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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 14 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting, for the first hour today, to continue its study on the inclusion of indigenous languages on federal ballots. For the second hour, the committee will move in camera to continue its consideration of the draft report on the review of the conflict of interest and ethics code for members. The clerk sent out a new version two of the draft report on Tuesday.

In order to go in camera, I will briefly suspend the meeting.

I'm going to take a moment to acknowledge that we are in the Wellington Building, and part of why we are in the Wellington Building is to ensure that we have indigenous language interpretation.

Today, we have been informed that we will not have Inuktitut language interpretation available in this building. I do hope the interpreter is all right. I'm not sure of all the details, but I do know that I'm disappointed that the resources and access are not there.

I also want to state on the record that one of our witnesses today had asked for interpretation, and as members of Parliament, ensuring that it is available is something we've been fighting hard for.

I do want to apologize to that witness for it not being available. Should the witness want to come back at a time when language interpretation is available, I am confident the committee would welcome the return of the witness at that time. I want to state that on the record.

Does anybody want to make any comments on that?

I can assure you that the clerk is working to make sure we do have language interpretation available in the future, and it is something we will address moving forward.

Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): I want to acknowledge the effort you've made to make sure that I could speak in my mother tongue. I really do appreciate it. I appreciate the challenges as well.

I want to share that while it is disappointing, I'm willing to proceed in English as I think the witnesses we have today are very important given the information this committee will gain for its work.

I'm willing to proceed in English.

Qujannamiik.

The Chair: I thank you for those comments.

Today we have the following witnesses. That was a perfect segue to let everyone know that Ms. Aariak, the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut, is with us.

Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated is here. Aluki Kotierk is the president.

We have, from First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network, Monsieur Cédric Gray-Lehoux and Monsieur Shikuan Volant.

[*Translation*]

We're going to take a few minutes so that everyone can make their comments.

[*English*]

I do tend to have about five minutes for opening comments. I will just let everyone know, because we have new and returning members, that we are continuing in the hybrid format. If you have something of substance the committee needs to share, I won't be very flexible with time. Please do take this time for committee members to be able to gain from the expertise and knowledge that you are providing.

With that, I will pass the screen over to Karliin Aariak.

Commissioner, welcome.

Ms. Karliin Aariak (Commissioner, Office of the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut): *Qujannamiik.*

First off, Madam Chair, I also am disappointed. I was hoping to speak in my mother tongue of Inuktitut today, but I also recognize the challenges. I appreciate the challenges and the efforts that you guys went through to make sure I was able to speak in Inuktitut.

Madam Chair, honourable members of the committee, *qujannamiik* for inviting me today. It's an honour for me to appear before you.

Nunavut is a jurisdiction like no other. It has three official languages: Inuktitut, which includes Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun; English; and French. The majority of Nunavut residents speak Inuktitut as their mother tongue. In fact, a majority of Nunavut Inuit speak primarily Inuktitut, despite significant declines in its use.

I am joining you virtually from Iqaluit, Nunavut. Nunavut is the only province or territory in Canada where the mother tongue of the majority of the population is homogeneously neither French nor English.

In fact, in 2016 the Canadian census painted a very clear picture. For Nunavut there is a heading that reads “official languages”, 11,020 English, 595 French; and a heading that reads “non-official languages”, 22,600 Inuit languages. Both federally recognized official languages are minority languages in Nunavut.

Nunavut Inuit expect to hear, see, read and speak Inuktitut in all aspects of their daily lives in Nunavut. This expectation includes participation in democracy through the casting of their votes.

Until being moved to communities between the 1940s and 1960s, Inuit continued to live nomadic lives and governed themselves with very limited government interactions. In 1950, Inuit were given the right to vote; however, according to Elections Canada, it wasn't until 1962 that all Inuit communities actually had access to voting services.

As voting citizens, we elect our representatives. We choose a representative thinking that they have a good understanding of our lived experiences and will be in the best position to be able to promote our interests and our views.

We expect elections to be fair so that all Inuit can freely participate in elections. During the most recent federal election in 2019, the voter turnout, according to Elections Canada, was 48% in Nunavut. This was the lowest compared to all other provinces and territories in Canada where the average voter turnout was 67% of all eligible voters. In other words, the majority of those who were eligible to vote in Nunavut did not vote and did not elect their member of Parliament. That is not good. It is not good for our democracy and it is not good for our country.

In a 2019 CBC news article, Iqaluit resident Elisapi Aningmiqu shared how she was asked to translate a sign that stated “mandatory mask” when she told elections staff at the Iqaluit polling station that the sign was not made available in Inuktitut. She translated one sign, but then declined when she was asked to translate more. Elisapi commented that it was not her job to do Elections Canada a favour when they were not prepared and that it was disheartening to see signs not made available in Inuktitut.

Worrying about the impact this may have on unilingual Inuktitut speakers, Aningmiqu said that it's just not acceptable not to see Inuktitut in the signs that are meant for our community.

The reality is it is quite common in our daily lives as bilingual Inuktitut-speaking and English-speaking Inuit to be expected to provide interpretation and translation services.

One important way to encourage Inuit to participate in the democratic process is to reduce every possible barrier for them to vote.

It is commendable that Elections Canada has taken some initiatives to address the issue. For example, in the 2019 election, Elections Canada translated the voting guide, voter information cards and some other material into Inuktitut, and their information campaign included ads in Inuktitut among other things.

• (1120)

To date, however, Inuktitut is not on the ballot, and the efforts by Elections Canada are inconsistent, ad hoc and depend on the goodwill of the staff of the day.

We need a consistent system that is legally required in order to provide these services in Inuktitut and other indigenous languages.

As I begin my conclusion, I want to point out how commendable it is that the current government has made reconciliation with indigenous peoples an important priority. Supporting indigenous peoples in Canada and the right to vote in their own language could be an important step towards the goal of reconciliation. It would help us feel as indigenous people that we are an important part of the democratic system. It would demonstrate respect for our language, our culture and our world view as a self-determining people. We would have a stronger sense of our ownership in Canadian democratic institutions, which would provide a stronger foundation for Canada to move forward with indigenous peoples and make Canada stronger.

To recap, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated supports putting indigenous languages on ballots in ridings with a substantial presence of indigenous peoples and supports giving voters the right to request special ballots in the indigenous language of their choice no matter where they may live. Such an initiative would make us stronger as a country and would contribute towards the goal of reconciliation.

Qujannamiik.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your opening comments.

[*Translation*]

Let's continue. We have with us two witnesses from the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network. If I understand correctly, Mr. Gray-Lehoux will be speaking.

Welcome, Mr. Gray-Lehoux.

[*English*]

Mr. Cédric Gray-Lehoux (Spokesperson, First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network): *Wela'lin*, Madam Chair.

Weli eksitpu'k. Good morning, everyone, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Today I am here as spokesperson for the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network, as well as president of the same organization.

Our reflections will be shared by one of my co-spokespersons, Shikuan Vollant, and it will be done in French.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Shikuan Vollant (Spokesperson, First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Witness spoke in Innu as follows:]

Kuei! Kassinu etashiek, innu Uashat mak Mani-utenam.

[Innu text translated as follows:]

Hello everyone in Uashat and Mani-Utenam.

[Translation]

Members of Parliament, members of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, you have brought to our attention a request regarding the feasibility, challenges and benefits of translating ballots into First Nations, Métis and Inuit languages.

First of all, we would like to stress that we support all initiatives that in any way enhance or revitalize our languages. However, we would like to take this opportunity to answer your question about the benefits of including these languages on ballots.

First, we must tell you that ballot translation is not a priority when it comes to revitalizing our languages. On average, about 40 per cent of Indigenous people, or fewer than one in two, vote in federal elections. There are many reasons for this, but no study has mentioned ballot translation as a solution to this abstention. Above all, we imagine that this measure would cost an enormous amount of money. If the goal is to revitalize our languages, that money would be much better spent elsewhere, such as to recognize and financially compensate our elders, build spaces in which we could meet to learn our languages, or organize trips with our younger community members.

Your committee is not mandated with making these decisions, but if the House is looking to support our nations, we have ideas and would be happy to discuss them with you.

Lastly, as spokespersons for the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network, we would also like to stress the importance of not taking any more measures that increase the environmental burden that we are all experiencing. Translating ballots into the 60 First Nations, Métis and Inuit languages would inevitably add to the waste generated by elections.

In conclusion, while we would again like to emphasize the good intentions of this measure, we do not believe it is a priority. The money that would be earmarked to implement it could be better invested in our communities, and we denounce its environmental impact.

Tshinashkumitinan, thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much for sharing your comments with all of the members here at the committee.

[English]

We're going to start with a six-minute round.

I understand it's Mr. Vis, followed by Mr. Turnbull, Madam Gill and Madam Idlout.

Mr. Vis, you have six minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for appearing today.

My first question will go to the languages commissioner from Nunavut, Ms. Aariak.

If, for example, residents of the territory were able to write on a special ballot in Inuktitut, do you think voter participation would increase?

Ms. Karliin Aariak: If I understand your question correctly, you're talking about special ballots, and if they were able to write—

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes, special ballots.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: In Nunavut, it's already expected, as I mentioned, in territorial and municipal elections. They are already in syllabics. That's the reason why our office, I believe, received concerns regarding federal elections, even though there's no obligation. Inuit already expect that. We're already practising having Inuktitut syllabics in our ballots in Nunavut.

I recognize the fact that there is some information that Elections Canada made available in the past federal election in the Inuit language. Having the Inuit language on ballots would help in increasing the voter turnout.

I also want to point out the fact that our orthography uses syllabics and Roman orthographies that are basically in the English alphabet and the syllabics that we do use. We use both of those orthographies.

Mr. Brad Vis: The commissioner of Elections Canada pointed to the fact that they had serious infrastructure issues with printing ballots and that printing ballots in syllabics, for example, would be very hard for them to accomplish. I am speaking in advance of an election. I'm assuming that you, as the commissioner of elections in Nunavut, already have that capacity.

Do you think that is a barrier? Do you think that the printing of ballots in two or three different languages is a reason we shouldn't include your indigenous language on a federal ballot?

Ms. Karliin Aariak: The issue they're coming across with infrastructure is something they have to deal with.

In my opinion, if we have our language on the ballots, it will definitely help. Nunavummiut will be part of the democratic process. I think it is very important to include Inuit and indigenous people in Canada, especially in Nunavut, since we already have these rights recognized in Nunavut.

Mr. Brad Vis: To be clear, have you, as the elections commissioner in the territory, ever faced infrastructure challenges printing ballots in multiple languages?

Ms. Karliin Aariak: As languages commissioner of Nunavut?

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: They've never had issues.

• (1130)

Mr. Brad Vis: They've never had issues. That's what I was looking for.

Thank you.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: I'll also add that it's the same thing with the municipal election. The territorial election is one and municipal elections are another. In that regard, there have been no issues that they have faced.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm glad you pointed out some of the concerns about printing information in Inuktitut for voters, and I know Elections Canada did recognize that.

Hearing it from you, I see that the problem might have been more acute than what we were led to believe at the last election.

If I take anything away from this meeting, it's that there is a minimum standard that has to be met that has not been met to date. That's very problematic for me to hear.

I want to thank you for sharing that information.

Elections Canada recommended that one way of moving forward would be to have the ballots printed, like a copy of the ballot, a facsimile of the ballot, in Inuktitut beside the English version.

What would you think of a compromise along those lines? The ballot wouldn't necessarily be in the indigenous language, but a copy of the ballot in the indigenous language would be available in each voting booth.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: If I understand you correctly, when people go out to vote, there would be a copy inside the booth for—

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: That would be a help, but it's not on the ballot. What we're talking about is including Inuit language on the ballots.

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: Skip that. Let's get the Inuit language on the ballots.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay. Thank you.

That was very helpful.

I have no further questions.

The Chair: That was very helpful.

Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Mr. Turnbull, six minutes go to you.

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

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today.

I'm getting a bit of an echo. Can you hear me okay?

The Chair: We can. We don't have an echo.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's great. Thanks.

Thank you for being here. I really appreciated your testimony.

We heard from the Chief Electoral Officer earlier this week. In his remarks, Mr. Perrault highlighted four different options.

He also talked a bit about the pilot that was done in Nunavut in the last election. There was some attempt to translate and provide some of the election materials in Inuktitut. Some of you have acknowledged that there's some effort there, but you've also pointed out that that was insufficient.

When I asked the CEO of Elections Canada whether he had received any feedback from the people in Nunavut, he didn't seem to have much to say in terms of direct feedback.

I want to give you an opportunity. You've given some feedback here. In general, Ms. Kotierk, you said there was a low turnout in the last election. Do you think that was a result of the pilot not being successful?

Ms. Aluki Kotierk: [Witness spoke in Inuktitut as follows:]

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[Inuktitut text translated as follows:]

Thank you for the question.

[English]

As Mr. Vollant indicated, there are many factors why there is low voter turnout. I indicated in my remarks that the ability to vote is still something fairly new—since the 1960s—that we've been exercising. As Commissioner Aariak has indicated, Inuit expect to be able to participate in the democratic process in Inuktitut. Any efforts to ensure that Inuktitut is available on the ballots will help to make it less intimidating and make it something that we feel we're a part of.

There have been instances where I've heard candidates say on the community radio, for instance, “When you go to vote, my name will be in the middle,” if there are three candidates, or “If you go to vote, my name will be the last one.” They do that because it's not in Inuktitut, and to give people the confidence that they're going to vote for the person that they want to vote for.

To me, that's adapting to a system that is not serving our needs.

• (1135)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for your remarks. I appreciate that response.

Mr. Vis also mentioned what the CEO said was his preference, which seemed to be the ballot facsimile. That is a copy of the ballot that could be translated into Inuktitut, and put in the voter booth, so that electors could reference it when they're filling out the ballot.

I think the reason the CEO was saying that would work... I think it goes beyond just Nunavut. You acknowledged in your opening remarks that Nunavut is unique in its jurisdiction, because the majority of electors speak one indigenous language, whereas in other parts of the country, there are many indigenous languages that are present in different jurisdictions. I think the CEO was trying to find a solution that might work for all indigenous languages and many jurisdictions across the country. There is consideration there.

This is a challenging issue. We're all committed to doing what's best here, which is moving along the path to ensuring that all indigenous languages are included to the greatest degree possible. I wonder whether, under that circumstance, considering all of the other jurisdictions, you think the ballot facsimile would be a good approach to take. I recognize that Nunavut might be somewhat unique.

Ms. Aariak, maybe I could go to you.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: *Qujannamiik*, Mr. Turnbull, for the question.

My jurisdiction is in Nunavut, and I would like to acknowledge that. These language rights are in Nunavut. The federal department and government agencies have to abide by the language legislation in Nunavut already. This is why my recommendation was for Elections Canada to have a specific policy and procedure for Nunavut electors, because this is a jurisdiction that recognizes not only the official languages of Canada—English and French—but also the Inuit language.

Because of the uniqueness of our jurisdiction, we expect our language rights to be respected. We expect to be able to be involved in the electoral process and to have our language be visible and used.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: It does, yes. Thank you very much for that.

I guess what I'm wondering, then, is whether Nunavut would have a different approach from other jurisdictions around the country, from your point of view. I recognize that you're advocating for your jurisdiction. That makes perfect sense, and I would never fault you for doing so; that's for sure. I'm just thinking more broadly, as Elections Canada has a mandate to serve the entire country.

From an elections standpoint, I'm wondering whether you think the approach in Nunavut should be unique to Nunavut, with maybe a different approach needed for other jurisdictions. What would you say to that, Ms. Aariak?

Ms. Karliin Aariak: That would support the recommendation I mentioned where I would like Elections Canada to have a specific policy and procedure for Nunavut because of our jurisdiction and the legislation we have. I think it would be a great opportunity to start off by working better within the jurisdiction of Nunavut.

I also recognize the fact that there were some efforts being made by Elections Canada in the last federal election to expose and have more communications and material in the Inuit language, but again, there were some shortfalls. Because in Nunavut we're in a jurisdiction where language rights are strong, I think it would be a great start. For the other jurisdictions, the ballot....

I'm sorry. How do you say that? English is my second language.

• (1140)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: No problem. It's the ballot "facsimile".

Ms. Karliin Aariak: Yes. I could see the ballot facsimile working in other jurisdictions, but in Nunavut we're advanced in recognizing our Inuit language rights. My recommendation, as mentioned, is to have the Inuit language in Roman orthography and in syllabics on the ballot.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Chair, I note that Mr. Vollant has also raised his hand.

Maybe he could respond quickly, if you are okay with that. I don't want him to feel excluded.

The Chair: We would not want that.

Go ahead, Mr. Vollant.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Shikuan Vollant: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to make one little comment. What we and our Inuit sisters are saying may seem a little contradictory, but that is not the case. In fact, this may be an opportunity for the members of this committee to finally realize that each people, each nation, is unique.

I am 30 years old today and I am part of one of the last generations that speak our language perfectly. The important thing is to promote our language so that our young people can learn it. I have a lot of nephews and nieces who no longer speak our language and speak more English with YouTube than they speak Innu-aimun, my mother tongue.

I don't think that would help us. An example is my mother, who is 69 years old today and does not really speak French, who has a lot of trouble speaking, but still votes. I don't think it would be useful for us, farther south, to have the opportunity to vote in Innu. The important thing really is funding for learning our languages. Whether you speak French or English, you learn to speak before learning to read and write. Having ballots in our language would not do anything for us.

If you want First Nations members to vote more, give them a reason to do it. It isn't a question of making it easier to vote; it is a question of giving a real reason to vote. That is what is important for us.

The Chair: Thank you for those comments.

I now turn the floor over to Ms. Gill.

You have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Tshinashkumitin to utshimau, to utshimau Gray-Lehoux, and to all the witnesses who are with us today.

I have to admit that as a member for the North Shore—and that doesn't apply just to the North Shore—I am very pleased to see young people today. It is rare for young people to appear before our committee and all parliamentary committees. I also sit on the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We should hear from young people more often. Mr. Vollant said just now that he is 30 years old. In some Indigenous communities, people are very young. I am thinking of Atikamekw in particular, where 65 per cent of the communities are made up of people younger than 30 or 35. I am very old, compared to them. We should invite them more often.

I found one presentation very interesting. For one thing, yes, we are all acting with good will. There is a difference between the situation in Nunavut and the situation where I come from, on the North Shore. Adding Indigenous languages to ballots in federal elections will not be an incentive for people in Nunavut to go out and vote in greater numbers. Nor is that what will revitalize Indigenous languages. I say "where I come from, on the North Shore", but Mash-teuiatsh is right next door, in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean. The same is true for the people of Mashteuiatsh.

I also want to wish everyone a happy National Indigenous Languages Day.

If Indigenous languages were to appear on ballots, it would still be progress. Then we would ensure that Innu-aimun, for example, was promoted in our polling stations. Indigenous people would at least see their language occupying visual space.

If we had electronic voting, would young people like that? The environmental footprint would not be the same if we decided to hold an electronic vote. Even if we agree that this would not revitalize Indigenous languages—we are not there yet—might some people find it worthwhile? I'm thinking of elders, in particular, who would see their language come back to life in other ways, even if in writing.

Of course, my questions are *forutshimau* Vollant and *utshimau* Gray-Lehoux.

● (1145)

Mr. Shikuan Vollant: Hello, Ms. Gill. It's been a long time since we saw each other.

Ms. Gill is our MP.

This is a very difficult question. When another entity appropriates the language... Do you understand what I am getting at? Yes, it's nice. When you go to the hospital, you see the words "*Kuei*, *Bonjour*, *Welcome*". It's written in several languages. But I don't think I feel more welcome or more at home because of that.

As a Quebecker, you will say "*Kuei*" to me out of respect, but you will also say "Hello" to me, because that word belongs to you. It is a matter of belonging.

The Canadian constitution doesn't belong to me. My laws come from the spiritual laws of my ancestors. That is what is important to me. That is what my everyday life is based on.

As I said, my mother, who doesn't really speak French, will vote somehow, it's her own choice. In fact, you met her on Septem-

ber 30, and you thanked her for being there. I don't think that if she saw the word "*Kuei*" it would change anything. The word "vote" doesn't even exist in the Innu language. Do you understand? The word "vote" doesn't work. We aren't going to reinvent the wheel. My mother wouldn't feel more at home.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: If find what you are saying really interesting. I wasn't thinking of talking about culture, but it is unavoidable.

In the Innu language, the word "vote" doesn't even exist. Today, I wanted to talk about the Innu-aimun identity. People have told me that the word "identity" doesn't exist in that language, just like the word "vote". In terms of culture, even if we want to translate or interpret those words, it can only be literal. That doesn't even convey what you want to say as a nation. That is what you're telling me. There is a language and we see it written, but it doesn't correspond to your values and to what you would like to communicate.

I absolutely don't want to put words in your mouth, but that would be a relative appropriation and lack of understanding of what you want, that is, that programs be funded so the language could be taught and so you could live in your language, speak your language at work and at home and more or less everywhere. That is more important to you than what appears on the ballot, is that right?

Mr. Shikuan Vollant: Yes, that's what is most important to us.

Mr. Gray-Lehoux was just saying that you learn to speak before reading and writing. I'm going to be honest with you [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] I always have trouble reading 95 per cent of the words in my language, Innu. Reading my language and speaking it are two very different things. It takes experts to write it today.

For a young person, it would be much easier to read the words "Vote for Marilène Gill" than to try to invent a word they have never heard or read, one that would be very long. That is much easier for us young people.

As I said earlier, find a way for members of the First Nations to feel at home, so more of them are able to vote.

Honestly, as long as the Indian Act exists, Indigenous people are not going to feel at home in the House of Commons.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Vollant.

I have one more question, but I might go over my allotted time. Madam Chair, may I ask it? If not, I can wait until later.

At the last meeting, we talked very technically about the threshold of one per cent of people in a riding being speakers of an Indigenous language in order for that language to be included on ballots. That is just a proposal at present, but, as I pointed out to the Chief Electoral Officer, I think it could have repercussions elsewhere, for other Indigenous languages or other issues, not just on ballots.

While the government and Canada are committed to UNDRIP's implementation, going through this, making sure that the Inuit language is on the ballot would definitely help in the right direction. More needs to be done. I think we should especially take Nunavut as a priority. Why? Because we already have language rights in Nunavut. It's a unique jurisdiction. Why? Because Nunavummiut are expecting ballots in the Inuit language and getting information and being involved in this political process inclusively in our language. Why? Because my office is still receiving concerns regarding the electoral process, the fact that there is not Inuit language material or that the ballots are not in Inuktitut.

There needs to be more done, but I think focusing on Nunavut because of its unique legal rights, language rights, jurisdiction would be definitely a positive move.

• (1155)

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamik.*

My next question will be for President Kotierk.

Could you share your experience? You've been elected as the president of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, and NTI has been holding elections with Inuktitut on your ballot for many years now. I wonder if you could share you experience in ensuring that Inuit have Inuktitut on the ballots.

Ms. Aluki Kotierk: [*Witness spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[*Inuktitut text translated as follows:*]

Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

I was actually going to echo Commissioner Aariak's comments about Inuit expecting it to be on ballots. It's always been a given, particularly for Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated and the regional Inuit associations as organizations representing Inuit, that the information would be available in Inuit languages and that the ballot would incorporate Inuit languages. To do otherwise would be quite shocking, I think, for many Inuit.

I know there had been a comment made earlier in terms of Elections Canada and their mandate to serve the whole country of Canada. I think with public institutions, the mandate is to serve the public majority. One thing that I've continued to convey—and it's obvious to me often that I'm not articulate enough—is that, for instance, Canada recognizes officially two languages through the Official Languages Act of Canada that was enacted in 1969. When they were working on modernizing it, I was trying to convey that the political landscape of Canada had changed. There is now a jurisdiction where the official languages of Canada are not a majority public language. Public institutions trying to serve the public need to keep that in mind and make sure that they are meeting the needs of the public majority of the jurisdiction of Nunavut.

I think it's crucially important that all public institutions keep that in mind. I also think that it is not helpful for us to have a discussion about whether resources should be allocated to something else other than ballots. In my view, and I think in the view of many Nunavut Inuit, the expectation is that Inuktitut is available in all as-

pects of our lives, in all public essential services. That includes being able to vote.

Qujannamik.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Could you share your experience on ensuring that Inuktitut was on your ballots during NTI's electoral process?

Ms. Aluki Kotierk: [*Witness spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[*Inuktitut text translated as follows:*]

I am sorry that I will not be able to answer you on this.

[*English*]

Each time there's an election, we contract people to provide the services to support our elections, to ensure there are individuals in each community who are able to conduct the election, and to ensure that the materials for candidates regarding the nomination process as well as all the information required to become a candidate are available in Inuktitut. In addition, for candidates we provide an example of what the name would look like in Inuktitut and ensure that the candidate approves that the syllabics are the way they want them to be written on the ballot.

I think following this meeting, if you're okay with it and there is an opportunity to provide written submissions, I'll make sure to submit information to the chair about how our electoral process works for Inuit organizations.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you. That would be very appreciated.

Commissioner Aariak, even just the comments you're sharing with regard to what you're hearing show the importance of language and who can communicate with whom. I would love to hear about some of that as well, in writing, if you don't mind sharing that with our committee. That would inform very well the work we're doing.

We were going to go into other business today, but I do think it's been a very fruitful conversation and the insights that you're all sharing are appreciated by all. If it's okay with our guests and you're able to stay, we would like to do a second round of questions. I'll try to be better at keeping time so we stay a little more on time, but the substance is so important that I do think it's important that we be able to complete thoughts and get to where we're going.

Is it okay with our guests to stay? Are you okay to stay with us for another half hour or so?

That's perfect. Thank you.

We will start with Ms. Block, followed by Ms. Sahota for five minutes each, then Madam Gill and Ms. Idlout for two and a half minutes, and then Mr. Scheer and Mrs. Romanado for five minutes.

Ms. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and through you I would like to thank all of our witnesses for joining us today. It has been awesome to hear the testimony they are bringing forward on this very important issue.

I do want to follow up on the line of questioning of my colleague Mr. Turnbull. He was highlighting that the Chief Electoral Officer has a mandate to address these kinds of barriers across the entire country so that perhaps when we look at addressing the barriers that have been brought forward by those individuals from Nunavut, that will open the door to all kinds of other conversations that need to take place.

I have a question for the languages commissioner of Nunavut.

I believe, Ms. Aariak, you suggested there could be a specific policy for Nunavut based on the demographics and the official languages that exist in Nunavut. It might tie in with a question for Ms. Kotierk. When it comes to something you said in your opening remarks around the need for a substantial presence or a significant number of individuals in order to provide this kind of service, we have heard various numbers suggested.

I'm wondering if, Ms. Aariak, you would speak to the specific policy.

Then, Ms. Kotierk, could you speak to what you believe would qualify as a riding having a significant indigenous population?

Ms. Karliin Aariak: *Qujannamiik.*

I'll start by answering the first question you directed to me.

The recommendation that I mentioned earlier in my opening statement is the fact that our office has had correspondence with the elections commissioner. We've had correspondence indicating where there are shortcomings. We've had correspondence on sharing the concerns that our office is receiving. We've had correspondence regarding the fact that because in the Elections Act it's not necessary to have the Inuit language in the ballots...but recognizing that there are language rights in Nunavut.

So I come with this recommendation to you, which has also been given to Elections Canada, to create and implement a policy and procedure specific to Nunavut to ensure that Elections Canada complies with its obligations. Elections Canada has obligations, and so do federal departments and agencies, that are set out in the Inuit Language Protection Act in Nunavut. ILPA requires Elections Canada to communicate with and provide certain services to the public in the Inuit language.

I'd like to go to a special section of ILPA. Section 3 obligates Elections Canada to use the Inuit language to display public signs, display and issue posters, and provide reception services in client or customer services that are available to the public. There are obligations already for Elections Canada set out in the Inuit Language Protection Act. This policy and procedure that I have recommended not only to the committee but also to Elections Canada is to ensure that they will make sure they are doing their due diligence to ensure that they are following what they're obligated to do under the Inuit Language Protection Act.

Does that answer your question, Mrs. Block?

• (1205)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciated that clarification.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Kotierk, did you want to speak as well?

Ms. Aluki Kotierk: No.

The Chair: We'll go on. Is that okay?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Yes.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, you have five minutes.

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

Through you to the witnesses, I'd like to ask a question of the commissioner first.

You mentioned that the voter turnout in the 2019 election was 38%. That is quite low. Of course, we want to make sure we increase that voter turnout. Let me preface this by saying that I don't think this is the only reason to include indigenous languages on the ballot, especially Inuktitut in Nunavut. I think you or the other witnesses mentioned respect for language, having ownership over the political process, and of course the right to self-determination. All those things are very important and are obligations under UNDRIP.

I would like to know what the turnout is for municipal and territorial elections currently. Could you give me a comparable for a similar election around that time, or at least for the last couple of elections?

The Chair: Commissioner Aariak, are you there? That question from Ms. Sahota was for you.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: Oh, I'm sorry.

I believe the voter turnout number that was mentioned was from President Kotierk.

Am I correct, Aluki?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes, the number was from there, but either of you can answer. I'm sure you may have material as to what the voter turnout is for territorial and municipal elections as well. I could hear from both of you.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: Both of us can provide written information for you on that, if you'd like.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Is it because you don't have an exact number with you today?

Ms. Karliin Aariak: Yes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's quite all right. Is there a ballpark figure that you would know? Is it more than 38% or is it less than 38%, do you think?

• (1210)

Ms. Karliin Aariak: Aluki, with your experience, did you want to add to that?

Ms. Aluki Kotierk: I was just going to say I would prefer that we provide the information. We'll find out what the voter turnout was for the territorial election and municipal elections. I don't have that on hand.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'll move on to a different question. This goes to all the witnesses.

In your experience, have some types of consultations already taken place regarding this issue in Nunavut, and what have been the outcomes of that consultation process? What do you hear from the residents of Nunavut in terms of seeing their language being used on the ballot?

It was referred to a bit in some opening statements. I wonder if you could speak to that a little more.

Mr. Cédric Gray-Lehoux: Our political adviser, Simon Dabin, did a research project for his doctoral thesis on exactly this question of indigenous voting within the federal system. We will be sharing that with you later.

In our opening statements, we mentioned some of our findings. There hasn't really been any research that shows that including indigenous languages would increase the vote, knowing that there is quite a complex reason behind indigenous peoples not voting, those numbers being about 40% of participation.

However, we will be sending the information on that research project, just to make sure that you have the most up-to-date information.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay. Unless there's a comment from somebody else, I'll move on to my next question.

We were talking to the CEO the other day. Some of the questions posed to him were about creating an advisory council on how to go about incorporating indigenous languages into the ballot.

Do you have any suggestions as to how the Chief Electoral Officer or Elections Canada could go about doing that? In terms of contracting the right assistance, should they have somebody in house to be able to provide all the materials or should they be contracting the services that you contract with for the municipal and territorial elections right now, that the territory of Nunavut contracts out?

We just heard that Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. also has contractors that they use for their ballots.

Ms. Aluki Kotierk: I think the first step in terms of Nunavut would be to contact Elections Nunavut, which conducts the elections for the territorial government and the municipalities, to see how their process works.

I already indicated that I sent information about how our elections work in the Inuit organizations.

The Chair: Does anybody else want to comment on that?

Thank you so much for that exchange.

We'll now go to Madam Gill.

[Translation]

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

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I know I took a lot of time just now, but I would like to ask one last question. Obviously, we could talk about this at greater length with Mr. Gray-Lehoux and Mr. Vollant.

I did understand just now that translation did not encourage participation by Indigenous people in elections, nor did it help to revitalize Indigenous languages. In fact, we talked about our sisters from Nunavut, where the situation is different from the situation for the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Youth Network.

If it neither encourages participation nor promotes revitalization, what use would it serve?

Mr. Cédric Gray-Lehoux: In our comments, we began by saying that we acknowledge all the efforts that may be made to promote the First Nations languages.

The problem we are facing often comes down to the fact that there are 11 different Indigenous languages in Quebec. There was reference to a 1 per cent threshold earlier. The peoples are relatively nomadic, and we often have to move, for school and jobs, for example. So we would have to make sure that our 11 languages are represented in every polling station and every riding. We think that might be too heavy a burden, not just for electors, for also for poll workers.

That is why we recommend that this money be used more effectively, when it comes to revitalizing our language and putting systems in place to support our young people.

That said, we recognize the importance of going ahead in certain ridings and situations, including the situation of our northern sisters. Obviously, we support our sisters' arguments.

• (1215)

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Vollant.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: *Tshinashkimitinau.*

Mr. Shikuan Vollant: I would like to add something.

My colleague [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in Quebec and Labrador, but there are 43 First Nations communities. That could be a linguistic and logistical nightmare, because we would have to make sure the correct pronunciation and correct written form was used in each community. I don't write, and don't even speak, the same Innu as is spoken in Natashquan, in Unamen Shipu or in Pakuashipi. We all have our differences, and that is the beauty of our languages.

The Chair: Thank you for those comments.

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

[English]

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik.*

I think my question will be for Aluki.

In an ideal world, the Innu nation would encourage parents to speak to their children in Innu at home, and that is how we could revitalize our language. However, it is very difficult, Mr. Scheer, because starting in primary school, we learn the alphabet in French, not in our languages. For a child who goes home after speaking French all day, do you think it is easy to speak Innu with their father or mother? No, Mr. Scheer, it is very difficult.

To revitalize the language, we have to dig a lot deeper. On the question of studies, the Institut Tshakapesh can tell you what to do and what would be a good idea when it comes to the Innu language. However, seeing the tip of the iceberg isn't enough; you have to look at what is underneath. That is very important.

It is not sufficient to write in Innu on a ballot, Mr. Scheer. I myself, Shikuan Vollant, don't recognize the Canadian constitution as my own, so I don't go out to vote. I think it was our MP, Marilène Gill, who asked what could be done to encourage the First Nations to vote. Make it something we want to do and give us a way of recognizing ourselves in that institution. That is the question.

Thank you.

• (1225)

[English]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Madam Chair, I don't have any other questions on this now so I will hand my time over to either one of my colleagues or one of the other committee members.

The Chair: Mr. Vollant helped you spend all your time. That was a really good opening question, and I think the perspectives he was able to provide are actually quite informing and even relatable a little for myself.

I'm the child of immigrants from India and we spoke Punjabi at home. Then all of a sudden I went to school and it was in English. I said, "What's going on here?" It was challenging because I lived in Canada outside of my house and it felt like I lived in India in the house. Language is very important. I really appreciated that exchange.

Mrs. Romanado, we go over to you for five minutes.

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

This has been excellent testimony for us and, in fact, will help feed a subsequent study that we will eventually be doing in terms of the 44th election. I think this is very beneficial for us to understand not just the question of indigenous languages on ballots, but also the barriers for indigenous peoples to participate in the democratic process.

I want to follow up with respect to a question one of my colleagues had when the Chief Electoral Officer was here. She inquired about what the Chief Electoral Officer was doing in between elections to prepare.

Based on the testimony from Ms. Aariak, it is clear that documentation for municipal and territorial elections, for instance, a "vote here" sign giving directions, already exists, so it's not a question of reinventing the wheel. The information is already available.

Ms. Aariak, you mentioned that you have been in correspondence with the Chief Electoral Officer. Perhaps this would be more a question for the chief electoral officer for Elections Nunavut, but has there been any proactive approach to reach out to your organization to get assistance in making sure that documentation that needs to be translated for federal elections is also in line with what you're doing? It strikes me that the Chief Electoral Officer did not have a poster—and you mentioned this in example one—directing voters where to vote in advance polls for a federal election when it exists at both municipal and provincial.

Even more disturbing for me is example 5, where it said a "masks required" sign posted on a door during the election was only in English. I quickly went on the Public Health Agency of Canada website to look up information regarding coronavirus, and there was a drop-down menu where I could select the Inuktitut language and proceed to print a poster in the official languages of Nunavut about mask requirements and so on.

If this information already exists, how is it that the Chief Electoral Officer cannot proactively make sure that this information is provided to you?

I am quite concerned that for some reason this is not happening. I would hope, as my colleague said in the last meeting with the Chief Electoral Officer, that in between elections this outreach and pretty basic googling is happening so this is not an issue at the next federal election.

Would you and any other witnesses like to comment on that?

• (1230)

Ms. Karliin Aariak: I believe that was directed to me, if I'm correct.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Yes. Thank you.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: The process within our office in receiving concerns is we have to go through an investigative process, contact the obligated body, and when it is with Elections Canada we have done so.

Before the federal election in 2021, I did correspond in the beginning of my tenure as the languages commissioner ahead of the elections of the previous concerns that our office had received.

The response that I did receive was the efforts and the list of what Elections Canada was doing to ensure there was more information available. That was promising, but why did my office continue to receive concerns during 2021?

There are still issues that need to be addressed. Thank you for pointing out the one about masks, because it was already over a year that we were experiencing COVID.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Absolutely.

Ms. Karliin Aariak: I would also like to mention that many resources are available in the Inuit language. There is also an Inuit language authority in Nunavut. Their objective is to standardize Inuit terminology. Is that something Elections Canada can go to? The sole purpose of the Inuit language authority is to standardize English and Inuktitut terminology.

There are also many other resources. Microsoft Bing Translator just came out with an instant translation.

Even so, in the correspondence I received from Elections Canada, they have contracted out to ensure that instant translation was available. If that was the case, why was that not used for displaying the “masks mandatory” poster? That would be for Elections Canada to answer.

There are resources and there should be better efforts made. It is recognized by law in the jurisdiction of Nunavut.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much for that.

I want to reiterate thanks to you for reaching out. At the end of the day, I think it's up to the Chief Electoral Officer to also be proactive to do these kinds of outreach efforts and to make sure that

the information you and the people of Nunavut need is provided to them in real time and in their language.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think I can speak for all committee members and anybody watching at home to say that this was a very informative panel. You have all brought a lot of knowledge and experience with you. I really want to thank you for providing us the extra time as well.

Please do not hesitate to write to us or submit any documents or anything that you think is important for the committee. We look forward to receiving it.

With that, I hope everyone keeps well and safe. I look forward to seeing you again soon.

I will suspend for about two minutes and we'll switch over to in camera, so we can continue with our work.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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