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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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● (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 13 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to start its study on the inclusion of indigenous languages on federal election ballots.

[*English*]

Before getting into our business, I want to have the approval of the budget for the indigenous languages study. Are we all okay with approving that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That's excellent.

Mr. Clerk, please continue providing us with lunch. If the chilly weather maintains, some have suggested that soup would be welcome, but we know it's not easy choosing a menu for this many people.

Ms. Idlout, MP for Nunavut, is joining our committee today, as well as Madam Gill and Mr. Schmale. Welcome to our committee.

I will remind all committee members, new and returning, that I would appreciate all comments being made through the chair. When they are not made through the chair, I tend to have to interrupt. I would prefer not to do that, because our meeting is a very important one, so please be mindful that all comments for everyone go through the chair.

Today we have Mr. Stéphane Perrault, the Chief Electoral Officer, and his officials.

Mr. Perrault has asked for some additional time to properly acquaint us with this issue. I think that is absolutely suitable.

Mr. Perrault, what I will do to minimize my comments is to ask you to introduce whoever is accompanying you today.

I will turn the floor over to you. Welcome to PROC committee.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

This morning I have with me Anne Lawson, deputy chief electoral officer, regulatory affairs; Monsieur Michel Roussel, deputy chief electoral officer, electoral events and innovation; and Madame Karine Morin, who is my chief of staff and responsible for languages issues in the agency.

Let me start by saying that improving services in indigenous languages is, in my view, an important aspect of offering a more inclusive electoral process and reducing barriers for indigenous electors. More fundamentally, I believe that it is part of reconciliation. Although we currently offer information products in several indigenous languages, we are working to improve our processes and service offering. This includes the consideration of indigenous languages on the ballot and on a range of information products that can be made available at the polls.

Before considering changes to the federal ballot, it is important to understand the existing legal and operational ballot production regime. The design and content of the ballot is set out in some detail in the Elections Act, including a schedule that contains a visual image.

These requirements relate not only to language, such as the use of the Latin alphabet and the alphabetical ordering of candidate names, but also physical characteristics, such as a counterfoil and a stub, with lines of perforations separating them. These special characteristics mean that current ballots can be printed only by a relatively limited number of suppliers, and are printed and distributed within a very tight time frame.

While the name of the candidate may be in any language using a Latin alphabet, candidates must provide proof of identification when they are nominated, and this name is then used on the ballot.

For political parties, the party name appears on the ballot in the language the party chooses. There is no requirement for a party to have a bilingual name. Currently, there are three parties that have a name only in French, and one uses an English-only name. These names are not translated on the ballot.

Under the Act, the ballots must be printed in the very narrow window that exists between the close of candidate nominations, 21 days before polling day, and the very first day of advance polls, which is 10 days before election day. In large and remote ridings, getting the ballots printed and distributed across the riding in time for advance polls is already a significant challenge.

That said, we see four different options for the use of indigenous languages for federal ballots. Each option raises specific policy, operational and electoral integrity concerns that need to be considered by this committee. All but one of them require legislative changes. For ease of reference, I have supplied a placemat that reviews the four options and the main associated questions that they raise, mostly for Parliament.

[*Translation*]

One option would be to offer a multilingual ballot that includes one or more indigenous languages in designated constituencies. This first raises an important question about what threshold of an indigenous population in a constituency would be required before including an indigenous language and whether a cap on the number of languages on a ballot is necessary.

Some have suggested ballots should be made available to indigenous voters in their own language in constituencies where they represent 1% of the population. A bill to that effect was tabled. In practice, if measured by the mother tongue of indigenous Canadians, a 1% threshold would mean administering ballots in 17 indigenous languages in 27 constituencies, with up to five indigenous languages in some constituencies.

The use of printed ballots with more than two languages raises important questions regarding accessibility and design. Putting the names of parties and candidates in multiple languages on a ballot risks making a crowded, busy text that may be difficult for some voters to comprehend, especially voters with low literacy levels or an intellectual disability, as well as voters with a visual impairment. It would be critical to test the ballot design with user communities prior to the legislative enactment of this model.

Madam Chair, I've passed around a copy of a PDF document. This ballot was used in the constituency of Saint-Boniface—Saint-Vital in the last federal election.

● (1110)

Of course, this is an extreme example. Some ballots have only three candidates' names on them. That said, when we think about ballots, we must consider this type of complexity if we need to add languages.

A ballot in a language other than English and French requires the transliteration of candidate names and the translation of party names. Elections Canada isn't an expert on indigenous languages. We currently provide information products in 16 indigenous languages. We know that, for some of these languages, there are very few experts and that translation timelines are sometimes substantial. This significantly affects production timelines and the whole electoral calendar, which would need to be extended. Multilingual jurisdictions typically use other processes or solutions to provide ballots in the elector's preferred language. These processes include the use of electronic voting machines that allow electors to choose the language of their ballot. For example, this happens in the United States. Sometimes, logos or symbols can also be used instead of names to represent parties on ballots.

Another option would be to amend the act to allow for a separate indigenous language ballot. This option reduces ballot complexity for electors. However, it poses additional challenges with regard to production and distribution timelines. In addition, assuming that the two ballot options would be available throughout a given constituency, the secrecy of the vote could be compromised in places where members of one linguistic community are few in number. Having a distinct ballot used by only certain voters within a polling division could identify the voting choices of these voters. As a result, I don't recommend separate ballots.

[*English*]

A third option, which is a variation on the multilingual ballot, would be to pursue an approach similar to that used in territorial elections in Nunavut, where candidates who wish to do so can provide their names to appear on the ballot in the Inuit language. An amendment to the act could permit candidates to provide an indigenous language name for use on the ballot, alongside their name in English and French. Federal parties could also be entitled to provide indigenous versions of their names to be used on ballots in certain ridings if they wish. This would be consistent with the current approach, where parties can but are not required to have their names both in English and in French.

Although this option would remove the need for independent translation or transliteration of ballots, it raises other questions or considerations for Parliament. Candidates must currently provide documentary evidence of their name. Would this requirement be kept for indigenous names as well as for French and English names—two documents? If not—and I'm assuming not—would Elections Canada have to validate the transliteration? In addition, who would determine—the candidate or the party—which version of a party name is used in which riding? Finally, it is important to note that under this model indigenous electors would not necessarily be offered a ballot with all candidate and party names on the ballot.

The final option, which I recommend and which is used in some jurisdictions, does not require legislative change. Elections Canada would provide and can provide a facsimile of the ballot in an indigenous language for voters to use behind a voting screen. During the 2021 election, the last election, Elections Canada experimented for the first time with the use of a ballot facsimile, with the preparation of posters reproducing the ballot in Inuktitut displayed near the voting booth in all the polling stations in Nunavut. I've brought—and we've shared—copies of both the poster and the facsimile that was laid on the table for electors to see and to make the comparison. Despite some production challenges, we were able to produce the facsimile just in time for use at advance polls.

In consultation with indigenous communities, I would like to expand testing of this approach in other districts, using other languages, although I also plan to expand the deployment of information products in indigenous languages at the polls to reduce barriers and to ensure that the voting experience of indigenous Canadians is more reflective of their identity. This will allow us to become more familiar and agile at using indigenous languages in the voting process outside of Nunavut, which to date is the only Canadian jurisdiction with experience in this area. We will be able to work with candidates and parties to test facsimiles, including transliteration of candidate names and, where appropriate, translation of party names. We can also test out the timelines for the printing and production process.

In conclusion, Madam Chair, I understand the significance of this issue for indigenous Canadians and I am committed to increasing the use of indigenous languages in the electoral process, but I also urge this committee to consider carefully the complexities around the use of multilingual ballots. I do not recommend legislative changes at this stage, but to instead pursue and expand the use of facsimile ballots in other indigenous languages. This experience will help Elections Canada and this committee to take further and better-informed steps in this important area.

● (1115)

Thank you, Madam Chair, for inviting me. Of course, I'd welcome questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Those were great introductory remarks. Even with two interruptions, you stayed under 10 minutes. I appreciate that and the thoroughness of your comments.

We will now start our six-minute round, beginning with Mr. Vis, who will be followed by Mr. Turnbull.

[*Translation*]

Afterwards, it will be Ms. Gill's turn.

Ms. Gill, will you or Mr. Therrien be speaking?

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Will I be the first to speak?

The Chair: No, you'll have the floor after Mr. Turnbull. Is that okay?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Yes.

The Chair: Afterwards, it will be Ms. Idlout's turn.

[*English*]

Mr. Vis, the first six minutes go to you.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you to all the witnesses from Elections Canada today. This is a very fascinating subject.

My first question relates to special ballots or early voting.

In the last election, given the facsimile option, did Elections Canada accept special ballots, which I believe were written in Inuktitut?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I did not raise it in my remarks, but it's an important issue.

That's something Parliament would have to consider. Under the current legislation, we do not accept languages other than those using the Latin alphabet, so the candidate name has to be written on the special ballot as it is officially in the candidate nomination in order for it to be accepted.

If we were to have special ballots in indigenous languages, it does raise a question when we're compiling the results in Ottawa for the mail-in ballots that go to Ottawa in a national vote. Then we would be dealing with quite a diversity of languages and alphabets, so whether that would include the special ballot is an important consideration. In the last election, it did not. In Nunavut, we had only the facsimile for the regular ballot, both at advance polls and at regular polls.

The Chair: Just because this is a friendly conversation, that felt really good, but when the conversation is not so friendly it's always nicer to go through the chair. We'll do that when we're having a friendly conversation and not a friendly conversation.

Mr. Brad Vis: My apologies, Madam Chair. I took the red-eye last night, so right now I'm not as sharp as I usually am.

Through you, Mr. Perrault mentioned in his introductory remarks concerns about printing special ballots in indigenous languages. Given that it's already the case in Nunavut that ballots are printed in indigenous languages, how much of an impediment would it be for Elections Canada to have ballots printed in indigenous languages in that territory specifically?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are very different situations across the country in different indigenous languages. In the case of Nunavut, translation is available within 24 to 48 hours, and we probably could have the ballot printed in Inuktitut. However, this would require an amendment to the legislation, and the policy considerations that I raised would be there.

Would all names be translated? Who would validate the translation? In the territorial collection, in Nunavut, the candidates themselves put forward their name. The name is not translated; it is taken as is from the candidate.

There are a range of policy issues there. There's the ordering of names on the ballot.

This is feasible, but it requires legislation to set the rules around the ballot format.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Chair, through you to Elections Canada, I understand that after every election, and sometimes in between elections, Canada goes to the voters of our country and asks them about barriers to participation. In any of the surveys conducted by Elections Canada to date, has the language of the ballots been flagged as a barrier to participation by indigenous Canadians?

● (1120)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I can come back to that. Maybe my colleague has the answer.

I do not believe our surveys address the linguistic barriers for indigenous electors. I do not believe that is a category that we capture in our surveys, but I stand to be corrected by my colleagues. Unfortunately, we do not have that.

What we know is from what we learn on the ground in terms of serving electors in those communities and working through the AFN to engage first nation communities across the country during the election period.

We use different means to do that and we have a range of tools to support that, but I do not have data to share with this committee on this topic.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Chair, how much time is left?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Brad Vis: I have one final, quick question.

Madam Chair, if we were to have indigenous languages on the ballot, what section of the Canada Elections Act would have to be amended?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, we can come back with information on that. There are a number of sections that would need to be amended. They're not hugely numerous, but we have that information and I could share it with the committee after this session.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Chair, finally, on special ballots, I think with foreign voters that would equally apply to further amendments to special ballots being mailed in from another country. Is that correct?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, is that for Canadians abroad?

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes, for Canadians abroad.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Any changes to the language used on the special ballot would require a legislative amendment. It would also involve, presumably, some translation. The ballot itself, of which I have a copy here, has French and English on the back. I don't know whether we would want to translate that into several languages. That would create challenges in terms of ensuring that the right ballot goes to the right person. We probably want to keep it as simple as possible because of the diversity of electors we're dealing with for mail-in ballots, and keep the ballot as light as possible.

That would require changes to the legislation.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think I'm good.

The Chair: That's excellent.

For clarification, are you saying every language we would like to add to a ballot would have to be added into legislation?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The legislation right now presumes two things. First, it uses the Latin alphabet. Secondly, it uses the name as it appears on the candidate nomination supported by voter ID. That could well be in Greek, English, French or an indigenous language. There's no restriction. As long as the ID supports it, it's acceptable. However, the alphabet has to be the Latin alphabet.

The Chair: That's brilliant. I just wanted that clarification. Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, you have six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to Mr. Perrault and team for being here. I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you in person. Nonetheless, I have lots of questions, as always, and look forward to this study. I think it's a really important one. I was a member of PROC in the last Parliament, where this was suggested under some other work we were doing on Bill C-19, which was more pandemic-focused. I'm really glad we're returning to this now, because I think it's really important work.

Mr. Perrault, I'm glad to hear about your commitment to incorporating indigenous languages and increasing indigenous participation. I think we all recognize that those are not exactly the same. Indigenous participation is far more than just including indigenous languages on ballots. This is an important aspect of that conversation. Thank you for outlining the four options and for contrasting them with some of the policy, operational and electoral integrity challenges or concerns you have. I think that's really helpful. Your opening remarks were quite well taken.

I have three lines of questioning. We'll see if we get to all of them. One of them is trying to unpack the conversation a little in terms of the threshold. One of the options you highlighted in your opening remarks on multilingual ballots was the threshold of 1%, which I think is interesting for us to consider. I wanted to contrast that. I understand that in the last election, you already tried to incorporate supporting documentation in indigenous languages. Based on the work you already did in the last election, what languages were selected? How did you make decisions about which indigenous languages to offer supporting documentation in?

I think that might highlight how you determined that threshold or what threshold was kind of implicit in what you were already doing in the last election. Could you unpack that for us a bit?

● (1125)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes—

The Chair: Through the chair.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Through the chair.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely.

Madam Chair, I'll separate the two things. First, with the threshold we used, we were assuming that the threshold was based on mother tongue. It could be based on language first spoken at home, or it could be based on the written language that is understood. We may not have data on all of these criteria, so that is something we need to unpack to understand which threshold we use. For the purpose of today's presentation, I used the mother tongue threshold.

On the 16 languages we use, that has been built over time, based on Statistics Canada data regarding mother tongue. It also includes some more historical groups for which, in the past, based on demand, we have offered products. It's a mix of percentages and on demand.

I can't give you a clean answer. I can certainly say that if we were to apply the 1% threshold, the 17 languages I speak of in my remarks largely overlap with the 16 languages for which we currently offer information products. I think there are a few that differ, but they mostly overlap.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. Perrault. I appreciate that.

What other options might there be for defining the threshold? I'm interested in that, because I think you've talked about a couple. It sounds like it's related to capacity mother tongue or percentage of the population who speak that indigenous language. Are there any others you can think of that we might consider?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, it's a very good question. That's why we want to experiment further. I think we need to look at the threshold but also look on the ground at the demand and the capacity to offer translation or transliteration.

I don't have an answer today. I think one of the things I want to do in the next election is try to explore as much as possible, using those languages that we currently use, and see where we can go and where we find obstacles. It may be that, given the calendar in an election, some may not be possible despite a threshold. I would come back to this committee on that.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great. Thank you for that, Mr. Perrault.

Through the chair, you also highlighted, Mr. Perrault, ballot facsimiles. I thought that was a really interesting potential solution, which I think you highlighted as having a lot of potential. I'm wondering whether you got any response and positive feedback on that in Nunavut in the last election. Could you tell us about any feedback you received?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, we didn't receive very much feedback. We had no complaints about it. We had some complaints about a few of our items, for example a "Vote Here" poster that was not translated, which I think should be translated. We had some comments about that, but not about the facsimile.

It may be simply that people who live in Nunavut expect to see Inuktitut in documents, so I would speculate that it is something that is not a shock to them. They would expect to see that, so seeing it, they were happy about it. At least, they didn't complain about it, but there's not much we can say from that.

We learn about the processes in terms of our capacity to do it in that language, but there's a lot more that we need to learn.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Chair, I have one more question, through you.

Mr. Perrault, in your opening remarks you talked about "in consultation with indigenous communities" and testing this approach further. Based on a need for regular consultation and the commitment you have to indigenous participation and incorporating indigenous languages into ballots or ballot facsimiles.... I know Elections Canada has other advisory groups. Specifically, do you think it would make sense to have an indigenous participation advisory group that could also focus on this issue of indigenous languages? Do you think it would be a good approach to have ongoing consultation and communication?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, it's something that we are currently exploring. I've asked for a program review on how we serve indigenous Canadian electors, and that will include a review on how we engage. In that program review, we will be bringing on board some indigenous Canadians.

One of the questions we want to look at is whether we need an ongoing committee to support us, so that's part of the work ahead for us.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to chime in one more time. Do you have somewhat of a plan as to where you would like to see this expanding? Is that information you could share with the committee?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We do not, at this point. We're in the process of setting up the group.

Increasing the language in terms of the pilot project we did in the last election is something that we will work on in the coming months, but at this point I don't have much to offer this committee beyond that. We are getting started on this.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the people from Elections Canada for joining us today.

I find your comments very intriguing. I have hundreds of questions. I'll ask several different types of questions, so that I can pinpoint potential grey areas to address. You spoke a great deal about usage and you also mentioned the land. I want to know whether the choice of languages is based solely on these matters when it comes to the services already provided.

We're talking about ballots. However, in terms of voter turnout, the availability of information in people's respective languages remains a barrier. We're talking about 17 languages and 16 languages already included in the services provided. I want to know how many languages there would be, ideally, if usage weren't the only factor.

I also want to know why one of the 17 languages wasn't selected. At least, that's what I understood at the start of your presentation.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The number 17 refers to the 1% population threshold of indigenous people who should be served in their first language. This amounts to 17 languages in Canada. We're currently using 16 languages in our publications on identification and voting. Some information is available in 16 languages. These languages were chosen partly on the basis of population thresholds and partly because of previous requests from some communities.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: It's about usage and demand.

I imagine that this poses a challenge for you, given that the number of languages is much higher. Is it possible to serve the entire population in their mother tongue or is that unrealistic?

I thought about the facsimiles idea. It can work well in communities. Sometimes, more than one language is spoken, and sometimes only one. I'm trying to imagine an indigenous voter in downtown Montreal. It's a place with multiple diaspora communities.

How would things work with facsimiles? How many languages would be available in the voting booth?

I'm wondering what can be done, whether this model has limitations and whether, at some point, it will be necessary to find another approach in order to serve the entire indigenous population.

The Chair: I want to say one thing.

[*English*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Answer through the Chair, please.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Indeed. I also want to let everyone know that I'm very flexible. When questions come up, if you need more time, I'll give it to you. We want to get more information today. This is a very important discussion.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Okay.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, Madam Chair.

I think that all paper models have inherent limitations. Some governments in other parts of the world use electronic machines, which make things much easier. Just as you do on the Internet, you choose the interface, the language, and so on. In an electronic environment, the doors to accessibility are wide open. However, it's different with a paper model.

You must consider the feasibility, even in terms of what I consider the simplest model, the facsimile. You couldn't possibly produce a very large number of facsimiles. It would create confusion.

I don't have all the data. However, I know that a number of constituencies have five indigenous language communities, each representing at least 1% of the population. Even with a facsimile model, five language communities is a lot.

I don't really have an answer for you. If you really wanted to have multilingual ballots that included indigenous languages, you would need an electronic voting system.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

We need to look a little further ahead. Certainly, we're finding solutions. However, we can see that many things are already happening in this area. This is part of the discussion on electronic voting.

I have more questions.

Obviously, there wasn't really a consultation. You said that you can't really determine, although you could guess, whether this would affect voter turnout. How did you decide that it was necessary to take further steps so that indigenous voters could see, for example, the names of candidates in their own languages?

Did you receive any complaints or comments from all the first nations? Where is this request coming from?

We're hearing a great deal about the 1% threshold, but perhaps other requests don't relate to that threshold.

Is there a widespread call for this? Do people know that this possibility exists?

I'm asking because there are people from indigenous communities in my constituency. I know that some of them mustn't even be aware that this possibility exists.

I'm asking a very general question, again.

● (1135)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think, Madam Chair, that we've tried to improve the services provided to Canadians and to take into account Canadians in special situations.

In the case of indigenous people, the reconciliation process, of course, gives us a different perspective. A long time ago, we started to provide information in indigenous languages. We also have different programs that help indigenous voters at the polls. This was our first time using a facsimile. Of course, you and I both know that Bill C-309 last spring clearly showed needs in this area. It was welcomed by all the committee members. I wanted to conduct the experiment in Nunavut. I believe that, at that time, it was the easiest place to adapt and test a facsimile.

That's how we reached this point.

The Chair: Do you have another brief question, Ms. Gill?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Yes, Madam Chair. I had one, but I forgot it. There was a connection, of course, but I'll come back to it later.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Idlout, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank you for involving me in dealing with very important issues, and I'm very happy that I am involved.

We have good interpreters, and you have given me opportunities to sit on other meetings, which has been wonderful for me. We need to talk about our culture and our way of doing things. Thank you.

I have a question. We all know that elections are a human right in Canada. There is a Constitution, and indigenous languages are entrenched well there.

We have a lot of things to do in Canada. We need to deal with indigenous languages and deal with them importantly and properly, and we want to continue to use our languages and strengthen them. The Government of Canada needs to help us to strengthen the bodies of Inuit organizations to entrench and enrich languages.

Are you open to dealing with the rights of indigenous people? I'd like to understand what you think.

[*English*]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Certainly, I'm open and willing. I believe, as I said at the outset, that the presence of indigenous languages at the polls is an important element of making sure that the voting experience is reflective of indigenous people's identity. To me, that is a significant step in the process of reconciliation.

I'm not saying that everything can happen immediately. We need to work on this, but as I said, I'm committed, Madam Chair, to working on this and to increasing the presence of indigenous languages where I can. We'll learn from that and I'll come back to this committee. We'll see what progress we've made and where we can take it from there.

Absolutely, you have my commitment to that, Madam Chair.

● (1140)

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik.*

[*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᖁᔭᓇᒥᐴ, ᐊᓪᓚᑦᑕᐅᖅ ᖁᔭᓇᒥᐴᕙᕐᓯᓯ, ᑖᐴᓂ ᐃᖅᑯᔮᒃᖃ ᓂᕈᐊᑐᕐᒻᒪᒪ ᑳᒃᑕ ᐅᖅᐴᕆᖃᑎᐅᖅᑲᑎᓐ ᐃᓇᑎᒍᒃᓇᒪᓂᑌ ᑎᑎᖅᖃᑕᐅᕆᒋᐴᒃ ᑲᒻᒪᓂᒻᒪᖅ ᖁᒃᐊᒐᓇᑯᐴᖅᒪᖃ ᖁᒃᐊᒐᑦᑎᑯᐴᖅᒪᒃᓕ ᐃᒪᓂᑦᒪᐴᖅ ᖁᒃᐊᒐᒪᐴ-ᑯᐴᖅᑐᐃᑦ ᖃᐴᐴᒪᐃᒻᒪᑯᒻᒐᑐᐴᒃ ᖁᒃᐊᒐᓂᒃᓱᐴᒪᐴᒐᒪᑐᐴᒃ ᐊᒪᕆᒥᒪᒻᒪ ᖃᓂᑦᑲᐴᐃᑦ ᐅᖃᐴᖃᒻᒪᖃᐴᒥᑐᐴᒃ, ᒪᐴ, ᑖᒪ ᐃᓯᐴᒥᕈᒥᒍ, ᒪᐴ, ᒪᒻᒪᐃᑯᐴᒃᖃᑯᒃ ᓇᒪᐅᒻᐴᑐᐴᒃ ᒪᕿᖃᒧᐴᕆ-ᐴᒃᑯᐴᒃ, ᒪᐴ, ᓇᕿᒥᒪᒐᓇᐴᒃᓯᐴᖅᑯᖅᑐᐴᒃ, ᒪᐴᑦ, ᒪᖃᓇᐴᒃᓱᐴ-ᒪᖃᑯᐴᒃᑯ ᒪᖃᑐᖃᑐᖃᐴᖃ-ᒐᓇᖅ ᓱᐴᒥ ᑖᒪ ᒪᓇᐴᖃ ᒪᑯᐴᕈᖃ-ᑐᒻᑯᐴᒃᒪᐴᔮᑦᒃᔮᑦᒐᓂᒻᓯᒥᐴᖃ ᐃᖃᕈᐴᑯᒻ, ᒪᐴᑦ, ᐃᒃᒧᔮᖃ ᖁᒃᐊᒐᓇᐴᖃᓄᐴᒃᖃᓐᑌᐴᖃ ᐴᒐᒻᒪᒪᖃᐴᒻᒥᕆᐴᑯᐴᖃ ᖁᐴᖅᒧᒐᐴᖃᓐᕈᖅᒧᐴ ᑐᑭᐴᓯᐴᖃᑯᐴᒃᑯᑯᐴᖃ ᒪᕿᒻᑦ ᖁᒃᐊᒃᓇᖃᐴᖅᐴᖃᑯᔮᐴᒃ ᐊᒐᐴᐴᕿᐴᖃᐴ ᐃᖃᒻᓇᐴᓯᐴᕈᐴ ᖁᒃᐊᒐᐴ-ᑎᕆᑦᐴᖃᐃᑦ ᐅᖃᐴᐴᖃᖃᐴᕈᖃᒻᒥ ᔮᐴᐃᐃᕈᒻ ᓇᐴᓂᒻᐴᒐᐴᕿᒻᑯᐴ ᖁᒃᐊᒥᒥᐴᑐᒻᓂᒪᒪᒪ ᑳᐴᐴ ᖃᐴᒻᕈᐴᒃ ᒪ ᐅᒻᓂᖃᐴᑯᒪᒐᒻᐴᒪᒻᖃᐴ ᒪ ᓇᐴᒻᒪᑐᐴ ᖁᒻᖃᐴ ᐃᑯᐴᖃᐴᒃᖃᐴᑎᐴᑯᐴᒃᒻᒻᒐᓇᐴᓯᐴᒃᒻᒪᖃᑯᒻᐴ ᒪ ᖃᐴᒻᒐᐴᖃᐴᓇᒥᒪᖃᐴᒻᒻᒪᐃ ᐃᓇᑌᑯ ᐅᖃᐴᖃᑯᒻᐴᑐᐃᑦᒪᒪᑯᒻᐴ ᐃᖃᐃᐴᖃᓐᑯ ᐃᓇᑦᑐᖃᐴᒐᖃᓯᐴᕈᐴᒃᒻ ᑳᐴᐴ ᒪ ᓇᐴᖅᐴᖃᒐᐴᒪᖃᑯᐴᒻᒃᒪᒐ ᖁᒪᖃᐴᒻ ᖁᒃᓇᐃᖃᒻᒪᐴᖃᐴᒐᐴᖅᒪᖃ-ᑯᐴᑯᒻᐴ ᐃᓇᑯᒻᐴᖃᓐᐃ ᓇᐴᐴᐴᖃᖃᐴᒪᒐᖃᐴᑎᐴᒃᐴ ᓇᐴᐴᖃᐴᒻᐴᒐᒻᐴ ᖃᐴᖃᓯᐴᐴᖃᐴᒐᒻᒐᒐᐴ ᓇᐴᖃᐴᐴᐴᖃᐴᒻᐴᒐᐴᐴᒪ, ᖁᔭᓇᒥᐴ.

[Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:]

I'd also like to thank you for involving Inuit in voting. It was very impressive what they did in the community in Nunavut.

There are many people who do not speak English. We speak Inuktitut. There are many people in Nunavut who have to travel south for their treatment or for hospitalization. English does not work. We need Inuktitut. There are so many people who go south to get their treatments, yet they have to use English.

There are many people who went to Iqaluit to vote but were unable to. They were told to get out because they didn't have proper policies and procedures on elections and on languages. It's no wonder. When they're not in their community and they have to travel, they need to vote, too, but it's not allowed.

How can you, as the Government of Canada, help us with the proper procedures, especially for people who do not speak English? Voting and ballots are very important to Canada and to us. Our rights should not be ignored, especially when there's a national election.

Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: If you will allow me, our service model is currently based on Canadians serving their fellow Canadians in their community. Normally, at the local level in indigenous communities, we are able to find people who speak the language—that's where they come from.

I understand, however, that in Nunavut, a lot of travel takes place. People are going to Iqaluit, where there is more of a mixed linguistic community. We are generally able to offer language services in the language of the people, but it's not always as easy as when you vote locally.

I understand that when you vote in Iqaluit, you have to vote by special ballot, which is a complex process. You're voting away from your polling division. The list is not the list for other polling divisions; therefore, you have to use the special ballot. It is a more complicated ballot.

We have a service called CanTalk, which offers, for a special ballot at the office of the returning officer, translation in 24 indigenous languages. I'm eager to hear if there are problems with that service in Iqaluit and whether we can improve it.

I recognize that voting outside of the polling division and outside of your community involves a more complex process, which is the special ballot.

The Chair: Would you like one more question, Ms. Idlout?

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᐊ, ᐃᑦᒃ, ᐊᒥᓘ�Lᑕᓄ ᓄᐊᑉᑊᕆᐅ ᐃᓄᑦᑐᑐᐊᖅ ᐅᖅᓗᓘᔪᖅ ᐱᔪᐊᖅᑎᖅ
ᐃᑦᓈᖅᑎᖅ ᐊ ᑖᒃᑦᐊ ᐃᑦᓄᐊᖅ ᓄᐱᐊᕐᓄᐊᖅᓯᒥᖅ ᐊᒥᔭᑊᕈᓪᐊᖅᒃᑦᖢᑦᖢ
ᑖᒃᑦᐊ ᑎᑎᖅᑕᖅᑑᕐᑊᐊᑦ ᐊ, ᐃᓄᖁᑎ. ᓄᑊᐊᖅᑐᓐᓄᖅᑊᑊᐅᖅ
ᐃᔾᓪᑊᑊᑊᐅᖅᓯᐅᖅᑊᐊᕿ ᑖᒃᑦᐊ ᐃᑦᖅᑊᑦᐅᐃᑐᓄᐊᑦᖢᑦ ᐊᓄᐊ
ᓄᑊᐊᑊᐊᑊᐊᖅᓯᒥᑊᐅᖅ ᐊ ᐃᑦᓗ ᑊᐃ ᐃᑦᑊᐃᑊᐊᑊᑦᐸᑊᐅᖅᑯᓐᐅᖅ
ᓄᑊᐊᑊᐊᐅᐸᐅᐊᑊᑊᑊᑦᐱᑊᖢᑐ ᑖᒃᑦᐊ ᐃᑦᐃᑊᑊ ᐃᑦᓄᑊᑦᐊᕆᒥ ᑖᐃᑦᓄᖅ
ᓄᑊᐊᑊ-ᐱᒥᑊᐅᖅ.

[Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:]

Many Inuit in Nunavut speak only Inuktitut. When elders are ready to vote.... They're half of the population now. They're not enough.

Can you consider, as a government, helping Inuit elders by giving them interpreters? They need access to their language, especially during elections. Elders are important.

[English]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair. I certainly will look more deeply into this.

Obviously I'm not in Nunavut at the scene there, but I will be there this summer to discuss this very issue. I intend to travel there with other chief electoral officers of Canada at the provincial level.

My understanding is that there is generally service in Inuktitut at the polls but that this is not equally true in Iqaluit. I understand that. We need to see how we can improve the services there. If it is your understanding that it's mostly an Iqaluit issue, then I'd like to hear that from you.

My apologies; that was through you, Madam Chair.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

I think that this is a moment of reflection as well. When Ms. Idlout speaks, we get to understand her in English and in French, yet when we are communicating, she does not have that same ability to hear it in her language. I just want to put on the record that I am noticing this. I know we are taking steps as a country and as a government, but obviously we have a lot further to go.

Your insights are very welcome here today. Thank you for the information you always share. I just wanted to put that on the record, because I've not experienced this yet. Thank you for broadening my horizons, as well.

Mr. Scheer, we are starting with you for five minutes, followed by Ms. Sahota. Then it will be Madam Gill for 2.5 minutes, Ms. Idlout for 2.5 minutes, Mr. Schmale for five minutes and Ms. Romanado for five minutes.

Mr. Scheer, I will turn the floor over to you.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a couple of clarification questions.

The commissioner described the pilot project. I think you referred to it as putting up posters in polling locations using what I believe you termed "a facsimile" of the ballot, with indigenous languages and how that would translate into the ballot.

One of the practical concerns or issues you flagged about using these types of languages on the ballot was related to who would validate the translation. I believe that's how you put it.

I am just wondering if you could explain the process to validate the translation for those facsimile posters. Whose version do you take, or on what basis do you have confidence that this is the proper translation—the proper transcription, I guess, for lack of a better word?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you. Madam Chair. I think that's a very important question.

In the last election, when we did this, it was translated.... Normally we work with the translation bureau. They offer many indigenous languages, but not all, and we had to do the translation, basically, over a 24-hour cycle in order to get the ballots produced, printed and distributed.

The tight time frame does not allow validation, at this point in time, and this is something we'd have to discuss with political parties. These names were not validated. They are not official ballots either, so there is a benefit to that. It's unfortunate if there are errors, and we'll try, of course, to avoid that.

However, until we learn more about our ability to translate quickly and turn that around, I believe it is risky to introduce additional languages on an official ballot. This was a tool for assistance, but there was no time in the process for validation, either by candidates or by parties.

The Chair: Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: I appreciate that. I guess the point is that there's a different level...partially because the ballot requirements aren't laid out in statute, but also because the official ballot would have to be 100% certain. You would have to have an extremely high level of confidence that there is accuracy on the ballot itself, whereas with informational posters, you have a bit of leeway there. It's a bit easier to amend. If you catch a mistake, you can likely amend it a lot more easily than reprinting tens of thousands of ballots.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Moreover, Madam Chair, if we are late—this time around, we were able to arrive just in time for advance polls—with a poster, it's unfortunate. It's very unfortunate, but it does not compromise the vote itself. If we have to do a more complex ballot, we have to be sure that we can produce it in time for the advance polls. There is no way around it. We have to be certain about that.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: This was the first election in which Elections Canada used this pilot project.

● (1150)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: For a facsimile of the ballot, yes, it was the first time we've done this.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Has Elections Canada had time to do any kind of analysis of how the project worked, and have you drawn any conclusions from that, or is it too soon after the last election to accurately summarize how it went?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It was a fairly simple project last time around, because we were familiar with the translation into Inuktitut and we were able to do it in time. That was the biggest aspect of the test.

I think there is much more to learn as we try different languages and we see whether we have some space for validation, before an election, for example, of the party names, what names the parties want to see on the ballot and how they want to see their names reflected.

It was the beginning of an experiment, but there is so much more that we need to learn in this area.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you, Madam Chair. That's all I have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Scheer.

We will now move to Ms. Sahota for five minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I also want to say that it was really nice to hear Ms. Idlout being able to speak in her own language here today. That was an important part of the work we did at this committee many years ago, but there is more to do, obviously, because we are not able to have it translated back to her in her language.

That being said, I think it's important—just as the Chief Electoral Officer has said—for us to make inroads and take steps, because it's not just about voter turnout, although I do think in certain areas, though perhaps not in all areas, it will have an impact. It's also about including indigenous people and making them feel included in the process. It's about reconciliation, and it's about promoting the languages.

I want to know a little more about the phone service that's being provided in 24 languages currently. Does the Chief Electoral Officer know how much that phone service is utilized? Are there languages other than those 24 indigenous languages in which the phone service is provided?

I have found that perhaps the service is there, but in terms of when it is utilized in the ridings, the service isn't as accessible as we may think it is.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's a good point, Madam Chair. I don't have the exact number, but if I remember correctly, there are hundreds of languages beyond indigenous ones. It's a very large number.

However—and I don't have hard data on this—anecdotally I am told that there is very little uptake, so we need to look at how we promote the use of this. It is a service only at the office of the returning officer and at additional satellite offices. It is not something that can be made available at the polling places. It's for people who use a special ballot or who come to the RO office in order to register and who may need some assistance. At that point, we have the CanTalk system available to them.

It is perhaps something that needs to be promoted more, because it does not seem to have a lot of uptake, but I don't have hard data for the committee.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Do you have to go into the office in order to use the CanTalk service, or can you call from your home and be connected to the CanTalk service?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: My understanding is that it's available only in the office.

The Chair: Part of why I ask that you go through the chair is to provide the interpreters that break, for anybody hearing in a different language. As somebody who does appreciate interpretation into official languages and who is hoping to expand those, I think we need to be mindful of the work that our interpreters do.

Could we continue our comments through the chair, Ms. Sahota?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'm sorry.

Maybe first I'll just make a comment, because I didn't realize that service, Madam Chair, was available in my riding. There are many languages spoken in my riding, not to mention the fact that Punjabi is one of the most popular languages. I believe that as of the last census, it was the third most widely spoken language in Canada.

Many of these speakers have no idea that this is available, but there are a lot of issues. I think I'm digressing, not that I am here today to advocate for those languages being on the ballot or anything like that. I truly feel this is the proper first step to be taking.

Madam Chair, through you to the Chief Electoral Officer, first of all, I'm very confused about the language being used on the posters. According to my understanding, fax mails are faxes that are sent out, but you can correct me. That was always my understanding, so I was a little confused when I read the material at first.

Are the posters placed in each individual voting booth, and have there been issues raised in terms of people being able to follow these posters, or ballots that are wasted at the end of the day? Do you see that happen more in certain communities than in others?

● (1155)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Again, Madam Chair, this was an experiment in Nunavut. The requirement that was made was that we would have posters on the wall and another copy, which I shared with you, at the voting table for people just to look at, so they weren't using that.

I'm not aware of problems with that. That doesn't mean there weren't instances where the document was not available, but I've not received any complaints in that regard and I'm not aware of instances where it was not available.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Would it be more helpful perhaps to provide this also in the actual voting booth? I believe that would be a little easier for the person voting.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, it was on the wall and the intent was to have it also at the table of the voting booth where the electors were. The intent ideally would be to have it posted in the booth so that they could see side by side the ballot in Inuktitut and the regular ballot that they use to mark, that they use to vote, so that they can align them.

In Nunavut, with three candidates, it was a fairly simply comparison and the translation was fairly easy.

The Chair: Do you have one more question?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: No, that's fine.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

This might be more of a comment than a question. I've been thinking about the 1% population threshold per constituency. It may have taken a little too long to address it earlier. My own constituency of Manicouagan has two indigenous communities, the Innu and the Naskapi communities. These communities speak two languages that, while similar, are different. We've talked about voter turnout, which is one of the reasons for the measures implemented.

I want to humbly state an impression based on my thoughts. As part of the reconciliation process, this approach could help to keep these languages alive. The Naskapi people in my constituency represent about 1% of the population and they're really quite isolated. Perhaps this approach would help keep their language alive.

We've seen that, since 2011, the Innu language as a mother tongue has been in decline each year. Some very famous Innu people have relearned their language. One example is Natasha Kanapé Fontaine. We can think about what happened with the residential schools. Sometimes, Innu isn't even the mother tongue of these people. As part of the reconciliation process, I think that this approach could be a way to protect indigenous languages. I'd like to hear your thoughts on this.

I want to add that, although we're talking about the 1% of the population per constituency, when it comes to electoral redistribution, indigenous people deal with something quite random and arbitrary. I wanted to share these thoughts. I was thinking that all languages should be protected. I can imagine all the difficulties that this can entail. Yes, we have the turnout issue, but we also have the responsibility to keep these languages alive.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I want to make two points.

The first concerns the significance, but also the difficulty, of the threshold. This has been discussed, I believe. The data on spoken and written languages is fluid. We're talking about writing here. Written language is also important in this case. We need to establish thresholds, but it isn't easy. When we conduct our tests, we must work with the communities to determine their needs, beyond the figures provided by Statistics Canada, to ensure a qualitative aspect.

The other very important point concerns reconciliation. You spoke about it. We—and I'm including my predecessors here—have always considered that we're providing a service. We know that, in many indigenous communities, about 40% of the people don't want polling stations on the reserve. It isn't that we don't provide the service. They don't want the service. I must respect this wish. It's part of reconciliation.

In my view, increasing the presence of indigenous languages, not only on the ballot, but also around the polling stations, is a way to begin reconciliation. Telling community members that these are their polling stations will perhaps, regardless of the turnout or figures on this issue, lead to greater acceptance of the stations on reserves.

● (1200)

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Madam Idlout, about two and a half minutes go to you.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᖁᔭᓐᓇᒦᒃ, ᐊ, ᑐᑭᓯᐅᒪᓪᓗᖓ ᑕᒪᒃᑯᐊ ᐅᖃᓕᒫᖅᖠᕐᒥᒃ ᑐᐊᕕᓂᒃᓴᖅ ᐅᖃᐅᓰᒃᑲᖅᖠᖓ ᓄᓇᖃᖅᑳᖅᖃᖅᒥᕐᕲᐊᑦ ᑎᑎᕋᖅᒥᕐᓗᒐᑎᒃᓴᖅ,ᐊᐱᕐᒐᔪᒐᖓ ᐊ ᑖᒃᑯᐊ, ᐊ, ᓂᐲᐊᓯᒻᒃ ᐊᑑᖅᑕᐅᖃᕐᓇᐊᒥᐊᑐᒻᒧᓪᒪᓪᓂᕦ ᐃᓄᖕᑐᒃ ᐃᓅ ᐅᖃᐅᓰᕐᒃ ᓄᓇᖃᖅᖃᕐᓕᕲᐊᓂᒃ ᐊᖅᐳᒃᖅᖃᕐᕲᐊᓄᔪᒻᓪᒪᓪᕲᐊᒻᒃ ᐅᐃᕲᒻᔪᓪᖃᐃᒃ, ᐊ, ᓄᓇᖃᖅᖃᖅᒥᕲᕲᐊᑦ ᐅᖃᐅᓯᕐᑦᓂᒃ ᐊ ᑐᑭᕲᓈᖅᑎᐅᕲᐊᒻᔪᓪᒧᓪᒪᓪᒃ ᑖᒃᑯᕲᖓᒻᒃ ᐊ ᓂᐲᐊᕲᐊᐅᑐᐊᕲᐊᒻᒃᒃ.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

From my understanding and my reading, you have 12 distinct language families that are listed and that they use every election, or do they get retranslated every election? Inuktitut languages use different dialects. Are you making sure that every dialect is covered, understood and serviced to Inuit?

[*English*]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you.

Madam Chair, the question is also a good reflection of the complexities of the issue that we have to deal with. We are not experts in indigenous languages, so we need to rely on others, and in particular the translation bureau, to provide their expertise to support us in the documentation.

It's a partnership that needs to take place. It's not something that Elections Canada can deliver on its own. We will never have the expertise to deal with all the indigenous languages and the dialects.

I know it's true in Inuktitut. I know it's true in other communities where there are different dialects.

We have to rely on the experts and, necessarily, there will be a choice made as to what is the appropriate version or dialect used in our documentation, but that is something that involves the communities, the translation or transliteration services that we obtain, and us. It's a very complex issue.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

About elections, about ballots, the language itself in English is the same. They're giving the same messages, but it changes in the different languages. If you're going to translate it into Inuktitut, or into the Cree language or any other indigenous language, you need to understand that if Elections Canada is not going to change its style or procedure, it's an impairment...it's not proper if they cannot change the languages.

[*English*]

I don't think the English terminology changes very much between elections. If you are translating documents into indigenous languages, there wouldn't need to be that many changes to indigenous documentation as well. I'm just asking if you reuse the same terminology—for example, in Inuktitut—that would have been used in the previous election.

Secondly, to go to my next question, in your experience, what are the time frames for translating these materials, knowing that you've given us times when an election is called? Basically, the terminology doesn't change. It's only the names that change, so it doesn't sound like it should be that much of a barrier to translate these documents into indigenous languages.

● (1205)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, that's quite correct.

If you look at our information products, you see that they're stable. Unless there are changes to the legislation, we typically do not revisit them, or we may because we want to improve them, but most of the documents themselves remain stable and therefore are reused over time. Translation is not an issue.

The timelines, of course, vary. Most service standards are between 10 and 20 days, and sometimes more than 15 days, but that's for fairly long documents. As suggested by the member, that does not apply to the name on the ballot. Even the party name, if we can work in advance with parties and get agreement on the translation and transliteration, we can have that resolved.

Candidates names, though, are a bit of a different matter. It's a small document, I agree, but the time frames that we're talking about are not days but hours. In Nunavut, for example, on the close of nominations, 21 days before election day, in order to have ballots at the advance polls on day 10, the image of the ballot has to be finalized on the night of day 21. There are not an extra 24 hours in the schedule for that, so we need somehow to find the time to do the translation there and squeeze it in.

Inuktitut is fairly accessible in terms of translation. It's not equally true of other languages, and there is no time there for validation. If a candidate who does not speak the language does not have the opportunity to verify, we have to find out how that works in the process and how long we extend the time frames to allow this, because right now there is just no space in those 10 days for that.

I'm not saying it shouldn't be done and it's not possible. I think we have to learn through the experiment of facsimile, running the risk in a facsimile that it may not be available on the first day of advance polls—we'll see what happens there—and build the expertise to then come back and see whether it is appropriate, useful and feasible to include that on the ballot itself. I think we need to work through the experience.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Now we will go for five minutes to Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to ask a question to Elections Canada, through you, to continue on actually what they just mentioned a second ago about the ballots.

We talked about ballots on election day and the problems and concerns you have with timelines. Maybe I'll pick up with what you were talking about with advance polls and the challenges that would entail for the staff locally, but also centrally as well.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, it's very tight for advance polls, and we want to make sure there is time for quality control once the ballots are printed.

I have a time sheet that I can share with the committee of every step that goes into the production of the ballot. It's really by the hour. There is the first step, which is confirming the image to make sure it has the right names in the right order, that there are no mistakes. It goes to the printer. Then there is a sequence of events. I've shared, I think, the copies, but I can share actual ballots where you can see the stub, and that takes a fair amount of time.

Then we need to check to make sure there are no mistakes, and mistakes do happen. We have seen ballots that are misprinted, so there's a very rigorous process that needs to take place to make sure we do not have improper ballots at the polls.

I'm not sure, Madam Chair, if that was....

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, there was more about the timelines. I think the answer to that question is it's tight to begin with. It's even more challenging for advance polls.

Madam Chair, through you, did Elections Canada receive any complaints about people not being able to vote, since we're talking about mostly in the north, specifically Nunavut? Did anyone complain, or were there any reports or complaints about not being able to vote because of the current languages used on the ballot?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No. We mostly have communications in Inuktitut, but we have received complaints that some of the language, for example that bright yellow sign that says "Vote" with Elections Canada on it, unfortunately, is not translated. I think that's something we could change, because it's apparent for people in Nunavut when they see that. That's not in line with their expectations and experiences. It's striking for them, because they are accustomed to that.

● (1210)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You have lots of time to do that, and it's standard, as you said, with your other material.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, that's something we prepare in advance. It's a lot easier to improve the overall presence of indigenous languages in the rest of the material than it is for the ballot itself, which is very sensitive.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Madam Chair, Elections Canada, from what I can tell through the documents, does try its best to get a local indigenous person who speaks the language wherever possible. Were you able to fill all the positions in the north with someone who could speak the local language?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I don't have a specific answer to that. I know that in some cases we have to fly people in to fly-in communities because there's a lack of resources, but it is exceptional. I would say the vast majority, especially when you look at remote and indigenous communities, we hire locally, and these people tend to speak the language. I'm not saying it's wall-to-wall, 100%, but I think it is the exception.

We have an elders and youth program. It's something I want to look into. The uptake of that has gone down. The elders and youth program is one whereby we hire an elder and a youth to come to the polls and assist voters, including for linguistic assistance. It's a good program, but I think the uptake has gone down. That's something I want to look into.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That was my next question: Is there some kind of program available? You answered that, and it's building, as you said, and more interest is coming online for that.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes. We want to revisit what we're doing. We saw some challenges in the last election, and we want to understand how we can better engage with the community on an ongoing basis, rather than just during an election. We've struggled over the years to maintain permanent connections with indigenous communities outside of the election. It complicates matters in terms of hiring but also in terms of understanding their needs if it's all rushed during the election. We're looking into that as part of a broader program review on first nations.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Is that it? You had 20 seconds left.

It was nice talking to you. Thank you for interacting with me instead. You're always a great addition, Mr. Schmale. Thank you for joining us.

Ms. Romanado, five minutes go to you.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you, I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I have a couple of questions. One is with respect to deployed Canadian Armed Forces members. The Chief Electoral Officer mentioned the difficulty or the challenge if the CEO had to identify each individual deployed officer and whether or not they needed a specific ballot in an indigenous language. I just want to double-check with the Chief Electoral Officer if I understood that correctly.

For those who are deployed overseas who receive a ballot, I'm assuming it's a special ballot that then gets returned to Canada. Would that still be possible to have, since they're voting in their last electoral district or the one that they have selected? How difficult would it be to make sure they received a ballot, should they wish to have one with an indigenous language on it?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: They would vote by special ballot, and this is a blank ballot with a limited amount of information, like the name of the candidate. We would need to see how we could translate and keep the content as light as possible in order to have it as flexible as possible.

As I said, currently any language used is the language of the candidate's name as it appears on nomination, whatever that language is in the Latin alphabet. The issue is, if we open it up to other alphabets, how it is presented to the voter and also how it's counted back in Ottawa, with different languages and different alphabets.

We have candidates and party representatives who are at Coventry, at our warehouse, where this count takes place. The people who do the count are referred by parties, so it's not clear that they would be equipped to properly understand handwriting in a different alphabet. That is a challenge and a concern. I have to say that I have some reservations about using the write-in ballot in a diversity of languages for that reason.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

That is something we noticed in the last election. A lot of special ballots were rejected because of additional marks on the ballots themselves. Whether it was a cute little heart sign or a smiley face or something, the ballots were actually rejected because of the extra markings. This is something that would be a concern for me.

I have a question for the Chief Electoral Officer with respect to the candidate process. Candidates are required to collect signatures. In cases of communities with large indigenous populations, are they accepting the actual nomination forms with the various signatures with a language other than English and French in terms of addresses and so on? Do they have the capacity to make sure that, in terms of validation, the electors who have signed the nomination forms are in fact electors in the riding? I know that it often happens that if the handwriting is illegible, the local returning officer may reject certain signatures.

What efforts have been made in that regard?

● (1215)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Through you, Madam Chair, the returning officer has to be able to ascertain, as the member indicated, that this is a signature from an elector residing in the electoral district. The elector does not have to be registered, but they have to reside in the electoral district.

The returning officers are not equipped to look up addresses in different alphabets or languages. That is just the reality. Of course, there may be the occasional returning officer who would be able to do that, but I cannot guarantee that service offering.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

I have two very short questions. I'd like to know how many indigenous people are employed at Elections Canada in the higher ranks who could assist with respect to indigenous languages but also with cultures and so on. As well, what can candidates be doing to assist in this regard?

For instance, in my community often candidates will make the little ballot and show where the candidate falls on the ballot. We do that often in terms of our campaign literature. What can we be doing as well to make sure that we're using it as a teachable moment in our own communities and in every community, including all 338 ridings, to educate people—for instance, if I have a larger Mohawk community in my riding—and to make sure that I'm actually conveying that as well? I know we do that for other languages, but what can we be doing?

Thank you.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I'd have to give that last question more thought.

On the first question, in the senior ranks right now of Elections Canada we do not have self-identified indigenous Canadians. We have in the past, but currently we do not. We have a small number at headquarters, but they're not senior.

As we recruit returning officers—and we do have a lot of openings, if anybody is listening out there—we hope to hire, as much as possible, returning officers who are reflective of the communities where they serve. That certainly includes, in large indigenous community ridings, the hope that we can bring in some indigenous returning officers. We do have some, but again, I don't have official data on that. It's more anecdotal.

In terms of senior ranks, as I indicated earlier, as part of the program review we want to bring in some people at the executive level who are indigenous Canadians to help us in that program review, so that it's not us on our own doing this. There is an engagement with the communities, but for the team itself, we are hoping to bring in, and we are going to bring in, some executives with that background.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that exchange. We will now move on to Mrs. Block for five minutes, followed by Ms. O'Connell, Madam Gill and Ms. Idlout. I'll tell you who else later.

Go ahead, Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witness for joining us today.

The more I read the information that was circulated to us, the more I recognize what a set of complex issues Elections Canada faces in regard to ensuring that all Canadians are able to participate in the democratic process and cast a ballot in a general election.

When I look at the conversation we've had today and reflect on it, I go back to Mr. Perrault's opening comments in regard to the fact that you are currently offering information products in several indigenous languages. You stated that you were working to improve your processes and service offerings. The bulk of your comments were centred around ballots and having various indigenous languages on the ballot.

We also talked about the range of information products that can be made available at the polls. I appreciate the comments by my NDP colleague in regard to how some of those products probably aren't being prepared at the last minute, or wouldn't need to be prepared at the last minute, so could be readily available in a timely way.

I wonder, though, if you could comment a little on the processes, because the service offerings are different. I also want to know whether you're facing similar problems or complaints from the other territories or other remote indigenous communities.

Lastly, are you aware of or in conversation with any other jurisdictions around the world that might be dealing with issues similar to those here in Canada in regard to indigenous communities and the barriers we're facing during general elections, specifically maybe even the Commonwealth? Is there a forum where you are able to have conversations with other countries around these issues?

● (1220)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, starting with the last point, there are several forums. There are a few countries that share the same characteristics as us in terms of our first nation communities and political system. We engage regularly with Australia, which, of course, does have an indigenous community and does have some challenges. However, even there, their realities are different.

I would say the same thing in regard to Canada. Even within the country, the realities and the challenges faced by the different indigenous communities are vastly different. We talked a lot about Nunavut, but Nunavut is a jurisdiction where there is a large predominant population that uses Inuktitut. It's an official language. There are expectations. There's an alertness to the issue of language in Nunavut that results in complaints that we're not necessarily seeing elsewhere. That doesn't mean there shouldn't be products made available, of course, but the reaction varies considerably, as does our ability to provide products. It's hard to find, even within Canada, a "one size fits all" approach—which I don't think is where we want to go—and even more so at the international level.

I'm not sure if I captured the full question. I think there might have been a question on the service offering, and I'm happy to speak to that if that's the desire of the member.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much.

Through you, Madam Chair, I would just go back to my earlier intervention, where I was focusing more on improving your processes.

Given the testimony you've just given, is Elections Canada being proactive in identifying some of the issues that might exist in parts of the country other than Nunavut, that perhaps don't have that readily available acknowledgement or knowledge of what needs to take place when it comes to Elections Canada and the kinds of communication that are available to those communities?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

That's why we want to look at how we can engage those communities on an ongoing basis. It's to get a better understanding of those needs and those realities, which we do not have right now.

The first step is to build the capacity to engage better on an ongoing basis in order to have a better view of the needs. There are things that we know, of course, and language is one. We work with the AFN, and the AFN has identified that as a significant barrier, so that's an important area.

The other important area that we know about is advance polls. We've increased the offering of advance polls over the years in urban and semi-urban Canada, but the offering has not increased in remote communities. We need to be able to offer more flexible options. As I said in my last appearance, we could have a single day of advance polling in remote communities. Where it's a very small community, we can't hire for three or four days, but we can for one, so there's a lot more flexibility in the services at advance polls, to avoid the rigidity of having a single day of voting that may not be suitable for everyone in that community.

These are the things we're looking at right now. We can make improvements on that fairly rapidly, but in the longer term it's building the relationships and building the engagement capacity so that we can better understand the needs and realities.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Block.

Ms. O'Connell, you have five minutes.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. My questions will be through you to the witnesses.

Thanks so much for being here. I want to follow up on a couple of issues that were raised by my colleagues. You touched on ballot translation. We've talked a lot about it, but what is stopping you in this time—in between elections—from having already produced those voting signs and whatnot? Even in minority governments, you have years, in a lot of cases, so why are they not yet produced, if that was something you heard?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I think there's a misunderstanding. They are produced. They are electronically available right now. We have PDFs of all of these documents, and if we need to alter them in some way, we can do that at any time. This is not about waiting until the election.

When the election kicks off—leaving aside the ballot here—these documents are made available to community relations officers, who work locally to see which products are suited to the community—

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: I'm sorry, Madam Chair. I have limited time. I don't mean to interrupt.

Madam Chair, through you, when were they produced? If they weren't available in the last election.... For example, there's the voting sign that you acknowledged caused some feedback.

When were they produced, and in how many languages?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'll clarify. We have essentially two main products, Madam Chair, in 16 languages. They are the voter identification rolls and the "ways to vote" products. Not everything is in 16 languages. The voting signs are not and, as I indicated, that's an area that I would like to improve.

There are more products that we can work on.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

Again, Madam Chair, what is your timeline to produce the materials that aren't translated? Again, we're out of an election, and that was specific feedback that you heard.

What are the timelines to produce the materials that aren't translated?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We'll have to decide which languages, among the many, we are going to do this in, to begin with. There's the translation time and the production of the physical material time. It's not extremely long. This is something that we can do.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Again, Madam Chair, that's my question. What's your timeline to do it?

If you're deciding.... I don't understand. I understand production time. Even in elections, we have a short window and I have to print materials and things like that, but this was an area that was raised.

How long will it take for Elections Canada to determine these other materials? What languages are you going to produce them in, and then what is the print time, so that, should an election be called at any moment, you have these materials?

My colleague made the point that there are certain materials that do not change—outside of ballots—every year. In what timeline will you have those materials in specific regions that need them? When will you make the determination of the languages? When will they be printed and ready to go to be shipped out at a moment's notice of an election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I don't have the answer to that, specifically. As I said, I have a team that's being set up to look at a range of issues. This will be one of the issues that they will be looking at.

I don't expect that it will take an extraordinary amount of time to decide which will be the priority products and the priority languages, but they will evolve over time. What we have if there's an election next fall may be different from what we have if there's an election in 2025.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to have some timelines communicated back to this committee. If you have a team coming forward.... I'm going to use that "vote" sign. I don't see why an election next fall versus an election in three years would change the timelines around the production of a "vote" sign, but I'm going to leave that there, because I think the point is made.

Elections Canada has additional panels set up. In terms of these committees or this panel, first, are you going to set up a formal panel, Madam Chair? Secondly, what is going to be constituted in this?

We look at things like the situation in Kenora, and what specifically happened there. You touched on advance polls, but Elections Canada has already had some flexibility in having advance polls. They weren't always executed or taken in the last election. In one of the media responses...and I think even in your last testimony before this committee, you said that you weren't aware of those issues at the time. It seems like there's no rapid response team to be able to address it in a riding or a polling station and feed it up to somebody in such a way that it can actually be addressed before election day.

Is this going to be part of any look ahead? Are you going to do town halls in these communities to find out what the issues were?

I promise I'm wrapping up, Madam Chair.

What I've heard a lot today is that you "haven't heard that yet". I'm wondering if you are going to go there to speak to the people who have been impacted.

● (1230)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, many points have been raised here, and I'm not sure I have them all down.

Rapid response is an important issue, as is understanding when to brief up to headquarters and the CEO. I'm doing regional meetings across the country starting next week and in all of May. It is one of the topics I'll be discussing with returning officers. We need to make sure we understand clearly what the issues are that need to be briefed up.

The issue in Kenora was partly that problem—that there was no briefing up and we were not aware—and partly a problem of planning. We need to plan in advance, not just responsively, Madam Chair, for those single days of advance polls. Normally, it's four days. The legislation was changed just before the previous election.

Our focus in this election was on pandemic measures, but we need to look at how we can use that, not just responsively when there's an issue, but in a planned way to increase advance polls and reduce the necessity of making last-minute changes, which are so problematic.

It's a two-track answer, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that exchange.

Mr. Fergus, thank you for sharing your time with Ms. O'Connell.

I think you're right; there are two tracks. You have the things that are not going to change. The "vote today" is a sign that's been around since...I'm not even sure how long, but I've always seen it. We can be prepared for some things. With other things that change, I can understand where the challenge would occur. That's just an understanding of things that don't change. Have we started planning to get those prepared? Maybe we're planning on saying something other than "vote today" at some point, which I don't see us doing, but maybe there's a different vision.

That was a very thorough and exciting exchange. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will ask two final questions. I would like to ask more, but I only have time for two.

My first question will be about thresholds.

We talked about the 1% threshold. We'll see how the pilot projects and consultations go, but I'd like to know if it would be possible to include people who are relearning their language in that 1%. These would be people for whom the language is not their first language, but who say they are learning it.

Would this be possible?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I don't think so, Madam Chair. I'm not even sure that Statistics Canada has that data.

The problem is access to sources. We have data from Statistics Canada for certain categories, but those are not there.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: They don't exist.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's right.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: That's fine.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There is the matter of the threshold, but also the matter of maximum languages, as I mentioned earlier. If five languages meet the threshold, should we include all five languages?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I would like to ask another question, Mr. Perreault. I only have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Go ahead.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: We are talking about the quantitative aspect, but you said that there was also the qualitative aspect. I would like to know what these qualitative criteria are that you were referring to.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: All this shows the need for discussions outside of election periods. These are not things that can be decided within an electoral calendar. Returning officers need to be able to have conversations with community representatives to understand their needs in advance, in order to prepare for this.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: If we talk about quantity and add quality to it, then it also changes that 1% figure.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes. I'm using the 1% as a barometer, because it was in a bill. I mention it to provide a frame of reference.

● (1235)

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Yes.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I refer to it also as it tends to reflect quite closely the languages we use in our information materials. I'm not saying that we will necessarily use this criterion for pilot projects.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

The Chair: Do you have any other questions?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I have finished. Thank you.

The Chair: As you can see, I always give you time, because you ask good questions. We also want to get good answers.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: You are very generous, Madam Chair. I think I've gone over my time on a few occasions.

Thank you.

The Chair: You're welcome.

We'll continue with Ms. Idlout.

[*English*]

You have two and a half minutes, give or take. Please take your opportunity.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᐃ,ᖅᐳ�'t ᒪᒍ, ᐃᑉᓯᐊᐳᑕ'ᖅ, ᐋᒪ, ᐅᒍᐊ ᐅᖅᑲ˙ᖦᖅᠵᠠᠵ ᑕᒍᔪᑐ ᠵᠠᠵᐤ ᒍᑕᓐᐃ, ᐳᑎᒃ, ᑲᒪᖦᐱᕐᑭᒃ, 170 ᐅᖅᐳᕐ˙ᖦᖠᖁ˙ᖮ ᐊᑐᖁᑐᒃ, ᑕᖁᔪᖁ ᐅᐊᖁᖁᖁᑦ ᖅᖅᖅᖠᑕᐅᑦᖦᖦᑦ, ᐋᒪ,ᐊ, ᖅᖁᖁᒥᐃᑐᑦ ᐱᖅᖟᕐᐱᓭᐳᑐᖦᖠᖦᖠᖁᖟᑦ ᑲᖟᠵᐅᖿᖿᖦᑦ ᐊᑐᖁᖁᖿ ᠵᠠᖁ ᖿᖧᠵᖿᖿᖧᠵᖟ, ᐋᒪ, ᐅᖅᐳᕐᖅᠵᠠᖿ ᐊᒥᐅᖁᖟᖁᖟᖦᑦᖁᑕᖟᖦᖟᖦᖦᠵᐳᖟᖦᖦᖦᖿᖦᖿᖦᖁᖦᖟᖁᖁᖿᑦ, ᐊᒪᠵᐳᖁᖦᖿ ᖁᖿᖁᖦᖿ ᐊᖿᖦᖿᑐᑎᠵᖦᖦᖁᖿᖿᖁᖁᠵᖦᖟᖁᖦᖿ, ᖅᖁᖟᑕ ᑐᑏᖦᖦᖦᖿᖟᖁᖿ ᖃᖦᖿ ᐃᑲᖦᖿᑐᐃᓂᐊᐳᖁᖿ ᐊᖿᖟᖁᖿᖟᖦᑦ ᐅᖅᐳᕐᖦᖿᑦ ᠵᠠᖁᖿᖦᖿᖦᖿᖟᖦᖿᑕᑕᖦᑦᖿᑦ

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

In looking at these communities, 170 different languages are being used. It's clear that we use our language strongly.

Colonialism has a big share of the blame. It destroyed our language. We lost our language. I'm asking you how you can get help to revitalize indigenous languages and Inuit languages?

To revitalize them, how can you help us? This language of ours, Inuktitut, is very precious and important to us, and we do not want to lose it.

[*English*]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the weight of those words. I think that obviously Elections Canada has a limited impact, in the sense that it will take efforts by many institutions working together to revitalize that, but I do think that, symbolically, having indigenous languages used around the political process, around the electoral process, is important.

It was mentioned, I think, by another member. It means that these languages have political weight. It means that indigenous people are welcome in their language in the political community, and that's why I say it's at the core of reconciliation.

Ms. Lori Idlout: What do you need?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Well, as I said, I'm looking to improve and to expand. I think I have the tools right now in the legislation, in terms of doing the facsimile. I think that from there we'll need to learn about capacity, translation and turnaround for production, and report back to this committee and see how it was received—whether the members of the community appreciate it or want something different from what we're doing, and whether it's feasible.

It's the beginning, quite frankly, in that regard. We have to accept that we know little and that there's a lot to do. Our role is to begin that process and to come back to this committee with more information.

The Chair: Ms. Idlout, I'd like you to know that the next Conservative slot has been given to you. You have five additional minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᖅᑰᖁᖁᖮᖁ, ᐊᑐᐊᖁᖁ ᖅᑰᖁᖁᖅᐸᖁᖁᐸᑲ, ᐊᖁ, ᐊᐱᖅᑕᐅᐳ ᐅᖁᖦᖦᖁᖠᖦᖿᖟᐳᖁᖦᖿᖕᖿᖕᖕᖿᖿ ᐊᐱᖁᖁᒪᑕᒪᒪᒪ ᐅᖁ ᑐᑲᖁᐅᖦᖦᐱᐅᖟᖟ ᠵᐳᠵ ᐊ ᖁᖟᐊᐳᑐᖟᖁᑐᐅᐃ ᒪᖁᖁᑦ ᒪᒍᑐᐃᖟ ᐃᖁᖁᐃᖟ ᖃᖁ ᐱᖟᖁᖿ ᑲᖁᔪᖟ˙ᖮᖿᖿ᠙ᑕ ᖃᖿ ᐅᖁᖦᖦᑐᖦᖿᖟᖁᖿᖿ᠙ᖕᑎᖅᑲᑦ ᖅᖟᖿ᠙ᐃᐅᖿᖁᖁᐳᑕ ᑕᖦᑲᖦᐊ ᠵᐤ ᐅᐃᐋᖦᐸᖁ ᐃᖁᐊᖁᖿ ᐊᐳᖟᖟ ᐊᖿᖟᖦᖟᖟ ᐅᖁᖦᖦᖦᖟᖟᖟ ᐱᖁᖦᖦᖦᖟᖟᖟ ᑕᒪᐃᖁᖁᖕᖕ ᐃᖁᐃᖟ ᐊᑕᖁᐱᖁᖕᖕᖁᖁᖕᖕ ᐅᖁᖦᖦᖿᖿᖟᖁᑦ ᐱᖦᖿᖁᖟᖿᖟᖟᑦ ᖃᖿᖁ ᐅᖦᖦᐱᖦᖿᖁᖁᖿᖁᖿᖦᐳᖁᖕ ᖃᖁᖦ ᑲᖟᖟᖁᖕᖕᖁᖁ ᐊᖦᖠᖟ ᖃᖟ ᠵᐅᖁᖿᖦᖟᖁᖕᖕᖟᖁᖦᖦᖿᖟᖕᖕᖟᖟ ᖃᖁᖁ ᒪᖁᖁᑐᐃᖟ ᐃᐋᖁᖟᖟᖟ ᐱᖟᖟᐊᖟᖿᐊ ᐱᖁᐊᐱᖿᖦᖦᑲᐳᖟᖟᑦ

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

I have a question for you. It is the first time I've heard about electoral issues. How can we help each other to handle our responsibilities for elections? We Inuit and indigenous peoples look very carefully at issues. Can you please tell me more about how you can help to communicate to the indigenous peoples of Canada instead of them not being heard, especially about elections?

[*English*]

● (1240)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, as much as I don't like to do this, I'll turn the question around: How can you help me? How can you convey to me the challenges that your communities face? How can you be the voice of those communities in terms of their experience?

I'm sitting here in Gatineau and Ottawa. I don't have this daily experience, and I'm not there on polling day at the polls. I have staff there.

I think you're right. We need to hear from the communities. As elected representatives in particular, your experience is critical for us to understand how we can improve.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᖅᑲᓐᓇᒥᑦ, ᐊᐱᕆᖅᑲᐅᔪᕋ, ᐊᐱᕆᔪᒪᓪᓚᕆᐊᖃᒻᖅ ᐅᖃᕆᐊᖅᑲᐅᒻᒪᑦ ᐊᓕ ᐱᓕᕆᐊᖅᑳᖅᓕᒻᒪᑦ ᐱᐊᕆᔭᕐᑎᖅᑳᖅᓕᒻᒪᑦ (ᖅᓗᖃᓐᐅᖅᑐᖅ ᐳᕈᒻᒥᕐ ᐃᓐᑐᕐ ᐊ ᒍᕐᒃ) ᒪᒃᑯᑐᖏᑦ ᐃᓱᓚᕐᓕᑦ ᑕᓪᓚ ᐅᓇᖅᑲᐅᑕᖃᓗᕆᐊᓕᕖᐃᐅ ᐊᖅ, ᑐᖅᓇᕐᓕᑦ ᐊ ᐊᒍᐲᒃ'ᖃᖃᐅᕈᕆᐊᕐᒪᑦ ᕿᒃᐊᓂ ᑐᖑᑐᕇᕐᕿᕝᓗᑦᑦ ᐳᖅᕆᒐ ᐊᒍᐅᖃᕐᓐᐊᓕᐱᑎᓐᒋ ᐊ ᐱᐊᓕᖅᖅᑎᒧᐊᕋ ᑐᒃᓯᐅᒪᑎᕐᖅᖃᓂᓖᐆᐳᓕ ᑕᓪᓚ ᐱᑎᖅᓂᕐᕕᕐᓂ.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much. I have a question.

Like he said earlier, they're working hard to meet the needs of indigenous people, especially elders. Can you please tell us about your support, because it's very interesting and it impacts us and impacts the communities.

[*English*]

Very briefly, I'm hoping you can describe the elders and youth program you mentioned earlier, because I think it's a great opportunity to inform indigenous Canadians about this program that I didn't know existed. I think if more people are aware of it, there's going to be more appetite to use it.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, in a nutshell, very simply—and my colleague can intervene and add as necessary—it is a program whereby, in indigenous communities, we hire an elder and a young member of that community to be present at the polls to welcome the voters and assist them through the process, including by providing translation where it is required. It's a program that has been in existence for several elections now.

Monsieur Roussel, who's been here longer than I have, may know the exact time that it was put in place. I've heard anecdotally that we're having more trouble staffing it and the take-up is not as great. That's something I want to look into, because I think it's a very valuable program.

Mr. Michel Roussel (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Events and Innovation, Elections Canada): Madam Chair, what the Chief Electoral Officer said is true. Over the past 10 years, when we recruit election officers at the polling stations, we also emphasize more and more recruiting in the communities. We're looking for a system in which Canadians serve their neighbours. There are other Canadians...and it's something that we strive for in the indigenous communities as well.

Ms. Lori Idlout: How much more time do I have?

The Chair: You have another minute.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᐆ, ᐆᐲ, ᖅᑲᓂᖃᒻᖅ, ᐊ, ᑕᓪᓚ, ᐊ, ᐃᒐ ᐅᓇᖅᖅᐅᐊᕆᓗᕐᓂᖅᖃᐃ ᑕᒃᕾᓈᓇᓂᖅᑐᖅ ᑕᐃᓐᓇ ᐅᖅᑲᐅᕐᑎᖅᖃᐅᔪᕐᔾ ᑕᐃᑳᔪᐊ ᐸᐊᖅᖄᕐᖃᑎᒍᒃ ᖅᖃᑕᖃᑐᑦ ᐱᐳᑕᐅᐱᑦ ᐊ ᐊᑎᖄᖅ ᐊ ᐊᕐᖄᓇᖅ ᐅᖅᑲᐅᕐᕆᑐᖅ ᓄᓇᖅᖃᖅᖃᖅ-ᕇᕈᐅᐃᑦ ᕿᓗ ᐊᕐᓚᐃᑦ ᑕᐃᒪᓕᕐᖏ ᐊᐅᑦᖃᕐᕖᐅᑐᖅ ᓄᓇᐅᕐᒥ ᐃᑲᐆᐅᐅᖅᓕᑦ ᐊ ᑕᓪᓚ ᐊ ᐅᐆᐅᐅᖅᖅᐆᑐᑦ ᓇᐅᖅᑲᔪᐅᑐᑦ ᖅᕊᑕᐅᖃᐅᔪᑦ ᐊᕐᖅᓇᐲᔾᓈᕋᒻᖅ ᖇᖃᔾᑕ ᖃᖃᐅᖇᐃᑦ ᕾᖅᑲᖃᔾᕈᖅᕝᐃᕐᒃᕆᖅᑲᕐᖃᐅᔪᕐᕋᓕᑦ ᑭᖄᕋᖄ-ᑐᐃᐆᐅᖅᖆᕐᔾ ᐊᑎᐆᕐᔿ ᖇᖅᖃ ᐅᖅᑲᐅᕐᑐᖅᖅᐆᐆᑦ ᓄᓇᖅᖃᖅᖃᕾᐃᕈᕆᕐᑐᑦ ᕾᖅᑲᖃᕾᑕᐃᐆᐅᕐᔅᑎᒃᓗᕐᑦ ᐃᑲᕐᕖᐆᒐᐆᕝᒥᕐ

ᕾᖅᑳᕝᕝᑑᕾᕆᖅᑎᐅᖅᑐᖅ ᑕᐃᒪᓗᕆᐆ ᖅᑲᓂᖃᒻᖅ ᐱᐱᖅᖅᖃᑎᖅᖃᐅᖃᓂᕋ, ᖅᑲᓂᖃᒻᖅ ᐃᒐᕾᑮᑕᕾᖅ.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

Perhaps if I tell you a bit of a story, you will understand more of what I'm talking about. It was good working through papers...and also with other issues that are of concern to the indigenous people of Canada.

I need help with this. Our language, through the computer, through technology, is available. It's a great tool to revitalize our language and to teach and show people that we have a real, live language. Indigenous people's languages are available through many communications.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think that was more of a comment.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: It was a very thorough exchange and very much appreciated.

Before I hand the floor over to Mr. Gerretsen, we have a witness list that we agreed to. We have witnesses who are not able to join us or have not responded. Mrs. Block made a suggestion, and that invitation has been sent out.

Mr. Therrien provided us with a couple of other names of people he would like to see invitations go to, and before we extend those invitations, I wanted to bring that to this committee. Are we okay with those invitations going out, so we can have a high diversity of representation for the study?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: To the clerk, please send out those invitations, and let's see if we can get them here for the April 7 meeting.

Mr. Gerretsen, you have five minutes.

● (1245)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you.

Madam Chair, if I understood Mr. Perrault correctly when he was answering Ms. O'Connell's questions and trying to address some of her concerns, he talked about engaging with members in the individual communities. I thought I heard him say that he would make sure that the RO is engaged.

Can he confirm whether or not it will actually be the ROs engaging, or him and his office directly? I think the latter is more important.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I will be doing some direct engagement. It is a very large country. As I said, I'm going to Iqaluit this summer, and I'm hoping to have some meetings there with members of the community, but the returning officers play a central role in their community.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I can appreciate that, Madam Chair, and I think that the information to get back from the returning officers—if he is going to be utilizing returning officers to do that—is important, but I think it has to feed into the overall strategy. I don't think the information can be left in the returning officers' hands, assuming that they will utilize it. He is committed to, if not engaging directly, making sure that all that information is funnelled back to him so that we know where the buck stops.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, of course, absolutely.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

In terms of the consultation that he's doing, I want to think that he is doing it proactively.

Can we have some assurance that this work is going to happen in anticipation of trying to determine problems, as opposed to always just reacting to problems that might have happened already?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Of course, the goal of making sure that we engage is to anticipate the needs and avoid the problems. It's to anticipate not the problems, but the needs.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

Earlier on in the conversation, Madam Chair, I heard Madame Gill ask some questions about the wider availability of supporting indigenous languages throughout the country as opposed to in specific areas. I think in her example she referred to the case where somebody in Montreal wanted to vote. I understood the discourse, and if I heard him correctly, Mr. Perrault's reply basically was that unless we go to some form of Internet voting, where there is the availability in electronic voting to make things more widely available, it wouldn't be possible.

Did I understand that correctly?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: To have a wide diversity of languages available in writing where there's a small percentage of population is not possible in a paper format. This is why you have, Madam Chair, jurisdictions like California or other American...that use digital interfaces. It may not be voting from home, but it's a voting machine interface that allows the voter to choose the language of that interface.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Good. I'm glad to hear that, Madam Chair, because I think that the lion's share of the difficulty in providing the service is providing it once, and repeating it 337 more times. Other than the fact that the cost associated with the hardware to do that might be cumbersome, I would suggest it's an investment for the country. There are other ways to do it, like he's saying now. I understand that you could have more of these machines, maybe in certain areas where you're expecting a larger turnout of people who are relying on them, but then in any other polling location, such as one in downtown Montreal, you could have just one.

Does that make sense, through you, Madam Chair?

● (1250)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, it makes sense; however, we are a far cry from introducing electronic voting machines in the federal electoral process. This is not allowed in the legislation, and this is not an avenue that I understand Parliament to be wanting to explore.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: My questions were more along the lines, Madam Chair, of how we ensure that the ability to communicate is there. I understood the complexity of that in the responses to Madame Gill around the challenges with upscaling from a few remote locations to the wider public.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I'm not sure we're referring to the same thing. My exchange with the member, as I understood the question, was about providing a diversity of languages in a single electoral district with a single-ballot format, which led me to refer to voting machines.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay. That's fair enough.

I guess I'm not that far off from what he's suggesting. I'm just saying that I don't know if it has to be the actual voting process as much as the ability for proper communication.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That might be able to be handled without including the actual electronic voting part.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Correct. That is handled currently only at the offices of returning officers and additional offices through the CanTalk translation service, but not at regular polling places.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

Those are all my questions, Madam Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that great exchange.

It got me thinking a bit, Mr. Perrault.

I have to say, committee members, massive kudos to all of you for the thoroughness of your questions and for what we've been able to learn today. I think this was actually very fruitful, and not really what I was expecting. I'm very pleased with the conversation.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Sorry. That's being honest.

I think what I find kind of fascinating in my head, as somebody who was born and raised in the Waterloo region, whose parents immigrated to Canada, whose first language isn't English, was the comment that you haven't received any complaints. Well, when there's no understanding of what's taking place, how do you expect to receive a complaint? I couldn't help but go through just a series of thoughts in my head as to what my grandparents and everybody else went through, and yet we're immigrants. We're not the first people of the land.

I think that's where this conversation is such a thorough one when it comes to the importance that we put on the true nation-to-nation relationship. I want to appreciate the fact that you recognize the importance of indigenous-led. I want to acknowledge that I think you understand there is a diversity of indigenous communities, and that they're not a monolith. I think we've started some important work, but we have a lot further to go. I know that this PROC committee has done a lot of work in this space, as have others.

I want to put a quick question to you, if I may. Well, I'm the chair, so I'm going to.

Have you have been doing some of this work with other districts or other countries that are also in this space? Are you asking other CEOs, such as in New Zealand, what their best practices are and what they've done?

When I think about electronic voting and whether the will is there or not, it took a global health pandemic for the Parliament of Canada to come into the 21st century and have hybrid so that we were able to vote electronically. It's because the work is so important. If voting is so important, I think we need to start having these tough conversations to see where it's going. Maybe the will then will come. I think a lot of things in the country that parliamentarians have advanced have been things we never would have been able to do if there weren't the political will. Then we brought more people along. So I think this is a very important conversation for us to get comfortable with being uncomfortable with.

We have about three minutes left, Mr. Perrault, if you would like to answer that question. You can always send our committee more information.

Ms. Lawson and Madame Morin, if you'd like to quickly put your voices on the record as well, I would appreciate hearing from you—and from Mr. Roussel, always.

I'll pass it to you, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'm trying to keep track of the question, respectfully, Madam Chair.

I realize that one of our responsibilities is to explore other ways of voting. Even though it's not happening now, it may happen some day. We need to stay abreast of what's done elsewhere. We look at prototypes sometimes for some form of electronic special ballot voting. It's not in the legislation, but we need to keep thinking about and exploring ways to vote, because the circumstances can change quickly. The agility is not always there if you've not done the work ahead of time. That is an important part of our mandate.

We have exchanges through different forums internationally. As I said, on the issues of serving indigenous Canadians and reconciliation, we're having a meeting this summer with all provincial and territorial CEOs in Iqaluit.

If you are there, I would be happy to meet you there and invite you there, if possible.

That is a common issue and area of interest for all chief electoral officers in Canada. We are going to explore ways and see how we each deal with these challenges and try to find best practices.

● (1255)

Ms. Anne Lawson (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Regulatory Affairs, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's always a pleasure to appear before this committee.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karine Morin (Chief of Staff, Elections Canada): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I can reassure you. In developing the document that you have in front of you now, we consulted with many jurisdictions, including Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Alaska, and even Australia. However, it's a little different for Australia, because the majority of indigenous languages are spoken there and not written. This has really been taken into consideration in presenting a range of options. This summer we will continue this work with our Canadian counterparts.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Michel Roussel: Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity.

I wish to assure you of our commitment to assisting the work of the committee and, more importantly I suppose, to see a real improvement in the way we serve first nations indigenous communities across Canada. Please don't take my word for it; we have to earn your trust.

The Chair: Thank you so much for this great conversation. I look forward to its continuing on Thursday.

We will have three organizations appearing on Thursday and four representatives. We have the language commissioner of Nunavut, Nunavut Tunngavik, and also the Réseau jeunesse des Premières Nations Québec-Labrador. We will continue this conversation, and then we will use the remainder of the time for other committee business.

Please, everyone, keep well and safe. We'll see you on Thursday.