



**Brief Presented to the
House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages**

Study on the Translation Bureau

By

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We wish to thank the Committee members for inviting us to appear before you today so that we may voice our concerns about Translation Bureau and make recommendations.

We believe that our union, the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE), is particularly well equipped to provide you with an overview of the Bureau's situation and to make recommendations in this regard.

My name is Emmanuelle Tremblay and I am the president of CAPE. Accompanying me here today is CAPE Vice-President André Picotte, who represents the interests of our members in the TR occupational group – a group consisting of translators, interpreters and terminologists.

CAPE represents some 13,000 public service employees. More than 12,000 of our members are economists and social science workers who advise the government on public policy. CAPE also represents the 90 analysts and research assistants employed by the Library of Parliament.

More importantly, in this case, CAPE represents the community directly affected by the activities of the Translation Bureau: the 925 translators, interpreters and terminologists whose tireless work at the Bureau ensures the bilingual face of our government. André and I are here today on behalf of these men and women who are positioned at the very heart of the activities of the Translation Bureau.

Is the Translation Bureau a commercial undertaking or the guardian of Canada's linguistic duality?

It is our belief that the Bureau's current difficulties, which certainly have been magnified by the machine translation tool saga, can largely be traced back to the dichotomy between its management's avowed intention to run the Bureau like a commercial enterprise and the Bureau's fundamental mandate to contribute to Canada's linguistic duality. We do not believe that

these two approaches can co-exist. This is evidenced by the fact that the Bureau is experiencing some dark days; it is waning under budget cuts and a sharply reduced workforce, but it nonetheless has to grapple with an increased workload.

Let's use the health-care sector as a point of comparison. If the Translation Bureau's treatment over the years were applied to the health-care sector, operations would be cancelled, patients would be sent home without treatment, practitioners would be swamped by huge workloads and the overall health of Canadians would be adversely affected.

It is our position that the Translation Bureau's chosen model is undermining Canada's linguistic health.

On March 10, Jean Delisle, a professor emeritus at the University of Ottawa's School of Translation and Interpretation, penned an op-ed for the French-language newspaper *Le Droit* in which he declared that many Canadians consider translation to be a "necessary evil of Confederation." In Professor Delisle's view, this prejudice is only reinforced by the actions of the Translation Bureau's management, which were undoubtedly a result of the previous government's ever-tightening purse strings.

As Delisle reminded readers in his op-ed, the *Official Languages Act* was passed in 1969, at a time when the Translation Bureau was mandated to ensure linguistic quality throughout the machinery of government. To fulfil this mandate, the Bureau hired specialists in the fields of translation, interpretation and terminology. It developed a level of expertise and tools that earned it an impressive international reputation.

In 1995, the Translation Bureau became a "Special Operating Agency" (SOA) – a sort of autonomous agency reporting to what was then the Department of Public Works and Government Services. That's when the Bureau first became unmoored from its mandate to protect Canada's

linguistic duality. And from that point on, it also had to start operating, at least in part, on a cost-recovery basis.

At the same time, the Bureau was forced to compete against suppliers in the private sector, who could now take work directly from federal government departments and agencies. Pitted against a private sector that didn't have anywhere near the same overhead costs, the Bureau had no choice but to adopt a mercantile approach that led it astray from its core mandate.

By comparison, Passport Canada, another special operating agency, has a monopoly on passport production. It is therefore free to set prices for its services that allow it to offset its costs. This is a luxury the Translation Bureau cannot afford, because it has to compete against fair market prices in the private sector. To add insult to injury, the Bureau has to shoulder research and development costs for language tools, such as the Termium Plus terminology bank, which it provides free of charge to the Canadian public. These tools are also used by translators in the private sector, even though these companies do not contribute to the cost of operating and updating them.

In addition, the Translation Bureau relies on annual service agreements with its client departments and agencies, which prevents it from adequately planning its work from one year to the next. These agreements are not contracts; they can be cancelled or not renewed at a client's whim. This explains in part why the Bureau now has 400 fewer employees than it did in 2002 and why it isn't replacing employees who leave the public service. The Translation Bureau anticipates that another 140 of its employees will be retiring between now and 2017–2018 without being replaced. This situation will further contribute to the erosion of services that Canadians depend on.

We also note, as spelled out in black and white in the Translation Bureau's own 2012 program evaluation report, that government departments are establishing their own internal translation services, in clear violation of the Treasury Board directive: "a few departments translate some documents internally, using staff in the Information Services (IS) or Administrative Services (AS) occupational categories."

Impact of budget cuts

The difficulties now facing the Translation Bureau are the result of the austerity measures imposed on the federal public service by the previous government since 2012. Budget cuts at the Translation Bureau were mirrored across all federal departments and agencies. And translation is often the first thing to be eliminated due to budget cuts. This had a pernicious effect: public service employees, particularly Francophones, have had diminishing access to translation services for internal working documents. As a result, they have had to agree to work more often in English in order to maintain their effectiveness as employees. This represents an unacceptable erosion of the right of employees to work in the language of their choice.

It is important to bear in mind that, while the amount of resources allocated to the Translation Bureau continues to shrink, the population of Canada is growing steadily. According to our members in the EC group working for Statistics Canada, the population was 35,851,774 in 2015, up 17% from 30,685,730 in 2000.

Another impact of the decreased resources allocated to the Translation Bureau has been the increased reliance on freelance translators and the private sector to perform the work normally done by Bureau employees. This practice of increasingly calling on contract workers, whose terms and conditions of employment are not protected by a collective agreement,

points to a pernicious effort to circumvent the requirements imposed by the unionization of workers.

Furthermore, the periodic need to work excessive amounts of overtime is undermining the morale of regular Translation Bureau employees.

A potentially irreversible loss of expertise

We have also observed that the expertise accumulated by Translation Bureau employees over the years is eroding as more and more employees are retiring without being replaced. The Bureau had developed considerable expertise in scientific and technical translation, for example, but much of that expertise has been disastrously lost in the wake of retirements, hiring freezes and a lack of succession planning. We risk losing this expertise in a relatively short period of time

Multilingual translation is another area that has been severely affected. It is becoming harder and harder to find translators who are able to work in more than one language combination – a resource that used to exist inside the Bureau. Now instead, downsizing has forced the Bureau to rely on the private sector to provide this expertise at discount prices.

Given that the Translation Bureau had developed a glowing international reputation for the quality of its services, it is disconcerting to find that political and economic decisions are undermining the ability of Bureau employees to produce quality work. Our translators, interpreters and terminologists still manage to produce work of impeccable quality, but they are being hampered in their efforts by a business model that cannot be sustained: eventually, the machinery is bound to break down, with disastrous consequences on the quality of the work produced. Our members, who are struggling to keep the services offered by the Translation Bureau afloat, are devastated by this new reality.

Affinity grouping is another example of choices made with a bean-counting mentality that have had direct consequences on the Bureau's work. Previously, employees used to be specialized in their particular fields and had acquired knowledge and command over a specific vocabulary that allowed them to perform their work more effectively and efficiently. Nowadays, affinity grouping has broadened the range of translation fields assigned to employees, who now must develop their skills all while applying them to several fields all at once.

Machine translation tool

The Translation Bureau and its management are in disarray. Case in point: the saga involving the implementation of the Portage machine translation software. Indeed, it either points to a misunderstanding of the Bureau's mandate to contribute to Canada's linguistic duality (which would be troubling in its own right) or a conscious effort to undermine it for the sake of financial objectives.

Billed as a means of facilitating communication between public service employees, the machine translation tool is ultimately an affront to the work of translators. Putting this kind of tool in the hands of individuals who do not have a finely honed knowledge of the target language means that the quality of translation is no longer important in the eyes of its very proponents. It is a backhanded way of telling translators, interpreters and terminologists that their work is not all that essential and that it can be done by a machine.

The response will be that the machine translation tool came with warnings that employees should refrain from using it to produce communications intended for the public. As far as the Translation Bureau was concerned, however, this tool was perfectly fine for intra-employee communications. Does this mean that public service employees are not entitled to the same high-quality translation services as the general public?

In any case, it is naive to think that such a tool would not be used for external communications. After all, it carries the Translation Bureau's seal of approval for quality. We have observed, furthermore, that at least one department has used machine translation in order to save money: our members have been asked to revise texts that have been run through this machine translation software.

Louise Brunette, a professor with the Department of Language Studies of the Université du Québec en Outaouais, hit the nail right on the head in an interview she gave to Radio-Canada, when she said that the use of a machine translation tool showed a lack of respect for Francophones. As she put it, “[translation] this is stunting the development of French, the quality and the capacity to write directly in French. The federal government is turning French into a language of translation instead of a language of communication.” Like Professor Delisle, she is among the witnesses who will be appearing before the Committee. We trust that she will be better able to give you a detailed explanation of why she is so critical of the machine translation tool. Suffice to say that we agree with her analysis that this approach will relegate the status of the French language in the public service from that of second language to secondary language.

Mandate or costs? A choice needs to be made

Irrespective of the Translation Bureau's mandate, it seems clear to us that the managers of the Translation Bureau have made it their absolute priority to cut costs. This is one of the consequences of assigning the Bureau's management to bureaucrats rather than translation specialists. There seems to be little regard for the importance of maintaining a sufficient number of employees to guarantee the quality of texts produced. Similarly, there seems to be a failure to recognize the importance of having new employees trained by their more experienced colleagues before these invaluable resources are lost to retirement.

We wish to conclude our presentation by making two recommendations that would make it possible for the Translation Bureau to regain the stature it once enjoyed, for Canadians to receive services of impeccable linguistic quality from their government and for federal public service employees to continue to benefit from the provisions of the *Official Languages Act* that allow them work in the language of their choice.

1- Make the Translation Bureau the sole government agency responsible for translation services within the federal public service

Making the Translation Bureau responsible for managing translation on behalf of all federal departments and agencies would elevate the quality of translated material produced outside the Bureau, reduce administrative costs associated with awarding contracts for translation services and ensure the preservation of linguistic expertise.

Moreover, entrusting the Bureau with the responsibility of overseeing the management of all of the government's translation operations would make it possible to eliminate the "phantom translation units" that, as the Bureau is already aware, exist in several departments and agencies, thereby achieving economies of scale.

2- Give the Translation Bureau the financial and human resources it needs to fulfil its mandate

It is important to put an end to the policy of attrition at the Translation Bureau and to start hiring translators, terminologists and interpreters once again. The Translation Bureau must be given the financial resources required to fulfil its mandate to support Canada's linguistic duality. It must stop bearing the brunt of untenable budget cuts.

In many of its mandate letters to new ministers, the present government has indicated that they must contribute to the protection of the *Official Languages Act*. However, this is just wishful thinking unless this desire is



matched by concrete actions, such as restoring the Translation Bureau's budget to levels that would allow it to fulfil its mandate.

In addition to opening its doors to new employees once again, the Translation Bureau must implement a program to restore its lost expertise in the areas of scientific, technical and multilingual translation. It must also develop a succession plan that will make it possible for experienced employees to pass on their expertise by helping to train a new crop of employees.

Governments are always faced with budget choices. The previous government made a conscious decision that Canada's linguistic duality and the right of Canadians to obtain quality services in the language of their choice could be sacrificed on the altar of austerity.

We are asking you to reverse that trend. We are asking you to give the Translation Bureau back its capacity to do the work it was created to do, to make a lasting contribution to Canada's linguistic duality and to ensure that Canadians are always able to obtain services in the language of their choice. We are also asking you protect public service employees' right to continue working in the language of their choice.

Thank you.