

SUMMARY: Addressing the challenges faced by interpreters during virtual parliamentary meetings and hearings / COVID-19

Submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC) Committee's Study of Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic | **Monday, June 15, 2020**

Background

On Monday, May 4th, 2020 Greg Phillips, in his capacity as national president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE), testified before the House of Commons Procedure and House Affairs Committee (PROC) as part of its “Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic” study. Speaking on behalf of federal interpreters represented by CAPE, Mr. Phillips sounded the alarm on the strain and increasing number of injuries government interpreters have been sustaining during virtual parliamentary meetings held since the beginning of the confinement.

In his remarks, Mr. Phillips highlighted several concerns that have been brought to CAPE’s attention including “technical glitches or poor compliance with interpretation standards and conditions.” Injuries reported by interpreters include acoustic shock, headaches, nausea and tinnitus. Over time, these can impair their hearing and concentration, which are critical to do their job.

Nicole Gagnon, advocacy lead at the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and her colleague Jim Thompson, communications counsel, both confirmed the information shared by CAPE and provided more details on the interpreters’ experience and suffering.

During his presentation, Mr. Phillips also argued that the situation interpreters are facing is affecting their ability to effectively champion Canada’s two official languages given their important role in promoting our country’s linguistic duality. When glitches occur or whenever poor sound makes it difficult to follow a speaker, interpreters are unable to offer the high-quality interpretation in both languages that is expected. This is doing a disservice to both parliamentarians and Canadians.

Updates

Since the May 4th testimony, some correctives measures have already been implemented. For one, during the virtual question period held on Tuesday, May 12, both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister were reported wearing a headset with a boom mike, for the very first time.

On this day as well, the Treasury Board Secretariat confirmed to CAPE the full involvement and support of the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM), Human Resources at Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) in tackling this issue. The ADM is currently looking at creating a

hearing protection program, and to that end, has retained a Doctor from National Research Council Canada (NRC) to review the situation and report back with findings.

However, interpreters still commonly report protracted ear pain, hypersensitivity to noise, tinnitus, nausea, and headaches. Several have had to take time off, or ask to be reassigned to non-interpreting tasks. These repetitive injuries cause major anxiety as to their ability to keep working in their chosen profession. Ultimately, they may reduce the pool of available freelance and staff talent, already shrunken.

Considering the ongoing virtual sittings and ongoing challenges interpreters continue to face, we want to highlight the following points for the Committee's consideration.

Recommendations:

1. **New:** As part of the Centre Block renovation project, a remote interpretation center is being proposed. This may well institutionalize, long after the pandemic, unduly taxing interpreting conditions. CAPE requests being kept informed of these discussions, given the impact of these changes to the working conditions of interpreters
2. Clearly communicate to Clerks, MPs and witnesses the best practices for videoconferencing and the equipment required for a successful participation in a parliamentary videoconference meeting
3. Make sure committee Chairs are aware of the standards so they can hold participants to them;
4. Understand that simultaneous interpretation might be impossible in some circumstances and that other methods of interpretation such as consecutive interpretation might be necessary if conditions cannot be improved;
5. Briefly go over the standards before each meeting;
6. Make sure the videoconferencing solutions used for parliamentary meetings follow ISO standards on Remote Interpreting; and
7. Ensure everyone communicates with interpreters respectfully.

About the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE)

CAPE is the third largest labour union in the federal public service and represents 17,900 economists, policy analysts, researchers in the Library of Parliament, analysts in the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, statisticians, translators, interpreters and terminologists. Our members help guide and inform policymaking as well as protect and defend our country's linguistic duality. www.acep-cape.ca

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