



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 014

Monday, May 4, 2020

Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1405)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 14 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Pursuant to the order of reference of Tuesday, April 11, the committee is meeting to discuss parliamentary duties in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before we start I want to inform members that pursuant to the order of reference, the committee is meeting for two reasons: first, for the purpose of undertaking a study and receiving evidence concerning matters related to the conduct of parliamentary duties in the context of COVID-19; and second, to prepare and present a report to the House of Commons by May 15 on that said study. The order of reference also stipulates that only motions needed to determine witnesses and motions related to the adoption of the report are in order.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So that you are aware, the webcast always shows the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee.

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for you to follow.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either “floor”, “English” or “French”. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak you can either click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, or you can hold down the space bar while you are speaking. When you release the bar, your mike will mute itself, just like a walkie-talkie.

This is a reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for speaking or questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the “raise hand” function. This will signal to the chair your interest to speak. In order to do so, you should click on “participants” at the bottom

of your screen, and when the list pops up you'll see the “raise hand” function. Please click that.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, make sure your mike is on mute.

The use of headsets is strongly encouraged and I believe today we may have everyone with headsets, so thank you for ordering your headsets and having them. It's definitely going to facilitate this meeting much better.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example, in relation to interpretation or problems with your audio, please advise the chair immediately, and the technical team will work to resolve them. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times as we want to ensure that all members get to participate fully.

Before we get started, could everyone click on their screen in the top right-hand corner and ensure that they are on gallery view? With this view you should be able to see all other participants in a grid view and it will ensure that all video participants can see one another.

During this meeting we will follow the same rules that usually apply to opening statements and the questioning of witnesses during our regular meetings. Per the routine motions of the committee, each witness has up to 10 minutes for an opening statement, followed by the usual rounds of questions from members. Just as we usually would in a regular committee meeting, we will suspend in between panels in order for the first group of witnesses to depart and for the next panel to join the meeting.

I'd like to welcome to this meeting, on the first panel, the Canadian Association of Professional Employees and the International Association of Conference Interpreters. First, we will hear from the Association of Professional Employees. From there, we have Mr. Greg Phillips, president; Katia Thériault, director of communications; and Nicolas Bois, the president of Local 900. I believe, on their behalf, we will have Mr. Greg Phillips speak. From the Association of Conference Interpreters, we have Nicole Gagnon and Mr. Jim Thompson. They'll be up next after Mr. Greg Phillips.

Mr. Phillips, you have 10 minutes to make your opening statement.

Mr. Jim Thompson (Communications Counsel, International Association of Conference Interpreters): Yes.

Sorry to interrupt, but I do not have the option on my screen to choose a “floor” channel.

The Chair: Hold on a moment.

Mr. Thompson, we are going to look into it. We'll start with the statement from the first witness and the technical team will try to help you out while we're doing that. Thank you for bringing that to my attention.

Let's start with Mr. Phillips, please.

Mr. Greg Phillips (President, Canadian Association of Professional Employees): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today about the strain and injuries that government interpreters have been sustaining during virtual parliamentary meetings, and how it's hurting their ability to effectively champion our two official languages.

My name is Greg Phillips. I am the national president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees, also known as CAPE. Joining me today are a colleague and two CAPE representatives: Katia Thériault, director of communications; Nicolas Bois, president of CAPE Local 900 and translator at the Translation Bureau; and Bastien Tremblay-Cousineau, a parliamentary interpreter and also an occupational safety and health representative.

I would like to greet the interpreters responsible for this meeting's interpretation services. Language professionals play an essential role in the application of the Official Languages Act, and I want to thank them for the important work they do in promoting our nation's linguistic duality. I also want to thank them for their exceptional work since the COVID-19 crisis. The government has been in constant communications with Canadians about the pandemic, always relying on our language professionals to convey their updates in both official languages. Our interpreters have not missed a beat.

CAPE is the third-largest labour union representing federal public service employees. We represent nearly 18,000 economists, policy analysts, statisticians and researchers in the Library of Parliament, and analysts in the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Of most relevance today, we represent all 70 professional interpreters in the federal public service. We negotiate their collective agreements, and we defend their right to a safe and healthy workplace. We also take a stand when needed to fix their enduring labour-related problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a lot of changes in the way the federal government operates. One of the most obvious changes is the steep increase in virtual sittings of committees and Parliament. Virtual parliamentary hearings and sessions are not new to the government per se. Interpreters know how to operate in this environment and can deliver exceptional interpretation services when the interpretation standards and conditions are respected. However, teleconferencing and video conferencing have been known for some time to be challenging for our interpreters.

Well before COVID-19, we had raised the problem with the Translation Bureau, with whom we enjoy a good relationship. Indeed, occasional technical glitches or poor compliance with interpretation standards and conditions have in the past prevented our interpreters from performing their duties to the best of their ability.

They have also caused injuries, including very serious cases of acoustic shock.

The current situation has created some urgency that has prompted an acceleration of our pursuit for remediation. CAPE is here to confirm the dramatic and exponential increase in injuries reported to us over a very short period of time. We can confirm that these incidents have been exacerbated by the exponential increase in the number of virtual meetings since the beginning of the confinement period. In fact, there have been more incidents reported between March 31 and May 1 of this year than for all of 2019 or, said differently, more than half of the injuries reported since the beginning of last year, 2019, to today have taken place in the last three weeks alone. Although not all incidents involve a serious injury or a visit to the doctor, the type and severity of symptoms felt by interpreters are very worrisome. This is not a normal situation.

CAPE's labour relations officers, stewards and government occupational health and safety representatives at Public Services and Procurement Canada, PSPC, can confirm the unusual increase in injuries reported by interpreters and the uncharacteristic nature of the trend since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. The people on whom you depend need urgent action on this matter.

There is more to the situation. Interpreters are generally used to working multiple parliamentary assignments in one day, many days in a row. As the Translation Bureau told your committee last week, the typical day for a parliamentary interpreter consists of six hours of interpretation. Virtual meetings are handled differently because the cognitive load is much heavier, which leads to more strain and more injuries. This means shorter assignments, shorter shifts and more interpreters going on sick leave for days or being permanently redeployed to other non-virtual assignments at their request.

• (1410)

As a result, the pool of the available interpreters to pick from is shrinking.

We are getting close to our worst-case scenario, which is that too many interpreters end up needing rest and healing at the same time. We fear that interpreters are getting dangerously close to being unable to keep up with the demand and having to refuse assignments in too great numbers to find replacements. This would jeopardize the conduct of parliamentary activities. Nobody wants to get to the point where we no longer have enough available qualified interpreters to support parliamentary work. This would be a great disservice to all parliamentarians and to all Canadians.

Last week the Translation Bureau presented you with a general list of the types of physical injuries the interpreters have been sustaining during these virtual meetings. We can confirm that the injuries reported are impairing our members' hearing and concentration, which are the instruments they critically need to hold their jobs and do this profession.

If you recall, the main symptoms of those injuries include tinnitus, a residual and long-lasting beating sound, pounding and sharp bursts in the eardrum, headaches, nausea, sleeplessness, mental fog and an inability to concentrate. This is why longer breaks are needed and why interpreters go on sick leave.

CAPE is also here to confirm the causes behind those injuries and the extreme exhaustion, and the fact that with everyone's support they can be eliminated or mitigated. Those causes include poor audio and video quality because of bandwidth or connectivity issues, for example, using a Wi-Fi connection instead of a cable Internet connection, or not using a headset or microphone; the disruption of usual lines of communication and logistical channels, which makes it more difficult for interpreters to receive and manage documents and speaking notes; and more generally, a video conferencing system that does not meet international standards.

There are solutions readily available to solve this problem, and we implore you to consider adopting the following corrective measures.

Clearly communicate to clerks, MPs and witnesses the best practices for video conferencing and the material required for successful participation in a parliamentary video conferencing meeting. Make sure committee chairs are aware of the standards so that they can hold participants to them. Understand that simultaneous interpretation might not be possible in some circumstances and that other methods of interpretation, such as consecutive interpretation, might be necessary if conditions cannot be improved. Briefly go over the standards before each meeting. Make sure the video conferencing solutions used for parliamentary meetings are in compliance with ISO standards on remote interpreting. Ensure that everyone communicates with interpreters respectfully.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, in my closing argument, I want to reiterate the fact that interpreters are your main allies, albeit often invisible. They are an integral part of your parliamentary sessions. They ensure that the message you convey to your constituents and other Canadians is communicated in both official languages, accurately and in real time. Good sound is what interpreters rely on to do their work. When the working conditions lead to a deterioration of sound quality, the interpreters can't ensure as faithful, nuanced and complete a transmission of the meaning in the other language.

Without interpreters, non-bilingual MPs would not be able to fully participate in parliamentary meetings, and Canadians would not be able to follow our parliamentary proceedings in real time in the official language of their choice. It is my fervent hope that this committee will review how the virtual committee proceedings are conducted to ensure remediation.

Thank you to the interpreters on this assignment today and for doing your very best under very challenging conditions.

Thank you also to the committee members. We look forward to answering your questions.

• (1415)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next we will hear, for 10 minutes or less, from Nicole Gagnon.

Thank you for providing your speaking notes as well. We have made them available to everyone in the committee. I hope they'll be able to follow along.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon (Advocacy Lead, International Association of Conference Interpreters): Thank you for the invitation, ladies and gentlemen.

If you recognize my voice, but you cannot place who I am, it's because you are accustomed to hearing me, not seeing me, when I am in the interpreting booth at your service.

The International Association of Conference Interpreters of Canada, or simply AIIC Canada, is the only national association representing conference interpreters in the country, both freelancers and Translation Bureau staff professionals. Our members are free to choose whether or not to join our association.

Let me first introduce my colleague, Jim Thompson, and to thank my colleagues in the booth today for their good services.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are a bilingual nation. Together, the two founding peoples along with our indigenous hosts have built our great country by sheer hard work. That was not always easy. But we persevered and succeeded against all odds. Our desire to be a bilingual country is written into the Official Languages Act and enshrined in the Constitution. Clearly...

• (1420)

[*English*]

The Chair: Could I intervene for a moment? I was thinking that the difficulty might correct itself.

We do have the speaking notes, and I want to let all the members know that an email was sent out with the speaking notes for Ms. Gagnon. You can take a look at those as well, as we're going through this.

Mr. Clerk, there is some difficulty in hearing the interpretation right now because the volume currently is approximately the same for the English and the French.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Yes, Madam Chair. Perhaps you may want to suspend for just a few minutes. We'll try to address the problem with the technicians here in the room. Hopefully, it should take only a handful of minutes, so just stand by, please.

The Chair: If everyone can just stand by for a couple of minutes, we'll suspend for maybe three to four minutes.

• (1420)

(Pause)

• (1425)

The Chair: If everyone is back, maybe we can get started. The suspension is over. It looks like everyone is here. Everyone is turning on their cameras, so we will carry on with the meeting.

I call the meeting back into session. We'll continue to hear from Madam Gagnon.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: So, as I was saying, our desire to be a bilingual country is written into the Official Languages Act and enshrined in the Constitution, which clearly obliges the federal government to provide access of equal quality to its proceedings in the country's two official languages. Neither the quality of the communication, nor the access to that communication in either official language can be overlooked in times of crisis.

We know from experience that our foundational partnership cannot be taken for granted. That is why AICC Canada's number one issue is the quality of interpretation in both Houses of Parliament, the highest institutions of our democracy.

As you well know, many are concerned that the French language may be taking second place during the pandemic. Provincial premiers are being called out for failing to communicate with their French-speaking residents in their mother tongue. What can we say when the Prime Minister himself has stated that English-only labels and signage are acceptable in certain circumstances?

Independent senator René Cormier recently said, "nothing justifies the lack of respect for our two official languages." We concur and submit that when it comes to access to the proceedings of the federal government, and in particular Parliament, nothing must compromise quality. In the rush to get a virtual Parliament, committees included, up and running, compromises had to be made, compromises that undermine the quality of interpretation during your proceedings.

[*English*]

The first compromise relates to technology. Witnesses from the Translation Bureau have stated that quality has not been compromised by technology during the past six weeks. They advised your committee last week that the bureau encourages interpreters to interrupt service when they cannot hear and, therefore, quality is not being undermined.

This blanket statement does not reflect what is really happening. Let me explain.

We endeavour to provide you with the seamless service you are used to. Even if encouraged, most interpreters are reluctant to interrupt service every time they are faced with bad sound quality. Instead, we will edit out some of what is being said because we haven't heard it properly. Some of the original message is lost; in many cases, more than what interpreters deem acceptable. We are

trained to provide accurate and faithful interpretation of the speaker's words with all the nuances. After all, no parliamentarian wants to be misquoted. This is one of the ways in which quality is being compromised.

It is disrespectful to the institution of Parliament to show up in the chamber wearing jeans and a T-shirt. There are rules that prevent this. It is equally disrespectful to Canada's linguistic duality to show up for virtual assemblies without the equipment needed to be heard properly. There should be rules preventing this too. Everyone participating in a virtual committee meeting or other virtual assembly must wear a headset with a built-in microphone and they must be connected to the Internet by a hard Ethernet wire—not Wi-Fi. We ask your committee to recommend that this become a mandatory requirement for all virtual events.

The second compromise has to do with bidirectionality. Like you, interpreters have a mother tongue. They usually work from their second language into their mother tongue. For example, an English-speaking MP will be interpreted into French by a francophone interpreter. Interpreters are capable of interpreting into their second language. This is known as bidirectional interpreting, but most interpreters who work into their second language offer a service of lesser quality because of accent, syntax and vocabulary, for example. For this reason, AICC-Canada strongly advises against this practice when interpreters are working in Parliament for broadcast, unless they have been deemed qualified to do so.

By its own admission, the Translation Bureau has no shortage of accredited interpreters, so interpretation into a second language is not necessary. Parliament is sacrosanct and should receive only top-notch interpretation services.

• (1430)

[*Translation*]

The third compromise concerns fatigue and injury.

"Zoom fatigue" is magnified for interpreters because we are working with new technologies that are not yet perfected for remote interpretation. Thus, in addition to the normal challenges faced by interpreters, they are not getting sound that is adequate for good results, they are lacking the usual visual cues—and we know that body language represents 70% of communication—and they are presently working in the booth alone, no longer in teams, because of physical distancing.

We therefore have to strain and concentrate more, to the extent that we are suffering injuries such as serious headaches and earaches, tinnitus, hyperacusis and excessive fatigue.

We do not know when this pandemic will end, but we want to be in it for the long haul and to make it through this crisis with you. We therefore ask that you be mindful of the health and safety of accredited interpreters, because remote interpreting is so much more taxing in the current context.

The critical resource that we represent must be protected and carefully managed during this time of crisis. In all cases, quality must be paramount.

[*English*]

Lastly, I wish to bring to your attention the force that has been eroding the quality of interpretation of federal proceedings for years. It may come as news, but it is the policy of the federal government to allow a double standard of quality to exist in the interpretation of its proceedings. We held out hope that this would change when, in early 2017, the then minister Judy Foote called on the President of the Treasury Board to fix this problem. Three years later, nothing has been done.

On the one hand, there is a high standard of quality that is delivered by federally accredited interpreters. The Canadian federal accreditation is recognized worldwide as the gold standard of quality. The Translation Bureau hires and contracts only those who hold this credential. Parliament is served by the Translation Bureau in keeping with this high standard, but every other government department and agency, including the PMO and ministers' offices, can and do hire unqualified interpreters through private language service companies. Therein lies the double standard. Due to the pandemic, this practice has become increasingly widespread because of growing demand for interpretation agreements and the events held over phone lines.

Last year, the Translation Bureau stopped offering over-the-phone interpretation, because typical audio levels are so dismal that quality interpretation is near impossible. Moreover, in the case of hybrid meetings, where you have people meeting in person and others joining in over the phone, interpreters risk sustaining the most serious of injuries: acoustic shock. If the federal government truly values our linguistic duality, it will end this double standard forthwith.

As you know, the association is committed to making virtual meetings of Parliament work. With this in mind, I draw your attention to a summary of recommendations that we urge your committee to adopt.

With thanks, honourable members, we conclude our presentation. Jim Thompson and I will both be pleased to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you. We appreciate both of the opening statements.

We will move on to our six-minute questioning round, started by Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks, Madam Chair.

To whomever wants to answer this, to be an interpreter with the Translation Bureau, there's obviously some very high standards involved in that. For everyone's information, can you briefly give us all a rundown of what those qualifications are to be an interpreter?

• (1435)

Mr. Greg Phillips: If I may, I would turn it over to Bastien Tremblay-Cousineau, who is an interpreter.

If he's comfortable answering that, he could give you exactly what the qualifications are.

Bastien Tremblay-Cousineau (Parliamentary Interpreter and Occupational Health and Safety Representative, Canadian Association of Professional Employees): All interpreters working for the Translation Bureau have a master's degree in conference interpretation, and all interpreters working for the Translation Bureau have to later pass an accreditation exam that is administered by the Translation Bureau. That is recognized worldwide as the gold standard for accrediting interpreters.

Mr. Blake Richards: How deep is the pool of interpreters of those available and qualified to work at Parliament?

We've heard that there is an increase in the number of interpreters needed to do these kinds of proceedings that are virtual or hybrid, or others. I am sure that a number of those are unable to work for a variety of reasons related to COVID. We're now hearing, of course, that there's been a huge increase in the number of workplace injuries. Are we in a situation where we could be getting thinned right out and wouldn't have enough interpreters available?

Mr. Greg Phillips: That is the ongoing concern.

There are about 70 staff interpreters working in official languages. There are another dozen working in foreign languages and sign languages. Of the 70 staff interpreters in official languages, during the pandemic, there are about 40 interpreters who are unable to work because of child care or health issues. There are about 60 accredited freelancers based in the national capital region, for all languages, who are not official language interpreters but are willing to work for Parliament.

Mr. Blake Richards: My understanding—and I want you to verify this for me—is that although we're all meeting virtually, I believe the requirement for the interpreters is still that they are working from booths in the West Block or from somewhere on the Hill for these virtual parliamentary proceedings. That's something that's being required and is necessary. Is that accurate?

Mr. Greg Phillips: It's my understanding that they're still working in the booths on Parliament Hill. They used to work in the same booth; they would be close by. Now, because of COVID and physical distancing, they're not in the same booth, but they're still working out of the booths.

Mr. Blake Richards: The reason I ask is that you were mentioning how many are available in the national capital region. The obvious question that someone might ask is, why not source people from elsewhere in the country? Tell me what the reasons are that this is the case and whether that's necessary, and that they are working from West Block and why that is.

Mr. Greg Phillips: My belief is that it's just based on demand for services. For the interpretation services, there are a lot more people who need interpretation services here in Ottawa, because this is where the government is. There might be a lot less need for interpretation services out of Calgary or other places where there may not be the demand for it.

Mr. Jim Thompson: Could I just add to that?

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure, briefly.

Mr. Jim Thompson: Mr. Richards, I wanted to let you know that, because the Zoom platform is not a stand-alone platform that interpreters plug into via their own laptops, they need to go to a place—in this case, the Hill—where there is an interface that connects Zoom to the consoles they normally work on. That is largely the reason for them having to go to work in the West Block.

Nicole may want to add to that. I don't know.

• (1440)

Mr. Blake Richards: I'd like to hear about that because we were told by a representative of Zoom the other day that the interpretation could be done through their platform, and it sounds to me like you're telling me that maybe that's not the case.

Quickly, before you answer that, could you also answer this for me? Your association sent a brief to our committee. It says that there is “conclusive proof that the quality of sound these [teleconferences] provide never come close to the quality of sound needed for” remote simultaneous interpretation.

Is there a research paper or a study where you've pulled this from that you could table with the committee for us?

You—or Ms. Gagnon, if she'd like to—can go also ahead and give me a bit more information.

The Chair: If you can, answer in 30 seconds. We're already over the time.

Mr. Jim Thompson: Nicole.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Yes, I realize that Mr. Moseley from the Zoom corporation assured you that there was an interpretation functionality on the Zoom platform. That is true, but it is minimal.

In the case of the Government of Canada, specifically parliamentary services, although the House administration has adopted a Zoom platform, it has been modified, so to speak, because of security concerns, first and foremost, and the end-to-end encryption that is required. Secondly, there has been an interface developed that has been twinned with the Zoom platform, whereby interpreters can go into work for you and do what it is they do day in and day out, and—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gagnon.

Mr. Blake Richards: Madam Chair, I asked if there was something that they could table to the committee in relation to that quote from their paper. Would you be able to allow them to give us a yes or no on that?

The Chair: Yes. I thought it was a given.

Would you be able to table that for us, please?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: We will endeavour to do so, yes.

The Chair: Next we have Mr. Turnbull, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to all the witnesses today for their statements. We really appreciate it.

I want to say first off that I think you are quite right that the work many of our interpreters do is often in the background. I just want to say how much you are valued. You are really an integral part of the functioning of Parliament. I want to acknowledge that and real-

ly thank you for the quality of interpretation you've provided despite circumstances that have obviously been quite challenging. Our country has a dual linguistic nature and history, and it is really important to all of us to preserve that.

I just wanted to start with that thank you for and acknowledgement of your hard work, and our appreciation of the quality of interpretation and how you're protecting that.

That said, I never would have thought that all of the situational improvements being made to Parliament's ability to operate would cause injury to interpreters. When I learned of this, I was deeply concerned. I want to ask for some clarification on some of the injuries that have resulted and on how quickly people can recover from them. Eventually I will ask you another question, but in particular, how many people are getting tinnitus, for example? That seems like a pretty severe injury. Of the number of interpreters, how many were afflicted with tinnitus?

Greg, why don't we start with you?

Mr. Greg Phillips: It's really hard. We can table it, for sure, and we can follow up with more precise numbers—the problem being to get an accurate count. Many injured interpreters might go home and may have experienced tinnitus but have not submitted a report. They might not go to see a doctor and might just suffer through it and not tell anybody.

I know that the Translation Bureau is doing a thorough review of the incident reports they've been receiving. I think the Translation Bureau is coming back, and they're going to be talking about it, but we can definitely endeavour to table something for you.

• (1445)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you. I would appreciate that. It is certainly something that is a cause for concern.

Could someone explain acoustic shock for us? I'm not really familiar with that as an injury. I've never had it and I have never known anyone to have it. Obviously, you would know more of the details on that.

Could you also describe what was said in the remarks—I think it was in your remarks, Ms. Gagnon—which was that hybrid meetings would pose the greatest shock or the greatest risk for acoustic shock? Could you explain what it is and why hybrid meetings might pose a greater risk?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you very much for that question. I would be happy to answer it to the best of my ability.

Acoustic shock presents symptoms like a concussion where you have headaches, nausea, difficulty with this fog we're talking about. I'm sure you know that concussions are cumulative in impact over time. As you sustain one after the other, it takes a lot longer to recover.

As to the statistics, I believe that CAPE is best placed to speak to that because the staff interpreters are providing incident reports to the Translation Bureau. The International Association of Conference Interpreters in Canada does not compile such statistics, but we are getting feedback from the membership to that effect—tinnitus, hypersensitivity to loud noises and that kind of thing.

You had a second question as to hybrid meetings. Yes, they are the most serious of the issues because when you're meeting in person—we are all familiar with that experience—what happens is that, on top of that, you have people joining the call over the phone lines, so you are dealing with different technologies. You have the equipment that has been put in place for the in-person meeting; you have, on top of that, a layer of equipment that is being provided for the interpretation; and then finally, you have the telephone equipment on top of all of that, to put it in simple terms.

All of this is not necessarily compatible. When people are joining by phone, they can be joining on a land line, but there aren't too many of those left. Most of them are on cell phones. Some are in their cars driving with a hands-free system. It's a matter of the inputs. The inputs are various, and because of this, the quality of the sound is degraded and makes our work all the more difficult. That is when you can have a feedback loop that causes acoustic shock.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Since virtual Parliament under this global pandemic began, which I think is a gradual process, would you say that improvements have been made? Have the Speaker, the House administration and others been listening to the feedback you have given? It seems to me that some of the suggestions you have made have actually already been implemented. My impression is that the House administration is working really hard to make sure we get the best quality interpretation.

The Chair: In 10 seconds, please.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Improvements have been made. Of course, virtual Parliament goes back some six weeks now. Staff interpreters were working these sessions and reporting back to the Translation Bureau. Because of that, the Translation Bureau has been talking to the House administration.

Freelancers only went back to the Hill last week, and after a week, they have been reporting back to their association as well about these issues we've raised. The association has talked to the Translation Bureau, and up the chain it goes.

So, yes, improvements are being made, but it's a very recent experience.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

The Chair: Next up for questions we have Ms. Normandin, please.

• (1450)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here and for their opening remarks.

I will continue with the same subject that Mr. Turnbull mentioned. I know the reference point is very recent, but has there been any improvement since headsets are being used, and so on?

That brings me to another question. The pace is likely to be a little bit faster in the coming weeks because there will be more and more virtual committee meetings and virtual sessions of the House.

Given these improvements, do you feel you are able to provide service, even if there is greater demand for it?

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Phillips: I believe we do have the ability, but we will have to wait and see what the workload actually entails.

I know the interpreters are dwindling, and if you increase it, there are going to be problems. I think it's a question you might want to ask the Translation Bureau when they show up. I answered a question earlier in which I outlined the exact numbers of interpreters; about 40 out of the 70 are unable to work right now. It's not just sick leave; there are other issues around why they can't work right now.

If everybody's able to wear the headsets, and if all of our suggestions outlined in my presentation come true, then I think it will extend and enable more interpretation to be handled, but things can't continue as they are right now.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Madam Chair, may I speak?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, absolutely, Ms. Gagnon.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I just wanted to add to what Mr. Phillips said about the injuries to interpreters being serious. Fewer and fewer interpreters are available. I must say that the Translation Bureau has been listening and has introduced basic health measures. No one is worried about potential COVID-19 infection. However, what is important to us now is our hearing.

I would like to thank the members and all the online participants today as they are all wearing a headset. As long as everyone does their best to do so, we will be able to avoid injury and the interpreters will be able to continue working for you. That is all they ask. They want the virtual Parliament to be a success. They are simply asking you to help them be successful.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I gather from the presentations that there is more pressure to interpret from English to French because there are more English speakers.

If French-speaking members talk in French rather than English when they have the opportunity, would that help the interpreters?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: It certainly would, Ms. Normandin.

Right now, I would say that 75% of the work is interpretation from English to French and 25% is from French to English. I don't have statistics, I am providing figures based on my personal impression.

Of course, members are free to speak in the language of their choice. If they want to speak in their second language, that is their right. We have to interpret them.

To answer your question, if the French-speaking members start speaking in French, it will surely lighten the load.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I don't know if you will have the answer to my next question. It is about the interpreting system.

I really like being able to hear the interpretation in one ear and to listen to the source language in the other, so I can compare the two, which Zoom does not currently allow me to do. It is one or the other.

Have you considered using a parallel system?

We could use the telephone and have an earpiece or something. We could set the volume of the interpretation and hear the original version at all times. Witnesses would not have to constantly switch channels either.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I can certainly try to answer your question, Ms. Normandin.

The Translation Bureau and the professional association are not responsible for any technical matters. We provide you with interpreters. Administration staff take care of the technical side of things.

What you are describing is indeed a problem. For example, today, every time I want to speak, I have to switch the console myself to speak to you in French, as is the case now, or in English, as you may have noticed during my speech. This adds to my workload as such.

For those members who would like to listen to the source language and the interpretation, it is true that the platform cannot do that. I would advise you not to use a telephone because you may have compatibility issues with the console. If the headset is too close to the telephone, that could also cause problems.

• (1455)

Ms. Christine Normandin: All right.

I don't know if I have time for another question, so I will make this quick.

In terms of the virtual Parliament, what is the main issue that leads to bilingualism not being respected?

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Phillips: One of the worst problems we could face right now is not fixing the problems we've outlined, which both AI-IC and CAPE have outlined, and that more interpreters would have to go on long-term sick leave because they can no longer perform their duties.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Phillips.

I've given everyone a little bit of extra time on this round just because we've had some difficulties.

Next up is Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you so much to all the witnesses today. I appreciate your testimony and your interventions.

Could we ask for the international standards for interpreters in video conferences to be tabled with the committee? I just want to make sure that's reflected in the report.

Mr. Greg Phillips: They are available for download for a cost online. If the chair would like to contact us to let you know what the appropriate ISO numbers are so you can download them, we'd be more than happy to help.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, thank you so much. That's helpful.

One of the things I heard very clearly is that having a proper headset on and having hard-wired Internet make the sound much clearer for the interpreters.

First, would it be useful to make that mandatory? Second, are all headsets created equal or is there a standard that we should set to make sure that the interpreters can hear us? I open that to anyone.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: On whether it should be mandatory or not to wear the headsets, absolutely it should be. It is appended to our brief. We make recommendations to that effect. The headset must be mandatory, as well as a hard-wired Internet connection.

You are quite right that headsets are not all equal, and recommendations can be made to that effect as well. We'd be pleased to provide you with what we feel is best. The House administration is, I believe, handing out headsets to all MPs and we urge you to wear them.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, perfect.

Mr. Greg Phillips: If I may, I would simply add that it's difficult.... You have to consider the witnesses when you're doing that because not every witness would necessarily have an appropriate headset like this one. When you're making the rules and you're considering that point, please consider the witnesses as well.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. That's helpful.

Mr. Phillips, in your testimony you talked about the increase of strain and injuries on interpreters. I really appreciate that you also explained in one of your interventions that a lot of the interpreters are not always choosing to disclose the challenges they're facing and are, of course, really just trying to deliver the work that is so desperately needed.

As I understood, you said that in the period of time between March 31 to May 1, you have seen more strain and injuries claimed than in the whole of 2019. Could you speak to that a bit and also confirm that you will be tabling those numbers for the committee to review?

• (1500)

Mr. Greg Phillips: What I'm saying is that more than half of the cases in the last year and four months or five months have happened in the last three weeks.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Will you be able to table that information with the committee?

Mr. Greg Phillips: Yes, for sure. I have a very good relationship with Lucie Séguin, who is the president of the Translation Bureau, so she and I can talk about this to get some better numbers to you.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, thank you so much.

You also said that the pool of interpreters is shrinking as people are facing the realities of COVID-19. I understand that interpreters have a very high-level special skill set. If we're running low on numbers, how do we get more? Are there people appropriately trained for that, who we can access? I open that to all of you.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: There are the staff interpreters, as I explained. Over the past five weeks, staff interpreters have been working in extremely difficult conditions. They have sustained injury and become excessively fatigued. Of course, that is understood: They were out there from the very beginning trying to put things into place and would have been exposed to more dangerous situations.

Since that time, you have been wearing the headsets and people are becoming more aware of what needs to be done or not done as we become more savvy when it comes to video conferencing. Now, as of last week, the Translation Bureau is calling in freelance interpreters to lend a hand to their colleagues on the Hill.

I believe that if we improve the working conditions, if the headset and the hard-wired connection are mandatory, it will protect the hearing of the interpreters and allow for better sound, and you will not lose more interpreters. If anything, the situation would stabilize if working conditions were good for them. By good working conditions I mean proper sound, no acoustic shocks, no sustained injuries and no excessive fatigue.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: The last part is this. There was a bit of talk about how sometimes you cannot do simultaneous and how consecutive interpreting would be more effective based on some issues. I am wondering if you could tell us when that would be appropriate. I'm thinking of how many rural and remote MPs we have who may not have the best level of Internet accessibility.

Mr. Greg Phillips: That's a very good question about when it is done. I think, given the time allotted today, we could probably put pen to paper and table something to you about when we feel which of the two would be appropriate, in order to save time.

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

I want to get agreement among members before we carry on to round two of questioning.

The Speaker and the House leadership team are ready to go on, but they're also willing to wait for about 15 minutes or so, if you would like to carry on to round two of questions. I would suggest, if we do that, that as we have done in previous committees, we cut down the time for round two to perhaps three minutes for the questioning for the first four questioners and then one minute each for the last two questioners.

Can I have agreement for that or would you like to move on to the Speaker at this time?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I agree with that. In addition, I am prepared to give one minute of my time to Ms. May, if she wishes.

• (1505)

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I would like to carry on.

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Let me thank Ms. Normandin for her kindness.

I'm sorry I was late for the meeting. I was delayed due to technical difficulties.

I will let the others ask questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Seeing as at least one member wants to carry on, we'll carry on.

Now we go to Mr. Duncan for three minutes, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I think it's good that we have this follow-up today following some of the management team speaking last week. I don't begrudge anybody...and I know everybody is trying, but it's good to get into the weeds of some of these challenges that we have in the short term and frankly ones that have existed not just here with COVID, but that I think have been highlighted by it and expanded by it in the last little while.

I'll agree with the point Madam Normandin from the Bloc made about us not being at 100% capacity even right now. I know we're having some committees meet. We're meeting virtually a few days a week. One thing I see a challenge with behind the scenes is our caucus advisory committees. Outside of our regular caucus meetings, we discuss specific portfolios. Not having the translation there is certainly a challenge for members and staff who are working as impromptu translators as well as they can, where they can.

I want to build a bit on the numbers again to clarify where we're at in terms of the issue here with staffing levels. As we mentioned, there would normally be 70 interpreters. We're down to 40 right now given the circumstances, but there are 30 freelancers who have come on.

Mr. Phillips, is the challenge there that there's hesitation to have additional staffing come in or is it an accreditation issue? Can you give us some of that background again to make sure we get it right?

Mr. Greg Phillips: I think Madam Gagnon would also have some very important things to say about that. For us, the major problem is the cumulative impact of the injury. Continued minor injuries can build up over time, and that's a major concern of ours that will come into play with this, so it's hard for us to say how quickly people are going to become injured and unable to work.

Just to clarify the numbers, there are 70 interpreters from the Translation Bureau working in the official languages. Of those, 40 are unable to work right now, so there are 30 who are working.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Ms. Gagnon.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Mr. Phillips correctly pointed out that there are 70 interpreters who work for the Translation Bureau as employees. There are about 30 to 35 freelancers accredited by the Government of Canada, who can be called upon to come and work on the Hill. They regularly work on the Hill; they just haven't since COVID-19 and until the start-up of the virtual Parliament. They are ready. They are without work, basically, because everything else in the country has been cancelled, any other meetings, and so they are willing to come forward and help out their colleagues.

Mr. Eric Duncan: In my quick time, I'll just mention the bidirectionality. I'm hoping that some of our work can provide some measures that help. For example, if we have hybrid meetings of some sort, maybe we should have a policy to say there would be one person who does the in-person interpretation, and have a set-up where there could be another who is doing the remote aspect, to avoid that shock aspect of going back and forth, as you mentioned. I'm very interested in working on that and making sure that we address those issues, not only from a social distancing perspective within the Hill, but from a health and safety perspective, as you raised.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Duncan.

Next up, we have Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's great to have you folks on today. I really appreciate the time that you've taken to spend with us.

Mr. Phillips, I just want to go to you first. In the information that you will be tabling, I understand that there are 40 people who are off right now, but I think you said before that a lot of those could be attributed to child care or whatnot, as a result of what's going on.

When you provide the information to us in terms of how many people have been experiencing workplace incidents, can you also give us the before picture, so that we know what it was like prior to this?

• (1510)

Mr. Greg Phillips: I will have to rely on some of the information that the Translation Bureau would provide because some of our members don't submit incident reports directly to us, the union, they submit them to their employer. We don't necessarily get all those statistics from the employer. It would be something that we'd have to be in discussion with the Translation Bureau about.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Are you getting them all right now?

Mr. Greg Phillips: We get some. It's a very tight-knit community, and they do speak to one another, but my background is in statistics, and I like the pure numbers. I don't have the 100% pure numbers to stand behind. From our end, it's more anecdotal. The bureau itself would have the real numbers.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: We need those numbers to look at, if we can get them.

The other issue that I wanted to talk about was the issue of the headsets. I just want to understand: is the issue having a headset, or is the issue having a proper microphone that is this close to your face? What are we actually looking for here?

Mr. Greg Phillips: Clarity of speech.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Right now, I'm talking to you using my headset; and now I'm talking to you using a \$250 microphone that's meant for podcasts. Is the clarity of speech different between the two of those?

Mr. Greg Phillips: You'd have to talk to the interpreters in the booth.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'll tell you where I'm coming from on this. I don't like wearing headphones because I have tinnitus in my right ear, and I attribute it to a lot of wearing headphones, particularly when I was younger. My preference is to not wear headphones, and I'm wondering if there is an alternative. Is it possible to make sure that quality of sound gets through without necessarily forcing people to wear headphones?

If I understand, for you, the issue here is the quality of sound that you're receiving, not what I'm hearing through the headset. Is that correct?

Mr. Greg Phillips: I would say that's correct. It's the quality of the sound from the microphone. Not everybody has a microphone like the one you showed. This is an easy solution that a lot of people can have, and it's easy to standardize, but a proper microphone like the one you demonstrated would probably be sufficient. It's the hearing of our members, not how it gets to them. It's the sound quality.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Phillips.

Mr. Jim Thompson: I would just like to add to check out our recommendation because it includes specifications as to the hertz that are delivered by your microphone.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards for three minutes please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Let's explore the workplace injuries that you both referenced in your opening remarks, which have been talked about since. As I understood it, in the last few weeks there have been more workplace incidents or injuries than there were in the 66 weeks prior to that, if you go back to 2019, which would be like a 22-fold increase in workplace injuries. Is that correct? Could you elaborate a bit more on this and how it relates to the increased requirements?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Mr. Phillips has pointed out to you that basically the Translation Bureau could provide you with those statistics. It makes sense that there is a greater number of injuries at this time, because we're into virtual Parliament. Up until COVID-19, there was some remote interpretation being done, but it wasn't steady. It wasn't every day, day in and day out. As the interpreters are working remotely, day in and day out, it is normal that they would sustain more injuries. It's not acceptable, but it in part explains the phenomenon.

It also has to do with how the interpreters were testing the systems, and I can only insist yet again, when it comes to what's being raised about using the headphones and the quality of the mikes, that what is important is that we standardize what everyone who is participating is using to connect to the platform. Every time someone is left with his own device, which is not necessarily compatible, the interpreters either do not get the quality of sound they need to do the work or sustain injury because they're not.

• (1515)

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Understood.

Can we maybe just talk a bit about right now, which is quite a modified situation for Parliament? There are virtual sittings for little portions of the day, a couple of days per week, and I don't know if it would be roughly a quarter of the committees of Parliament that are sitting.

If that were to be expanded on a more permanent basis—that's not what we're talking about here, but just because this is the conversation we're having—if all of the committees of Parliament were sitting and if Parliament were to sit virtually every day of the week and these kinds of things, if that decision were made, given what you've told us about the difficulties already being faced with the extra interpreters required and what that's leading to in terms of injuries, what would that look like for interpreters? Would that be a feasible situation?

The Chair: We're over time now, Mr. Richards. Thank you, though. I wanted you to at least be able to finish your thought.

Next we have you, Mr. Finnigan. If you don't need the full three minutes, it would be appreciated, as everybody is waiting to switch on for the next panel.

Mr. Finnigan.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would also like to thank the interpreters for the vital work they do.

As a committee chair, I remember when interpreters were injured last year, or the year before. It happened on a few occasions at our committee. So it is nothing new.

I wonder if any members, like those here now, have been injured as well. If not, why does it only happen to interpreters?

Could Ms. Gagnon or Mr. Phillips explain that?

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Phillips: The reason the interpreters are experiencing the problems is that because of the nature of their work, they have to sit in a booth, they have to listen to you speak and they also have to speak, so they are speaking at the exact same time that you're speaking, and then there is the sound quality amongst all of that. Interpreters have to pay so much attention to what you are saying and translate the tone and also the message, which a member of Parliament would not have to do. When you're sitting there, you're not thinking about another person speaking and you're not translating it

in your head and trying to translate the tone, the message and everything else that's involved.

It's an all-inclusive situation, and then maybe you go from your committee back to your office, while the interpreter goes to another meeting. It's an accumulation of all of that over a long period of time.

Mr. Jim Thompson: I would just add that when interpreters are straining to hear, if somebody is connecting by phone or a cell-phone from the back of a car, they turn up the volume. In cases where there is feedback—that screech you hear, as you know, when you get too close to the microphone with your phone—the volume is up, the headsets are on and that goes straight into the brain of the person who is trying to interpret you.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Mr. Finnigan, if I may, in answer to your question about whether the MPs could sustain injury in a remote setting, yes, you could, because, to the best of my knowledge, none of the major platforms out there provide hearing protection to anyone. The hearing protection the interpreters are getting is due to and thanks to the technical team that is riding the consoles and ensuring that all of the audio goes through a limiter/compressor so that there is no possible damage, or little damage, in terms of acoustic shock. Again, this is the most serious injury sustained by the interpreters.

• (1520)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, do you want to take your one minute?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Sure, I'll take one minute.

Madame Gagnon, I wanted to ask you specifically about the double standard you've identified. You talked about other government departments, including the PMO, using uncertified interpreters. I'm wondering if you could explain what the risk could be in that.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: As we explain in our brief, and we've spoken to this in the past—we were on the Hill three years ago—the issue is that at one time every government department, every agency, the Houses of Parliament, went through the Translation Bureau to obtain the services of Government of Canada accredited interpreters.

In 1995 the Translation Bureau became a special operating agency. Then the Translation Bureau was still providing services to the Houses of Parliament and to those government departments and agencies that were willing to call on it, but government departments and agencies are free to call on the private market, where there are accredited and non-accredited interpreters.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Gagnon. That's all the time we have for this panel.

Thank you, Madame Normandin, for forgoing your one minute, and Ms. May as well.

We're going to switch to the next panel. Please be back in five minutes with your computers and your videos turned on, to take questions and to hear the statements. Thank you.

• (1520) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1525)

The Chair: Welcome back. We're going to get started.

Without further ado, I'd like to welcome our witnesses back.

We have the Speaker of the House, Mr. Anthony Rota. Could we start with your statement first? Before we do so, I also want to point out that Speaker Rota sent a letter to the committee on Friday. Members may want to take a look at that if you haven't already.

Thank you as well for sending the committee that letter. Welcome.

• (1530)

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*Translation*]

Thank you all very much.

Madam Chair and committee members, thank you for your invitation to reappear today as you continue your study of parliamentary duties and the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I explained in my previous statement to the committee, your challenge is to consider and recommend how the House and its members can perform their roles of advancing legislation and holding the government to account while observing the necessary health precautions during the current pandemic.

[*English*]

I have been following your committee's proceedings with interest over the past two weeks as you have heard presentations and posed questions to witnesses who have provided important evidence.

Today I would like to offer some suggestions on how the House of Commons could adjust these practices in light of the two operating functions: one, as a deliberative assembly engaged in debate; and two, as a decision-making assembly on legislation, resolutions and orders.

Through the first meeting of the special committee on COVID-19 on April 28, most members have now participated in virtual deliberations. A virtual meeting is undeniably different from our usual in-person proceedings, but as we continue to adjust to using new technologies, we have seen it is possible to gather, debate and deliberate in virtual meetings.

As chair of the committee I was impressed by this experience, both from the technological standpoint and the quality of the exchange. I took some notes that I want to share with the committee. They may provide some ideas for your consideration as you prepare your report.

One issue that I think must be addressed has to be with the visual background in front of which members appear. Based on established practice, these backgrounds should be as neutral as possible, and consistent with the non-partisan environment of the chamber or committee. I have written to the chair of this committee expressing my concerns on this topic.

Absent a decision of the House to the contrary, I will be advising members to refrain from including any background that is not consistent with the norms and standards followed within the parliamentary precinct.

[*Translation*]

I also noted that many of the House's practices surrounding its deliberations can readily accommodate virtual participation. For example, the Chair is aided in recognizing members in debates by the rotation lists established by all the parties. This already brings a degree of predictability to the proceedings, something that is equally helpful to members and the Chair participating through a virtual setting.

Other proceedings, such as question period, where fixed interventions are relatively brief, might need some adjustment. In a virtual sitting, time must be managed differently, and the exchanges between members asking and answering questions will not be the same as in an in-person sitting. These aspects of question period—the length of interventions and the unpredictability surrounding who will respond—are, however, matters of adjustment among the parties or matters of practice, and could be adjusted to provide more time for questions and answers without requiring formal changes to the House's rules.

• (1535)

[*English*]

Many of the House's more routine practices could also be adapted to accommodate virtual participation in a straightforward manner and without changes to the rules. For example, the provisions that allow members to present petitions in the special committee on COVID-19 specifically ensure that such petitions are deemed presented in the House. In a virtual sitting of the House, no change to the rules would be necessary for members who are participating virtually to present petitions. Members would simply continue to submit the petition certificates electronically.

In short, as this committee decides what types of business it would like to see in the House debates and how—whether virtual or some hybrid of in-person and virtual—the procedural experts in the House administration will provide the committee with a more detailed proposal on how to accomplish this. In fact, the House administration has already begun work on how to support such an outcome, following the guiding principles I shared with the committee during my previous appearance.

On April 5, I received a letter from the government House leader asking about the ability of the administration to support and facilitate virtual sittings of the House during these unprecedented times. In my response on April 8, I stated that I had mandated digital services and real property, in collaboration with procedural services, to prepare for the possibility of holding virtual sittings within four weeks.

Similar to the approach to virtual participation of a number of international legislatures, including the United Kingdom's, the administration has begun testing with simulations of a hybrid model and will soon be ready to go beyond what has already been achieved with the virtual meetings of the special committee. This hybrid model would allow the deliberative aspects of the proceedings to continue throughout the pandemic with options for all members to participate. In this model, minimum changes to the House's rules would be required to allow its deliberations to continue, all while incorporating members' virtual participation.

[*Translation*]

As to the second operating function of the House, its decision-making authority, the challenge is greater. The standing orders that define this function are closely connected to the physical presence of members in the House itself. A more extensive review is required of the procedural mechanisms involved.

I was informed that the House administration is ready to provide detailed advice and options once it has received some direction from the committee as to what kind of approach it would like to consider. The technology is available and the rules can be adapted, and while the time to do this is tight, it can be done so as to leverage the capabilities of virtual sittings during the period of this pandemic.

[*English*]

Once this committee has determined the types of deliberations it would recommend to the House that the House undertake during the current crisis, and how much virtual participation it would like to see in those deliberations, we can begin implementing as quickly as possible. Whatever the deliberations, they will involve the participation of all members, all the while respecting physical distancing and travel guidelines.

Similarly, once the committee has decided on how it would see the House exercise its decision-making function during this time, we will develop specific options for consideration. This would be in line with the incremental approach that I strongly recommended in my initial appearance.

With that, the Clerk and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Speaker Rota. It's a pleasure to have you and your whole team back again. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but I thank you for your patience.

I believe this is going to be a great opportunity for us to be able to learn about some of the challenges you have and to verify some of the testimony we've heard from other witnesses before this committee. I'm really glad you were able to make it in today, as opposed to Thursday. I know that you haven't had a lot of opportunity to test out the COVID-19 committee, but hopefully you'll still be able to do your best job to answer the questions we have.

Just so everybody knows, we do have with us the Clerk of the House, as mentioned by the Speaker, and the deputy clerk as well. We also have with us the clerk's assistant and the law clerk, and I believe we also have somebody from the digital services team.

Starting off, we will have Mr. Brassard, please, for six minutes.

• (1540)

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Mr. Speaker, for coming back today as we conclude our sessions on virtual sittings.

Let me begin by saying that I can't overstate how difficult this task is, given the volumes of information that we've received from our various witnesses. It will be difficult to come up with even some incremental report on these virtual sittings, given the fact that we've had only roughly five sessions to do this.

I appreciate that, and I also appreciate your advice, Mr. Speaker. As you can tell by the backdrop, I've tried to keep it as neutral as I can, other than my old fire helmet and a picture of José Bautista's bat flip.

One of the first witnesses we had was Dr. Raymond, an executive medical adviser in the infectious disease prevention control branch for the Public Health Agency of Canada. She's also a specialist in epidemiological diseases. At that time, there had been three sessions of in-person Parliament and the daily briefings that are being held by the Prime Minister and by the ministers in West Block. I asked her whether she thought we were in full compliance with public health guidelines as they relate to physical distancing and other measures.

Mr. Speaker, my question is for you and Mr. Robert. Given the experiences of limited Parliament, do you feel that we have been complying to physical distancing and other measures to the satisfaction of the Public Health Agency of Canada?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I understand that the time that you have been allotted to come up with some kind of solution is very limited and the number of meetings that you have is very short, but I would hope that the report that you do come up with is something that is more at a macro level. I really do hope that this continues for some time after May 15, so that you will continue to have this committee inquiring into this area and so we can come up with some kind of a solution, should this come up again. There's no question that a crisis will come up again, and it would be nice if the report covered that. It is very important to all of us in the House.

As far as the public health guidelines go, we have been doing our best to make sure that does take place. When it's done virtually, that is really up to the individual members, but in the House, sitting in the chair, I get to observe what's going on and, overall, everyone is staying at least six feet apart. We do take sanitary precautions, but there are times when that six feet really does get a little bit smaller and then it's a concern.

Overall, we're putting the guidelines out there, but it is up to the individual members when they are in the House to conform to the guidelines put out by the public health authorities.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Patrice, we have it on record that 55 staff members have been required at any given point of a normal sitting of Parliament, a reduced Parliament. We've had at least one session of the COVID-19 committee when all members were expected to participate. Then, of course, we've had several committee meetings, including this one.

Can you advise the committee how many staff members are in West Block when a virtual setting takes place?

• (1545)

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): I will have to find out the exact number because it varies. It's not necessarily West Block because we also have staff members in other locations.

As you understand, in the first virtual COVID special committee, we had a number of staff on standby who were communicating with members as the meeting was going on, to address any potential or actual technical issues that could occur during the meeting.

Mr. John Brassard: Could you guess, Mr. Patrice, how many staff members would have been involved for a virtual sitting of Parliament last week?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It's about the same or similar numbers to what is happening when you meet in person.

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Speaker, given the fact the same number would be required for a virtual sitting as an in-person sitting of Parliament, what's the need to have a virtual sitting? We have virtual sittings on Tuesdays and Thursdays now, and then Wednesday. If the concern is for the staff, yet members are not there during the virtual sitting but would be during the in-person sittings, why would we not move to three sessions during that week if it takes the same number of staff to have that type of meeting?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is it three virtual sessions or three in-person sessions?

Mr. John Brassard: Now we're having two virtual sessions. One of the concerns we've heard throughout is about the number of staff required to hold an in-person sitting. We just heard from Mr. Patrice that it takes roughly the same number of staff for virtual meetings. If the members are there for only one day a week, why couldn't we keep them there three days a week when it takes the same number of staff to have those meetings?

The Chair: You're far over your time for questioning, Mr. Brassard.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I can reply to that very quickly. When we're looking at people's safety, I think we're looking at the MPs' safety as well.

The idea of having a very limited group there on the Wednesday—I think the whole idea of having the virtual is having multiple people.... The last thing we want to do is to regionalize it so we only have people from the area show up and represent their parties.

One of the things I am very concerned about is parliamentary privilege. Every individual MP has the right to represent his or her riding in Ottawa and by doing—

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'll continue on that later.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think we got the gist of that.

I'll move to Mr. Gerretsen, please.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

On that point, Mr. Speaker, is it safe to assume that the level of engagement those particular staff people would have on the Tuesday and Thursday is significantly less—their potential exposure to the virus would be significantly reduced on the Tuesday and Thursday because all these extra people are not there?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes. That would be a logical assumption. I think for something like that, to get the exact numbers, you would have to talk to someone in public health, but because you're not in the same room, my assumption as a layman would be, yes, you would have less chance....

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I want to go to your letter to us and some of your questions around the protocols, visual backgrounds and stuff like that. I think this is really important to get right.

One of the things I noticed from the first sitting of the virtual Parliament was, at least the way it displays on my screen, when the meeting began there were 17 pages of thumbnails of video. When it first began, only the last page was of people who had shut off their video, because they all go to the end. By about 20 minutes into it, people had muted their video on seven or eight pages, as some people on this meeting are doing right now. What's your take on that? Does that concern you?

At least when somebody is in the House physically you know they're there; you have no idea when somebody mutes their video, or audio for that matter, if they're even in the same room. Is that a concern? Do we need to address that issue?

• (1550)

Hon. Anthony Rota: When you look at the House itself when it's sitting, members have the right to walk out or stay in the room. That is their prerogative. Therefore, for us to determine that they have to be there when the questions are being asked or when proceedings are taking place is something you may want to study as a committee; however, I would recommend that it happens in virtual time just like it does in House time. There is not much difference.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Our mandate here did not exclude us from discussing voting virtually. How would we accomplish this when it comes to voting, given that we know there is such an issue about people being in the House when it's time to vote?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That is something we'll have to look at, or the committee will have to look at it.

That is why I mentioned when I first started, with Mr. Brassard, that I'm hoping this committee doesn't stop on May 15 with all of the procedures, because we will have changes coming up and more crises in the future. If we take this crisis and learn and build on it, we might be able to improve not only virtual sittings but actual sittings in the House when we return to normal.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Our objective and our mandate in this committee was to establish some kind of virtual Parliament in light of COVID-19.

Could it possibly be one of the recommendations of this committee that we recommend further, more in-depth, study be done, so that we can build a system that can be deployed on a moment's notice in a year or two years or three years from now if necessary?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I would hope that's the case. The committee has to determine what it wants to study.

What we're in right now is a crisis, and you've been brought together at this point because of the crisis. It doesn't mean that a crisis isn't going to happen again. If it does, I would hope that what we've learned right now we could use in future crises. As I mentioned a few seconds ago, if some of the results you come up with can be transferred to the House to make it more operational and make it work more cohesively or efficiently, that would be a real bonus coming out of this.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Right.

I think I have a minute and a half.

Ms. May, would you like that minute and a half?

Ms. Elizabeth May: Definitely. Thank you.

I have two quick questions, Mr. Speaker.

One is, were you able to follow or get reports on our meetings with representatives from Wales, Scotland and the U.K.? If not, are you generally familiar with the approach that the U.K. Speaker has taken to what they call "hybrid Parliament", where some members are in person and some are on video screens?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I was not. I saw some of your proceedings, but that was one I wanted to see and never got around to. Unfortunately, time—

Ms. Elizabeth May: It was fascinating.

I'll just say quickly that the Speaker in the U.K., just as you do, emphasized privilege and said there should be nothing that bars a member of Parliament from attending in person; except, on public health advice, they don't want people to travel within the U.K., to try to get to London if they don't have to.

So some members appear on large video screens and pose their questions to ministers who are physically present in the House. The large video screens are present in the chamber at the same time that a few people are there physically. This deals with this issue of whether some people are precluded from participating. Of course, as you know, in the U.K., the Speaker receives letters from members requesting to ask a question.

I don't know whether you have any views on how doable that would be for our chamber.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think we're moving toward that. If it's possible, we should go ahead with it, as we make sure technologically that we can do that.

The concern I have, and what I have read about the chamber in Westminster especially, is how to determine who is in the chamber. I don't want to see a situation where it's not the individual members who decide if they are in the House but it's another party—and I mean "party" as someone else, not a political party—determining who is in there.

Especially when you start looking at people who are far away, people who are close.... England is a very compact country compared to Canada, and it really does make a difference.

This virtual meeting will help people quite extensively, especially in rural and regional areas where they can't come down.... I remember you telling me about your trip taking a day and a half, which normally does not take a day—

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Speaker Rota.

I want to interject, if I may, for a moment. I'm not giving my preference on any of these recommendations, but I want to state again that the study does include all ways that members can fulfill their parliamentary duties while the House stands adjourned over public health concerns caused by COVID-19. Voting could be considered a member's parliamentary duty, so I don't think it's necessarily precluded.

In the order of reference that was given on April 11, the House did propose that the committee include the following elements in its study: first, temporary modifications of certain procedures; second, sitting in alternate locations; and third, technological solutions, including a virtual parliament. We're looking at all ways that members can complete their duties.

I just wanted to put that out there so we have a frame of reference again, as we're on our last meeting of witnesses, and so we can elicit the testimony we wish in order to go over the draft report and our recommendations and of course any dissenting or supplementary opinions.

Next up on the speakers list is Madam Normandin, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to talk a bit about the issue of parliamentary privilege. Ms. May has already talked about it. I asked other witnesses a question about it last week.

If the number of in-person sittings are increased, doesn't that risk infringing the parliamentary privilege of some parliamentarians who have health problems, are older or are more at risk?

I'd like your comments on that, Mr. Rota.

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's a possibility. In the past, if a member couldn't come to the House, it wasn't because of an external obstruction. The member couldn't come, either because of a storm or because he or she couldn't make the trip. It was because of something external. That's one thing.

Breach of privilege is when something prevents members from doing what they are supposed to do in the course of their work in the House. It's not a big difference, but it's a very important one.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Am I to understand that this could be a form of obstruction by Parliament, since Parliament controls the number of sittings that will be held in person?

If Parliament were to increase the number of in-person sittings, could that be a form of obstruction?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, that could be one argument.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Could you now tell us about the ratio we might have between the number of in-person sittings and the number of virtual sittings? You told us that you wanted to take a gradual approach.

Do you feel comfortable gradually increasing the number of virtual sittings while maintaining the number of in-person sittings we currently have?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes. When we started, we suggested that it be done gradually. That way, we could see what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong. It would allow us to get as close to perfection as possible.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Is the gradual increase for virtual sittings?

Hon. Anthony Rota: These are virtual sittings or hybrid sittings, meaning that some members are in the House while others participate in the debates by teleconference. This is something that the committee must decide before making its recommendations to the House. Ultimately, the House will decide what we'll do.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Given that you participated in the last Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic, do you have a positive view of being able to hold oral question period and debate bills with the following ratios: 20 minutes for questions and 10 minutes for answers and comments, or 10 minutes for questions and five minutes for answers and comments.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Given the way things have been going so far, I'm sure it's possible. However, we have restrictions based on the laws and regulations that govern the House. We have to respect both, and perhaps interpret them a little more freely. They have to be interpreted in a way that works, without changing their original intent.

• (1600)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Speaking of changes to the procedure, I would like to know if you've already started thinking about some situations that might arise. For example, in the House, it's

quite rare for a member to suddenly disappear, while it can happen if the member is having problems connecting.

Are you considering alternatives that would address this type of procedural situation?

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's certainly something we've discussed, but we haven't yet found a solution. When someone is speaking and disappears suddenly, that's a problem.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think we have an interpretation issue.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: What's happening?

[*English*]

The Chair: We missed part of the interpretation. If you would please repeat yourself, we could have the interpreter follow the whole thought.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

The question was whether we had thought about what we could do in the House when someone disappears. It doesn't happen every day. We're looking into that, but I don't have a solution yet. It's very important that we take that eventuality into account in the procedure of the House so that members can reconnect and complete their remarks if they lose the connection in the middle of their speech. We have to make sure it works.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'd also like your comments on respecting the parliamentary calendar. In your opinion, should the virtual Parliament comply with the parliamentary calendar as it exists, or should it be possible to hold virtual meetings outside the parliamentary calendar?

Hon. Anthony Rota: The parliamentary calendar exists. That's a decision of the House, not the Speaker. Parliament can be called at the request of members that Parliament. I don't have the power to do that.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'd like to know if you've already started thinking about the possibility of amending the Standing Orders for the holding of certain votes. I'm thinking in particular of a vote of confidence that would be held in person, but with a reduced number of people. A question was asked about this last week.

Should this vote be considered valid, and should it be allowed to happen?

Has this issue ever been considered, given that this is a minority government?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's a decision that must be made by the House and not by the House Administration. The current rules were put in place a long time ago. Some of them reflect the reality of 1867, and much has changed since then. Some of the rules of the House have changed.

If we ever wanted to change the rules, that would be a decision for the House. It couldn't come from outside. If the House wants to have votes, whether they are confidence votes or not, it's the House that has to make the changes. The House has to determine its own rules.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Rota.

I think I'm running out of time, Madam Chair. Is that correct?

[English]

The Chair: I interrupted you for about 30 seconds, so....

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'd have time to ask a question, but not enough time for an answer. So I'll give it up.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Ms. Blaney, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I thank all of you so much for being with us today.

You know, the reality is that as I go through this process, I feel very strongly that the more I learn, the more questions I have. I feel pretty strongly that this is not the end of the study. I'm wondering if you could speak to whether or not you would advise this committee to continue to do some of this work, noting that the reality is that we could have a second or third wave of COVID-19 and we don't know what other potential challenges we may face in the future that would provide us an opportunity to look at a virtual parliament.

Could you speak to that, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I encourage the committee to continue with this to find alternatives, virtual or whatever else might come up, certainly, and to continue to look at what procedures we do have in the House. Actually, as I said earlier, there might be some spilling over into the House, because if you do an in-depth study and find out what works and what doesn't work in other places, it's something that you can bring back here.

When we look at the situation that exists now, you were given a very short time as a committee to come up with what is, I'm going to say, a macro-level solution. Now, once that report comes in, there's implementation, and we will need more in-depth answers to that macro solution. I would hope that the committee would continue to look at what we have, how we can implement it and how it will make not only virtual meetings but also actual in-house meetings better.

• (1605)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I also want to express my appreciation for your talking about the need for regional representation in this pandemic, and that's why virtual sittings are so important. As a person from British Columbia

who represents a fairly large remote and rural riding, the realities in my riding are very specific, and I feel that it is my most important honour in this role to represent the voices of my constituents.

One of the things that we've also talked about is really needing a framework of standing orders so that, if we ever hit a situation like this, we have something we can pull off the shelf that provides a great way for all the House officers to start having that negotiation and that discussion. I'm wondering if you could talk about whether or not you think it would be appropriate to have standing orders that are ready for this kind of issue and if there are recommendations from the Speaker's office and from the clerks around what specific challenges we may have in some of those standing orders.

Hon. Anthony Rota: There's no question right now, and that's what the standing orders are about. If you look, the standing orders we have now are not the same standing orders we had back in 1867 when they were first put in place. As time goes on, we modify things. Again, Parliament—the House of Commons—is a creature of the House itself, the members, so as things go on, whether virtually, live or a hybrid of some sort, those standing orders that you're going to suggest as a committee or the Clerk and his staff will suggest.... I would hope that, working together, we can come up with something that works very well so that the next time something like this does happen, a crisis, we will be ready.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: When we talk about the need to explore voting, I think the other part that has come out in these meetings is the requirement for committees to meet in camera and have a higher level of security. This is something I am concerned about in terms of voting as well. I want to make sure that voting is done as safely as it possibly can be done.

I'm wondering if there is there any work being done around looking at other ways of making sure there's that level of security, which we are not sure Zoom has, especially around things like in camera meetings and voting, specifically for this study.

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's definitely something that is being looked at by our technical staff, and there are examples of technology that exists out there. It's just a matter of taking it and modifying it so that it works in Canada with, as I said, our vast geography and our time zones as well.

We do have five time zones. I don't envy MPs who come from B.C. I envy their weather in the middle of the winter, but other than that, having to travel to Ottawa and to have that time difference makes it difficult. As soon as you have a vote that might be at a certain time, it really doesn't make sense in B.C. versus Newfoundland, and that's something to consider as well. It's something that we have to look at.

One of the other things that we have to look at, as I mentioned, is that the rules were mainly created in 1867. We talked about Parliament, and that was basically an assembly of people. That's what we were looking at, bringing people together in one place, but what was the intent? Was it to have them physically there or have their minds there? That's something we have to examine and determine. Is a physical presence necessary in order to vote and in order to speak, or is the person being there in spirit, through virtual connection, really good enough for what we are trying to accomplish? That's something we have to come to an agreement on. Right now, it is a physical presence in the chamber.

• (1610)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm a big fan of the physical presence. I think it's important for MPs from different parties to talk to each other.

Right now we're in a minority government, and when we look at the level of collaboration that has been happening, I think all Canadians are feeling assured by that, but I'm wondering about structures in terms of making sure the collaboration continues whether or not we have a majority or minority government.

Have you guys looked at that in any way?

The Chair: That's all the time we have, but maybe we can get the answer to that in our other rounds.

Next up we have MP Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the presentation.

Thank you to the other clerks who are here today.

My questions are on the contract with Zoom.

How long has the House of Commons been working with Zoom?

Hon. Anthony Rota: For this one, I think I'll defer to Monsieur Patrice or Monsieur Aubé.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Aubé, I'll let you answer the question.

[*English*]

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, Digital Services and Real Property, House of Commons): Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

We have been working with Zoom over the last six weeks.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Do we have a contract with Zoom?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I don't want to have a discussion on terms, but we actually have a licensing agreement with them to use their products right now. We don't have a master agreement, as they would say in the IT field, with that company yet.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Who would sign that contract, then, or that agreement?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Actually, I am personally responsible for the purchasing of the licences that we have right now. If we were to

have a master agreement put in place, both the CFO and I would be the signing authorities, as we usually are for contracts.

Mr. Corey Tochor: What is the price of that agreement?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Currently it is less than \$10,000, sir.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Is it \$10,000 for the year or \$10,000 for the month?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The current contract that we have in place right now is on a monthly basis, sir. But we've established a contract to consume up to \$10,000 right now—not a contract but a licensing agreement.

Mr. Corey Tochor: So the agreement is for up to \$10,000 per month. If you renew it, it's another 10 K.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Software companies like to build in different features and add-ons for end-users. Was there any other expense in getting Zoom to its current state for us, outside of the \$10,000 we've been paying every month?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We have not incurred any additional costs from the Zoom perspective. The costs have been related to modifying our infrastructure to integrate with any of the tools that we would have looked at, sir.

I'm just going to correct the \$10,000 contract—

Mr. Corey Tochor: What are the other platforms?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We've looked at the existing portfolio of platforms that we have at the House of Commons, such as Skype for Business. We've looked at Microsoft Teams. We've also looked at Cisco Webex, sir. These are the platforms we assessed after we were requested to consider doing virtual meetings.

Mr. Corey Tochor: When I was elected, I was honoured to take my seat as the member for Saskatoon—University. When I went through my computer training and got my Surface Pro and other devices, Zoom wasn't on there.

What has transpired that makes Zoom a better platform than Skype, which was preloaded onto my Surface Pro?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I will walk you through the process we took to select Zoom for this purpose.

As I just said, our first step was to evaluate our existing tools to make sure they did or did not meet the multiple requirements we have for committees. We quickly found out that the platforms we have right now could not meet some of the mandatory requirements to hold virtual meetings, such as built-in integration for simultaneous interpretation—your previous witnesses talked about that—as well as the ability to enable 338 people in a meeting if required, and also the ability to control the broadcast output in order for us to distribute to Canadians. Some of our existing tools didn't have these capabilities; hence, we needed to look at other products.

Beyond that, we did extensive market research, and we liaised with international and national security partners. We consulted over 30 parliaments, sir. We consulted leading research institutions and security partners. We also collaborated with existing parliaments using that platform.

Hence, in order to meet these requirements, we brought different tools into our lab and assessed them. One of the tools we brought in was Zoom. We discovered that Zoom met all of our requirements. It was easy to use in the context of what we needed to do. It supported all of the devices we offer to members, and it is as secure as the other solutions that we have in our environment right now, sir, to hold meetings that are open to the public.

• (1615)

Mr. Corey Tochor: So it would not be fair to say this is a sole-source contract. Was there bidding, or were there proposals written by other providers? How did that roll out? I understand that you have evaluated all the ones that are out there, but did other providers provide a proposal for the tender?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: For all the Microsoft products, sir, we have them on standing offers currently. We have them on contract, so we didn't need to purchase them.

The Chair: Is there a point of order being raised by one of the members?

Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Chair, I was going to wait until Mr. Tochor was finished. I didn't want to interrupt him.

The Chair: Oh, okay. I wasn't sure whether it was a point of order. I'll get to you right after this, then.

You have about 30 more seconds, Mr. Tochor. I'm just letting you know that this is not cutting in.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Who else was on the committee that made the recommendation for Zoom? It probably wasn't just you. Who were the other individuals that made the recommendation?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The members of my team, sir, who were engaged in the assessment of the different platforms made the recommendation to me to go ahead with this, too. I made the decision to move forward, recognizing the schedule and recognizing that I had the authority to purchase that tool for the consumption, as we are using it right now, sir.

Mr. Corey Tochor: That's the end of my questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: On a point of order, Madam Chair, Mr. Aubé was about to correct himself on some information but then he never got that out. I believe it was in reference to the \$10,000 thing. Would it be appropriate to allow him to correct himself?

The Chair: Mr. Aubé, is that correct?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes. I wanted to correct that. It was actually for three months, the initial purchase, so it was \$3,000 a month, which comes out to close to \$10,000. I wanted to clarify that.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. It's important to have that clarification on the record.

Next up we have Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair. Thanks to our witnesses again. It's good to see you, as always.

This morning I was reading the Samara Centre for Democracy report. It mentioned right at the beginning that during the Spanish flu there was about a 10-month period when Parliament didn't meet because of the pandemic. While reflecting on this, I thought, "My, how we've made major improvements." The fact is that we've used digital technology, information technology, quite seamlessly from my perspective, to date to perform many of the roles and duties we have.

With that said, I wondered if Mr. Speaker could tell me how many people logged on to Zoom for the first special committee meeting that was hosted virtually.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe the upper limit was 309. There were just about 290 who were actual MPs. Of course, we had staff and backup on board. Even with all the 309, had we had 338 and upwards, I believe it would have gone rather smoothly. I was very impressed with the way it proceeded.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I was as well. I guess all 309 of those individuals did not have any health risk associated with meeting that day, right?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That would be my assessment as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great, as opposed to meeting in person, which would definitely have some health risk associated with it.

How many issues were reported on that day when 309 MPs joined in?

• (1620)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Well, we had 13 altogether. Eight of them were the choice of the channel. What we've done is we've made some modifications. If you notice now, if you want to speak English, you're on the English channel. If you want to speak French, you're on the French channel. When I was giving my speech, there was a little bit of a pause in between, but it seems to have worked.

There was a third channel where it was the floor. It would recognize whether it was French or English, and the interpretation, it has something to do with the software. It's the program itself. It's something they're working on. We may come to that with time. Those were eight of the issues.

What seemed to happen was that about 70% of people were working fine on the floor level, but for 30% there would be some interference, where they would be speaking English, and there was either English translation or French translation. It really was bothering, I'd say, about 30% of the people involved.

Another five were about sound. Again, I encourage everyone to use the headset, like I have. I notice some of you are using your own. Some of you aren't using any at all—one of you, I guess. I'll leave it at that. I won't name any names. I would encourage you to get hold of your IT ambassador and see about getting one with a boom. It actually makes a difference when things are being said.

Again, with the people who were in earlier, the interpreters who were in earlier, it's not only for the MPs' health; it's for theirs as well.

One person had an echo on their channel and there were some video problems, but overall everything worked fairly well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much.

I'd like a brief answer to this: Were all of those minor technical issues resolvable?

Hon. Anthony Rota: They were, and I'm hoping we will know better tomorrow whether they were resolved or not. They are fairly simple fixes, but it's a matter of figuring out what they are so we can fix them.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great. Thank you.

It seems to me that we're on a continuum of achieving, maybe down the road, a more fulsome and formal proceeding of the House. Many parliaments seem to follow a similar path around the world. They are starting off with committee meetings that are smaller in number and maybe easier to start with, and they're moving to special scrutiny sessions or proceedings, which I think we have with our COVI special committee.

We can move down the line on that continuum. How far do you think we can go, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's a good question. Right now I'm looking down the road. Can we have a full parliamentary session virtually? I think eventually we will get there. Are we ready to do that now? Technologically I believe we can do it. Our rules, unfortunately, are in place, and they are the rules of the House. We have to contend with those rules to make sure they are flexible enough to allow virtual meetings.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I remember that Siwan Davies from the Welsh national assembly said, "Where there's a political will, there's a way." I really related to that comment.

There is another thing I want you to dive a little deeper into. In your opening remarks you said that maybe some of the decision-making functions of the House are more dependent on or more closely connected to physical presence. Could you mention what decision-making functions you were referring to specifically? Then I want to ask you another question, if I have time.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The big one here is the vote that takes place in the House. There are rules in place stating that members have to be in the House when the question is read and have to be in the House in their seats until they leave. That is something we have to contend with. We will have to look at that and determine how we want to do that.

I encourage this committee to look at the different possibilities. I'm looking forward to the recommendations this committee will come out with on this. Considering the changes that could happen and what's happening now in the House when the votes take place, this could mean different options for future parliaments.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's all the time we have.

Next we have Mr. Richards for five minutes, please.

● (1625)

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Speaker, maybe you will be able to give me an answer; I'm not sure. Maybe you will have to turn to some of your officials, but that's fine. I will let you determine who's best qualified to answer.

In regard to the security aspects of our virtual sittings, have you been working or has the administration been working with the Communications Security Establishment in the development of the platform that's being used for these proceedings?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I will pass it over to Monsieur Aubé. He can answer that.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes, we have been consulting with the national security agency, sir.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. It was reported by, I think, the CBC last week that Zoom "has not been approved for any government discussions" by the CSE. Obviously we've moved forward; we're using Zoom. This is the decision that was made.

Can you tell us whether CSE cautioned you against that? What were their thoughts and recommendations on the use of Zoom?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: In our discussions with the national security partners, sir, we always do risk assessments for products that we want to use. In our discussions, recognizing that these are public meetings and that the Zoom platform enables us to implement the security controls that are required for a public meeting, we felt comfortable we could move forward with this platform and that this was the best choice for these types of meetings at this point.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. So you felt comfortable, but what was their advice? It sounds like, based on what was reported in the media, they didn't really feel it was something that should be approved. What kind of advice did you receive from CSE?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The advice we received was that we needed to put the proper security controls in place, sir, and we did.

Mr. Blake Richards: What types of controls were they suggesting needed to be put in place?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Without getting into specifics—if you wanted to do that, sir, I would request that we go in camera—I can certainly share at a high level some of the things.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure. Let's start with that. We can always make a decision on whether we need to do anything further.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I can give you examples. There's the concept of virtual waiting rooms, sir, so that all participants can be cleared. Before someone participates in or enters a meeting, they need to be vetted through their credentials so that we know who's in the waiting room. We authenticate the participants using House of Commons authorization servers so that the identification is done through our infrastructure and we know who's participating in the meeting. We use Canadian data centres, such as the Toronto and Vancouver data centres, where the traffic and our data is hosted for these particular meetings. These data centres are owned by Amazon. We also do some geofencing, sir.

These are examples of recommendations and discussions that we shared with our partners, and not only with CSE. We're always in discussion with many partners. We also have discussions with international partners and—

Mr. Blake Richards: Sorry; I don't mean to interrupt, but we have limited time.

With these measures in place, did CSE feel comfortable at that point and recommend that it would be okay to proceed with those specific measures in place?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes, they did, sir.

Mr. Blake Richards: They did. Okay.

This question may not be for you. If you're the best-qualified person, fine; if not, whoever is can go ahead and jump in. I heard that the Board of Internal Economy met last week, I think, and used Skype. It was apparently a pretty convoluted arrangement. Some of the participants had to use two different devices simultaneously to be able to participate. I'm wondering why Zoom wasn't used as a platform, like we've been using in the committees, and why that was chosen instead.

Would that be a question for you?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I can answer, sir, if you want.

Mr. Speaker, would you like me to answer this?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Maybe I'll just start off and then hand it over to you.

The meetings we have right now are public meetings—

• (1630)

The Chair: Please go quickly.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay.

Mr. Aubé, I'll let you finish it off. You will have all the technical—

The Chair: You can have 20 seconds.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Because of the nature of the debate during these types of meetings, we did not assess Zoom for that particular profile of risk and threat tolerance level. This is something that we will be doing in the future. Skype for Business is within our infrastructure, and we felt that we wanted to use that.

Mr. Blake Richards: What does that then do for in camera meetings of committees?

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

Mr. Blake Richards: How would we deal with an in camera situation?

The Chair: We'll have enough time to maybe go a little bit further, so you might be able to get that question in.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Madam Chair. It is a pretty important question.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Blake Richards: I do hope we have a chance to understand how we'll deal with in camera sessions if we are going to use this.

The Chair: Perhaps it will come up with one of the other questions. I have given so much leeway, I feel that's all I can give now.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's fine. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Next up is Mr. Alghabra.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the Speaker and the others who are present today.

Mr. Speaker, I have a question for you regarding the Standing Orders. Obviously, if we want to move ahead with virtual sittings or further advance our virtual sittings, we need to change some of the standing orders. Is it possible to create a category of standing orders that would only be triggered under an emergency or a special situation rather than changing our traditional Standing Orders?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'll defer this one to our Clerk, who has a very in-depth knowledge of the Standing Orders. He can answer this in probably more depth than I can.

Monsieur Robert.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Mr. Alghabra, the simple answer is yes.

Again, it really depends on what the House chooses to do through this committee. If you feel that the pandemic crisis we are confronting now requires some consideration for the possibility that it could come again, that may be an opportunity for you to package some rules and practices that would be triggered by the event arising, and then allowing the House to function in a way that would respect social distancing and allow as many members to participate...bearing in mind health safety concerns.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Yes, I'm thinking that a lot of the provinces and municipalities and even the federal government have things like a state of emergency, and once you declare a state of emergency, it triggers certain rules. It's good to know we have that option.

The other question I have is about the rules for changing the Standing Orders. Does it require unanimous consent?

Mr. Charles Robert: Not historically, no.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Then a simple majority of parliamentarians can change the Standing Orders?

Mr. Charles Robert: Yes, indeed.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Obviously, the preference for all of us here is to reach unanimous consent, but it's important to know the rules ahead of time as we are discussing among ourselves the options we have.

Mr. Charles Robert: That's correct.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: What are the technical obstacles before us right now if we were to choose to go fully virtual?

Mr. Charles Robert: As the Speaker mentioned, you might want to go back to the idea of how we want to vote. That's a critical element of procedure. It's really the purpose for the deliberative aspect of the debates you have. As the Speaker indicated in his presentation, we feel comfortable that the current rules work reasonably well and the adaptation would not be too difficult, but voting is perhaps a bit more challenging.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: To clarify, that's not necessarily a technical infrastructure aspect. We could choose to change voting rules to make sure the member of Parliament is seen on screen and is present during the vote, so it's more of a procedural aspect. Is that correct?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, but we have to remember the rules. The member of Parliament has to be physically in the House to cast that vote. To implement what the parties have agreed to among themselves, they could pass it. I'm not sure I would feel comfortable with that, but the House has the right to do it.

If we were to have everyone vote, we would have to open the House and have everyone come in to vote on making those changes. That's one of the things that has to be considered right now with the pandemic. How safe and how prudent is it to bring everyone into that chamber so they can vote, when they won't be standing six feet apart and bodily fluids will be spread around or breathed around in the room? I'm not sure it would be a safe way of doing it, but that would be the way that it would have to happen.

• (1635)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: It could be adopted on division, couldn't it?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'll let the Clerk answer this one.

Mr. Charles Robert: There are several ways of doing it. You could do it on division, but you can always escalate. That's the real issue, and there are no rules in place that prevent the escalation. Members have the right to vote in a way that clearly demonstrates how each member in the House who's participating in the vote chooses to vote.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Right. I guess to adopt it on division, you'd need unanimous consent.

Mr. Charles Robert: You don't have unanimous consent if you're adopting it on division.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: No, I meant unanimous consent for the process for adopting it.

Mr. Charles Robert: You'd have to have fewer than five members rising to request a recorded division.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Right.

The Chair: Okay, that's all the time we have. Thank you so much.

Ms. May, you have either a point of order or—

Ms. Elizabeth May: I was hoping to ask a brief question around the voting issue if it could be squeezed in, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I want to discuss the work plan that our analyst, Andre, has put out for us, but we have enough time to do that and perhaps give two to three minutes to each party for one last round. If it's okay with everyone, we can give Ms. May the opportunity as well.

Ms. May, we'll put you after the NDP. We'll go through our regular round. Each party will have two minutes so that we will have time to discuss what Andre has for us in his work plan. Thank you.

Mr. Richards, this gives you an opportunity to finish your questioning for two minutes, if you'd like to be the one going for the Conservatives.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure. I'll take that opportunity and see how many of my colleagues choose to be upset with me later.

I would like to follow up a little further on where we were with the issue of in camera meetings.

Obviously, there are times in committee—it even arose in my previous round of questioning—when, if we want to explore something further, we may need to go in camera. It seemed to me that I was hearing that we would have difficulty with Zoom being able to do an in camera type of setting for meetings. I think it also applies to things like caucus meetings. I know that we haven't been able to have caucus meetings or internal caucus meetings of various types. We haven't been able to have interpretation or things like that.

I wonder if you could speak to that aspect. If we were to proceed with these types of meetings, how would we deal with the in camera nature of things? How would we deal with proper security for caucus meetings and these kinds of things?

Hon. Anthony Rota: At this time, Skype is approved for in camera meetings. The meeting we had for the Board of Internal Economy was in camera. That's why we had to shift to Skype.

What we're doing right now with Zoom is something that's very public and out there so that everyone can see what's going on in Parliament or in this virtual COVID-19 committee—

Mr. Blake Richards: Sorry, Mr. Speaker, but just knowing the shortness of the time we have, I want to explore a little. What about caucus meetings, which have a larger number of participants?

Also, what about when there's a need to go in camera quite quickly in the middle of a committee meeting because a certain subject comes up? I understand that happened in the Board of Internal Economy meeting. What about those kinds of instances? How would using Skype work in those situations?

• (1640)

Hon. Anthony Rota: At this time, if there's a meeting that foresees a need to go in camera, I would recommend going with Skype. That would be the way to go. As far as—

Mr. Blake Richards: We would use Skype for caucus meetings and those kinds of things, then?

Hon. Anthony Rota: You know what? That's a party issue. I'm not sure I'm qualified to comment on that aspect. You would have to consult with your party. The individual parties would determine the platform they would use.

Mr. Blake Richards: Then does each party makes a determination? It's not Parliament itself that determines the platform—

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

Next up we have Ms. Petitpas Taylor, please, from the Liberals.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Thank you so much, Madam Chair. My question is for Monsieur Patrice.

Last week, among a number of witnesses who appeared before committee, there was an individual by the name of Chantal Bernier, who was with a global privacy and cybersecurity group.

As part of her testimony, she talked about the issue of cybersecurity, but she also entered an area where she talked about our employees and working out of home. She talked about making sure that we respect privacy-related areas when working at home.

I'm wondering if the House administration has been looking at establishing some guidelines for us and our staff when it comes to working from home.

Mr. Michel Patrice: In general, we do provide communication and guidance documents and we also do some webinars with respect to working at home and adapting. We've also been looking at providing ergonomic equipment and so on, as well as allowing staff to use our equipment.

If it's relating to cybersecurity in terms of privacy and in terms of the surroundings, because I had that same discussion with Mr. Aubé, I'll ask Mr. Aubé to answer in relation to VPN and what it means in terms of direct access and in using personal equipment while being linked to our network.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As part of our mobile strategy at the House that we've been implementing over the last three years, we do provide best practices for security for people who work from home. They're basically founded on ISO standards 27001 and 27002, without getting into the technical details. There are specific controls and specific ways to use our devices that we put in place in order to interact with the House of Commons resources. This is the way we do it.

We implement these best practices. We also provide equipment that has these controls in place. We also provide, as Mr. Patrice said, some awareness, and we also provide some training to the employees who would like to work from home.

If ever there's a specific requirement, Madam Petitpas Taylor, we're more than willing to engage with every MP and every MP's staff members to communicate that and make them aware of it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aubé.

Next we have Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My first question is for you, Mr. Aubé. I'd like to know whether the House has spontaneously offered support to the parties for their caucus meetings, which require a higher level of security.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We have had discussions with the parties on a level of security for caucus meetings similar to the level of security associated with in-camera meetings.

Our priority is that people understand the sensitive nature of the information that will be discussed, how it will be discussed during the meeting and the nature of the discussions. If these three factors increase the risk surrounding the discussions, we recommend using tools such as Skype Enterprise. We have evaluated various tools for

the needs of the House. For the specific needs currently being discussed, the only tool we evaluated was Skype Enterprise. This software is part of our physical infrastructure, it's not in the cloud, so we can control its use.

I'm not saying that the other tools aren't safe, but we haven't evaluated them for our specific needs yet. If you want to have critical discussions or exchange sensitive information during these meetings, we recommend that you use only the tools we suggest and nothing else.

Ms. Christine Normandin: That's perfect, Mr. Aubé. Thank you.

I now have a quick question for you, Mr. Speaker. You mentioned a number of technical problems that occurred during the virtual sitting of Parliament. In addition, there was a practice run the day before, as well as committee meetings. Were you informed that there were problems during those various meetings or during that practice run?

• (1645)

Hon. Anthony Rota: There weren't really any problems, no. Everything went pretty well. Little things will always happen, but nothing major has been reported, and everything continues to go well so far.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Madam Chair, do I have time to ask another question?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much. That's it. You're very much right on time.

Next is Ms. Blaney, please, for two minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that, Madame Chair.

When I last asked a question, I was talking about the reality of being in a minority government and what this could look like in a majority government, and how to keep that connection. As a House officer, I know we meet once a week when we're in the House and go over what's going to be happening in the House for the upcoming week. I'm just wondering about continuing that level of collaboration in those kinds of structures.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That happens between the parties themselves and between the House leaders. It's actually quite refreshing to see the House leaders work together and come together with a certain amount of agreement. I hope you continue to do that.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: One of the things you brought up in your report, Mr. Speaker, was that the 35-second limit on questions may need to be reviewed. Could you give us a bit of feedback on that?

Finally, if there's time, what are the most important of the Standing Orders that we need to modify to have a virtual Parliament?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'll answer the first part and then hand it over to the Clerk, who can talk about the Standing Orders specifically.

In committees of the whole and emergency debates, there are actually five-minute questions that allow an exchange between the person asking the question and the person answering the question. This allows for more in-depth questions to be asked and for more in-depth answers to be given. I think we get a lot better debate that way, as opposed to what we have now with 35-second questions and 35-second answers. This 35-second format results in more of a "gotcha" session on both sides, regardless of who's asking or who's answering.

This was brought into place in the late nineties, when we had five parties, and they were trying to give people more chances to ask questions. Extending the amount of time for the questions allows members to go in depth, and it gives us, I believe, a better performance on the floor. It's something that I'm asking this committee to look at, not only for virtual meetings but also for the floor of the House of Commons when question period takes place.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

Maybe, Ms. Blaney, we can wrap up with that second part of your question, because I do think it's important for all the parties. Perhaps I can make it my question. I haven't asked any questions throughout any of the proceedings.

We'll move on with Ms. May for now. Maybe we can get a summary from our clerk as to what Standing Orders we should be specifically focusing on for our report.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Chair, how much time will I have?

The Chair: You have two minutes, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you very much.

To the Speaker, just parenthetically, because it's come up so often, it was interesting to hear that in the U.K., for security reasons their cabinet is meeting by Microsoft Teams, and we haven't talked about that very much yet, but their Parliament is basically meeting by Zoom.

Mr. Speaker, we've heard from Scotland, Wales and the U.K., and what struck me was that the current method of voting there is much freer than what our rules require, and this has nothing to do with the pandemic. I think our rules are the most archaic in the Commonwealth. They require standing at your desk and being there at the moment of voting until the vote is counted. There's electronic voting at your desk in Scotland and Wales, while British members of Parliament walk through outer lobbies to register a vote outside of the House.

I'm wondering if any of those methods of voting in other parliaments suggest to you a direction we might go, leaving aside the question of how we approve it in a pandemic.

Hon. Anthony Rota: This is certainly something that the committee should look at, not only for virtual meetings but also for all the rules in the House. I would encourage the committee to explore the possibilities that are out there and how we can bring them back. It will require a longer time to ensure recommendations are well thought out, but the committee should certainly consider possible

changes not only to virtual sittings but to electronic voting within the House. It would be a lot quicker and more efficient for all members to push a button. There would have to be some security and, as I say, a lot more thought has to go into it, but I would certainly encourage the committee to consider it.

● (1650)

Ms. Elizabeth May: If I have any time left, I'd turn to the Clerk and ask for the specific Standing Orders that we would have to change to move to a virtual parliament. I'm asking Rachel's question again.

Mr. Charles Robert: It's a rather difficult question to answer in such a short and limited amount of time available.

The Chair: It was going to be my question as well, so you have two minutes to answer.

Mr. Charles Robert: That's more than enough, I suppose.

I think, in fact, there are two aspects that we need to consider. One would be how you want the voting system to function. There would be a gamut of rules that might be changed in that respect.

The other one that was raised during the course of this meeting was the trigger mechanism that allows you to go to the virtual option. That could be done by having a rule in place that allows for a fixed time for debate to be triggered, perhaps, by a minister. You would allow for a certain amount of time to debate the issue, to determine the merits of such a step, and then have a vote that would take place at the end of that process.

That might be one consideration for you to bear in mind when you look at how a virtual sitting program might be implemented and carried out after this current pandemic.

The Chair: Is there anything else? You have another minute.

Ms. Elizabeth May: That is extraordinary. No, the Clerk has the other minute.

The Chair: Yes. Would the Clerk have any last words for us before we look at our draft report and make recommendations?

Mr. Charles Robert: I think that the approach that you've taken so far, to gradually and slowly become adapted to the technology, is very important. There are some members who are rightly dissatisfied with the risk that comes into being if the technology is not really satisfactory. That, I think, has to be taken into account.

Once that hurdle is cleared, then it's really for you to decide how you want to adapt the current rules with respect to issues like notice, the structure of the order paper and how other information is conveyed to you through your devices. There are all sorts of features that involve technology, which I'm not particularly good at, that might be part of the rules that need to be changed to make a virtual parliament a comfortable environment for all the members.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Thank you to the Clerk, to the Speaker, to the law clerk and the entire team. It's been a real pleasure to have you here today. You've given us a lot of insight for our report.

At this point, our witnesses can definitely sign off. I will ask the rest of the committee members to hold on just for a little while longer. We have until five o'clock, and I want to discuss a few things regarding the work plan moving forward.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Duncan, did you have a point you'd like to address?

Mr. Duncan, go ahead.

Mr. Duncan is gone. Maybe he was waving goodbye rather than waving to get in a point of order. Hopefully we can get Mr. Duncan back on. Maybe one of the other Conservative members could message him and let him know that his input would be needed to move forward. It's okay if you guys are good to speak on his behalf.

Next, I want to find out if you had a chance to look at the table of contents that was provided by Andre.

Andre, do you want to walk us through a little bit of this? Before we go through it, I'd like to let you know that we have a full meeting on Thursday to look at the draft report. By Friday, by the end of this week, it would be ideal if we could get the recommendations from each of the parties. I know that's a very tight time frame and it doesn't give you a lot of time to look at the draft report, but maybe Andre could walk us through some of the steps of what would help him in order to be able to produce the draft for us by next week.

• (1655)

Mr. Andre Barnes (Committee Researcher): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I don't have a lot to say. Hopefully, the table of contents made sense to everyone. Really the only thing I would add is that about 26 pages of testimony have been sent to the translators, but it's just testimony. It's trying to capture what the committee heard.

If the committee wanted to make recommendations, you could look at the table of contents and try to slot in where your recommendations could go. They can go anywhere in the report—at the beginning, the end, the middle, or wherever you feel they would fit.

It's kind of difficult to describe in the abstract what is in the report without actually giving you a copy of the it, but hopefully you can look at the table of contents and get a sense of the structure of it, the direction of it, and what would be in the report at present. Not to continue to ramble, but if you would like to see something in the report that isn't in it now, it's your report and I'd be more than happy to add it, if that helps as a starting point.

The Chair: Andre, when will you be able to get the first version of the draft report to us? Will that be tomorrow?

Mr. Andre Barnes: Translation has received a draft report that has the testimony from Thursday's meeting and Wednesday's meeting, but not today's meeting. They have not got back to me to let me know what they'll be able to provide to us for Thursday's meeting. They've had 17 pages of it for over a week. It's whether or not

they can include the nine pages that were added this week and this morning.

The Chair: Okay. You're saying we'll most likely have at least 17 pages of it by our Thursday meeting.

Mr. Andre Barnes: Yes, it certainly should cover, and I hope it would cover, everything except for Wednesday and Thursday of last week, but it might even include Wednesday and Thursday of last week.

The Chair: That would be excellent.

Our next meeting is on May 7, from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. The whole meeting is going to be on consideration of the draft report. The committee can choose how we wish to go about going through it. We could go through it line by line, make proposals for recommendations, or just talk it out and have our proposals submitted by Friday. We could even talk about that at the beginning of Thursday's meeting. I wanted to put the ideas out there so that you're thinking about them and you come to Thursday's meeting prepared and having thought it through.

Go ahead, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: As a non-member of the committee—and I've been so grateful for the latitude and generosity of so many members to let me participate—is there a way in which I could submit notes to Andre or have access to the draft report to submit thoughts in time for Thursday's meeting? I've been pulling together sort of a framework of analysis for myself and I don't know if that would be of use to the committee. I would like to be helpful.

The Chair: Are there any comments from any of the members on that?

Just a moment. Maybe we can hear from the clerk on that.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm kind of a policy nerd. I love Parliament, so if I can help, I'd love to.

The Chair: Justin is going to help us out with the answer.

The Clerk: The short answer generally would be that it would be up to the committee to make a decision like that. Members of the committee know that on consideration of a draft report, any decisions related to its contents would be for the permanent members to make or any member properly substituted for a permanent member.

In terms of decision-making, unless Madam May were substituted for one of the permanent members, that would not be something that would generally be envisioned. However, the committee could always make a decision to share the draft report with another member or with Madam May.

As well, there would not be anything stopping Madam May from making suggestions to the committee if she wanted to. She could send suggestions to the committee for them to consider and then accept or reject.

• (1700)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I am happy to receive those recommendations.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

The committee may want to discuss that question without my being online, so I'm going to leave so that you'll have the freedom to discuss it. If it's all right, I'd love to see the draft and I would love to know the best email address to send some thoughts, knowing that they are not going to be translated. I hope they will be useful in framing what we might want to do with the report.

I should leave in case you want to make a decision on whether I can see the draft.

Thank you again.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. May. You can always send me an email as well.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

The Chair: To sum up, I want to remind everybody that we're going to have two entire meetings to consider the draft report and then adopt it. The first of those meetings will be this Thursday, and then the next meeting will be on either May 11 or May 12.

After that time, there is going to be a very tight time frame in which to submit supplementary or dissenting opinions. Those supplementary or dissenting opinions cannot be longer than 10 pages, or the same length as the initial report, which we know is going to be longer than 10 pages in this case, so you're fine with that. It will be no longer than 10 pages in this circumstance.

That's about it. Does everybody understand what we're looking at in the next couple of meetings?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Chair, I don't know if there's a moment for me to ask a couple of quick questions about the outline.

First, I'm just checking to see if there's a section that includes a discussion of the platforms and the confidentiality aspect. I just want to make sure.

The other thing is on guiding principles and regional representation. I'm wondering if that's captured in one of these categories.

The Chair: Regional representation seems to be a very important consideration. Andre, can you respond to whether that can be included?

Mr. Andre Barnes: Yes, Chair, I'm just trying to flip back and forth between the document and the screen.

The technological part will be under "ensure digital security of proceedings".

The regional representation would be under "ensure accessibility of proceedings".

Those would be the two places I would look at putting that information.

The Chair: Is that okay, Ms. Blaney?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It is. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Does anyone have any other comments or feedback on the table of contents so far?

Okay. We will see each other on Thursday to go through the draft report.

Thank you so much to all the members. Have a good evening.

The committee is adjourned.

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