



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Board of Internal Economy

TRANSCRIPT

NUMBER 030

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Thursday, May 23, 2024



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• (1105)

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Speaker of the House of Commons): Welcome to meeting number 30 of the Board of Internal Economy.

Let us run through the matters that are before us.

The first thing on the agenda is minutes from a previous meeting. All members have had an opportunity to take a look at the minutes.

[*Translation*]

Would you like to make any changes to the minutes from the previous meeting?

[*English*]

Is there any dissent to adopting the minutes as written?

(Motion agreed to)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: We'll now move on to the second item on the agenda, which is business arising from previous meetings.

[*English*]

Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Deputy House Leader of the Government): Thank you you, Mr. Speaker.

There's the one issue that I had sent to you via letter regarding expenses. I'm hoping that we can give some direction to the staff here to go back and perhaps make some recommendations on how we can tighten up the loopholes that exist regarding caucus meetings coinciding with the time of conventions.

I don't know if we need further discussion or if direction needs to be given, but I'm hoping that the board can ask staff to go back and prepare some options for us on how we can proceed on that.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (House Leader of the Official Opposition): I'm happy to have the administration consider that. I just wanted to point out a couple of things.

I know Mr. Gerretsen has referred to this as a loophole. I should just point out that the rules around travel for caucus meetings that occur during political conventions were agreed upon by all parties back in, I think, about 2011 or 2012—in that era.

He's characterizing this as a loophole, but it's quite the opposite. It wasn't a loophole. It was a conscious decision that the board

made to put some rules around caucus meetings and travel. Again, all parties agreed to them. The Liberal Party fully supported the implementation of these rules with the specific intention of putting rules and clarifications around how MPs could travel for the purpose of attending a meeting that happened to be held in conjunction with a convention.

If we're talking about travel outside of Ottawa for caucus meetings, we could talk about the September 22 Liberal caucus retreat in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, which cost the taxpayer \$354,692, with \$43,000 on top of that billed for spouses and dependants. There was \$73,566 in additional amounts billed to various government departments. The total billed to taxpayers was \$428,000 for that one retreat. That's a significant expenditure for caucus meetings outside of Ottawa.

In September 2023, the Liberal caucus retreat in London, Ontario, cost the taxpayer \$231,636. I believe 26 Liberal MPs have yet to declare their expenses for that retreat, so that amount could obviously be higher. There was \$16,576 billed for spouses and dependants to attend, and \$82,915 was an additional amount billed to various government departments. That one, with the caveat that there could be more expenses to come when Liberal MPs finalize their expenses, cost \$314,552. That's just on Liberal summer caucus retreats.

Just to put that in context, there are regularly caucus meetings for national caucuses outside of Ottawa in the form of retreats. If the Liberals are going to characterize this as a loophole, then clearly those are also loopholes and the administration should consider them and come back with options for changing the rules there as well. We would hope that the House administration does that when they do their evaluation of this.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Scheer.

Ms. Findlay is next, and for the record, she'll be followed by Mr. Julian, Mr. Gerretsen and then Mr. MacKinnon.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (Chief Opposition Whip): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have the same point that characterizing this as a loophole is a mischaracterization. It was agreed to by all parties some years ago. I also have no problem with admin looking at it, but I think we need to know what we're looking at and be fair about its characterization.

I note that the Liberal cabinet expended over \$1.3 million on just three so-called affordability retreats, which resulted in life becoming less affordable for Canadians, in my view. The August 2023 retreat to Charlottetown cost over \$485,000 to the taxpayers. The January 2023 retreat in Hamilton cost over \$290,000. The September 2022 retreat to Vancouver cost over \$471,000. Also, the New Democratic Party held a caucus meeting before their 2023 national party convention, which cost \$88,699, billed by the smallest recognized party in the House of Commons, and it included expenses of \$23,259 for 14 staff members to attend.

I think this touches all parties, and we are happy to take a look at it, but I'm not sure that the House leader for the Liberals, who speaks for them here at this board, is necessarily going to commit that cabinet retreats only happen in Ottawa and that all parties have been fashioning their meetings in this way. However, we're happy to continue the discussion.

Thank you.

• (1110)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Ms. Findlay.

[Translation]

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Julian.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, disagree with the characterization of this being a loophole. This is something that all parties agreed upon for what I think is a very legitimate reason. When you have caucus meetings at a convention, there is more often than not a direct tie with the discussions that take place in the House of Commons.

I will give you the notable example of pharmacare. There were pharmacare discussions in caucus at the NDP convention, with the caucus meeting providing a link between the work that was done at convention and, of course, the fact that we now have a pharmacare bill before the House of Commons that is going to make a big difference in the lives of people.

I never object to the administration looking into better ways of doing things, but my concern is the reality that at the last Liberal convention, all members of caucus used the MOB to come to Ottawa. We were all sitting that week so it's true that part of the MOB was used for parliamentary work, but they were also here in the national capital region and able to attend the convention. I think it is a bit disingenuous to say this is different because the MOB was used first to come to Ottawa for parliamentary work and then, following that, for a convention. What Mr. Gerretsen suggests in his letter is that when a party convention is scheduled outside of the national capital region, that should be looked at and should perhaps not longer apply.

I have the furthest commute, along with Ms. Findlay. I think we're probably at exactly the same number of kilometres. It's a 5,000-kilometre commute to come here, and I often feel that there is a vast difference between what happens in Ottawa and what happens in my riding of New Westminster—Burnaby. To suggest that we encourage party conventions and caucus meetings to only be

held in the national capital region does a disservice to the vastness of this land. We are the world's largest democracy. We are an extraordinarily diverse country, and to say party conventions, if there are caucus meetings attached to them, should only be held in the national capital region and essentially that the MOB should only apply when those conventions are held the same week as a parliamentary session does a disservice to democracy and the immenseness of our land.

That would be my concern. I never have objections to the administration looking at better ways of doing things, but if the result is a recommendation suggesting that the MOB can be used for party conventions held in the national capital region when caucus meetings are held at that same time, it would do a disservice to our democracy, the immenseness of our country and the diversity we have.

[Translation]

For all those reasons, I didn't really like the way the letter was written. We're talking about a loophole when all the parties have agreed on this issue. We're opening the door to the possibility of creating a policy according to which party conventions should take place in the national capital region, where caucus meetings are also held. This isn't to our advantage, given that our country is huge and that we are the largest democracy on the planet.

I will listen to my colleagues' comments. I have no objection to the administration looking into this, but I would say at the outset that if this practice prevents caucus meetings outside the national capital region from taking place at the same time as conventions, I will oppose it. I think that would be a disadvantage for our democracy and our country.

• (1115)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

[English]

Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For starters, I want to apologize if it appears as though my intent for this comes from a political angle. It genuinely does not.

Mr. Scheer can laugh about it, but I'm being completely honest. I read the same story that others read, and it created an opportunity to reflect. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation is also calling it a loophole and for this loophole be closed. There are lots of people out there who are doing that.

When a story like this comes out, we have an obligation to see if there are ways to do things better. I completely agree with Mr. Julian that it is acceptable and should be encouraged that we have caucus meetings and cabinet meetings, regardless of who the government is, in different parts of the country. We should not expect Canadians to have to come to Ottawa to communicate with caucus and cabinet. When cabinet has the opportunity to go somewhere, they spend a lot of time talking to people there, to Mr. Julian's point, with which I completely agree.

All of the examples that my Conservative colleagues gave specifically were about caucus and cabinet. The issue that I'm trying to raise, which was identified in the story and which now other organizations, like the Canadian Taxpayer Federation, are calling on us to address, is that these caucus meetings, coincidentally, are coinciding with conventions. It's the convention that's going on that creates the concern.

I apologize if I offended anybody with my term "loophole". I wasn't here in 2011, and I certainly wasn't part of an agreement. I understand that at the time, the BOIE met in camera all the time and every issue was dealt with in camera, so there would be no public record of that. If there was an agreement on something that came to light, maybe Mr. Scheer, who would have been the chair at the time, has records of that meeting that could show us they came to an agreement at the time. That still doesn't mean we shouldn't have cause for reflection on it, and that's what this is really about.

I'm not saying that it has to be done this way or that way. I'm suggesting that we have a discussion about it. We do things through consensus. If the board, collectively, determines, no, the way we currently have it is good, and if we're content with keeping it that way because it's fine, then at least we've done the due diligence of having a conversation about a very important issue that has been brought to the attention of the Canadian people. They should have an opportunity to see how we come to resolve it.

I'll leave it at that. I intended and hoped, in writing the letter, that this would take no more than two or three minutes, and that our House administration could look into it if the board felt they wanted to do that. If not, I won't bring it up again, I promise, and I'll leave it right there.

I'm not looking to make a big issue out of this, other than to present it. If the board determines that they don't want staff to look at it, I'm just as happy to never talk about the issue again.

Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. MacKinnon.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I won't add much to what my colleague just said. I would just like to point out to everyone that no one is suggesting that caucus meetings or cabinet meetings shouldn't be able to take place across Canada. It's part of our job to listen to Canadians, and it's entirely legitimate for parliamentarians from all parties to do that. We didn't allege any misconduct in this matter either. The rules allow for that.

What we're wondering is whether it's reasonable to combine an activity as partisan as the national convention of a political party with a caucus meeting simply to facilitate arrangements for members, their spouses and staff to participate in this partisan activity. We were wondering about that.

I note that the Liberal Party of Canada voluntarily abandoned this practice in 2014 when it was the official opposition, and we stand by that decision, with respect to partisan activities outside the national capital.

So we're asking the administration to look into this practice and to suggest ways to resolve this issue. I did want to point out, though, that no one is suggesting that there was any misconduct in this matter. There was no misconduct. No one is questioning the travel of parliamentarians across the country either, with members of their caucus or individually. That goes without saying. That said, I invite my colleagues to consider the voluntary practice of our party, and the administration could do the same. That's what we want to suggest today.

● (1120)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I now give the floor to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think that Board of Internal Economy members have always been open to the idea of asking the House administration to modernize regulations. This is done in a certain order, in a way that we are used to. When a problem is reported to the administration, it analyzes all aspects, consults with all parties and proposes solutions. I am not opposed to our looking at this, but I do not like the way the problem is being presented to us today.

In listening to my colleague Mr. MacKinnon, I understand that he is trying to bring back into line certain colleagues who used words that might suggest that some parties were using a standing order in an unreasonable way. I'm thinking in particular of the word "loophole". In my opinion, when you want to get out of something, it's because you're not following a rule. That's what he implied not only here, but outside as well, in the media. The subject did get some media coverage. I don't know if that's the right word, but I would have expected Mr. Gerretsen to show a little more class in the way he presented this problem.

I think this issue is being used for partisan purposes. As a member of the Board of Internal Economy, I don't like the way the problem has been presented to us at all. Mr. Gerretsen has apologized. I think he understood that he may have misused certain words, but I'm far from convinced that he used them innocently and without premeditation.

That said, the Bloc Québécois travels all over Quebec. I imagine that the teams conducting the analyses will consult us on the practices we've developed as a political party. However, I would like to tell people that when Bloc Québécois caucuses travel throughout Quebec, they're accompanied by a tour of spokespeople who meet with citizens, businesses and organizations to establish contact with them and listen to what they have to say. This tour isn't necessarily, as Mr. MacKinnon might suggest, a kind of ploy to save on travel expenses for our members or staff.

The situation is quite complex, and I trust the House administration to conduct a thorough analysis and to provide us with proposals and suggestions, which we can debate, always keeping in mind what Mr. Julian said, that it's important to allow our constituents, the people we represent, to have access to members, regardless of where they live. Above all, this must be done within the rules of the Members' Manual of Allowances and Services, which, as I told you, can be improved.

I simply want to caution that we shouldn't start, a year before the election, reporting to the Board of Internal Economy issues that polarize people, that are highly publicized and that have a partisan connotation. As you know, Mr. Chair, the climate in the House and in committee isn't exactly fun right now. I wouldn't want the Board of Internal Economy to transform itself as well and start debating subjects that could be interpreted as partisan.

If the House administration has the time and if it's part of its plans and priorities to conduct such an analysis, so much the better. As someone who likes to modernize regulations, I can tell you that a major project is under way to modernize the Members' Manual of Allowances and Services, particularly as it relates to finances. I don't know if what Mr. Gerretsen is pointing out is a priority for the House administration. In any event, I trust the House administration will deal with this request while respecting its action plan and its plan to modernize the Members' Manual of Allowances and Services. I'm sure it will make the right choices, so as not to penalize or delay the achievement of its own modernization performance objectives.

• (1125)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

We've gone around the table now. We'll go back to Mr. Scheer and Ms. Findlay, but just before that, I see that there seems to be a consensus that the House administration could use this information to conduct an analysis and come back to us at a subsequent meeting.

[*English*]

Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thanks very much. I will try to keep my remarks brief.

Mr. Gerretsen seemed to want some more clarification about the fact that all parties agreed to this. I can tell you that it was absolutely agreed to by all parties, and I believe it's minuted that way as well in the board documents that would have been published after the meeting. There was no objection and there was no dissidence, so it was minuted as a decision that reflected the unanimous nature of the decision.

It was a very conscious and deliberate decision as well. It wasn't that the overall package of rules was being changed, tightened up or updated. It was just part of a larger package. It was a specific item directly related to the fact that at national conventions, for most political parties, it was a common practice to hold a caucus meeting—the same type of caucus meeting that would be held in Ottawa ahead of a session or coming out of a parliamentary break. That's normally when conventions are held.

We all know what those caucus meetings are like. You get a legislative presentation on the bills ahead. You get shadow ministers updating caucus on various issues. We have policy experts who come in and inform our caucus about everything from economic data to housing data. This happens normally. This happens for all parties outside of Ottawa.

I already enumerated the hundreds of thousands of dollars that the Liberal Party has spent on caucus retreats outside of Ottawa. If they are only going to look at caucus meetings outside of Ottawa related to conventions, I don't see how this will save taxpayer dollars if they are going to continue to have their caucus meetings separate from conventions. Obviously, they don't have conventions all the time, but they will still continue to travel outside of Ottawa for the purpose of those caucus meetings. If a legitimate caucus meeting is being held, what is the principle we're looking at if it's not going to result in saving taxpayers money?

I already indicated that we're fine to have the House administration look at this and come up with options, but I believe sincerely that if we're doing it with the lens of protecting taxpayers' money, I want to congratulate Mr. Gerretsen on finally paying attention to something the Taxpayers Federation has come up with. I hope this is the start of something new, and maybe he will be a passionate crusader against the carbon tax, which is also something the Taxpayers Federation has raised the alarm on.

I appreciate his apology. I know we had a representative from the government broadcaster in the media gallery today who has written on this, and I trust it will be reflected in the follow-up article that Mr. Gerretsen apologized for the misleading nature of his comments on this issue.

I want to once again repeat that significant taxpayers' dollars are used to hold legitimate caucus meetings outside the national capital region for all the reasons that my colleagues have indicated. If the House administration is going to look at changing or updating the rules on this, we believe that at the very least, we should look at how we can tighten up rules for spending on caucus retreats outside of Ottawa and even for conventions that happen in Ottawa. If the principle is that there should be no caucus meetings affiliated with a convention, then even if that convention is held in Ottawa and members are only coming to Ottawa for a national convention—and not for a summer committee meeting, to get in touch with their Ottawa staff or to work on whatever projects that may happen—that principle should apply as well.

I hope the administration looks at those points.

• (1130)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Scheer.

Ms. Findlay has the last comment. Actually, there will be a small comment from Mr. Gerretsen, I see, so it's the second-last comment. Then let's call this done and move on to the next issue.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously, we have some consensus regarding the House admin looking at this, but I think it's important that we make some of these comments now to inform the analysis they're going to do. Although Mr. Gerretsen apologized, I heard Mr. MacKinnon talk about these being combined events. I've never been to a combined caucus and convention event. We have had caucus meetings, and in and of themselves, there's a beginning, middle and end, and they have a purpose. I have also attended conventions.

The reason we're talking about this today—and this is important because I'm supporting what both Mr. Julian and Madame DeBellefeuille have said—is that we have a letter before the BOIE that says, “a loophole exists” as a statement of fact from Mr. Gerretsen. Then it says:

This is unacceptable, and we believe—

That must be speaking for the Liberal Party.

—the loophole should be closed....

But when that caucus meeting is used to justify expenses for attending a party event, Canadians are not being served appropriately—nor are they being told the truth

That is quite an allegation that has been brought before this board in a very partisan manner, and I think it's entirely inappropriate the way it's been characterized. Mr. McKinnon says they're not suggesting misconduct, but you are suggesting misconduct in this letter. Then to use the word “combined”.... I want it to be clear that, from my point of view, when the assessment and analysis are done, all these comments should also be taken into account.

I also agree with Mr. Julian that it's important that we as parliamentarians reach out in this very large country. We are often plane mates back and forth to British Columbia, and just flying over everyone isn't the same as landing, consulting and meeting with constituents in the country. We all afford ourselves opportunities to do that, and these are some of the ways we do it.

There is no combining, to my knowledge, of caucus meetings with conventions. These are separate events. For efficiency, frankly, if for no other reason, it's understood to be appropriate, with all rules being followed, that sometimes they take place in the same area at a time that is most efficient.

I'll leave my comments there. Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Ms. Findlay, for those clarifications.

I understand that there are two remaining short interventions.

Colleagues, we've spent a half-hour on this, and I'm reluctant for us to spend more time on it. There is a consensus for the administration to come back at a later time with some proposals. Of course,

we'll consult with all House leaders when we come back with those proposals before we get to a meeting.

Mr. Gerretsen.

• (1135)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Chair, if all that came of my letter was a focus on one word that I happened to use, then clearly I was not successful in trying to communicate what I intended to through my letter. It's extremely important, especially when things like this come to light, for us to attempt in the best, most responsible way to protect taxpayer dollars.

This is not a new-found interest of mine, as Mr. Scheer might mention. I've been on this board for less than six months, and this is the second such issue that I have brought up. I also brought up the issue about charging people to charge electric vehicles here and about asking staff to look at whether we should change our kilometre rate when people are paid mileage when driving an electric vehicle. These two policies would both have a negative impact on me.

My agenda here is not to make a political issue out of this. It is to find a path to best represent the concerns that exist in communities today, just as I did with the other issues. That's my intent. I apologize if one word seems to have dominated the discussion among some of the people at the table.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Julian, you get the last word. I hope it will be a fairly short intervention.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have enormous respect for Mr. Gerretsen and always enjoy hearing him in the House of Commons, but this was a clumsy attempt to try to make a political point that I don't feel was appropriate. It could have been made in a better way.

I'm not objecting to one word in his letter. I'm really objecting to what I think misrepresents the entire issue. It's the letter itself that I find somewhat objectionable.

[Translation]

As Mrs. DeBellefeuille just said, this isn't the right place to be partisan. We should remove our party hats here. It's true that we represent all parties and all ridings.

I wouldn't want us to get caught up in a partisan battle over the coming months, when the work that the Board of Internal Economy has to do at this table must be free of partisanship. That's my opinion.

If someone wants to raise another such issue at the Board of Internal Economy meetings in the coming year, I hope it will be done in a more elegant way.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Thank you, colleagues, for this discussion.

We will now move on to the third item on the agenda, which is telecommunications service in constituency offices and the presentation of a pilot project for members.

I invite Benoit Dicaire to take the floor and tell us about it.

Mr. Benoit Dicaire (Acting Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm here today to brief the Board of Internal Economy on the current state of telephone service in constituency offices and to seek its approval to implement a 12-month pilot project that will assess the viability of new telecommunications solutions in anticipation of a potential national rollout following the next anticipated post-election period.

[English]

The current constituency office phone system was implemented in the early 1990s as a standardized service that allows members and their staff to make, receive and manage calls, voice mails and faxes, and allows constituents to reach constituency offices using a toll-free number.

As the current service is reaching the end of its useful life, several members have experienced significant issues in various constituencies across Canada, and it has become extremely difficult for the House administration to respond effectively to members' needs and offer the level of service expected. Issues have ranged from a lack of service availability to delays in provisioning when members need to adjust telephony features or following an office move. To complicate things, legacy telephone hardware is no longer being manufactured, forcing our team to seek replacements from the used market to sustain the service and putting at risk our ability to continue supporting the current offering. As the telecommunication industry has evolved significantly over the last decade, the current constituency telephony service also lacks the feature set that members expect from a business-grade service, which leads to growing dissatisfaction with our current offering.

The current market reflects the industry's departure from legacy phone services, which traditionally centred around voice communication through conventional phone systems. Modern approaches provide a broader range of communication services beyond just voice, such as video conferencing, messaging, collaboration tools and app-based soft phones. This modernization relies on voice-over-IP technology using the Internet for calls, which cuts traditional phone line costs. VoIP also offers operational benefits, such as quick deployment and scalability, and improves service responsiveness. With VoIP-based calling, members and their staff can make calls from any Internet-connected device. This streamlines the support they provide to constituents without the need to be physically located in the constituency office to make or receive calls from constituents.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Drawing on market analyses and input from the members of Parliament in a recent proof-of-concept exercise carried out with four members of Parliament representing all the recognized parties, the House administration identified key features to frame a new service offering based on IP telephony.

First, we must address the technological obsolescence and limited functionality of the current service.

Second, we want to improve call and voice mail management.

Third, we want to improve the visibility of call history, to enable better monitoring and management.

Fourth, we want to align call functions and capacities across the parliamentary precinct, constituency offices and off-site work locations.

Fifth, members of Parliament must be allowed to use the device of their choice to make and receive calls, such as a soft phone.

Sixth, we want to strengthen the connection between constituency office and parliamentary precinct staff.

Lastly, we must give members of Parliament the chance to tailor solutions to their needs and preferences, by allowing them to choose how the telephony service is managed and delivered in their constituency office.

Given the importance of these key components of a modern telephony service in constituency offices, the House administration is submitting for your approval a pilot project involving 30 members of Parliament representing the parties proportionally. The project aims to assess two different service offerings in a number of distinct regions of Canada.

[English]

Option one is an HOC-managed telecommunications offering. This option provides seamless integration and utilization across House devices and services, leveraging the existing and familiar capabilities of Microsoft Teams. Our prime pilot candidates for this option are members who value the familiarity of the current telephony service in the parliamentary precinct and who value the integration potential between Hill and constituency telephony and collaboration platforms.

Option two is an MP-managed telephony. This option prioritizes a decentralized model for telephony services, providing an independent, business-grade calling system within constituency offices. Members will have the opportunity to select a local provider of their choice that aligns with recommended specifications set by the House administration, similar to the way we provision our current constituency Internet offering. Our prime pilot candidates for this option are members who value regional choice and are not necessarily seeking telephony integration with parliamentary precinct offices.

Both options will be fully supported for the duration of the pilot by our technical teams and will be protected by the IT infrastructure already in place in constituency offices. To effectively evaluate the merits of both options across multiple regions in Canada, we are seeking equal representation of 15 members for each option for the duration of the 12-month pilot, in addition to the four existing members who were part of the proof-of-concept phase.

[*Translation*]

Please note that we aren't asking for any additional funds today. We're proposing that existing central funds for telecommunications be reallocated to implement this pilot project. The House of Commons administration's technical staff will also be reassigned to manage, support and run the pilot project.

At the end of the pilot project, the results will be submitted to the Board of Internal Economy. A recommendation will then be made based on feedback from members of Parliament on the two service options tested.

This concludes my presentation. I look forward to addressing your questions or concerns.

• (1145)

Hon. Greg Ferguson: Thank you, Mr. Dicaire.

If you have any questions, please let me know by raising your hand.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Dicaire, thank you for your recommendations.

I'm one of the members of Parliament whose system isn't working properly. My only concern is that, if a pilot project lasts a year, the service will continue to decline in the meantime. Is there any way to make this pilot project shorter? It seems better to provide solutions to all members of Parliament as quickly as possible.

The telephone system is our point of contact. We receive thousands of calls a month. The poor performance of the telephone system means that my constituents aren't receiving the service that they deserve. Sometimes, we lose a call if too many people are calling at the same time. The system can't handle that many calls. Volunteers are working with my team. We're currently handling a huge number of cases for people in my constituency. To do this, we need a system that works.

[*English*]

Given our workload, having a working phone system would make a big difference, and I want to make sure that my bosses, the 120,000 people in New Westminster—Burnaby, never have problems with our phone system, which is increasingly the problem.

Is there a way of shortening this time frame so we can provide the service that my bosses deserve?

Mr. Benoit Dicaire: Mr. Julian, this is a valid concern, and it's a concern that we've been dealing with for many months now as we navigate the bridge solutions currently in place to provide service and offer the minimum level of service expected right now.

We can definitely look at the option of shortening the pilot if you want. These are all options. We need enough time to evaluate the different options. Also, should the House prefer a centrally managed system, we would need enough time to put in place supply arrangements at the national level. These types of scenarios come in to play in our ability to execute and scale beyond 30 members' offices, so there are some considerations there for shortening that.

Hon. Greg Ferguson: Is there anything supplementary?

Mr. Peter Julian: Doing the evaluation can be shortened. I understand that there are some next steps, but the longer we have a pilot project, the longer it takes to actually put in place solutions.

I'm sure my colleagues would agree that service to our constituents—our bosses—is the most important part of the work we do. Having the best possible ability to get in touch with members of Parliament through a phone system that is functioning perfectly has to be a priority.

If my colleagues agree, we could amend the pilot project to cut in half the evaluation period to six months. That would mean solutions are in place quicker.

Hon. Greg Ferguson: Before Mr. Dicaire responds—and I know he will do so substantively—I'll note that perhaps this is a situation where we'd want to make sure, in your case, Mr. Julian, or for other members you are aware of who are having some difficulties.... We can certainly take this away from the table and have more individualized responses to help members make sure they have a telephony service that is not causing problems for their bosses, like your 120,000 bosses, as each one of us faces the same situation.

[*Translation*]

I want to take this opportunity to say the following to all members of the Board of Internal Economy. If you hear that some of your colleagues are experiencing difficulties with their telephone system, please let us know. We'll take steps to help them or propose short-term solutions.

For the reasons set out by Mr. Dicaire, we need enough time at the end of the pilot project assessment period to implement the changes. This will involve coordinating with various companies across Canada to ensure that the system meets expectations. This will take time.

Mr. Dicaire, you have the floor.

• (1150)

Mr. Benoît Dicaire: I can answer your question as follows, Mr. Julian.

[*English*]

Currently, anytime there has been a significant issue with telephony in constituency offices, we haven't stopped. We've worked on gap solutions to ensure the continuity of those offices. It might not be the ideal scenario, but we are working on finding solutions and temporary measures while this new offering is being evaluated. That's just to reassure you on that front.

Some of the considerations that need a bit of time to evaluate are ensuring that standing offers are in place and ensuring the portability of phone numbers. As you know, this is one of the issues in ensuring consistency and ensuring that constituents can reach you if the office moves or if there is a change following an election—these types of scenarios.

There are some constraints we want to make sure we evaluate as part of this, like bilingualism. Telephony in Canada is a regional market, so there might be areas that are well served and some that are underserved. We want to make sure we're providing the same type of service regardless of where you are located in Canada.

There are some constraints with this, but if there's consensus in moving the pilot to six months instead of 12 months, we're happy to change it and adjust accordingly.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Dicaire, I want to thank you for including us in the project's proof-of-concept phase for technology that you have been testing. If you really want to receive feedback and consider all possible situations, you must give yourself time. I understand Mr. Julian's position. However, if you rush through the assessment, you may not choose the right technology or the right tool to implement. You must bear in mind that each province has its own way of working and its own suppliers of telephony services and Internet access, for example.

Personally, I have mixed feelings about Mr. Julian's suggestion. If the proof-of-concept phase had been shorter, our feedback and comments might not have been as extensive.

You can set a target of six months if everyone agrees. However, you shouldn't hesitate to continue the pilot project if, after six months, the data is insufficient. If the feedback shows that you aren't sure about the quality of the technology, you should let us know.

This analysis of telephone systems is a major project. It involves 338 offices, or even more, since some constituencies have more than one office. As Mr. Julian said, the telephone is our teams' main tool for getting in touch with the public.

I think that it's important to take the necessary time. I would add a caveat if Mr. Julian agrees. You could think about making the pilot project a bit shorter. However, if you find that the results don't necessarily meet the expectations for these long-term tools, you must come back to the Board of Internal Economy.

I want to say that this is a major project. I don't know whether everyone around the table understands the amount of work involved. I know, because my office was included in the list of offices selected for the proof-of-concept phase of the pilot project. By the way, I want to take this opportunity to applaud your team. All the members of your team who call my office or attend the assessment meetings are consistently polite, courteous, respectful and attentive. In addition, they provide feedback to the people on my team and express appreciation for their work. The pilot project means extra work for our teams. We must take this seriously, because you're relying on our feedback to build something new. Please pass on my congratulations to your team. I find that they're doing a thorough job and taking the time to make proper adjustments and provide good recommendations.

Personally, I agree with your project. I suggest that you proceed as quickly as possible with the pilot project, while keeping in mind that we want to make sure that the technology chosen is really the best option.

• (1155)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. DeBellefeuille, thank you for your flexibility and your feedback. My office is also included in the list. We've been working with this team for years. This started long before I became Speaker of the House of Commons. You're absolutely right that the team is highly professional and receptive to our concerns.

[*English*]

Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank you and your team. This is a very complex matter. We're talking about many offices and many users, so we all appreciate the efforts you're making.

I don't think anyone really realizes how bad a problem this is unless they're one of the people for whom it's not functioning. My condolences to you, Mr. Julian, if you are. As whip, I've had several members come to me, and their frustration is extremely high.

When you're testing and doing a pilot project, of course, what it should be doing is trying to see where things don't work. I have an instance of this from our MP for Red Deer—Lacombe. His staff said they had the issue that when a second call comes in, it cuts their mic off if they're already talking to someone. While they're in the middle of trying to help a constituent with a very difficult problem, they can no longer hear and have to try to figure that out.

It's about the communication piece. If there are any priorities within the priorities, it's the simple ability to know that staff have secure communication when speaking to someone. That has to be highlighted.

I also think a year sounds very long. It seems to me that six months should be available. However, I also agree that if you target the six months, you can come back and say you need a little more time because you're finding this worked or that didn't work, or you fixed this but haven't fixed that. However it works, we want to get to a point where we have secure communication systems. We understand you're working hard on them, but for those who are inadequately serviced, this is not just a huge concern; it's a huge impediment to the service we're called upon to do for literally millions of Canadians.

I will encourage you in your work. I like the idea of targeting more of a six-month time frame for the pilot project and then com-

ing back to say you need a little more time if that's what you need. Then we'll see where we're at.

Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Ms. Findlay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dicaire, would you like to add anything?

Mr. Benoit Dicaire: No, thank you.

We'll be back to talk about it.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, colleagues.

We will target a shorter timeline, understanding that we'll come back if we require more time in order to make sure we do an appropriate job for all members in preserving members' rights and privileges and allowing them to serve their people.

Colleagues, we're going to take a short break while we move in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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