



Havoc on the Hill

**A study on the impact of the shift to virtual meetings on
the functioning of Parliament**

by the

**International Association of Conference Interpreters
(Canada Region)**

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Overview

This report examines the move to virtual sittings of Parliament over the past nine months and the impact this shift has had on discourse in the highest institutions of our democracy at a time of crisis, in particular as it relates to the ability of MPs and other participants to express themselves in their chosen official language.

The Canada Regional Bureau of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC-Canada) is committed to serving Parliament and Canadian democracy by delivering the highest quality interpretation services. It is in this spirit that the Association has undertaken this review to document the nature and number of times parliamentary sessions have been disrupted by faulty technology since the pandemic forced its meetings online.

The findings are based on an automated search for key words [such as “interpret”, “audio”, “technical”] in transcripts of meetings of the House of Commons and fourteen of its standing committees that have met the most often from April to December 2020.

The ability to communicate effectively is especially critical in crisis moments like these. Canadians are looking to their elected leaders for clarity and comfort. When it comes to the proceedings of Parliament, this has not been its finest hour. Canadians hoping to follow the proceedings of the House of Commons or its Standing Committees in the official language of their choice delivered with equal quality have thus far not been well served.

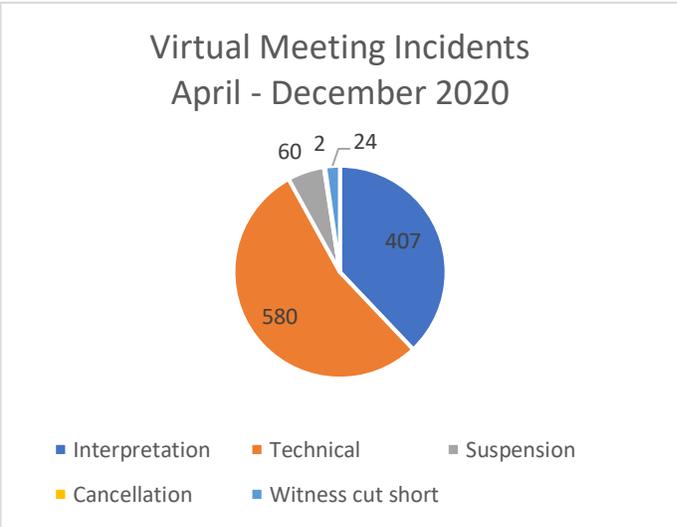
This review suggests that inadequate technology has wreaked havoc on the proceedings of Parliament.

KEY FINDINGS

More than 1,000 interruptions

The experience of the first nine months of virtual sittings has not been pretty.

After reviewing the transcripts of a majority of parliamentary proceedings since April 2020, we have identified 1,073 occasions when debate in the House of Commons or one of its Standing Committees has been interrupted during the 368 sessions studied for this report.



Technical and interpretation issues top the charts

The review found that technical issues were the most common problem that results in interruption of parliamentary proceedings, including any incident solely of a technical nature that affects the meeting at large i.e., lost connection, frozen screen, speaker on mute or on the wrong language channel. Interruptions caused by these kinds of problems accounted for 54% of total interruptions

Interpretation problems are a double-edged sword

At 38% of total interruptions, problems associated with interpretation were almost as prevalent. These included any incident that results in interpretation difficulty i.e., fast speech, speaker is far away from mic, interpretation not coming through headsets, poor quality audio.

Interpreters interrupt the proceedings when the quality of sound delivered over the videoconferencing platform is so poor they cannot hear the speaker well enough to interpret their words.

Providing top quality interpretation of the proceedings of Parliament is further challenged because interpreters have suffered a spike in auditory injuries since Parliament's wholesale shift to distance interpreting (where the interpreter is not in the same room as meeting participants) with audio delivered to them over an online platform. A recent [survey](#) of interpreters employed by the Translation Bureau who work mostly in Parliament found that 70% had suffered injuries such as tinnitus, nausea, headache and fatigue severe enough to require time off the job to recover.

A number of themes of great concern emerge from our review of the transcripts.

Official languages take a beating in virtual Parliament...

An off-shoot of the widespread problems with interpretation in virtual Parliament is the common complaint among MPs about the limitations placed on participants when it comes to the official language they choose to express themselves in.

The bilingual character of Canada is being set aside as discourse in Parliament is forced into one language, usually English, because sound quality and other technical problems prevent interpreters from being able to do their jobs. Witnesses seem to find it difficult to toggle between interpretation channels, as they must when switching from one language to another.

Bloc MP Madame De Bellefeuille put it bluntly when she said:

"At the last meeting, I said that I thought 90% of francophone witnesses gave their evidence in English. I was wrong by 4%. It would seem that 86% of witnesses who appear before parliamentary committees do so in English. We've been saying from the outset that interpretation and technical problems have been having

"... 86% of witnesses who appear before parliamentary committees do so in English."

Claude De Bellefeuille, MP
December 3rd, 2020

more of an impact on interventions by francophone MPs. And now we have facts and documentation to support our claim.”¹

There is a clear sense that the use of French in Parliament has been unduly curtailed because of interpretation issues related to the platform the House of Commons administration has chosen for virtual meetings of Parliament.

There are numerous examples in the transcripts of witnesses forced to speak English because interpreters were unable to hear speakers well enough to do their job. For example, a witness before the Procedures and House Affairs Committee testified that:

“At meetings of the Standing Committee on Finance, I saw interpretation problems several times, as a result of which people who were speaking French felt obliged to switch to English.”

Peter Julien, MP
December 3, 2020

“I had intended to speak a bit in French, but given the time and the technical issues, I think I will just continue in English for the translators' ease.”²

Judith Robinson, the Commissioner of the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada testified to the Finance Committee on July 7, 2020 that:

“As suggested to me, I will be speaking only in English to avoid any technical difficulties.”

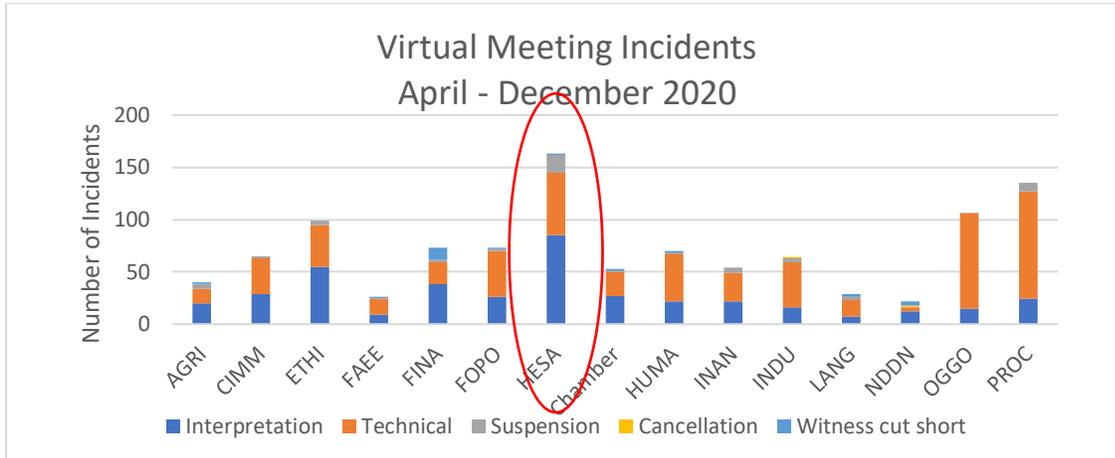
And MPs have raised the issue of French language discourse being suppressed because of interpretation problems in particular.

¹ Board of Internal Economy, December 3, 2020.

² Prof. Cristine de Clercy (Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, The University of Western Ontario, As an Individual) to the House of Commons Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, April 29, 2020.

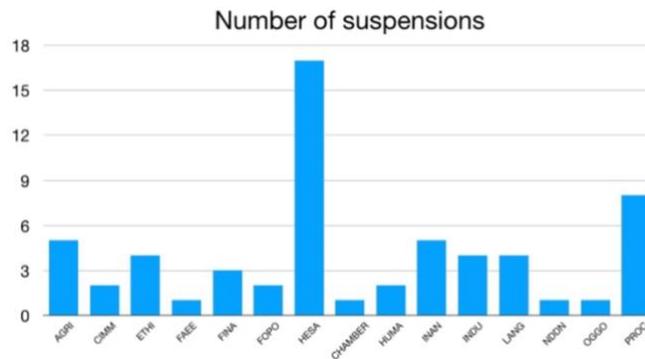
The proceedings of the Standing Committee on Health have been the most interrupted

In the midst of the pandemic crisis, the Standing Committee on Health experienced the highest number of interruptions of its proceedings of any parliamentary committee.



The Health Committee was interrupted more because of issues related to interpretation rather than technical problems, and the Committee was forced to suspend its meetings on seventeen occasions, a frequency far outstripping the next most frequently suspended committee (the Procedure and House Affairs Committee was suspended 8 times).

At the very time our elected officials are trying to examine pressing health, social and economic issues of great importance during this crisis, interruption of the proceedings of the Standing Committee on Health have become routine.



For example, interruption in the interpretation service led to farcical exchanges at the Health Committee where unilingual witnesses have been interpreted by other witnesses so their testimony could be understood by members of the committee.³

³ Witnesses from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency appearing before the Standing Committee on Health on June 24, 2020.

MPs are not able to do their jobs

MPs have complained with some justification that they have been unable to properly hold the government to account because the testimony of Ministers appearing before their committees or in the House of Commons has been interrupted, sometimes for significant periods. The same is true for witnesses testifying before parliamentary committees. Interruptions often waste valuable time MPs would otherwise use to gather evidence related to legislative proposals, committee studies and the like.

The review found that technical problems were so severe that two

“They (ministers) need to have headsets and they need to ensure that they have a proper connection.... We're seeing that those opportunities are being lost and ensuring that ministers are accountable is a very important part of our democracy.”

Blake Richards
December 3, 2020

committee meetings had to be cancelled altogether, while 16% of meetings had to be suspended to address technical or interpretation issues.

In conclusion

Parliament functions in an official bilingual legal and political context that is the wonderful reality of Canada. Our country is founded on the requirement that both the English and French languages must be of equal quality in federal institutions. With Parliament occupying the pinnacle of our democracy, it must function so that Canadians can follow its proceedings in the language of their choice delivered with the highest quality interpretation. That is the duty of Parliament to Canadians, a duty that needs to be refreshed.

“Every time a technical problem of this kind occurs, it results in lost time in terms of evidence and our parliamentary work. Every now and then, this might be considered acceptable, but unfortunately, a lot of time is being lost, with interruptions of up to 10 or 20 minutes, because of technical problems.”

Gérard Deltell
December 3, 2020

About this report

Data reported here were collected by searching transcripts from meetings of the House of Commons and a selection of Standing Committees held from April when Parliament first began meeting virtually to December when Parliament adjourned for the Christmas break.

Standing Committees searched were selected on the basis of the number of meetings held during the research period and include:

Agriculture and Agri-Food	Human Resources, Skills and Social
Citizenship and Immigration	Development and the Status of Person with
Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics	Disabilities
Foreign Affairs and International	Indigenous and Northern Affairs
Development	Industry, Science and Technology
Finance	Official Languages
Fisheries and Oceans	National Defence
Health	Government Operations and Estimates
	Procedure and House Affairs

The following terms were searched using the auto-search capabilities of Adobe Acrobat:

- | | |
|----------------|---------------------|
| a. "interpret" | h. "fast" |
| b. "audio" | i. "headset" |
| c. "technical" | j. "sound" |
| d. "difficult" | k. "problem" |
| e. "mic" | l. "point of order" |
| f. "mike" | m. "translat" |
| g. "mute" | |

In order to ensure that incidents are not counted more than once, searchers annotated the text where the incident occurs in the transcript. This can be done in Adobe by highlighting the text, so that it remains highlighted through subsequent searches of the transcript for different search terms.

Contributors

Havoc on the Hill was produced by the Canadian Region of the International Association of Conference Interpreters with the following contributions:

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