



ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DES INTERPRÈTES DE CONFÉRENCE  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS

Submission to

House of Commons Standing Committee on  
Procedure and House Affairs

From

International Association of Conference Interpreters –  
Canada Region

15 June 2020

The International Association of Conference Interpreters, Canada region (AIIC-Canada), is pleased to provide these written comments as the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs continues its consideration of issues related to the virtual assembly of the House of Commons and its committees.

We would like to begin by noting in general that your Committee's [Report 5 - Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) presented to the House on Friday, May 15, 2020, is a very good start at creating the conditions required for quality interpretation of virtual meetings of House of Commons and its committees and for safeguarding Canada's linguistic duality and the fundamental statutes that guarantee its high status. More work needs to be done, however, in both temporary adjustments to the Standing Orders and the implementation of practices by the House administration.

In this brief, we would like to update your Committee as to issues related to the quality of interpretation and the impact on Canada's bilingual character and the ability to use and have access to both official languages on an equal basis.

Representatives of the Association appeared before your Committee on May 4 and testified that the **quality** of interpretation of the House and its committees in a virtual setting is suffering as a result of technology and related issues that have negative consequences for the health and safety of interpreters and the integrity of official bilingualism in Canada.

At the heart of AIIC-Canada's testimony was the issue of inadequate sound which is frequently fed into the headsets of interpreters over an inadequate audio chain while they attempt to faithfully convert what they are hearing into another language as they speak over the voice they are listening to.

Any system is only as strong as its weakest link. The headset with integrated microphone, the internet connection and the platform (ZOOM) are all part of the audio transmission chain. Any element of this chain that does not meet the ISO standards for proper sound with regard to interpretation will directly impact overall sound quality, and therefore, the quality of the interpretation. When weak links produce

“toxic sound”<sup>1</sup> interpreters strain to hear which is dangerous to their health and well-being in the immediate and long term.

Since our appearance before your Committee to discuss this topic, there have been improvements to the chain of audio technology.

First, many more MPs are now using House supplied headsets with built-in microphones. This has improved the first link in the audio transmission chain. Unfortunately, the headsets supplied to members by the House administration are not compliant with the standards required to deliver the audio interpreters need to do quality work, in spite of your Committee’s recommendation “That the House of Commons adopt a rule stating that any member or witness participating in any House proceeding virtually, including those proceedings that use a headset or microphone, must respect minimum standards to be set by the Clerk of the House in consultation with the Translation Bureau.”

In addition, witnesses appearing before House committees are left to their own devices when it comes to headsets and microphones, in spite of the fact that these participants occupy the majority of committee airtime.

We are pleased to advise that AIIC’s Technical and Health Committee (AIIC-THC) is constantly scanning the market for suitable products, including headsets, headphones and microphone combinations, audio interfaces and peripherals, platforms and services that can best meet the needs of all stakeholders in virtual meetings. Based on the requirements set out in applicable ISO Standards, reliable research findings and the results of test sequences commissioned by experts and supervised by AIIC, the AIIC-THC is now publishing guidance documentation to assist all stakeholders.

The AIIC-THC’s list of headsets that meet minimum audio standards for interpretation can be found here: <https://aiic.net/page/9007/thc-newsletter-issue-1/lang/1>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Described by one Translation Bureau staff interpreter as “poor, choppy sound with a signal to noise ratio well below the threshold for interpreting, background noise, echo and distortions of all sorts.”

AIIC has been consulted on these matters by international institutions such as the European Parliament, European Commission, United Nations, World Bank and others. We would be pleased to make this expertise available to you and your officials as you navigate these challenging times.

**We recommend that audio headsets with microphones that are compliant with minimum ISO standards become mandatory equipment for anyone wishing to participate in a virtual parliamentary session.**

The second link in the audio chain is the link participants use to connect to the internet.

Many of us now connect to the internet through a WIFI network. While it may be liberating to lose the ethernet cable and be untethered from a modem or router, such freedom comes with a price: WIFI often leads to choppy sound that can eat up words suddenly leaving interpreters wondering what the speaker actually said. Was it can or can't, symptomatic or asymptomatic? Words make a world of difference and in a virtual setting this link in the audio chain is often weak. A cabled internet connection provides much more stable and continuous sound, not to mention that cabled connections are a lot more secure.

**We recommend that a wired connection to the internet be required for anyone wishing to participate in a virtual parliamentary session.**

The platform is the third link in the audio chain, in this case ZOOM.

There are several issues with ZOOM that undermine both quality interpretation and the integrity of official bilingualism in Canada.

We appreciate the Committee's sentiment as expressed at page 33 of its most recent report that:

“the Committee is of the unequivocal view that all virtual sittings and committee meetings of the House, or sittings with modified procedures or in alternate locations, must be conducted in a way that fully respects members' constitutional rights to carry out their parliamentary work in English and French, including the provision by the House of its usual simultaneous interpretation service.”

Unfortunately, the current technological limitations of virtual assemblies are a barrier to members of the House enjoying this right and privilege.

In the virtual world of parliament, limitations of the ZOOM platform are pushing the discourse in the most important institution of our democracy toward a single language, most often English.

Members and participants can choose to participate in English OR in French but switching from one language to the other is discouraged and cannot be done without the members or participants manually switching settings on their screen, a cumbersome and distracting requirement that effectively limits bilingual discourse. All participants are told<sup>2</sup> to “pick a lane” and stick with their linguistic choice throughout.

ZOOM precludes interpretation of Indigenous languages all together because the platform offers only two channels. Obviously, this is a significant shortcoming of this platform. Interpretation of aboriginal languages is a casualty of compromises that have been made in choosing ZOOM as the platform for hosting virtual session of Parliament.

While we concur with the encouragement the Committee has given to the House in its May 15<sup>th</sup> report “to examine options for ensuring the processes for the interpretation of Indigenous languages continue during the pandemic.”, we would like to point out that this service is no longer available and cannot, therefore, “continue”.

We note that ZOOM is not in compliance with ISO standards when it comes to audio required for quality interpretation, though there is no platform currently available that does. That said, improvement to these technologies are ongoing and we encourage your Committee to urge the House administration to pursue any and all options to find a platform that meets these important standards of quality.

---

<sup>2</sup> Participants receive the following instruction from Committee clerks prior to virtual sessions: “In order to avoid both languages being heard at the same time during a ZOOM meeting, we ask that witnesses use the English Channel when speaking in English or the French Channel when speaking in French, and to avoid switching from one language to the other during their intervention.” These instructions are often reinforced by Committee Chairs.

In summary, the technology chain that feeds audio for virtual parliamentary sessions is not ideal. The interpreters who are interrupting service during assemblies of the House of Commons and its committees are the only insurance you and your colleagues have from being mis-interpreted. At the same time, the threat to their well-being is at risk as long as this situation is allowed to persist. That is why we wholeheartedly support the recommendation from your May 15<sup>th</sup> report **“That the House adopt standards to help safeguard simultaneous interpreters against injuries and fatigue.”**

Throughout your May 15<sup>th</sup> report and recommendations there are references to the rights and privileges of members to hear and be heard, and the sacrosanct nature of our linguistic duality which is deeply rooted in the fundamental laws and culture of Canada.

The privilege of freedom of speech in parliamentary proceedings is generally regarded as the most important of the privileges enjoyed by members of Parliament. This right is protected by the Constitution Act, 1867, and the Parliament of Canada Act.

But, is this privilege infringed upon if an MP cannot be heard? Is this privilege undermined if a member of Parliament is discouraged from speaking in the official language of his or her choice? These important questions are very much at issue during this Committee’s deliberation of virtual meetings of parliament and its committees.

At pages 9 and 10 of its May 15 report, the Committee notes:

“The right of individuals to speak in either English or French in the House of Commons is guaranteed by section 133 of the Constitution Act, 1867.... The Official Languages Act (OLA) confirms that English and French are the official languages of Parliament, and that the right to use either language in any debates or other parliamentary proceedings is protected.”

And, at page 31 your report notes:

“Further, in the exercise of the rights accorded by parliamentary privilege, members have the right to full and equal participation in parliamentary proceedings.”

Some expert witnesses have advised your Committee that technological shortcomings that prevent members from being heard are not necessarily breaches of your most fundamental privilege of freedom of speech.

Make no mistake, however. When technology fails and you cannot be heard your right and privilege to speak on behalf of your constituents is as obstructed as it would be by someone blocking your access to the Chamber or committee room.

--end--

For further information:

Jim Thompson