



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

---

# Board of Internal Economy

TRANSCRIPT

**NUMBER 011**

**PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT**

Thursday, November 26, 2020

---





## Board of Internal Economy

Thursday, November 26, 2020

• (1235)

[Translation]

**The Acting Chair (Hon. Anthony Rota):** We are now in a public meeting.

We're at item three in the minutes of the previous meeting. I see that everyone agrees with what they received.

Let's move on to item four, business arising from the previous meeting.

We'll go to Ms. DeBellefeuille now.

**Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois):** I'd like to thank Mr. Janse for having answered our questions. Some members of the Board of Internal Economy, or the BOIE, had questions about some of the reports that were tabled.

I asked a question about the headsets worn by witnesses appearing before the committee, but the answer, while not unsatisfactory, could have been more detailed.

It says here that 400 headsets were sent to witnesses. In fact, approximately 20% of the witnesses received a headset. I'm sure you understand, Mr. Chair, why I'm drawing attention to this.

The hybrid format being used for House sittings and committee meetings is creating problems for francophone MPs from all the parties. The headset problems are one thing, but trying to get witnesses to understand how to change the interpretation channel is another. I'd like Mr. Janse to have an answer for us at the next meeting of the BOIE. I would like to know how many witnesses spoke French, and I'll tell you why.

Here's what I think. Approximately 90% of witnesses speak English, which means that it's essential to have interpretation into French. When a witness gives evidence in French and no English interpretation is available, there's sure to be a point of order within 30 seconds to correct the situation. I'd like to see these technical and interpretation problems dealt with. I don't feel that the situation is improving quickly enough.

Yesterday, I was a bit exasperated, or I should say discouraged—that's the better word for it. In a meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship appeared to discuss the main estimates, but did not have the right headset and interpretation was impossible. It's rather discouraging to see that the minister's officials didn't go to the trouble of making sure that he had the right equipment and knew how to work the interpretation channels to make interpretation into both official languages possible.

If Ms. Normandin, our spokesperson, had been a unilingual francophone MP and had not understood anything in English, what would have happened? It's easier for the technicians to tell the witnesses to speak English, because then they don't have to do anything with the interpretation channel, which we all agree has been a problem and a hindrance.

In the report that was tabled, I'd like the number of witnesses who gave evidence in French to be recorded, so that we could see whether the technological problems have been having more of an impact on members who speak French.

Yesterday, a witness at the fisheries and oceans committee did not have a headset and the interpretation was not working in either direction. When he spoke French, the anglophone MPs said that the interpretation was not working and when he spoke English, it too was not working. The Bloc Québécois member had to ask questions in English because she could not ask them in French owing to these problems.

I don't know who to tell about the problem. The clerks and the committee chairs certainly need to be made aware that it's unacceptable for francophone MPs to be told they can't ask their questions in French because the witness does not understand or because the interpretation or the equipment is not working. There are francophone MPs in every party. The MPs can't understand the witnesses because things are not working in either direction.

We had an exploratory discussion yesterday about the French situation.

• (1240)

It's rather sad to see that we still have some hiccups in terms of access to French.

We received a solid report about the committees from Mr. Janse and we are going to use it to look into this matter at the Bureau of Internal Economy more thoroughly because it's too important and we have to find answers to the problems that francophone MPs are currently experiencing when they sit on the various committees.

I am aware of all the efforts being made by House staff members and by the IT teams. I'll be the first in line to thank them. I know that everyone is working hard on it, but we're running out of time. We know that we'll still be operating as a hybrid Parliament for some time to come and that we can't carry on for long until this situation about access to interpretation in both official languages has improved.

I know that some witnesses are called only on the day before they are to give evidence. Headsets can't be teleported, and have to be sent to them, which is impossible at the moment through House services, particularly when a meeting is called only the day before. However, I do find it unacceptable when ministers and others don't have the right equipment when they appear.

If the witnesses don't have the required equipment, then we need to find another solution. We can't tell the francophone MPs that there are problems and limitations and that that's just the way it works. I'm going to do battle on this important issue. If we don't, who will? It's up to all of us to find a solution.

I have no complaints about House Administration; quite the contrary. However, we need to work harder to make the committee chairs more aware of the situation. They need to demonstrate flexibility in allocating time. If a francophone MP from any of the parties is asking questions in French and needs to repeat them because the witness did not understand as a result of an interpretation problem, then the speaking time needs to be adjusted.

We've already discussed this. I clearly remember that the government House leader said that speaking time would be adjusted. He mentioned that the chairs should be flexible about the idea of allowing a little more time to avoid penalizing an MP who is losing speaking time because of having to repeat things three times for witnesses who did not understand the question in French because of interpretation or technological problems.

At the next Board of Internal Economy meeting, I would like an update on how much of the evidence was presented only in French, because that would show us the scale of the problem.

Here is an example of what can happen when evidence is only in French. Last week, the member for Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP) was interrupted in the middle of asking a question in French to an anglophone member who rose on a point of order because he didn't understand the question. You allowed the member to repeat the question. In question period, when a member is interrupted in the middle of a question, it has an impact on spontaneity. Some people don't hesitate to interrupt a member when they don't understand.

We're trying to be understanding and willing to compromise. There are some exceptional circumstances in which we will compromise by listening to evidence in English. For example, there was moving evidence at a meeting of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights. We understand that there can be exceptions, but they should be just that — exceptions. At the moment, it's happening all too often.

At the next meeting of the Bureau of Internal Economy, I'd like us to get together to try to find ways of improving the situation on the basis of Mr. Janse's report.

Thank you for taking the time to hear me out.

• (1245)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thank you very much, Ms. DeBellefeuille

Over to you, Mr. Julian.

**Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party):** Mr. Chair, I fully agree with Ms. DeBellefeuille's comments.

On some of the committees I sit on, when there is an interpretation problem, the committee's work simply comes to a halt. This is what should be happening for all committees and witnesses. Our technical capabilities should definitely enable us to handle both official languages. The practice needs to be introduced just about everywhere to ensure that both official languages are always respected.

Even though I have never experienced this situation myself, I know that when there were problems at some committees, the chair just carried on. In some instances, not all arrangements were in place to ensure that both English and French could be treated equally. I think something could be done, including in our respective caucuses.

Yesterday evening, there was a four-hour debate in the House of Commons. It was about the use of French in Montreal and concerns about the issue from all the parties. The concern expressed was unanimous. Throughout the entire evening, everyone spoke only in French, making it a francophone evening in the House of Commons. It's ironic that we should find ourselves here this morning facing the same problems, which are occurring within the House of Commons' own institutions.

It therefore needs to be taken seriously. I believe that the suggestions Ms. DeBellefeuille just made could steer us in the right direction.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Rodriguez, over to you.

**Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm fully in favour of Ms. DeBellefeuille suggestions. I believe that we all want to strengthen French. This commitment was expressed yesterday, but it needs to be heard every day. I think that we're all sincere, whether in the New Democratic Party, the Conservative Party, the Bloc Québécois or the Liberal Party. But we need to do even more. We all agreed on this yesterday. We need to say it again today and say it again tomorrow. And it needs to go beyond mere words, and transformed into concrete action.

I think that some of this responsibility unfortunately falls to the committee members. We spoke about it earlier. I therefore suggest that when a problem of this kind arises, the MPs themselves, out of respect for both official languages, should ask that discussion cease until the problem is solved.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Deltell, you're next.

**Mr. Gérard Deltell (Leader of the Official Opposition in the House of Commons):** I am 100% behind everything my three colleagues have said. It goes without saying that we need to be able to express ourselves in both official languages and to be understood no matter who is speaking, or where and how they are speaking, our comments need to be understood and we have to be able to understand what others are saying.

For three months now, we have been in unknown territory with the hybrid Parliament. In the first few days, and even the first few weeks, we put up with a situation that might on occasion have been tentative. After two months, the train is moving forward and making progress. However, it is not moving in the right direction. As Mr. Rodriguez was rightly saying just now, the responsibility is now over to us. As francophones, whenever we don't have access to French interpretation, we should rise on a point of order. And our anglophone colleagues need to do the same.

It's also up to us as parliamentarians to call to order or complain about any colleagues who show up with an inappropriate headset. It's a bit awkward to do this when it's a witness, but we can certainly call out a colleague. We could even apply some rough and ready rules and tell those who don't have the right headset that they simply can't speak. That's all. There are rules and they need to be followed. I would never, for example show up here wearing a cock-eyed tie. As an MP, I'm required to wear a tie and I'm also required to wear my headset. Otherwise, I don't have the right to speak. I think we should give this some consideration.

My final point is more technical. If, for one reason or another, a witness is asked only a few hours before the meeting to appear and doesn't have the required equipment, then we should be more flexible. Is it technically possible in cases like that for a person to give evidence by telephone? I don't know whether this is possible. If so, and if we find that they can't give evidence because they don't have a headset, then we could give them 20 minutes to find a phone and call us at a number like "1-800-House of Commons". In the meantime, we could hear another witness.

• (1250)

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons):** We'll look into that, Mr. Deltell.

**Mr. Gérard Deltell:** Thank you, Mr. Aubé.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thank you, Mr. Deltell.

Go ahead, Mr. Gagnon.

**Mr. André Gagnon (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to the discussion and thanks to Ms. DeBellefeuille for having raised the question.

You raised another point that's just as important for us, and that is the service provided in both official languages to parliamentarians and witnesses. There is no reason for me to go into detail about why we had problems in certain instances, because you're thoroughly familiar with the situation.

Several of you have pointed out that part of the solution resides in the decisions that the committees will make. Thus far, the role

that the Liaison Committee could play has not been mentioned in the discussion. We need to approach them to inform them more directly about the problem. The guidelines provided by the Liaison Committee could be very useful in solving some of the problems you raised with respect to official languages and technical support.

I've noted the issues raised by Ms. DeBellefeuille, as well as the requests for information about the number of witnesses who speak in French. I think that we can come up with this information, and with the percentage of French spoken.

We'll work with Mr. Aubé's Team on other configurations for appearing, as suggested by Mr. Deltell. We'll get back with answers to these questions as soon as possible.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Thank you, Mr. Gagnon.

[English]

Now we have Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip):** Thanks.

Just to add to this, there have been a number of issues, certainly for translation or interpretation, with regard to the headsets. However, probably the most serious breaches of it has been when we've had instances with ministers appearing at committees or committees of the whole where there have been delays related to either their not having a proper headset or their not having secured a proper location to have a good Internet connection.

It is absolutely incumbent upon ministers of the Crown to ensure that they are putting themselves in a position where they will have the proper equipment, connections and so on. They know often well in advance when they're appearing at these things to be held accountable in committees.

Where this is happening, I won't indicate the motives behind it and there may not be any, but without a doubt, it should be expected of ministers that they be prepared for their committee and committees of the whole with proper connections and proper headsets. In instances where committees are being delayed or held up as a result of these kinds of issues, I really believe the minister should be expected to make up that time at the committee.

If anyone should be expected to be clear on these things, it should be ministers of the Crown. I point that out as well for the deliberations that are being held in terms of how we can address some of these issues. Ministers should be very clear on the need for a headset and a connection that is not problematic. We've seen far too much of this, and it seems to me as though it's limiting the ability of members of all parties to hold the ministers accountable, so this has to be addressed as well.

• (1255)

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** That's very good. Are there any other comments on this?

We'll be getting some information back.

I notice we have all the whips here, so I'll ask the whips to reiterate with their caucus to wear headsets when they're asking questions, when they're answering and when they're at committee. I know it's frustrating, even when we're in the chair. I like the suggestion by Monsieur Deltell that maybe if you don't have the right equipment, you can't play the game. It might be something we'll have to consider. I can't make that decision unilaterally, but if the House were to decide that, I would be more than happy to enforce it.

Next is item five: sustaining the end-user software subscriptions for the House of Commons. I notice that we have only four and a half minutes left. Do we want to start it, do we want to extend the session or do we want to wait until the next session to actually embark on this in a fulsome manner?

**Mr. Peter Julian:** I cannot go past 1 p.m., but this may be a very quick item.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Mr. Aubé, you're on the clock. Go as fast as you can.

**Mr. Stéphan Aubé:** I'm going to change my presentation.

[*Translation*]

We are here today to ask for permanent funding for subscriptions to the software used on personal computers in the House of Commons and on smartphones. The goal is to give you a brief description of how funding has worked over the past few years. In 2015, the companies that supplied these goods and services made a major change in their business methods.

Previously, during an election, we would ask the Board of Internal Economy, through a bidding process, for funds to purchase software and updates. Every four or five years, more or less, with a list in hand to indicate the life cycle of the software and personal computers, we requested the funds from the Board of Internal Economy, and funds for capital investments as well. However, in 2015, the system changed. The industry and our suppliers moved to a subscription model. Today's request reflects this major change.

There are other factors too, including an increase in the number of users on the hill. There is also a growing number of services that we now offer owing to the explosive increase in Internet use and security requirements. That's why we're requesting permanent funding of almost \$2 million per year for items to be used by MPs. We are requesting permanent funding of approximately \$1.2 million for House of Commons Administration in connection with these items.

That then is a summary of the prepared presentation.

**Hon. Anthony Rota:** Are there any questions or comments?

I believe that everyone is in agreement on the recommendation. Good.

That's all for today then. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

---









Published under the authority of the Speaker of  
the House of Commons

---

### SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

---

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

---

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité  
du Président de la Chambre des communes

---

### PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

---

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

---

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :  
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>