

## **Challenges of simultaneous interpretation in virtual proceedings of the House and committees**

**June 12, 2020**

### **Introduction**

Madam Chair, Members of the Committee:

As the chief executive officer of Public Services and Procurement Canada's Translation Bureau, I would like to thank the Committee for taking into account the issue of interpretation in its work on Parliament's virtual sittings. Establishing optimal conditions for quality interpretation ensures not only that the language rights of Canadians are respected but also that the dedicated professionals who provide this service are protected. I am pleased to provide an update on this important matter.

### **Mandate**

As you know, the Translation Bureau has a mandate to provide services to both houses of Parliament as well as to federal departments and agencies. These services include translation, terminology and interpretation in both official languages, in Indigenous and foreign languages, and in sign languages.

We are the federal government's centre of excellence in linguistic services. As such, we have been working for a long time now to ensure that the conditions required for quality interpretation are met.

### **Remote interpretation and recommendations**

Long before the pandemic started, we knew that it would be difficult to reconcile remote interpretation with quality interpretation, mainly because of technological issues that are beyond the Translation Bureau's control, since our clients decide what technology to use.

When the pandemic began, we were far from ready to go completely virtual. But thanks to the work that we had already started, we were well positioned to react quickly. For example, we used the remote interpretation guidelines we established in spring 2019 to draft the recommendations we submitted to you in late April. These recommendations included the following:

- wearing a headset with a built-in microphone;
- participating by video conference rather than by telephone;

- using a cable Internet connection rather than Wi-Fi;
- ensuring that an audiovisual technician is present at all times; and
- providing written statements to interpreters in advance.

These recommendations are based on expert opinion and in-depth data that we have collected. I would also like to point out that you echoed our recommendations in your report, when you suggested

- installing compression limiters to prevent acoustic shock;
- doing a sound check with a coordinator and technician before each meeting begins;
- setting up an electronic system for requesting to rise on a point of order to reduce noise; and
- giving all members of Parliament standard and consistent access to hardware, software and Internet connectivity.

The Translation Bureau sincerely thanks you for this support. We are committed to working with you and the House Administration to set the minimum requirements you recommend for members of Parliament and witnesses who participate in the virtual proceedings of the House.

### **Activities since our last appearance**

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been going full steam ahead to ensure that our interpretation initiatives come to fruition as quickly as possible. For example, since late April, we have

- received promising preliminary results from the National Research Council of Canada regarding a project to develop a device that will not only prevent sound spikes but also improve sound quality;
- posted an advance notice on [Buyandsell.gc.ca](http://Buyandsell.gc.ca) in order to launch an empirical research project on the fatigue and mental workload that interpreters have to deal with during remote interpretation; and
- begun holding a series of very encouraging meetings with stakeholders in Parliament, the government and the courts to increase our collaborative efforts in setting up optimal conditions for quality interpretation.

### **Interpreter health and safety**

As you can see, we are working hard to improve interpretation conditions in Parliament and throughout the federal government. We are doing this work because we are committed to fulfilling our mandate and meeting the needs of our clients. We are doing

it because we are determined to be a centre of excellence in government interpretation. But most of all, we are doing it because we care about the health and safety of our interpreters.

For now, interpreters must still go to Parliament to provide services on site, but we are continuing to explore options that would allow them to work from home. In the meantime, we are maintaining strict sanitary procedures to safeguard our employees against contamination, including the following:

- using portable interpretation booths and dividers so that interpreters are not working side by side;
- implementing breaks so that booths can be ventilated between shifts;
- disinfecting booths twice daily;
- purchasing disinfecting wipes so that interpreters can disinfect their equipment; and
- enforcing strict physical distancing rules.

Furthermore, as we mentioned at the end of April, we have shortened the duration of our interpreters' virtual assignments so that they have time to rest. As a result, we have increased the number of interpreters, and participants who attend virtual sittings will not have to worry about exhausting them if they choose to speak in one official language more than the other: Translation Bureau interpreters are equally capable of interpreting in English or French, as long as there is good sound quality.

Sound quality is indeed the main issue. Since the start of the pandemic, our interpreters have reported an increase in the number of health incidents caused by poor sound quality. Thankfully, no one has reported any acoustic shock or injury requiring hospitalization. Nonetheless, there were a total of 55 incidents from March to May 2020. It is our duty to take action, strictly enforce the recommendations that have already been made, and keep gathering data in order to continually improve protection for our interpreters and minimize the cumulative effects of their exposure to less than optimal sound quality.

By following the recommendations that we have made and that the Committee has included in its report, we will not completely eliminate the risk of service interruption caused by the technology that remote participants use. However, these recommendations will greatly reduce the risk of service interruption and support both high-quality interpretation and the health of interpreters.

## **Conclusion**

We are committed to continuing our work with the Committee, the House Administration and all our partners to support Parliament's virtual sittings.

In closing, I would like to highlight the outstanding spirit of cooperation shown by all stakeholders, including House Multimedia Services, the Committees Branch, the Canadian Association of Professional Employees and the International Association of Conference Interpreters. If there is one thing to take away from this crisis, it is that we are strongest when we work together toward a common goal!

**Lucie Séguin**

Chief Executive Officer

Translation Bureau

Public Services and Procurement Canada