

## Will official bilingualism be a casualty of COVID-19?

The Federal Government has a constitutional obligation to provide access of equal quality to its proceedings in both official languages. For Canadians this is especially important during this pandemic.

In spite of this, **quality of interpretation** of the spoken word in House and committee proceedings, and across Government stands a serious risk of being undermined during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Assurances you may have received that the House of Commons administration is ready to stage virtual meetings of the House of Commons are overstated. What is required to deliver interpretation of equal quality is not in place, and with that, access to the proceedings of the most significant institutions in our democracy in the official language of choice could be compromised during this time of crisis.

The Canada region of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC-Canada) is the only national professional association representing federally accredited interpreters. Our members are in the booths in your committee rooms and in the House of Commons, among other assignments.

AIIC-Canada believes that the following key issues risk undermining quality:

### **I can't hear you**

Government has resorted to offering remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) with participants connecting either via the traditional wired phone network or the cellular phone network in spite of conclusive proof that the quality of sound these provide never come

close to the quality of sound needed for quality RSI. **If we cannot hear you properly, we cannot interpret your words accurately.**

In 2019, after rigorous testing, the Translation Bureau stopped offering interpretation services over the phone because of this irrefutable fact. This move was also made to protect the health and safety of interpreters who can sustain serious auditory injury when they are forced to turn up the volume in an attempt to hear your words.

Since that decision, the Translation Bureau has been working hard to find viable videoconferencing solutions. The systems that provide quality sound conducive to RSI use voice over internet protocol (VOIP) via dedicated bandwidth. For this to work, a stable internet connection and proper headsets with an integrated microphone are essential to avoid undermining the quality of sound.

**At the moment, this combination of requirements is not in place.**



*The Pope's COVID address is interrupted by a weak internet connection.*

### **Federal accreditation out the window?**

The Government of Canada accredits interpreters. Its accreditation is recognized the world-over as a guarantee of quality interpretation. The Translation Bureau hires or contracts only federally accredited interpreters.

Government departments and agencies can and do hire interpreters from private companies who use non-accredited interpreters. Even though this practice undermines quality, government bodies, even those serving cabinet ministers, are guilty of doing this. In today's circumstances, this practice has become increasingly widespread.

### **That's not my mother tongue**

Interpreters have a mother tongue. It's called their "A" language. They usually work from their second ("B") language into their "A" language. For example, an English-speaking MP will be interpreted into French by a francophone interpreter.

They are capable of working from their "A" language into their "B" language, and this is known as "bi-directionality", but their work is not necessarily as good and therefore not recommended for Parliament. Interpreters who speak into their second language offer a service of lesser quality because of accent, syntax, vocabulary, etc.

**Because of COVID-19 isolation (working alone in a booth and not as part of a team), interpreters may be compelled to work bi-directionally, and the quality of their work would suffer.**

### **TROUBLE AT THE TRANSLATION BUREAU**

At a time when public health officials are urging people to stay at home, a small but dedicated team of Translation Bureau staff interpreters have gone into work every day now for many weeks to deliver essential services and stand at the ready to make a virtual Parliament viable.

Yet, this brave group is flagging due to injury and fatigue. Reports of injury are now an

everyday occurrence. The situation has become so dire that the Translation Bureau is calling on freelancers this week to help reinforce their troops.

**As for quality, the Translation Bureau has quietly advised interpreters to interrupt virtual proceedings if the audio quality is too bad.**

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Propose that the PROC:

- Ask the Speaker to keep a close eye on quality
- Urge that the changes in the way interpretation is conducted during the crisis be temporary and not precedent-setting
- If government departments and agencies hire from the private sector, urge them to require that only interpreters with Government of Canada accreditation be engaged.

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Government of Canada accredited conference interpreters (staff and freelancers) are highly-trained professionals. They can do the job but need the right conditions to do it professionally and with high quality.

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