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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1830)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 14^x of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

The committee is meeting on its study of Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

[*English*]

For those participating virtually, I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants in this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted, and also highlight the fact that this was mentioned by Speaker Rota on September 29, 2020.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of “Floor”, “English” or “French”. Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike. When you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference.

I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely. Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair or the clerk. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[*Translation*]

For those attending the meeting in person, masks are required unless seated and when physical distancing is not possible. Should you wish to get my attention, signal the clerk with a hand gesture, or click on the icon to request the floor. Should you wish to raise a point of order, please activate your microphone, and indicate to me clearly that you wish to raise a point of order.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses who will begin our discussions with seven and a half minutes of opening remarks, followed by rounds of questions. As is our customary process, I will

let you know when you have approximately one minute left. I will also inform you that your time is up when you have about 10 seconds left.

Today we have representatives of the International Association of Conference Interpreters: Nicole Gagnon, who is its Advocacy Lead, and Jim Thompson, its Communications Counsel for the regions of Canada.

I now turn the floor over to the witnesses from the International Association of Interpreters. You have seven and a half minutes. I know that most of the witnesses have forwarded notes, but I have also seen the number of pages you have submitted to us. Those documents were sent to the members of committees so they could read them. We will devote some time to those documents during the question period.

Ms. Gagnon or Mr. Thompson, you may begin your opening remarks.

• (1835)

Ms. Nicole Gagnon (Advocacy Lead, International Association of Conference Interpreters): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, we are here this evening to discuss your right to speak in Parliament in the language of your choice, and to be heard by Canadians in the language of your choice, delivered with equal quality.

Like you, the Association we represent sees these fundamental rights as duties that cannot be compromised. Sadly, we think our founding linguistic partnership is not being respected during the pandemic as it should be.

In fact, we are at a crisis point. Since Parliament began meeting virtually in April last year, a wave of injuries has swept through the team of interpreters employed directly by the Translation Bureau. Seventy percent of those staff interpreters who responded to a survey we conducted have suffered auditory injuries during the past nine months. Injuries were so severe many had to take time off work. Of those injured, most, 62%, have not fully recovered. Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC, is reported to have said that health and safety incident reports are down and no one is presently on sick leave.

Such statements hide the fact that, in the past nine months, there have been more than double the number of health and safety incident reports filed by staff interpreters compared to the previous 15 months, according to the Translation Bureau's own data. They ignore the fact that many TB staffers have given up filing complaints because little if any action comes of it. Staffers are disappointed. These statements belittle their injuries and silence their concerns. This is unacceptable. As the Prime Minister recently said, "Every employee in the Government of Canada has the right to work in a safe and healthy environment, and we will always take this very seriously."

As the ranks of Translation Bureau staffers thin, qualified freelancers are being recruited as reinforcements. Normally, freelancers are assigned to about 30% of parliamentary events, committees and the like, while staffers cover 70%. Recently, freelancers are doing a much bigger share of work on the Hill, amounting to almost half the workload in November and December.

Against this backdrop, PSPC and the Translation Bureau are weeks away from locking in contractual requirements that could expose freelancers to more of what is making staffers sick while undermining the quality of the services we can provide to Canadians. When you hear the word "contract", a collective agreement negotiation between a union and an employer may come to mind. That is not the case here. The Association is not a union and we are not negotiating anything with the PSPC and the Translation Bureau. As far as the contract is concerned, they decide what will be in it. It's a one-way street.

The Translation Bureau has floated some contractual trial balloons that are of great concern because, among other things, the TB would like to increase the hours freelancers are exposed to conditions that are making staffers sick. Of course, this is unsustainable. There is already a critical shortage of interpreters qualified to work on the Hill.

We have highly specialized training that is not common in Canada. There are only about 80 freelancers in the entire country who can do it. The Translation Bureau's approach will burn out the freelancers just as it is doing to the staffers. Then what?

The Translation Bureau has also resorted to using teams of two interpreters more often, even when the assignments are broadcast or webcast. Team strength is critical because when teams are small you increase the load each interpreter must carry. And, because we take turns at the mic, inevitably it means we will be working into our second language. Assigning interpreters so, they must work into their second language is generally regarded as one that reduces quality and, as a result, has rarely been permitted for meetings that are televised or webcast to Canadians, until now.

I have met on numerous occasions with Lucie Séguin, the CEO of the Translation Bureau. I know her to be a person of high integrity who cares deeply about the job her team is able to do with available resources. At the same time, if these trial balloons and recent practices are baked into the next freelancers' contract, it's not difficult to imagine how quality will suffer.

You will have interpreters sick with hearing injuries, working longer hours or in smaller teams, sometimes into their second lan-

guage, which at least some of the time will be broadcast or televised.

● (1840)

The House of Commons administration may have had good reasons to select Zoom as the online platform where Parliament meets, but its suitability for delivering quality interpretation could not have been one of them. Actually, Zoom is not even recognized as an interpretation platform by the international experts who set ISO Standards. Interpreters call the sound delivered to them by Zoom and other platforms "toxic". It makes them sick with headaches, extreme exhaustion, tinnitus, nausea and other symptoms. In tests conducted by independent sound engineers comparing platforms, Zoom Standard Mode comes last.

The survey of staffers we conducted has revealed what all interpreters know: under the current conditions of distance interpreting, quality cannot be delivered in the same measure as in-person interpreting. Your proceedings have been interrupted hundreds of times since going virtual because we just can't make out what you are saying. In addition to concerns about quality, this is affecting your ability to do your work and is forcing discourse in Parliament into a single language, and it's usually English.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, interpreters have stepped up to do our essential work in Parliament, placing ourselves at risk of injury and infection. Every day, we go to the Hill in spite of the lock downs. Our duty is to bring the Official Languages Act and the Constitution to life with the work we do. We want it to be the best quality it can possibly be, in both Official Languages, even under difficult circumstances. That is why we have come before you today. And that is why we ask you to intervene to protect the quality of the service we provide to you and to Canadians.

Please urge Minister Anand, who is responsible for the Translation Bureau, to instruct her officials to take a precautionary approach to conditions for distance interpreting in the freelancers' contract they are finalizing. And further, please urge the Minister to address the critical shortage of qualified interpreters in Canada on an urgent basis and ensure the very small existing pool of Government accredited interpreters is encouraged to work in the Parliament of Canada and not actively discouraged as they have been.

Thank you. We are happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Gagnon. You stayed within the allotted time.

I would ask you please to raise or lower your microphone because we are hearing a "pop".

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Do you mean an implosive consonant?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: My apologies.

Is that a bit better?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Josée Harrison): I'm told yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to the period of questions. The first round will be for six minutes.

We will begin with Mr. Blaney, the Vice-Chair of the committee.

Mr. Blaney, you have the floor for six minutes.

• (1845)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had indicated that I wanted to share my speaking time with Mr. Généreux. With your permission, I could speak in the second round.

The Chair: Yes, of course.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Good evening, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gagnon and Mr. Thompson, thank you very much for being with us this evening.

First of all, I am very pleased that you contacted us parliamentarians to discuss the problem you're experiencing. I also acknowledge the presence of the interpreters working here this evening.

You've taken the time to bring us up to speed on the health and safety problems you're experiencing at work. Personally, that's the angle that interests me in this discussion.

I'd also like to note that the Standing Committee on Official Languages is the most apolitical committee there is. We're in politics, and that isn't always the case, but we've been trying to prepare fairly unanimous reports for many years now.

There is no room for partisanship of any kind in the matter before us today. Our aim isn't to blame the government for what's happening to you, quite the contrary. We want to work with you to find options that will solve some, if not all, of your problems.

Ms. Gagnon you said in your opening remarks that 70% of the people you surveyed said they had suffered illness or injuries, to their hearing in particular. Can you tell us how many people responded to the survey?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: If you look at page 3 of my opening remarks, you'll see a bar graph showing injuries suffered by staff in-

terpreters and the number of interpreters who responded to the survey.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: What's important in a meeting such as this is that what appears in the documents that are sent to us is also verbalized. If possible, I'd like you to state the number of individuals that appears on your graph.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: There were 51 respondents out of the some 70 interpreters on the Translation Bureau's staff.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: If I'm not mistaken, the Government of Canada currently employs 70 staffers apart from people like you who are freelance interpreters from outside the House of Commons. Is that correct?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: That's correct.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: If I understand you correctly, 70% of those people have suffered injuries, and now they don't even dare complain because they won't get a response. So I understand very clearly why you've laid out your problems before this committee.

Do you know the exact number of people who are off work right now, if any?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I couldn't tell you because I'm a freelance interpreter. That's the kind of information you should be able to get from the Translation Bureau. I think there is one person on leave and two more who have been assigned to other duties to rest their ears. However, the Translation Bureau alone can confirm that information.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I see.

If I'm not mistaken, the Translation Bureau is trying to develop contractual provisions specific to remote interpretation and, for that purpose, has turned to government agencies in Europe. Would the provisions and agreements that have suited, now suit or will suit European freelance interpreters be acceptable here in Canada since they've been verified in those government agencies?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: The problem is that those European bodies don't operate in a bilingual setting such as ours. Contrary to what's done in Canada, they don't have an obligation to provide service in English and French with the same level of quality. Those organizations don't have a shortage of interpreters.

In our view, the comparison is invalid because we work in a situation where there is a shortage here. We also work with a videoconferencing platform that isn't recognized as an interpretation platform, whereas they use an actual interpretation platform in Europe.

• (1850)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ms. Gagnon, what's the difference between an interpretation platform and a platform like Zoom, which we're using now?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Zoom is a videoconferencing platform to which an interpretation function has been added. In Europe, they use interpretation platforms that are designed, first and foremost, for interpretation.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I see.

Do you know the reasons why the government chose to use Zoom?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I couldn't tell you, Mr. G n reux.

The House of Commons Administration must have had good reasons for choosing the Zoom platform. Its representatives will be testifying before you this evening.

All I can tell you is what we've seen. The Zoom platform doesn't offer you high-quality service because we can't hear what you say clearly, and we have to interrupt you, among other things.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gagnon.

Ms. Martinez Ferrada, go ahead for the next six minutes.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank you for being with us this evening and for taking part in this committee meeting, which is indeed very important.

Like you interpreters, we are Zoom users too. I am one, and I have to admit that just listening to you when you interpret requires a lot of concentration. So I can imagine what it must be like to do it. I really empathize with you given the work you do, and I can imagine the difficulties you encounter. I also want to thank you for telling us about them.

There is a shared responsibility in this situation. We members must be prepared with our tools and our headsets, and we must speak a little more slowly so you can interpret.

In practical terms, what else do you think we members can do to help you? Should we have stricter rules to ensure better interpretation?

For example, I'd go so far as to suggest that members not be permitted to sit without wearing their headsets. What do you think about that?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you for that question.

I can tell you that the platform is the problem. Of course, wearing headsets and having an Internet cable connection should be mandatory because we obviously can't interpret your remarks correctly if we can't hear what you say.

However, it's not just the volume issue. All too often, when we tell people we can't hear them, they turn up the volume. However, what we need is to hear your remarks clearly. You have to understand that we're listening to what you say, processing that information and speaking over your voice. Suddenly, the volume goes up. That's where we risk getting injured because sometimes the volume's too high.

So what you can do as members is reconsider the set-up. I don't really know whether it's possible to consider another platform than Zoom at this point. However, interpretation platforms do exist. You could definitely—and I urge you, implore you and beg you to do it—make it a mandatory rule to wear a headset with an integrated microphone and to get an Internet cable connection.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you for your answer.

[English]

Mr. Jim Thompson (Communications Counsel, Canada Region, International Association of Conference Interpreters): I would add to that, and it relates to the decisions that Public Services and Procurement are making now that would, we fear, increase the time that freelance interpreters will be exposed to the toxic sound Nicole mentioned is coming through Zoom.

This is a time for caution. We know people are getting hurt, and it is not a time to increase the hours that freelancers are exposed to that situation. As Nicole said, if the staffers are falling because of those conditions, it won't be long before freelancers do too. Then what?

• (1855)

[Translation]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you for that answer, Mr. Thompson.

I'd also like to go back to the recommendations that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs made respecting interpretation services. They included a rule that members and witnesses participating in virtual meetings of the House or committees be required to wear their headsets you just discussed.

Should we set a deadline when inviting witnesses to ensure they have the necessary tools, such as a headset, to appear before the committees, for example? In several committees, I've seen witnesses wearing headsets that were not appropriate for interpretation.

Do you think we should establish the longest possible lead time to ensure they arrive in the House with headsets so they can contribute to committee meetings?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Yes, definitely. Anything you can do in advance will be a big help to us. You're right.

Parliamentarians wear their headsets now, but it took some time for them to come around to the idea. It's unfortunately not a widespread practice among witnesses, but, if they have more time to receive the headset the House offers them, then they'll be able to use it.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Thompson, do you want to add something?

Mr. Jim Thompson: The headset is just one part of the audio chain. There is the headset, the microphone, the Internet connection and the platform, Zoom, through which the sound goes before it finally reaches the interpreter. Because of that, addressing one broken part of the chain doesn't fix the whole problem.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thompson

Thank you Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

Now we will go to Mr. Beaulieu for the next six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, thanks to Ms. Gagnon for her excellent presentation. She told us there was a shortage of interpreters. I'd like her to say a little more about that and to tell us how she thinks we could address that shortage.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you for your question.

The shortage of interpreters preceded the pandemic, which merely exacerbated the situation. Across the country, there are approximately 50 interpreters who currently work as Translation Bureau staffers and who are qualified to work on the Hill.

We have to make sure that Parliament functions properly, and we rely on a very small group of people to do that work. So it seems to me we should protect them so they don't in turn get injured. Once again we are asked to come and work in the same conditions experienced by the employees who have been injured and have to stop working. Our fear is that, if no one intervenes to protect the freelance interpreters who provide reinforcement, fewer and fewer of them will be able to provide their services to Parliament and that, as a result, there will be no one to do the work.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Should we adopt a policy in Parliament prohibiting anyone without a headset from speaking?

• (1900)

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I would totally agree with that, as I told Ms. Martinez Ferrada, if that were possible. It seems to me that where there's a will, there's a way. Yes, it would definitely be a solution if everyone wore a headset.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Members would probably make sure they always had their headsets with them if that kind of rule were introduced.

You said the Zoom platform wasn't appropriate for interpreters.

To your knowledge, could other, more appropriate platforms or systems that are used elsewhere be used here?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: In the document containing our opening remarks, we provide a list of available platforms that have been tested by an independent engineering company.

As you'll see, the Zoom platform is ranked last. Other platforms, interpretation platforms, are more suitable. For example, the Kudo platform is used in Europe. There's also Ablioconference. There are several platforms. All I can tell you is that the one the Canadian government has selected is unfortunately not the best. In fact, it's ranked dead last.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It seems Public Services and Procurement Canada will soon be reviewing your contract, and that will mean deteriorating working conditions for you. For example, you would be working in teams of two interpreters instead of three. I don't know whether you can tell us more about that. It seems absurd to

revise the quality of your working conditions downward when there's a shortage of interpreters. It should be the reverse in order to retain staff and facilitate recruitment.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you for that question.

The contract in question is the freelance interpreters' contract and its renewable annually. The contract comes into force on July 1^x and expires on June 30. So that means decisions have to be made on the terms and conditions of the upcoming contract, which is what we're doing now.

We find it hard to understand why the Canadian government would want to offer us less favourable conditions in the midst of a pandemic by exposing us to longer hours of work and other conditions. We need to exercise some caution because, as we told you, the platform is what it is: it's affecting our hearing and injuring us. So don't ask us to work longer hours; on the contrary, we need to work in accordance with the temporary measures that have been adopted until the platform problem can be solved.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We will definitely be getting presentations by technical experts who can guide us. We could also issue directives, such as requiring witnesses to provide their documents in advance to facilitate the interpreters' work. Would you have any other suggestions for us?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: As Ms. Martinez Ferrada proposed, and you yourself mentioned, there should be a deadline for confirming witnesses so they can acquire appropriate headsets. It's also very important to have a stable Internet connection.

We also need the documents so we can prepare. I'm not an expert in all fields. You have to understand that we're called upon to work for some 25 standing committees of the House and the same number for the Senate and that we jump from one topic to another. If I work on the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, I don't know the names of the 33,000 species of fish in English or in French. If I have to interpret a presentation on that, it's absolutely crucial that I get the documentation in advance so I can do that work and do it well.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gagnon. That's all the time we have.

I turn the floor over to Mr. Boulerice for six minutes.

• (1905)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Thompson and Ms. Gagnon, thank you for being with us this evening. What you say is very interesting and instructive, and I hope the committee can do a good job and help you and all the people you represent.

Our discussions this evening have raised two very important issues: respect for the two official languages and bilingualism, a very important value that we advocate, but also—and perhaps especially—occupational health and safety, on which we accept no compromise.

Ms. Gagnon, you said that 70% of your members had suffered work-related injuries, including tinnitus, nausea, fatigue and other symptoms. That's an enormous percentage. Some of your members are off work, while others are still providing the service that we need and that Canadians and Quebecers need as well.

Do you have any idea of the impact of prolonged exposure to all this toxic sound and the cumulative effect of that exposure that causes occupational injury?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you for your question, Mr. Boulerice.

I would say we don't yet know the long-term effects of prolonged exposure to this toxic sound. You have to understand that we come and work day after day and that we are currently on the platform three or four hours every day. Before the pandemic hit, we were working six hours a day. Then the Translation Bureau adopted the precautionary principle and shortened our workload to four hours. However, we're still getting injured even at four hours a day.

Now the bureau wants to increase our workload to five hours a day. We think that's dangerous. All that to say that we don't exactly know how these injuries affect the inner ear, but we do know something is happening. The studies are under way, and the empirical evidence of the injuries we are incurring is being gathered.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: There are permanent interpreters and freelance interpreters, of which you are one. The government hasn't really invested in the next generation of high-quality interpreters who are briefed on the issues.

Are we at a breaking point, and is there a risk that we may not have enough interpreters to do the work in the Parliament of Canada?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I would say yes. For lack of the necessary resources, the Translation Bureau already has to refuse to allow interpreters to work at certain meetings of members, such as caucuses, although it's not withholding their services from committee meetings for the moment. The Canadian government must absolutely invest in interpreter training to ensure there is a next generation of interpreters. Only two universities in Canada train interpreters, and one of them, the University of Ottawa, shut down last year as a result of the pandemic, but also because the resources preparing the next generation were required on the Hill. They simply had to go to work.

In the long term, we have to invest in interpreter training, somewhat as was the case when we invested in women who wanted to study science, engineering and mathematics. That's where we are now. So we're capable of doing the same for interpreter training, if we have the will to do so.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Perfect.

I really want to ask you this question because it's come up in the media and in public. A spokesperson for Public Services and Pro-

curement Canada said that freelance interpreters earned between \$750 and \$1,250 a day for approximately three hours of work.

Could you give us some context and perhaps set the record straight?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you very much.

We are here to talk but the quality of sound and auditory safety, but this is a very important question because I'm afraid the spokesperson for Public Services and Procurement Canada has misled you.

It's true that we have worked three or four hours a day since May 2020, when the virtual Parliament started. Our six-hour day shrank to four hours as a result of the precaution taken by the Translation Bureau.

The fact is we don't work three hours a day; that's just the tip of the iceberg. I mentioned the 33,000 species of fish, for example. I have to prepare for those three- or four-hour meetings every day. When I enter the booth, that's the end of the process. I've already spent three or four hours preparing everything; then I enter the booth and have another three or four hours of work ahead of me.

• (1910)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: That's like teachers who have to prepare lesson plans and correct students' work after class. Their work isn't limited solely to the hours they spend in class. It's somewhat the same situation as yours, since you have preparatory work to do so you can provide a professional service.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: That's correct.

[English]

Mr. Jim Thompson: It's also important to understand that this is a free market. These are freelance suppliers to the government. The government sets the rules, and the freelancers bid.

In keeping with the very strong demand for this service and the very limited supply, you have to take that into account when you're talking about money.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

We will now begin another round of questions, in which two members may participate, but it will be a five-minute round. I think it's Mr. Blaney who will be asking questions instead of Mr. Généreux.

We are listening, Mr. Blaney.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here this evening, Ms. Gagnon and Mr. Thompson.

I wanted my colleague Mr. Généreux to start the round of questions because he's the one who introduced the motion. I salute him and my colleagues who made it possible for you to appear here as soon as possible. The Standing Committee on Official Languages made the unanimous decision to invite you to join us this evening and Thursday.

I think we can agree that headsets are necessary for parliamentarians, but, this evening, you raised what I think is the most important aspect, the platform, the software we use. We can understand that the government chose Zoom in a rush, but, based on the figures you've shown us, that software doesn't make the grade. This evening, you said it was a videoconferencing platform, not an interpretation platform. It's also the only software package among all those tested that's rated not compliant on the speech intelligibility criterion. I'd like to hear what you have to say on that subject. I imagine it's extremely important for you to hear and understand what's being said.

My impression is that the Government of Canada is driving a Lada, when we know that linguistic duality is central to our identity and parliamentary activities.

Could you explain to us at greater length how this platform isn't satisfactory?

Your comments may definitely be included in the recommendations we make following your appearance.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: The platform is the choice that was made by the Canadian government, which had its own reasons. On Thursday evening, you'll be hearing from expert witnesses who can definitely explain this better than I can. I'm not an expert on these platforms. Our association and the Translation Bureau are conducting studies on the platform, more specifically its impact on the work of interpreters and linguistic duality in Canada.

Obviously, if we can't hear your remarks clearly, we have to interrupt the service, and, as we've shown, we've had to interrupt you more than 1,000 times since we started, and we're talking about just 14 committees. Imagine what that would be if we included all committees. It's really annoying because it compromises your right to speak in both official languages and interferes in your parliamentary work, not to mention that it's irritating for you to be constantly interrupted because we can't make out what you're saying.

Hon. Steven Blaney: That's especially the case when we tend to speak a bit quickly, as I do.

Ms. Gagnon, Mr. Généreux said there were international standards. You mentioned European standards.

Could you tell us what those standards are and why it would be important for Canada to adopt such standards, which are recognized by interpretation professionals?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I wasn't actually talking about standards, Mr. Blaney. European institutions opted for interpretation platforms, whereas, here in Canada, we opted for a videoconferencing platform.

The standards in question are the ISO standards, which apply in Canada as well. Unfortunately, the current platform doesn't meet

ISO standards in the two categories you can see on the chart, which are fidelity and speech intelligibility, which is very important.

• (1915)

Hon. Steven Blaney: So you recommend that Canada simply use a platform that meets ISO standards. There are several choices, but the platform we're using doesn't meet them. Thank you very much.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute and five seconds left.

Hon. Steven Blaney: All right. I will yield my speaking time to Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ms. Gagnon, you mentioned the percentage of time devoted to preparation. Do you do three or four hours of preparation for three or four hours of work for all committees? Does preparation time correspond to interpretation time?

In addition, what percentage of material, such as witness speeches, do you receive in advance to assist you in your interpretation work? Do such percentages exist?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I don't know of any percentages, Mr. Généreux. However, I can tell you that, since the pandemic started, and since Parliament went virtual, we've noticed that we've been receiving fewer and fewer briefs [*Technical difficulty*], which help us prepare for our committees. An interpreter like me normally works on as many as three different committees a day. There may be seven or eight witnesses per witness panel, who may or may not give us their briefs, which we may or may not be able to prepare. We don't get them the day before the meeting. Sometimes we receive them 10 minutes before the meeting starts. We can't prepare adequately, and that compromises the quality of the service we offer you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gagnon.

Ms. Lattanzio, you have the next five minutes.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Ms. Gagnon.

[*English*]

Good evening, Mr. Thompson. I'm going to be directing my first question to you.

In moments of crisis like these, it is especially important that we, as politicians and parliamentarians, be able to communicate effectively with our constituents. I want to basically come back to what you said before when we spoke about the platform and having issues—that we could face different issues. The headset would be one issue, but you also said that fixing one element doesn't necessarily fix the whole problem.

Am I to understand that no matter what platform or device or however we would correct it, we would always encounter some sort of an issue, whether it be Internet connectivity, as you said, or headsets, or whether it be delays in getting the proper equipment?

I'd like for you to elaborate on that this evening. Thank you.

Mr. Jim Thompson: Thank you.

I want to start by quoting from the transcript of the PROC from a meeting at the end of April last year. Harry Moseley, from Zoom, was asked about the suitability of Zoom as an interpretation platform, and he said, "Madam Chair, thank you for the question. I'm not sure I understand what 'simultaneous interpretation' is." That's pretty illustrative of how suitable Zoom is as a platform for a bilingual country like Canada.

It's true that there are multiple chains in the audio stream from the speaker to the listener and that you're only as strong as your weakest link, but that is not an argument to allow for weak links to persist. It's an argument, I think, for addressing the weakest links, starting with the platform and working from there. That's the most difficult problem we have.

It's certainly one thing to have members of Parliament using the proper equipment, and that's been terrific; it's been picked up well. We need to do more work with the witnesses on that front. However, we need to put some attention on the platform too.

• (1920)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: To your knowledge in terms of this platform, I understand your colleague has given us a grading of these different platforms, and I understand that Zoom was placed in last place. Of these other platforms, which ones would be the most effective, if not the one that Parliament would be better off with, and why?

Mr. Jim Thompson: The comparison that we presented to you was done by an independent sound engineering firm in Germany for AIIC International, and it compared, on four or five parameters, the audio performance of these nine different platforms.

There was one of them that was compliant with all of the parameters tested. None of them were compliant with all...and Zoom was the least compliant, earning a non-compliant grade for two out of the four parameters, all of which are really important technical things that make a huge difference in what you can and cannot hear over these platforms.

I'm sure you'll get more information—and I don't want to bore you with the technicalities—but, yes, Zoom came last.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

My next question is for Ms. Gagnon.

Ms. Gagnon, you say your report emphasizes that some witnesses have had to testify in English as a result of interpretation difficulties and that members have even had to limit their speeches as a result of technical problems.

In addition to changing platforms, what can we do to help witnesses and parliamentarians feel comfortable and able to speak in the language of their choice?

The Chair: Ms. Gagnon, it would be ideal if you could answer that long question in 10 or 15 seconds.

Do you have a few words to add in response to that question?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: All I can tell you is that people must absolutely wear a headset and there must absolutely be a cable connection. Where possible, people must familiarize themselves with the way the platform is used so they know how to do things right.

The Chair: Thank you.

The next speeches will be for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As regards your working conditions, under the new contract the government wants to offer you, your working days would be extended by 25% and you would be required to be available for 15 hours.

What do you think about that?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: It's quite unfortunate. As you'll understand, knowing that we're getting injured working four hours a day, the situation improve if we work five hours a day.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Indeed.

We're also told that the Translation Bureau now requires you to work in teams of two. A chart seems to show that this happens increasingly frequently.

What are the consequences of that for you?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: When we work in pairs, it's normally for a period of three hours. As you can understand, we're on the mic for 30-minute periods. Actually, we work for 20 minutes on Zoom because, for a number of reasons, it's exhausting. So we relieve each other every 20 minutes.

The two-interpreter team consists of one interpreter working into English and another working into French. As the "French booth", I need to be relieved after 20 minutes, and it's the "English booth" that does it. That person is then working into his or her second language. However, work in two-interpreter teams has always been done.

The difference in this case is that the government wants to increase that work, whereas it would be of lower quality.

• (1925)

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, you have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We're seeing everything that's happening right now regarding your employers' failure to listen, among other things.

However, the larger part of interpretation work is done from English into French. Can we conclude that services in French aren't at all a priority for the government?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: As you know, it's not up to me to offer an opinion on that.

All I can tell you is that we're not up to the task and that we have to be protected from prolonged exposure so we can continue serving you in English and French to the best of our abilities.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gagnon.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We're quite concerned about the upcoming changes. Requiring availability for 15 and a half hours, even 16 hours a day, is...

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I'm truly sorry to interrupt Mr. Boulerice.

I'm told there is a technical problem with the conference lines for the people participating in this meeting by telephone. I've just received a message asking me to raise a point of order.

The Chair: All right. I'll check with the technical team.

Don't worry, Mr. Boulerice. I've stopped the clock.

Madam Clerk, are you aware of what's going on?

The Clerk: We're checking on it. It shouldn't be long.

The Chair: All right.

Colleagues, we will suspend for a few seconds.

• (1925) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1930)

The Chair: We will resume.

Mr. Boulerice was speaking when we had to suspend.

Mr. Boulerice, you have exactly two minutes to complete your question.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Before the break, I was talking about availability for 16 hours a day, the request to increase work by 25% per day and sound problems that can cause injuries. In addition, freelance interpreters' contracts will soon be expiring, in mid-February. What could we do to prevent this imminent contract renewal from being a disaster?

• (1935)

[English]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Jim, would you like to answer that question?

[Translation]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Thompson.

[English]

Mr. Jim Thompson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This goes in part to answer Madame Lattanzio, who wondered what can be done. I think it would be very helpful for this committee to acknowledge that the bilingual character of our country, in

the highest institution of our democracy, is under threat. It's being undermined. People are being forced into one lane and mostly it's English.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I'll interrupt you there because I have a few seconds left. I think we've understood your point, Mr. Thompson.

What have you communicated to the office of Minister Anand, and what answer did you get?

The Chair: Which of you wants to respond?

[English]

Mr. Jim Thompson: We have been impressing upon the department and the political leadership in the department the importance of safeguarding interpreters. We've had not a lot of feedback from that level. We have had spokespeople, as you have noted, from the department talking about things in the press that are only half right.

We're waiting. We hope to have more discussions. Our consultations with the translation bureau itself were suspended before they were concluded, so we don't even know what is really going on.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Thompson.

[English]

Now we are going to turn to Mr. Dalton for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for their presentations and their excellent work, which is essential.

What are the differences between interpreting for meetings on the Zoom platform and in-person meetings? We had a microphone, and the interpretation was continuous. What problems has this new way of operating caused for interpreters?

[English]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you for your question, Mr. Dalton.

What I can say to this is that there's a big difference between being online and being in the room with everyone, as I'm sure you've noticed. Everybody can't wait to get together again.

It has made our work more difficult in that, first of all, interpretation is teamwork. We're usually a team of three, and we help each other out. For instance, if we're doing the finance committee and we're listening to briefs and interpreting briefs at a gazillion miles an hour, our colleagues in the booth will jot down numbers so that we say "billions", not "millions" or "thousands", and get the numbers right, which is a challenge.

The problem now is that we are all separated, all working alone in one booth on our own, because of COVID-19. On top of which, we go to the Hill and we have the technical support team, but everyone is remote.

We do have a few MPs coming back to the Hill now, so the sound that we are getting, we are getting from different inputs. We are getting it from Zoom, we're getting it from the MPs in the meeting room and we are getting it from people who are online and not using the proper equipment. There's a lot of variability in the sound that is coming through on a platform that, as we've pointed out, is not meeting our requirements in terms of intelligibility.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

Tell us a little more about the various systems. You mentioned the European system. Is the visual aspect of the other systems as good as that of Zoom?

• (1940)

[*English*]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I can't really speak to the other platforms. I'm not an expert on platforms. On Thursday, you will be receiving a witness who will speak to that.

What I can say is that we are seeing issues abroad as well. There seems to be a trend in terms of injuries being sustained, but certainly not to the extent that we are experiencing them here. Because of our bilingual character, we have been working in a virtual Parliament for some 10 months now, basically on a five days a week schedule, and nobody elsewhere in the world has been exposed to this kind of sustained work. That is why we are showing so many injuries. It's because of that very situation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Dalton: You said that two universities offered interpretation training. What steps do you have to take to become a parliamentary interpreter?

[*English*]

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: You certainly have to do your studies at this time to work for the Government of Canada. The translation bureau only hires interpreters who have a master's degree and you....

I'm sorry, Mr. Dubourg. Do I have only one second or one minute left?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Okay.

What we need is to invest so that we have more training opportunities to prepare the next generation of interpreters to do the work,

so no, you don't have to go through the route of a master's, but if you want to work for the Parliament of Canada.... This is the highest institution in our land in terms of democracy. It's the seat of democracy.

We have to meet exams to work with the bureau. The accreditation exam is the gold standard the world over. Canada is recognized for its quality of work, be it in interpretation, translation or terminology. It's a great source of pride to all Canadians that we have a stellar reputation in terms of these services, so—

I'm sorry. Mr. Dubourg has cut me off.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

The Chair: That's all the time there was for that intervention.

Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor for the next five minutes.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gagnon, I don't have much time and there are so many questions I could put to you. My colleagues have already asked you some good ones.

I'd like to take a look at the data on the health situation. I've read all the documents that were prepared for us for this meeting.

On page 34 of its May 2020 report, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs cited remarks by Greg Phillips, from the Canadian Association of Professional Employees, who said that 40 of the 70 staff interpreters were on sick leave at the time, either as a result of health issues related to current conditions, as you described, or because of childcare needs during the pandemic.

What is the situation, given the statistics you gave us earlier. Do the interpreters who are at home because their children are isolating there, or for other, auditory health reasons, have to be removed from the teams?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: The survey we conducted of Translation Bureau staffers concerned employees on the job. Those who weren't at work as a result of the pandemic because they didn't have childcare services for their children weren't surveyed.

As for freelancers like me, once again, we answer the call. If we can't provide our services because we can't get childcare, we necessarily can't come to work on the Hill, which appreciably reduces the number of people available, unfortunately.

Mr. René Arseneault: Yes, indeed.

Talking about surveys, we've received documents dated January 18, 2021 that refer to something I find intriguing.

Perhaps it's the fact I was a lawyer in a previous life that leads me to ask this question, but you say these injuries resulted in files being opened with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. Is that a provincial agency?

• (1945)

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Once again, these are staffers who filed incident reports and opened files. Yes, I believe it's a provincial agency, but I wouldn't swear to it.

Mr. René Arseneault: That's important for us. I'm referring to page 11 of the document that all members of the committee have in hand.

Am I correct in thinking that it's the equivalent of New Brunswick's Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission or Quebec's Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail, the CNESST?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Yes, I believe the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, the WSIB, is the Ontario agency.

Mr. René Arseneault: All right.

So these complaints concern workplace injuries, such as auditory injuries, and the provincial agency didn't take action on those files.

Is that correct?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: I don't know whether there was any follow-up. I imagine those cases will be investigated in due course. We were talking about complaints from employees who unfortunately may not get the follow-up they want.

I have nothing else to say on the matter. You should contact the Translation Bureau, which is in better position to answer the question.

Mr. René Arseneault: According to the document I'm referring to, it seems that 62% of respondents got no response to the file they opened with that provincial agency.

I don't want to go back over what you said. We talked about headsets, microphones and the need to use a direct line, not WiFi, but there's also the last-minute work you have to do in a hurry because witnesses are called at the last minute and documents are provided to you at the very last second. That prevents you from doing your preliminary work before you arrive at the committee meeting, as you explained earlier.

What impact does this new situation have? And is it really a new situation, or did these kinds of unexpected events occur before the pandemic as well? Did the members of a committee sometimes summon a witness at the last minute and provide you with documents at the last second?

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Witnesses have always appeared at the last minute at the request of the various committees; that's for sure. However, we see that this definitely occurs more often now that we work remotely.

If you remember the good old days when we were in the committee room, the clerk could distribute the documents that had been received to us. They were sent by email in advance, the day before, if they were available. Otherwise we received them when we arrived

for work. We always got to the committee room very early so we could study the documents.

So the impact that has, now we no longer have that service, is that we no longer get the documents, or else we get them on our computer. Imagine receiving 30 briefs that you have to prepare on your computer. You have to print and comb through it all. So the impact is that we aren't as well prepared as we would like to be when we arrive for work, and that's reflected in the service we provide you. I'm not a lawyer. I can't discuss the various legal issues pertaining to the legislation on medical assistance in dying, for example.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

Thanks to our witnesses for their testimony.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon, you are your organization's advocacy lead. Thank you. You are here with Mr. Jim Thompson, who is its communications counsel for the Canada region. Thank you for your intervention. We now continue.

Ms. Nicole Gagnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

[English]

Mr. Jim Thompson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for your strong interest in this.

It is very appreciated.

[Translation]

The Chair: I will suspend for a few seconds so the next witnesses can be seated.

• (1945)

(Pause)

• (1950)

The Chair: We will resume.

The committee is meeting today on its study: Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, but if the question is addressed to you, you may respond. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. A reminder that all comments should be addressed through the Chair.

Interpretation in this videoconference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either Floor, English or French. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

Having said that, I would like to extend a warm welcome to some people who are used to crossing over to the House of Commons from time to time: Charles Robert, Clerk of the House of Commons; Eric Janse, Clerk Assistant; and Stéphan Aubé, Chief Information Officer.

The three of you will have a total of seven and a half minutes to make a presentation. I will tell you when you have one minute left and when your time is up.

Go ahead, Mr. Robert.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the invitation to address the committee in relation to its study on the “Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

The role of the House Administration in the provision of interpretation services is limited and focuses on the technical infrastructure. As you know, the interpreters are employed by the Translation Bureau, an agency of Public Services and Procurement Canada. The House is responsible for providing the facilities and tools required by the interpreters to support proceedings.

Over the years, and throughout the pandemic, the Administration has continued to work hand in hand with the Translation Bureau to ensure the health and safety of the interpreters and offer the high-quality interpretation services required by parliamentarians to do their work.

It is my understanding that you will be hearing from the Translation Bureau at a future meeting and that their representatives will be able to share with you information as to the many measures that they have put into place to address this situation.

• (1955)

[*English*]

Since the introduction of hybrid proceedings less than a year ago, the administration's senior management team has been keeping me apprised of the actions taken to ensure that the House's technological infrastructure could support a safe and rapid transition to the new hybrid environment.

Furthermore, the issue before you has been the subject of considerable discussion at recent meetings of the Board of Internal Economy. Information provided to the board by the administration was shared with the chair of the Liaison Committee, who in turn shared it with all committee chairs.

I will provide you with a brief overview of the investments and improvements that have been undertaken to enhance the safety and audio quality of our interpretation system. Along with my colleagues Stéphan and Eric, I will be ready to answer any questions you may have.

As participants in hybrid proceedings, you will already be familiar with some of these initiatives.

[*Translation*]

The equipment that participants use has a considerable impact on sound quality and a direct impact on interpreters capacity to do their work in adequate and secure fashion. For this reason, we pro-

vide Members of Parliament with high-quality headsets with integrated microphones. Given the importance of good connectivity for audio quality, the Administration implemented a comprehensive review of connectivity services available to all Members in their ridings and helped procure upgraded Internet services where necessary. We also reallocated resources to offer enhanced IT support to Members in order to provide hands-on and timely assistance.

Another critical variable that impacts the audio quality of proceedings is the technology and equipment used by witnesses. This is a challenging variable to control, especially in instances where appearances before a committee are organized on short notice. To help mitigate this, we are extending a program whereby we systematically reach out to witnesses to schedule testing of their equipment and connections prior to their participation in committee meetings. In the recent past, this was done by email, but we will now do so by telephone, and it is our hope that the new process will increase results.

Furthermore, we have for many months now shipped headsets to witnesses who may be in need of them, and we have also offered to test connections, something that we will now be insisting on.

[*English*]

We also continue to make significant technological investments in our precinct infrastructure, all in keeping with evolving health and safety recommendations. For instance, noise-limiting interpretation consoles were installed in all 17 committee rooms, as well as in two multi-purpose rooms in the Sir John A. Macdonald Building.

[*Translation*]

We also set up additional simultaneous interpretation booths: two interpretation booths were added in all committee rooms and three were added to support the Chamber. This was done to allow for better physical distancing as per public health guidelines and to allow for easier and more timely cleaning of the booths.

Our technicians also improved audio programming and system configurations for the Chambers' sound systems to reduce instances of echo. Updates were also made to the Zoom videoconferencing platform to enhance the user experience.

On the topic of Zoom, I should point out that most parliaments that are operating in a virtual manner are using the Zoom platform, including parliaments using more than one language, such as ours. We are in constant contact with colleagues in other parliaments in order to share best hybrid parliament practices.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that this summer, we participated, with the Translation Bureau, in reviews of the sound system and health and safety protocols in the Chamber and in two committee rooms. The results of these reviews, which were conducted by National Research Council of Canada, were very positive. We are currently focused on facilitating further analysis and possible future fine-tuning of the systems and equipment.

We remain committed to collaborating with Public Services and Procurement Canada so that we can continue to make improvements to the work environment of our interpreters. The commitment to ensure a safe and healthy workplace for everyone is shared by all in the parliamentary community and remains the highest priority in the current environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important topic. Eric, Stéphan and I would be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you.

• (2000)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Robert.

We will now go to questions from members of the committee. The first round of questions will be for six minutes.

Mr. Williamson, you have the floor.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to yield my speaking time to my colleague Mr. Généreux, but first I would like to thank the interpreters who have come to testify.

Your work is already very difficult when members speak well in English and French, but even more difficult when members like me speak reasonably well but still make mistakes.

It was very interesting this evening to hear you talk about the problems you're experiencing, and I'm eager to find some solutions. Without your efforts, the House of Commons would be very different and inaccessible for many Canadians. Thank you very much for that.

I now yield my speaking time to Mr. Généreux.

The Chair: Thank you for your remarks, Mr. Williamson.

Go ahead, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I hope you don't hear too much wind. There's a lot of wind blowing here right now.

Thanks from the bottom of my heart to the witnesses for accepting our invitation to address this very important topic. I would immediately like to ask you a question.

In her testimony before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, Nathalie Laliberté, vice-president of the service to Parliament and interpretation sector at the Translation Bureau, said that the bureau and the House of Commons Administration had established a set of criteria that had to be met, if possible, in the provision of remote interpretation.

Is it possible for us to know those criteria? Are they publicly known?

I'm asking any one of the witnesses.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, Digital Services and Real Property, House of Commons): I can answer that question.

Our priority is the quality of the environment in which you work and in which interpreters work.

Every system put in place for the House committees must meet ISO standards. For both conference and meeting systems, there are mainly six ISO standards that must be met in order to provide high quality service that meets health and safety standards. That means...

• (2005)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'm going to interrupt you right there. I just want to know whether the criteria that were established for interpreters' health and safety have been introduced.

You no doubt listened to the previous witnesses, who mentioned that the Zoom platform was not the best for interpretation purposes.

I'd like to know what the criteria are and whether they have been implemented.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Généreux, I'd like to emphasize that we meet the ISO standards respecting booths, interpretation systems and conference systems.

I should add that, for us, Zoom is not the interpretation system used in the House of Commons. We have a different model, and Zoom is a tool that may be used for meetings such as ours.

There are other videoconferencing platforms, such as Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex, and there are also platforms that lend themselves specifically to meetings directly involving interpretation. Lastly, there is a fourth model, one we have chosen, the hybrid model.

This model enables us to meet ISO standards and lets people work as they were already working. We added an element, Zoom, solely to allow information to be transmitted among the various participants. It's important to ensure that our systems meet ISO standards.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I see, but, as you'll understand, the interpreters have hearing problems. I don't mean to be adopting an accusatory tone here, quite the contrary. I want us to look at this together and find a solution.

I should also tell the committee that, since last spring, we've been using headsets every day, even for several hours a day, as were doing today—I will have had this on my head for six hours—and now I have a ringing in my ears and a headache that I never previously had. I've never had a headache in my life.

So we have to understand that these people have real problems. As a result, the House of Commons Board of Internal Economy has looked into their working conditions.

In your work in the House of Commons, you decided to opt for Zoom because you wanted a hybrid model, but were there any other possible solutions?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Généreux, we initially examined several solutions, but I have to tell you that the ISO standards are established by the Translation Bureau. So we made sure that all the solutions that we proposed for parliamentary events and meetings met those standards.

The Translation Bureau therefore establishes the quality standards, and we propose solutions that meet them.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay.

I'd like to talk about headsets now, another important matter.

I've never understood why headsets weren't made compulsory from the outset. Three or four of them should have been sent to each parliamentarian so that there would be a headset at each workplace. This evening, I'm working from home, and I have a headset. I also have one in my office in Ottawa and another at my riding office in Rivière-du-Loup. I never hesitated to ask for them.

Wouldn't it have been simpler from the very outset to just send three or four headsets to every M.P.?

Once again today, some witnesses and parliamentarians forgot their headset and used small earbuds instead. That certainly doesn't make the interpreters' work any easier.

The Chair: Mr. Aubé, Please answer in 10 seconds if you could.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Généreux, we established a process that would allow us to send out headsets within a 24 to 48 hour period to all members and witnesses, if we have enough lead time to send them. A process was established and agreements were signed with companies across Canada to deliver the headsets.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aubé.

Mr. Arseneault, you have the next six minutes.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am a bit puzzled, Mr. Aubé, because I understood that the Zoom platform met all the ISO criteria suggested by the Translation Bureau, but then the problems being encountered by the interpreters are not really being caused by Zoom. That being the case, what is causing their problems? Could they be arising because of the equipment in the booths?

• (2010)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: No, Mr. Arseneault.

I'd like to clarify something.

As I said earlier, we implemented a hybrid model. At the moment, the interpreters don't work directly with Zoom. Instead, they use the currently available consoles and headsets.

We are using Zoom only for audio transmission of the quality audio from the committee room systems. Currently, the audio and interpretation both come from an interpretation room and are sent to all participants; the same is the case for the participants. Their audio is sent to the interpreters through our audio systems, which are operated in accordance with the ISO standards that also protect the interpreters' hearing.

Zoom is therefore simply a mechanism for transmitting over the Internet. Everything that happens here and in the House makes use of our own systems, which comply with current ISO standards.

Mr. René Arseneault: Okay.

We heard otherwise from the previous and current witnesses. I understand what you're telling me, and I accept that, but there's something wrong, because the interpreters appear to be blaming the Zoom platform. However, you're saying that the audio being sent to them is really something else.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I'll offer two comments, Mr. Arseneault.

This summer, we carried out independent tests on the hybrid solution, which includes Zoom and all of our audio systems. We ran these tests with the National Research Council of Canada in Ottawa. We carried out tests in the House of Commons and in various committee rooms to make sure that the audio quality met standards that would prevent interpreters' suffering from hearing injuries. This doesn't mean that they won't experience fatigue, as Mr. Généreux was describing earlier. I personally attend several meetings a day and I must admit that I get tired. However, I wouldn't blame only one factor for it, because that wouldn't be right.

I disagree with the previous witnesses. There are several factors involved in the problem. Our approach was designed to ensure that the sound should be of a quality that would not subject the interpreters to any harm.

Mr. René Arseneault: Okay.

In his opening address, Mr. Robert alluded to the fact that several parliaments that operate virtually use the Zoom platform, including the European Parliament, at which several languages are spoken.

Do you have any other examples for us?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Arseneault, the European Parliament uses a number of tools. They use Zoom and other tools, depending on the context and the size of the event.

At the outset, the number of participants at meetings was one of the factors that led us to choose Zoom. But if we wanted a solution that would also work in the House, then 300 to 400 people would have to be able to take part in the meeting. Zoom was one of the options, and we said to ourselves that if the Zoom audio quality was not as good, we should use our existing systems; hence the hybrid solution. That's what we implemented in the fall.

Mr. René Arseneault: Okay.

With respect to the complaints from the interpreters and the Translation Bureau, have you noted an improvement since issuing your recommendations? You made recommendations about headsets, microphones and cable Internet connection rather than Wi-Fi, among other things. You went to all the riding offices for each M.P. to check signal quality.

Has there been an improvement since your office made sure the equipment was first rate and that it was being used properly by members?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Arseneault, the complaints are not made directly to our office, but rather to the Translation Bureau. The Bureau's representatives could answer this question.

But I can say that we are working steadily to deal with every request from the Translation Bureau to provide and improve interpretation quality and enhance what I would call the three major variables that have an impact on audio quality: the equipment used by the people taking part in the meetings, the carrier technology and the interpretation system. We are continuing to work with the Translation Bureau to deliver quality interpretation and to protect people's health.

Mr. René Arseneault: How are you made aware of interpreters' complaints about the poor sound and synchronization quality?

Who are the intermediaries between their complaints and your work?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It's rather a combination of things, Mr. Arseneault.

We keep in very close touch with people at the Translation Bureau, and some of them interact with our managers and employees on site.

In addition, the technicians are on the premises every day for every meeting. This means that they are made aware of whether the interpreters have encountered any problems during the meeting. We make note of them, keep statistics on them and follow up with members and witnesses, where required, in order to explain to them what needs to be changed to improve the situation.

We do these things every day to ensure quality, and to look after the health and safety of the interpreters.

• (2015)

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you very much. I would have liked to ask another question, but I get the feeling the chair is going to crack the whip.

The Chair: You're right! Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

I'd like to take a moment to remind all the participants to speak more slowly. Although it's an interesting subject, let's not forget our interpreters.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to return to what was said earlier.

There's really a contradiction between what the interpreters presented and what we've just heard.

The Association's documents specifically state that the Zoom platform may have been chosen for good reasons, but that "its suitability for delivering quality interpretation could not have been one of them." The interpreters described the sound as "toxic" in terms of the ISO standards established by international experts. We were also told about all the injuries to which they were subjected.

There's also a small table showing that in terms of quality, Zoom comes in last on the list of various platforms.

What's your take on that?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I can't comment on that because I don't have the Association's data.

But I can tell you that we've been working closely with the parliaments of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which have also prepared reports comparing the various platforms. As I was saying earlier, four models were compared. We are using one of them, which is not the Zoom version with interpretation only, but a hybrid model with several additional health and safety features.

In fact, the comparison that was made in the previous presentation was not very accurate. It's important to look at the facts and compare existing models. I don't want to put words in the mouth of any of the Association's representatives. I'm simply reporting what I understand about what was said and what we're comparing.

We compared the standard version of Zoom with the other products, but that is not the version we're using. As I said earlier, Zoom is only one component of a platform that has been designed for quality, and for the health and safety of the people taking part in our meetings.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Could you show us some of your audio test results so that we can see how they compare to other platforms?

In any event, we're not trying to blame anyone. If you haven't seen these tables or heard this other version of things, you might even take advantage of the opportunity to look for ways to improve the system.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The purpose of our tests was to ensure that our platform met the ISO standards, which are obligatory. We did not compare the various platforms.

Most of the professional platforms that were used meet these standards. We do too, and we can document it.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Are these hearing injuries they spoke about normal?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: If any system causes injuries, then that's not normal. On the other hand, I wouldn't recommend pointing at simply one component of the solution.

As I was saying earlier, quality is usually determined by the quality of the sound that enters the system, which depends on what is happening in the House of Commons or wherever the people attending virtually are participating from.

I can assure you that in the House of Commons, our system meets all the ISO standards.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As I was saying, the goal is not to point the finger at anyone, but to improve the system.

As for procedures and anything that might improve things, and not necessarily of a technical nature, the Board of Internal Economy asked Mr. Janse to send a letter to the chairs, who would then pass them on to the members of their respective committees.

I'd like to know whether there has been any follow-up action. I haven't received this letter from the committee, but I heard about it from my party whip.

What's happening with this?

• (2020)

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Well, at the Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, we provided this information to the Bureau of Internal Economy. It was then sent on to the Chair of the Liaison Committee, who sent it to all the standing committee chairs. Most of the chairs in turn passed this information on to all members of their respective committees. For the few that have not, we sent a reminder for them to do so.

That was just before Christmas, which means that most of the committees did not really have a chance to discuss it. However, now that the committees have resumed their work, some have discussed it, like the Standing Committee on Health, which did so yesterday.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's important to make sure that it's done. For us, the committee members, it's difficult to know what's going on. As for me, I only sit on the Standing Committee on Official Languages, where, according to the letter, 87% of interventions are in French. On the other committees, it's the other way around.

There was even a statistic reporting that 86% of Francophone witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees do so in English because they want to avoid any technical problems. As we know, there have been many technical problems with interpretation services in Parliament.

The Chair: Please answer in 10 to 15 seconds.

Mr. Eric Janse: In terms of procedure, there are several options available to each committee. The committee could adopt a motion saying that witnesses can't testify without wearing their headset or if the headset they have has not been tested.

It's important to remember that witnesses are often called at the last minute, with only a few days notice. There's a complex process for confirming the appearance of a witness, sending the witness a headset, and all the other details. It can take up to a week.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses who are giving evidence this evening. Messrs. Robert, Janse and Aubé, I'm very pleased that you're with us to speak about an important matter that affects not only respect for official languages, but also occupational health and safety, something of concern to everyone.

You began, Mr. Aubé, by saying that the equipment used and the Zoom platform meet ISO standards.

Do you have a report or a study you could send to the committee members to demonstrate that the tests and checks were carried out and that the system does indeed meet ISO standards?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I could certainly give you the tests we carried out this summer for the two committee rooms. I could give you the results for the audio recording loaded into the system, and "heard" by a dummy. A sound system was placed on a chair in a committee room and in the interpretation booth. I can give you the results for the House of Commons rooms that were tested.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Great. We'd be keen to see these reports, if possible.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I should add that these documents belong to the Translation Bureau, because the tests were carried out in partnership with them. I'll ask for permission to obtain them and then give you the required information.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Great.

Apparently the Translation Bureau was asked to send regular statistical reports on interpreter audio injuries to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. These haven't been sent to the committee since at least September 2020.

Have you received information or statistics on work-related injury reports from interpreters?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I haven't received any information about that.

Have you received anything, Mr. Janse?

Mr. Eric Janse: I haven't received anything either. We'll have to ask the people from the Translation Bureau when they appear at a future meeting.

• (2025)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay. Thank you very much.

When the tests were carried out on Zoom and the interpretation system during the summer, were any Translation Bureau employees, whether permanent or freelance interpreters, there to test the system with you or was it only your own people who were there?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: From the outset, the implementation of all solutions was completed in partnership with them. When we made changes or modified the systems used by M.P.s on Parliament Hill, some interpreters did the tests with us. That's how it's always done.

We called upon an independent agency, the National research Council of Canada, to measure the quality and levels of the audio component of the system to determine whether there were any risks to the interpreters' hearing.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay. So you'll be sending us a report on the tests that you carried out.

I have some school-age children. I'm well aware that children can just pass or truly excel. Some just barely get by with 60% while others get 90%. Do the existing standards match up more closely to the minimum or was everything perfect?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Based on the terms used in the report to describe the test results, our systems were...

[English]

“in a safe range”

[Translation]

... for hearing. These tests were monitored. As I said earlier, when the equipment is used remotely and there are connectivity problems or microphone problems, then that could affect audio quality. The tests that we ran showed us that what was coming in from outside over the Internet met the current standards.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay.

Are you telling us that it's not necessarily the zoom platform that's causing the problems, but rather the equipment or the quality of the connection?

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

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay. Couldn't we have some—

The Chair: Mr. Boulerice, your five minutes are up. Time flies by.

Given the time remaining, we'll just do a final round. Mr. Généreux and Mrs. Lalonde will each have five minutes and Messrs. Beaulieu and Boulerice two and a half minutes each.

Before giving the floor to Mr. Généreux, I'd like to advise Mr. Beaulieu and all the committee members that the Liaison letter we spoke about has been sent to all members of the committee. It's also in the digital binder. It was sent a while ago now and might have been overlooked.

Mr. Généreux, over to you now for five minutes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If you don't mind, I'd like out of courtesy to give my speaking time to my colleague Stephen Blaney because it's important for everyone to have an opportunity to ask questions. Mr. Dalton might be able to comment as well.

The Chair: Yes, of course.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank my colleague, Mr. Généreux.

Thanks also to our House of Commons representatives. Mr. Clerk, it's always an honour to have you sit in on this committee.

What we're going through is chaos. We're in committee and I'm here in my office in Lévis, in the middle of a snowstorm, and Mr. Généreux is in Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup. We're aware of the fact that you had to do some fancy footwork and make some snap decisions.

We've spent a lot of time discussing the platform this evening. The table we were given refers to Zoom standard and Zoom advanced. Is the House of Commons using the version that is compliant with speech intelligibility? That's my first technical question this evening.

• (2030)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I'd say that the platform mentioned can't be compared to the standard version, Mr. Blaney, because it's not the same environment.

Our goal is to address both the intelligibility of what is being said and the health and safety of participants. That's why I've been referring to a hybrid model.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I want to make sure that I fully understand. To whom are you referring when you say "we"? You're from the House of Commons, and then there is the Translation Bureau and the interpreters.

Could you explain how that works?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The Translation Bureau provides the service. As you know, the interpreters work for the Translation Bureau. We provide the technical environment in accordance with the standards established by the Bureau.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Are you the Translation Bureau's boss, so to speak?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: No, I'm just in charge of providing service at the House of Commons, under Mr. Robert, who is responsible for implementing the technologies used by interpreters on the Hill.

Hon. Steven Blaney: So who does the Translation Bureau report to?

Mr. Charles Robert: It reports to Public Services and Procurement Canada.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Okay. We therefore have two entities and it's a partnership.

So you're using a hybrid system, and you said that what the interpreters in the booths are hearing comes from your system. The sound is therefore not coming from the Zoom platform, unless there are external witnesses.

Is that correct?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes it is, Mr. Blaney.

Hon. Steven Blaney: There was a lot of discussion about the headsets. You mentioned that you were able to send headsets to witnesses within 24 to 48 hours, and that there had been a trial run. Shouldn't that have been a sine qua non? Even we, the parliamentarians, are sometimes told that we can't intervene if we don't have our headset.

Shouldn't the requirement to wear the headset supplied by the house become the standard for everyone?

You even pointed out that you had modified procedures at the beginning. The Clerk said this had been done by email. Now, they take the time to call people. We committee members always take the time to do the tests. It's a bit tedious, but a headset is a lot less expensive than a plane ticket.

Do you think that part of the solution might be for witnesses and parliamentarians always to use a headset approved by the House?

Mr. Eric Janse: Yes indeed. That would be an excellent solution.

However, even though we can generally get these headsets out to people within 48 hours to most parts of Canada, it might be more difficult on weekends or when people live in more remote areas, for example.

And this only happens once the witness's attendance has been confirmed. The committee has to have decided which witnesses it wants to hear. Then it has to contact them to confirm their presence and obtain their address so that we can send the headset. This might take a few days. After that, some tests have to be carried out.

All in all, the process might take up to a week, and as you mentioned earlier, in most instances the advance notification period for witnesses is much shorter.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I saw you signalling. I'll turn things over to my colleague Mr. Dalton, but it's a little selfish of me to do so.

Mr. Dalton, would you like to add anything?

Mr. Marc Dalton: No, everything's all right. This is around the third time I've used the interpretation channel to listen to the interpreters and I'm very impressed by their work. I'd like to thank them very much.

I ordered more headsets last week, and I think it would be a good idea for all members to do the same.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your comments.

Over to you now, Mrs. Lalonde, for five minutes.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin, Mr. Robert, on behalf of my colleagues, by thanking you and your team for the excellent work you've done since the beginning of March. I'm a new parliamentarian, but I know that many of my colleagues here in the House have been here much longer than I have. On behalf of all of us, I want to thank you this evening for your work and for your caring attention to our occupational health and safety. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you publicly on behalf of all my committee colleagues.

This evening, we've discussed the Zoom platform at length. I'd like you to explain the reasons why this platform was recommended and why we are using it now.

● (2035)

Mr. Charles Robert: As Mr. Aubé worked on this, he's the one who has the information to properly answer your question.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Thank you Mr. Robert.

The decision wasn't an easy one. We made it in the spring, early on in the crisis. We immediately put together a team to size up what was being done elsewhere. As I mentioned a short while ago, we were also in contact with several other parliaments, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, to find out how they were doing things and what options they had considered. For example, we worked with the British Parliament to find out how they were proceeding. They too had decided to use Zoom. However, I need to point out that the British Parliament does not provide any interpretation services.

We asked ourselves what platform we should choose to deliver quality services. We also took other important criteria into consideration, including security. We were also looking into how to integrate it with our existing systems. It's important for the interpreters to be able to use the existing consoles and booths, which are compliant with ISO standards. Zoom allowed for this integration and made it possible for us to provide the service without having to change too many things for the people working on Parliament Hill. These are a few of the criteria we considered.

We also looked into broadcasting. Zoom allowed us to integrate our broadcasting systems, and to provide other services to parliamentarians. For example, we use Zoom for press conferences, because it can function in different modes.

When we made our decision in March 2020, we also took the scale of events into account. Zoom was one of the only platforms that would allow us to have more than 300 people connected. That was another criterion we factored in.

Health and safety were other criteria. As I previously mentioned, we wanted to be able to integrate our systems and to comply with standards. The Translation Bureau didn't impose these standards on us, because we work in partnership with them. It's certainly a key factor for them. We held discussions and were told that they preferred for us to continue to use the existing systems on the Hill, because they provided the proper protection for their employees.

Those, Mrs. Lalonde, are all the criteria we took into consideration before coming to this difficult decision.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you, Mr. Aubé.

I'm not sure how comfortable you are about discussing what I'm about to say. This evening, we spoke a great deal about witnesses and parliamentarians. The last witnesses referred to headsets and network cable connections. These are often important factors that allow our interpreters to have access to quality sound, and that help them do their work better.

Do you feel that if headsets weren't used in the House, it would have an impact on the interpreters' working conditions?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: If we hadn't used the systems we chose to integrate with the Zoom platform, and which meet ISO standards, there would probably have been some impacts. Currently, operating remotely can lead to fatigue, but we've done everything possible to address this. That's why we opted for a hybrid system rather than a videoconferencing platform like Zoom, which could have been installed separately while the interpreters could have used different systems for interpretation.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Mr. Aubé, I'm going to ask you a final...

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mrs. Lalonde, But your speaking time is up.

Thank you, Mr. Aubé.

We will now continue with Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'm going to begin with a brief question.

The letter from the Board of Internal Economy mentions some statistics. As we know, most of the interpretation is from English into French. That being the case, the mother tongue of the interpreters should ideally be French, or the interpreters should be highly skilled at interpreting towards French.

Do you know what percentage of interpreters whose first language is French are working for debates and committees?

• (2040)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I don't have those statistics in hand, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Eric Janse: It's a question you should ask the Translation Bureau when it appears before your committee.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You're right.

Do you have any idea why 86% of francophones give evidence in English? Is it because the chairs don't provide any guidelines on this?

Here at the Standing Committee on Official Languages, most of the discussions are in French. It's difficult to imagine what it's like elsewhere, but it would appear to be the other way around.

People seem to switch into English as soon as there's a technical glitch. As most of the committee chairs do not speak French, this has much more of an impact on francophones.

Could the solution be to have conditions that would encourage witnesses who want to give evidence in French to do so?

Mr. Eric Janse: I believe we do that already. All witnesses know that they have an absolute right to speak in the language of their choice and are even encouraged to do so. Some witnesses are bilingual and can respond in both languages, which affects the statistics.

However, I've taken note of it. We could do even more to encourage witnesses to speak in their preferred language, given our excellent interpretation services.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I don't know if you can comment on it, but I was wondering whether you think the headset should be compulsory.

Mr. Charles Robert: The problem is still headset availability. If they've been sent out to the witnesses, we can insist that they use them.

The chair recently said that all members have to wear their headset. It's less of a problem for us now, but it's another story for the witnesses.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I meant the M.P.s too, because some are still not using them.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I'd like to add something briefly.

Connectivity is just as important, if not more so. It needs to be tested before the meeting begins to test the sound quality, and make sure that the meaning comes across. Most of the problems that have been occurring are the result of problematic Internet connections.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The final intervention is for Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Boulerice, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Once again, I'd like to thank Messrs. Robert, Janse and Aubé for being with us this evening.

Mr. Aubé, I'd like to return to the connectivity and Internet hookup problems.

What platforms did you test before reaching a final decision? The previous witnesses mentioned KUDO and other platforms designed specifically for interpretation.

What other options were given serious consideration?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We tested two other platforms, one from Microsoft and one from Cisco.

We had to decide quickly between a specialized platform and a hybrid model. Following our research and consultations, we chose a hybrid platform because the quality was higher and it allowed much more flexibility in terms of all the other essential services we provide to Parliament.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I get it.

I'd like to return to the various options.

For parliamentarians and witnesses, what should be required in terms of Internet connectivity to improve the standard, and reduce the likelihood of hearing injuries for interpreters? What do we need to do to get things on the right track?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Even though I have Wi-Fi at home, I still connect through a cable to keep connectivity as strong as possible.

Also, as some people mentioned, it's important to make sure that people have a good microphone. Other standards should also be developed. People could make sure that they turn off their microphone when they're not involved in the discussion to keep noise down.

A little more planning would also be a good idea, with tests done prior to the meetings to ensure that the sound and the Internet connection are good. That's what will really have an impact on intelligibility during meetings.

• (2045)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Could sound input attenuation act as a buffer between Zoom and the interpreters? Would it be possible to do this?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It's already been done, Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Hats off to you, then.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: It's required in order to meet the ISO standards, Mr. Boulerice. We had to replace all of our consoles at considerable expense.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

I've now heard all the questions and answers from the members and witnesses. Before ending the meeting, I have a question for Mr. Aubé.

In coming to a decision on the tools—you mentioned Zoom and other hybrid systems—the emphasis was on health and safety.

Did the confidential aspect of parliamentarians' work influence the equipment decisions?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Dubourg, security is an essential criterion. As you know, our meetings require different levels of security.

The platform we decided upon allows us to take this into account and to continue to provide the required services.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That's it for the meeting.

Members of the committee, allow me to warmly thank the witnesses, Mr. Charles Robert, Clerk of the House of Commons, Mr. Eric Janse, Clerk Assistant, and Mr. Stéphan Aubé, Chief Information Officer.

Thank you very much for your testimony. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank all staff, and particularly our interpreters and technicians.

Thank you and good evening.

The meeting is now adjourned.

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