurement and new purchasing strategies and just left the old in place? I don't see the savings in your budget, either.

Hon. Scott Brison: First, it's a good question, because the package you've identified is something that always exists when you introduce a new approach. For a period of time, there is some duplication and there are some parallel processes, and you can't help that. Particularly with technology, you can expect that during the implementation period.

As other departments participate, one of the things with new technology that we may develop centrally as Public Works and Government Services Canada—for instance, the Government of Canada marketplace project—is that there's a period of time during which other departments pony up and participate, so there is duplication for a period. You can't avoid that. Frankly, during the initial stages of a new enterprise approach, it would be foolhardy not to allow some level of that.

In terms of standardizing how we buy and what we buy and achieve in value, the potential success is significant. I'm going to ask Walt Lastewka to reply, because Walt really has led the procurement forum side for the department with his review.

Hon. Walt Lastewka (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services): What I see happening as we move forward, as we move our department from a purchasing, transactional department to being a procurement department doing more bundling and doing more work in a planned approach, is that we will go through a period of implementation that will be more expensive for us, because as you said, you'll have people phasing out of the old and new people phasing in to the new. But over time, the savings will go up—in the next three or four years. That savings will continue to move higher for purchasing in the other departments, and then we'll be more efficient as a procurement department.

There are some other areas that we will have to add to, being a more efficient procurement department, like customer satisfaction for the 98 and continuous improvement. We shouldn't be doing this every 20 years or 30 years. We should be doing it on a continuous basis, and that is something on which I'll be glad to come back to present.

•(1205)

Mr. Joe Preston: The danger is that we don't ever realize the savings because we keep adding something new on top of something old and duplicating. You've said we certainly will see that in the future and potentially will see savings. Potentially, I'd like to see a tax decrease, but I can't take “potentially” to my bank. So the potential savings are there, I recognize that. When will we realize them?

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Preston, one of the benefits of the expenditure review process is that it will involve departments like ours in putting stakes in the ground, saying this is what we're going to deliver in savings over the next five years. Once we've done that—and rest assured, we're going to be committed to making that happen—

Mr. Joe Preston: Will we be informed of that somehow?

Hon. Scott Brison: As part of that process, when the budget comes out, it will have some very clear details in terms of the way we'll do that. But purchasing and smarter procurement will be one of the ways we help all departments achieve savings, so there are real incentives for those departments to participate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Preston.

Mr. Boshcoff, for seven minutes.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will have two questions, and Mr. Powers will have the third.

When we talk about procurement—and we'll use the example of Grand & Toy in Ottawa for our office supplies—often we could almost find that 5% just in the cost of shipping alone for this material. My concern is that if it can be acquired cheaper locally, why aren't you utilizing or trying to develop some kind of policy whereby you could get a local supplier who can beat the government standard? More often than not, the stuff you get from one central warehouse is wrong anyway.

The second question was this. Over the past eight or nine years, the Conservative government in Ontario eviscerated the public service in the regional and district offices, consolidating a large number of them in downtown Toronto, at about 11 million square feet. Of course, now there are exorbitant rents. Even the staff pay, because they travel long distances and experience the gridlock of getting to and from work. When you talk about decentralization, it's hard not to think of those things as a way of restoring accessible government to people.

If you could deal with those and still save time for Mr. Powers, I would be very grateful.

Hon. Scott Brison: I'm going to ask Walt to reply on the first one in terms of procurement and ensuring we get best value, but at the same time local supply, because I agree with you. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive, in fact.

When we talk about centralizing, we're not talking about geographic centralization. What we're talking about is coordination. I think we probably ought to expunge the word “centralize” from our lexicon when we're talking about these things, because it really is more of a coordination approach as opposed to geographic centralization when we come to procurement.

Walt.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: Let me add to what the minister has said. In fact, by having a more government-wide approach, moving more and more items to standing offers, and having a continuous improvement program in place all the time, we will do that with suppliers right across the country. The good part about having things like that is that it gives opportunities for good delivery. Small companies that can make things happen can be more competitive on the standing offer. That's why it's important for us to move more items to standing offers and have companies right across the country that are able to compete.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: From the example I used, would that apply to just about everything, or are there things that can't be done?

Hon. Walt Lastewka: It actually would apply to all the standing offers. Those things that are big projects and those things that are one-off are different items, but for items we buy all the time, whether they're pencils, files, furniture, or those types of things, companies across the country can be looking at them and can be able to compete.

● (1210)

Hon. Scott Brison: If I can add to that, in a lot of cases a lot of small mom-and-pop businesses in small-town Canada are in fact already part of national buying groups, whether you're talking about Home Hardware, Canadian Tire, or other buying groups. So they do in fact have the capacity. We can negotiate with the national organization in terms of prices on standing offers, but the goods or services can be provided through a local supplier in small-town Canada. In fact, it need not be mutually exclusively.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: For the last four weeks, including this week, we've been meeting with industry associations and small-business associations across the country. We're very cognizant of their input and of making sure we can measure as we go forward. I think you were alluding to being able to measure how you are progressing in implementing on an ongoing basis. That's exactly what we will be doing and will be able to report back to the committee.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: We know how much the Conservatives cost themselves with the debt in Ontario with moving everything to downtown. Is your program nationally going to reduce that, eliminate it, or follow it?

Hon. Scott Brison: Again, we negotiate on behalf of departments in terms of their locations and where they want to be. We will negotiate the best possible arrangement for the space they require.

I can speak in terms of my personal belief. We can be doing more in smaller centres. That is something I personally believe. It's a bias I bring to the table when we're having those discussions. In fact, I think one of the new approaches may help to achieve a greater level

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We have two minutes left for Mr. Powers.

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Russ Powers (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, Lib.): Thank you.

First, in terms of what we could do in keeping with moving toward the Kyoto objective, we have the ability to move to 10%

ethanol in our fuel right now. There are suppliers in the Ottawa area, and we should lead by example where we have combustible vehicles. We should consider that move immediately.

As a second issue, I'm certainly very pleased that you're in the portfolio, Mr. Minister. I'm equally pleased Mr. Lastewka is providing that. He brings a wealth of expertise in a senior position, particularly as it relates to procurement.

Perhaps just to wrap up my time and add to a lot of the questions raised about procurement, I think that's where a lot of savings can be achieved through our procurement methods, yet at the same time providing that personal touch that's important to the communities within our ridings. Perhaps you would like to wrap up my time by commenting on the procurement component.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: We spent a lot of hours going through the discussion paper, which is on the web for Canadians to comment on. From our discussions with the associations, I can tell you it has been clear to me that the associations are looking at it as a win-win situation. If businesses can do things in a more supplier-management relationship with the government, it's a win for them and it's a win for the government. As we go forward, we need to be looking at that on an ongoing basis.

I mentioned to you the importance of having continuous improvement from year to year and not doing studies every eight, ten, or thirty years. With the computer systems we have in place in this day and age, procurement is a field in which we should be making continuous improvements on an ongoing basis. It's a savings for the supplier and a savings for the government. We need to make it in that win-win stage.

Mr. Russ Powers: Thank you.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: Thank you, Mr. Powers.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll begin five-minute rounds now, starting with Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think my questions will be very straightforward and very easy to answer, as most of them require only a yes or no response.

The previous Minister of National Defence stated repeatedly that he believed the Department of National Defence would be well suited to move to the JDS Uniphase building in South Nepean. I've communicated with your office on this a number of times, and the latest inquiry that I've sent your way has not been responded to. Does the government still agree with the position of its previous Minister of National Defence, and does the government plan to purchase the JDS Uniphase building in South Nepean?

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Chair, the honourable member has asked me to answer yes or no. Is that correct?

● (1215)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: If you can.

The Chair: Please give a very brief answer, Mr. Minister. It's certainly a very simple question.

Hon. Scott Brison: Yes. The answer would be no, we have not concluded a positive negotiation to purchase.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Have you ruled it out?

Hon. Scott Brison: Well, we don't purchase buildings for which there's not a tenant, and there's not a tenant, so we haven't purchased a building.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: In other words, the Department of National Defence has ruled out moving to the building?

A voice: We believe in negotiations.

Hon. Scott Brison: To not—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I'm not negotiating, I'm questioning.

Hon. Scott Brison: We do not purchase buildings for which there is not a tenant, and there is not a tenant confirmed within the Government of Canada.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Have you discussed the possibility of this move with the Minister of National Defence?

Hon. Scott Brison: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Has the public works department considered leasing the building, leasing the property, perhaps from the existing owner?

Hon. Scott Brison: I've had no discussions relative to that, no.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The first time you responded to my inquires, Mr. Minister, you indicated that you were very much considering the property for the public works real estate portfolio.

Hon. Scott Brison: As you know, at the time when you made your initial inquiry, the discussion was on whether or not we were interested in buying. In fact, at that time, there was a discussion. The discussion was not concluded with an acquisition because there was not a tenant within the Government of Canada to occupy it.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So what you're telling me is that you are certain there is not a tenant. In other words, there is no interest now on the part of National Defence in purchasing that building.

Hon. Scott Brison: I'm not commenting on a specific department at all, Mr. Poilievre. But what I will say is our department, as part of our real estate strategy on an ongoing basis, is always interested in and looking for opportunities to better house our public servants. We also juxtapose the general approach that has been the case with the consideration of new approaches on a go-forward basis that may not involve ownership. So there's a number of moving parts, frankly, in our real estate strategy right now.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Are you still actively considering this location?

Hon. Scott Brison: No, not that I am aware.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No.

Has there—

Hon. Scott Brison: Deputy, do you have anything to add?

Mr. David Marshall: It's certainly one of the large available office properties in the market. We're constantly looking at what's available and how it works in terms of our obligations to have

accommodation on the Quebec side, in Gatineau, and in Ottawa. A move of a department that is the size of Defence is very expensive, so there are all sorts of considerations on whether this a good thing or a bad thing. We are continuously assessing it. There are also other campuses in this area that we're looking at, as well.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Are you looking for a campus perhaps in the east end?

Mr. David Marshall: No, it's not a geographical area.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Finally, I want to know, was there ever a contract tentatively between the Government of Canada and JDS Uniphase, a contract to purchase?

Mr. David Marshall: I really think, Mr. Poilievre, this would be a commercial transaction type of thing, where it's not really appropriate to comment on publicly.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But you're saying there hasn't been a contract.

Mr. David Marshall: I think we wouldn't comment on it, unfortunately, because we have to do all sorts of transactions that would affect the market.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. During the lead-in to the last election, the Minister of National Defence, who happened to hold the riding in which the JDS Uniphase building was situated, indicated very strongly that this was a priority of the government of which he was a part, and that it was very much a good idea.

It has been discussed for many years. This is not new. Many experts in the field have said that the existing Department of National Defence building is not sufficient and that the JDS Uniphase building would do well to consolidate DND employees and to further secure the location.

The Chair: Your time is up. I'll have to ask you to cut the question off.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Why have you changed your position?

Hon. Scott Brison: I'm not aware we have changed our position, Mr. Poilievre.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Sauvageau, five minutes.

• (1220)

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau (Repentigny, BQ): With your permission, let us forget about real estate matters for now. I would like to ask you some questions about the 2004-2005 main estimates. Previously, I would have a favour to ask of you, Minister. I also want to welcome your associates.

My colleague, Ms. Thibault, asked you twice about the famous BIC logo which disappeared. I believe you have documentation in your possession about that logo. We would appreciate your providing it to the committee.

I would also like you to give us some comparable documents. For instance, EDC has a logo and the Canada Development Bank has a logo. Logos exist, we see them, and it is nice that the government has paid for all of them. Moreover, they obtained a logo, which is quite interesting. I would like you to tell us about the process and the costs associated with existing logos. A lot of people would be surprised to learn that in general a logo costs between \$50,000 and \$100,000, but that those one loses cost \$600,000, aside from the fact of losing them.

It would be good for the committee to hear from Public Works Canada about the normal process that is followed to obtain those logos, especially those that have the good fortune of still being there. I am sure you will be able to provide us with all that.

On expenditures, budgets and so on, we were told that a sum of \$5.2 million had been earmarked in 2003-2004 for common telecommunication and computer services. There has been a mistake, which is not all that bad; you spent \$168 million rather than \$5 million. You explained that. You said that \$28 million had been allocated in the 2004-2005 main estimates, while another forecast had set the figure at \$88 million, which represents a disparity of \$60 million. Last year there was a \$163 million mistake, and this year there will be a \$60 million error, or at least a disparity is expected. Can you explain the reasons for that situation?

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you very much. I appreciate your question very much. Firstly, it is difficult to answer the question about the logo because the agency concerned no longer exists. It was a Heritage Canada agency, and did not fall under our department.

[English]

We negotiate on behalf of agencies that have needs, whether those are advertising or marketing needs.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: May I interrupt you? This brings us back to Ms. Thibault's first question. Who is accountable? This is a good example. You are not responsible, but rather Heritage Canada. That is precisely where the problem lies. I think that it is in fact at the root of the sponsorship scandal. You didn't answer Ms. Thibault's question, nor will you answer mine. We want to know who is accountable. When money is spent on a logo that doesn't exist, you say that it is not your responsibility since Heritage Canada ordered it. Are we to look to the person who ordered it, the person who authorized it, the one who does not have it or the one who pays under the table? Who is responsible? That is what we want to know.

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison: We are responsible for negotiating the contracts. Some of these issues are what Justice Gomery is working with now.

I can tell you that we have fundamentally changed and overhauled our contracting policy: posting all contracts over \$10,000; having an open, fair, and transparent process, a competitive process, for advertising, information polling—all this.

We have made those changes on a go-forward basis to ensure we are achieving and attaining the best services for the best value for taxpayers. In fact, I think that's one of the things we should talk about here. I can come back and do a session on that. We will

provide the more granular information in terms of the process that leads to a natural logo being selected.

In terms of the budget question, I'll defer to David or Lysanne.

Thank you very much.

• (1225)

Mr. David Marshall: Mr. Sauvageau and Madame Thibault, I want to emphasize what my minister has just said.

In the government structure, it's the one who has the budget who has to be accountable for receiving the goods and for where it was spent. Unfortunately, in this particular case of the logo, the matter was very poorly handled. I think we're going to hear a lot more about it as the inquiry progresses, what happened and why so much was paid, and so forth. We'll get a lot more detail. But essentially, the people who have the budget receive the goods; they sign that they got them. They're responsible. We're their agent.

I hope that helps clarify it a little bit.

In terms of your question on the telecommunications informatics budget, you thought of it as potentially a mistake, that there was a certain amount in the budget and then more money was spent. This is caused by the expenditure on Government On-Line and the secure-channel expenditure. We're experiencing, as well, the fact that it has been going through a developmental stage in which it is not part of a normal budget, an annual budget, in our department. It came over from the Treasury Board. The reason the Treasury Board wanted to handle it that way, in supplementary estimates, was that they wanted, every time an expense was made, a special examination and challenge, and then a submission under supplementary estimates for your approval.

We are negotiating with the Treasury Board and hoping that from next year forward, now that the main development has occurred and we are now into a more regular operation, it will be reflected in normal estimates and you'll be able to see the up or down of it in a normal way.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marshall.

Merci, Mr. Sauvageau.

Next is Mr. Szabo, for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Minister, earlier there was some discussion about the Bank Street Building. There is some \$8 million in the current estimates under capital expenditures. There may have been a little confusion. I think you responded that the project had been frozen, and I'm not sure what the rest of the answer was—I don't recall. But the \$8 million in these estimates, correct me if I'm wrong, is not available for spending for any other purpose.

Hon. Scott Brison: That's correct.

Mr. Paul Szabo: If the estimates are achieved exactly as proposed and nothing is done on the Bank Street project, there will be a favourable variance for the year of some \$8 million.

Hon. Scott Brison: That's correct.

Mr. Paul Szabo: It can't be used for other purposes.

Hon. Scott Brison: Correct.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Does it make any sense to cut \$8 million out of your estimates today because that is frozen?

Hon. Scott Brison: That would be based on the assumption that the Bank Street Building project would not be taken from the portfolio that is considered under the capital freeze. I think that would be a premature judgment.

Mr. Szabo, I think all of us recognize—and it's part of the discussion we're having with the Board of Internal Economy—there is an acute need for new space in the parliamentary precinct. That's part of the discussion, and I don't want to—

Mr. Paul Szabo: I understand.

Hon. Scott Brison: It would be a mistake to take that out.

Mr. Paul Szabo: I have about three other questions that I want to get in.

In this case, though, the freeze may be lifted; there may be some spending here.

With regard to the questions about Health Canada, your budget has gone up because Health Canada needs additional space. I think you described that you have no discretion over that; they basically requisition the procurement of space for their needs.

Hon. Scott Brison: We are working with Treasury Board now, and with colleagues' departments as they need space, to enforce a better standard.

Mr. Paul Szabo: You have to get the space?

Hon. Scott Brison: That's correct.

Mr. Paul Szabo: You don't have any discretion.

Hon. Scott Brison: No, that's correct.

Mr. Paul Szabo: If we went line by line for everything that Public Works and Government Services does, what percent of the overall budget is in fact decision-making made by other departments for which you provide services?

Hon. Scott Brison: It's an excellent question, and I'm going to defer it. But I think you strike at the exact point, Mr. Szabo. We help other departments achieve savings for their budgets, in a sense, when we do our jobs properly, and that reflects value and economic benefit in other departments.

• (1230)

Mr. David Marshall: Mr. Szabo, we are a service department, as the minister has said. In addition to just responding to real estate needs, we buy things for the other departments. We also have a very large pay and compensation... we're the central pay department for the government—and pensions. We are also the Receiver General for Canada. We manage all the bank accounts for the government. So we are really responding, where we have an opportunity, to do it as efficiently as we can.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Earlier you gave the number of \$600 million, or something, that was discretionary.

Mr. David Marshall: Yes. Discretionary means it isn't tied up in long-term contracts. It doesn't mean we could cut off the service—

Mr. Paul Szabo: Okay, but that's not your directive.

How much do you really have control over—where it's your decision, your control? Do we know?

Mr. David Marshall: Yes, we do. I'm trying to make sure I answer your question properly.

It is under our control, for example, whether we execute it in a certain way or not. So in other words, to become efficient is important.

Mr. Paul Szabo: What is it you're responsible for—

Mr. David Marshall: Do you mean for our own department?

Mr. Paul Szabo: — where you can say, "I'm going to cut it"? I can't be clearer than that.

Mr. David Marshall: It's well less than 10% of our budget.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Okay, so to suggest somehow an across-the-board 5% cut of your gross budget, which covers all these other departments, is actually impractical.

Mr. David Marshall: It would devastate us.

Mr. Paul Szabo: You stop working at that point.

Mr. David Marshall: Right.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Is that what ultimately happens?

Hon. Scott Brison: As the deputy said, our discretionary spending represents less than 10%, so 5% would mean that we were basically not around, because a lot of the costs we incur are for other departments.

Mr. Paul Szabo: I have one more question, please, Minister.

You referred to a \$1-billion deferred maintenance program. This is very important. It may represent short-term gain, long-term pain. It may in fact be reflected in the above-average cost of our properties compared to other commercial alternatives.

Who decided we were not going to follow prescribed maintenance? In fact, wouldn't it be more responsible for you to incorporate or start some catch-up on the deferred maintenance before we're in a position where it's no longer maintenance but capital replacement?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Szabo. Your time is up.

Could you give a short answer please, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Scott Brison: I want to come back, as part of the real properties strategy, and give more time. We have an acute need for a number of our properties—and it has resulted over a period of years, if not decades—in terms of deferred maintenance. That's the real answer. What we have to invest and who best can make that kind of investment efficiently to address the shortfall in maintenance, and at the same time achieve better value for the real estate footprint of what is there... It may be achieved in a more efficient and effective way through some level of partnership with the private sector entities.

The Chair: Next, for five minutes, are Mr. Preston and Mr. Poilievre, if there's time.

Mr. Pat Martin: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I've been waiting patiently for you to go back and forth here to arrive at poor old NDP.

The Chair: You are on the list, Mr. Martin, for a little later. We have a couple of more people here.

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Chairman, just so I understand, the first round goes in the order we all agreed upon, and it unfolded as it should. Then in the second round it goes back and forth across the table—opposition to government for the Conservatives; opposition to government for the Bloc; and opposition to government for the NDP.

I sit here waiting patiently at the end of the table, and it looks to me like you've bypassed my opportunity.

The Chair: No. In fact, we're following the agreed-to questioning order as we have in the past. We haven't changed anything. I can assure you that you will get another opportunity.

Mr. Preston, go ahead.

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Minister, on a question by Mr. Szabo, you just stated that you have a very reduced level of responsibility within your department for spending, and if you attempted to reach the Treasury Board's expenditure review guidelines of a 5% cut, it would be beyond your means. Did you share that information with the Treasury Board when it set these expenditure review guidelines?

• (1235)

Hon. Scott Brison: In fact, I think Minister McCallum would probably be very pleased with our participation, because we are in a unique position as a service department in that when we do our job well and we make changes to processes and approaches that improve the way we function and the efficiencies we gain, we actually help save money across government; and what you and Mr. Moore also referred to correctly is that there is only one taxpayer. So when we do our job really well, we save money in other people's departments—more so than our own in some cases. And there are areas where in the long term we can achieve, and are achieving, savings in our own department. But for instance, as in those procurement examples we talked about earlier in terms of negotiating on behalf of the government as a whole and in terms of negotiating on behalf of other departments, when we can save in some cases 70% on some of our contracting for, in that case, IT, that is a huge benefit.

So the Minister of Revenue, Mr. McCallum, is aware of the uniqueness of our situation and the power we have to actually help. We're talking about 5% for the government as a whole, that's what we're talking about here—

Mr. Joe Preston: I do recognize that, I'm just wondering whether you've shared the fact that you didn't think you'd be able to meet that goal within your own spending?

Hon. Scott Brison: As a member of that committee, absolutely. In fact, we're working to help other departments. The goal, Mr. Preston—

Mr. Joe Preston: I'm certain there are other ministers who are very happy with the spending cuts you've found them.

Hon. Scott Brison: In fact, I believe they are, because the goal, Mr. Preston, one I think you'd share, is the best possible value for taxpayers and the best possible services for citizens. We can help colleague departments achieve both.

Mr. Joe Preston: My next question—and it's the percentage I'm looking for—is this. If you take out the new spending that you say inflated your budget for this year, what percentage increase in spending is your department actually going to incur?

Hon. Scott Brison: The figure net of the real estate and net of the Government On-Line and shared travel—it's flat.

Mr. Joe Preston: You're not showing an increase?

Hon. Scott Brison: I'll defer to Lysanne for that.

Ms. Lysanne Gauvin (Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Finance, Accounting, Banking and Compensation Branch, Department of Public Works and Government Services): The only areas where we're showing an increase in our own budget outside of the items that were transferred over to the department is that we're getting some extra money for federal accommodations, which the deputy and the minister spoke about previously. The only other significant sum of money that would contribute to any increase is that we do get some salary contracting dollars from the Treasury Board as a result of contract settlements with various unions and that comes to the department, but fundamentally, that's it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Minister, you've discussed how we might use economies of scale by centralizing government procurement, and I'm interested in this idea. I want to examine, however, some of the pitfalls that are often associated with that practice. One is that large contracts, as you know, tend to be dramatically more complex and can result in the kinds of expensive legal actions, on the part of losing bidders and others, that can end up costing taxpayers more in the long run. Finally, in my constituency, for example, a lot of smaller contractors, small businesses who do very good work at a very high price, are excluded by definition from the contracts that you're discussing when you consolidate them in the hands of the much larger contractors, who may have powerful lobby firms to help win their bid.

I'd like you to give your general comments on that.

Hon. Scott Brison: First, on the point of larger contracts being more complex, I think that's a good point, but in terms of the cost savings, as we negotiate those we can achieve very good value if we do it properly, and I have great confidence in our people in terms of the work they're doing. I mentioned three specific cases earlier where in fact that is occurring.

In terms of small business and small and medium enterprises, you mentioned constituent businesses that provide really good services, but maybe at a higher cost. You said at a higher cost—

• (1240)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry, if I misspoke; I meant to say at an equally beneficial cost basis. I must have misspoken; my apologies.

Hon. Scott Brison: All right, because it's a greater challenge if it's at a higher cost, but there is a difference between best price and best value, and we consider both on an ongoing basis.

One of the considerations as well that we work with, and we want to work on increasingly with the Department of Industry, is to consider benefits around small and medium enterprises and regions as part of the best-value proposition and industrial benefit proposition, so I think those are valid concerns. It can be achieved. There is no reason why small businesses in your riding, or in my riding, or in Walt's riding cannot compete if the playing field is level, and part of it is through regional standing offers and also in terms of subcontracting policy.

If we negotiate a large contract, for example, on a national basis, we can ensure—

The Chair: I'll have to ask you to end your comments.

Hon. Scott Brison: — through subcontracting policy that they work with smaller contractors in the delivery of that. That's something I'm committed to.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: I'll make one quick comment. We are working very closely with CFIB and the CABiNET Group association concerning small business.

The Chair: Thank you.

For five minutes, to Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I apologize, I had to leave the meeting for a few minutes to speak in the House and I hope my questions and comments won't be repetitive.

I have just a few questions and comments, Mr. Minister. I know that as a fiscal conservative you realize a lot of good can be done through efficiencies and cost savings in your department and across government. Indeed, I think there has been a paradigm shift in the last 10 years or so toward fiscal conservatism in general, but let's not forget the great benefit that can derive from the purchasing power of a department as large as yours.

I'm wondering, in terms of our environmental objectives as a government and a society, does your department take a strategic approach to purchasing environmentally friendly products and services? In other words, do officials at the department have a strategy or an approach in mind where they say they think they could encourage this particular industrial sector—for example, the producers of ethanol—to grow and eventually to become international competitors if they shift their spending priorities in a certain manner?

For example, it's the same with industries such as the solar energy industry, which ties into a comment I'd like to make regarding the announcement of your review of the management of our government real estate holdings. I think the media was a bit unfair out of the starting gate, implying you had the intention of selling off the Centre Block and the Lester B. Pearson Building when in fact you had made no commitments and you'd mentioned simply that you wanted to review the matter.

But one comment I'd like to make, Minister, is that there is an opportunity here, I think. I think if we manage our own buildings—maybe not in the day-to-day way—but if we own our own buildings,

why can't we give a boost to the solar energy industry by converting those buildings to solar energy?

On the second comment I have I don't necessarily expect an answer, because it involves the social economy, which is a very vague concept. As a matter of fact, people are still trying to define what it is.

My understanding is that the social economy is not the volunteer sector; it's made up of non-profit organizations that offer products and services created by individuals who the government, or that we as a society, are trying to transition to productive work. It could be people who are experiencing chronic unemployment, it could be the handicapped, and so on. I would just urge you to consider giving a priority to social economy businesses in terms of purchasing.

My third question or comment is in regard to the Government On-Line initiative. As I see the Government On-Line initiative from the outside, as a user of this resource, it seems to be progressing in stages. In the first stage it was getting all this government information accessible through the Internet, and other than helping researchers and citizens better understand government, I can't see it necessarily resulting in economies.

The second phase I see resulting in economies, which is where, for example, you can obtain income tax forms online, which means we don't have to have people at Revenue Canada answering phones and putting forms in envelopes and sending them to taxpayers. Are we moving into a third stage, where we really start to go full steam in terms of the savings that can be realized through Government On-Line?

• (1245)

The Chair: Mr. Minister, you have one minute and ten seconds to answer those questions.

Hon. Scott Brison: Very quickly, environment and sound procurement and building designs are priority for the department. We're the largest operator, for instance, of a hybrid vehicle fleet in Canada. We have reduced our greenhouse gas emissions within our department by 24%, a 33% improvement in energy efficiency, and at the same time saving \$16 million per year in operating expenditures. This is just the tip of the iceberg. We have, starting in 2005, a whole government green policy that will de-siloize—and I think this is what you're getting at—economic policy from environmental policy. We shouldn't separate them, because they both deal with the management of scarce resources, so whether we're procuring or we're designing buildings...

In terms of the question of own versus lease, we don't have to own a building to have it designed to be environmentally friendly. We don't have to own a building to have covenants in the space where we put public servants that will ensure that they are environmentally oriented. In fact, some would argue that the private sector has done a great deal in terms of building design, so we can achieve that and want to.

When I come back, Mr. Chair, one area I would like to talk about is the leadership role that Public Works is playing in terms of remediation of contaminated sites across Canada. That is something I'm very proud of. I think we have the capacity to work with DFAIT and CIDA to export that efficacy around the world as part of our general toolbox of institution building in the developing world, where remediation of toxic sites is such a massive challenge for them. I think it's one of the things we can do, not only to build a better Canada but to build a better world. I want to see our department play that role.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I have to cut you off there. We've gone over time.

We have Monsieur Sauvageau, followed by Mr. Martin.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: My question is very simple and concerns accountability. One of your predecessors, Mr. Gagliano, said that the minister responsible for Public Works and Government Services was not responsible for that department. Should there be other problems, would you be responsible for your department?

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Are you responsible for your department?

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison: I believe in ministerial accountability, recognizing that in terms of day-to-day activity as a minister, I depend very much on the skills, wisdom, and ethics of my very effective deputy minister. But I believe in ministerial accountability, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Since you have a rather special relationship with all of the departments, and since many contracts are concluded through your department, do you believe that the other ministers are responsible or should be responsible for their departments?

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison: If you're asking me whether I believe in ministerial accountability, yes I do. I believe you'll find that comes with an understanding of the role between senior public servants, particularly the deputy who works with the minister. There is a responsibility on a day-to-day basis. In terms of the operation of the department and in terms of strategic direction, there's a cooperation and a responsibility working with the deputy.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: I thought my question was clear. Apparently, however, it seems that it was not.

Is a minister such as yourself also responsible for his department's budget or only for its political direction?

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison: Both, in fact. Whether it's a department or a business, one works with the senior members of his or her executive

team, in fact with the whole team. We have 14,000 people in our department, so we actually work with those individuals to implement long-term plans and, in the short term and on a day-to-day basis, ensure accountability and transparency.

• (1250)

The Chair: Are you finished?

Five minutes, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, my question is going to be about access to information. You're the point man and, some would even say, the fall guy on the most controversial file this government has ever faced. Much of the controversy stems from what's seen as a complete absence—or at least a paucity—of ethics in Public Works. I'm talking specifically about the sponsorship scandal. Now, what I'm getting at is that ethics can't be mandated, ethics can't be legislated, but the conduct can be observed and scrutinized in such a way that ethics are encouraged and fostered.

The reason I raise this is that Public Works has the worst record—it's my information—of access to information complaints made to the Information Commissioner, Mr. Reid, in terms of failing to comply on time, or at least not failing to comply so much as taking an unreasonable time to share information. If we all agree that freedom of information is critical to ethical conduct, how do you justify that?

Would you support an expanded access to information regime that not only put more of government's activities under access to information but had guidelines that would speed up the process so that withholding information for undue periods of time would be considered a violation of the act as well?

Hon. Scott Brison: I agree with you that withholding information would be, but I assure you that our department has cooperated fully, through the ATIP process and also with both the public accounts committee and with the Gomery inquiry, in a manner commensurate with each body's authority and consistent with the laws of the land, and we have done so expeditiously.

Keep in mind the volume, Mr. Martin—and this is part of the issue. For whatever circumstances, the volume of requests our department was subject to over a fairly short period of time did create, not through delay but simply because of an exorbitant workload, time issues.

Mr. Pat Martin: You know how critical it is to have good access to information, not only for a critical press but for a critical public.

Hon. Scott Brison: Absolutely. I believe in it and I agree it's a priority. I'm sure you would agree that it's reasonable to assume that during periods of extraordinary volume of requests there can exist sometimes what seems to be a delay. It's not a delay and it's not a tactic; it's a reality.

But I agree with you in terms of the priority.

Mr. Pat Martin: What about broadening the Access to Information Act so more activities of government will fall under it?

Hon. Scott Brison: I would have to study that as an area of public policy and consider that. I can tell you that the Information Commissioner has recognized and in fact lauded our government for openness, transparency, and significant improvements in terms of our cooperation in the providing of information. Mr. Martin, our department is absolutely committed to that and to participating in that.

I can also add this. You spoke of reputation issues in our department, and I'm aware of them. Everyone here is aware of them; my officials are aware of them. But I want you to know how proud I am of our department and the tremendous progress our department has made and how much confidence I have in both the ability and the ethics and integrity of our team. I think sometimes when you do something well in government it doesn't get recognized, but if there's a screw-up it gets amplified.

I'm not making any apologies for things we may be accused of having done in the past in terms of our people, but I can tell you, I've been very impressed with the people I've worked with in our department. I think they're a first-class team, and our ten-point ethics and integrity package has been recognized by an external body, the Conference Board of Canada, as a best-practice model for both the private and public sectors.

If you look at what we've done with our advertising processes, you'll see that what we've done in terms of transparency and openness in procurement is considerable. This is a department I know you'll be proud of as part of an efficient and ethical—

• (1255)

Mr. Pat Martin: I'm proud already, Minister.

Hon. Scott Brison: He's already proud of this.

Mr. Pat Martin: It's welling up inside of me.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

We'll go to Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Thank you.

I'll ask the question and I'll share my time with you.

You talked about the green part of the green program and the diminishing of vehicles in terms of the fleet. Is it in the purview of the Department of Public Works to ensure that the practices you employ, say using smaller vehicles or trying to lessen the number of vehicles, apply across every department and crown corporation? Does it also apply in terms of rental vehicles and those types of things? Further, in terms of the encouragement of...we see the Minister of the Environment driving around in this little car, and there's also the use of bio-diesel and ethanol. Essentially, the role of the government is to set the example, but the vehicles we own may not do the same thing as what we lease or what we rent or what people drive on a daily basis.

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Boshcoff, that's an excellent point.

I know that in terms of our own private fleet, what we manage as a department, we do have a focus on it. In fact, it's the largest hybrid vehicle fleet.

In terms of the leasing, I don't know whether that is so, but there's no reason.... Of course, the success of that depends on rental car

industry people providing vehicles consistent with that goal, but I believe that would in fact be the case, and maybe it ought to be.

I personally think it's a very interesting idea, one we ought to consider when we rent cars on behalf of government. The deputy has reminded me of the success of the Vancouver rental fleet, where we effectively outsource the entire leasing arrangement to...which vendor?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Madam Marleau.

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Chair, may I very briefly...

The Chair: Very briefly.

Hon. Scott Brison: I apologize.

I want to respond to Mr. Martin's important point for a moment. In the latest Information Commissioner's report, from 2003-04, he says our department has made considerable improvements in a number of areas and that, "All of these...have led to a substantial turnaround in the... situation over the past year resulting in borderline compliance with the time requirements..." He recognized that we have made significant progress, and part of the issue was one—

Mr. Pat Martin: There's a long way to go, Minister, is all I am saying.

Hon. Scott Brison: You know what? It's a long way to go, and we're going to get there.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Minister.

Now we'll go to Madam Marleau. You have about two and a half minutes.

Hon. Diane Marleau: I want to go back to your national suppliers and the contracting that goes on. While you say some of the regional businesses do belong to national groups, many do not. I have seen many people severely affected by national contracting policies. I know that on paper it certainly appears that you get much better prices, except that the devil is in the amendments. Who controls the amendments to these particular contracts? Is it the departments you serve or is it you? Do you actually see a real saving? Is it just a saving, yes, if you abide exactly by this contract, or does the department then go out and amend the contract you have to have extras, which is where the real costs are? I've seen that very much across contracting.

Hon. Scott Brison: Thank you, Madam Marleau.

I am going to ask Walt Lastewka, who is on the procurement side, to respond to that.

•(1300)

Hon. Walt Lastewka: That's an excellent question, and that's why the measurement system of our system going forward is very much key. That's what we're going to be putting in place so we can measure on an ongoing basis exactly what is happening in our total procurement. This is a little bit absent now because we operate under 98 separate departments. We need to put all that under one roof and understand, as we have standing orders.... We do things in procurement on which we could easily gather the data back. We don't have that now; that's what we have to do in the future. In fact, my study, which started last December, uses 2002 data because we don't have our arms around the complete data in order to make the study more current.

It's an absolutely excellent question. We have to be able to measure that on an ongoing basis.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lastewka.

Mr. Moore, a short question.

Mr. James Moore: On behalf of the committee, I thank the minister again for coming here today, and Mr. Lastewka as well, the parliamentary secretary. Very good.

I did want to just take the opportunity to make it clear to the committee that the Conservative Party will never support publicly owned buildings turned into solar-powered marijuana grow-ops.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Paul Szabo: Never is a long time.

Mr. James Moore: Never is a very long time, but I'm prepared to commit.

An hon. member: Thanks for clarifying that.

Mr. James Moore: My question to the minister is, just out of curiosity, because he'd mentioned the alterations of the government's fleet of cars and the government's commitment to be environmentally responsible, what kind of car do you drive as a minister?

Hon. Scott Brison: It's a good point. I currently have a Chrysler that is coming up for renewal, at which point I will be getting a hybrid.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Scott Brison: I look forward to taking long drives.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I appreciate very much both your and the officials' appearing today.

There are two pieces of information we'll be looking for from you. The first is an outline of the process used for contracting for a logo, and the second is an accounting of cases where you've said your budget has increased due to an increased mandate and there's been corresponding decreased spending in other areas, and we'd like the dollar figures attached.

Thank you very much.

Yes, Mr. Minister, briefly.

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Chair, I just want to thank the committee. I've enjoyed this very much and I do want to come back to talk about the strategic direction, to get feedback and input. And, on an ongoing basis, I would like to work closely with this committee as we move forward.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister. Thank you all.

The meeting is adjourned.

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