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• (1105)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number five.

[Translation]

This is February 17, 2022. The meeting is televised.

[English]

The first thing we're going to take care of is minutes of the previous meetings.

Is there anything that anyone wants to bring up?

[Translation]

So we have a consensus. We can proceed.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian (House leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I move that we begin the meeting in camera in order to discuss these matters.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have everyone's agreement to go in camera?

All right. We'll take three minutes to go in camera.

As soon as we are ready, the meeting will resume in camera.

[English]

We'll start in camera in a few seconds, as soon as we're ready.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

• (1105)

(Pause)

• (1150)

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We are ready to resume the meeting.

We now move to the second item on the agenda, which is business arising from the previous meeting.

[English]

Does anyone have anything from the previous meeting?

[Translation]

Ms. Bellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am happy to speak to this, particularly on the issue of interpreters and the dashboard that was in the Liaison Committee report.

I would like to thank all the clerks for preparing this dashboard for us. It allows us to follow the progress of the efforts made by the House administration to reduce as much as possible the technological problems, the sound problems and the problems that our interpreters have.

One of the problems with virtual work are the issues arising from connectivity and technical errors. This has an impact on the quality of the interpretation.

I'd like to thank the staff for keeping this dashboard; I know it's a lot of work, and it's in addition to their daily tasks. They did a good job.

I have looked at the dashboard, and I have found that there are still problems; the performance rate has not yet reached 100%. Improvements have been made, but there are still a lot of problems.

The fact that the committee meets through the Zoom application has implications for francophone MPs, primarily, but also for anglophone MPs. The latter need to hear the interpretation well when an MP speaks in French.

I am therefore asking that the dashboard be maintained. As I said, it allows us to follow the progress of the administration's efforts to correct the problems, in order to improve the quality of the sound, and therefore, the quality of the interpretation.

For two weeks, my team monitored the progress of all the committees. On the whole, I must say that we were surprised to see the many problems that there have been since the work resumed in January. I don't want to generalize, but this has happened in several committees.

One of the problems is that many members are still not using the equipment provided by the House.

For example, this morning at the meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, one member attended the meeting using her iPhone headphones. I will not name the MP or her party — it was not mine.

So the interpreters are complaining about the sound quality.

In committee, there are also problems because the chair does not always respect routine motions.

According to a routine motion which has been adopted by all committees, the chair must say, before the meeting begins, that the tests have been carried out for all the witnesses. Few do so. The fact that the tests have not been carried out, or have been carried out too shortly before the start of the meeting, is a problem.

I know it is not your responsibility, but the chief clerk is with us today. Perhaps he could be asked to make the chair of the Liaison Committee, Ms. Sgro, aware of the importance of routine motions. It is the duty of a committee chair to respect routine motions.

As this is a new motion, the clerks should endeavour to remind the chair that they must ensure that the tests have been done.

At the meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs two weeks ago, I learned, by chance, that members are no longer being tested. It is taken for granted that members are aware, after two years, that they should not come to the meeting without the right equipment.

As my colleagues know, repeating yourself is part of a whip's job.

In some committees, members were not using the equipment provided by the House, which made the job of the interpreters more difficult, as the sound quality is not the same.

Sometimes it also sounds like the sound is reverberating. I will report on some of those incidents.

As I am generous, I will give my notes on this to Mr. McDonald or Mr. Aubé. Sometimes the interpreters have difficulty working, because there the sound reverberates. Also, at the February 1 meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, there was a lot of interference, which caused problems for the interpreters.

Also, on two occasions, the chair allowed witnesses to testify even though their cameras were not working. In my view, it is part of the rules of the game to see the faces of witnesses, unless they have made an agreement or the committee is meeting in camera for reasons of confidentiality or even security. However, in the instances I mention, this was not the case.

There is even one committee chair who let the meeting continue, even though there had been points of order because the interpretation was not working. At a meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence, there was an anglophone witness whose interpretation channel was not working. So when the Bloc member asked him a question in French, she could not hear or understand his answers. As a result, this prevented active participation by the Bloc member, because the chair allowed the session to continue.

You will understand, then, that the struggle I am waging today in the Board of Internal Economy is important. It is about maximizing the participation of members, whether they speak French or English, and making sure that they have access to good services, but also reminding the clerks to be very supportive of chairs that do not

respect the housekeeping motions and do not seem to be very sensitive to the participation of French-speaking members.

I consider that the clerk can do some of the work with the clerks and the Liaison Committee, but, as I am fortunate enough to be in the presence of my colleagues the whips of all the parties, I would say that there is some work for them as well. They could remind us of some of the rules that we have set together to maximize participation. It is a question of having adequate equipment, but also of having the concern that the sessions take place entirely in both official languages.

I have to tell you that I'm somewhat impressed. There have been changes, because we don't wait for the Board of Internal Economy to try to find solutions, obviously. Recently, the clerks decided to start doing technical trials with members again, because there was a lack of discipline, and this was among members from all parties.

In fact, at the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, several witnesses did not have headsets with microphones. When witnesses do not have proper equipment, it causes health problems for our interpreters. In light of the complaint filed by the interpreters' union, I am surprised that we still allow witnesses or members of Parliament to participate in meetings without the necessary equipment, when we know that a large proportion of work-related accidents affecting interpreters are linked to the quality of the equipment, among other things. I think we have a responsibility in this regard, and we should have zero tolerance.

We have been working virtually for two years. Normally, we should be a little bit better than this. I think everybody is making an effort, but it's not acceptable that witnesses don't have the necessary equipment and that we tolerate it. It's not acceptable that when the interpretation doesn't work and an English-speaking witness speaks, we don't care. I don't understand why I'm still reporting such cases.

● (1155)

I will be happy to provide this document to your team.

Mr. Speaker, I ask three things of you: that you ask the clerk to convene the Liaison Committee, to really raise awareness and provide guidance, and to have each party whip make important reminders to their caucus about the use of equipment, and maybe be a little bit stricter: if you don't have the proper equipment, you don't have the floor. That's the rule we had given ourselves.

On the other hand, if there is no interpretation, there is no testimony. If there is no interpretation, we cannot speak. If we continue to give the impression that it is not so serious, we trivialize the effects on the health and safety of our interpreters. I don't know if my colleagues agree with me.

So I will summarize my proposal: that the dashboard be maintained; that the Liaison Committee be seized of the difficulties we have talked about today; and that we be able to have answers, following the analysis that I will table of all the events with the dates and the names of the committees, in order to see if, indeed, we in the Bloc Québécois have the same analysis as your team regarding technology.

This must be an important point for the Board of Internal Economy because we care about both the health and safety of our interpreters, and the ability to participate in debates in both official languages, which is essential.

• (1200)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

The three measures that you have asked for are very reasonable and very important to the committee process. In fact, they are rigorously applied in the House. So there is no reason why they should not be applied to committees.

I noticed that the clerk was taking a lot of notes. We will see that you get answers and several solutions as soon as possible.

Are there any other comments?

I'll give the floor to Mr. MacKinnon, to be followed by Mr. Julian.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Chief Government Whip): I will not repeat what Ms. DeBellefeuille said, but I thank her for her persistence. It is important to stress that we are of the same mind. In fact, it is unacceptable to us, on the government side, that meetings are not held in both official languages, on an absolutely equal footing, and it is essential that all measures be respected, whether it be testing, the use of the right equipment, and the rest.

Please be aware that, on our side, we constantly remind our members to use the equipment that has been provided to us. As for the House administration, I am always impressed with their diligence in sending the right equipment. They respond very quickly when we call on them in this regard.

I think that corrections, whatever they may be, must be made until we have absolute parity in the use of both official languages in our institutions, in the House of Commons and in its committees.

Thank you, Ms. DeBellefeuille. Rest assured that we will support any measures that may be introduced to help us in this regard.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

We will now continue with Mr. Julian, Mr. Calkins and Mr. LeBlanc.

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I also thank Ms. DeBellefeuille for raising these issues.

In fact, these are questions of respect for the employees of the House. The interpreters do a magnificent job, often in difficult situations in this time of pandemic, when we often have to work virtually. The least we can do is to ensure that all interpreters are treated well—they deserve it—and that occupational health and safety measures are respected.

The idea of having the same rules at committees and in the House seems the least we can do. We need to protect the interpreters' workplace to limit workplace accidents.

Before I was a member of Parliament, I ran a social enterprise that provided services to the hearing impaired in British Columbia.

My wife, Limei, is an audiologist. So I know how it can cause permanent injury to interpreters if they don't have the proper equipment to protect their ears. This is serious.

I am disappointed that some members, even after two years of working in virtual mode, have not yet realized that they absolutely must use official headsets, which protect interpreters and improve the sound. I am also disappointed that the committee chairs do not understand that the same conditions must apply to all witnesses.

I think this is a good plan of action, which we will have to come back to in a few weeks if we find that we don't have the co-operation of the committee chairs. On the other hand, we could agree now with the whips of all parties that if people are not using the official equipment to work virtually on Zoom, they cannot speak in committee. That way, I don't think any member will continue to disrespect our interpreters. So this condition should be implemented immediately, as it is common sense.

• (1205)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll now go to Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Chief Opposition Whip): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't think anybody at the table is going to disagree that we need to be as respectful and as gracious as we can be with those who serve us in our duties in the House of Commons, particularly our interpreters.

I, for one, am probably the only one at this table—maybe there's one another—who absolutely, fundamentally requires the use of interpretative services. I wouldn't be able to conduct my duties here because I am unilingual member of Parliament.

On behalf of the Conservative Party—a number of my colleagues would be as unilingual as me—I want to extend my appreciation to interpretative services for the great work they have done.

There's a relatively simple solution to some of the concerns being raised here today. Some of us have been here a very long time. That doesn't mean that people who have been here for a longer time have all of the answers. From about March 2006, when I first came to this place, until about March 2020, we didn't have this thing called hybrid or virtual Parliament. All the problems we're discussing here today are in part because we are trying to accommodate—and rightfully so—the issues pertaining to conducting the business of the nation through a COVID pandemic.

We have asked for some reconsideration as we move forward—as restrictions are getting lifted in various other jurisdictions, like in the province of Ontario where the nation's capital resides—of the restrictions we have here in the precinct.

Perhaps one thing that we can tie in to that review would be what the pros and cons are when it comes to workplace safety for those who serve us and our needs as parliamentarians. Perhaps that should be taken into consideration. Perhaps we should make sure that consideration is given a little more weight if it's actually creating frustrations and causing workplace incidents, hazards or injury.

In my recollection, we had very few of these issues prior to adopting a virtual or hybrid Parliament. While I completely understand the nature of wanting to protect staff, we also have, as members of Parliament, parliamentary privilege, which means that we actually do have the right to address the House. I think we will have significant issues if we decide to challenge members' abilities to address the House even though we can prescribe the rules in which we do that. Look, we even have rules on what we can and can't wear in order to speak in the House of Commons. I have to wear a jacket and a tie, so a headset is not an unreasonable thing, but there could be potential challenges to that.

Members of Parliament are extremely busy individuals. We travel at great length. It's not inconceivable that somebody might find themselves delayed by a flight or by any other means and want to participate in their regular duties, thinking that the headset they left at their office would be replaced by the one at their home or their other office and got waylaid in between.

We can pack these things around. That's understandable. We have had things like teleconference before as well. I remember numerous teleconferences at committees where we didn't actually have video availability.

As long as we meet the needs of the staff, the communications equipment and the technology, I think we can proceed, but I can assure you that on behalf of the Conservative Party, I will be revisiting this issue with our caucus and making sure that people are using the equipment they ought to be using. It has been clear. We do have two years of experience in doing this.

The solution to me, colleagues, is quite simple. Let's start a plan moving forward to de-normalize hybrid or virtual Parliament and get back to the way things were two years ago. The vast majority of the problems we're talking about here today will simply disappear.

• (1210)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. LeBlanc, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I wish to endorse the comments of Mr. MacKinnon and Mr. Julian to support Ms. DeBellefeuille's suggestion. I am concerned by this as well.

It is a bit embarrassing that after two years some of our colleagues do not feel the obligation to be well equipped to participate in debates and committees for whatever reason. As Mr. Julian said, it is not only a vital issue for the safety and health of our interpreters, but it is also a vital issue of respect for our colleagues, who must understand the discussions. I think Mr. Calkins has just made that point.

Mr. Speaker, I therefore suggest that the Board of Internal Economy remain seized of this matter and that, when the time is right in your judgment and in the judgment of the clerk, you give us an update, as Ms. DeBellefeuille has suggested. I don't want us to discuss this today only to discover in four or eight weeks' time that is has not been resolved in a much more rigorous way.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Ms. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank my colleagues, who are willing to work together to help us improve.

I would like to put a brief question to Mr. McDonald.

Representatives of sign language interpreters have told us that for some meetings they do not have access to the written documents of witnesses or ministers that our interpreters have access to. Yet this would allow them to do their job more easily.

Is it for security reasons that they are not given the texts in question so that they can interpret in sign language?

I think that the Translation Bureau does not hire this kind of interpreter. So I would like to take advantage of Mr. MacDonald's presence to get an answer to this question.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. McDonald, the floor is yours.

Mr. Ian McDonald (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's a good question.

We don't have a lot of experience in this respect. However, I believe that sign language interpretation was provided for all meetings on the study of Bill C-81 during the 42nd Parliament.

I don't believe that we had issues providing the documents at that time. We provide documents to the interpretation service, which is responsible for making them available to all interpreters, including sign language interpreters.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: What representatives of this group have told us is that they requested documents. Perhaps they didn't ask the right person. Should sign language interpreters who want the hearing impaired to have access to debates address their request to the translation bureau or the clerk's office?

Which is the better option?

Mr. Ian McDonald: We will take a look at the issue.

To my knowledge, we already provide documents to the interpretation service, which is responsible for all interpreters who support the work of committees.

Your next witnesses may have more information on the subject, and we will be able to provide you with additional information. We would be very glad to examine the issue to ensure that it is resolved. That being said, to my knowledge, we have always provided documents to the interpretation service.

• (1215)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

I think that I came through loud and clear. I have noted the solidarity of my colleagues around the table, who also seem to want the situation to improve.

Nevertheless, I would like to highlight that it's about not just allowing members to understand what is said, but also allowing witnesses to provide testimony. In this respect, each of the whips around the table has work to do, and I would say that the lion's share of the work falls on the government whip, since members of the government are usually the ones to chair meetings.

I know that Mr. MacKinnon will do everything necessary to raise the awareness of his members who chair committees so that they are more attentive, because it seems very clear today that we want things to improve, not just for members, but also for witnesses.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Brassard, please go ahead.

Mr. John Brassard (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I note that the House has become even more responsive over the course of the pandemic, and the virtual hybrid sittings, in supplying different types of resources not just to members of Parliament consistently but also to witnesses. I have seen an improvement in that.

Through you, Chair, Mr. Calkins talked about March 2020, and the fact that we had started moving to a virtual hybrid system. We've seen a marked increase in interpreters suffering from hearing problems as a result of this.

In advance of 2020, how many cases would we have typically dealt with proportional to what we're seeing right now in terms of the number of interpreters being impacted and affected by the hybrid Parliament? I suspect that it certainly wasn't the same as in an in-person Parliament.

Do you have any idea of what those numbers are, for workplace injuries as they relate to pre- and post-hybrid?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. McDonald, would you be able to answer that, or would you be able to come back with an answer?

Mr. Ian McDonald: I believe the interpretation service representatives will be able to deal with that question momentarily for you.

Mr. John Brassard: The reason I am asking is because it is relevant to the discussions we are having as they relate to this transitional plan of moving forward, restricting some of the measures that Mr. Calkins talked about, and eventually, I hope, returning to a normal Parliament.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

I'm not seeing any more questions.

I would just point out to all parties that perhaps they want to ask their members to check their emails. I sent out an email yesterday, it just so happens, on best practices when using virtual meetings. It's just to highlight that they would want to check that out and follow that, and make sure they're following that to a tee, because any deviation from that really makes it difficult for people.

Again, it comes down to this. I know we take things for granted sometimes. We say, "Oh well, I'm caught in my car. I'll just use my phone." It will cause problems for someone who is interpreting, so please follow those guidelines for those best practices.

I realize that sometimes it can't be done. We just had one case where one of the members could not use the headset, and they made arrangements. What ended up happening was they got him a microphone and speakers, and everything worked well, but the microphone wasn't working well enough for the interpreters.

A simple solution would have been getting the speakers working other than in the headset, and he'd wear the headset and use the microphone on the headset. This was not working. The speakers were working, but the microphone wasn't, so sometimes something simple like that really covers that area.

If there are any problems, please contact our technical people, because they have been very diligent and trying their best. Believe me, they are bending over backwards. I have to compliment our technical team for trying to make it so the interpreters do well.

I know what it's like to try to translate. I've done some in the past, nothing to the extent of what they're doing, and they're keeping up with what they're doing.

[Translation]

It's not always easy to listen to what is being said and then interpret into another language. In fact, it's very difficult, and we really appreciate the efforts undertaken by interpreters to allow Parliament to continue its work.

• (1220)

We will now move on to the third item, entitled translation bureau - resources utilization for simultaneous interpretation.

Our witnesses today are Ms. Lucie Séguin and Mr. Matthew Ball.

[English]

We'll let them get set up.

[Translation]

Ms. Séguin will start.

You have the floor, Ms. Séguin.

Ms. Lucie Séguin (Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the members of the Board of Internal Economy for this invitation. With me today is Matthew Ball, vice-president, services to parliament and interpretation, translation bureau.

I would first like to acknowledge that I am speaking to you from the traditional unceded territory of the Anishnaabeg people in the beautiful city of Ottawa. It's a pleasure for us to be here today to provide an update on the interpretation services that the translation bureau provides to the House of Commons and its committees, not only in both official languages, but also in indigenous languages, foreign languages and sign languages.

Although interpreters work primarily behind the scenes, they play a crucial role, as mentioned earlier during this meeting. They ensure that parliamentarians and Canadians can follow the proceedings in Parliament and participate fully in the democratic life of our country. It is a job that interpreters do with a great deal of pride, and I want to really pay tribute to their dedication.

I would like to recognize Cécilia, Christine and Sharon, who are in the booth for today's meeting.

Honourable members, as you know, interpreting is a demanding and complex task, and you have mentioned this. It requires very precise technical conditions to be performed safely, particularly with regard to sound quality. As interpreters speak and listen at the same time, sound quality is very important to them. At the end of the day, interpreters cannot work if they cannot hear.

I would like to make it clear that the translation bureau, as you know, is not responsible for the technical aspects of providing interpretation services. That is the responsibility of our clients, including the House of Commons administration. That said, we collaborate closely with our clients to ensure that interpreters work in conditions that are safe and conducive to high-quality interpretation.

However, these conditions are sometimes lacking when participants are remote—and you gave a number of examples of this today. Remote interpretation has become the norm, particularly since the beginning of the pandemic. The pandemic has led to the widespread use of virtual sessions and has completely redefined the working environment for interpreters, resulting in an increase in reports of health and safety incidents related to sound quality among interpreters. I can assure you that health and safety is a priority for the translation bureau and the Government of Canada, and I see today that this is also the case for the honourable members of Parliament.

Even before the pandemic began, the translation bureau had started taking steps to protect interpreters during meetings with remote participants. We have since strengthened these measures with the help of our partners, including the House administration and the associations representing interpreters. There is no quick fix for the challenges of virtual sessions. However, some measures have improved conditions since the spring of 2020.

For example, as you have mentioned, Parliament provides members of Parliament, senators and parliamentary committee witnesses with headsets that have one-way microphones. I sincerely thank you, on behalf of all interpreters, for diligently using this equipment. I can also see that you are taking health and safety very seriously, which is commendable.

Furthermore, since February 7, we have required that participants in virtual sessions hosted by Government of Canada departments and agencies use a proper microphone, as you do. We have instructed our interpreters not to interpret contributions from participants who do not meet this requirement. This directive applies to our clients in federal departments and agencies, because here, at Parliament, we can see that habits are changing for the better. This will therefore not apply to Parliament. However, we encourage parliamentarians to continue adopting the recommended practices.

• (1225)

[English]

Other successful measures include continuing to implement reduced work hours for virtual sessions without a reduction in pay. As well, we have increased staff scheduled for each virtual session to allow interpreters to take more frequent breaks. Of course, these measures increase the number of interpreters required for each session.

As is the case in many other professions, there is a shortage of interpreters around the world, including in Canada. The translation bureau is the largest employer of interpreters in Canada. It has 64 official languages interpreters on permanent staff.

We are also fortunate to be able to rely on freelance interpreters, but even in the private sector capacity is limited. Sixty freelance interpreters are currently helping us serve Parliament, but their availability varies depending on the demands of their other clients.

This means that we have to be very agile in matching our offers with the needs of Parliament and our other clients. Fortunately, we can count on the co-operation of the House of Commons as well as Senate administration to anticipate needs and allocate resources according to priorities.

Please rest assured that we are making every effort to improve our ability to continue to provide you with the quality language services that you deserve.

We are actively collaborating right now with the only two Canadian universities that offer the master's in interpretation program. We're also actively engaged in helping ensure a strong succession, loaning them our seasoned interpreters to teach courses and to help students prepare for our accreditation tests.

We are also constantly looking to expand our pool of freelancers. Furthermore, we are vigorously pursuing our research projects with top hearing specialists in Canada and abroad in order to make evidence-based decisions in the implementation of optimal protective measures for interpreters.

Among other things the National Research Council of Canada has confirmed that the interpreter consoles in the House of Commons and committee rooms provide excellent protection against acoustic shock. However, tests have revealed that the sound reaching interpreters in booths during virtual proceedings is of lower quality than that reaching remote participants. We are actively exploring possible solutions with the House of Commons administration.

Honourable members, I would like to thank you and all of your fellow members of Parliament for your co-operation and your concern for the health and safety of our interpreters, staff and freelance.

I would also like to extend a big thank you to the staff at the House of Commons for their constant support and active involvement in the search for solutions to make the work of our interpreters safe and easier.

My colleague Matthew and I are now ready and happy to take questions.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. MacKinnon, you have the floor.

Then it will be Mrs. DeBellefeuille's turn.

[*English*]

Then we'll go to Mr. Brassard and Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had the honour to work and collaborate with Ms. Séguin and Mr. Ball in a previous life, as parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement.

Having followed the evolution of this file and the status of the translation bureau, I am convinced of the great dedication of everyone, from Ms. Séguin to the deputy minister, by way of each and every employee of the translation bureau. The bureau, as an institution, has existed for 87 years now. In fact, it is one of the oldest government institutions in Canada. It is truly a centre of excellence, which employs some 1,600 people, if memory serves.

I am not here to sing the praises of its employees, but I know that they are very proud of the work they do. In my opinion, it's important to highlight that it is a great institution that serves all Canadians and shines around the world.

We have been politely reminded of the burden imposed on the translation bureau when it receives requests for documents that are not necessarily directed to the right place. However, that is not the subject of today's meeting.

I invite my colleagues to exercise greater care when developing and drafting requests for documents. Out of a desire to not miss anything, a large number of documents unrelated to the request are often included, which puts incredible pressure on the already limited resources of the translation bureau.

We knew it already, but Ms. Séguin just reminded us that needs are greatest and the demand is highest for interpreters, especially in this era of virtual work. I know that great efforts are being made to attract people to this profession. We have a duty to thank the interpreters, as we often do. In my opinion, it's obvious that more work needs to be done to attract people to this profession and to the translation bureau.

Ms. Séguin, you spoke about university partnerships. As we know, when there is a labour shortage, everything must be done to address it.

Could you tell us a bit more about what needs to be done to attract more people to the professions of interpretation and translation?

• (1230)

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As Mr. MacKinnon mentioned, the translation bureau is the largest employer of translators and interpreters in Canada. Furthermore, we take this responsibility very seriously. We work with all Canadian educational institutions that offer interpretation, translation and terminology programs.

In addition to our specific partnerships with York University, Glendon College and the University of Ottawa, which offer master's degrees in interpretation, we also have a partnership with the Canadian Association of Schools of Translation, which comprises 10 Canadian universities.

We therefore have collaborative training programs, both for interpretation and translation, where we offer young interpreters and young aspiring translators the opportunity to gain concrete experience. This experience counts as credits toward their bachelor's degree or diploma.

On the interpretation side of things, there are three to five graduates annually. With York University and the University of Ottawa, we have frequent discussions about ways of attracting young people to the profession of interpretation.

We hire basically all of the students who graduate, as long as they meet the translation bureau's very rigorous quality criteria. We offer them employment, and we are always seeking to collaborate with other educational institutions, in Canada and elsewhere, to increase staffing.

• (1235)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Do you wish to make any comments on the other subject that I touched on: translation?

I know that you will not want to comment on the necessity of requests or excessive requests for information. Making a request for information is the most inherent right of any parliamentarian.

To what degree have these requests increased and put pressure on your resources?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for that follow-up question.

The translation bureau is responsible for providing translation and interpretation services to both chambers of Parliament: the Senate and the House of Commons. However, it also offers its services to all departments; agencies; members of the judiciary, such as the Supreme Court of Canada; the Privy Council Office; and the Prime Minister's Office. Not to mention, the bureau provides services during press conferences and other such events.

In terms of translation volume, we are one of the largest translation shops in the world. On average, we translate 350 million words annually. We have experienced increases recently, over the past two years, and we support a larger number of committees.

Concerning the documentation sent to our interpreters, it's true that it's a good thing if our interpreters receive documents in advance, if possible. At least, they should receive the most relevant documents, so that they are better equipped to interpret using the most correct and consistent terminology.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I will come back to the interpreters.

You mentioned that there were only three to five graduates a year, which isn't a lot. Are you able to keep up, despite resignations and retirements?

Are there enough graduates to replace the people who are leaving the field? Do you foresee an increase in this number?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: The number of new graduates is less than the number of retirements. In the last three years, we have hired nine new interpreters, while 12 interpreters have retired. However, we are fortunate in that a number of them become freelancers. Often, interpreters who have spent their careers at the Translation Bureau become freelancers for the Bureau.

However, we have also observed a drop in the number of freelance interpreters who are available or prepared to provide their services to Parliament. This is a constant challenge for us. For 30 years, we have been involved in training the next generation, and we will continue to do that. As I said, it is a challenge for us, as it is for a number of other professions.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: The services to parliamentarians now involve other requests, specifically interpretation with indigenous languages. The interpretation of indigenous languages is a service that parliamentarians are now entitled to receive.

Have initiatives such as that also added to your load?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Yes, absolutely.

Since 2019, parliamentarians have had the right to address Parliament in the indigenous language of their choice.

We are able to count on a pool of approximately 100 freelancers, which allows us to interpret about 50 indigenous languages and dialects.

Yes, we have added responsibilities to provide services in indigenous languages. Moreover, since the new Accessible Canada Act was adopted, there are new requirements for accessibility. The Translation Bureau provides services in sign language, both American Sign Language and Quebec Sign Language. We also provide captioning and other services for the deaf and hard of hearing, and those with problems with visual or auditory perception.

So we are providing a lot of new services, and we have the legislative mandate to provide all language services to Parliament, to the government and to its agencies. The Bureau's mandate remains unchanged but the workload is certainly increasing.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I was talking to Ms. Séguin but I know that Mr. Ball also plays an important role in all this.

I know that we are asking a lot of the Translation Bureau. The demand is intense, especially because of the virtual sessions of Parliament and the other requests that we have made to the Translation Bureau. Labour shortages are everywhere, and I know that Ms. Séguin and her colleagues have to come to grips with it. However, I feel that it is important to tell them that we do acknowledge their work and that we are grateful to them for it.

• (1240)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I would like a few points clarified.

You talked about 3 to 5 graduates annually. Is that in the Ottawa region or nationally?

Where do those graduates come from?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: I will ask my colleague Mr. Ball to answer that question.

Mr. Matthew Ball (Vice-President, Services to Parliament and Interpretation Sector): We are talking about 3 to 5 graduates nationally.

Canada has two Masters programs in conference interpreting, and the people we hire come from there. I myself was an interpreter trainee, having graduated from one of those two programs in 1999. We actually hire all the graduates as interpreter trainees, because, when they graduate, they don't really have the level of accreditation they need to be able to work with committees. We provide them with good training over two years, after which, they are ready to support you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much for that clarification.

We will now continue with Mrs. DeBellefeuille, followed by Mr. Brassard.

[*English*]

We will then go to Mr. Julian.

Madame DeBellefeuille, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I see that my colleague is as passionate as I am about the whole interpretation issue. He took 20 minutes to ask Ms. Séguin questions and we only have about 15 minutes left in the meeting.

That's not a criticism, Mr. MacKinnon, it's just an observation.

Ms. Séguin, I want to congratulate you for your clear, honest and transparent statement. It is not always easy for me to understand who has responsibility for what. From what you are telling me, you, as the manager, are responsible for hiring interpreters and for their health and safety, but the House administration is responsible for ensuring the quality of the equipment with which those interpreters work.

Did I understand correctly?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Yes, exactly.

The Translation Bureau is responsible for providing the interpreters, the human resources, but everything to do with the technological resources is the responsibility of the clients, like the House of Commons, the Supreme Court, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, and so on.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay, so I did understand correctly.

I came across a figure showing the number of interpreters who fall sick. You have identified about 300 work-related incidents or accidents, which is almost a record.

Your job is to tell your clients, in this case the House administration, that your interpreters are injured for reasons such as poor quality sound or equipment, am I right?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for your question.

You are exactly right. We have seen an increase in incidents and we are working closely with our colleagues in Parliament who are responsible for all the technology here and in the Senate.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: As a manager, you seem to be attentive to the health and safety of your interpreters, the people who allow you to provide a service for your clients.

I know that you commissioned a study from the National Research Council Canada, a scientific organization. You asked the Council to conduct sound tests because, as a good manager, you saw that the increase in work-related accidents due to the quality of the sound did not make sense to you.

You wanted to validate that increase scientifically, so you asked the Council to conduct some tests. In a first series of tests, some problems were detected. Subsequently, other more in-depth tests were conducted around October 2021. Those tests revealed major problems that could explain the growing number of work-related accidents that your interpreters were suffering.

When I say that, am I on the right track?

• (1245)

Ms. Lucie Séguin: We retained the services of the National Research Council Canada, the NRC, as an impartial organization. Expert sound engineers conducted tests in basically two phases. First, they tested the volume of the sound, which contributes to acoustic shock. In that regard, the NRC study found that the consoles and the equipment used in the House of Commons provide exceptional protection. So the interpreters are protected against acoustic shock and problems related to the volume of the sound.

However, problems were found in the quality of the sound. That is what we are working on at the moment, to make sure that the quality of the sound that reaches the ears of the interpreters during virtual meetings is at least as good as, or better than, the quality that members of Parliament hear when they are participating in the virtual meetings.

One of those studies has been done and others will be done. As the interpreters' employer, our goal is to have firm data on the impact of exposure to a less than optimal sound quality. That data does not exist, either in Canada or internationally, because the phenomenon is very recent. Consequently, we are investing our resources so that we can obtain that firm data.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Those tests are being done on systems that do not belong to you; they belong to your clients.

The results of the first phase of the study are satisfactory, while those of the second phase are a concern and merit our attention. Moreover, the accidents continue to increase. Does that mean that your clients are not making corrections significant enough to curb the number of work-related accidents? Do you feel that your clients are not making the effort needed to correct the problems that the NRC study revealed?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Quite the opposite. Our colleagues in the House of Commons are very conscientious and very concerned about the results of the NRC study.

As I mentioned, the NRC was chosen because it is an impartial organization. We have collaborated fully with our colleagues in the House administration who are responsible for the technology. We have worked hand-in-hand on the study and, because we regularly meet with our colleagues in the administration, I know that they have a very meticulous program and that they are investing a lot of resources in the quest for solutions.

I am not saying that the problem is completely solved, but we have found solutions to the problem of acoustic shock that was related to the volume of the sound. This was done because of investments in equipment purchases by both the House of Commons and the Translation Bureau.

However, some problems still need to be solved. They are with the quality of the sound, which is why our interpreters are reporting incidents. We have received about 230 incident reports since the start of the pandemic. The symptoms that the interpreters report are fatigue, tinnitus and headaches.

If members of the committee so wish, I can talk about the other study that we are conducting in order to gather firm data on the long-term effects of these symptoms.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Basically, you have no short-term objectives or timeframe. There is no solution.

If I understood correctly, you and your clients are looking for solutions to reduce the problem that causes the affliction.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: I will let Mr. Ball answer that.

However, I can say that possible solutions have been clearly identified. We know that a lot of energy is being put into finding a solution as quickly as possible. What is happening in the Parliament of Canada is also happening in other institutions around the world, like the UN, NATO, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. Everyone is facing the same difficulties in terms of sound quality.

I am sure that Mr. Ball will be able to supplement my answer.

Mr. Matthew Ball: Yes, actually, a lot of gains have been made. I can venture some optimism; a lot of progress has been made to date. Our work environment is very different from the one before the pandemic and before the virtual or hybrid meetings.

• (1250)

[English]

There are still challenges that we're facing, and we're realizing the complexity of the issue.

Sound quantity is easy to measure. It's easy to protect against and, like I said, we've had lots of success on that front.

When it comes to sound quality, it's quite complex. There's noise-to-sound ratio, artifacts and lag between the image and the sound. We're still learning a lot about that.

We've seen a lot of these hazardous occurrence incidence reports. You're right that they're growing, and they concern us. That's why we're trying to do more to learn about the phenomenon, to gauge the risk to the interpreters' health and safety. It's something we're still learning about, which is why we've sponsored research with the University of Geneva to learn more about the cognitive load problems or challenges in remote interpreting.

We've just published an advanced contract award notice for the University of Ottawa. We're working on doing a longer-term study with audiologists to look at the challenges that interpreters are facing with sound quality. There are specialists who specialize in speech perception in noise. We think that it's a really good fit and we will obtain lots of good data to help us do more to protect interpreters.

I hope that answers the question.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I would like to ask another question.

In your opening statement, you said that a directive...

I read in a media article that the interpreters' union had filed a complaint, because the problem had not been quickly solved and because the poor sound quality is bad for the interpreters' ears. You took that complaint seriously and you issued a directive. It surprised me to hear you say that the directive excluded work in Parliament.

We all know that the interpreters work with the committees and the House of Commons.

I have a copy of the directive issued by Ms. Bret, the Translation Bureau's director of interpretation and chief interpreter. The directive does not specify that interpreters can say that they are not able to interpret the words of members of Parliament in a committee or in the House. Personally, I see that as a problem. Actually, committee interpreters do tell us when they can't interpret because the sound is not good. So they are listening to the directive.

Ms. Séguin, you said earlier that Parliament was not included, but perhaps I misunderstood.

I am giving you some time to clarify that.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for that question.

The directive is in place specifically for departments and agencies. It's our observation that those who take part in remote events have shown behaviours that are a little less rigorous, and less immediate, than members of Parliament. We are actually very grateful to members of Parliament.

Basically, if interpreters do not hear what is being said, they do not interpret. From the start of the pandemic, management decided to give the interpreters the right to interrupt their interpretation. I personally am not a professional interpreter, but they remind me that it is very difficult for interpreters to interrupt the interpretation because that runs contrary to their code of ethics. Interpreters want to provide interpretation at all costs, even though it may expose them to problems with health and safety. It is clear to us that we

must give the interpreters permission to not interpret. We will have their backs if there any complaints.

As for wearing appropriate equipment, we are working with the administrations in the House and the Senate. We are very grateful that more and more members of Parliament are participating. I see the problem arise when participants are not using suitable equipment. That can happen, but the interpreters have permission to not interpret what is being said.

The unique feature of the directive that went into effect on February 7 is that the interpreters do not need to say that they are going to stop interpreting. We don't want to put the responsibility onto the shoulders of the interpreters. As soon as they notice that the speakers do not have the right equipment, they can simply not interpret what is being said.

● (1255)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I have to jump in quickly, because we only have five minutes left. Do we want to extend the meeting, since this is a very important subject and we have other questions to ask?

It appears that we do not. I know that Mrs. DeBellefeuille scolded Mr. MacKinnon and it's perhaps something that we should discuss further. I know that this subject interests us greatly, so perhaps we should limit questions to 10 minutes, for example, and allow people to speak once more a little later.

However, I am going to let Mrs. DeBellefeuille finish her questions and then we will try to hear from the two other presenters.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Respectfully, since this appearance is so important, if there are members who can't stay longer, I propose that our witnesses be invited back so we can continue the discussion in another office. If our friends and colleagues agree, I would like to conclude the meeting with one question and save my other questions.

Ms. Séguin, you said that you weren't spared by the labour shortage, which affects you like everyone else. I noticed something quite important. I know that in terms of providing interpreters, your priority clients are Parliament, the House of Commons, the Senate, and parliamentary committees. I don't know what's going on, but since I arrived in 2019, I've noticed that in all the departmental technical briefings, there are no qualified interpreters accredited by your office.

There was a technical briefing this week by the Department of Justice on the important legislation we're debating, the Emergencies Act, and I must tell you sincerely, Ms. Séguin, that I have never seen such a pathetic briefing.

There was no interpreter. He was an anglophone who was doing his best to interpret his remarks into French, and I found this extremely serious. My reflex was to write to some of my government colleagues to ask them how it could be tolerated that such an important briefing on such an important piece of legislation be given without guaranteed interpretation services by accredited and qualified interpreters.

I would like to understand what happened. Were you asked? Did you refuse because of a lack of staff? I'm focusing on this event, Ms. Séguin, because it's a very important piece of legislation, but I've experienced the same situation in other technical briefings. A public servant who speaks a bit of French and can muddle through is asked to do their best. I know it's not because the departments don't want to provide quality interpretation, but because they don't have the resources.

So I'd like to know where you stand in terms of your ability to provide quality, accredited interpreters to the departments.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you. I'll be happy to answer that question.

You've touched on a key point in today's meeting, and that's the pool of interpreters. According to the Translation Bureau's legislative mandate, priority must be given to Parliament, which includes the House of Commons, the Senate and the parliamentary partners. Given our limited staff, be it Translation Bureau employees or freelancers, since the advent of virtual meetings, which are much more frequent than usual, we have had to refuse service to the departments and agencies more frequently than in the past. We do our best to accommodate as many events as possible, but there are limits.

The other factor is that the departments aren't required to use the Translation Bureau's services. All services are optional. Parliament uses our services exclusively, but although we get the majority of their business, the departments and agencies have the right to use their own linguistic services or those directly from the private sector.

I think I'll stop there, since time is short.

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's now 1:00 p.m. I'd like to ask the hon. members if they agree to invite Ms. Séguin and Mr. Ball back to the next meeting. Indeed, there is a great deal of interest in this subject and a lot of questions. I, myself, have questions to ask. We have about 30 seconds left, so I'm going to take advantage of the chair's privilege to ask a quick question.

There have apparently been 230 incidents here in Parliament. How many interpreters do we have? That seems like a lot for such a small team.

• (1300)

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Those 230 reported incidents didn't just take place in Parliament because, as I mentioned, we provide services to all departments and agencies, to the Supreme Court of Canada, the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery and other clients.

This is serious, since 52 employees filed more than 200 incident reports. As I said earlier, there are reports of symptoms caused by the increased cognitive burden associated with remote interpretation. These include headaches and tinnitus. That's the type—

Hon. Anthony Rota: So there haven't been 230 incidents in Parliament. How many incidents took place in Parliament?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Mr. Ball, do you have that data?

Mr. Matthew Ball: In 2021, 14 reports were filed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: So we're talking about 14 incidents, not 230. I'm sorry if I sound surprised, but I am.

Mr. Matthew Ball: There have been 236 incidents since the start of the pandemic. In other words, there have been 236 incidents between 2020 and now.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We can discuss this further at the next meeting.

I will adjourn the meeting, but first I want to thank the witnesses and the hon. members for their patience.

At the next meeting, we'll pick up the discussion where we left it. I'd like to make a suggestion to the hon. members, and I would ask them to think about it. I like to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

[*English*]

As well, everybody can ask their questions, but perhaps we should look at having 10-minute sessions and maybe come back to it once we come back again. This way everybody gets a chance, and we can get things done that way.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your patience.

The meeting is adjourned.

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