



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

Mario Dion – Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner

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Introduction

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the Committee, first of all I would like to thank you for inviting me to appear before you today as the Committee considers my Office's budgetary submission for the 2019-2020 Main Estimates.

With me is Sandy Tremblay, our Director of Corporate Management.

The purpose of my appearance today is to discuss the current budgetary requirements of the Office. For context, I will begin by reviewing some of the projects and activities we undertook last year, as well as some of activities planned for this fiscal year.

Mission

I will start with our mission, because it is key.

Everything the Office does under my leadership is designed to support the achievement of our mission. Our mission reads as follows:

Our Office provides independent, rigorous and consistent direction and advice to Members of Parliament and federal public office holders. That is the first thing. Second, it conducts investigations. And third, where necessary, it 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*.

Strategic Plan

Last year, we implemented a rolling three-year strategic plan to guide our projects and activities in support of our mission. It identified three key priorities, those being to improve communications and outreach, to modernize technology and information management structures, and to maintain operational excellence. It also identified how we would achieve them.

One key priority is to build and improve communications and outreach processes to help Members and public office holders understand and meet their obligations under the Code and the Act.

Education and outreach have been a key focus of my approach as Commissioner, one we will continue to push forward on. I believe education and outreach go a long way in preventing conflicts of interests by ensuring Members and public office holders are aware of their obligations.

As I told the Committee last May, I wanted to go beyond the traditional classroom approach to educational presentations and leverage new media technology for presentations and other uses.

Last April, I launched a review of all of the educational materials that our Office has issued over the years to explain how the rules of the Code and the Act apply. The goal was to simplify them and make them a more effective source of information for Members and public office holders to consult. Last year, we revised and updated 12 of those documents, condensing their content into seven new information notices that explain various requirements of the Act. This project will continue in the current fiscal year and will address provisions of the Code.

Our focus on educational tools included two webinars about gifts that I hosted with my colleague the Lobbying Commissioner. We adopted a more proactive approach with our use of Twitter to communicate directly with Members and public office holders. We also produced a few short videos to provide additional channels to reach our stakeholders.

That was on the communications and outreach side. A second key priority in our strategic plan was to modernize technology and information management structures.

Last November, we launched a new Integrated Case Management System. All information from our old system was migrated to the new one. Several previous customizations were replaced with more streamlined solutions so operations were not interrupted. Our upgraded information technology infrastructure is compatible with existing systems, and allows the Office to explore new technology options for delivering our mandate. Because of the scope of this transition, we are still dealing with technical and procedural issues that we are working to resolve.

Presently, we are working on the development of a new website that will make it a more effective source of information for Members and public office holders. It will be mobile friendly, which is not the case now, to help us better reach our busy stakeholders on the device platforms available today. We are planning to launch our new website before the October 2019 election.

Finally, the third key priority identified in our strategic plan is to maintain operational excellence, with a focus on our people and on the tools we have at our disposal.

In my first year, I took steps to ensure our Office invested in employees' training and professional development, and provided the tools and equipment they need to perform their jobs. I also acted to ensure we offer a respectful, diverse and inclusive workplace.

During my appearance before the Committee last May, I was asked if I would be making any recommendations in my annual reports to strengthen the regimes I administer. At this time last year, I did not feel ready to do so in the annual reports. However, I expressed my hope that the Committee would invite me to present my thoughts on possible amendments last fall.

Otherwise, I would include something in this year's annual reports. Indeed, that is what I will do shortly. The Office has drafted recommendations for amendments that could strengthen the operation of the Act in the event there is another review of the legislation. Some key points will be included in the 2018-2019 annual report under the Act.

Our strategic plan provides my organization with a guiding document and is used to align our priorities as we deliver on our mission to provide independent, rigorous and consistent direction and advice. We will continue to monitor progress against our strategic plan on an ongoing basis. And I will report on it in future annual reports to Parliament.

Investigations is another area in which our Office has been very active and one that tends to garner the most outside interest. In 2018-2019, I issued eight investigation reports—five under the Act and three under the Code. There are currently four matters that I have not yet reported on. Our investigation team must balance confidentiality, integrity and procedural fairness with work that is very complex and time-sensitive.

Staff Resources

Our Office conducts its operations in support of its mission with a total of 49 full-time positions. The Advisory and Compliance Division accounts for over one-third of our staff resources. This total is reflective of their daily interactions with those individuals—over 3,000 by the way—who fall under the Act or Code. Those interactions form the majority of the work the Office undertakes in compliance, accounting for over 2,000 calls or inquiries last year.

The remainder of the Office falls into three broad categories: corporate services, communications, and investigations and legal services. I am very satisfied with the quality of work undertaken by the Office. A daily demonstration of rigour, professionalism and guidance on compliance matters is what we are aiming for.

I have complete confidence in the quality of work and the integrity of all members of my senior management team and indeed in all the Office staff.

Budgetary Requirements

So unless there are unexpected increases in the demands on our resources, I expect our Office will be able to implement its mission in 2019-2020 with a budget of \$7.1 million.

This year's budgetary estimate represents an increase of 4% from the last fiscal year, but an amount really unchanged in 12 years despite changes to our workload and inflation.

A small increase is needed this year to enable our Office to prepare for the October 2019 election while continuing to ensure operational excellence.

Our workload increases significantly in the lead-up to a general election and the months that follow. In fact, election readiness is already a key focus of our activity and planning. We have started hiring term employees to help with the increased workload. We are updating letters and information kits. We have also begun offering presentations on the Act's post-employment rules.

All of these elements flow from our strategic plan and will enable the Office to best serve our stakeholders in a busy election year. Tools and efficiencies gained this year will better support the Office and me as the Commissioner in years to come.

As part of this planning, our Office maintains a reserve to allow us to respond in a nimble fashion to exceptional circumstances. For example, there could be an increase in the number of investigation requests or a particularly complex investigation. It can also fund projects, such as information technology upgrades to improve our operations. We have in our proposed budget this year a reserve of \$100,000, or just under 1.4% of the total.

I am confident that, as always, our Office's sound internal management framework will help ensure that its operating budget is used effectively, efficiently and economically in support of our mandate.

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