



PARLIAMENT | PARLEMENT
CANADA

Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament

BILI • NUMBER 003 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, June 19, 2012

—
Co-Chairs

The Honourable Marie-P. Charette-Poulin
Mr. Royal Galipeau

Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament

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•(1200)

[Translation]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)): Dear colleagues, I would first like to apologize for holding this meeting on such short notice.

However, I wanted to make an announcement.

[English]

We've had a puff of white smoke and we now have a librarian. I welcome Sonia L'Heureux as the new parliamentary librarian.

I thought it was better to have this meeting now, rather than wait until the fall just to welcome Madame L'Heureux among us.

We'll have a short meeting, after which I propose the following procedure, that we go in camera for a few minutes and move the appropriate motion.

Madame Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): First of all, I would like to know if we can keep our staff here while we go in camera.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): There's no issue there. No problem.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: And from now on as well?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): There may be a problem when we discuss issues that would impact on staff relations, but for the moment your request for today is absolutely appropriate.

[Translation]

Ms. L'Heureux, you are our witness, and I welcome you.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux (Associate Parliamentary Librarian, Library of Parliament): Thank you, Mr. Joint Co-Chair.

I would like to thank the joint committee for giving me the opportunity to speak to you and announce my interest in the position of parliamentary librarian.

[English]

I would like to share with you some information about my professional life, why I'm interested in the Library of Parliament, as well as the challenges and opportunities I believe the library will be facing over the coming years.

I am an economist by training, and over the 25 years of my career I have worked mainly for the federal government as a policy analyst. I have worked in different federal departments doing policy analysis

in very strategic policy units, until I was promoted to management jobs in the late 1990s.

The challenge of advising decision-makers on options to best allocate scarce resources to the achievement of public policy outcomes was what I was paid to do. I must say that I never got bored with that task.

•(1205)

[Translation]

Over the past decade, I have been promoted to management positions, and I have interacted with ministers and MPs from all parties. I have also managed research and analysis groups in sometimes difficult contexts. I have had to deal with budget cuts, massive reorganizations and mandate changes in the units I was leading. In fact, I see myself now more as a manager than an economist.

[English]

I came to the library four years ago. While I thoroughly enjoyed my years in the executive branch, I thought my career was lacking an important aspect in public policy-making. I needed to understand and experience the legislative branch of Parliament. So I applied for the executive job of overseeing the library service providing you with the reference and research support you need in your parliamentary duties. I have never regretted it.

[Translation]

I discovered a unique organization with a focus on client service. The Library of Parliament supports the activities of parliamentarians every day. Its employees have an eye for detail and want the job to be done well. In the midst of an extremely partisan environment, they do their job with exemplary neutrality. I couldn't dream of a better work environment. Parliament is an important institution in a democracy, and I feel privileged to be able to work there.

[English]

Over my four years at the library I've had the opportunity to learn about its challenges and opportunities. It is an organization at a crossroads. It is faced with the challenge of being the keeper of history and a broker of information in an ever increasing ocean of information.

Like the Senate, the House of Commons, and federal department administrations, the library has embarked on a strategic operating review exercise. The library's budget has not increased since 2010-11, and we are facing the increasing costs of doing business. Employee salaries are increasing, the cost of maintaining a relevant collection is subject to inflation, and we must absorb expenses that were previously paid by partners. While the operating budgets cannot go as far as they did, the expectations of parliamentarians and the public are still high.

The library must therefore take a serious look at how it does business.

[Translation]

Since the parliamentary librarian's retirement in December 2011, I have taken on the administrative leadership of the library. In light of the challenges the library is facing, I felt it was important to take this assignment with all the seriousness and commitment it deserves. So I worked with the library's senior management team to strengthen the library's management and business planning.

We began assessing all of our services and how we do things. We must focus our attention on the services that help you with your activities, something you cannot get elsewhere. We must find ways of operating that support the work you do based on your needs.

[English]

Looking to the coming years, the library requires focused management. Are we doing what parliamentarians need and want? There are no average senators or MPs. Your needs and ways of working are varied. We need to support you the way in which it makes sense for you. When do you want personalized, customized service? When do you or your staff prefer to self-serve, using our vast range of information assets?

Parliamentarians come from all walks of life. As good as you may be, you are not experts in everything. It is our job to help you be conversant in areas where you may be less familiar. We also know that the benchmark against which we are judged is the support you got in your previous job, before you became a parliamentarian, or the Internet consumer experience you have day to day. Some days, this is a tall order for us, but the library needs to make sure that we get up to that benchmark.

Libraries around the world are challenged also by the rapid expansion of electronic collections. We are no different. We need to look at our collections as being used. Do you or your staff have access to what you need, both in your preferred format and content?

[Translation]

I am also aware that our guides are often the first Canadians that meet the tourists who come to visit Parliament. Despite all our efforts to represent you well, we can accommodate only a fraction of the people who want to visit Parliament. The challenges presented by the renovation to the parliamentary precinct buildings add to the need to ensure that our interaction with the public is professional and flexible.

[English]

Explaining the workings of Parliament is one additional way we partner with you. Many of you are active with visiting students as

they embrace education in civics. The presence of a parliamentarian in a school class is not always possible. The library must explore ways we can supplement your outreach work, using tools and methods that can reach young Canadians and their parents.

At this point I have more questions than answers, and it is my goal to use the next year to work with the library employees to find some of these answers.

• (1210)

[Translation]

We are operating in a context of fiscal restraint, and I want to make sure that the library can support you in this context, now and in the years to come. I do not think we should currently be making great plans, but rather we should be looking for opportunities for improving our services.

[English]

I believe the standing joint committee is an important sounding board for the library as it looks at its future. Should you support my nomination, I would be pleased to work with the committee and the parliamentarians it represents to ensure that the library is a resource of choice and support to your parliamentary work.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me.

[Translation]

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin (Northern Ontario, Lib.)): Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux. I know we cannot congratulate you now because we haven't voted yet, but we will do so properly at the end of the meeting.

Do my colleagues have any questions?

Mrs. Hughes, you have the floor.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: We know that you are quite competent. And, I have congratulated you already. If we could have had Ms. L'Heureux's curriculum vitae as a candidate, that would have made our job easier.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): You will have it before the end of the day.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Thank you.

You said that there were challenges, and I don't know whether they have to do with the new technology. You mentioned that every request from a member or a senator is truly unique. Thank you very much; that helps us. If you get the position, and we are sure that will be the case, what is the first thing you are going to address?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: That's a big question. I think we should first determine whether we are doing the right things for the public, on behalf of parliamentarians.

Without going into details, I will say that, a few weeks ago, I told the committee members that our budget would be tight. With a somewhat limited budget, can we do the same things? We need to analyze our activities with the management team, which I have started to do. The first challenge is to find out what requests the library needs to respond to and what resources it has. After that, I will be able to see whether I am doing the right things and whether we are doing them the right way.

Should we explore different methods to ensure we continue to provide the service required? There may be other ways of doing things that might, perhaps, involve the collection or how we interact with the public. For example, it is difficult to replace an analyst who is seated beside you in a committee meeting. I cannot put a computer in its place. There may be other avenues that the library can explore. One of the first things to do is to evaluate what we are providing and how we are providing it.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Thank you.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Thank you.

Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

Madame Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Welcome. This is very exciting.

Obviously, as parliamentarians we are very cognizant of our job of holding government to account. We've all known that government's resources are extraordinary compared to the resources of Parliament and that the research capacity, the consulting capacity, of a government department is always going to far surpass what we are able to do at parliamentary committees or as individual parliamentarians in a research capacity in our own offices.

So I'm a bit concerned with what you're saying, in terms of the restraints placed on you, particularly when there are ongoing collective agreements with the library employees. I want to know whether you think you have sufficient resources to be able to continue your excellent service, in terms of providing trusted and impartial advice to parliamentarians, with the current budget and without having to reduce services to parliamentarians.

•(1215)

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I have yet to meet a manager who would say they have enough resources; everybody wants more resources. At the same time, employees are probably one of our most precious resources at the library. What I want to do is to protect that capacity as much as I can, to have employees, professionals, our knowledge workers, available when parliamentarians need that personalized, customized approach to interacting.

Clearly, when you have questions about a public policy issue, we need to have professionals available to answer your request. We know that some of our parliamentarians or their employees would like to be able to search through our information assets, for example. That is not working as well as it could. So there might be places where we'd go forward and protect the staff and pay them competitive wages and those kinds of things, and other places where we may do things slightly differently.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Before the last election, at the committee we were exposed to Parliament 2020, which you had participated in with the U.K., the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Chile. There was an international collaboration on how all parliaments could do a better job of supporting parliamentarians in the future, but also of engaging citizens.

Is there any update on that or something you could apprise this committee of this fall, as to the things you've learned in that process?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: With the work that was done on Parliament 2020, it's very clear that parliamentarians are interested in youth engagement in civics and democratic activities. There are no further activities that have been pursued by the group of countries that were looking into it.

At the same time, internally, we have looked with our partners in Ottawa, who are looking into these issues... For example, we worked with Elections Canada on a voters' guide, looking at young people, at how they engage, and at whether they understand elections. You might be familiar with the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which is coming to Quebec City in October. There will be a big focus on the use of social media in Parliament. Is there something there? Is there an interaction with citizens? It's not Parliament 2020 per se, but you will have a very large number of countries represented there discussing issues around engaging with citizens and using different methods to do that. That could be very informative for the Canadian Parliament.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Before I go to the next questioner, I just want to remind you that there's food.

[*Translation*]

There is food for everyone at the back of the room.

Some of you have told me that you have an obligation at 1:00 p.m. I have an obligation at 1:00 p.m., as well.

Senator Rivard, you have the floor.

Senator Michel Rivard (Les Laurentides, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Ms. L'Heureux. I hope we can confirm your appointment immediately after this meeting.

I am coming to the end of my third year at the Senate, and one of our duties is to be on senate committees. In the past three years, I have seen that the quality of our analysts is outstanding. But, I am surprised that there is also a high employee turnover rate.

For example, I don't think we have had the same analyst on one committee for more than a year or two. Might it be due to the fact that some of them leave or the administration decides to assign them to another committee to give them more experience? Do they leave to take better jobs, to get a better salary or anything like that?

•(1220)

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: We have looked at what is going on with the Library of Parliament staff. Some of you will have noticed that there has been a bit of a baby boom going on among our analysts and other Library of Parliament employees. Several employees—men and women—have taken parental leave. Some others have retired, which we were sort of anticipating.

You have probably noticed that a number of new faces have appeared on committees because of this turnover in our staff, which we consider natural. Obviously, there are also people who leave for other reasons, either to go back to school or to follow their spouse to another city or province.

We analyze these departures, and do what we call an exit interview. There is no problem with the Library of Parliament's administration. People like their jobs. They like the contact with parliamentarians, but life itself means that there is some turnover.

Senator Michel Rivard: In fact, few people are dismissed, and employees are committed to their work.

I also think that changing committee on occasion helps them broaden their knowledge and do research in other fields.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that the quality of your French and English is outstanding. I would be proud to be able to speak as well as you do in both official languages.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Thank you, senator.

Mr. Richards, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Thank you.

Madame L'Heureux, I think you're about to become only the eighth parliamentary librarian in the history of this great country, so you must consider that quite an honour, and I will be so bold as to offer my congratulations.

Certainly, in hearing your remarks today, and your previous testimony, when you appeared before us just a few weeks ago, I guess it was, I've been very impressed. It seems to me that you have all the necessary qualifications, skills, and enthusiasm for the job.

We're looking forward to working with you.

In your remarks, I noticed a couple of comments that I found very refreshing. You mentioned that at this point you have more questions than answers. I always think it's great when someone is willing to admit that it will take some time to learn a new job. You indicate that you're going to be consulting with the staff members in the library and working with the stakeholders involved in determining where you want to go.

I also noted that you mentioned that you appreciate that it's a time of fiscal restraint and want to work within that context. That's very important, because obviously that's a big focus for our government. I appreciated that comment as well.

Although you indicated that you want to take some time before you set any major goals or priorities for the library, I'm sure you must have a few things in mind. You have spent some time at the library already, about four years now. You must have a few things in mind, even if they're small things that you want to do in terms of changes. I'd love to hear a couple of things as far as the paths you'd like to go down.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I'll be true to my comment of having more questions than answers. One of the things that bothers me is that we have a very poor web interface with people. We hold tremendous amounts of information and it's very difficult for parliamentarians and employees of the library to access it. There's no point in holding something if nobody can look at it, so that's something I would like to improve, to change. I don't think it's at all efficient.

The other thing that's starting to worry me, and again, I don't have a clear answer.... I know that the parliamentary precinct is becoming more and more of a construction zone. I'm getting a little concerned about visitors moving around and guides not knowing exactly where to marshal them.

What will we do with our public programming? It's been fine up to now. We're trying to make do, but that's going to be a challenge.

Those are the things that are on my mind. I know there will be other things popping up.

● (1225)

Mr. Blake Richards: Good. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I'm not sure if it's appropriate at this time, Mr. and Madam Chair, but if it is, I would certainly like to move that this committee—oh, it's not appropriate at this time?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): It's appropriate, but let's go through the questions.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It's not timely.

Mr. Blake Richards: All right. I certainly heard an indication that all parties were in support of the nomination, so I felt that it might be, but I'll defer to the direction of the chairs.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Thank you. We're just following what we call the grand tradition.

Madam Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Merci.

I understand Mr. Richard's comments and wanting to move the motion, so it certainly looks as if we will be supporting that.

I've had a chance to look at your resumé, and it is very impressive. I know there were big shoes to fill, and I have no doubt that with your experience and your skills you will take on this challenge. I also know that whenever someone else takes a position...we all do our work differently; we all bring a different view as well to the tasks before us, and we handle our challenges differently.

I certainly wish you well. In some of the information the analyst has provided us, I notice there is a collective agreement and it is currently under negotiation. I'm wondering whether or not you will be taking part in some of the negotiations of that collective agreement and what you see as your role.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: In terms of the collective agreements, as you know, it's a process with different steps. We have a team that represents the library. It does include people from the management at the library who engage with the two different unions that we're in discussions with at the moment. I do pay attention to what's being discussed, but I don't personally get involved at the management table in discussions directly with the union representatives.

The managers who are closer to the day-to-day operations with the people who are represented by unions are probably better positioned than I am, since they can see what the difficult situations may be. Sometimes it's about figuring out how to accommodate a leave or a provision of an agreement, and having a person who understands that or lives day to day what the employee lives might be more efficient than a senior administrator, who is less exposed to that. I think that's a better way of handling it.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: You've been there for four years. What do you consider your current working relationships to be with those who are there?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: The employees of the library are probably our most precious asset. I think our relationships are good. I'm not saying there are never any little hiccups, but we do meet regularly with the union representatives, both locally and nationally. I think we try to have regular meetings every four or six weeks with the different representatives, whether or not there are negotiations going on, just to keep apprised of each other's concerns or developments and things like that. Personally, I think they're good relations.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Also, just because we talked about Parliament 2020, I'm hoping this committee will eventually pick up where we left off and that you'll be able to provide us with a summary for the new members here, so we can continue, because I think that was actually a really good study. At the same time, I know that the library was actually quite excited about that at one point as well.

I'm just wondering about it, because it was in that study, actually, that we also looked at other practices from different libraries that we were trying to base ourselves on. So the fact that you've been around for quite some time.... You've done four years as an assistant parliamentary librarian, and you've also worked abroad, from what I can tell, with respect to the Australian piece that I saw in here...?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: That's correct.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I'm just wondering if you have seen some models that you think we should grasp when you're looking at maybe doing some policy changes, which I'm sure you will probably do, because often there are policies that are a little antiquated or are just not working the way people had hoped. I'm just wondering if there are some models out there that you have seen and that you could take bits and pieces from, pieces that you feel would work.

• (1230)

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: I think the presentation you had—several months ago, I believe—from other countries was interesting on different ways of doing things. I think Chile in particular had different approaches.

I'm anticipating that this summer, when the international association that groups parliamentary librarians meets in August, we will be looking at some of those issues and some of those questions. I might be able to bring some experiences back. Similarly, as I mentioned earlier, the Inter-Parliamentary Union in October in Quebec City should also bring some fresh thinking, in that parliamentarians, secretaries-general, and parliamentary librarians might be able to discuss these things in the context of IPU. I'm looking forward to that kind of information as well.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Thank you.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Thank you very much, Mrs. Hughes.

My joint chair has a few questions, as well.

Go ahead.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Ms. L'Heureux, what we are most interested in, as a joint committee, is how you would like to work with us. What do you expect from us?

[*English*]

In your opening remarks you said something very important. We're really at a crossroads here, for several reasons.

It's not only about trying to do more and better with less money. It's also the fact—and you brought it up—that we now have communications tools that can really enhance the services of our library. We also might have opportunities to increase revenues for the library.

How do you want to work with us? We know that you work very closely with the two Speakers, so could you include your description of that?

[*Translation*]

How will you work with the two co-chairs? What do you expect from us? In other words, as a joint committee, how can we help you spell the word "success" in five years?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: That is a very good question.

[*English*]

I think the recent exchange we've had updating you on some of the work we were looking at in the strategic brain review is one example. Sometimes we might be able to work in a more open concept, other times more in camera, depending on the impacts on the library, but I would like to be able to interact with you on a regular basis, basically checking in: here's what the directions are; here's what we're doing; are we on a good path; would you suggest course corrections. Then we can take your advice on that. A little bit of testing with you: are we going in the right direction?

There are probably different times throughout the year where that's a more appropriate endeavour. At the moment I'm still trying to figure out what the budgets will be this year. I don't have that answer yet. In the fall I anticipate I will. I might be able to come back to you and say here's where we are and here's what we're planning. If that interests you, we can see how you're reacting to what we're doing and whether we are doing it in the right way.

We don't tend to get into detailed operating issues with the Speakers, and I don't think that would be appropriate. That's really what I'm paid to do. But there might be trade-offs we have to look at in how we do things. I think it would be appropriate to ask you, the parliamentarians, what your opinions are on those things.

• (1235)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It appears to me that's how the Speakers want it, in any event.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): I have a second supplementary, Co-Chair.

[Translation]

Do you intend to develop a five-year plan that would enable us to discuss the future now?

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: Yes, I would like to develop a strategic overview for the next five years.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Are there any other questions?

[English]

Now we go back to Mr. Richards.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I want to thank Mrs. Bennett who, inspired by the white smoke analogy, came back to me *nobis bibliotecarias....*

[Translation]

We have a librarian.

[English]

I'd like to correct something I suggested at the beginning of the meeting. I had proposed we follow the process at the time of the last appointment, and that is to go in camera. In consultations with the two clerks, although this is how it was done in the past, it's not necessary to do it like this. So with everybody's assent, I propose that we don't go in camera.

I understand Mr. Richards would like to move the appropriate motion.

Mr. Blake Richards: What indicated that, Mr. Chair?

Certainly. I would be happy to.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The appropriate motion would be that the co-chairs report to their respective Houses that the committee approves the appointment of Sonia L'Heureux to the office of Parliamentary Librarian.

Mr. Blake Richards: That is word for word what I was going to suggest, Mr. Chair, so I would be happy to.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Do you have a seconder? Apparently there's no need, but even if there's no need, Madam Hughes would like to do it, and I don't think there would be any objection.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): All in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Thank you.

Ms. L'Heureux, all the members of the joint committee finally offer you their heartfelt congratulations.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Ms. Bennett, you have the floor.

[English]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Do we have a white puff of smoke for not going in camera?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Maybe grey smoke.

[Translation]

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Ms. L'Heureux, on behalf of my joint co-chair and all the members of the joint committee, I have the pleasure of officially congratulating you. We trust that we are going to be able to work closely together, so that the committee can provide you with the best possible support and advice.

Ms. Sonia L'Heureux: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The meeting is adjourned.

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