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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Welcome to the 145th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Today, as we continue our study of parallel debating chambers, we are pleased to be joined by Mr. Bruce Stanton, member of Parliament for Simcoe North, who is also the Deputy Speaker and Chair of the Committee of the Whole. As a personal note, he is also the chair of the Canada-Myanmar Friendship Group. For members' information, Mr. Stanton has authored articles on the subject of parallel chambers in both the IRPP's Policy Options magazine and the Canadian Parliamentary Review.

Thank you for being here.

Just before you start, I want to let members know that the delegation from Kenya never made it, so the meeting you got a notice for is not on. Take it off your schedule if you did include it.

Mr. Stanton, we're delighted you're here. I actually think this is one of the most exciting projects that PROC has undertaken, so we look forward to your suggestions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning.

Thank you for the invitation to appear as part of your study of a parallel or concurrent debating chamber for the House of Commons.

[*English*]

Before I get into this, I'd first like to say that I really don't consider myself to be an expert in these matters, but I have shared and will share my perspective today on some of the research I have done in this area. Of course, as some of you may know, some of this was published in the Canadian Parliamentary Review and in the IRPP op-ed the chair mentioned, but these are also my own observations, as a parliamentarian, here since 2006.

I am going to touch on three main things here in my opening comments. The first will be a general description of the concept; second will be some reasons we might be considering this kind of innovation; and third will be some thoughts on how, if the decision were to proceed, that might be dealt with.

After that, of course, I'd be happy to take your questions.

[*Translation*]

Firstly, in terms of the second chamber itself, the briefing materials and the testimony of Mr. Natzler, the clerk of the UK House, will give you a rough idea of how the system works. Both Australia's House of Representatives and the UK Parliament use them. Australia was the first country to implement the structure, in 1993, and the UK followed, to a degree inspired by Australia's experience, in 1999.

[*English*]

Each has evolved into a permanent and valued part of its parliamentary institution, and it's noteworthy that their functions and the way they serve MPs and Parliament are somewhat different.

The Federation Chamber in Australia, for example, is used as an adjacent lane for parts of the legislative process, such as second reading and report-stage debates, whereas the U.K. keeps all its consideration of government legislation in the main chamber.

In my view, this is telling. While we share the Westminster parliamentary tradition with our Commonwealth friends in the U.K. and Australia, our Standing Orders, conventions and practices have evolved differently to suit our needs and the priorities of parliamentarians here.

[*Translation*]

However, there are some common virtues of the two second chambers. These virtues include the following.

They have a low quorum of three people, including the chair occupant, a member from the government side and member from the opposition. The forum is less controversial, since the debates by their nature are less divided.

● (1105)

The parallel structure affords more time for members of Parliament to debate and to speak about issues that have direct relevance in their constituencies. The second chambers operate on a fixed schedule that's around 30% to 35% of the time in the main chamber.

The second chambers are seen as a way of managing or supplementing the noncontroversial aspects of the day's business that would otherwise take debating time away from the more consequential business of the main chamber, such as routine proceedings, adjournment debates and members statements.

[*English*]

They can act as a proving ground for testing new procedures that may be considered for implementation in the House, and for MPs to hone their debating skills and familiarity with procedures. They are also a help for newer presiding officers to gain knowledge of their roles and points of procedure that will invariably become helpful when they preside in the House.

They generally operate on the same rules of order as the main chamber. They are televised, transcribed and journaled, and provide a small gallery for the public. In our case we would have to add to that simultaneous translation—in essence, the same way that we support standing committees.

The physical setting is similar to a large committee room. The more intimate setting aids decorum. The U.K. and Australia use a U-shaped design to invite more collegiality across party lines.

Since their inception, each of the two chambers has created new features that have become very popular. In the U.K., as you heard, they use the chamber for e-petition debates that can have in excess of 100,000 signatures. Due to the high level of public interest in these debates, they can attract a big online audience, which have been noted to be sometimes higher than for other debates that are broadcast. In Australia, time is reserved for what is called "constituency statements", like a three-minute S.O. 31, which both members and ministers can use to tailor messages to their own constituents. You'll know that our ministers are prohibited from using that in our S.O. 31 system.

[*Translation*]

The reviews of each second chamber after more than a decade of use—two decades in the case of Australia—show that each overcame the early concerns and skepticism regarding their merit and usefulness.

Secondly, I want to address the reasons for embarking on a project like this. I believe that it's important that any effort to establish a second chamber be based on a reasonable need or short-coming with our current parliamentary system and procedures.

Understanding the scope of the problems would be instrumental in explaining how a proposed second chamber would work, and more importantly, why it's worth doing. Though the outcomes were favourable for the parliaments in our fellow Commonwealth countries, it's recommended that we understand what issue or gap a second chamber would be intended to address.

[*English*]

There should be a cross-party consensus on this before proceeding much further, and it would take some additional work even to land on what the rationale for such a project would be in the Canadian context.

For the examination of where these gaps or areas of improvement could lie, Samara has done some excellent exit surveys of MPs and tapping of the views of MPs currently serving. House leaders, whips past and present, and table officers have an understanding and experience of parliamentary processes that is unique compared with that of the average backbencher, and their insights on where the current system could be improved would be invaluable.

● (1110)

I would also suggest getting a firm understanding of the original motivations for both the Federation Chamber and Westminster Hall, because they are instructive. The way these two chambers operate today reflects very much their initial raison d'être. That is why, for example, Westminster Hall is more a domain for backbench business versus the main chamber, whereas the Federation Chamber acts as more of an adjacent lane for a wider array of House business.

Finally, as you look at possible steps for your study and recommendations, it is worth looking at how the Select Committee on Modernisation proceeded with their investigations into what eventually became Westminster Hall.

[*Translation*]

The select committee was aware that creating a second chamber would be, for the institution, a radical and broad innovation to the usual practices. The UK first looked into the second chamber idea in 1994, based on Australia's success. It wasn't until December 1998 that the select committee tabled a discussion document for members of Parliament presenting the possible advantages of the chamber. At that point, the select committee wasn't even proposing to start a second chamber on an experimental basis.

[*English*]

Their intent was to set the idea out in some detail, so members could give their views on the basis of as much information as possible. They then invited members to comment on the proposal over several months, after which they could determine whether to proceed, but if so, how it might best be implemented. As they explained, members will wish to consider it with care, not only in principle but how it might work in practice.

With the inputs they received from MPs in hand, the modernisation committee tabled its second report in the House on March 24, 1999. It was debated in the House in May, and that second report became the basis of a trial of Westminster Hall starting in November of that year. It was not until 2001-02 that Westminster Hall became a permanent part of the U.K. House of Commons parliamentary process.

[*Translation*]

In summary, I believe that your consideration of this idea is a constructive exercise. Parliament, like any other organization with which we have worked, must constantly seek to improve the efficiency of its internal and administrative processes and make good use of its time. The time demands on parliamentarians is a recurring theme throughout the evolution of our standing orders and our practices and traditions.

[*English*]

Moreover, we should always be looking for ways to demonstrate to our constituents the value and consequence of the exercise of our duties as MPs.

There are many possible advantages to moving ahead with this idea, and the success in the U.K. and in Australia is well established. For our Parliament, having a good grasp of the issues, obstacles or limits that a second parallel chamber could address is the crucial first step.

I thank you for your attention. I'm happy to take your questions, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

[*English*]

Great.

In the report, you referred to the information from Samara. We have a report here. It's in English, but it's in translation, so you will get a copy of that shortly.

Also, we have someone from Samara here. Could you put your hand up, in case anyone wants to talk to you later?

I have just a quick question. Am I correct that the Australian double chamber evolved because the Canberra state chamber did it first? Are you aware of that?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I'm not certain of that, Mr. Chair. I do know that, in the original evolution of this around 1993, it was a fairly volatile time politically for the House of Representatives. They were having real issues with essentially closure of debates, time allocation —"guillotining" was the word they used at that time. They really got to somewhat of an impasse there. I think that got them looking at finding other ways to get on with it. The Federation Chamber was born out of that.

The Chair: We will go to questioning. If it's okay with the committee, I thought we might do one round normally, and then if people are reasonable, just open it up informally to different people, as we have in the past.

Is that okay?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Let's begin.

The Chair: Let's start with Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): Mr. Stanton, all partisanship aside, I'm a fan. Thank you very much. I enjoyed your article when it first appeared in Canadian Parliamentary Review, I think it was.

I've been following this issue and looking into it further in other jurisdictions, much like you have. During my time, I'm going to do two things: I'm going to ask you questions, but I'm also going to give myself the opportunity to vent my spleen on many of these issues.

I say that because I am absolutely envious of many of the things I've heard in witness testimony about Westminster, the clerk there, and what I've read from Australia. I've seen how they have made strides well advanced of what they were back then, both in Australia and England, but also in New Zealand, and how they've managed to do that with a great deal of maturity.

As a matter of fact, if I may be so bold, sometimes they debate the way their House operates in such a mature fashion that it makes us look like a stationary clown car where reasoned debate goes madly off in different directions. That is most disappointing, because we had an episode last year that was absolutely disgraceful, and I think we should all be blamed for that.

I saw it 10 years ago. I saw it 10 months ago. I think ideas like yours get lost, because I don't know if we're mature enough to deal with them yet. That's my view. That's 15 years of my spleen vented.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Simms: There are two things about that. There is the Federation Chamber in Australia and then the Westminster Hall. One is a supplemental, if I may use that term, in the sense of there being over 600 members of Parliament. A lot of it deals with the backbench business of emergency debates, e-petitions and constituency statements. I'd love to get three minutes to talk about my constituency. I think we all should have that. The Australian model is more of a parallel chamber. That's the one that's adjacent.

My opinion is that we would be better served with a parallel way of doing this. In other words, for the actual legislation that's in the House now, we should have the opportunity to go beyond the House and discuss it outside if we want to talk about a certain issue of the day. As a matter of fact, I do believe that we could deal with the issue of travel on Fridays, because it seems like everybody who is in government wants to get rid of Friday sittings. Everybody in the opposition wants to keep Fridays; it doesn't matter what party it is. That's been going on for 50-odd years.

This could be a situation where Friday is set up for a parallel chamber, and you don't have to be there on a Friday; you want to be there on a Friday because it deals with a bill that is pertinent to the people you represent.

Do you have a preference between the two?

● (1115)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I think there are features of both that could be seen as advantageous, depending on how we.... As I stressed in my remarks, this comes down to what we think will work best. I agree with taking a look at this in a mature and less partisan fashion, because you're essentially trying to innovate and improve the processes that serve not only parliamentarians but, through them, the public as well. I think this is where the parallel chambers have worked successfully, and certainly in the case of Westminster Hall with the addition of their debates. They have debates on a number of issues that would never be seen here other than the rare take-note debates that we have in the chamber.

I agree with your point, Mr. Simms, with regard to looking at the U.K. example. They used a modernization committee to take up consideration of just that issue. They were able to bring forward some ideas in fairly precise detail.

On the other point you mentioned with regard to debates and taking the issues of governmental business for additional comment, the chambers do use a form of what we would consider adjournment debates. This is where members of the government and opposition are both present, and there's an opportunity for opposition members to then pose questions. You can have this exchange in the parallel chamber. Let's face it: adjournment proceedings are highly subscribed. Quite often there isn't the time to permit them all.

There are a number of different options. This is why, as opposed to landing on a firm position as to what it should be and what it should entail, I think we should take a good look at some of these advantages, and what we can agree upon we could move forward with.

● (1120)

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes, I think you're right. As I said earlier about the parallel function of it, I think that's the prime importance of a parallel chamber. I think you could cover off the other stuff and constituency statements as well.

In the age of social media, we all want to get on camera so we can record it for our Facebook accounts or what have you. I don't mean that facetiously. It's what we do.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Right.

Mr. Scott Simms: I have so many constituents who say, "Gee, when do you get up in the House and say something?" I tell them that I just did it the day before. But nobody watches CPAC, and if they did, I'd be rather alarmed.

The thing about what you're saying is that I fundamentally agree with the function of it, and it should be flexible in the case of this country, because all the other stuff does mean something to a backbench member of Parliament.

In addition to the legislative function and the vetting, let's go back to the guillotining that you talked about—or as we call it, by a fancier name—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Scott Simms: Speaking of guillotining, government programming started back in the late 1990s. It allows people to see what is available for debate, because you can't do it forever, right? Despite the consternation over time allocation, that we don't like it, we've been using it. And I say "we" meaning around the board. Let's face it, you know, at some point you're going to say, "Why are you cutting this off? Oh, and by the way, how come you haven't passed any legislation yet?"

So how does it help in that situation for this chamber to serve a role?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I think it would be worth considering that in his testimony, Clerk Natzler was right onto something here. It was to say that as we go forward on this, we should be mindful that we're going to do something that at the very least leaves both opposition and government neutral as it relates to the function of a second chamber, that you're not, on the one side, adding or taking away opportunities for government to make sure they can implement their agenda, or on the other side be in any way changing the degree to which the opposition have the opportunity to put those arguments towards the government. At the very least, we should achieve a balance with that if there are going to be changes at all.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your comprehensive reply to Mr. Simms.

I'd also like to welcome Frank Baylis to the committee. He's had a long-time interest in changing our democratic systems to make them more efficient, so he's studied this as well.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you.

First of all, welcome, Bruce. We're glad to have you here.

I want to ask about something from your presentation. You mentioned, and I think this is true for both Westminster Hall and the Federation Chamber, that they operate on a fixed schedule. It's around 30% to 35% of the total sitting hours per week of the House of Commons, or House of Representatives in the case of Australia. Are the numbers right for both of those?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: It seems to be fairly consistent, Mr. Reid.

In each case the chambers have a regular schedule per week, not unlike in the House. That's not to say that each rubric of that schedule is used every week, but for the most part it is, and there's a fixed schedule of set times for a certain part of business to be taken up. For example, in Westminster Hall, on a certain day a time is reserved for e-petition debates, and there's one hour for the liaison committee. There's even a section, I believe, on Thursday for backbench business.

Mr. Scott Reid: And that has to be done in order to allow coordination with the business of the House, so that people aren't expected to be in two places at once, much as with with our committees.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: That's entirely correct, and that's why on average, on balance, the time that's taken in the parallel chamber is around 35% of the total hours that are taken up in the main chamber.

Mr. Scott Reid: So if you had the goal of ramping it up so that it would run at 100% of the number of hours of the main chamber, it would be logistically difficult or impossible, unless you were to have it run into the wee hours of the night.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes, and I think at that point, one would have to wonder.... That would be an even more radical innovation than what we've seen in both of these other parliaments. They were very specific in setting certain aspects of business in the second chamber, and it was directly in line with what they felt they needed to solve or address, gaps or weaknesses with the current system.

Another recurring theme was the time needed in the main chamber. There was never any doubt that the main chamber is the important forum, especially for exchange and debate on the more controversial and consequential issues of the day.

● (1125)

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

The Chair: And votes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: And votes, certainly. As I said, votes are never taken in the parallel chamber.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. That gives us an idea. There are some hard limits on how far you can go, unless you're willing to go into the wee hours of the night, in which case you can go back to the main chamber, because it too shuts down at night, presumably because we are all reluctant to sit overnight—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Most of the time.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, most of the time. Perhaps not this week—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Reid:—but in other weeks.

Here's the thing. The reason I ask that question is that to me.... Others will identify different things they think are of primary concern, but to me the thing that gets squeezed out of the parliamentary calendar, the legitimate business that just doesn't get taken care of the way it should be, is private members' business. I'm not referring to S.O. 31s, although I think members' statements are important. I'm talking about actual private members' legislation. We have a lottery. I'm guessing that about 270 MPs are eligible for the lottery.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes, all of them except ministers, parliamentary secretaries and Deputy Speakers.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, and Deputy Speakers, who are tragically and unfairly excluded in one of the great crimes of our modern times.

We get to about item 150 and then we run out of time.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: I am in this category, with an item of mine coming up soon. It's a motion. We'll likely get the first hour of debate in, but not the second. That's just the way it works. I'm not happy about that. I'm less unhappy than I'd be if I were someone whose item would have come up with the House sitting in July. The point is, we can move that over to a parallel chamber entirely, I would think. I'm just wondering, if we made that the primary focus of a second chamber—effectively a private members' business chamber—whether we would then be able to go through this.

I have a wrinkle to this question. Right now, about 170 people are included. It's reasonable to expect, at least if the supplementaries were to last a century—that's how we should think in an institution like this—that we're talking about 500 members of Parliament. That's a reasonable estimate as to how many members of Parliament there will be a century from now. If I add another 180 items on there, could we still get through a four-year Parliament and allow everybody a fair shot?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Well, it is just as you have described. It's the straight time. We only have one hour a day in the main chamber in which we take up consideration of private members' business, be that bills or motions, so there is a limit there. One could consider adding time to the chamber, I suppose. I don't think there would be agreement to reduce time for government orders and other important parts of the rubric.

When you consider that now only a little more than 50% of eligible members ever get a chance to bring forward a private item for debate in the main chamber, it is conceivable that part of that consideration could be taken up in the parallel chamber and you could essentially move that business along much more quickly.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I would want to think about the consequences of that for supporting the whole process of preparing bills and all of the functions that currently support private members in that area. You'd have to think about that, but it would certainly be doable. It might be one of those areas of current limitations that a parallel chamber could very much address.

Mr. Scott Reid: I have only less than a minute here, and the next question is one that I did actually run by you beforehand.

You have a rotation of House officers, Speakers and Deputy Speakers who serve in the House during normal debates. Would it be necessary to have a separate rotation, perhaps with an expanded body of people or a separate body of people who are chairs and deputy chairs of the parallel chamber?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Again, you could come at that differently. We currently have a panel of chairs, as does the U.K., which is appointed by the Speaker to preside over meetings not just in the House, but also, for example, in association annual general meetings.

There's a designated group of people. In some cases, it includes senators, and I wouldn't see doing that in a House-type committee, but they are eligible for doing that kind of work.

There would be an additional up to 12 hours a week, potentially, where you would need a chair occupant to manage that. The House may want to consider if they would need to add an additional chair occupant on a regular basis to manage those additional hours, but it could be quite easily done.

● (1130)

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move on to Mr. Christopherson.

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thanks, Chair.

Deputy Speaker, thanks so much for attending today.

You and I have similar experience in this place. You arrived in the 39th Parliament in 2006, and I got here in the 38th Parliament, just 18 months before you, so most of our experience is the same.

Again, to speak to my experience in coming to this, I've also been a House leader in opposition at Queen's Park, but I was also a part of the House management committee when we were in government. I served a stint as deputy leader, trying to be a referee, similar to you. I think I have a good feel, from all sides, for the concerns and the opportunities.

Let me just say that since this first came on our radar a few years ago when we started to do a review, you and Frank and Mr. Reid and a few others—Mr. Simms—have really taken this to heart. I've had an interest in it, but some of you have gone further and done the research on it.

I only say that to reflect on having been here long enough to see enough things come to life and then go away, then come to life and go away again. However, I think this has some legs. This has captured our attention. We've continued to work on it and people have taken it to heart. If I can be so bold, albeit I won't be here, my gut tells me that this is going to come to be and that it's going to be a good thing. It's a question of how we do it and the process.

If I could jump ahead in my thinking, I think a trial is going to be a definite component of this, because nobody is going to want to go too fast, too far.

I appreciate your recognizing the politics of this, because there are two sides of it. One is the most efficient way to give all members as much participation as possible, particularly in light of our being in a number of eras where more and more power is devolving to the PMO. That's not just to the executive, but concentrated in the PMO.

If I can make a shot for my motion coming up that speaks to our taking back control of hiring our own agents, I will remind people that we still allow the executive to do the hiring process for someone like our Auditor General. It's our Auditor General, but we let the executive, a subset of Parliament, do the hiring process. That's except for the night before when there's a quick little, “Hey, are you okay with Bob Smith?”, and that's it. That's the extent of consultation. To heck with that; we own it.

To me, this is another aspect of trying to reach out and grab back what the historical purpose of Parliament and individual members were.

I would emphasize that no one speaks better to this than Mr. Reid, in terms of both his longevity here, which surpasses ours, and from his interest and being a historian in his own right.

I do think that a trial is going to be a component. That's the one side of it.

The politics of it on the other hand—and I'm glad you touched on it because we have to deal with that too—is that the government wants as much time as possible to get its bills through so that it can say, “Yes, we allowed lots of debate.” Mr. Simms, I think you nailed it right on. The government gets kind of screwed both ways: If you don't allow debate then you're being undemocratic, and if you don't get bills passed, you're being ineffective. Good luck trying to work your way through that.

When we put this in place, we're going to need to be cognizant of that. That's why I'm really happy we are talking, for now, that this is looked at from the view of enhancing, and I would say returning backbench members to their rightful place as important members. We're not supposed to be here just echoing what our leaders tell us to say or to vote the way that our whips say, although that's what we do a lot of the time. We on this committee should be doing everything we can to enhance and preserve the role of individual members, which historically has been going the wrong way.

This was a really good presentation, by the way. Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you.

Mr. David Christopherson: I liked what you said in noting that we need to reflect on our initial raison d'être. If we stay on that point and let the government of the day, regardless of who it is, know that this is not about trying to play any games with that timing, but rather enhancing the backbench.... Whether it will eventually get into that, remains to be seen.

I will ask you a question. I'm clearing my throat, Scotty.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: I found it curious that you mentioned ministers. Could you expand on that a bit?

As you know, we separate that pretty clearly here, and yet you're bringing.... That brings back some interesting points. Ministers of the Crown—and I've sat as a minister, provincially—are still members in their own right, with constituencies and constituents and the politics of getting re-elected.

What are your thoughts on how we would sort of break with our tradition, or are we better to stay with keeping the ministers out of it because that system works best for us?

What are your thoughts, Bruce?

● (1135)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: As you pointed out, Mr. Christopherson, ministers are still MPs and they rarely get an opportunity to get on the record on matters that are pertinent to the people they represent.

Australia embarked on what's called a “constituency statement”. They initially scheduled 30 minutes for those, meaning there are roughly 10 of those as part of the rubric, I think, once a week where they have the opportunity. On numerous occasions, there had to be motions made to extend the 30 minutes to 60 minutes. This has happened frequently because of the demand for these three-minute constituency statements.

As you know, ministers are not permitted to participate in S.O. 31s, so it was another avenue for them to get on the record, much like in the spirit of the backbench elements of Westminster Hall, on matters that are directly important and related to the people at home. Often this has been the case. Ministers clearly appreciate that as much as anyone.

Mr. David Christopherson: So you think that is something we should at least consider even in the initial trial process?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: It has been a grand success in Australia. Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm probably out of time.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: That was a great exercise to see who could talk the longest without asking a question.

Now I will open it up informally to anyone who would have a question.

Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Chair, I believe my colleague Mr. Reid may have a couple of questions later.

I have a broad question to get your thoughts on it.

First of all, I do want to thank our friends at Samara. I see that Dr. Paul Thomas is here. I would say Dr. Thomas is one of my two favourite Canadian political scientists who are named Paul Thomas. I just want to point that out. I do appreciate the exceptional work that Samara does and the information it provided to this committee.

You talked a bit about the evolution, especially of Westminster, and how they got to that point. I hadn't realized the process they went through with the initial committee report and the period for members to respond and give some thought to what they wanted, and then coming up with the final report and debating it in the House. It seemed like a very logical process they went through, whether it started that way or not or whether events got in the way.

How would you envision a similar process playing out here? Would it replicate that process, with an initial report and a period for feedback and then a final report that could then be debated in the House? That's my first question.

Connected to that, should we as committee, if we decide to look at that process, also have a part in that looking at other aspects related to that? I'm thinking about some of the Westminster innovations such as the Backbench Business Committee. Should we be looking at that at the same time to see how that might play a role?

We had a review of the e-petition systems here. One thing that was suggested in the past and wasn't adopted at the time was like in the U.K., with a debate to be triggered based on a petition. Should that be rolled up into this type of discussion, or should we focus only on a parallel chamber process? Should we include more in it at the same time? Can we have your thoughts on that?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Those are two good points.

In terms of the process going forward, I do recommend...because as the U.K. recognized, this is a fairly large—they said “radical”—innovation in their usual practices. They were very cautious with it. They had a select committee look entirely just at putting that set of initial proposals together, which they then got out to all MPs for a period of months over Christmas break and into the following year, before they came back with a second report. That formed the basis of the debate that went into the House. Then they started it on an experimental basis for a year.

When they first came out with that first set of proposals, they weren't even at that point suggesting a pilot project. They just said, here's what we're thinking, and we really want to see what you think of this proposal. I think the input they had back from MPs went into report two, and that eventually formed the basis of the Standing Orders.

On the second point, the whole culture of backbench business in the U.K. is different and has evolved differently. It would not be my recommendation to go down that road. It might be something for another look, maybe chapter two for the modernization committee, if we were to create such a thing.

It certainly has merit. I think there would be aspects of the program that you could put in a second chamber that would improve opportunities for backbench members to get on record matters that are relevant to their constituents. I would want to get a separate understanding of just how backbench business and that committee operates in the U.K. That is fascinating, I grant you, but I think that would be something for a separate look.

● (1140)

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Christopherson mentioned, and it was mentioned around the table as well, that if we were to implement changes, we should do it on a trial or provisional basis. I suspect you would recommend that as well.

What time period do you think is acceptable? Is it the length of a single Parliament? Is it two Parliaments? What timeline do you think would be appropriate to be able to get to know the system, first of all, but then actually to have a legitimate opportunity to see if it's working and achieving the goal that was set out?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: In each case, when they got to the point of establishing a pilot project, there were reports a year or so after the first year of operations. That was a report to Parliament, around which there was a determination made as to whether they would go forward, and in some cases what changes or modifications they would make.

In terms of the span of time, a committee looking at this would need at least several months—there's a ton of information out on this—to put together an initial set of proposals. They would need to get it out for input and consultation—that's perhaps another half year—and then try an experimental or pilot project, all broadly within the framework of one Parliament. Then, perhaps at the end of that Parliament or some time shortly after, there would be a report on its utility and its usefulness to Parliament, and only after that—probably in the Parliament after that—an adoption, if Parliament chose to make it a permanent part of the institution.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Other members?

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Just a quick comment before I ask a rather more serious question. If we have the parallel chamber sitting after the regular chamber, wouldn't that make it a serial chamber?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I take that as a rhetorical question.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: When these topics have come up in the past, what have been the credible arguments against doing this, if there were any? Have there been serious...? What are the points made against it?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: There were, in the initial go-around, in both instances. In the case of Australia, there were dissenting reports on that initial debate and the tabling of the first reports. There was concern that the parallel chamber would in some way diminish the pre-eminence of the main chamber. There was a sensitivity to that. In addition, there was a feeling that it would be inconsequential for audiences at home.

In all cases, the experience showed that early skepticism was essentially solved or dissipated over time, because of the values and some of the enhancements they made to the program. They added things like the constituency statements and having more of what we call "take-note debates". The debating schedule in Westminster Hall is full. You basically apply to get your debate put on the agenda—either a 30-minute or a two-hour debate. You have to guarantee as the applicant that people from different caucuses will show up and participate. Those debates have been extremely relevant to the people at home. You'll know that take-note debates for us are a pretty rare occurrence. It's pretty much the domain of the usual channels in the main chamber.

Honestly, as we look at this, the opportunities for that parallel chamber to make that kind of a difference are certainly there.

● (1145)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Has anybody ever made a parallel chamber and then closed it because it just didn't work?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Not to my knowledge.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have one final, quick question before I cede the floor. Are the party structures and the party control in favour of these things in general, or is there a threat to control over business by giving more power to the backbench from party organizations?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Again, that touches on the culture that has developed in the U.K. in particular. Backbench business and the role of backbenchers have been given a very much higher but different kind of profile, going right back to their 1922 Committee. Things have evolved, just as I said at the outset.

Our set of conventions, traditions and Standing Orders has evolved differently from theirs. It's a situation where the functions of the chamber need very much to line up with what we consider our needs to be. Members here have the best understanding of what's going to make a difference, not only for the efficiency of their time—you'll know that we're all under pressure time-wise—but also because it will correspond in essence to bringing the public closer to Parliament, giving them a much greater and stronger connection with the work we do here.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Simms had a question, but he's deferring, if it's okay with the committee, to Mr. Baylis. Is that okay?

You have a question, Mr. Baylis?

Mr. Frank Baylis (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

If we were to do something in Canada, we'd still not be the pioneers. Can we say that? We're not the first. We're not the second. We're not even, how would I say, a rapid third follower. How long have these been in place in Australia and in the U.K.?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: They have been since 1994; so Australia has more than 25 years' experience. At mid-decade it did its 20-year report, which to a great extent was the source of the research I did. Yes, we're certainly not early to this at all.

Mr. Frank Baylis: I'm asking because we're great in Parliament at talking things over and over again. We wouldn't be reinventing the wheel here, would we?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: No. There are really excellent reports on what the pros and cons have been and the process they undertook to get to the introduction of a second chamber. I will say that there are even differences between those two, Australia and the U.K. In the same vein, we can't take what they did and necessarily replicate it here.

Mr. Frank Baylis: We can't copy and paste it.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I think we need to take account of any gaps or issues or limits that such a device or mechanism might help.

Mr. Frank Baylis: We would take something that pioneers have done for decades but customize it as Canadian.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: That would be my read of it, yes.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Given this approach, when you first go down a path, you go slowly; the second time, when it's been well travelled, you can go with a little more security. I'm just curious, timing-wise, about how long it would take to put this thing in there. Is bringing parliamentarians up to speed on what it would look like the main thing you'd like to accomplish?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes.

Mr. Frank Baylis: I know we talked about Samara. It did its survey, and most parliamentarians were against a second chamber. I presume they don't know what it means when they say they're against the second chamber.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I took that report, if I can say so, to be more neutral. There's not a wide understanding of what a parallel chamber even is, among parliamentarians, because it's something new for us. In the last Samara report you're referring to, I didn't see the result as being at all a diminishment of that idea. I think, with more information, that could be looked at.

To get back to the origins of your question, Mr. Baylis, the first part would be creating the initial proposed standing order, but we would take some time to really get that right. We would use the examples of the other Houses and put forward the best proposal we could and then get input from MPs. That should take some time, months at least, in which they would have the opportunity to study and reflect on that.

● (1150)

Mr. Frank Baylis: I'd like to hear your thoughts on this. If we were to propose something along the lines of "this is the proposal"—you never get things 100% right anyway—and built into it that after a certain period of time, etc., that would be within the same Parliament.... I note this because one Parliament could say, "We really like it", but then they could all be voted out. It could happen.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Frank Baylis: A new group could come in and say, "What's this about?". I'm wondering if it should start and at least be evaluated within the term of the same people. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I think that's a really sound way of framing it, honestly, because you're right that in a four-year Parliament you would have the opportunity to also put it out as a proposal, get feedback on it, propose a pilot, and allow at least a year or so for that to operate, to learn from how it works, its shortcomings and its advantages, and to table a report on the first year of operations. That would all be completed before the end of a Parliament, and in the next Parliament, then, a motion could be taken up to adopt it.

I'll say again, just as a final point, that the best way to accomplish this, of course, is to have all registered parties in the House working together on this.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Do I have one last question?

The Chair: You can have one more.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Just speaking to the historical sense, you mentioned that there was reluctance in both Houses of Australia and Westminster when it first came. Am I correct in understanding that after it had run, it gained popularity?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes.

Mr. Frank Baylis: How did that happen?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: The early criticism and skepticism all but abated after several years of operation. I mean, it's not to say that there still might not be some dissenting voices out there, but by and large it was seen as an innovation that, no question, was an advantage and a help to the work of parliamentarians and to Parliament itself. In the case of the U.K., these e-petition debates, as Clerk Natzler said at your last meeting, are sometimes the most watched bits of Parliament that you're going to find, aside from some special committees from time to time at which there's controversy or something of that nature. In terms of general debates, it has the effect of bringing the public closer to the proceedings of Parliament.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Thank you.

The Chair: Madame Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Thank you.

Mr. Stanton, I listened to you very carefully. I'll ask you the following question to make sure that I understood correctly.

You're proposing, for example, that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs conduct a fairly extensive study. However, consultations and studies take time. As my colleague Mr. Baylis was saying, some things already exist, including reports. You mentioned limits earlier. We mustn't reinvent the wheel each time.

If I have understood correctly, you're proposing that, in the next Parliament, we conduct a major study and prepare a report on the topic. You're suggesting that we set up pilot projects and carry out the projects in the next Parliament. Is that correct?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes. First, the Parliament of the United Kingdom may have created a select committee on modernization to study this issue specifically.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Yes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Therefore, it may not be necessary for a subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to do so. In this case, it will be up to us to decide. However, the topic and study are very broad, and consequences and changes must be implemented in all Parliament's processes and procedures. As a result, I think that the committee can first propose a set of recommendations for consideration and consultations with the members of Parliament. If they so wish, a motion could then be introduced to establish the second chamber. It would on an experimental basis, in my opinion.

I agree that this process will take up to two years, in order to obtain all the comments and recommendations from the other members. The new second chamber will then be tested for a certain period, on an experimental basis.

● (1155)

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You spoke earlier about all the people in Great Britain and Australia who were initially skeptical. However, this skepticism is no longer necessarily an issue. Have these countries carried out studies and prepared reports on the topic?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: In my opinion, some things have become obvious over time and as the second chamber project progresses. Concerns and skepticism were initially expressed. However, these concerns didn't materialize. More importantly, there has been further improvement with regard to the business of parliamentarians. The benefits showed a significant improvement, despite the initial concerns.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Just to follow up, we've been talking around it, but I really want your perspective because, in your capacity as Deputy Speaker, you've spent more time than most of us thinking of this place holistically—every day, it's your job—and how things move and what's doable and what isn't.

I think it's fair to say that there is a lot of interest and a fair bit of support, and some of us are actually excited about this as a positive move forward. All of that is to say that it looks as if, right now, Chair, at least at this committee, if we could find the sweet spot, I think we're in a position, I would hope, to put together a report that actually moves this forward.

My question to you is this: In the real world of how this place actually operates, the question is ideally, within that context, for those of us who want this to happen, what do you think we should shoot for in this Parliament? Do you think there is enough time that we could actually get into the details? Should we spend more time now drilling down on details to get it as close to ready as possible, and then ask the House to endorse it, and then carry that over?

Or do you think that, given the realities—and you and I have been through a number of Parliaments now—that we're better off to just wrap up this report and give a favourable recommendation to the next Parliament?

I sense that you're enthusiastic toward this as an idea, as many of us are.

So that was a long way to ask what you think is the best we could do in this Parliament with this committee, given that we probably have majority support across all three of the recognized parties to do something. What do you think that something is? What's the most ambitious thing we could do to see this come to light, given that we're into the silly season, we're running out of runway, but we do have time?

Give us your thoughts, sir.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes, it might not be the most ambitious approach that I would take, but I think if your committee were to table its recommendations based on what it has reviewed here and to give perhaps an initial path forward as to what next steps Parliament may wish to consider in the next iteration, that would still form the basis of a study on record, looking at the facts—the pros and cons of this idea—and then putting it into play so it could be picked up by the next Parliament to move forward with....

In that report, you might want to take some of what this committee considers to be the highlights, or what you consider to be the advantageous aspects of a parallel chamber.

But if you were to go forward, also give some thought to what that path of development might look like. Is it a separate committee? Is it a subcommittee of this one? However, agreeably, your work is very busy. You have a lot on your table. It might not be ideal for this committee to do. But that's the way I would see it.

I agree with your latter suggestion around getting that documented evidence summarized and reported to the House, but beyond that I don't see creating a pilot project by the end of this Parliament. There are a few other things going on between now and June, and it might just get lost in the matters pending.

● (1200)

Mr. David Christopherson: So as much as possible, tee up the next Parliament—

Mr. Bruce Stanton: That's what I would suggest.

Mr. David Christopherson: —and if they, in the majority, are as enthusiastic, they would have something to work with.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes, very much.

There will be members who will be back in the next Parliament, who will know that this is an area of study in which there was some interest and can pick it up from there, if the next Parliament wishes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Excellent, that's a great contribution to this discussion. Thank you so much, Deputy.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have time for one short question. Either it could be Mr. Simms or he could defer to Mr. Whalen.

Is that okay?

You have one question.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity.

Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It's a great report.

In your presentation, you mentioned one point, which is that it's important to know what gap we're trying to address by having a second chamber.

What is your view on the gap that needs to be addressed by the second chamber, or is there one?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Well, I have looked at this in more of a conceptual sense. I would certainly defer to members to really think about and discuss those things.

In my view, and speaking not so much as a chair occupant but as an MP over these years, I do think that the opportunities for more MPs to get on the record matters that are directly relevant to their own constituents has been a feature of the other parallel chambers that has been resoundingly successful.

I would suggest finding ways to do that through debates, through constituency statements and through other aspects of that part, while not taking away from the main chamber the importance of its taking up consideration of government and more controversial and consequential business.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Do you think this could happen simply by shortening the amount of time that each individual would have to participate in regular debates? Many chambers in the world limit the amount of time you speak on an issue to three minutes per reading. It seems that 10 minutes per reading has a lot of repetition.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes, it can have that effect.

If you were to venture into that area—not to say it isn't worth consideration—you're getting into an area that is very much the domain of the parties and how they wish to debate important measures before the House as they relate to government business. I think time limitations are a different kind of discussion. I do believe that both on the government side and on the opposition side—and we see this repeated time and again—parties want the opportunity to get on the record on these matters that are very much part of our law-making, so I would not want to see this in any way derogating from the ability of the House to perform that important function. This is perhaps why a secondary chamber gives an additional ability to do some of these things without taking away the preeminence of the main chamber.

The Chair: There is one last quick question from Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: To be honest, this is a comment, not a question, to my colleague, Mr. Whalen I'm responding to his suggestion that you can shorten interventions to three minutes.

As a practical matter, it's often difficult to express a complex thought, especially one that involves providing the chamber with background information in a shorter intervention. I recently was addressing the indigenous languages act and had to go through population statistics on Inuktitut speakers and how many of them are unilingual. You just can't do that quickly.

You can always divide your time. We already have a process for allowing 20-minute speeches to be divided into 10. One could easily subdivide further and accomplish that goal. A folkway has to develop of accepting that, but division of time is all done by consent anyway. I think that's a better way of achieving what you're pointing to than to put a cap on, which creates an irreversible problem. I can't say that I'm going to be aggregating the time of the next three speakers in order to provide a more fulsome discussion.

I just wanted to get that on the record.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid, and thank you, Mr. Stanton. This has been very helpful to kick off our debate on the potential of this.

We'll just suspend for a couple of minutes to change witnesses.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back to meeting 145 of the committee.

During the break, I had a compliment on how well our committee works together. I may have to refer to that in the future at some time. I'll keep that.

Our next order of business is the study of the Centre Block rehabilitation project.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, we're starting a few minutes past 12. Would it be agreeable to the committee, in order to get a full hour with these witnesses, if we go a little bit past 1 p.m. to sort of even out?

● (1210)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a meeting at 1, but you guys can go longer.

The Chair: Do we have agreement? Okay.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Can we go on autopilot for that time?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, no votes.

The Chair: Autopilot and no votes. Okay. That's fair.

Our next order of business is a study of the Centre Block rehabilitation project. As members will recall, one of our last meetings in Centre Block before it closed was on this subject. We agreed that it was important for PROC to be involved in the process throughout the project, a point that the Speaker supported when he appeared before us recently in relation to the House's interim estimates. The issue was also raised at the February 28 meeting of the Board of Internal Economy.

As we continue the discussion, we're delighted to be joined today by officials from the House of Commons: Michel Patrice, Deputy Clerk, Administration; Stéphan Aubé, Chief Information Officer; and Susan Kulba, Senior Director and Executive Architect, Real Property Directorate.

Thank you all for being here.

Although we're extending this, I still want to have the last five minutes to do some committee business for our next meeting, if that's okay.

Mr. Scott Reid: Totally.

The Chair: You may want to stay, because one of the things I want to talk about is the tree.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: A tree?

The Chair: Yes: “the” tree.

Mr. Patrice, if you could give your opening statement and enlighten us, that would be great.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I intend to do a short presentation in order to maximize the exchange with the committee.

[*Translation*]

I'm pleased to be joining you today to present the governance model approved by the Board of Internal Economy. My goal is to ensure the ongoing involvement of members of Parliament in the Centre Block rehabilitation project and to speak with you so that you have the chance to share your expectations and observations.

[*English*]

In terms of the governance model, at the last meeting of the Board of Internal Economy, the board decided to establish a working group composed of one member from each recognized party. That working group would report to the board but would be involved in the rehabilitation project of Centre Block to ensure that MPs were fully engaged, aware and part of the decision-making. Ultimately, while the authority of the decision rests with the board, they would do a report and go into more of the granularity in terms of the Centre Block rehabilitation project.

Obviously, in addition to this working group, as I said last time I appeared before this committee, at the administrative level there is an integrated working group with the administration of the House of Commons, Public Services and Procurement Canada, and also our Hill partner that is looking at and overseeing the project more in terms of its execution and its implementation.

In addition, there's this committee, which is for us a forum, in terms of the governance, to come here on a regular basis to provide updates and to consult and to receive your views on your expectations and needs.

I would suggest that in a nutshell, this is the model of governance. Obviously, there are other aspects that will flow from the work and from looking at the project in terms of where we go and how Centre Block will be rehabilitated. Other stakeholders, such as the media and the public, will for sure also be engaged in consultation, whether through this committee, the working group or the board itself.

I will say, having gone through the West Block experience, a significant number of lessons were learned from that project. From my perspective and in my personal opinion, the most significant one was that the MPs were not sufficiently engaged in the West Block development and its creation. I welcome, then, the direction we've received from the board in establishing that working group of MPs that will assure their continuous involvement at a high level in the project and its granularity. Centre Block is obviously an iconic building for the centre of parliamentary democracy, but it's also your workplace, so it's important that your needs be taken into consideration and that the reality of your lives here be recognized and taken into account in the rehabilitation.

Susan, Stéphan and I are ready to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you very much.

● (1215)

The Chair: Just before I go to the first questioner, did the board make any suggestion that this committee might have input into the Board of Internal Economy if there were a need to make an adjustment in this building?

Mr. Michel Patrice: The board talked about this committee quite a bit during that discussion and obviously welcomes any involvement this committee may want to have in the project, and recognizes —

Mr. David Christopherson: Our lobbying worked.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's music to our ears.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I don't have a full seven minutes of questions, so I'll start with what I've got for now.

You mentioned you have a new oversight panel of members from the existing parties, to come in. How is it going to work? Will you have one member from each party look over the blueprints, the plans, or have an overview once a year?

Mr. Michel Patrice: No. I think those MPs are going to be more involved than that. Obviously, we will consult and meet with them on a regular basis.

One of the first asks, I would suggest, given the discussion we had at the board, as members suggested, is that this group come up with proposed guiding principles or fundamental principles for the rehabilitation of the Centre Block. That's going to be in addition to giving them a detailed briefing on the project, its structure, the way it works. The different players and stakeholders will have to have a discussion to develop those guiding and fundamental principles, which obviously will be presented to the board.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: How is the shutdown of Centre Block going now? We've been gone now for a couple of months.

Ms. Susan Kulba (Senior Director and Executive Architect, Real Property Directorate, House of Commons): To date, obviously it's become a project site. A period of decommissioning has started and there are continued investigations. As you know when you occupied the building, the investigations were slightly intrusive. Now they are getting more and more intrusive. They're the type of investigation work that would have disturbed operations. They are ongoing and will increase over the next number of months, as well as the decommissioning, moving out all of the assets that were left behind at the end of their life cycle. That's where we're at right now.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is the timeline you're seeing now consistent with what we have heard in the past, of 10 years?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Ten years has often been mentioned, but I would suggest that it's premature to determine a number of years until the scoping has been deep enough to understand the state of the building. I find it a very interesting project, but I've learned that in reality we're not sure how the building has been constructed. We have pictures from that time. For example, as the building was built over a period of years and rebuilt after the fire, I understand the foundation structure was wood. Then there was a technological change in the industry and it moved to steel. That we have learned from pictures from the construction at the time, so I think it would be premature to talk about how long it's going to take and the state of the building once we start opening it up, but 10 years often comes up. We'll see as it develops.

The same answer would apply to the budget.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is there any possibility of it being faster than 10 years?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I think anything is possible.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: A final question before I hand it off to Ms. Sahota, if there's still time.

When I started here, I heard that the West Block was to be closed to put in committee rooms. Is that still the intention? Is that a plan in stone or will we decide 10 years from now?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I think that option was put on the table. It's not cast in stone right now because there's going to be an evolution over the next 10 years in the needs of Parliament or the House of Commons in that time.

We just heard a discussion about the possible creation of a parallel chamber. Is that an option?

● (1220)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is there any reason that West Block has to be closed when Centre Block reopens or could it stay open right through—

Mr. Michel Patrice: The West Block will stay open after Centre Block is renovated. For example, a lot of the offices here are planned to become MP's offices, MP's suites.

Every option for the chamber is on the table, but it's been designed so it could be reconstructed to create multiple committee rooms.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I'm interested to know how you're going to select the MPs for the working committee.

Mr. Michel Patrice: That's a prerogative of the parties.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: The parties will choose.

Mr. Michel Patrice: The parties will determine, yes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Is this the official parties or every party that has a seat in the House?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It's the recognized parties.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You mentioned there are a lot of lessons you learned from the construction of West Block. You mentioned that having MPs involved was something that had been overlooked at this time.

Can you be more specific as to what actual physical lessons, aside from the involvement of members of Parliament, you learned from the opening of West Block, what things were overlooked here?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It could be a very long list. Obviously, we're going to do a report and we're going to assess. We're still learning things.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What about three big ones, off the top of your head?

Mr. Michel Patrice: One of them, I would say, is about the operationalization of the building versus the construction. How can we do that better? We had a model. When it was developed it was that we finish the building—the construction, the structure and so on—and then we integrate the technology and the testing. We accelerated that process toward the end of the project, when we started to do it in parallel to basically shorten the time to operationalize and make the building fully operational. I think it's a qualified success, but I think we have learned that, if we want to do that and do it in a more serial manner, the way that we do the project—we've discussed it often amongst ourselves—is by zone. We need a clean zone before we start doing the technology.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: And I have two more. I don't think I have much more time.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Stéphan.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): If I could add to this, as we just talked about, instead of saying an end date 10 years ago, but kind of focusing on an end period, to give ourselves maybe a return of Parliament versus saying it has to be that September. We can look within a yearly period. It gives us the proper time to do the operationalization, as Michel talked about, so we can move in at the proper time for Parliament. That's one big thing.

The other one is the balance between security and operations. We want to make sure.... For example, we had some issues with the exterior doors on this building. Security requirements were very high to meet requirements for this building, recognizing that it caused many operational issues. These are lessons learned that we want to make sure are folded into the design of the Centre Block, as an example.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you to our guests for being here today.

Based on what came out of the previous discussion regarding the effort to try to move toward getting authorization for a plan at the front end from parliamentarians, I think that makes sense. I think it's a logical way to start approving the overall theme and needs. Facing up to some of the compromises it involves on our part would be helpful.

I do observe that there are some things for which we can't avoid putting off some of the decisions, based on the fact that our needs and expectations are going to change. I'll give you an example of one.

We're going through this process with my family's business. We're building a new head office. We have to deal with the fact that expectations about washrooms are changing. Washrooms were traditionally women's washrooms and men's washrooms. Now we've started to incorporate the idea of baby changing washrooms. Now you have three sets of washrooms with less space in each one. Maybe we want a gender non-specific washroom in the future. We can actually guess at what our future selves are going to want.

Given that the washrooms in Centre Block are a vexed question anyway, this is something where an approval process may have to occur several years down the road for certain aspects of the building. We can get to some of the lighting—I'd point to that as another example—possibly as changes occur, as well as ventilation, because expectations as to acceptable carbon dioxide levels are likely to shift over time. I throw those out.

I wanted to ask a couple questions on general themes here. On the relationship between the Centre Block renovation and the long-term plan, is the group that's being set up just meant to feed back regarding Centre Block only, or on long-term plans as well?

● (1225)

Mr. Michel Patrice: I would suggest it's the long-term plan as well, because it's all part and parcel of a bigger project, which is the parliamentary campus.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

I have just been reading that the rehabilitation of Centre Block isn't what is referred to as the "functional requirements" gathering phase. Do you have an end date in mind for that phase?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I will just give you the end date of what we talked about as design completion. We're talking about January 20, 2022.

Susan, would you go more into—

Ms. Susan Kulba: Yes. The gathering of the requirements is part of the pre-design and schematic phases, which essentially are ongoing until February 2020. We're at the very beginning of schematic design.

Mr. Scott Reid: February 2020 or February 2022?

Ms. Susan Kulba: Pre-design and schematic design go to February 2020.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

Ms. Susan Kulba: Then we enter a phase that's called "detail design". That would go until the beginning of 2022.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Are these timelines published on some website somewhere?

Ms. Susan Kulba: No. These are the planned timelines by PSPC at this point.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right. Is this the sort of document—I think you're referring to something—that you would be comfortable tabling with us so we can have a better grasp ourselves?

Ms. Susan Kulba: Sure.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Maybe the clerk can get that from you at some convenient time.

Getting our heads around that is obviously helpful. We're not sure in 2022, or even 2020, for that matter, what the structure of Parliament will look like. Is it going to be a majority or a minority? Who will be the Prime Minister? We're not sure about all of that stuff. That would be really useful. Who is going to be in what position on this committee, or on the Board of Internal Economy?

Is phase two of the visitor centre considered to be part of the Centre Block renovation, or is that considered to be something else?

Ms. Susan Kulba: It is. That's correct. It's part of the Centre Block rehabilitation.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is phase two effectively a *fait accompli*? We've all heard about the famous elm tree. I remember that elm tree from when I was a kid. I grew up in Ottawa. I have a certain amount of sentimental attachment to it.

Leaving aside my personal attachment, evidently other people have an attachment to it as well, as we've all seen. The plan is to have that come down, as I understand it, by the end of this month in order to harvest it for furniture. It's coming down in order to facilitate the expanded visitor welcome centre, or phase two of the centre.

I have to ask the question. First of all, is the tree's downing a *fait accompli*? Is the giving out of contracts, the locking-in of expenditures for the visitor welcome centre, also at this point a *fait accompli*, or is there still room for input prior to these things happening? I'm not sure I should be asking that, too, by the way.

Mr. Michel Patrice: The visitor welcome centre is obviously a big component of the Centre Block rehabilitation project because we have to look at a window of the next 50 years. Centre Block should be able to sustain the next 50 years of Parliament.

The visitor welcome centre is basically an addition of space to move certain functions out of Centre Block to provide more space in Centre Block, to recognize, for example, the growth in the number of MPs that is likely to occur during the next 50 years, and also the various services and so on.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

Mr. Michel Patrice: I would say, yes, it's an integral part of the Centre Block project.

Mr. Scott Reid: No, no. I was not asking about that, but about whether or not contracts have been given out, designs have been made, expenses have been incurred in a way where an attempt to slow down and take a look at them would have the effect of causing —

● (1230)

Mr. Michel Patrice: I think the contracts have been given. I don't know when it's—

Ms. Susan Kulba: The overall project contracts were awarded—

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes.

Ms. Susan Kulba: —for design and for the construction managers.

Mr. Michel Patrice: So a hole will be dug because the visitor welcome centre will be underground, but the design in terms of what's going to be contained in what room and what space has not been established.

Mr. Scott Reid: Are the contracts that have been let so far in the public domain?

Ms. Susan Kulba: Yes. They were tendered by Public Services and Procurement Canada.

Mr. Scott Reid: I realize you are not from Public Works, but would you be in a position to direct us or our clerk to that information?

Ms. Susan Kulba: Absolutely.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We will provide that information to the clerk.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be very helpful to us.

I think I'm out of time, Mr. Chair. Maybe I will try getting back in the open round.

Thank you.

The Chair: If it's okay with people, we will do an open round after Mr. Christopherson.

But before we go to Mr. Christopherson, I want to get clarification on something related to what Mr. Reid was talking about.

I'm assuming that the ultimate authority for anything that happens in the parliamentary precinct is under the auspices of the Speaker and/or the Board of Internal Economy. No one can trump that. Do the Speaker and the Board of Internal Economy have the last say in everything that happens in the parliamentary precinct both inside and outside of buildings?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I would say that in practice it's a bit more complex than that in terms of the requirements for parliamentarians and Parliament. It's definitely under the authority of the Speakers and the boards of their respective Houses, but it remains a reality that the Parliament Buildings and the grounds are in the custody of or belong to the Government of Canada.

It's the same in terms of how ultimately they're the ones who obtain the funding for the projects, and it's the executive that basically grants the funds for the projects. It's a mixed model, I would say, but obviously in terms of requirements, needs and identifying the needs, it's the parliamentarians under the Speaker and their respective board.

There's also another player on the Hill, and it's basically the National Capital Commission with respect to federal land use in terms of the grounds themselves. It's sometimes a web of players that are involved.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Michel Patrice: I'm going to add that there's also what we call FHBRO, which is about the heritage, preserving the heritage fabric of the building. That is another entity that gets involved in terms of what we can or cannot do to the heritage buildings.

The Chair: It's very helpful to understand that complexity a bit.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair. I'm glad you asked that question, because it's quite germane to the point.

Before I do that, though, I do want to just give us all a little pat on the back—nobody else can do it; I can tell you that. We started out getting a report on West Block. We became alarmed at the lack of MP input. We were determined, ourselves, at this committee, that it was going to change in the future, and we made a decision that we were going to make an overture to BOIE. Each of us was then asked to go back and lobby our respective whips and members of BOIE. It would seem that was effective, based on what I'm hearing now, that there was constant talk about "PROC, PROC, PROC". That's good. I'd just start out by congratulating the chair and the committee on being able to do this. Having been around for a while, I can tell you it's pretty big, in the world of moving government and decision-making, that we've been able to insert ourselves in the way we need to.

That being said, based on your last answer, though, it seems to me that we should be pushing for a little more clarity. The very question the chair asked is the one that was on my mind. I thought the combination Speaker/BOIE was the end of the road. I thought, "They make the decision; that's it." Now I'm hearing it's not quite that simple, because at least the government—in its capacity to allocate money but recognizing that Parliament, and not the executive, controls the purse strings at the end of the day, though they can ask for money, as they will do tonight.... It's Parliament that says, "Yes, you can have the money", or, "No, you can't have the money." We see what goes down, down in the States, when that kind of thing gets challenged.

Then there is, as you've mentioned, the National Capital Commission. It gets its oar in the water. There's something called FHBRO or something close to that. It gets its oar in the water. Now we're putting our oar in the water. I think, Chair, that we should ask the staff to come back and give us a flowchart, as well as they understand it. I see the look on your face, and that's why I want it. The fact that it's nebulous leaves us out in nowhere land. We can think we're an important part of this, but we're all politicians. We can make something something or we can make something nothing, starting with the same something—it just depends on what we want to do with it.

I would like to see that clarity. Doing that, Chair, I think would allow this committee to establish the exact role of that integrated working group. To me, their reporting, if you will, or their advice goes to BOIE, yet I think we should still maintain that the group come in to meet with PROC, I guess as a separate entity. We could even define it as a subcommittee of this committee to make sure that it still stays here.

The fact is the parties get to pick who they're sending. Again we're now back into the executive structure of how this place runs, potentially leaving ordinary members once out, meaning they get to pick who those people are. They may or may not be the ones the rest of us would see as the best representatives of our interests. I'd still like to see some kind of line item—not so much on accountability but on input and dialogue—between that integrated working group and this group.

To put all of that in a nutshell, I'd like to see, as well as can be determined—the fact that it's not clear is one reason I want to see it—the flowchart of decision-making. In that I would ask you to include where you see the working group or where BOIE sees the working group. Then, Chair, we'll have an opportunity to delve into the details of that.

I was surprised. I'll tell you I was a bit surprised that BOIE said, "We have decided." I'm okay, because I think it's a good move, but I was hoping we were establishing the kind of working relationship in which it would say, "This is where we're thinking of going. Does this satisfy your needs?"

To me, there still needs to be a clarification of the relationship between BOIE and final decision-making, the integrated working group, and PROC, and how they actually fit into an actual process.

● (1235)

The Chair: The ministers too should be in this chart, where they have an effect.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, yes. That's why I said, Chair, that I heard there were at least four entities—FHBRO; the government, meaning the executive; the National Capital Commission; and the Speaker/BOIE. Then you could add PROC to that. We have our oar in the water, so that's five players.

Again, the fact that you can't make it clear is my point. I'm not expecting it to come back such that you need to go and figure out how this works; I want to see it right now. If it's a bit of a web or unclear, I'd like to see that reflected so that we can help provide clarity, because it's in the clarity that we'll actually determine whether we get meaningful input or not.

That's kind of where I am right now, Chair. I hope that provides focus for when we next take up this issue. Thank you.

Thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I guess we could add the heritage department to that flow chart too.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. Add everybody who has a say in the decision-making and in what order.

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, I would perhaps add that there are other tenants as well in Centre Block, such as the Senate, PCO, Parliamentary Protective Service, and the Library of Parliament.

Mr. David Christopherson: And the media.

Mr. John Nater: The media and all of those are part of that web.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll go informally now, beginning with Madame Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here and for taking the time to return to the committee to answer our questions.

The last time you were here, I was surprised by the little informed provided. We didn't know where we were headed. At least, that's the impression that you gave me. We would start by leaving Centre Block, and then we would see where we stood. That's how I saw things.

Mr. Aubé, thank you for providing information on the number of square meters in Centre Block in comparison with West Block. We can see that the support space in West Block has increased in comparison with the support space in Centre Block. However, you haven't provided details. Is it because the information isn't available?

● (1240)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I provided some details.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You mentioned postal services and communication rooms. It's very detailed, but we don't know what used to be in Centre Block. We went from 570 to 1,441 square metres. I believe that the storage service gained space, and there must be reasons for this. The rest of the information is very clear.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We'll provide those details later, Ms. Lapointe.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you. That's nice of you.

Ms. Kulba, at the previous meeting, you said that the decommissioning would take nine months and that it would help you know where we're headed.

Parliamentary business ended in mid-December. I remember that, on the very popular show *Infoman*, the Prime Minister demonstrated how quickly the offices had been emptied. In mid-December, I had the impression that we were removing everything from Centre Block.

The decommissioning started three months ago, and is scheduled to take nine months. Where do you stand after three months?

Ms. Susan Kulba: We are about 20% complete.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You're 20% complete, but we are a third of the way through the scheduled timeframe.

Mr. Patrice, as I understand it, once the building is decommissioned, then, we'll know what the next steps are. Is that right?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I didn't give any details on the next steps. Beyond decommissioning the building, we need to conduct some investigative work. That will give us information on the building's condition, mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, and other structural elements. I can tell you that it will take a bit more than nine months.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Decommissioning involves emptying everything out of Centre Block in order to study its structural condition.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We need to open up the walls and floors to see their internal structure.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: The decommissioning process is 20% complete.

Ms. Kulba, in response to a question from my fellow member Mr. Bittle, you said you were going to provide us with a first steps plan in January. I don't think I received it. Is the plan ready?

Mr. Michel Patrice: The plan actually comes from the Board of Internal Economy. The plan had to be presented to and discussed with the Board of Internal Economy, which then had to provide direction. That direction was provided at our last meeting.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: The Board of Internal Economy gave you…. You showed up with a….

Mr. Michel Patrice: A discussion took place, and the Board of Internal Economy gave us direction. Discussions took place and a decision was made. I am very glad for the direct involvement and ongoing engagement of members.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: That's important, to be sure. As you said earlier, this is our workplace.

Mr. Patrice, I was a bit surprised when you said that anything was possible in relation to the 10-year timeline.

Might we be returning to Parliament in eight or nine years, or could it take as long as 15 years?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Unfortunately, I don't have a crystal ball. I wouldn't want to speculate as to whether it will be sooner or later. We'll see. It will become clearer as the work progresses.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I still find it quite surprising that Centre Block is being closed and that so little is known about its structural condition. Back in October, I watched an episode of *Découverte*. The program reported quite a bit of detailed information. From the show, it seemed that everything had been evaluated and that there was a clear sense of what the next steps were. I don't get the impression that—

● (1245)

Mr. Michel Patrice: For historic buildings and projects of this magnitude, it's always possible to come up with better projections or guesses. I prefer to deal in facts, because I like to know that, when I say something, it's based on research and science, as opposed to average-based data for similar projects.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I see.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We have a very high-level plan. The experts and other stakeholders know exactly what has to be done to deliver a successful project. There are very high-level steps, and those working on the project know exactly where the process is headed. Neither we nor the experts know all the details about the project.

I often liken it to a home renovation, which, by the way, is much more straightforward because we know how a home is built. Nevertheless, there are always surprises. Everything can't be expected to go according to plan during a small renovation. That is all the more true when carrying out a project of this magnitude, with this kind of construction and symbolism at stake. The surprises will be many.

[*English*]

I would go back to something Mr. Reid mentioned, because right now he's involved in a project. Obviously at some point in time we're going to have a design and a plan. I'm going to suggest that we cannot be fools and think that those plans won't change if the project is under way for a period of 10 years, for example. We need to be ready to reassess when needed or when the circumstances change, and to address and accept changes to the design, even though it may have been adopted, approved and agreed to in January 2022, for example. We need to be open-minded enough to go back and say, "Things have changed, or as we were doing it we found a better solution, or the needs have changed in terms of bathrooms, or layout," and things like that.

That's why it's important in my view that MPs, and I repeat, are continuously engaged. When I say continuously, I'm talking from the start to the end, because we're not doing this building for ourselves; we're doing it for you, because that's your workplace and that's the art of democracy.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you very much.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Of course, the technology is changing so quickly.

We'll go to Mr. Graham and then Mr. Reid.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have more comments than questions at the moment.

We were talking about the oversight committee. I'll come back to it quickly. I proposed that it become a subcommittee of PROC or a committee of the chair and vice-chairs of PROC, or something, to have a direct connection between that oversight committee and PROC. We're in the loop and it's not a committee of whips, who have a very different perspective from all the other MPs, which is one thing I'm concerned about.

So I want that on the record now.

The other thing is to ensure that a former parliamentarian is on the oversight committee, someone like David who will soon be a former parliamentarian, who has a deep understanding of privilege of the place—which not everybody does—and somebody who will still remember Centre Block when it reopens, because by the time this project is finished, a PROC committee might not have anybody who's ever seen the inside of Centre Block. So it would be nice to have somebody on that oversight committee who remembers what it was supposed to look like. If three-quarters of Parliament changes again, which can happen every generation, and it takes a generation to do Centre Block, no one's going to have a clue what Centre Block's supposed to do.

So I think it's important to have that institutional memory brought with us by people who have worked in that building and know what it can and should do.

But I do have a quick question. It's been a burning question for me since we opened West Block, albeit it's less serious. Why is there a cat door on the side doors of all of our committee rooms? Take a look at that door. You'll find a little cat door on it.

Ms. Susan Kulba: It's for cable pass-through.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Cable pass-through, okay, because it's just the right size and shape for a cat.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's all I've got for now. Thank you.

Ms. Susan Kulba: The cats are long gone.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It's a requirement of the media so that they will have access, if ever they need to televise outside.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: It's for the media, okay.

Sorry, I did have one more quick comment. The elm tree shouldn't be cut down. Shut it down for 10 years and renovate it.

● (1250)

The Chair: You have a sensitivity to cats and trees.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: There is some evidence. I was just reading.... I've got so many papers here, but our friends at Greenspace have given us some information about the elm tree.

They've got a piece here that discusses the tree and says it may not be as unhealthy as has been reported. I took the liberty of confirming that there was a parallel story of an elm tree, the Washington Elm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, supposedly the spot under which Washington commanded the American army in the revolution. It was already old and large at that time. As a result it was seen as iconic and it survived and finally died of old age at the age of 210 in 1923, the moral of the story being that this tree might have a lot of life in it if it's allowed to live.

I want to ask a couple of questions relating to the visitors centre, phase two.

So the work on phase two will begin, I assume, before major work on Centre Block begins, Ms. Kulba?

Ms. Susan Kulba: In digging into the ground, yes, that's what they're planning at this point. Again, the schedules are not firmed up through Public Works. We've received some draft preliminary ones but their plan is to start to dig—

Mr. Scott Reid: That would have the effect of removing the circular drive from operation. Would it also have the effect of intruding upon things like Canada Day celebrations, the light shows, and the weekly Wednesday yoga that has become a part of our culture up here—for some of us less intensively, I admit, than others. I'm not as stretchy as other people, I guess.

But all of these things could be intruded upon. We have no information at all, and some of these things are taken very seriously by Ottawa residents and by Canadians in general.

Ms. Susan Kulba: That's correct. Public Works has indicated to the best of their ability that they want to keep the activities of the Hill ongoing.

So right now we know that they want to put hoarding just forward of the Vaux wall and that those activities would still have about half the lawn to use. So the space will be reduced, but they want to maintain the sound and light shows and the Canada Day celebrations. That's what they're trying to achieve.

Mr. Scott Reid: Perhaps, colleagues, it might make sense to get someone from Public Works to give more detailed answers on those considerations.

Is there a completion date estimate or cost estimate for phase two as opposed to the overall Centre Block renovations at this point?

Ms. Susan Kulba: Not that we have. We don't have that information from Public Works.

Mr. Scott Reid: Do you think somebody has that information, or is it something that is still too early to tell because we don't know?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It's probably too early right now.

Mr. Scott Reid: We don't know about the geology down there, whether we have to do blasting and that sort of thing.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We know it's Canadian bedrock, so we know there's going to be blasting.

Mr. Scott Reid: Do we know if there would be as much blasting as there was for phase one? It was quite intrusive.

Ms. Susan Kulba: I would expect at least that much, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: From looking at the 2006 development plan, which gives us a bit of an idea of an anticipated footprint, I get the impression that it is larger. I could be wrong, but it looks like it is larger than phase one was in terms of the volume of space.

Ms. Susan Kulba: I would say yes to that. It's not determined 100% yet, because we haven't firmed up all the requirements. All the requirements to support Parliament that can't fit in the Centre Block as is are going to spill out into that underground visitor welcome facility, so that final footprint has yet to be decided exactly because we don't have all of the requirements that feed into it.

Mr. Scott Reid: One thing I heard from one person who had been involved in this process was that there was talk of putting a museum of parliamentary history into that space. Have you heard anything about that?

Ms. Susan Kulba: No, I'm not aware of that. There will be visitor services in that space, which may include potentially some interpretation services, but there has certainly been no mention of museums.

● (1255)

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

Mr. Michel Patrice: For example, I know that the Library of Parliament is thinking of maybe having some interpretation services in that facility, but I've never heard anything about the museum.

Mr. Scott Reid: When I heard that, I meant to raise it eventually.

To make what seems to me to be an obvious observation, we should be trying to minimize to the extent we can, in a way that is compatible with the other objectives we have to achieve, the amount of bedrock we have to blast and remove. If there's anything that can be done elsewhere rather than there, then it should be moved there.

I offer the fact that at number 1 Wellington, we have a series of underused committee rooms in what used to be a railway tunnel. If, for example, there were a desire to display some of the artifacts associated with Parliament's history to interested visitors, it would be reasonable to use that space once the Senate has returned to the Centre Block rather than try to create space in what is now solid bedrock, both because that would be very expensive and also because it would be more intrusive.

If you're blasting further out, you've got to come further out, and you take up more of the Hill, and that blasting really is intrusive. When we were sitting through the House of Commons and committee meetings, I think we'd all agree when the blasting was under way it was genuinely intrusive.

Mr. David Christopherson: Especially a few days after the shooting.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, that's right.

Even when it wasn't, explosions would shake the foundation and so on... I don't want to exaggerate the importance of that, but I could see how it could intrude on a number of things.

There was one last question on that theme. What has been done so far with phase two of the visitor welcome centre, I suspect, must have had no input from the new process you've suggested. But is the intention to allow that process to kick in for any further decisions made on phase two of the visitor centre?

A voice: Correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: I have one very brief question. It's about this building.

Up on the fourth floor within the Mackenzie Tower is a wonderful room. It's currently used as a spousal lounge, but it's not accessible. I find that concerning. My mother-in-law uses a wheelchair. My wife and I have three young children, so we often use a stroller to get all three of them there. They're at the age of four and under. That room's not accessible. I find it a little bit concerning that we've spent $800 million plus, yet we have a wonderful room that looks lovely on the inside and is not accessible. I hope that we can have some thoughts on why that might be.

Ms. Susan Kulba: Yes, it was a challenge to find a use for that room. I have to say that you start going through a list of priorities and knowing that it wasn't going to be accessible.... There was space across the hall provided for activities that would require accessibility for some of the people participating in those activities. No matter what space we would have assigned there, to put a lift in was just not feasible.

Mr. John Nater: So that room will never be accessible for...?

Ms. Susan Kulba: At this point, no.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: [*Inaudible—Editor*] I don't get it.

Ms. Susan Kulba: We do have space across there for some activities, but in working with that particular user group, they preferred to have both spaces.

The Chair: Given the connection, as you said, between the various authorities, including the relevant ministers, would it make sense to have a bit more formal connection between the relevant ministers and the Board of Internal Economy on this particular project, just so they're not working in isolation?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I would suggest that the government is also represented on the board with the ministers who are on the board. Without getting into their own internal way of functioning, I would suggest that there are members of cabinet on the board.

The Chair: I think there is only one member, and it's not the minister responsible for Public Works, or whoever does have a responsibility related to the Hill.

Mr. Michel Patrice: We have the House leader, who is on the board, and also right now Mr. LeBlanc. We also have the whip.

The Chair: David.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm sorry, Chair, but I want to come back to this. If I'm too far off, I'll of course follow your guidance to get back, but I am really disturbed to hear this. I understand the practical reasons why. I accept that, but here's the thing. In this day and age, not only a government building but the premier government building on Parliament Hill, one of the buildings used for spouses—meaning the public—is not accessible. We deliberately designed, built and designated a room for Canadian citizens to use. In this case it's a spouses lounge, but it could be anything, and if you have any kind of disability regarding mobility, you can't get in there.

I'm sorry, but I find that unacceptable. Either we bite the bullet and spend the money that it takes to make it accessible or we don't use it for a public space, and we use it for some other capacity. To say that we had no other choice but to go ahead and create a space that disabled Canadians can't get to.... In this case, it might even directly be a member or a member's spouse, partner or parent, which is what the room is designated for, and if they aren't perfectly able-bodied, they can't use it.

I have trouble with it. Maybe that's just me, but I am having trouble with that. Again, I understand the practicality. I am not faulting anyone per se, but in allowing a space for the public or for anybody, any person at all—visitor, worker, member, family, whoever—that is not accessible, we've made a major blunder. All it's going to take is one spouse or partner to make an issue out of it, and we have no defence. I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that if that happened we'd quickly shut it down and find another space.

Again, I'll just leave with colleagues one of these forward headaches that won't be mine.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: I urge all of you to give some thought to the idea that we've done something and allowed something—and now we're aware of it—that makes no sense given current laws and attitudes, especially around equality.

Thanks.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any more questions for our witnesses before we go to committee business?

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: I have just a quick observation. I'm sure there were defensible reasons—we might not agree with them—for the space not being accessible, reasons that relate to honouring the heritage of the building and not being able to adjust floor levels without intruding upon materials that are a century and a half old. It's also conceivable that parliamentarians, who tend to be very sensitive to this kind of need, if they were in a position to say so, would have said that on this occasion we were going to override the heritage consideration for the sake of accessibility.

Looking forward, I think this is a good example of the kind of thing where you hit some kind of line, and where it would be helpful to have people and parliamentarians to say that in this case something overrides another normally absolutely solid line, and that a red line is actually not a red line in this case.

The Chair: Thank you all.

If you could stay, I want to do a little committee business here.

First of all, on the elm tree, I'm suggesting that we do two things. I think most members are aware of the issue. We should have an emergency meeting, bringing in Public Works or whoever, plus the people who wrote us the letter, and scope it out and learn more about it. Second is to write a strong letter to Public Works, the BOIE and the Speaker that there be a moratorium on cutting it down until we have that meeting so we can make our recommendations.

I don't know what people think of that.

A voice: It's an important idea, Chair.

Mr. David Christopherson: So moved.

The Chair: Okay, we'll schedule that.

Second, our next meeting on Thursday may or may not occur, because we may be voting all night on the supplementary estimates. But if it does, for the next two meetings, just to give the Speaker some ability to work, on this study we're doing now on the dual chambers, we could have Samara, for one, and maybe the Clerk, for another, give us input, if people think those would be valuable witnesses. Would that be good?

Mr. Reid's motion may be after the break week. Hopefully we'll have room for that. It's the one about us carrying on this work into future PROCs and parliaments.

Minister Gould suggested that April 11 would be the best day for her on election and security intelligence threats. Here I speak of Ms. Kusie's motion. Is April 11 okay with people?

● (1305)

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, I have a reminder. We mentioned it at our informal luncheon. I mentioned it at our formal meeting. Again, I just want to remind members that public accounts is still very interested in getting a couple of standing order changes to improve and beef up the ability of public accounts to do their oversight. I just want to put it on a future list that at some point in the near future I'm hoping that we'll receive a report from public accounts in terms of a couple of standing order changes that, in an ideal world, would get unanimity and get through the House quickly. As you're thinking through things we want to work on, there's at least one meeting there that I'm hoping will happen in April or in May at the latest.

The Chair: People may want to get any feedback they need from their parties on that, and we'll add it to the schedule, if we get that request from Public Works.

Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): She's coming on April 11. What is our schedule until that time?

The Chair: It depends on whether we have a meeting on Thursday.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

The Chair: If not, there are things we've agreed to. First of all is an emergency meeting on the elm tree; then on the dual chambers, we would have Samara and the Clerk as witnesses; and then possibly this Public Works request, if we get it. Those are the things we've talked about.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you.

The Chair: Also, in order to have Australia as a witness on the dual chambers, we'll have to have an evening meeting, because that's early in the morning for them. I assume everyone—

Mr. David Christopherson: We should go there.

The Chair: Is that a motion to travel to Australia?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: I could move it.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: So is an evening meeting good?

A voice: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.