



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# **CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS: THE CORNERSTONE OF BILINGUALISM IN PARLIAMENT**

**Report of the Standing Committee on Official Languages**

**Emmanuel Dubourg, Chair**

**MAY 2021  
43<sup>rd</sup> PARLIAMENT, 2<sup>nd</sup> SESSION**

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## **NOTICE TO READER**

### **Reports from committees presented to the House of Commons**

Presenting a report to the House is the way a committee makes public its findings and recommendations on a particular topic. Substantive reports on a subject-matter study usually contain a synopsis of the testimony heard, the recommendations made by the committee, as well as the reasons for those recommendations.

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# **THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON OFFICIAL LANGUAGES**

has the honour to present its

## **FOURTH REPORT**

Pursuant to its mandate under Standing Order 108(3)(f), the committee has studied the Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and has agreed to report the following:





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# LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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*As a result of their deliberations committees may make recommendations which they include in their reports for the consideration of the House of Commons or the Government. Recommendations related to this study are listed below.*

## **Recommendation 1**

**That the House of Commons Administration purchase headsets with built-in microphones and distribute them to members of Parliament and witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees, as well as to House of Commons, Committees Directorate and Library of Parliament employees who are assigned to House of Commons committee meetings, and that these headsets have the following features:**

- a) superior-quality over-ear stereo headphones; and
- b) a built-in microphone that meets ISO 2603 (15,000 hertz)..... 17

## **Recommendation 2**

**That, barring exceptional circumstances, the House of Commons and its committees give at least one week’s notice in order to ensure that connectivity testing can be conducted and equipment can be sent so all witnesses can participate fully in committee proceedings. .... 17**

## **Recommendation 3**

**That the House of Commons Administration adopt a rule stipulating the following:**

- a) that, during virtual or hybrid meetings, members of Parliament must wear a superior quality headset with a microphone that meets ISO standards or the equivalent, to be provided by the House of Commons Administration, in order to be recognized to speak in the House of Commons and in committee; and

**b) that witnesses called to appear before parliamentary committees must wear such a headset during virtual or hybrid meetings, failing which their appearance will be postponed or cancelled. .... 17**

**Recommendation 4**

**That the House of Commons Administration consider the possibility of requiring members of Parliament attending House of Commons sittings and committee meetings virtually to use a wired Internet connection. .... 18**

**Recommendation 5**

**That the House of Commons Administration ask the House of Commons Committees Directorate to emphasize to witnesses the importance of using a wired Internet connection when they appear during a virtual or hybrid committee meeting. .... 18**

**Recommendation 6**

**That the Translation Bureau adopt a broad definition of remote or distance interpretation, whereby an interpretation task is considered remote if one or more participants is connected and communicating through video conferencing software.**

**That, in keeping with its mandate, the Committee allow the organizations concerned to address the issues related to the working conditions and equipment necessary for interpreters to provide, at all times, a high-quality interpretation service in both official languages in a safe environment. .... 18**



# CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS: THE CORNERSTONE OF BILINGUALISM IN PARLIAMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the winter of 2020–2021, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages (the Committee) responded to the call of the Canadian Region of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC Canada).<sup>1</sup> AIIC Canada made it clear that parliamentary interpreters were at a crisis point.<sup>2</sup>

This sad state of affairs is partly due to the public health measures that had to be implemented to ensure that Parliament could sit safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a short time frame, the House of Commons Administration and its partners rallied to put together a functional virtual Parliament. When Parliament reconvened, it was in a hybrid format, combining virtual (remote, online participation) and in-person (physically present) settings.

While it was necessary to add a virtual component for parliamentary sittings and committee meetings in order to comply with social distancing rules, working conditions for interpreters worsened as a result. It appears that the technology used to connect participants attending virtually does not fully meet Parliament’s interpretation needs. The shortcomings of this technology have caused a significant increase in sound-related workplace accidents, which can damage interpreters’ hearing.

The current technological limitations not only are compromising the health and safety of parliamentary interpreters, but also could undermine the language rights of parliamentarians. Pursuant to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*<sup>3</sup> and the

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1 The Canadian Region of the International Association of Conference Interpreters is a national professional association that represents conference interpreters accredited by the federal government.

2 House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages (LANG), *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1835 (Ms. Nicole Gagnon, Advocacy Lead, International Association of Conference Interpreters, Canadian Region).

3 Under section 16 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, “English and French are the official languages of Canada and have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada.” In addition, section 17 states, “[e]veryone has the right to use English or French in any debates and other proceedings of Parliament.”



*Official Languages Act*,<sup>4</sup> parliamentarians have the right to express themselves in the official language of their choice and to be understood by their colleagues and the Canadian public. Canadians should be able to follow the proceedings of Parliament in the official language of their choice, without being put at a disadvantage.

This report is based on the evidence collected by the Committee over the course of its study. Its purpose is to make recommendations to improve the working conditions of conference interpreters working for Parliament. In so doing, the Committee hopes to help improve parliamentary interpretation services in the context of the public health crisis. It is a matter of fully implementing the provisions of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Official Languages Act* as regards the use of official languages in the Parliament of Canada.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY INTERPRETATION SERVICE

The parliamentary interpretation service is the result of an ongoing partnership between the Translation Bureau (TB, or Bureau), which hires and accredits the conference interpreters who work for Parliament, and the House of Commons Administration. As Mr. Charles Robert, the Clerk of the House of Commons, explained, “[t]he role of the House Administration in the provision of interpretation services is limited and focuses on the technical infrastructure.”<sup>5</sup> Specifically, he stated that the “House is responsible for providing the facilities and tools required by the interpreters to support proceedings.”<sup>6</sup>

Approximately 130 conference interpreters are qualified to work for Parliament. Of these, just over 50 are Bureau employees, and about 75 are independent interpreters with a contract to work for Parliament.<sup>7</sup> Ms. Lucie Séguin, the Chief Executive Officer of the Translation Bureau, specified that just over 63 interpreters are assigned to official

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4 Part I of the *Official Languages Act*—Proceedings of Parliament—outlines that all parliamentarians have the right to use English and French in any debates and proceedings of Parliament. It specifies, “[f]acilities shall be made available for the simultaneous interpretation of the debates and other proceedings of Parliament from one official language into the other.”

5 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1950 (Mr. Charles Robert, Clerk of the House of Commons).

6 Ibid.

7 Public Services and Procurement Canada, *Response Package—PSPC responses to Questions Taken on Notice—Standing Committee on Official Languages (LANG)—Challenges faced by parliamentary interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic*, 16 February 2021, p. 2. Information about TB employees is from January 2021 and about independent interpreters is from February 2021.

language interpretation, with 25 working toward English and a little over 35 working toward French.<sup>8</sup>

## **PREVIOUS PARLIAMENTARY STUDIES ON THE CHALLENGES CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS FACE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

In May 2020 and again in July 2020, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC) presented reports to the House of Commons<sup>9</sup> on establishing a virtual Parliament. These two reports included a number of recommendations to improve the working conditions for conference interpreters. As Mr. Steven MacKinnon, Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement,<sup>10</sup> confirmed, many of these recommendations have been implemented by the Bureau and the House of Commons Administration in the last few months:

For example, Parliament is providing headsets with an integrated microphone to members of Parliament and senators, as well as to witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees. These headsets improve sound quality and decrease health and safety incidents.

Another measure is having a technician present with the interpreters at all times and having sound checks conducted ahead of meetings.

Moreover, the Translation Bureau has reduced the length of assignments for interpreters working at virtual sessions without reducing their compensation.

The bureau has also instructed participants to provide written statements to interpreters in advance, as I have done tonight, when possible, as well as to use video conference to allow interpreters to see their facial expressions and adjust their tone.<sup>11</sup>

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8 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 16 February 2021, 2105 (Ms. Lucie Séguin, Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau).

9 House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC), *Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, May 2020; PROC, *Carrying Out Members' Parliamentary Duties: The Challenges of Voting During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, July 2020.

10 Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) is the department responsible for the Translation Bureau.

11 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 16 February 2021, 2030 (Mr. Steven MacKinnon, Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement).



In addition, “the Parliament of Canada, on the advice of the Translation Bureau, has replaced all of its interpretation consoles with models equipped with built-in sound limiters, which also meet international standards.”<sup>12</sup>

Mr. MacKinnon also said that the Bureau and its partners were actively seeking solutions and that they had established a research program to that end. Its purpose is to collect data on simultaneous interpretation in a virtual setting—specifically on hearing and sound quality, which is a relatively new field of research—to inform lasting solutions. First, the Bureau is collaborating with the University of Geneva in Switzerland on a research project about the fatigue and cognitive load arising from distance interpretation. Second, the National Research Council of Canada (NRC) is testing a new active sound limiter. As Mr. MacKinnon explained, “[t]his type of device can protect interpreters from acoustic shock and can measure their daily exposure to sound levels so that they can avoid exceeding the daily dose.”<sup>13</sup> Third, the NRC has shared its preliminary findings from an analysis of sound levels with the Bureau. Testing and sampling are ongoing. Fourth, and finally, the Bureau “is developing a hearing protection standard for interpreters” with the support of health and safety experts at Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) and external audiologists.<sup>14</sup>

The Committee recognizes that, since hybrid sittings and meetings began, the House of Commons Administration and the Bureau have implemented a number of logistical and technological measures to improve working conditions for interpreters, thereby improving the interpretation services being offered. As Mr. Stéphan Aubé, Chief Information Officer at the House of Commons, explained, “[o]ur priority is the quality of the environment in which you [members of Parliament] work and in which interpreters work.”<sup>15</sup> He added that the conference system used by Parliament “meet[s] the ISO standards respecting booths, interpretation systems and conference systems.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the House of Commons Administration is “working steadily”<sup>17</sup> to deal with every request from the Translation Bureau involving the health and safety of interpreters and the quality of interpretation services in general. He said it is taking measures “every

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12 Ibid., 2035.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 2000 (Mr. Stéphan Aubé, Chief Information Officer, House of Commons).

16 Ibid., 2005.

17 Ibid., 2010.



day to ensure quality, and to look after the health and safety of the interpreters.” For example, “technicians are on the premises every day for every meeting.”<sup>18</sup>

However, conference interpreters working for Parliament are still dealing with issues on a daily basis, despite the corrective measures that have been taken so far.

## ONGOING PROBLEMS

Between 11 and 15 January 2021, AIIC Canada surveyed conference interpreters employed by the Bureau.<sup>19</sup> The survey revealed that “[70%] of those staff interpreters who responded ... have suffered auditory injuries during the past nine months.”<sup>20</sup> As Ms. Gagnon explained, “[i]njuries were so severe many had to take time off work. Of those injured, most, 62%, have not fully recovered.”<sup>21</sup> The symptoms associated with auditory injuries include tinnitus (ringing in the ears), headaches, nausea and acoustic shock, which can lead to permanent hearing loss.

AIIC Canada’s survey also revealed that “102 incident reports have been filed to report injuries since April 2020, more than triple the number of injury reports filed during the previous 20 months.”<sup>22</sup> According to Ms. Séguin, Bureau employees are required to report all incidents internally, and the reports are then submitted to PSPC health and safety experts and to the union representing interpreters.<sup>23</sup> However, AIIC Canada said that “many TB staffers have given up filing complaints”<sup>24</sup> with the Bureau, because “little if any action comes of it.”<sup>25</sup>

Data provided to the Committee by PSPC indicate that, since 2020, “46 staff interpreters filed a total of 141 reports related to sound quality”<sup>26</sup> and that “15 filed a total of

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18 Ibid.

19 Of the 51 Bureau interpreters currently working, 37 responded to all the survey questions, which is a response rate of 73%.

20 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1835 (Ms. Nicole Gagnon).

21 Ibid.

22 AIIC Canada, *Distance interpreting during the pandemic: A survey of official language interpreters employed by the federal Translation Bureau*, 18 January 2021, p. 3.

23 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 16 February 2021, 2115 (Ms. Lucie Séguin).

24 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1835 (Ms. Nicole Gagnon).

25 Ibid.

26 Public Services and Procurement Canada, *Response Package—PSPC responses to Questions Taken on Notice—Standing Committee on Official Languages (LANG)—Challenges faced by parliamentary interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic*, 16 February 2021, p. 2.



30 reports involving a disabling injury—injuries requiring time off or an accommodation.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, as of 16 February 2021, two interpreters were on sick leave because of an injury related to sound.<sup>28</sup>

According to AIIC, the Bureau has hired more freelance conference interpreters on contract in response to this situation. Ms. Gagnon explained that, under normal circumstances, “freelancers are assigned to about 30% of parliamentary events, committees and the like, while staffers cover 70%.”<sup>29</sup> However, because the current working conditions have affected the health and safety of Bureau interpreters, freelance interpreters “are doing a much bigger share of work on the Hill, amounting to almost half the workload in November and December.”<sup>30</sup>

According to information provided by PSPC, the Translation Bureau relied on freelance interpreters less in 2020–2021:

- 2019–2020: 34% freelance interpreters vs. 66% staff interpreters.
- To date in 2020–2021 [February 2021]: 31% freelance interpreters vs. 69% staff interpreters<sup>31</sup>.

## WEAK LINKS IN THE SOUND CHAIN

As mentioned earlier, Parliament and its committees are still meeting and sitting in a hybrid format.

As shown in Illustration 1 below, when participants are on site, what they say feeds directly into the House of Commons interpretation system that was already in place before the pandemic. In more technical terms, the sound frequencies are picked up by the person’s microphone and are fed into the interpretation console, which then relays the sound to the interpreters. The House of Commons interpretation system works well, and problems are few when participants are on site.

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27 Ibid.

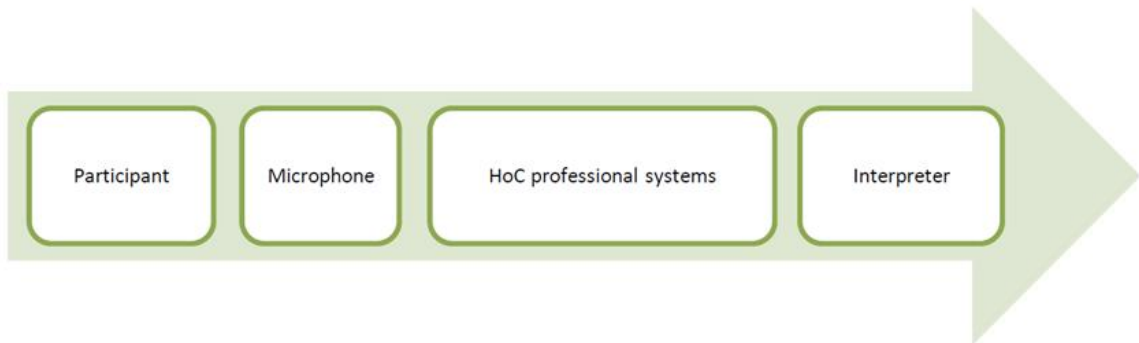
28 Ibid.

29 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1835 (Ms. Nicole Gagnon).

30 Ibid.

31 Public Services and Procurement Canada, *Response Package—PSPC responses to Questions Taken on Notice—Standing Committee on Official Languages (LANG)—Challenges faced by parliamentary interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic*, 16 February 2021, p. 2.

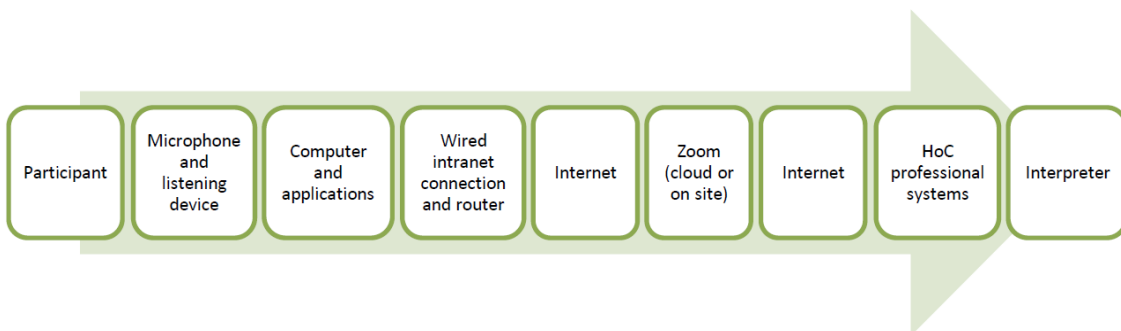
### Illustration 1: The sound chain of the House of Commons' in-Chamber solution



Source: House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 5.

The problem lies with the virtual format. As Illustration 2 shows below, when participants—MPs, witnesses, employees, etc.—attend a meeting or sitting virtually, their voice follows a set path, or chain, to reach the interpreters, and each link in the chain affects the sound quality. Broadly speaking, the sound frequencies produced by the speaker are picked up by the microphone on their headset, they go through the computer and the Zoom platform, which sends them to the interpretation console over the Internet, and lastly the interpretation console relays the sound frequencies to the interpreter's headset.<sup>32</sup>

### Illustration 2: The sound chain of the House of Commons' hybrid solution



Source: House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 5.



According to AIIC Canada, most of the ongoing technical issues with the virtual format are caused by three of the links in the sound chain<sup>33</sup> described above: the way the videoconferencing software application processes the original sound frequencies, the Internet connection quality of the person speaking, and the quality of the built-in microphone of the speaker’s headset.

## The videoconference software program

As mentioned earlier, a videoconference software program has been integrated into the sound chain for hybrid and virtual meetings. Strictly speaking, it is not an interpretation platform or interpretation software. That is why the House of Commons Administration emphasized, “[t]he House of Commons does not use Zoom for interpretation services. The House of Commons only uses the Zoom platform as the interface to transport the video and audio content to and from Parliament Hill, which integrates with existing professional-grade audio and video systems, including those used for interpretation.”<sup>34</sup>

Mr. Christoph Stoll, Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow with the University of Heidelberg’s Conference Interpreting Programme in Germany, explained why AIIC Canada has said that “toxic sound” from the videoconference software program is the leading cause of injury among parliamentary conference interpreters. According to Mr. Stoll, the videoconference software program alters the original sound frequencies produced by the speaker. These changes are behind the increase in auditory injuries experienced by parliamentary conference interpreters.

Specifically, the videoconference software program transmits only a small portion of the sound frequencies produced by participants:

Sound information that is lost in one of the links connecting the speaker with the interpreters cannot be reconstituted. It cannot be added later on. What platforms do to sound ... could well be a key reason why so many interpreters are being injured.

The spectrogram from the study shows how much of the original sound across the spectrum is lost through the Zoom platform that we’re currently conversing over. The

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33 According to the House of Commons Administration, “six variables can impact the quality of the audio transmitted from participant to interpreter: The participant’s internal network (intranet), router and Internet connection; The participant’s microphone and listening device; The participant’s computer and applications (CPU utilization is critical); The acoustic characteristics of the environment; The videoconference platform (Zoom) and the House of Commons’ professional interpretation, broadcasting and transcription systems.” Ibid., p. 6.

34 House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 8.

speech intelligibility was rated at 0.49 and 0.7 respectively for the two platforms. Those were among the lowest of all measured systems.<sup>35</sup>

Once the sound transmitted by Zoom enters the professional House of Commons interpretation console, only basic options are available, such as volume equalization between participants and treble and bass adjustments; the console cannot restore the sound frequencies that were lost. As a result, some of the speaker's words are inaudible by the time they reach the interpreters.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most videoconference software programs were not designed with simultaneous interpretation services in mind. As Mr. Stoll explained, "[w]hen interpreters speak, their voice overlaps the original."<sup>36</sup> However, the interpretation functions of these videoconference software programs "have not been designed to allow people to hear and speak at the same time."<sup>37</sup>

The loss of audio frequencies, which make speech unintelligible or distorted, paired with the inability to listen and speak at the same time—the very essence of an interpreter's work—means that "interpreters tend to increase the volume, which tires the stapedius and tensor tympani muscles, which mechanically soften sound's impact on the cochlea and the cilia of the inner ear."<sup>38</sup>

In an article published on LinkedIn, Mr. Cristian Guiducci, an accredited conference interpreter who works for the European Union, explained that Zoom has a "high-fidelity mode" that was introduced in September 2020. He said that it "enables a high-fidelity reproduction of the 'Original Sound' generated by the speaker's microphone."<sup>39</sup> Mr. Guiducci made the following statement about Zoom's high-fidelity mode:

One of its latest versions also enables MS Windows users to bypass Windows audio drivers and achieve broadcast-like quality with a 96-192 kbps bitrate. Zoom claims that this mode delivers a 20-20kHz frequency range, which if used would by far exceed the relevant ISO requirement [...]<sup>40</sup>

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35 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 4 February 2021, 1540 (Mr. Christoph Stoll, Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow, Conference Interpreting Programme, University of Heidelberg, As an individual).

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Cristian Guiducci, *I would normally trust a German expert* ..., LinkedIn, 10 February 2021.

40 Ibid.



The House of Commons Administration has stated that it will “continue to test and assess Zoom’s high fidelity and advanced features that reduce audio processing. Opportunities may exist in the future to leverage some of these capabilities in order to improve audio quality or speech intelligibility.”<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, the House of Commons Administration has confirmed that the videoconference software program currently in use has advantages in terms of acoustics, such as sound compression, and that it performs extremely well at delivering good audio quality, especially from locations in rural and remote communities in Canada, where high-speed Internet connections are not always available.<sup>42</sup> The software program is also compatible with “the interpretation systems and booths that provide interpreters with an appropriate environment in which to carry out their work safely and properly.”<sup>43</sup> In July 2020, at the behest of the Translation Bureau and the House of Commons Administration, the NRC conducted live testing of parliamentary events to measure sound quality and determine whether working conditions were safe for interpreters.<sup>44</sup> According to the NRC, test results indicate that “sound pressure level spectra measured during normal sessions had not raised any concerns with regard to the maximum levels that the [interpreters] are exposed to” and that interpreters “adopted a responsible approach and take very seriously care of their hearing health.”<sup>45</sup>

## Participants’ Internet Connection Quality

All the witnesses who appeared before the Committee agreed that the Internet connection quality of participants attending virtually affects the final sound quality that interpreters receive. That is why the House of Commons Administration “implemented a comprehensive review of connectivity services available to all members in their ridings and helped procure upgraded Internet services where necessary.”<sup>46</sup> It also reallocated resources to offer enhanced IT support to members of Parliament and witnesses in

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41 House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 10.

42 Ibid., p. 8.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 11.

45 National Research Council Canada, *Parliament Hill measurements*, Sebastian Ghinet, Yong (Eric) Chen and Christophe Légaré, Aeroacoustics and Structural Dynamics, Flight Research Laboratory, 27 November 2020, p. 10.

46 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1955 (Mr. Charles Robert).

order to provide timely, hands-on assistance.<sup>47</sup> For example, technicians can help witnesses test their equipment and their connection before they appear.

A number of witnesses recommended that participants be required to use a wired Internet connection. Wired connections are faster, more stable and less subject to interference than wireless connections. The connection is better, and sound transmission is better as well.

Mr. Stoll explained how certain types of Internet connection can affect the work of parliamentary conference interpreters:

They are sitting in excellent technical conditions with a professional system, but the sound is coming through a connection, like a bad telephone line, basically, that compromises sound to the level where you cannot really hear and speak at the same time unless you turn up the volume to a level where it damages your hearing.<sup>48</sup>

Recently, in a document submitted to the Committee, the House of Commons Administration stated that it will “continue to assist Members with the deployment of wired connections from their computer to their router and upgrades for Members still experiencing connectivity issues.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, “as new low-latency connection options become commercially available in 2021, the House of Commons will assess potential upgrades to support improved remote connectivity.”<sup>50</sup>

## Headset microphone quality

To improve the quality of sound that reaches interpreters and to make it easier for members of Parliament, witnesses and others speaking virtually during a hybrid sitting or meeting, the House of Commons Administration provides “high-quality headsets with integrated microphones.”<sup>51</sup> The House of Commons Administration has signed

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47 Ibid.

48 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 4 February 2021, 1600 (Mr. Christoph Stoll).

49 House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, pp. 6-7.

50 Ibid.

51 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1955 (Mr. Charles Robert).



agreements with a number of companies to ensure that headsets are delivered<sup>52</sup> to participants across the country within a 24- to 48-hour period.<sup>53</sup>

These measures are commendable, but it seems that one headset model being used—the EncorePro/Plantronics 310—does not meet ISO standards.<sup>54</sup> Its built-in microphone transmits frequencies only up to 6,800 hertz<sup>55</sup> for human voices, while the ISO standard is 15,000 hertz.<sup>56</sup> That is roughly half of the frequencies that interpreters need to be able to speak while hearing what participants are saying.<sup>57</sup> Mr. Stoll said that the sound quality of the aforementioned headset is comparable to the sound quality of a telephone.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, it is a mono headset (with only one headphone), which puts all the stress on one ear. As Mr. Stoll explained, “[i]t’s not suitable for interpreters and it’s not very good for listening either, because you’re putting load on only one eardrum and also on the rest of your hearing. Using both sides is [better].”<sup>59</sup>

Ms. Séguin was very clear: “Headsets with an integrated microphone compliant with ISO standards will ensure better sound quality and, therefore, a better interpretation service.”<sup>60</sup>

The House of Commons Administration recognized that “the quality of participants’ audio-capture equipment has a demonstrable impact on the quality of their audio output.”<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, it “is investing in the testing and analysis of improved microphones and listening stations for Members.”<sup>62</sup> As Mr. Aubé explained:

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52 Ibid., 2005 (Mr. Stéphan Aubé).

53 Ibid.

54 ISO 20108:2017 addresses simultaneous interpretation—specifically, the quality and transmission of sound and image input.

55 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 4 February 2021, 1540 (Mr. Christoph Stoll).

56 ISO 2603.

57 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 4 February 2021, 1540 (Mr. Christoph Stoll).

58 Ibid., 1610.

59 Ibid.

60 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 16 February 2021, 2055 (Ms. Lucie Séguin).

61 House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 7.

62 Ibid.



Most of the problems identified in the tests came from the equipment of those who were joining the meetings over the Internet when they were away from Parliament. I believe that 90% of the quality problems and their impact on fatigue are attributable to this.<sup>63</sup>

The House of Commons Administration is working in partnership with the Translation Bureau on this initiative and “will formulate recommendations within the next two months.”<sup>64</sup>

### Requirements or best practices?

AIIC Canada called on the Committee to recommend that the House of Commons Administration adopt rules requiring parliamentarians attending sittings and meetings virtually to use a wired Internet connection<sup>65</sup> and to wear a headset with a built-in microphone that meets ISO standards. These two points would become pre-conditions to be recognized to speak in the House of Commons and in committee. They would also apply to witnesses and employees participating in parliamentary committee meetings.

Currently, using a wired Internet connection and a headset with an integrated boom microphone is one of the practices promoted by the House of Commons Administration and the Committees Directorate. As Ms. Gagnon explained, “[p]arliamentarians wear their headsets now, but it took some time for them to come around to the idea.”<sup>66</sup>

As regards establishing strict rules for parliamentary committees, Mr. Eric Janse, Clerk Assistant at the House of Commons, explained that committees have several options. He offered an example: “The committee could adopt a motion saying that witnesses can’t testify without wearing their headset or if the headset they have has not been tested.”<sup>67</sup>

However, Mr. Janse told the Committee that witnesses “are often called at the last minute, with only a few days’ notice.” He added, “[t]here’s a complex process for confirming the appearance of a witness, sending the witness a headset, and all the other

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63 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 2025 (Mr. Stéphan Aubé).

64 House of Commons, *The Audio Quality of Hybrid and Virtual Proceedings: Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 7.

65 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 1850 (Ms. Nicole Gagnon).

66 *Ibid.*, 1855.

67 LANG, *Evidence*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 February 2021, 2020 (Mr. Eric Janse, Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons).



details.”<sup>68</sup> It can take up to a week to confirm details with witnesses and ensure they have the technical equipment they need to participate in the meeting.

Recently, the House of Commons Administration submitted five proposals to the Committee to “help effect immediate and significant improvements,” including recommending the use of wired connections for parliamentary proceedings and requiring all participants in virtual or hybrid meetings to use a House of Commons—authorized microphone.<sup>69</sup>

## MANAGING THE WORK OF CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS

As part of the discussions surrounding interpreters’ working conditions in the context of the COVID-19 public health crisis, the Bureau is preparing to review the working conditions for freelance interpreters. AICC Canada said that “in practice interpreters are likely to be overexposed to toxic sound from [Zoom].”<sup>70</sup>

The Committee heard testimony about working conditions that could affect interpreters’ health and safety, such as the number of hours of distance interpretation per day, interpretation team assignments and the official definition of distance interpretation.

During their appearances, Mr. MacKinnon and the Bureau representatives did not comment directly on these issues but said they would be addressed during the consultation process that was underway. In a letter addressed to the Committee, the Honorable Anita Anand, Minister of Public Services and Procurement, made the following statement:

Protecting employees and freelancers is our government’s top priority, and Public Services and Procurement Canada continues to monitor the situation in Canada and around the world to make informed decisions and implement the best safety measures for interpreters providing distance interpretation in collaboration with the Department’s partners at the House of Commons administration who are responsible for the technology to support Parliament’s virtual meetings.<sup>71</sup>

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68 Ibid.

69 House of Commons, *The audio quality of hybrid and virtual proceedings. Key Factors, Considerations and Recommendations*, submitted to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, 18 February 2021, p. 5.

70 AICC Canada, *Draft supplier arrangement leaves freelance interpreters exposed*, 15 February 2021, p. 1.

71 Letter from the Hon. Anita Anand, Minister of Public Services and Procurement, 29 March 2021, p. 1.

Minister Anand also committed to a “fair and transparent procurement process”<sup>72</sup> that takes into consideration the “views of stakeholders and the most up-to-date research related to distance interpretation.”<sup>73</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends:

### **Recommendation 1**

**That the House of Commons Administration purchase headsets with built-in microphones and distribute them to members of Parliament and witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees, as well as to House of Commons, Committees Directorate and Library of Parliament employees who are assigned to House of Commons committee meetings, and that these headsets have the following features:**

- a) superior-quality over-ear stereo headphones; and**
- b) a built-in microphone that meets ISO 2603 (15,000 hertz).**

### **Recommendation 2**

**That, barring exceptional circumstances, the House of Commons and its committees give at least one week’s notice in order to ensure that connectivity testing can be conducted and equipment can be sent so all witnesses can participate fully in committee proceedings.**

### **Recommendation 3**

**That the House of Commons Administration adopt a rule stipulating the following:**

- a) that, during virtual or hybrid meetings, members of Parliament must wear a superior quality headset with a microphone that meets ISO standards or the equivalent, to be provided by the House of Commons Administration, in order to be recognized to speak in the House of Commons and in committee; and**

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72     ibid.

73     ibid.



- b) that witnesses called to appear before parliamentary committees must wear such a headset during virtual or hybrid meetings, failing which their appearance will be postponed or cancelled.**

#### **Recommendation 4**

**That the House of Commons Administration consider the possibility of requiring members of Parliament attending House of Commons sittings and committee meetings virtually to use a wired Internet connection.**

#### **Recommendation 5**

**That the House of Commons Administration ask the House of Commons Committees Directorate to emphasize to witnesses the importance of using a wired Internet connection when they appear during a virtual or hybrid committee meeting.**

With regard to the management of conference interpreters' work, the Committee recommends:

#### **Recommendation 6**

**That the Translation Bureau adopt a broad definition of remote or distance interpretation, whereby an interpretation task is considered remote if one or more participants is connected and communicating through video conferencing software.**

**That, in keeping with its mandate, the Committee allow the organizations concerned to address the issues related to the working conditions and equipment necessary for interpreters to provide, at all times, a high-quality interpretation service in both official languages in a safe environment.**

In conclusion, the Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who appeared as part of its study, as well as all the parliamentary conference interpreters, whose excellent work, recognized worldwide, is the cornerstone of bilingualism in Parliament.

## APPENDIX A LIST OF WITNESSES

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The following table lists the witnesses who appeared before the committee at its meetings related to this report. Transcripts of all public meetings related to this report are available on the committee's [webpage for this study](#).

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
<p><b>House of Commons</b></p> <p>Stéphan Aubé, Chief Information Officer Digital Services and Real Property</p> <p>Eric Janse, Clerk Assistant Committees and Legislative Services Directorate</p> <p>Charles Robert, Clerk of the House of Commons</p>	2021/02/02	14
<p><b>International Association of Conference Interpreters</b></p> <p>Nicole Gagnon, Advocacy Lead</p> <p>Jim Thompson, Communications Counsel Canada Region</p>	2021/02/02	14
<p><b>As an individual</b></p> <p>Christoph Stoll, Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow Conference Interpreting Programme, University of Heidelberg</p>	2021/02/04	15
<p><b>Department of Public Works and Government Services</b></p> <p>Matthew Ball, Director, Interpretation and Chief Interpreter Translation Bureau</p> <p>Steven MacKinnon, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement</p> <p>Lucie Séguin, Chief Executive Officer Translation Bureau</p> <p>Michael Vandergrift, Associate Deputy Minister</p>	2021/02/16	16



## APPENDIX B LIST OF BRIEFS

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The following is an alphabetical list of organizations and individuals who submitted briefs to the committee related to this report. For more information, please consult the committee's [webpage for this study](#).

**Canadian Association of Professional Employees**





## REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this Report.

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* ([Meetings Nos. 14 to 17, 21, 22, 25 and 26](#)) is tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Emmanuel Dubourg  
Chair



## **SUPPLEMENTARY OPINIONS**

### **Conservative Party of Canada**

The Conservatives would like to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, staff, analysts, and witnesses who participated in the study: Challenges to Parliamentary Interpretation in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The pandemic has hit Canada hard and has forced Canadians to face new challenges. The House of Commons, too, had to adapt to new realities and operate virtually. The shortage of interpreters and the virtual translation of House of Commons sittings and committees have worsened the situation of interpreters and their health at work. It should be noted that since the pandemic, interpreters have been working in conditions that can worsen their health and affect the quality of their work.

Subsequently, the Conservatives believe that it is necessary to allow the committee and the House of Commons greater flexibility in summoning guests and witnesses. With modern technology and the quality of service we have with the Canadian postal service, committee staff have sufficient time within 48 hours to send and test the soundings necessary for the proper functioning of committees. Also, the Conservatives believe that it is necessary to be cautious about technology, such as microphones or headsets. Technology and computer techniques are increasing rapidly, and it is important to give administrations room to manoeuvre in order to remain flexible when changing equipment. Equipment such as headsets can quickly become outdated in the future and standards can also evolve, so it is important that the House is able to change technology quickly to ensure a quality service and to ensure the functioning of interpreting, but also for the health of interpreters. In conclusion, the Conservatives propose two amendments to two recommendations in the report: Challenges to the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That the House of Commons and its committees give themselves **at least 48 hours** to ensure connectivity testing and the provision of equipment for full participation in committee by all witnesses, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

#### **Recommendation 3**

That the House of Commons Administration adopt a rule stipulating

- a) a) That, during virtual or hybrid meetings, Members of Parliament must wear a high-quality headset with an ISO-compliant microphone or any equivalent system provided by the House of Commons Administration, failing which their right to speak will not be recognized in the House of Commons and in parliamentary committees;

- b) That, during virtual or hybrid meetings, witnesses called to appear before parliamentary committees must wear the above-mentioned headset, **or any equivalent ISO-compliant system approved by the House, failing which it will be up to the committee to decide whether or not to hear the witness without the appropriate equipment.**