



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

PROC • NUMBER 026 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, March 8, 2012

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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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•(1205)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, all. It's great to be back here today.

We're looking at our estimates. We have with us today the Speaker of the House and the Clerk of the House. It's always great to have them and the guests they bring to this committee.

We're going to start off with an opening statement. Mr. Speaker, go ahead, please. Then we'll go to questions.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to be here today and to present the House of Commons supplementary estimates (C) for fiscal year 2011-2012. I am joined today by the Clerk. Following a brief address, we'll gladly respond to any questions that you may have.

The proposed supplementary estimates (C) for the House of Commons total \$11.7 million. I would like to stress at the outset that all items in the House of Commons supplementary estimates were presented to, and approved by, the Board of Internal Economy.

For reference purposes, you have been given a document showing the voted appropriations and statutory appropriations that are included supplementary estimates (C).

To facilitate today's discussion, I will provide a brief overview of each item in the order in which it was presented.

[*Translation*]

Let's begin with the voted appropriations. The voted appropriations in the supplementary estimates (C) total \$2.7 million. Here are the details.

To begin, the supplementary estimates (C) provide additional funding of \$413,840 for fiscal year 2011-2012 to cover the revised elector supplement. This funding is necessary because of an increase in the number of ridings that are now eligible for either a new or revised elector supplement.

According to the official electoral list published following the May 2011 general election, these changes affect 60 ridings. As you know, members who represent densely populated constituencies receive an elector supplement that remains in effect for the duration of a parliament. This graduated supplement is added to the basic

budget when there are 70,000 or more electors on the final list of electors for the constituency.

[*English*]

Next, the supplementary estimates (C) allocate \$294,552 for miscellaneous requirements. These funds were allocated to help members with special needs carry out their parliamentary functions.

The supplementary estimates (C) also include funding of \$7.3 million for election costs that arose from the general election of May 2, 2011. Of this amount, \$4.7 million were statutory appropriations. The remaining \$2.6 million represents voted authorities to cover costs such as severance pay for staff of members and House officers who were not re-elected, provisions to help former members resettle, provisions to allow former members to complete outstanding parliamentary business and operations in their Ottawa and constituency offices, and provisions for costs associated with moving a constituency office to a new location.

Supplementary estimates (C) also reflect the fact that a sum of \$556,000 from fiscal year 2011-2012 was reprofiled to fiscal year 2012-2013 to enhance the House's asset management system. The current asset management system provides limited information to support the effective management of the life cycle of assets. The upgrades that will be made with this allocation of funds will help to improve the ongoing management, accounting, and reconciliation of assets, while providing support for strategic and operational planning.

This project was scheduled to be completed in 2011-2012, but it had to be delayed because of the general election and the Auditor General's performance audit.

[*Translation*]

The supplementary estimates (C) also include the reprofiling of \$105,000 in funding for the implementation of a new online recruitment tool. This new tool will help improve the staffing process, which is currently time-consuming and somewhat inefficient.

The current economic climate has resulted in an ever-increasing number of applications being received for every position that is advertised. Without the ability to pre-screen, the staffing process can take so long that the House runs the risk of losing the most qualified candidates.

A new online recruitment tool is critical to ensure that the House remains competitive in today's market.

[English]

In addition to the \$2.7 million in voted appropriations that I just outlined, these supplementary estimates (C) also include an amount of \$9 million in statutory appropriations.

As you know, statutory items are those that Parliament has approved through other legislation that sets out both the purpose of expenditures and the terms and conditions under which they may be made. Statutory appropriations are therefore displayed in the supplementary estimates for information purposes only.

Referring once again to the document that has been provided, the first of the statutory appropriations in the supplementary estimates (C) is a \$3 million increase to the Members of Parliament Retiring Allowances and Retirement Compensation Arrangements accounts.

This increase reflects a Treasury Board decision. As we know, the Treasury Board is responsible for determining and managing these accounts based on actuarial calculations.

[Translation]

In addition to the \$2.6 million in voted appropriations to cover election costs, the supplementary estimates (C) also provide for \$4.6 million in statutory appropriations required to cover severance pay for members who were not re-elected.

• (1210)

[English]

Finally, the supplementary estimates (C) include funding of \$1.3 million for fiscal year 2011-12 to offset the increase in travel costs for the travel point system.

The travel point system ensures that all members have equal access to travel resources, regardless of where their constituency is located, and each fiscal year members are allocated 64 points. Travel under the travel point system is a non-discretionary statutory expense, as per the Parliament of Canada Act.

The current budget is not sufficient to cover rising travel costs, and this is why an additional \$1.3 million has been allocated.

[Translation]

That concludes my brief overview of the House of Commons supplementary estimates (C) for fiscal year 2011-2012.

[English]

At this time, the Clerk and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You're so informative that I'm sure we have no questions.

However, we'll offer questions to the members, starting with Mr. Kerr. You have seven minutes for the first round.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. You're so generous, and I appreciate that.

Welcome to the Speaker, the Clerk, and the House staff. It's nice to have you here, and I promise I won't ask about reserving rooms for receptions or that sort of thing today. We'll leave that alone. For a rookie star, you did very well and seemed to understand your budget.

I know we're going to get into a lot of detail; probably I'll be sharing my time, because I only want to focus on one thing first.

What came as a great surprise to me as a chair of a committee is that even with all the upgraded rooms and terrific facilities we have, we can only have two live coverages at one time. I haven't yet received an answer, not that I've dug that deeply, but if we had, for example, an ombudsman in today, we couldn't get it covered unless we tried to bump another committee.

I'm wondering if you could explain that background. Are there plans to make changes to accommodate more?

I certainly know that a number of the rooms are set up for that purpose, but because we can only cover two, it means that a number of witnesses and meetings go by without their having the opportunity to be covered. I've had members ask about that, and this seemed to be the opportunity to raise it.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: That is an excellent question. I know there is always competition for limited resources when it comes to these types of things.

I will have to ask the Clerk to handle the more technical aspect of what the IT department may have had to deal with on that.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien (Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): As you say, we have the two rooms set up for televising committees. We realize there is pressure on the use of those rooms.

Over time, one of the problems we're facing is that with the long-term vision and plan and all the renovations that are being planned for new committee rooms, that is likely to be in the mix. We don't have any plans right now to allow for televising in all the committee rooms.

That is partly because of the gavel-to-gavel coverage of the House of Commons and the televising of not only committees of the House of Commons but also of the Senate on CPAC. The number of hours of television exceeds the amount that is feasible to distribute via CPAC, so we're trying to resolve an ongoing balance.

Mr. Greg Kerr: You're saying there are only two rooms that could do the televising. There aren't more rooms.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Two are permanently set up for it.

Mr. Greg Kerr: You're saying the others would be temporary, if that.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: That's right.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay. That's maybe part of the confusion, but in terms of the teleconferencing, are there still only two that can do that at one time?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Oh, no. I'm sorry. I thought you were talking about the televising.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I was, but I just—

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: The teleconferencing is in the new rooms—for example, at 1 Rideau. We have set up the meetings to allow for teleconferencing, because that's one of the ways in which we think technology can assist committees in having access to witnesses across the country without incurring either the time or expense involved in travel.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I'm not going to continue pursuing.... I get it and I appreciate the answer, but I gather that with the sense of some restriction coming on budgets, it may be some time before we go beyond the two rooms. It wouldn't be a top priority right now, I gather.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: The timing now for new or expanded services is probably not the best.

Mr. Greg Kerr: That's a very good answer. Thank you very much, and I'll yield my time.

The Chair: We'll let Mr. Lukiwski take the rest.

• (1215)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): I'll maybe just take one or two minutes. How much time do we have left?

The Chair: You have three minutes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: It's three minutes.

Since we're in a public meeting, for the benefit of those people who may be listening or are going to look at the transcripts, could you explain why you first presented the supplementary estimates to the Board of Internal Economy before coming here?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: The Board of Internal Economy has to approve spending to support members of Parliament in their parliamentary functions. If the board doesn't approve a particular expenditure, there's no point in asking Treasury Board for the money. That's the first place where the House determines there's a need for the money.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I think a number of Canadians would probably be unsure what the Board of Internal Economy is, which is a story unto itself.

My question, specifically, is this. You've got \$11.7 million in supplementary estimates; could you have, in your opinion, anticipated any of these supplemental expenses prior? Could they have been put into the main estimates, or did they catch you completely off guard?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: If you go down the list and look at it, quite a large aspect of the supplementary estimates were caused by the election, whether it was for dealing with members who weren't re-elected or dealing with severance for staff and things like that.

You can't really predict.... Now we might be able to, but at the time it was impossible to predict when that might happen or what the results might be. If there are few members not re-elected, then there's a different cost than if there are many. Those things will always have to be dealt with through that type of channel.

As well, some of the special requirements for individual members are dealt with by the board as they arrive. It's a little bit difficult. On the whole, these are things that came up in a manner that was virtually impossible to predict

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Do we have any time?

The Chair: There's one minute left.

Go ahead, Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): I may have missed the nuance of what was asked before, but it's my understanding that we have six or eight rooms that have the ability for teleconferencing, but we only have sufficient staff available for two or three of those at one time. We have the physical capabilities, but the personnel capabilities seem limited.

Am I correct on that?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: The distinction was between televised and teleconferencing.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I'm referring to teleconferencing. If I said televised, I was....

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Mr. Albrecht, I think you are correct that there are restrictions on the number of staff, because we have the number of staff that we've found appropriate to handle the average number of requests for teleconferencing. It's unusual to have a situation in which there is more demand for teleconferencing than we have staff to handle it, so I don't think that's proved to be a problem.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Then that's never been an issue as far as—

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I'd have to check. I would hesitate to say “never”, but it's unlikely to have been a regular issue, because it would be something we would have had to address.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Well, it would seem to me that—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Comartin, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you. I may not take them all, and Ms. Charlton will pick up if I don't.

Thank you Mr. Speaker and Madam Clerk, for being here.

I just have three questions. The first is regarding the supplementary estimates (C) in terms of the amount of \$413,000 for the revised elector supplement. Would we not have known that at the start of the fiscal period, and could we not have estimated that amount?

Was it census? I think the chair has already answered, so....

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I didn't hear what the chair said.

Mr. Joe Comartin: He has a really bad habit, Mr. Speaker, of interfering in the process.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: What did you say before the—

The Chair: I guessed that it was likely because the census came out and we redistributed ridings.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Yes. It's based on census data. That is where the electoral list originally comes from. Any riding that has more than 70,000 registered electors in it is entitled to the supplement, so there you are.

A voice: Any other questions for Joe?

Mr. Joe Comartin: I'm trying to ignore him, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I've never been heckled by a chair before.

Mr. Joe Comartin: You should come to the meeting regularly. It happens all the time here.

With regard to the online recruitment tool, could you describe how that actually functions?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I'm going let Audrey deal with that, since that's part of House administration and recruiting personnel.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: That is basically a way for people to put forward their CVs and to apply for jobs online. It allows us to use the online information to do a triage for the people who will move on to the next stage.

One of the things we've found, as the Speaker mentioned in his opening remarks, is that we have a growing number of applications for any kind of position that comes open, so we need to use the technology that is available in order to be able to work smarter to get through these hundreds of applicants and cull those that we want to keep through the various stages of the selection and competitive process.

• (1220)

Mr. Joe Comartin: Just to use an example, suppose I and a thousand other people put in our applications, and I'm not qualified because I don't have enough years of experience. Would the program automatically exclude that person?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: This is still in the process of being developed, which is why it's been moved to this fiscal year, but you would automatically be counted out, and letters would be prepared automatically for you saying this is why you have not proceeded to the next step.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Is it the program itself that does the pre-screening?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Joe Comartin: My final question is regarding the \$1.3 million increase for the travel points system.

This week I looked at my travel and saw it had dropped by about almost 20% because of the election. I'm just wondering why there would be an increase, because a large number of MPs would have had a decrease in the number of points they used.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: We hadn't sought an increase in the actual...

We fund the travel for MPs on an actual basis and we've been cash-managing that now for a good number of years. The kinds of increases that have occurred because of taxes and surtaxes for fuels and this, that, and the other thing haven't been in our base budget. With the new crop of MPs, we realized that we were not going to be able to continue to cash-manage it, so we've asked for a top-up to the travel budget in order to be able to pay for the various increases that have happened over the years.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Again I go to the point that this year, April-May of 2011, would have seen a dramatic decrease in the cost. The travel points system would have had hardly any demand for those two months. I would have thought that such a drop in demand would have more than offset any increase in cost for some of the other points, such as fuel, surcharges, or whatever else.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I don't think I'm quite following your logic there.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Because of the election, we were simply not travelling. We weren't using travel points for almost two months.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I realize that, but that doesn't change the fact that the base budget for the travel points was underfunded. We did not have the moneys required to pay for what the travel cost.

Perhaps I can ask Mark Watters, the chief financial officer, to come to the table and—

Mr. Joe Comartin: I'm just having a hard time, Madame Clerk, because—

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I realize that in an election year travel costs were lower than usual, but we're trying to address a chronic underfunding.

Mr. Joe Comartin: But the overfunding because of the actual usage was, at least in my personal example, 20%. I used 20% fewer miles this year than I did in previous years. I would have thought that would have been more than enough to offset these other costs.

Mark, would you comment?

Mr. Mark G. Watters (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think it could be that what the member is expressing is an isolated case.

When we accumulate all the costs for all the members in the House, we find that the budget has remained static since at least 2009-10, which was the last time we topped up the travel budget. It was established at about \$21.3 million, and we had been spending in the neighbourhood of \$22.6 million for some time.

As the Clerk was explaining, when there was room in other budgets to be able to supplement the travel budget to pay for it, then we did so, but we've exhausted the capacity to do that, so we've had to ask for a top-up of \$1.3 million in travel to align that budget with what we're actually spending, the \$22.6 million.

It does not reflect the funding for the entire point system, but because it's a statutory item, it's always topped up to the amount we actually spend in a particular year. We've now adjusted so that it's based on the most recent spending pattern. If members were, on average, to use more points going forward, we'd be back here again asking for more money as well, because it's always reset to what we actually spend.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Garneau, go ahead, please, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): I thank the Speaker and the Clerk for a very thorough presentation.

Being a new MP, I don't feel this uncontrollable urge to fill my seven minutes, so I'll pass it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Would anybody on that side like four minutes' time?

Go ahead, Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Sure.

Again I join with all my colleagues in thanking you for being here—particularly Speaker Scheer, since this is your first appearance, I believe, before this committee.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I haven't been in a committee in any capacity since 2005.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Then welcome.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): I noticed that wasn't in your campaign letter.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I'll ask more of a general question, then.

You're new to this committee. You're also obviously new to the Chair, so my first question would be more of a general one: does anything about the overseeing of the House administration surprise you? Are there things you're seeing now for the first time that you were unprepared for, and subsequent to that, are there things in the brief period of time that you have been in the chair that you would be looking to change or improve?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: The biggest thing, I think, that maybe most people, including members, don't realize is that the House of Commons has to interact with several other government bodies, whether it's the RCMP providing security or the National Capital Commission for things around or Public Works for the physical things, so there's a myriad of layers that are not always so straightforward when you're dealing with something.

In terms of changing things, a few months after I was elected Speaker, the Board of Internal Economy was invited to participate in the strategic operating review. We are going through it very thoroughly at the board level, and I think all members are looking for ways to do things more efficiently on the Hill. I don't have an answer for you yet on those types of things, because decisions haven't been made, but there are certainly a lot of things that the Clerk's team, including me, is going through to make sure we are making very good use of taxpayers' money. We are looking to make sure that we're doing things in the most efficient way possible while still providing a high level of service to members so that they can carry out their duties in the manner they've become accustomed to.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I can see where there would be a couple follow-ups, but I think some of my colleagues also indicated they might have a question, so I'll cede my time to my colleagues.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn will be first, and then we'll have Mr. Zimmer.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

You mentioned security, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that always struck me and I don't know how many others is that we have a multiplicity of police forces on the Hill. What's your view, and are we going to get serious about rationalizing that down to perhaps one?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I think it would certainly make sense to do those types of things. We have partners we have to work with on the Senate side, as well as the RCMP, to make sure the goal of providing all members with a safe and secure place is maintained. As well, there are the unique security concerns of various high-level officials.

Discussions are constantly.... It's also part of the long-term vision and planning aspect. There are many aspects to that type of thing, both for the physical buildings as well as for security.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I understand the requirement for the RCMP, but I don't see any requirement for having a separate force for one end of the building and a separate force for the other end of the building. That makes no sense to me.

An hon. member: We've had that discussion before.

• (1230)

The Chair: Mr. Zimmer, you have 30 seconds.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Sure. I shouldn't be long.

To get back to the teleconferencing issue, a lot of us on different committees are looking into increasing its use.

I have a curious question. Do we have an average on having in-house visitors as opposed to an average on teleconferencing? What are the cost differences there? A lot of these sorts of things can actually cost more in the long run. I'm curious as to whether we have an average-to-average costing.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Mr. Chairman, I don't have those figures with me, but I can certainly check with committees and information services and look to providing that to the committee.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It would be interesting to see accurate cost comparisons.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Charlton, would you like four minutes of grilling—?

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Thank you; I would—well, at least I'd like to ask a couple of questions.

First of all, let me make a comment. I always appreciate these kinds of presentations because it gives me an opportunity to catch up to the new government lingo. I never knew that moving an expenditure from one fiscal year to another meant you were “reprofiling” money. I'll try to use that in my personal budgeting as well. It sounds very impressive. Thank you.

I do have a question about the supplementary estimates (C), especially since they deal with the period since the last election.

I wonder if you could tell me whether there has been an increase in the costs associated with interpretation. I know from our caucus that the need for interpretation services has dramatically increased since the last election, obviously because of the huge success we had in Quebec. We're now functioning in a fully bilingual way. I know the interpreters we have do an amazing job for us, but I also know the resources are really, really stretched.

It is important to be able to continue to provide that service to both our caucus members and our staff for meetings. I wonder if there's a reflection of that increased need in the numbers before us today.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: It's my understanding that nothing in the supplementary estimates is for that aspect, but perhaps Mark could tell us if there has been a higher level of expenditure on interpretation.

Mr. Mark G. Watters: I'll have to get back to you exactly on that.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Through you, Mr. Chairman, as Ms. Charlton has noted, there are increased uses of interpretation by virtue of the official opposition's situation. We're monitoring that very closely and we're in close contact with the government department that provides the interpretation services. That's paid for out of a government department budget allocated to us.

I know they're stretched very thin at the moment, but they're finding that the budget they have seems to be adequate to their needs for the moment. We're keeping a very close eye on that situation, for the simple reason that there have been unanticipated calls for interpretation. For example, the interpretation provided to members in a given meeting with other members is one thing, but if it's staff with other staff, then that falls into a different category, according to the government guidelines. That's something we've negotiated with them to keep a close eye on.

As Mark was saying, I can certainly talk to them to see what kinds of moneys we're talking about in terms of increases.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thanks. That would be really helpful.

Can you tell me which department that is? I'm sorry; maybe I should know that, but I don't. Which government department is actually responsible for that?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: It's Public Works and Government Services.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Okay. Thank you very much.

The other question I have is to understand what I'm reading here in terms of the ministry summary on the supplementary estimates (C). It says there are expenditures in lieu of residence to the Speaker of the House of Commons and in lieu of an apartment to the Deputy Speaker.

Let me just ask the question straight up. What is that?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: That is part of the members' allowances act. It's a stipend, in addition to salary, paid to the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker.

Ms. Chris Charlton: You have a residence at—

Hon. Andrew Scheer: It was there when I got here—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Andrew Scheer: It wasn't something I...

Ms. Chris Charlton: Methinks thou dost protest too much.

Seriously, I am just asking for clarification, because you, as Speaker, have a residence here in Ottawa, right? Does the Deputy Speaker as well?

• (1235)

Hon. Andrew Scheer: No.

Ms. Chris Charlton: If you have a residence, what does "an allowance in lieu of residence" mean, when you clearly have a residence here?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Where do you see "in lieu of"?

Ms. Chris Charlton: "Program expenditures, including allowances in lieu of residence to the Speaker of the House of Commons..."

is what the sheet in front of me says. I'm just trying to understand what that means.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I confess that this has caught me off-guard as well. Perhaps by virtue of my Catholic background, I've just seen it so often that it seems like something that I'm quite used to. However, I will check to see exactly what it means.

There are allowances that are provided by the Speaker. This particular formulation, I confess, I've never even read before.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I haven't seen that wording used before. I know—

Ms. Chris Charlton: Have you seen the money? No, I'm just kidding.

The Chair: Let's reprofile it—

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I think it's some sort of nominal amount like \$2,000, or something of that ilk, but the business of an apartment for the Deputy Speaker, I confess, is complete news to me.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Just for information, I'd be really interested in just knowing what that is, if you wouldn't mind.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Yes.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I can assure you that the allowance is not \$290 million.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: We'll get back—

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thank you.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: —to you with the colourful little detail there.

The Chair: As the Clerk knows, we're in the process of crossing things like that out of the Standing Orders, so we could help you cross some of those things out too, if you would like.

Mr. Lukiwski is next, and then Mr. Albrecht; I think you're sharing with him.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I didn't realize I was, but I'm pleased to do so.

Actually, I had two quick questions. One was a follow-up on my first intervention on finding efficiencies, if possible, within the House administration. You had mentioned you've not completed that exercise. I was just curious as to how you were going forward with that exercise—whether you felt that you are going to be able to come up with a 5% or 10% reduction in expenses on the administration size, and, consequent to that, whether we would be able to then be informed of that. I think that would be an interesting examination.

The other thing I would like to point out more than anything else—and we've talked about it twice already—is on the security side. This committee has been seized with the security issue for years, quite frankly. I think there's been unanimity around this table for years, regardless of which members sit at this table, that there should only be one security force, but for many reasons—and I won't get into them now—we've never been able to get to the point where we have agreement. There are probably some territorial imperatives going on here.

Regardless of that, would you as Speaker be in a position to make a recommendation on that issue, if in fact you are as concerned as we are that we have a large expense item as a result of having two separate security forces when one would do?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I can tell you that finding efficiencies has been before the board for some time, and it is a comprehensive process. I don't want to prejudge the work of the board or what members of the board may ultimately decide in terms of a percentage or a number, but I can say that it is ongoing. Apart from that, both the Speaker's office and the Clerk's side knew it was coming, and we have been looking for ways that we can do more with less, or in some cases do the same amount with less, depending on the circumstance.

I have had a number of discussions on the security issue and on harmonizing it. Again, ultimately both the Senate committee on internal economy and the House Board of Internal Economy will have to make decisions, figuring out where the authority stems from, and the oversight and the proper management of it. I continue to have those types of meetings and briefings on it. All I can say is to stay tuned. I know it's been discussed a long time, but no decisions have been made at this point.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I have one quick follow-up question, then, specifically on that subject. Have you had dialogue and are you continuing to have discussions with the Speaker of the Senate on that issue of security?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: It is a bit different over there. It's not so much with the Speaker himself, but with their body, the committee on internal economy, and the chair of that committee. I have had some discussions on that issue.

• (1240)

The Chair: Mr. Albrecht is next.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll follow up briefly on the point Mr. Zimmer was starting on in terms of the savings that might be realized if we were to utilize the technical abilities in teleconferencing as opposed to bringing witnesses in every time.

I recognize there is often great value in the physical presence of a witness, but when you have witnesses here for literally a 10-minute speech and three or four answers to committee members—a total investment of maybe 20 minutes of their time—there are also opportunities not only for savings to taxpayers but also for saving the person's time in coming here. I'm wondering if we could follow through with that study in terms of what the actual potential savings are.

That brings me back to the question I raised earlier in terms of our having 10 rooms that can do it but only enough staff for two or three of them. If we're going to utilize teleconferencing more fully in the future, we may need to look at an option to have backup staff trained and ready and available, so that we're not faced with a situation of needing six rooms for teleconferencing on a given day—I'm just using wild numbers—but not having the personnel to actually make use of the great facilities we've invested in and taxpayers have paid for. It makes no sense to have it sitting there being requested if we don't have the personnel to actually make it work.

It's just a comment. You can make a response if you want to now, but it's more for the future. I think it's a concern we would have going forward.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Through you, Mr. Chairman, to Mr. Albrecht, one of the things Mr. Speaker has been talking about in terms of the ongoing discussions and the ongoing analysis we're doing of our services is precisely this kind of thing.

For example, as you've pointed out, there is not the capacity right now to handle teleconferencing in every committee room. What we would look at is the idea of having people who are now conceivably attached to other things become available and be trained in handling that sort of thing in order to effect those savings. It's certainly the kind of efficiency we're looking at. We would be prepared to support it in order to gain precisely the kinds of advantages you've described.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Charlton.

Ms. Chris Charlton: I have one last question for clarification purposes.

I note here again in the ministry summary that the Senate ethics officer falls under our set of estimates. Why is that? Why would that person be under the House of Commons estimates?

The Chair: It is under Parliament.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Apparently the full synopsis here is for the full Parliament, but the only thing that is added onto this page that's not the House of Commons is the Senate.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I thought it was another case of apartments for people. I was panicking there.

Ms. Chris Charlton: It's just a reprofiling. Don't worry.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Just send your invoice to us, and we'll get it—no.

I welcome anybody with just a one-off question, as we have a couple of minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: This one relates more to the Standing Orders, but it does have significant financial implications. I'm just curious: when people cause a disturbance in the gallery and are held in custody by the Sergeant-at-Arms and can't be released until they pay \$4, I'm wondering how many of those fines he's collected and where that money has gone.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Semi-seriously, have you ever collected \$4?

Mr. Kevin Vickers (Sergeant-at-Arms, House of Commons): A certain visitor to my backroom once in a while owes me more than \$4.

Mr. Chair, I guess almost two years ago, after several incidents we had in the galleries, the board decided that we should proceed with obstruction charges for those people who make disturbances in the galleries. Since that time it's been our practice to turn these people over to the Ottawa city police. They then face charges under the Trespass to Property Act. They have been getting fines in the smaller range of \$75 to \$100; as well, they're not allowed to come to the Hill for more than a year.

•(1245)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you.

The Chair: But we're out our \$4 is what you're saying.

Mr. Speaker, did you have anything to add to that?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: No, no.

The Chair: Okay, great.

Is there anyone else? Go ahead, Mr. Zimmer, on a one-off.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I have a quick one with regard to the increasing cost of travel points. We've heard some talk about travel passes and stuff like that, but the cost has been borne off personal credit cards and those sorts of things. From your perspective, is there a move now to accommodate that in other ways, so that the funding comes directly from the House? When is that coming? When will it be available?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I can't give you a "when", but I can tell you that this discussion has come up at the board. We are very cognizant of the fact that for many members, especially the further away you go, the more the flight passes cost, so the House of Commons financial team is looking at a way to.... When the details on flight passes come out, I think it's safe to say that there will be an explanation about how to facilitate the process for our members so that they aren't carrying several thousands of dollars in costs for some time.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Is there even an estimated time when that will be forthcoming? Is it a year from now, or two years, or...how soon?

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I don't know if.... I'm told it's within a month.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's within a month. That's what we're looking for. Good. Awesome.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. It's always great to make the members feel happy.

Are there any other questions for our witnesses today?

Then I thank you for being here. Thank you for such a great explanation at the beginning. The questions came very softly today. It was very good, except for that whole apartment thing. We're going to check into that.

I thank you for coming. If there's anything we've asked that you have not been able to answer, please forward the information to us and we'll be able to share that with the committee.

Thank you very much.

Is there anything else for the good of the committee today?

Then the meeting is adjourned.

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