



Opening Statement before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

Mario Dion – Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner
Ottawa, Ontario, May 1, 2018

Introduction

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today as the Committee considers my Office's budgetary submission for the 2018-2019 Main Estimates.

I am accompanied by Sandy Tremblay, Director of Corporate Management and Chief Financial Officer.

It has been almost four months since I started as Commissioner. When I arrived at the Office in January, I found, as I had expected under Ms. Dawson's leadership, effective structures and processes in place, and competent, hardworking staff.

I am therefore in a situation where I can focus on continuing to improve what has already been built. I intend to focus on changes that are necessary.

In fact, my Office had already submitted its budgetary estimate when my term began. I did not see a need to seek a revision to the requested amount of \$6.9 million.

To provide some context for this figure, I will discuss some of our Office priorities in terms of how I intend to fulfil my mandate.

Mission Statement

The approach the Office will take under my leadership is articulated in a new mission statement we adopted two months ago. It reads as follows:

Our Office provides independent, rigorous and consistent direction and advice to Members of Parliament and federal public office holders, conducts investigations and, where necessary, makes use of appropriate sanctions in order to ensure full compliance with the *Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons* and the *Conflict of Interest Act*.

Our Office is an institution that serves an important purpose: to enhance Canadians' trust and confidence in elected Members of Parliament and appointed public office holders. This mission statement reflects our responsibility for administering two similar but distinct regimes and the various means, some preventive and others reactive, by which we will do so.

It serves to remind our staff that our Office's day-to-day work is governed by the very rules that we administer, and to help focus our efforts on what matters most. And it enables external audiences to quickly grasp our Office's purpose, objective and modes of action.

In addition to revising our mission statement, we have refreshed the Office's brand identity. It communicates our independent and impartial character, the nature of the work we do and the way we do it—with integrity, rigour and consistency.

Strategic Plan

The implementation of our mission is also supported by a new strategic plan for the next three years and beyond. My staff had already drafted it before I started, but the direction it set was in line with my vision and I have therefore adopted it.

The plan identifies priorities in three key areas.

Education and outreach is such an area.

As I told you in my previous appearance, I want to make sure public office holders and Members of the House of Commons have the information they need to understand a somewhat complex set of rules and to be in a position to actively meet their obligations at all times. Then, if they do contravene the Act or the Code, it will not be because of ignorance.

We will go beyond the traditional classroom approach and leverage new-media technologies to reach out to them, through webinars and online videos, for example. We have already started to expand our presence on Twitter. I have also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Commissioner of Lobbying on cooperation between our offices in the areas of education and outreach, as there is overlap between our respective subjects.

In the coming months, we will review all of our educational materials and revise them as necessary.

When public office holders and Members seek advice from my Office, we aim to provide them with clear and consistent direction. We also advise them on how to comply not only with the rules themselves, but with the spirit in which they were written.

I have made it clear that I will strictly enforce the Act and the Code, by promptly investigating possible contraventions of both regimes, and by making use of appropriate sanctions when contraventions are found.

We will also make greater use of the media to inform the public about our role and activities.

Technology and information management is another key area covered in the strategic plan.

We have replaced our financial management system, and started upgrading our electronic case management system. We are also planning the redesign of our website, with implementation to take place in the next fiscal year.

Operational excellence is the third priority area identified in our strategic plan.

Our goal is to maintain the Office's operational excellence, with a focus on accountability, leadership, integrity, stewardship and transparency.

In the coming months, I intend to review all of our policies and plans, and to update them as necessary to reflect best practices in public sector management.

I also intend to focus on making our investigation and report production processes more efficient.

Budgetary Requirements

Barring unexpected increases in the demands on our resources, I expect our Office will be able to implement its mission in 2018-2019 with an annual operating budget of \$6.9 million that we have sought.

Salaries account for a majority of our expenditures, or 81%. We are almost fully staffed, and typically experience low employee turnover, which is a good thing.

There are 49 positions in total. Most of our staff resources, or 18 positions, are in our Advisory and Compliance division. There are 11 staff in our Corporate Management division, 8 in Communications, Outreach and Planning, 8 in Legal Services and Investigations, and 4 in the Commissioner's Office.

Major expenditures this year include the upgrade of our electronic case management system, changes to the public registry and the redesign of our website, as well as costs associated with enhanced education and outreach and the implementation of our MOU with the Lobbying Commissioner.

With these projects and our high workload, I expect we will make full use of our requested budget for this fiscal year. Our surplus for 2017-18 is estimated at just below 2% of our budget, and I expect it will be even lower this year as we have reduced our reserve to 3% from 6%, largely to pay for salary increases. It is our practice to follow average salary increases for other parliamentary entities and the public service.

It is worth noting that the Office has maintained an annual operating budget that is no higher today than when it was created more than ten years ago, in spite of a marked increase in the number of interventions. For instance, the Office provided advice and direction 2,898 times in the last fiscal year as opposed to 2,381 times during the previous fiscal year, an increase of almost 22 percent. Communications from the public also grew to 2,662 from 2,066, and requests from the media rose to 411 from 315, an increase of almost 30 percent in each case.

So far, we have been able to accommodate within existing budgets the additional expenditures associated with significant increases in our workload over the years. Much like the volume of requests for advice from public office holders and Members and information requests from the public and media, the number of active case files managed by our Office has increased. We have also faced higher technology, salary and other costs.

We have been able to do this thanks to a sound internal management framework, and the introduction of measures to make our operations more efficient. For example, we recently implemented a paperless office initiative.

I will be in a better position this fall to evaluate whether additional funds are needed in order to fulfil my mandate next year.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening statement. I will now be happy to discuss any questions the Committee may have.