



SPEAKING NOTES

Appearance before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC) - Parliamentary Duties and the covid-19 Pandemic Study

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By Greg Phillips
President, Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE)

(Check against delivery)

Introduction:

Good afternoon Madame Chair and members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today about the strain and injuries the government interpreters have been sustaining during virtual parliamentary meetings, and how it is hurting their ability to effectively champion our two official languages.

My name is Greg Phillips, I am the national president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees – also known as CAPE.

Joining me today are a colleague and two CAPE representatives:

- Katia Theriault, CAPE Director of Communications;
- Nicolas Bois, president, CAPE Local 900, and translator at the Translation Bureau;
- Bastien Tremblay-Cousineau, parliament interpreter, OSH representative.

I would like to greet the interpreters responsible for this meeting's interpretation services. Language professionals play an essential role in the application of the Official Languages Act, and I want to thank them for the important work they do in promoting our nation's linguistic duality. I also want to thank them for their exceptional work since the beginning the COVID-19 crisis. The government has been in constant communications with Canadians about the pandemic, always relying on our Language professionals to convey their updates in both official languages. Our interpreters have not missed a beat.

[PAUSE]

CAPE is the third largest labour union representing federal public service employees. We represent 17,900 economists, policy analysts, statisticians, researchers in the Library of Parliament, and analysts in the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Of most relevance today, we represent all 70 professional interpreters in the federal public service. We negotiate their collective agreements, and we defend their right to a safe and healthy workplace. We also take a stand when needed to fix their enduring labour related problems.

[PAUSE]

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a lot of changes in the way the federal government operates. One of the most obvious changes is the steep increase in virtual sittings of committees and parliament. Virtual parliamentary hearings and sessions are not new to government per se. Interpreters know how to operate in this environment and can deliver exceptional interpretation services when the interpretation standards and conditions are respected.

However, teleconferencing and videoconferencing have been known to be challenging for our interpreters for some time. Well before COVID-19, we had raised the problem with the Translation Bureau – with whom we enjoy a good relationship.

Indeed, occasional technical glitches or poor compliance with interpretation standards and conditions have in the past prevented our interpreters from performing their duties to the best of their ability. They have also caused injuries, including very serious cases of acoustic shock.

The current situation has created some urgency that has prompted an acceleration of our pursuit for remediation.

CAPE is here to confirm the dramatic and exponential increase in injuries reported to us over a very short time period. We can confirm that these incidents have been exacerbated by the exponential increase in the number of virtual meetings since the beginning of the confinement period.

In fact, there have been more incidents reported between March 31 and May 1 of this year (47 total) than for all of 2019, or said differently more than half of the injuries reported since the beginning of last year, 2019, to today have taken place in the last three weeks alone. Although not all incidents involve a serious injury or a visit to the doctor, the type and severity of symptoms felt by interpreters are very worrying. This is not a normal situation.

CAPE's labour relations officers, stewards and government occupational health and safety representatives at Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) can confirm the unusual increase in injuries reported by interpreters, and the uncharacteristic nature of the trend since the

beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. The people on whom you depend need urgent action on this matter.

There is more to the situation. Interpreters are generally used to working multiple parliamentary assignments in one day and to working many days in a row. As the Translation Bureau told your committee last week, a typical day for a parliamentary interpreter consists of six hours of interpretation.

Virtual meetings are handled differently because the cognitive load is much heavier, which leads to more strain and more injuries. This means shorter assignments, shorter shifts, more interpreters going on sick leave for days, or being permanently redeployed to other non virtual assignments at their request. As a result, the pool of available interpreters to pick from is shrinking.

We are getting close to our worst-case scenario, which is that too many interpreters end-up needing rest and healing at the same time. We fear interpreters are getting dangerously close to being unable to keep up with the demand and having to refuse assignments in too great numbers to find replacements. This would jeopardize the conduct of parliamentary

activities. Nobody wants to get to the point where we no longer have enough available qualified interpreters to support parliamentary work. This would be a great disservice to all parliamentarians and to all Canadians.

[PAUSE]

Last week, the Translation Bureau presented you with a general list of types of physical injuries the interpreters have been sustaining during these virtual meetings.

We can confirm that the injuries reported are impairing our members' hearing and concentration, which are the "instruments" they critically need to do their job and hold this profession.

If you recall, the main symptoms of those injuries include tinnitus, residual and long-lasting beating sound, pounding and sharp bursts in the eardrum, headaches, nausea, sleeplessness, mental fog, and an inability to concentrate. This is why longer breaks are needed and why interpreters go on sick leave.

[PAUSE]

CAPE is also here to confirm the causes behind those injuries and the extreme exhaustion, and the fact that with everyone's support, they can be eliminated or mitigated.

Those causes include:

- Poor audio and video quality because of bandwidth or connectivity issues - for example using a WIFI connection instead of a cable Internet connection, or not using headset or a microphone;
- Disruption of usual lines of communication and logistical channels, which makes it is more difficult for interpreters to receive and manage documents and speaking notes;
- And more generally, a videoconferencing system that does not meet international standards.

[PAUSE]

There are solutions readily available to solve this problem and we implore you to consider adopting the following corrective measures:

1. Clearly communicate to clerks, MP's and Witnesses the best practices for Videoconferencing and the material required for a successful participation in a parliamentary video conference meeting;
2. Make sure committee chairs are aware of the standards so they can hold participants to them;
3. Understanding that simultaneous interpretation might be impossible in some circumstances and that other methods of interpretation such as *consecutive* interpretation might be necessary if conditions cannot be improved.
4. Briefly go over the standards before each meeting;
5. Make sure the videoconferencing solutions used for parliamentary meetings are in compliance with ISO standards on Remote Interpreting; **and**
6. Ensure everyone communicates with interpreters respectfully.

[PAUSE]

Madame Chair and members of the Committee, in my closing argument, I want to reiterate the fact that interpreters are your main allies, albeit often invisible. They are an integral part of your parliamentary sessions. They ensure that the message **you** convey to **your** constituents and other Canadians are communicated in both languages accurately and in real-time. Good sound is what the interpreters rely on to do their work. When the working conditions lead to a deterioration of sound quality, the interpreters can't ensure an as faithful, nuanced and complete transmission of meaning in the other language.

Without interpreters, non-bilingual MPs would not be able to fully participate in parliamentary meetings, and Canadians would not be able to follow parliamentary proceedings in real time in the official language of their choice.

It is my fervent hope that this committee will review how the virtual committee proceedings are conducted to ensure remediation.

Thank you to all the interpreters on this assignment today and for doing your very best under very challenging conditions.

Thank you also to all the committee members.

We look forward to answering your questions.