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Mr. Leon Benoit

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•(1615)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)): We are starting the public portion of our meeting now.

Mr. Minister, I hope that eight-inch-high file of material is not your presentation.

We're here today pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) to deal with main estimates for 2005-2006, votes 1, 5, 10, 20, 25, 30, and 35 under the Treasury Board, referred to the committee on Friday, February 25, 2005.

We have appearing today the Honourable Reg Alcock, President of the Treasury Board.

Thank you, Mr. President, for coming today. If you would, make your ten-minute maximum presentation, and then we'll get straight to the questions.

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear. This is exactly the kind of meeting I had hoped this committee would have, simply because I think it's incredibly important that House committees get engaged in the estimates. I think it's a way in which we begin to restore some of the traditional accountabilities to the House, and it's something members who served on this committee before will know is close to my heart.

I have a very lengthy presentation, but given that you've had a lengthy in camera meeting, I'm quite happy to follow your agenda. I could summarize a couple of things rather than deal with this whole statement, if that would help accommodate the amount of time. I understand we have a vote coming up.

The Chair: Mr. Alcock, if you could do that it would be very much appreciated. Our meeting is not cut short, but the extra fifteen minutes we know you were going to give to us will be cut short because of the vote.

Go ahead, please.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Let me do this.

One of the problems with a file like Treasury Board is that it is fundamentally about management. It's about things that aren't the most exciting kinds of things in the public debate. They aren't the kinds of things people get deeply engaged in; they're just incredibly important to how government works.

What we have established at Treasury Board, and what you have seen established through a number of departments, is a portfolio approach to management. Treasury Board is really comprised of three separate bodies, the secretariats that support us, and even within the traditional part of Treasury Board there are significant divisions. I am responsible for not only the Treasury Board Secretariat, which does a lot of the budget and oversight functions, comptrollership, etc., but I also have responsibility for the Public Service Human Resource Management Agency of Canada and the school.

You will see in these estimates there have been what appear to be significant increases in certain lines that are in fact the result of transferring significant pieces of work together as we reconfigured this. We transferred units in from the Public Service Commission, from Treasury Board into the school to make the school a larger unit focussing completely on education, and there were similar transfers as we created the Human Resource Management Agency.

The Public Service Modernization Act—which this committee dealt with, of course—lies at the core of the agency, and we are delighted that we were able to proclaim the Public Service Labour Relations Act aspects of that this year.

What I will do, Mr. Chairman.... I suspect you already have a copy of this, but if you don't I'll leave the remarks with you, so if people want to have on the record some of those remarks you can have them. Frankly, I was going to walk through some of the things I suspect we will get questions on. Why don't I just leave it there and we'll go right to questions?

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Alcock.

We start today with Mr. Lauzon, for seven minutes.

•(1620)

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. President.

There was a lot of background information on the estimates, and a couple of things jumped out at me regarding some significant increases in estimates. One of the things I'd like to zero in on, in the limited amount of time I have, is about the contributions to employee benefit plans. There seems to be a very significant increase. I wonder if you could address that and maybe by way of explanation give us an idea why that is.

Hon. Reg Alcock: That's vote 20, is it not?

Your question is why is there a net increase of \$35 million in this vote?

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Yes.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'm sorry, \$3.5 million.

It's really due to the net increase in the salaries and operating expenditures of the Treasury Board. Treasury Board has grown in this last year. These are statutory requirements that just reflect the labour force growth so much as a percentage increase added on.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Thank you very much.

The benefits of contribution to employee benefits has pretty much doubled. Has your staffing doubled?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'm sorry, I should have introduced Stephen Silcox; he's coordinating this event.

Mr. Stephen Silcox (Special Advisor, Corporate Services, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat): If you look at vote 1, which is the operating vote of the secretariat, it's increased by \$29.1 million. Most of that is salaries. Contribution to the employee benefit plan—

Mr. Guy Lauzon: The short answer to the question, has the staffing almost doubled?

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, but benefits are figured at 20% of the cost of staffing.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: If the benefit package doubles, it would seem to indicate that your salary costs have doubled somehow.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'm looking for the reference, Mr. Lauzon, on the doubling of the benefit costs.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: While Mr. Silcox looks for those, maybe you can address another issue with me. I was a little bit surprised to note that you now hire temporary employment service agencies. Is that how we staff casual employees now?

Hon. Reg Alcock: On the contributions to employee benefits, they've gone from \$15.5 million to \$19,023,000. It's not doubled. In the vote summary, you'll see that information.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Regarding the temporary employment agencies, is that how casual staff is hired now? How much of our staffing is done through temporary agencies?

• (1625)

Mr. Stephen Silcox: Temporary agencies are just to fill in for short-term needs. We also have casual employees. They're not quite the same thing.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How often do we use temporary agencies?

Mr. Stephen Silcox: For example, if an assistant leaves, you have to find someone to keep the work flowing. Then you would go to a temporary help agency until such time as you get staff in.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How many temporary hires did you have last year?

Mr. Stephen Silcox: That's a detail I don't have with me. I'm sorry.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Can you give me an approximate—

Hon. Reg Alcock: If you like, what we'll do is we'll get that information to you.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Okay. I'll tell you why I raise this question. My office received information about cases where employment agencies were contracted by the government to fill temporary positions. In some cases, the agency is paid twice as much as what the employee receives. I'm wondering if a whole bunch of that...value for money kind of thing.

I'm trying to figure out what benefit the government gets from paying such exorbitant fees. How does the government benefit from that?

Hon. Reg Alcock: You're assuming, Mr. Lauzon, that the rumour is true. I can't refute a rumour.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Just a minute; I don't think that's a rumour. I have had, as I said, not just one case but a number of cases.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I know, certainly in clerical positions in particular—I have one in my office right now, where the person who was doing some of my scheduling was hired and went to another office. We've hired a temp to fill in until such time as we can go through a recruitment process to bring somebody in.

As to whether or not the agencies are paid double what the people are paid, I'd be surprised to hear that. What I will do, because I don't have that information in front of me, is undertake to get it and get it back to you. I would certainly be—

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Like me, I think you'll be quite surprised when you figure out what the employee receives and what the temporary agency receives. In the meantime, the employees themselves receive no benefits. These temporary employees are working on a casual basis and they get very little wages. The government, the taxpayer, pays lots, but it doesn't end up getting into the money of the person who does the work.

So I would really like to know, to get to the bottom of that and find out.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I would share your concern if that turns out to be the case. I'll endeavour to get that information to you.

The Chair: Yes. We will get that information from the minister.

Go ahead. Sorry.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: And Mr. Silcox, you can't give me an overall number of how many people, for example, in Treasury Board would have been hired?

Mr. Stephen Silcox: No, I cannot, sir. By their nature, they're short-term hirings, and I simply don't have that number available. But as the minister has committed, we will get that information to you.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Do you have contracts with certain temp agencies, or how does that work? Because obviously I have constituents who beg to get a government job, can't seem to get an appointment, can't seem to get in, and we're hiring people through temp agencies. Why would we not hire casuals? By the way, in my days as a public servant, as a manager, I used to hire casuals all the time. That's the way we did it, rather efficiently, to give well-paid work to the taxpayer. It seems to me that would be a better way of doing it.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Until we get a sense of the size of the issue, Mr. Lauzon, it's a little difficult to respond. In the limited experience I've had with this, it's been a person brought in for a period of a couple of weeks to fill in on an emergency basis, until such time as the hiring processes could bring somebody in.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: In the minister's office, but I would dare say probably down in the rank and file it must be going on. If you have a hundred people in an office, are 10% of the people being hired through temporary agencies? I think it's the kind of thing that I would want to know.

The Chair: Mr. Lauzon, your time is up.

Mr. Minister, could we have a short answer?

Hon. Reg Alcock: It's the same answer. We'll get the information, Mr. Lauzon, so you can have a look at it. I will look at it myself, and we'll see if there's a need to have a further conversation.

The Chair: Madam Thibault, you have seven minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Alcock and Mr. Silcox.

I'd like to go back to page 5 of your speaking notes, Mr. Alcock. You refer to a net increase of \$29 million in Vote I, which is: mainly due to increased funding to the Comptroller General, Chief Information Officer and to strengthen the federal presence in the regions through the Regional Federal Councils.

Could you possibly tell us what portion of the \$29 million represents federal presence in the regions?

A similar explanation is provided for Vote 10, with the further stipulation of a \$5.2 million increase for government-wide initiatives. Once again, you state this: "This increase is mainly due to increased funding to strengthen the federal presence in the region through distribution to regional ministers' offices."

If I might make one side comment, albeit on a very serious note, the government is cutting back on essential police services in some municipalities — in Quebec, among others — while the public is witnessing an enhanced federal presence. That doesn't sit very well with me. Exactly what is the cost of this enhanced presence?

There is also the matter of reports. You've already stated — and there is no reason to doubt your sincerity — that you are improving the transmission of so-called horizontal information. I'd like to focus on a subject that is near and dear to me. You may recall that I asked you this same question last fall in the House of Commons. When should we expect to get some horizontal information about the

budget of the Governor General's office for this fiscal year? I'm taking advantage of your presence here to put the question to you, sir.

If there's any time remaining after you've answered my first three questions, I'll ask you a fourth one.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

• (1630)

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Okay. Let me start with the last one first.

As it turns out, I believe I'm coming back before this committee to talk about the Governor General's estimates, which will be the most ironic thing actually we've seen in a long time, proving the world is round.

So I will endeavour to have that information for you, Madame, at that point. I don't manage that particular budget, so I was unaware of that request, but given that I'm going to be back here discussing that, I will see that I have that for you.

I think there may be a bit of a misunderstanding on what the regional issue is, because it touches on the same thing that... Actually, let me give you the numbers first. You wanted the amounts. In vote 1, the amount is \$8.9 million, and in vote 10 the amount is \$5.3 million.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Therefore, this \$8.9 million should be divided up, because when you talk about the regions... For instance, approximately how much are Quebecers paying for this federal presence and visibility? An approximate figure will suffice.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Let me explain the process to you, because I think it's worth understanding.

I don't understand this issue of visibility, because it's really an organizational dilemma that has existed for some time. Until I became President of the Treasury Board, I wasn't actually aware that there's a little secretariat within Treasury Board that supports the federal councils.

In each province and territory, there is an organization made up of the heads of all of the federal departments and agencies that are active in that particular province. Treasury Board provides some support to coordinate horizontal information. As I met with the regional councils across the country, there have been concerns expressed that they were being expected to do a lot of coordination without many resources.

On the term "horizontality", I spoke the last time I was here about the issue with the aboriginal files. As we tried to figure out what the government was spending entirely on aboriginal programs, I mentioned that there were some 32 departments that were delivering about 240 programs, and nobody even knew. The left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing.

We have been working with the federal councils, because they are the ones actually delivering programs, to see if we can do some coordination at that level to get better value. Nobody is resourced overly well at the regional level. There have been concerns about disproportionate cuts in the regions versus Ottawa. They've argued for some time that we should try to build up that capacity, so that is essentially what we're trying to do.

On the issue from province to province, instead of going in and telling them to do this, we essentially made an amount of money available at Treasury Board. We've asked each regional council to come forward and make a proposal on what they feel would be in the best interests of their region. On that basis, we'll then dispense the money.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Vote 10 is in fact for strengthening the federal presence in the region through distribution to regional ministers' offices. Mention is made of Regional Federal Councils in Vote 1. However, Vote 10 is for something entirely different.

The reference is to "regional ministers". To my knowledge, the ministers in this case are federal ministers. They have offices. To my way of thinking, this is a considerable expense, money that is being redirected from the regions.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chairman?

[English]

The Chair: You're almost out of time, Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Perhaps a colleague can take the question up again.

You stated that you had received new mandates. If time permits, you could perhaps talk to us about the projected increase in your budget between the year 2000 and 2009-2010.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: In the portfolio, the 29%, is that what you're referring to?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Yes.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think that is made up of two or three things. There has been a desire on the part of the government on the need to strengthen management. This was expressed in the previous budget in 2004-05 and again in this budget.

We brought in the new position of the Comptroller General. If you note that budget line, you'll see ongoing increases over the next three or four years, as we recruit and train comptrollers in each of the departments. As we play out the policy that we announced a few months ago on an internal audit, that's going to require adding and training auditors in all the departments.

The Government of Canada is huge. There are 119 fundamental units and God knows how many small ones. In the large

departments, they have a lot of capacity to deliver on internal audit and comptrollership. In the smaller agencies, there has also been a move to have Treasury Board deliver those services directly. They are too small to have a larger unit within each one of them. There have been additional resources made available, most of it focused around comptrollership and audit.

The other large increase would be in the area of the office of chief information officers, as we move down the road, as we committed the last time, to building government-wide financials, the EMIS system, and others that are being driven out of the Treasury Board. But it's largely—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Alcock.

Mr. Godbout, followed by Mr. Martin.

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know that you've requested additional funds for the implementation of the Office of the Comptroller General. Could you give us a brief update on where we are in this regard? Will it be fully operational this year? I'm just looking for a snapshot.

Hon. Reg Alcock: The Office of the Comptroller General is up and running now. The comptroller was appointed last spring. He has been working hard with all the departments. He's been building up the capacity at the centre to provide that support and working hard with all of the appropriate departments.

There are a number of issues: the standardizing of the accounting procedures to be used; the recruitment and training of professional comptrollers in each relevant department; the restructuring of internal audit. These programs will be growing over the next few years as he gets each piece put in, and the training programs set up. It will be three or four years before it's fully up and running.

• (1640)

Mr. Marc Godbout: Madame Thibault made a point that I guess you didn't have time to get to: the improvement of the estimates document. It could give us a much better understanding of the horizontal picture in many areas. We're a bit lost when we get the information. There always seems to be a piece missing. What improvements can we expect?

Hon. Reg Alcock: There are a couple of things that are important to note here. By way of referencing this, I would draw your attention to the supplementary estimates B from the last fiscal year.

There is a group within Treasury Board that manages the creation of these documents, and they have been working hard to add additional tables that crosswalk some of the transfers. For example, in the school, you will see this very large increase, which is made up of pieces coming from other departments. There are tables provided to demonstrate exactly where this came from, so you can begin to see the whole picture of government.

We went through a systems change in the development of the main estimates. We were not able to go that far, simply for want of time. We need to get it out early enough in the year for the committees to have time with it. We have a group reporting to Parliament, and they've been thinking long and hard about this enormous task. It's extraordinarily difficult. There have been attempts through the RPPs and other documents to improve the information. One of the difficulties is that the information is a shot in time. Next month things will evolve in ways you can't foresee. You can't keep the documents evergreen. Our group has developed ways of holding some of the information electronically, so that you can drill down on a particular question. There're new tools to access the core information you need to begin an overview. These will allow you to get quick access to any other information you need. I would encourage the committee to meet with this group. It would be helpful for them to know exactly what kind of information you would find useful, what you'd like to have immediately available in printed form, and what we might be able to give you in other ways. As I said, they've thought long and hard about this, and they're coming up with some very creative solutions. I'm sure they would welcome your input.

Mr. Marc Godbout: There's an act aimed at modernizing our public sector. I met the president of the Public Service Commission, and she gave me an appreciation of where we were at. It's going to take several years. Are you satisfied that the timetable has been respected and that we're on track?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think the agency is doing a terrific job. It's a huge task they have, because we're attempting to change two things, and Mr. Martin knows more than I about one aspect of it. We're attempting to change the relationship with the bargaining units and the employees, the labour-management relationship. We're trying to modernize that and make it a more collaborative process. That's one aspect of this change. The other is to change accountability around hiring, to make deputies and senior management of departments and agencies more accountable for delivering certain results in their hiring, but also more able to influence their own hiring to get the staff they need quickly and efficiently.

This is not a small change. It's a change you'll also see us moving toward in terms of financial management, as we move through changing the accountability structures within the departments.

The agency is, I think, pretty much on the agenda they laid out when this committee debated this bill.

The Chair: You still have a minute, Monsieur Godbout.

Mr. Marc Godbout: I'm going to come back to my favourite subject. You won't be surprised. You've just completed the review of the governance of crown corporations. Can we expect some changes in the way some of these corporations operate when it comes to transparency—for example, the NCC, to name one?

•(1645)

Hon. Reg Alcock: I don't want to relive some local battles.

Certainly the principles that govern the way these boards function are much clearer. The access to information, of course, is now being applied to all of them, with one exception. That legislation has to move.

On the reporting relationships and the financial accountabilities, I think they are much stronger.

But there's another aspect to this that I think this committee could pick up on, too, if it wished. These crowns submit annual corporate plans to us, which are reviewed. The Treasury Board has an area that looks at this. We've strengthened our capacity internally to provide support and oversight in the financial relationships with the crowns. But because we are all so busy due to the workload at the House, too often some of these corporate plans don't get looked at by committees. It would be quite possible for a committee to call one forward. If you had a concern about a particular crown, it would be quite possible for the committee to ask that crown to come forward to discuss their plan.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Next is Mr. Martin, followed by Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I think this is a very useful exercise. I always envisioned that this is how this committee should be running—to have you here at this stage of the process and not hounding you after the fact to criticize why you did certain things. We may do that anyway. We reserve the right to do that later.

I know that Mr. Lauzon couldn't say where he thought the benefits doubled. But I am reading this handy bar graph you circulated as well, and the staff for the Treasury Board Secretariat has in fact doubled since program review from 1994-95. You went from 600 active staff to 1,200. I'm not critical of that. Frankly, I think program review was ruthless, so we may have differing views on this side of the bench. However, it is interesting to note. That's not the main thrust of my questioning, but how did the Treasury Board Secretariat blossom in that way in recent years?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think it did in a couple of ways. I think if you go back to program review—and in fact you've heard me talk about this on many occasions—one of the things that occurred was that we cut a lot of internal capacity. I think we removed capacity from departments and from Treasury Board that was important. The position of Comptroller General had actually been eliminated in 1992, but there were other capacities cut, because it's always easier to cut internally. I would argue, and I have argued publicly, that some of the concerns we've had in terms of accountability and other issues are a direct result of the fact that we cut some of the fiscal capacity too deeply. So some of it has been rebuilding some of that capacity over time.

Then there has been a conscious decision by this administration to strengthen management, a decision that began the day I was appointed. When you're appointed a minister, the Prime Minister hands you a mandate letter outlining his expectations. The very first one was to re-establish comptrollership. Well, that's not a zero-cost business, but you have to build capacity there. The decision to add auditing added to that.

So there's been a fairly rapid increase in these last two years, but that's been a direct result of this commitment to rebuild internal management capacity.

Mr. Pat Martin: I didn't know that a minister is given marching orders from the Prime Minister when they are appointed.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Oh, yes.

Mr. Pat Martin: I thought you just dreamed this stuff up.

Hon. Reg Alcock: They're marching suggestions.

Mr. Pat Martin: Marching suggestions.

My real question has to do with the recent announcements or the feeling that there's going to be an effort to further decentralize the public service. We've long been told that Canada already has one of the most decentralized public services in the western world, but there are not many western countries that have the geographic challenges Canada has either, in being so spread out.

Now, some people are freaking out about this, if they're based in Ottawa. Those of us in Canada's hinterland are kind of tickled about the idea. I know that the critics will ask, what's the cost-benefit analysis? Is this going to be a thrust that we're going to be able to anticipate, or look forward to? And when doing the cost-benefit analysis, are you looking at not only the short-term costs of decentralizing those jobs, but also at the long-term cost savings to having those jobs out in the regions, with their secondary benefits?

● (1650)

Hon. Reg Alcock: I should say, Mr. Martin, there has been a bit of confusion, not that we haven't added to it. You recall back in our province there was an extant policy decision made back under the Filmon government to take units of the provincial government and move them into communities outside of the centre. This is not a policy decision that we are following right now. There has not been a policy decision made to do that.

What there has been, though, is a recognition of the concern that you identify, and I go back to what Madam Thibault was talking about. If you go and talk to the regional councils, you will find that during program review there was a sense that we cut more deeply in the provinces than we did in the centre. There is also an argument that the public servants in the various provinces will make that when it comes to making policy, because there isn't capacity locally, the policy challenge from a regional perspective is lacking.

The third thing, and it's another issue that this committee would benefit from looking at, is when we went through the HRDC problem some years ago, we established, in the name of accountability, a whole bunch of very tough rules. When the people in the region started to work with community groups to implement these rules, they were so onerous that groups began just to walk away. I suspect that you and others around here have heard that.

Mr. Pat Martin: I know examples of that very thing.

Hon. Reg Alcock: What I've done now is gone to the councils and said, "You are the ones who are working directly with people. Work with us." I spoke to the Auditor General, and I said let's work together on this and gather that information from a local level and work with the Auditor General to make sure that we can build accountability. We want the accountability, but we want it done in a context that facilitates the delivery of good services. That's part of the reason why we're providing more capacity to the councils.

Similarly, if you're going to look at growth, the Service Canada initiative is one. I don't know whether this committee is going to talk about it independently of this meeting, but I know there was a suggestion that we could do so. Madam Robillard is the one who is the lead on that file. It is an enormously interesting file.

We have service capacity across the country, but with the arrival of new tools, the Internet and other things, some of that capacity will diminish further still, unless we start to think through, both for reasons of operational efficiency but also for reasons of maintaining capacity in the regions, how to reorganize them and how we use them. And the Service Canada proposal is about gathering federal services and making best use of them. For example, the public servants who were trained in providing good services to citizens with the tools to deliver support on an EI claim or on a CPP benefit claim could do more than one, rather than your having to go to this office for one and that office for another. It's a very creative way to address that. It will maintain, and if there's growth in capacity, it will happen in the regions where it's required, rather than in the centre. But the sense that we are launched on a process of relocating chunks of what's here in Ottawa just isn't the case right now.

● (1655)

Mr. Pat Martin: One thing you mentioned that was useful was, when asked, you pulled together from all the 119 different federal units that you talked about the whole cost of the aboriginal file. That's useful to all of us. I sit on the aboriginal affairs committee, and we're not alone in saying that our areas of expertise often have 20 different sources of revenue and it's really difficult to know what's really costing what.

Is this a function you're going to offer to other areas as well? Should we come to you if we have a question, for instance, on what's the whole cost of Kyoto? Are you the appropriate person to ask?

Hon. Reg Alcock: You put your finger on another one: climate change. There is a group working on exactly that, because the problem was an awful lot of money—this goes back pre-dating anything that may happen tomorrow—was identified for this and there was a question about it as it got scattered around and given to the different departments to deliver. The question was, what do we get for that? There was a little group mapped out—

Mr. Pat Martin: How do you measure the benefit if it's—

The Chair: Mr. Martin, your time is up.

Mr. Alcock, if I could follow up a bit on the rebuilding capacity answer that you gave with regard to a question, when you look at the Treasury Board Secretariat charts showing the number of employees in the department, back in 1990 it was roughly 650 people. Back in 1998 it was slightly less than that; it was almost the same. Now we're up to almost 1,200 people. So I don't see that as rebuilding capacity, unless there is some explanation. I would like you to say whether there's some explanation for the number of employees almost doubling if the department was only rebuilding capacity.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Mr. Chairman, not having had the benefit of this chart, I'd have to go back and walk through it. Some of it, I suspect, will be because of the reorganization of functions, the addition of functions from other areas.

The Chair: From other departments?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I don't know what the basis for this is, so I would have to get that information.

The Chair: Could you get that for us, Mr. Alcock?

We'll go to Mr. Poilievre, for seven minutes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): I will be sharing my time with Mr. Preston.

Merci d'être venu.

Mr. Minister, I'm going to continue on this line of questioning. We were told there was effort by the government to review its expenditures, and yet we see doubling of the size of the bureaucracy at the highest levels. In 1998, as our chair has pointed out, we had roughly 600, and today we have roughly 1,200. How can those two realities correspond—on the one hand an expenditure review, with the goal in mind of saving tax dollars for Canadians, and on the other a near doubling in the size of the Treasury Board Secretariat?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Not knowing what the basis is for this chart, I'd have to understand it. I'd have to understand why those trends have taken place. On the issue of cost containment and cost control, one has to understand the government's much larger than just the Treasury Board. The Treasury Board is a central function.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But it is an example of government. It's at the highest level of administration. Just for your own clarification, this graph pertains to active employment. It deals with active employees in the Treasury Board Secretariat. Clearly you're familiar with those functions that are included under the rubric of active employment in your own office, so perhaps you could give us an explanation based on your knowledge of your own office.

Hon. Reg Alcock: No. I could speak about the actions and the employment changes in the Treasury Board in the last two years that I've been active for it; I cannot begin to explain what occurred in 1998 or 1999. I wasn't around or involved with it. And what I don't have in this is when you use—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But I think you can speak for those years, because you are the government's representative for that position now, and therefore you're responsible for its actions since the government took office, and it did in 1993.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Right.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: In 1998, we have 600, and now we have almost 1,200 people who are actively employed. We're just looking for a very simple explanation as to why the massive growth,

especially when you're part of a government that talks of expenditure review.

Hon. Reg Alcock: The problem with simple answers to complex problems is they're often wrong. If you want an actual answer to this, the reality is I will have to go back and get the details, which I'll gladly provide for you. But I suspect you'll find there are other reorganizations in it during the same period of time, and now the government has done an enormous piece of work over this last year. It made a commitment to reducing the overall expenditures by some \$10.9 billion, which is also detailed in this document.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Sure, even though the budgetary estimates for years to come will actually see government expenditures rise in total. But I'll move on to another question.

My constituents are concerned about the fact that the government is moving departments to other regions of the country without a business case to justify doing so. My constituency was once the home of the tax processing office in Bells Corners. It was moved to—of all places—Shawinigan during the reign of our former prime minister. Coincidentally, that was his constituency, as you may recall, even though you weren't Treasury Board president at the time.

Now we see the Tourism Commission moved to British Columbia, a politically important province to your Prime Minister's electoral agenda, and with no business case to justify it. In fact, it will increase costs, because it will involve re-hiring, transportation, retraining, etc. Can you perhaps, in light of all of that, provide some comfort to my constituents as to why jobs are being taken, at great expense to taxpayers, and moved to politically important regions for the Liberal Party?

• (1700)

Hon. Reg Alcock: I guess the dilemma I have in part with your question, Mr. Poilievre, is are you saying that all jobs should be in Ottawa?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Absolutely not, but if they're moved—

Hon. Reg Alcock: The reality is that the country does seem to be a little bigger than just Ottawa, the last time I checked.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Now that you have asked me a question, I'll complete answering it.

The Chair: Minister, could you let Mr. Poilievre respond to the question you asked him?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: If there's a business case, absolutely; if it's going to save taxpayer dollars for improved services. But there is no business case for moving, at great cost in retraining and rehiring, a commission that has historically been here.

Hon. Reg Alcock: The last time I checked, the province of British Columbia had a rather active tourism industry, and it is about to be the host of the Olympics.

It's possible to promote the activities of this country from just about any place in this country. I just think that to suggest other parts of the country can't do that is wrong.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I agree that they can, but you've given no reason why they—

Hon. Reg Alcock: We, including your party, represent British Columbia as well as other parts of the country—well, not all parts of the country, but some of them. I think that in building a country we have to reflect the characteristics of all parts of the country. I don't think it's an inappropriate policy decision.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Well, the concern I express here today is about moving for moving's sake. I just asked you for and gave you an opportunity to give the business case for having made that move, and instead you made a philosophical statement about how government should locate.

I'll just ask that the record note that the President of the Treasury Board refused to make any business case for this move, so we'll be left to assume it was politically motivated.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Preston, you can finish up Mr. Poilievre's time.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you, and I assume I have lots of it left.

I get that the total expenditure of the Treasury Board is going up by \$81.9 million over last year, not a small amount. We've talked a lot about transfers in and new comptrollerships and other suchlike. How much of the \$81.9 million is new money?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Oh, \$81,932,000.

Now, that's an interesting question. How much of it is new?

Mr. Joe Preston: This is, again, part of this horizontal, vertical, and on-a-slant type of document we talked about.

Hon. Reg Alcock: That's a very good question.

Because there is the contribution to the expenditure review committee, I'd have to net that.

I would venture to guess that a good portion of it is new money on this particular file. For the School of Public Service and the Human Resources Management Agency there are substantial transfers in, but I'm....

Mr. Joe Preston: We'll allow you to let us know that, if I can carry on asking questions.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes, please.

Mr. Joe Preston: Under vote 10 you talk a lot—and Madam Thibault touched on it, as did Mr. Martin—about federal presence in the regions and the distribution of ministers' regional offices out in the regions. I would think that for the most part those could be cost savings rather than cost additions, yet I'm seeing them as cost additions. If somebody's job went elsewhere, wouldn't that mean the job wouldn't be done here any more?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think they call these the ministers' regional offices. In each major centre across the country there are ministers' offices; it's the generic ministers. For example, if I'm in Montreal and I need a place to work when I'm there or I get called to participate in a cabinet committee meeting on a secure basis, I—

Mr. Joe Preston: Does it replace anything? This is in addition to. This is another level of bureaucracy, another level of offices.

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, this already exists and has existed for—

Mr. Joe Preston: We're just going to fancy them up a little, then.

Hon. Reg Alcock:—I would guess, decades. What we are doing is enhancing the capacity to provide the policy and coordination—

• (1705)

Mr. Joe Preston: My wife has enhanced the capacity of our rec room recently—instead of just fancying it up.

So this isn't going to save us anything by regionalizing it.

The Chair: Mr. Preston, I'm sorry, you're out of time.

Mr. Minister, go ahead and respond.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I didn't understand what that last comment was.

Mr. Joe Preston: I asked if you were just fancying up offices, and you said no, you were enhancing capacity. I suggested maybe the two meanings were the same.

The Chair: We'll go Mr. Boshcoff for seven or eight minutes.

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

We'll continue on this regional theme, because many parts of the country, including ridings that I represent, really are hoping to see more federal government presence. Also, many areas of the country—and I will not stoop to the partisan comments on that—really require the federal jobs, first, because their offices are established and they have the capacity for even more jobs, and secondly, because over the course of time, especially in recent years, we've often heard it said that with the technological age you can do any of these tasks in really any part of the country. I suppose if you have a reasonable airport and you can connect, our service delivery capacity as a nation could indeed be spread out.

I understand very much the concern for those people in this area who have lots of the jobs. I don't think they are aware that many of the government policies seem to contract work from the regions to Ottawa. When there's an expenditure review, whether it's two or five or seven jobs, on places under 150,000 that tends to have a huge cumulative effect.

I need to know what your philosophy is and what the government policy direction is on this.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Thank you, Mr. Boshcoff.

It's an important question. I know that when Minister McCallum went through this process on the expenditure review and laid out that plan, they applied what they call a regional lens. They looked specifically at the impact on the regions because of this concern in the past where a lot of those cuts had been visited on the regions. We'd cut outside of Ottawa at a much greater rate than we had in Ottawa. So that was one of the lenses that was used.

Also, in the delivery of certain kinds of services, it is arguable—and I think this may have been behind Mr. Martin's comment also—when you take in all the cost parameters, not just the salaries, but also the cost of operating office space, etc., there are lots of centres throughout Canada that can deliver these services at a much lower average cost. That needs to be taken into consideration as we make decisions, particularly decisions around growth.

There's a differentiation between saying we're going to take this department and move it elsewhere and saying that if we're going to grow this capacity, we'll grow it in British Columbia or in Calgary or in Regina, as opposed to growing it here or—and I don't mean to offend anybody—in any one of the Atlantic provinces or Sudbury. I've even heard Sudbury could do this.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: We have to continue on that, because really as a committee we have to know that the government itself, especially in your capacity and the professional staff capacity, understands that many of those.... You alluded to the rent and leasing costs, say for the GTA or any of the metropolitan urban centres, MTV, or MTV plus Calgary. We need to know that the government understands that those costs themselves—the costs of commuting, the time that people spend in getting there, the difficulties—can easily be justified in business cases for smaller communities, where there's the space available.

I'll ask you right now, is it your understanding that over time our federal civil service has diminished in size?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes and no. It diminished dramatically during the 1995 to 1998 period through program review and began to grow and has returned almost to the size it was at the beginning of program review.

To contextualize that a little bit, if you look at the federal public service as a proportion of the total workforce in Canada, it is still down, because Canada continues to grow, but in straight numbers we are roughly at the same levels that we were.

• (1710)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Then it only reinforces my argument, which can be very physically evidenced in many communities, that you have places such as the Canadian Grain Commission or the Canada Revenue Agency or those types of agencies where you have floors of operation with sections, a third or a quarter of them, cordoned off because the staff has gone to primarily Ottawa or another larger centre. That's the way that, from the deputy minister on down, people suggest, if there are going to be cost savings, take those people out of there and we'll provide this function in another location. There's that aspect of the business case, in terms of expenditure review or for just the nation at large: the infrastructural ability of smaller centres to assist larger centres by overcoming their gridlock, by our being able to provide quality services and quality lifestyles.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I don't dismiss the value of that at all. I think you're absolutely right, Mr. Boshcoff. Where there are growth opportunities and such, we should be looking outside of there. In a sense, this issue with the regional councils is one that is important to think about. Part of that is that I don't think in many cases there was an intention to centralize; I think the decision-making structures are just oriented towards the centre.

For example, on straight policy development, there hasn't been a place in the policy development system where you get policy challenge from a regional perspective. It always happens here, in the centre. One of the arguments or reasons for this enhancement, Mr. Preston, is to provide the public servants in each region with the capacity, with the staff and resources, to provide that policy challenge function, so that the regional voice is heard all the time. I

think that will lead to greater consideration of exactly those questions.

There are challenges to be made as to why a particular service in some cases was relocated from a smaller community to a larger community without some of the business case challenges that could have taken place. This impact on the regions I think was significant. What this is an attempt to do is to begin to push back against it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: I'm relieved to hear that statement, Mr. Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: We go to Mr. Preston for five minutes, followed by Monsieur Sauvageau.

Mr. Joe Preston: One of the best ways, I've always found, to look at budgeting is to look at last year and ask how you did. You have forecast spending in 2004-2005 of a certain amount and a certain number of full-time equivalents. How did you do versus that?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Well, as a government we saved a lot of money.

Mr. Joe Preston: So you spent less than the \$2.43 billion?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Mr. Preston, that figure will be published in the public accounts. That's one of the dilemmas with the federal government: we don't close our books until the end of the summer.

Mr. Joe Preston: Good. It's always a good question to ask.

We talked about there being 990 full-time equivalents in 2004, and yet our chart says almost 1,200.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes.

Mr. Joe Preston: Again, we're going to let you get back to us as to what the addition is.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Unless what this is doing is including the portfolios....

Mr. Joe Preston: It could also include the school and what not.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Are you saying I'm not refusing to answer?

Mr. Joe Preston: You talked earlier about vertical and horizontal integration and how we've put some working models together and how we can, as you've said, drill down in individual departments. I'm very interested in that. This committee, with its review of estimates each year, would maybe be even more interested. When do you see that type of model being somewhat available to members of a committee like this to look at, to just say, "Gee, I wonder what that was", and be able to go online someplace, in a secure place, and try to do that type of research?

• (1715)

Hon. Reg Alcock: I can tell you, Mr. Preston, I wasn't being simply polite when I said I think this committee should call this group. There is actually a group in Treasury Board that has been working on this for a while. In fact, as one of the very first things I did as a member of Parliament, in 1994, when I was first here, I was invited into a group that was joint with the Treasury Board and the Auditor General looking at this issue of reporting. The frustration they have is they don't have easy access to you and to members of Parliament to know—

Mr. Joe Preston: And the opposite is also true, I suppose.

Hon. Reg Alcock: But I'll tell you, this group impresses the heck out of me, and Treasury Board impresses the heck out of me, actually.

Mr. Joe Preston: You're just saying that.

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, actually, I have to tell you.... As others will tell you around here, I've been a little critical of the management of the government—I'm not a big fan. I spend a lot of time thinking about the information technology world. This group has thought long and hard, and they have some creative ideas about how they can better meet your information needs. What they need to do is sit at this table with you, offer some of those to you, and then get you to say that's the one we want. We'll deal with that as quickly as we can turn it around.

Mr. Joe Preston: Do you say it's imminent, then, that in a year or a couple of years we might be able to have that type of information? Going through estimates in this form is just driving my old paper and general-ledger mind crazy. It's very hard to get down to where the information actually occurs, and I guess specifically because we do main estimates and we do supplementaries, so you never know where the hidden surprise is in this. It looks as if you're doing well, and then another estimate comes along.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Well, there are no hidden surprises; it's just all good work.

Mr. Joe Preston: Yes, if only that were the case.

You maintain under one of the votes a very large contingency fund for the government.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes.

Mr. Joe Preston: I recognize the need for that. How much of it has been used? Can you give me an example in each of the last couple of years? Have you had to touch this contingency fund? Having \$750 million sitting there waiting for a disaster to happen is all well and good, but are we planning well with this?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I should reference something here, Mr. Chairman. I wrote you recently a letter on this particular vote. Vote 5 is a little different from an operating contingency fund, in the sense that it is designed in recognition that things will occur. Vote 5 is put there so that the government can respond to an emergency before it has the authority of the House, and that's an important consideration. There were concerns raised over the years—by the auditor, at one point, and by the Senate finance committee—about whether or not we could constrain that a bit.

The idea for vote 5 is that something occurs, we fund it out of vote 5, we then come back in the next supplementary estimates and say to the House this is what we've funded, the House passes that, and we return the money to vote 5. At the end of the year there might be only a trivial.... I think we pay severances and maternity leaves out of vote 5 also, so there might be an actual expenditure that is quite small.

Mr. Joe Preston: That's not so much my point. I understand the reason for vote 5. I'm asking you how our planning has been. Is \$750 million the right amount to have sitting around waiting for this? Have we used that much ever?

Hon. Reg Alcock: We've never used it all is the response. I think it would go up and down from year to year. But remember this point:

at the end of a normal year we may actually only have used a small portion of it. We might have used half or three-quarters of it mid-year, and then we zero—

Mr. Joe Preston: But it gets refreshed under supplementary estimates?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Right.

Mr. Joe Preston: All right.

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

Mr. Sauvageau, you have five minutes.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Let me add, Mr. Chairman, before I forget that point, we have made some recommendations on the policy around vote 5 to further constrain and clarify what it's used for. I would like the committee to have a look at that and give us an opinion. We're ready to implement, but I didn't want to implement in advance of having come before this committee and said this is what we're doing. If I could get some turnaround on that, I'd like to implement it fairly quickly.

The Chair: Yes.

Monsieur Sauvageau.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau (Repentigny, BQ): Thank you.

Good day, Mr. Alcock and Mr. Silcox.

With your permission, I'd like to ask a question relating to Part 7 of Bill C-43, as compared to Bill C-277. I know that you are relative experts on the subject.

[*English*]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Part 7 of Bill C-43? You're talking about the budget implementation bill versus one creative private member's bill, right?

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: My private member's bill.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Oh, that was yours? Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: If my understanding is correct, the major difference between the two bills is this: in Part 7 of Bill C-43, the Bank of Canada and the Canada Pension Plan are excluded. Furthermore, in Bill C-277, the \$100 million in question is spread over 12 months, whereas you're talking about a total of \$100 million over five fiscal years. Therefore, the differences between the two bills are minor.

Don't worry. I'm not planning to ask you questions about the bill's technicalities. Let me quote something you said in the House of Commons last February 22: "I would, however, be prepared to support the referral of Bill C-277 to a committee [...]"

Approximately four weeks later, you tabled a bill that was similar in every respect. Bill C-277 could have been amended, as you were prepared to do on February 22, 2005, to address the situation set out in Part 7 of Bill C-43.

What is the rationale behind Part 7 of Bill C-43? Do government bills often draw their inspiration from private member's bills? I trust that you had no political motives for drafting Part 7 of Bill C-43. I'd really appreciate confirmation of that fact.

• (1720)

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think there are two answers I can give to that. One is that I said, as you know, I thought the intention of your bill was good and that it was something that I felt should go to committee. I had conversations with you in which I indicated that I felt there were elements of it that would need some modification and that there were elements of it I thought were problematic.

Having said that, the bill you're referencing is not my bill; it's the bill of the finance minister, and these issues are shared with the finance minister—for example, the application to foundations, and the Auditor General herself reports to the finance minister. “Reports” to the finance minister is using the wrong word, because the Auditor General reports to the House, but she has relationship for these issues with the Department of Finance. So they undertook to write this bill in accordance with the policies they were supporting and the negotiations with her. There were extensive discussions with the Auditor General particularly around the foundations that the Comptroller General worked on, but worked on for the Department of Finance, because they are the owners of that particular bill.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: So then, if I understand what you're saying, discussions took place between the Finance Department, which tabled Bill C-43, and the Auditor General. Therefore, you had nothing to do with Part 7 of Bill C-43. Is that correct?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: What is part 7? Is part 7 the application of the Auditor General to the foundations or the application of...? Yes?

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Yes.

You weren't consulted, or brought in to the process in any way whatsoever?

Therefore, you had no purely political reasons for introducing Bill C-43, which closely resembles the other bill. To your knowledge, has the government often looked to a private member's bill for direct inspiration?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think the government is continually inspired by private members, but to suggest there were base political reasons, I couldn't imagine the finance minister doing that.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: So then, to get back to the first part of my question, you're saying that the Treasury Board Secretariat was never consulted about Part 7 of Bill C-43 which pertains to foundations and calls for broader powers for the Auditor General. You're saying that all of this was decided by the Finance Department and by the Auditor General. Is that correct?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No. I said this is not my bill. It's not a Treasury Board bill, it's a Department of Finance bill, and it was put forward by the Minister of Finance.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Were you consulted, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes, absolutely. It is the Comptroller General who reports to me the discussions, and nobody puts forward a bill without there being extensive consultation at cabinet also. So absolutely, I was consulted on it. The ownership of the bill, though, is not mine

You will notice from conversations you and I had in other areas of the House, other than the chamber, that there were elements of the bill that I did not support, and I spoke about that also, particularly the issue around the foundations.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Could I please have five more seconds?

[English]

The Chair: Is it a short question? Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: In conclusion, let me remind you of what you said: “I would, however, be prepared to support the referral of Bill C-277 to a committee [...]” Yet, despite saying that, you introduced another piece of draft legislation. That is unacceptable.

• (1725)

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: It's referral to committee, absolutely. That's what I said. Did it get referred to committee?

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur Sauvageau.

Madam Marleau, five minutes.

Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.): I have two questions. The first one is a progress report.

There's the problem I've brought up many times before about the intake of new public servants and how if you live within so many kilometres of the capital you can apply for the jobs, and if you don't you can't. And most of our young people are disqualified from applying for these jobs because they don't have a permanent address in the capital or in Toronto. I know that everyone has said there's work in progress, so I'd like to know where we're at on that one.

And there's another thing I'd like to know. You talked about these regional councils. I take it these are public servants in these regional councils. Is there one specifically for northern Ontario, or is there only one for Ontario located in Toronto?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'm going to say there is one for northern Ontario, although I must say I have not specifically met one from northern Ontario. For example, for Manitoba there's one; in most provinces there would be one. In Quebec there would be more. There would be subdivisions.

I did meet with one unit in Kingston, so there are sub-regional councils, but I'm not sure exactly what the structure is in northern Ontario. I would believe, given that there is one in the Kingston area, there would be one in your area also. I did meet with the central group on Friday of last week, actually.

With respect to the progress report, it concerns regional advertising and recruitment positions. I don't have an update for you. The Public Service Commission manages that particular file. I agree with you, though, that this has been around a long time now. I know they had done a great deal of work on how they managed it. It's fundamentally an intake volume management problem; that is the argument they will make.

You could do one of two things. I can ask them to provide you with a progress report, or you can call them before you. You can do it either way.

Hon. Diane Marleau: I'd like that, please, because with new technologies I don't think it's necessary any more. I think there could be a program that just vets the applications and gives everybody a chance.

Hon. Reg Alcock: The other issue that would be worth looking at in this new world, where we're delegating more of that responsibility to departments to deliver... It would be interesting to consider how that policy gets played out in that regard.

There is fundamentally a problem—

Hon. Diane Marleau: A very big problem.

Hon. Reg Alcock: —with entry-level positions in particular. Unlike with a corporation that can pick out five, deal with them, and ignore everybody else, if a Canadian citizen applies for a job, we go through the process of responding to that. If you get 25,000 people applying for a receptionist position in an office, it just becomes enormously costly.

Hon. Diane Marleau: Well, part of our problem of course is the fact that when the cuts were made in the mid-nineties, the cuts were made in the regions, and frankly, there haven't been very many openings of public service jobs in the regions. The openings have been in the capitals, and our young people just can't apply for them because they don't have a permanent address in the capital or in Toronto.

It's extremely costly to take your new graduate and set him up in Ottawa or Toronto so he can apply for a \$25,000-a-year job. I think a lot of our families would like to see our young people have the same access to jobs as those in the capital.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Martin, go ahead.

Mr. Pat Martin: I'll just ask one really brief question.

I'm just interested to know, Minister, how it is that we asked the Governor General or at least a representative of Rideau Hall to come to this committee and answer questions about the budget and estimates of the Governor General, but we learned today it will be you in fact who will be here to give a spirited defence, I presume, of the expenditures of Rideau Hall. By what twisted logic did that come about, by what cruel twist of fate?

I think we are on camera.

• (1730)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think the representatives from the Governor General will be here.

Mr. Pat Martin: I would certainly hope so, because I'd be disappointed if they refused to come to our committee.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I want to be clear on that, Mr. Martin. It was unusual to ask the Governor General to come forward to do that, and the very first time we did it, the Governor General's office was here. They were forthcoming and they put information on the table. They've never resisted that.

I think there has been a feeling, as this debate has become more political, that the Governor General herself is enjoined from coming here. She can't come here; that's well established. But you have two public servants coming without anyone who can deal with the policy issues from the perspective of the government, so it was felt that in addition to them there should be someone who represents the government at the table. I volunteered because I enjoy coming to this committee, and I just thought it would be a unique and creative discussion.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Pat Martin: Fair enough.

Hon. Reg Alcock: That's why.

I want to make it very clear there is no attempt on the part of the Governor General not to be here or not to be as forthcoming as she always is.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I just have a little bit to add to that, in regard to information I believe you promised to provide to the committee. It was to give the expenditures on the Governor General's office by all the other departments so we have the same type of figure we received, I believe, when you were chair of the committee about a year ago. That really gives a true or better picture of all the money spent on the Office of the Governor General. Will you be prepared with that on Thursday?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I will undertake to see that is collected and made available to you.

I should say one other thing. The dilemma in these kinds of meetings is always that you only see a very tiny way into what is a very large and complex subject. If members have questions they have not been able to get answered or wish additional information, you only need to ask, and we will endeavour to provide it—so you can understand the deep creativity of Treasury Board.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Szabo has a question.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Minister, you may be aware that the committee has decided it would like to do a more fulsome review of two of the areas, namely Service Canada and the Governor General's office. I would ask you, in preparation for Thursday and just knowing how this committee has operated, to please come prepared to explain any notable variances, positive or negative, in terms of the financials. I think it's also very important that we have the dimensions of the activity that goes on compared to the traditional level of activity of the Governor General's office.

As well, because there was a very significant cut in the Governor General's estimates in the last round, please familiarize yourself with how they dealt with that and what impact it had on the office. I understand, for instance, they transferred or delayed staff training as one of the elements.

Finally, I think it's going to be extremely important that we have a handle on this issue of what the Governor General's estimates are and how they relate to the activities under her purview, separating that from, for instance, the foreign affairs department—which would pick up expenses related to non-domestic travel—the National Capital Commission, and the RCMP. We understand that those relate to her activities, but it's very important that the case be made that the level of activity in the Governor General's plans and priorities is consistent with the estimates that have been tabled and that to change any of those estimates has a direct bearing on either the volume or the level of those activities and possibly the staffing of the Governor General's function.

So I would ask you to be sensitive to those needs of the committee.

Hon. Reg Alcock: You referenced Service Canada. If you wish to have a fulsome discussion of Service Canada, it would be better to bring Madam Robillard before the committee to do that. She is the minister responsible. Treasury Board, of course, provides the coordinating function and support for that, but I answer questions mainly on the staffing because I have a responsibility to protect our employees who are involved in that.

On the issue of the Governor General, Mr. Szabo, I will endeavour to do all of that. There's this question of horizontally mapping all the information. Given that we have about 48 hours, if that has not been done, I'm going to have to check very carefully.

What would be useful would be to take the map that was done before, do the new one, and look at the variances. Whether that can be accomplished in this period of time, given the complexities, I do not know. If it can be done, it will be done, and to the extent it can be done, it will be done.

● (1735)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are out of time; we have votes coming.

Mr. Minister, thank you very much for appearing today, providing the information, and answering the questions. If you're too busy to go to the vote, that would be okay on my part.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Reg Alcock: Well, if a few of you want to join me, I'm quite happy to sit here and keep working, but I get to pick the ones.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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