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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger





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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)):** Good morning.

I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 15 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to continue its study on the inclusion of indigenous languages on federal election ballots. That will be our focus for the first hour.

Before we go any further, I would like to welcome a new member to the committee, Marie-Hélène Gaudreau.

Welcome to the committee, Ms. Gaudreau.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ):** Good morning.

I'm pleased to be joining you.

**The Chair:** I would also like to thank Mr. Therrien for all his hard work.

We have to elect a new vice-chair.

It has been moved by Ms. Romanado that Ms. Gaudreau be elected. Is everyone in agreement?

Since everyone is in agreement, I declare the motion carried and Ms. Gaudreau duly elected vice-chair of the committee.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** It's a privilege to be vice-chair of the committee.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Our first panel of witnesses comes to us from the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and the State of Alaska. They are Stephen Dunbar, chief electoral officer, Elections Northwest Territories; Dustin Fredlund, chief electoral officer, Elections Nunavut; and Samantha Mack, language assistance compliance manager of the Alaska Division of Elections. Welcome.

In that order, we will have quick five-minute opening comments. I'd just like to assure all of you that if you are providing substance for the committee to help us in this study, I will not cut you off, but if you are not providing us relevant information, I will probably get you to move on so that we can get to questions and answers. That's just so you know.

With up to five minutes, we will start with Mr. Dunbar.

Welcome.

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Northwest Territories):** Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members, for the invitation to appear before you today.

The Northwest Territories has 11 official languages: Chipewyan, Cree, English, French, Gwich'in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuk-tun, North Slavey, South Slavey and Tłı̨chǫ. The ability to converse in an indigenous language ranges from under 200 for Inuktitut to over 2,200 for Tłı̨chǫ. While these numbers may seem low in a national context, it is important to note that, in our smallest communities, most residents speak an indigenous language.

Our governing legislation, the Elections and Plebiscites Act, currently makes no provision for anything other than the candidate's name and photo on the ballot. As the committee may know, there are no political parties represented in the Northwest Territories legislative assembly, and efforts to introduce party politics have, thus far, been unsuccessful.

In 2016, the territorial government introduced amendments to the Vital Statistics Act, to allow for names to be registered using indigenous characters and diacritics, instead of the Roman alphabet. While these amendments have not yet been brought into force, some residents have started reclaiming indigenous names. As one member said, during the debate on the amendments:

...it also sets the stage for self-identity of First Nations people. You know, the irony of our existence in North America and the world stage is that we all have Anglicized names and Christian names. Our culture is not really reflected in our English names. So this provides an opportunity for people to distinguish themselves as First Nations and Indigenous First Nations around the world.

Under our legislation, a nomination form requires a candidate to indicate the given name and surname by which they are commonly known in their community. There is no requirement to present government-issued documentation, and the ballot would reflect the name as stated in the nomination paper. Figure 1 is an example of what our ballot would look like with indigenous names.

The 1992 plebiscite on the boundary between Nunavut and the Northwest Territories had the plebiscite question translated into 10 of the 11 languages, with Cree being the exception, as interpretation could not be provided in the plebiscite time frame. The proclamation and instructions for voters were also produced in 10 languages. Depending on what languages were commonly spoken in the electoral district, the ballot could have up to four languages included on it. Figure 2 has the English, French and Inuktitut ballot that was used in the eastern Arctic electoral districts.

I'll conclude my comments with some of the issues we face in producing materials in official languages. The languages bureau that was used in the 1992 plebiscite no longer exists, so there's no longer a one-stop shop to have materials produced into all official languages. We are reliant upon individual contractors who may not have the time to quickly turn around materials. The cost to translate materials can also be significantly different, depending on the contractor's rates. There may be considerable variation in terminology between dialects of the same language, so not all speakers may understand the materials produced in that official language. Figure 3 includes examples from three dialects of North Slavey from the Sahtu region, all translating the word "vote".

Finally, care must be taken to ensure that proper orthographic tools are installed on computers to support indigenous fonts. The default settings in word processors can present indigenous fonts using incorrect diacritical marks. Figure 4 has some examples of what can happen when using default settings when opening a document.

I would be pleased to respond to any questions the committee may have. Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1110)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for that insightful information.

We will now move on to Mr. Fredlund.

Welcome.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Nunavut):** *Qujannamiik Iksivautaq.*

Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members, for the invitation to appear before you as part of the study on the inclusion of indigenous languages on election ballots.

I am honoured to share with you some of the work that my office does in promoting and advancing Inuktitut in Nunavut's democracy, not only as an obligation under the Nunavut Elections Act, but simply because Nunavummiut rely on us for information in their own languages.

An important tool in the voting process are the ballots upon which we express our democratic choice. Our ballots include candidates' names in any of Nunavut's official languages, French, English and Inuktitut, which we've heard from some of the previous speakers include Inuktitut, which is written in syllabics, and Inuinnaqtun, which is written in roman orthography, the common alphabet that we use in English and French.

Inuktitut names are personal and deeply rooted in Inuit customs and culture. We rely on candidates for the spelling and transliteration

of their names. These are provided to our office during the declaration period and are included on the ballot.

Fortunately, my office does have the capacity in-house to ensure that each name written in Inuktitut syllabics accurately depicts the candidate's choice. This capacity is also necessary to decipher the write-in ballots, to ensure that the voter's choice—written in any official language, including syllabics—is accurately recorded. I have provided the committee with a few examples that depict our multi-language ballots.

*Koana.* I welcome any questions you have.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That was excellent.

Samantha Mack, we will go to you for your opening comments.

**Ms. Samantha Mack (Language Assistance Compliance Manager, Alaska Division of Elections):** *Uvlaasatkun.* Thank you, and good morning.

My name is Samantha Mack. I am Unangaġ, from King Cove, Alaska. I come to this work in language access from a previous background in academics, focusing on the self-determination of indigenous peoples. This work is very important to me.

If you don't already know, Alaska is currently undergoing the implementation of ranked-choice voting for the first time in our voting process. As such, my department has recently launched a vast educational campaign, which is being carried out in nine Alaska native languages, in addition to Spanish, English and Tagalog.

For us, the inclusion of indigenous languages in the elections process very much does not end with simple inclusion in the ballot, but is all-encompassing, including items like outreach advertising and all public communications from the division of elections. We also utilize a panel model wherein multiple speakers of each indigenous language meet in a panel to translate together. We feel that this is a best practice in terms of indigenous translations, and it works out quite well for us in regard to accuracy and things like that.

Much like Alaska, Canada's role in the colonization of its indigenous peoples and the ongoing impacts of that mean that the inclusion of indigenous languages in the electoral process is a really important first step. I look forward to this discussion.

Thank you for inviting me.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. We also are looking forward to this great discussion.

We are going to start with six-minute rounds, starting with Mrs. Block followed by Mr. Turnbull.

[Translation]

We will then go to Ms. Gaudreau, followed by Ms. Idlout.

[English]

Ms. Block, you have six minutes.

**Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Firstly, thank you to our witnesses for joining us today, as well as for this study.

Through you, Madam Chair, I would direct my first questions to Mr. Dunbar.

I'm imagining that there are multiple indigenous languages represented in the different ridings in the Northwest Territories. If that is the case, what is the process for producing ballots in multiple indigenous languages?

• (1115)

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** The ballots in the Northwest Territories only have the candidate's name and photo on them. We don't have the requirement to print anything other than the name and photo on the ballot. We are in the process of trying to make sure that we have a lot of e-voter information published in the indigenous languages spoken in that electoral district.

If we were looking at the Mackenzie Delta electoral district, the languages there would be Gwich'in and Inuvialuktun. If we were looking at the Monfwi electoral district, we would only be looking at Tłıchǫ and English.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you very much for that.

What types of materials would you be producing in order to provide information to the constituents?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** We would be producing signs that say "vote here" and "polling place" in the various languages.

There will be information about what you require to vote. If there is a voter ID requirement.... For instance, an elector here must show proof of their identity and residency. Obviously, a driver's licence or government identity card would be optimal, but in a lot of our small communities, fewer than half of the residents will have government-issued ID. We would be looking at a health card in conjunction with something else, whether that's a utility bill, a lease, a mortgage or a hunter's card.

Those are the things we would be looking at, and we will have posters produced in each language outlining what materials you can bring to prove your identity.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you very much.

Through you, Madam Chair, you also identified that there were some issues with regard to the timelines and dealing with multiple contractors.

Can you define for us how you have mitigated some of those issues?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** At the moment, we haven't really mitigated any of them. We are in the process of gearing up for the 2023 general election. We are starting this work right now. I am meeting

with our languages commissioner next week to start laying out our preliminary plans and getting some feedback from her on what steps we can take.

One of the examples I used was about the different dialects in North Slavey. This language is spoken in a region of the territory that is over 280,000 square kilometres, and these communities are fairly well spread out, so we want to ensure that whatever materials we produce will be understood by electors in each of those communities. We may need to look at producing things in each dialect at that point.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you for that.

I believe the next question I'm going to ask could be answered by either Mr. Dunbar or Mr. Fredlund.

Could you describe for us how long your official election periods are, typically?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** I can start and pass it on to my colleague.

Our elections are 29 days long by law.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Our elections are 35 days.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** They're thirty-five days. Okay.

By what point are candidates required to be officially registered? Is there a certain time frame before the elections are going to take place? When do you have to have your candidates in place in order to be able to produce all of the materials?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** For the Northwest Territories, because we don't have political parties, they have until the 25th day before polling to get their nomination papers in to be listed on the ballot. That's the first five days of the campaign.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** We were similar to NWT when we split. We just lengthened our election period, but it's the same concept. It's in the first five days, so between 35 days and 30 days prior to the election.

• (1120)

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** My last question that I would put to you both, through the chair, is what sort of feedback have you been given about language being a barrier for federal elections?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** I can't speak to any feedback we have received about federal elections. We had a by-election here in February and some of the feedback we received was because we did not have time to produce the materials in Chipewyan. That was a barrier for some of the elders to be able to cast their vote. Due to a COVID outbreak, that election was done by mail-in ballot.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** In conjunction with the federal election in 2019, we had our municipal elections, which we hosted. Our advance vote was on election day, so we shared many of the same venues with Elections Canada in 2019. Anything that leaves my office is in all four languages. Our Twitter account is in all four languages. Our ballots are in all four languages as requested, whereas Elections Canada didn't...it's just English and French.

We had the signs posted side by side on the wall. Ours were in all four languages and Elections Canada's signs weren't. Obviously, we heard a lot from people. They were sometimes confused between the two organizations. We took a lot of phone calls from people complaining to us about our languages production, but in the end, it wasn't ours. It was Elections Canada's, so we got confused in that sense.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We'll now move to Mr. Turnbull.

You have six minutes.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thanks, Madam Chair. I'll split my time with my honourable colleague, Mr. Fergus.

Let me start by thanking the witnesses for being here. I really appreciate your testimony today.

For me, what we heard from Elections Canada during this study in the initial meeting was a kind of one-size-fits-all approach. At least, I took from some of the testimony we heard that perhaps there needed to be a solution that could work for every jurisdiction if Elections Canada were to implement a solution on this important topic.

I think that assumption got challenged in the last panel of last week, when we heard from individuals from Nunavut that indigenous languages being included on ballots was really important to them. In terms of other jurisdictions, it wasn't necessarily the top priority for other indigenous speakers. That was interesting for me to note. It challenged a couple of assumptions there.

Perhaps I'll go to Mr. Dunbar first, because the Northwest Territories has many indigenous languages.

Do you see an approach that really recognizes the regional differences of indigenous languages spoken in those areas? What would you advise Elections Canada to do in terms of being able to accommodate as many indigenous languages as possible? I know it's a tough question, but I'd be interested in hearing your perspective on that.

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are probably two comments that I'll make on that.

First, we were one of the first jurisdictions—if not the first—to include the candidate's photo on the ballot. There were numerous reasons for why that first took place about 20 years ago. In part, it was to ensure that electors who may not have full literacy, or who may be able to speak indigenous languages but not to read them, would be able to identify the candidate by sight. That is one of the actions that Elections NWT took—I believe it was for the 2003 general election—to ensure the ballots would be more accessible to all electors.

The other action is that the returning officers in each electoral district will arrange, if there is a need for it, for interpreters to be available at each polling place. Because we have fairly small communities, we have one polling place per community, so there's a need for one interpreter in each community. In the communities where you have multiple languages spoken, we do make efforts to have interpreters for each language, but obviously that is not always possible. I don't think I've fully answered your question, but that is the best effort we make at the moment.

• (1125)

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you very much.

I think that's my three minutes, Mr. Fergus, so I'll pass it over to you.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.):** I'd like to thank the honourable member.

I also want to thank all the witnesses who are with us today.

My question is along the same lines as Mr. Turnbull's, and it's for Mr. Dunbar and Mr. Fredlund.

As Mr. Turnbull said, Elections Canada takes a one-size-fits-all approach, but in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, the language that appears on the election ballot can depend on the community. In some communities, the languages used for the election ballot are English, French and Chipewyan, but in other communities, the language used for the ballot is the most widely spoken language in the community.

Do I have that right?

[*English*]

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** For plebiscites, yes, the plebiscite question would be translated into the language that is commonly spoken in that electoral district, but not for a general election because we don't have the languages on the ballot.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Mr. Fredlund, the information on the sample election ballot you provided appears in Latin or Roman characters, as well as in an indigenous language.

How do you determine which indigenous language will be used for the election ballot? Does it depend on the electoral district or riding?

[*English*]

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Yes, for the example you see, this is exactly what a ballot would look like. Of the 25 communities, 23 use syllabics, the language you probably don't read. Then two of the communities use the roman orthography, but as you've noticed from the last example, it's written in Inuinnaqtun. This is exactly what a ballot would look like.

We have 100% compliance, so everyone in each community has their name in English and in Inuktitut syllabics regardless of whether they speak Inuktitut. If it's someone from southern Canada who's moved to Nunavut who wants to run, they also have their name provided to us in syllabics. We strongly encourage it, and we have 100% compliance when it comes to this.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Thank you, Mr. Fredlund.

I think my time is already up, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

Ms. Gaudreau, once again, welcome to the committee. Please go ahead. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Madam Chair. That's very kind of you.

I read what the witnesses from the last two committee meetings had to say, and that helped clue me in for today's discussion.

I appreciate the useful and specific answers the witnesses have provided in regard to organizing an election and making decisions about how candidates' names appear on election ballots.

I would nevertheless like to hear more from them on the proposal being studied by the committee.

To my mind, we need to determine how we can be inclusive of indigenous peoples—as part of the truth and reconciliation process—in a realistic and achievable way that aligns with the values of democracy, of course.

I believe it was Mr. Dunbar who said that, 20 years ago now, a recommendation had been made to include candidates' photos on the ballot to ensure that all voters, in Quebec and in Canada, who could not read their mother tongue or who were not literate would know who the candidates were. The issues the committee members discussed at the previous meetings may have pertained to omissions, errors and such.

I want to use the five minutes I have left to hear what each of the witnesses has to say on the subject.

Mr. Dunbar, what is the first step we should take to ensure that our recommendations reflect our desire to include indigenous languages on election ballots as part of the truth and reconciliation process?

• (1130)

[*English*]

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** Certainly reconciliation is an issue that we, as chief electoral officers, will be discussing later this summer in Iqaluit as well. It's an ongoing process and, for Elections NWT, one of the first steps that I'm certainly interested in taking is ensuring that someone who has an indigenous name would be able to see their name reflected on the ballot as they would spell it, and that may require using non-roman orthography.

On the ballot that I provided to the committee, you will see there are two names on there, one with Chipewyan spelling and one with ᑕᐢᑭᑦᑭᑦ. There is a glottal stop in Chipewyan that, if it is removed in

an anglicized form, you lose the meaning of what the name actually means. If you remove the glottal stop, you've lost all the context of what that name in Chipewyan actually means. For us it would be very important to ensure that, if a candidate came forward with a Chipewyan name and Chipewyan spelling, we would include that name as they spell it on the ballot. We would not try to anglicize it because I feel that would be quite offensive to their identity, to their name and to the spirit of reconciliation.

I'll pass it on to Mr. Fredlund from there. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Go ahead, Mr. Fredlund.

[*English*]

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** I'm an instrument of my politicians. My work is not something that I make up. They meet, like you, and they tell me how they'd like to see my office proceed, when it comes to running elections.

If you're asking for my personal views on reconciliation, and how it would work with Elections Canada and indigenous languages, I can only tell you how my office does it, and from the examples, everything that comes out of my office is 100% in all four languages.

I will agree with my colleague, Mr. Dunbar. It's very important for people to be able to express their names publicly, and how they want them to be written, transliterated, and said. During Project Surname in Nunavut, everyone was given either English names or anglicized names. Many people still don't recognize their name, even though on paper that's their name. Typically, on a ballot, their name would be written in anglicized words, or they would be provided a surname from the government at the time.

Allowing people to write their name however they want, many elders will put their Inuktitut syllabic names without finals. It would be like writing in English without vowels. We accept that, because that's how they want to write their names.

In essence that's what—

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Mr. Fredlund.

That helps me understand the specificities of indigenous peoples, who want their language to be recognized, including the different ways in which they write their names. It's important to make sure that is clearly understood. I also really appreciate what the other two witnesses said in terms of wanting to explain their experience.

Ms. Mack, I want to know what you think of what the Northwest Territories and the Yukon are doing. Perhaps it could serve as a model for Quebec and the rest of Canada when it comes to the inclusion of indigenous peoples.

• (1135)

[English]

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** I can't really speak to the full extent of the progress so far in the specific areas that you have mentioned. I do think that what Mr. Dunbar and Mr. Fredlund have discussed in regard to the intricacies of even alphabet and name is really important. The construction of the ballot, and what the ballot physically looks like in terms of [Technical difficulty—Editor] direction, is also a really important question.

The most fundamental question is to ultimately make sure that everyone who is looking at [Technical difficulty—Editor] digital or physical piece of paper [Technical difficulty—Editor].

Fortunately, in our case that's not—

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Ms. Mack.

**The Chair:** Thank you everyone.

Go ahead, Ms. Idlout. You have six minutes.

[English]

**Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP):** [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you to all the witnesses who have just spoken. Your comments are very important, and I think we all have a clearer understanding, especially in terms of indigenous people and voting.

Thank you for inviting me to speak as a witness. I have enjoyed listening to other witnesses regarding this important issue. As an Innu, I have always known that language and culture are intimately connected, but I have been intrigued by this system's attempt to isolate language in the context of voting. I believe the attempt to separate language and culture is another indication of the impacts of colonialism. While initially voter turnout may have been high, voter turnouts declined, and remained low for generations.

Can you speak to that in terms of funding?

**The Chair:** Ms. Idlout, is your question going to everyone?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** It's for the NWT and Nunavut.

**The Chair:** Perhaps we'll start with Mr. Dunbar again, followed by Mr. Fredlund.

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** *Qujannamiik*, Ms. Idlout.

We have a budget process that we go through with our legislative assembly. They have given us contract dollars that we will be using for interpretation services to be able to translate materials into languages. There is no one in my office who speaks all 11 official languages. I think we cover off two at the moment. I would say we are adequately resourced to translate materials into all 11 official languages, the caveat being that it is not always possible to turn around materials in a timely fashion given that we don't have a one-stop languages bureau like there used to be in the 1990s.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Thank you for the question, Ms. Idlout.

Absolutely, the legislative assembly, where my budget comes from, has always been very generous when it comes to ensuring

that all of our information is in all four languages. It's never a question of being underfunded for that.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

I want to ask this of everyone because I think everyone understands it, especially those of us with an indigenous background.

As indigenous people, we are growing in population and numbers. I am sure there will be fundamental issues that we'll be facing in the future.

Are you prepared for the increase in population, especially in the NWT because you have 11 different languages? Are you prepared to accommodate the growth of populations? What are you doing to meet the needs that you will face with the increasing populations?

• (1140)

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** One of the actions we'll be taking, especially in regard to languages in some of the electoral districts where they are predominant, is working with the regional indigenous governments to ensure that the translations we are producing... As you said earlier, you can't separate culture and language. We want to ensure that a lot of the materials we produce are actually reflective of the culture and the language being spoken in a community. Take some of the translations of the word "vote", for instance. It's a literal translation of the letter "x" in some of the North Slavey dialects. We want to ensure that we are working with the indigenous governments to ensure that we have captured not just the literal translation, but the spirit of the word as well.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** It's always important. Our population is increasing. Even though in this last general election we saw a slight decrease in voting, we can attribute that to COVID-19.

In preparations, my office always ensures that our Inuktitut language and Inuinnaqtun language are strong. Four or five of my staff are Inuktitut first language speakers, and we bring in a French-language specialist who helps us out during the election periods. Our office has native speakers of French and Inuktitut. Of course, Inuinnaqtun is a bit more difficult. We live in Rankin. This is not Inuinnaqtun central, but we have good connections with people in the western Arctic to help us out with that.

**The Chair:** That's excellent. Thank you.

We are going to proceed with the second round of questions for this panel, and then we'll have Ms. Idlout for the next panel and just do the first round with Ms. Idlout.

Mr. Scheer, it's five minutes to you.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC):** Thanks very much.

I just have a quick question for Ms. Mack. I believe you were listing some of the languages that you offer services in or produce materials in. I believe I heard you mention Tagalog as well. Is that correct?

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** Yes, that's correct.



**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** Obviously, a lot of the discussion flows from some of the things we've heard about reconciliation and acknowledging the unique role the government has with respect to indigenous languages. Of course, Tagalog would, as far as I understand, not fall into that type of category, but is maybe more the offering of services to people who require it because it's their language. Is that the spirit of why that language would be included in the services you offer?

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** The requirement for Tagalog is a federal requirement. With that, both the spirit of the inclusion of the language and the simple legal requirement means that it is a necessity in various districts of the state. Therefore, in order to make sure that we have as many people involved in the voting process as possible, we do try to produce materials in as many languages as we can find translators for.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** You mentioned it's a federal requirement. Is that specific to Tagalog, or is there a requirement that once a language reaches a certain threshold in terms of percentages of the overall population, then that must be included? What would the regulation be that would make that a requirement?

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** The federal requirement concerns the Voting Rights Act, section 203. It says that, if 5% of the voting population speaks a particular language and speaks English less than very well, that language becomes triggered for requirements for the election process.

• (1145)

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** That is interesting. I appreciate that clarification because that does open up a whole other rationale or motivation in the inclusion of different languages. If the goal is for federal governments, departments and services to be relevant, or at least have an impact on people's lives, then they need to facilitate that understanding. It is a little bit of a different philosophical approach than some of the reconciliation ideas, but they all lead to the end result, with the difference being that, in your system, this is much more expansive. That would really open up the possibility for literally almost any language.

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** It certainly would.

In regard to the spirit of reconciliation, as you've been discussing, the federal requirement for indigenous languages lists language groups. We have a federal requirement for Yupik instead of the various languages within Yupik. Our role as the [*Inaudible—Editor*] in reconciliation is to then to figure out which specific Yupik languages will be produced.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** Indigenous languages then have their own set of criteria, I suppose, that are more unique than just any language that might attain the 5% rule?

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** I think we can definitely say that.

**Hon. Andrew Scheer:** I only have one other question, and I'll open this to any of the panellists who would like to respond to it. We're looking at the inclusion of indigenous languages on the ballot itself. A number of you have talked about the number of languages that are used in your jurisdictions. I was wondering if anybody would like to comment on the dynamic of providing services or support at the polling locations, beyond just the ballots.

In other words, I've scrutineered before at different levels of elections, so I have often had people who were maybe in the wrong polling location, who may not have the right ID or who have questions about some of the aspects of the voting process. Is it a requirement in any of your areas to provide that ability? In our federal system, we have deputy returning officers, the DROs, who oversee the polling locations and answer questions.

Is there a need, requirement or rule for the ability to have somebody who could speak to people who may only use that one indigenous language? In addition to having it on the ballot, is there any requirement for the staff operating the polling locations to be able to offer clarification, instructions or support in indigenous languages as well?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** There is no requirement under our legislation, but our returning officers and deputy returning officers would be expected to make efforts to ensure that if there is a language being spoken in that community, we'd have interpretation available. Electors are also allowed to be assisted by a family member or friend who can help interpret for them.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Yes, we are legally required to have poll workers who speak the language of the community. That's where it says so. It doesn't say, "French," "Inuktitut" or "Inuktut"; it just says that whatever languages the communities speak, our poll workers must speak that as well.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that great exchange.

Mrs. Romanado, the next five minutes go to you.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, I'd like to welcome the witnesses here today. I'm especially excited to hear from our colleagues from Elections Nunavut and Elections Northwest Territories, and, of course, Ms. Mack from the Alaska Division of Elections.

My first question is to Mr. Fredlund.

We heard from Ms. Aariak, the language commissioner of Nunavut, at our last meeting. I'd like to know if you've had any meetings with our Chief Electoral Officer for Elections Canada, Mr. Perrault.

• (1150)

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** The chief electoral officers from across Canada meet as a group at least once a year, so yes, I've met with Mr. Perrault numerous times.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** The reason I'm asking this is we had heard that there was some difficulty with Elections Canada having, for instance, a poster that says, "vote here," in the appropriate language, or having documentation about wearing masks at the polls in the appropriate language. I'm hearing from you that at the municipal elections, you had signs in four languages and the Elections Canada signs were merely in two. The translations already exist.

I wanted to know if there was any opportunity to share information, so that there's not a duplication of efforts, but that it's available to Elections Canada, so that they don't have to reinvent the wheel and reprint.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Thank you for the question on efficiency and whether sharing between the federal agencies and territorial agencies always works out 100%.

Absolutely, this is something that we're working on. We're always in discussions. No one's ever going to say no to sharing our Inuktitut and our translated works.

Keep in mind that our rules are different. Elections Canada rules are different from our rules. It's not just a blueprint. It's a bit more than that.

Unfortunately—or fortunately—the last two federal elections coincided with two of our general elections. Both of our offices are extremely busy and we don't really have much time to interact and ask each other how it's going. That's kind of where it stands.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Thank you.

Another point in that regard is that you mentioned your election is 35 days long, similar to a minimum of 36 days for a federal election. It's comparable. However, your nominations need to be in between days one and five, whereas in the federal election, it's up to 21 days prior to an election. It seems there's a discrepancy in Nunavut with the requirement for nomination forms to be in, compared to the federal election. Perhaps that could be something that we look at with the Chief Electoral Officer, to see if he requires additional time to get those names of the candidates translated, and so on and so forth. Maybe that's something we need to look into.

My next question is for Mr. Dunbar.

You also mentioned—through you, Madam Chair—that the “vote here” signs for a polling place were in appropriate languages in the specific districts, and that posters about what kind of ID is required were already translated. My question is similar to the one I posed to Mr. Fredlund.

Is there an opportunity for collaboration between the federal government—the CEO of Elections Canada—and you, to make sure that there are some synergies in translation?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** The materials are not translated yet. That is something that we are in the process of starting right now. Certainly, we would welcome any opportunities to collaborate with our colleagues at Elections Canada.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Perfect. Thank you.

Madam Chair, how much time do I have left?

**The Chair:** You have 45 seconds.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** I won't be able to get into my question at length. I know Madam Sahota has questions, but I'm not sure if she'll just take it in her next round.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** I will add the 30 seconds to your next round.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Ms. Gaudreau for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to ask my question in quiz form, and I'd like the witnesses to answer with a yes or no.

Ms. Mack, Mr. Dunbar and Mr. Fredlund, you know how federal elections work.

Are you aware that Elections Canada can provide election materials in 16 languages?

[*English*]

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** No, not all 16.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** No.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Ms. Mack, were you aware?

[*English*]

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** No.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Okay. I'll move on to my next question.

I've learned that, in indigenous communities, the meaning of a word can depend on the culture, even in the same language. French, for instance, has a number of similar words that do not mean the same thing.

I was surprised to learn that the translation of the word “vote” differed depending on the community.

Is it possible to translate words in an accurate yet culturally specific way?

• (1155)

[*English*]

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** That's something we are certainly working on and is one of the areas of discussion we'll be having with indigenous governments. Some indigenous governments are in the process of trying to standardize language; others are not. They're trying to respect the dialects in those communities. It's an ongoing discussion.

I suspect that for some regions of the Northwest Territories, we will have a more uniform translation and for others, it might be community-specific.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Mr. Dunbar.

What do you think, Mr. Fredlund?

[English]

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** We have lots of different dialects within Inuktitut-speaking communities. Our translations come straight out of Rankin Inlet. Our Inuktitut is from a small town just north of Rankin Inlet. It doesn't meet the standard of Grise Fiord. It's a separate dialect, but amazingly, Inuktitut speakers understand each other enough that the gist, the ideas, the names of things are accurate. We don't have to do it in 25 different dialects.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

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

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

Those language issues are very important to us, as we know. Why do you think places like Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are able to provide language services in four different languages for municipal and territorial elections yet Elections Canada struggles to provide those same services in federal elections?

**The Chair:** To the interpreters, we did not get the substance of what was said. I would just like to give a moment to the interpreters to provide us with what Ms. Idlout has shared with us.

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

I'm not getting the French interpretation.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Clerk, are we getting it? Perfect.

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Great.

Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Can we please have the question read into the record in English, with translation, please?

**A voice:** Okay. I'll try again.

Why do you think places like Nunavut are able to provide language services in four different languages for municipal and territorial elections, yet Elections Canada struggles to provide those same services in federal elections?

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** I can speak for Nunavut's experience. We live and breath Inuktitut, so for us it's not a question of difficulties or challenges. This is what we do, so I can't speak to what Elections Canada's challenges are.

Thank you.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

We understand what your issues are. What feedback have you heard from indigenous communities regarding the languages act for elections? Have you heard suggestions about how access to voting can be improved in this regard?

• (1200)

**The Chair:** I would open the floor to both Mr. Dunbar and Mr. Fredlund to answer.

Go ahead, Mr. Dunbar.

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Certainly, the feedback we receive is that doing more indigenous languages is always welcome, and it's certainly something that our office is now undertaking over the next years to try to improve and increase the amount of services we can provide in indigenous languages.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

That's a great question, Ms. Idlout.

I think one of our strengths is that the majority of the office staff speak Inuktitut, but I think the dialectal differences are something that we struggle with all the time.

Moving forward and as Nunavut standardizes Inuktitut in the next 100 years, we'll have one level of Inuktitut [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] across the territory. That's one of our struggles. It's to ensure that people in Grise Fiord understand our translator from Chesterfield Inlet.

**The Chair:** Would you like Ms. Mack to answer?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Yes, if she wants to.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mack, would you like to answer as well?

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

In regard to how voting access can be improved for languages, again, our biggest struggle has been with the dialectal differences, as Mr. Fredlund mentioned. That is precisely why we subscribe to the panel translation model to bridge that divide of standardization versus specificity. The translation panels have been really instrumental in making sure that those kinds of content [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] across a wide geographic area.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that.

Mr. Vis, five minutes go to you.

**Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC):** I'll wait until the next panel.

**The Chair:** Can I go to Ms. Sahota? She wanted to be on this one.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Yes. That's fine.

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

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

My first question is for all three panellists. What is the voter turnout for your territorial and state elections?

We'll start with Northwest Territories and Mr. Dunbar.

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** The number is failing me off the top of my head. I know that it is certainly highest in our regional centres and lowest in Yellowknife. I believe the overall voter turnout was around 50% or 51% in the last general election.

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** Pre-COVID, it was in the high sixties. In our last general election, during the height of our pandemic, it was in the low fifties.

**Ms. Samantha Mack:** Depending on whether or not it's a general election year, our voter turnout averages between the high 40s and low 60s percentile.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** The next question I have is for Mr. Dunbar.

You had said that you have materials translated in about 11 or 12 languages to provide during the election, but the actual ballot is only in two. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** We are in the process of translating materials into the 11 official languages of the Northwest Territories. The ballot produced here for a general election just has the candidate's name as the candidate would spell it. There are no other words on the ballot. It is just the candidate's name and their photo.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Their name can be spelled in any language, however they choose?

• (1205)

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** We would print their name as they wrote it on the nomination paper.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** When you went from the two languages back to increasing the number of languages that you're going to produce materials in, what thresholds were you looking at when making those decisions?

When you had picked the two, was it by the percentage of people speaking the language? What made you switch that perspective?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** We've never stuck with just two languages. The Official Languages Act enshrines official language status for all 11 languages. For the plebiscites in 1982 and 1992, those plebiscite materials and questions were published in 10 official languages, with Cree being the exception due to an interpretation—

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** That's interesting, Madam Chair.

The sample you gave was only in French, English and one indigenous language. However, you had provided the material in 11 languages. Is that what you're saying?

**Mr. Stephen Dunbar:** Yes, the example provided there is the eastern Arctic electoral district ballot. However, in some of the western Arctic electoral ballots, there could be up to four languages on the ballot. For Mackenzie Delta, that would have been Gwich'in and Inuvialuktun. For the Tu Nedhé-Wiilideh electoral district, that would have been Chipewyan, English and French. For the Hay River electoral districts, it would have been Chipewyan and Cree, as well as English and French.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Madam Chair, Mr. Fredlund had mentioned earlier that they have in-house capacity there and where they don't have the in-house capacity, they have good relations and connections in other communities that can help them out.

What would his advice be to our committee and to Elections Canada regarding building up in-house capacity or contracting services, perhaps through some of the same service providers they use or creating some sort of advisory group? Could I get some feedback that we can bring back to them?

**Mr. Dustin Fredlund:** My office is always open for any agency that wants to find out more about Inuktitut or Inuvialuktun terminology or anything. We would extend our resources to assist any agency, including Elections Canada.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Thank you to all of the witnesses here today.

**The Chair:** That was very fruitful and very exciting.

On behalf of PROC committee members, I would like to thank our witnesses for joining us today, and the insights you provided. This is a very invigorating conversation.

If something comes to your minds later, do not hesitate to write to our committee. I can assure you that members will appreciate any insights or intel that you can provide from your vast experience.

I hope that you have a good rest of the day, and we look forward to continuing this important work. Thank you.

• (1205)

(Pause)

• (1210)

**The Chair:** We are going to continue our study on indigenous languages on ballots. Our second panel will include the MP for Nunavut, Ms. Lori Idlout. Welcome to our committee.

This session will start with opening comments from you. We look forward to hearing from you.

We will go through one round of questions from each of the parties, and we will ensure that the Conservative Party has extra time.

Mr. Vis, I'll start with you, and if you want to share some of that time with anyone else, you're welcome to. Then we'll move to the Liberals, followed by the Bloc and then completing with the NDP.

Ms. Idlout, welcome to PROC committee.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for inviting me to speak as a witness. I have enjoyed listening to other witnesses regarding this important issue.

As an Inuk, I have always known that language and culture are intimately connected, but I have been intrigued by this system's attempt to isolate language in the context of voting.

I believe the attempt to separate language and culture is another indication of the impacts of colonialism. While initially voter turnout may have been high, voter turnouts declined, and remained low for generations.

The president of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Aluki Kotierk, pointed out that in the last federal election, the voter turnout in Nunavut was only about 34%. Indeed, the voter turnout in Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.'s election was approximately 17.5%.

I must share that Nunavut has shown that elections in Inuktitut, along with English and French, can and do work.

Procedurally, there is a precedent, but as I pointed out, ensuring indigenous voting by providing indigenous languages is not sufficient in and of itself. Voters are greeted at the polling station by an Elections Canada employee who speaks English or French. The elder may not understand what the employee is saying, so the elder is usually assisted by the kindness of someone else.

I will speak to what I have experienced, and seen in Nunavut. Many Nunavummiut voters enjoy the freedom of being able to vote in their mother tongue during a territorial election, or during a designated Inuit organization election. This is their right.

With the exception of the pilot project in the 2021 federal election, this is not a norm. The ballots had roughly transliterated Inuktitut names, and phonetically spelled party names in syllabics in the last federal election. This is not a norm.

According to the 2021 census, the population of Nunavut is 36,858, of whom 85% are Inuit. There are 25 Nunavut communities. Each community and region has its own struggles, and experiences when voting. It is imperative to understand that these are complex issues without simple solutions.

• (1215)

One specific example is the consequence of medical travel. Hundreds of Nunavummiut are forced to travel to Iqaluit or the south for medical services and treatments. In Iqaluit, those medical travellers wanted to exercise their right to vote in 2021. However, they were turned away because they were not residents of Iqaluit though they were residents of Nunavut. Therefore, they were denied their fundamental right to vote. Through the assistance of my campaign team, some were able to vote, but many were turned away. This is an example of how Nunavummiut must constantly fight to exercise their basic rights. Nunavummiut should not have to lose their right to vote because they are on medical travel.

I will summarize my comments regarding staffing. There are many unilingual Inuktitut speakers, especially Inuit elders. As a unilingual speaker on election day, an elder must have a proper ID. They are greeted at the polling station by an Elections Canada employee who speaks English or French. The elder may not understand what the employee is saying, so that elder is either assisted by the kindness of someone else or goes to the polling station not knowing what to do. With the exception of the pilot project de-

scribed earlier by Elections Canada, the ballot is in English or French. Most elders cannot read English or French.

During my campaign, when it became evident that the ballots would not have Inuktitut, I had to describe to people that my name was the one in the middle, between two other candidates. This is not acceptable in a modern Canada. This is not reconciliation.

Another example involves the complaints process. Often when complaints are being made to the chief returning officer, if interpretation or translation is not provided, then a unilingual elder will have to depend on someone else to file the complaint. Sometimes it is not worth filing a complaint, because the person receiving the complaint literally does not speak the same language.

Prior to colonialism, first nations, Métis and Inuit had their own ways of identifying elders. Inuit in smaller camps based leadership on exemplary skills of hunters, sawmen or seamstresses. Inuit still have local leaders who are unique to our culture and way of life.

I learned, since my election, about the hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en. The chiefs in the territory within British Columbia are not elected as are those in the colonial system created as the Indian bands. The hereditary chiefs will have authority over the use of their lands, for the most part. I am sure we have all heard about the infringement of their rights and about the pipeline going through their territory without proper consent.

We must learn how best to respect indigenous governance to ensure Canada lives up to its commitments to reconciliation.

As a witness in this committee, I want to include the following recommendations for specific and immediate action.

• (1220)

One, learn from Elections Nunavut, which has extensive experience running elections in four official languages.

Two, hire full-time indigenous interpreter-translators within Elections Canada for those indigenous communities that need them. This will help build the necessary expertise and corporate knowledge for the department regarding indigenous languages for future elections.

Three, streamline the complaints process for unilingual indigenous people to voice their concerns. This needs to be made very clear and be improved.

Four, conduct a further study on indigenous governance within Canada's democracy as another form of reconciliation.

Finally, number five, ensure that the federal Government of Canada respects indigenous cultures in order to build the trust that is necessary for real reconciliation.

Thank you for allowing me this time.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I would like to thank all the committee members for the leniency in providing that extra time for the opening comments. I'm sure certain words in English versus Inuktitut would probably take longer as well, so that was very appreciated.

We are going to go into basically an unlimited amount of time, it will feel like, with Mr. Vis. I will look forward to you, followed by Mr. Ferguson, I believe, Madam Gaudreau and then Ms. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Vis.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, MP Idlout, for being at committee today. I went to your territory once. It was about 12 or 13 years ago. I went to the Nunavummiut legislature. It was in session, and they took a break from the session. What I remember from the chamber was that all of the interpreters were around the chamber to represent all of the languages. They all went into the lunch room afterwards. I was standing there, and they invited me in. I had a traditional Inuit meal with all of the translators. I had caribou, beluga whale and another type of whale. They even used their traditional knife. That was the one experience of my life where I really learned a little bit about what you said about connecting language and culture. It's an experience that will stay with me forever.

You made five recommendations just now in your opening remarks. This is our third day studying indigenous languages on the ballot. I've come to the personal conclusion—not even with my colleagues, but just me personally—that I almost feel that the situation in your territory is very different from the rest of Canada. That largely goes back to the 1993 land claims agreement that was supported by 85% of the Nunavummiut people. When that agreement was signed, were there provisions for culture and language that the federal government had to respect as part of that reconciliation process?

• (1225)

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

That is a very good question.

I am so proud that you came to the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. It's good to know you that had a chance to eat with the interpreters. The interpreters are held in the highest esteem, because they are very capable and knowledgeable people.

With regard to the boundary, under article 32 on social and cultural development, anything can be included in there in terms of culture and languages. There are no really clear clauses in the articles in the land claims agreement, and they're not really clarified right now, but they are included in the land claims agreement.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** I'm just going to make sure that I got that correctly. Article 32 is not very clear about the use of language specifically.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** I'll say it in English. Article 32 within the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement addresses language and culture. It addresses social development too. I think it's purposefully vague about what is meant by social development. It doesn't clearly define what is meant by social and cultural development for Inuit by purpose, because I think when the land claim was crafted, they wanted

more room for it to be interpreted properly, not to make limitations on what would later become interpretations of that article. There is no specific wording about voting or elections, but that would be the article that I refer to when it comes to language and culture.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Would it be feasible for the Tunngavik corporation to come forward, because I'm assuming they still have regular negotiations with the federal government, and maybe make a request to the federal government that, in the unique circumstances of the territory of Nunavut, federal elections be in the recognized languages of the territory as part of its unique agreement with the Government of Canada through the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Just to clarify this a bit, when the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement was negotiated and signed, it was signed between the Government of Canada, Nunavut and Tunngavik, the organization that is now Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated. It wouldn't necessarily be a request by NTI to ensure that languages are in Inuktitut because of it being enabling for other acts, including the Nunavut Act. The Nunavut Act, as enabling legislation, allowed for the Government of Nunavut to have authority over how elections would work within the territory of Nunavut, so that's more within the jurisdiction of the Government of Nunavut.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Okay. Is it your objective, in putting this study forward, to ensure that indigenous languages are on the ballot in your territory or possibly across Canada? If you were to walk away at the end of this term and in the next federal election we have your language on the federal ballot, would that be considered a success for you?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** That's a great question. I would love for all indigenous languages that exist in Canada to be incorporated into every ballot that is possible. If there are known to be more Ojibway people in northern Ontario, for example, then northern Ontario should have Ojibway on the ballot. I think we have a precedent we can follow, which is the Northwest Territories. It has 11 official languages, and from what I understood in their testimony this morning, they were describing that they're able to determine which communities and which areas in that territory have more of each of those different 11 languages to make sure that those languages are reflective of the needs of the community.

This is definitely something that I would love for all of Canada. We've seen it in Nunavut and the NWT, so if we can do it in populations where there are more indigenous people, then we should accommodate the needs of indigenous people in all of Canada.

• (1230)

**Mr. Brad Vis:** I see that perspective, but I think in Nunavut it could almost be easier than in other parts of Canada, largely because of the threshold question that MP Sahota raised: What would be an acceptable threshold for the inclusion of an indigenous language? Consider how that relates to our two official languages and especially what other Canadians would feel about having languages that aren't part of the Official Languages Act on a federal ballot. That would be problematic for some people, probably most likely for the Québécois.

What would you say about thresholds?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** That's a great question. I think what I would say about thresholds is that the extent of language loss in indigenous communities should be the threshold. If there's been more language loss, then Elections Canada should work harder to help promote and protect that language.

Elections Canada can have a role to make sure that languages are being protected, even through the ballot and materials towards becoming a candidate. Making sure that elections are all available in those languages should be the threshold. The more the language loss, the more that Elections Canada should work harder to ensure that those languages are on the ballot.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** If you were to amend the Elections Canada Act, what sections do you think would need to be amended? Have you considered putting forward legislation yourself in this Parliament?

As part of the agreement that the New Democratic Party made with the governing Liberal Party in your coalition, have you guys—

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Brad Vis:** This is a fair question. There are broad definitions of what a coalition is in the Webster's Canadian Dictionary.

My question is, when two political parties, if you want to do this....

**The Chair:** Mr. Vis, I would say that your line of questioning has been quite informative, and I would ask that you continue.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Thank you.

Was an agreement made to include amendments to the Elections Canada Act between the New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party? I believe that there were some lines in there on reconciliation. Was an amendment to the Elections Canada Act a part of the agreement made between your two parties?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** To respond to the first part of your question about legislation, bills that I might want to see, I can refer to my predecessor, Mumilaaq Qaqqaq, who developed a bill that I am looking over right now to see if I would want to introduce that as a private member's bill. However, I have to consider that with my party as well.

I have considered it. I have looked at Mumilaaq's bill that she developed before it died on the Order Paper.

On the second part of your question, I have not had any conversations with the Liberal government about what changes I might propose in regard to this confidence agreement that we have with the Liberals.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Thank you for the exchange. I appreciated it.

**The Chair:** That was a very thorough exchange, Mr. Vis. Thank you for that.

Mr. Fergus, you have six minutes.

• (1235)

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Idlout for your testimony, and also for your initiative.

I'm going to go back to a question that I asked of the commissioner for the Northwest Territories and also to the testimony that was provided to us from the CEO of Elections Canada.

Elections Canada seems to have a one-size-fits-all perspective. I always like to say that we're the sum of our experiences. Some people would say that we're the victims of our experiences.

It would appear that because we have two colonial official languages that exist across Canada, the effort is made to always provide, regardless of where you are in the country, fully accessible material in both languages. That's a good thing.

What I was hearing from our testimony in the first panel today, and I think what I'm hearing from you, especially in your conversation with Mr. Vis, is that you're looking for recognition and a respect to include indigenous languages on material, including the ballot, where it's appropriate. If you noticed, I didn't use the word "threshold". I'm not looking to some...kick in a percentage and all of a sudden it's there, but where it's appropriate.

Is my understanding of what you're seeking correct? If not, please—

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Yes, I think so.

Part of the reason I became a parliamentarian was that I wanted to have influence, where I could be part of helping to protect and promote first nations', Métis' and Inuit's—Inuit specifically with me being an Inuk—place in Canada. There have been too many atrocities that we've all experienced, and there have been too many times where "reconciliation" is a buzzword. I wanted to be part of something where I helped to make sure that it's not just a buzzword and that we talk about actual reconciliation.

A part of reconciliation has to include finding ways to protect and promote indigenous languages in Canada. The elections process is one of those ways. It's not the only way by any means, but it has to be a way that we respect these indigenous rights that do exist. We're not just talking about exercises in democracy. We're also talking about the existence of the rights of first nations, Métis and Inuit. That's what I'm looking to ensure that we do as parliamentarians, to make sure we're helping to respect those rights and to make sure those rights are upheld.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** In your testimony to the committee today, I found myself outraged at the fact that there were many members who happened to find themselves, for a whole bunch of reasons, in a different part of the territory and tried to exercise their right to vote but had no effective access to understanding the process or to people who could help guide them through that process so that they could vote appropriately.

I know that my constituents, if they moved or if they were serving abroad, could go to any mission or go to any voting booth and seek to vote. They could write in on the ballot, but it's because most of the people in my constituency speak English or French. They have that full freedom to do what you would expect one would be able to do in your territory but can't effectively do that because of the language barrier. Is that a correct understanding of your testimony?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Absolutely. I was so saddened to hear that people had been turned away from voting. To also have to work that hard just for the basic right to vote is such a sad story in Canada.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** I agree.

• (1240)

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** We know that Canada as a democracy is founded on its right to vote so it really is.... From my perspective, from the people who I represent, from Inuit, we have been oppressed for generations. It was shoved down our throats that our culture does not belong, that we must practise Christianity, that if we speak Inuktitut we'll be whipped with a metre stick, that if we speak our language, if we sing our songs, we're going to be beaten. It's very difficult for Inuit to even go to complain because of those generations of oppressive atrocities towards first nations, Métis and Inuit.

When I was hearing—I forget his name—the one from Elections Canada saying that there have been no complaints, that is just an indication of how strong those government officials are because they're still afraid to go to complain. It's still not an exercise that we can do as easily as other cultures, but that world view and those behaviours are changing. I'm so proud to see more Inuit, more first nations and more Métis becoming more determined and voicing themselves. We are seeing those changes and we need to continue to promote more first nations, Métis and Inuit to exercise their voices.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** May I have just one last question? It will be a brief question.

**The Chair:** I would appreciate a very brief question, and a very brief answer.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Idlout, I would like to ask a very practical question. We've heard testimony now at two meetings, where we've compared the voting turnout at territorial elections to the voting turnout at a federal election, the latter being significantly less than the turnout at territorial or municipal elections in the territories.

Would you ascribe that largely to the lack of respect we have shown the folks in your community?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** The impacts of governments, churches, and the RCMP are still very deep within our communities, and because of that, it's very challenging. When I was campaigning, for example, I heard many people say, "What's the point of voting, when it's not going to make any difference?" Many first nations, Métis, and Inuit have lost the sense of using their voice, because their voice doesn't matter.

We all need to work harder to make sure that we hear first nations, Métis, and Inuit, and make sure that when we're hearing them, we're making decisions that have better impacts for their communities.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Madam Chair, thank you for giving me the opportunity to ask several questions and to make an observation.

I hope those who are following the committee's proceedings and discussions regarding a possible amendment to the Canada Elections Act will take something away. By engaging in a dialogue over a number of hours, we have had the chance to share our views, better understand the issues and show the openness that is so often called for.

Ms. Idlout, even though we may not be able to achieve everything we should by the next election, does the dialogue we have initiated answer your plea at all? As a parliamentarian, I keenly felt it.

• (1245)

[*English*]

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** That's a great question.

When it comes to indigenous languages, more can always be done.

I was fascinated. I don't know if you heard the witnesses who were here a couple of witnesses ago. The two young men who appeared indicated how important it was to invest in actual programming that ensured they had the ability to learn and speak in their languages. I was very impacted by their statements, because it showed the generational differences that we're experiencing between cultures.

More can be done within Canada's programming, but having this dialogue at this committee is also an important aspect of that.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you.

The year 1995 marked a very important time in my life. At the age of 18, I felt the need to learn English in order to be taken more seriously in Quebec and Canada. I went to Hawaii to learn English. The experience of the indigenous community in Hawaii is completely different from the experience here. There, people shared a sense of unity, and I even learned Hawaiian in high school. For me, it was part of the culture.

We have two official languages in Canada, but now I realize that things are often tough as a parliamentarian, even in French. I won't call it contempt, but it is still clear today that our differences lead to breakdowns in communication. That is why I am here, as a member of the Bloc Québécois. I can certainly appreciate the steps that have to be taken.

Much of what the witnesses said focused on the measures that could be taken in advance to recognize the various languages—16, in this case—to help revitalize those cultures and to foster a sense of pride among those speakers.

A few days ago, I went to La Conception, in my riding of Laurentides—Labelle. I visited the site of a future indigenous cultural centre called Kinašat, which brings cultures together and helps people discover them to encourage an appreciation of our differences.



Ms. Idlout, I'd like to hear your comments on the outcome of this process.

Do you think we will have taken a significant step down the path of truth and reconciliation with this study?

[English]

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** I think the work of this study could play a small part. I know that when it comes to reconciliation, it can't just be compartmentalized. The part of this committee could make a dent in it.

For example, we don't need to have all 16 languages on all of the ballots, but if we know that in Nova Scotia there are more Mi'kmaq, we should make sure that the Mi'kmaq languages are on those ballots in Nova Scotia. If we know that there are more Gitksan in B.C., we need to make sure that ballots are available in Gitksan in B.C.

There are opportunities where we can learn procedures that have been used in the NWT, where they know there are pockets of specific indigenous people. We could use those pockets of indigenous people as a model to say that's where we can target those languages. I think it's possible to compartmentalize toward success.

• (1250)

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

**The Chair:** Thank you to the both of you.

We now go to Ms. Blaney for six minutes.

[English]

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

As always, all my questions will go through the chair.

Ms. Idlout, I want to thank you for your work here and for the words you shared with us today. I really admire it. The conversation we're having today is really important.

I'm really moved by the story you told in your testimony about literally having to tell your constituents, "My name is the one in the middle." That really is a good reminder of how challenging it can be to feel like you even have the right to vote, if all you know when you walk in is that the middle name and those symbols mean that person. I also found it really interesting in the testimony the idea of having photos beside the names.

I would like to ask you a question. The first part of the question is, what do you think about the photos by the name? Does that also assist people who have challenges?

Also, how are we going to see the indigenous population start to vote more? I represent over 20 first nations communities. The voter turnout locally in their own nations is very high, around 90%. They get out and they vote, but when it comes to the federal election, it's a lot lower.

What do you think impedes indigenous voters from casting their vote, and what do you think can be done to increase voter turnout among those communities?

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** It's a great question. Thank you.

For sure it's about learning to understand just how deep the impacts of colonialism have been, especially when it comes to the ballot. As I was mentioning, first nations, Métis and Inuit have been forced away from their world views. When Elections Canada is hiring staff, those staff have to be trauma informed. If they're not trauma informed, then their behaviour is going to seem very colonial. They are so used to just ordering people around and saying, "Do this," which are the very symbols of colonial behaviours towards first nations, Métis and Inuit.

I think there might be a lack of interest in practising this right to vote when you're voting for people who will ultimately be part of that system. As I said earlier, part of this ongoing conversation we need to have is about making reconciliation real. What are some tangible things we can do that show we are trying to do better for first nations, Métis and Inuit?

I can see why the voter turnout would be a lot higher for first nations because they know that those first nations groups are going to fight for their rights. To have someone represent you who you know will fight for your rights is someone you know you'll want.

To the second part of that question, I think we have to do a better job as parliamentarians in how we do our work. One thing I'm always shocked by when I go back to my riding is, first, how thankful my constituents are that I visited their communities but also how uninformed they are of the services that are available to them within their communities.

There still doesn't tend to be a lot of understanding of what Service Canada does or what Elections Canada can do. I think that as parliamentarians we all can do a better job of informing our constituents of the services that they should be allowed to have, the services that they can expect to have from the Government of Canada, and making sure that legislation, policies and programs are better reflective of the cultural needs of first nations, Métis and Inuit.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you for that.

Something that is very apparent is that there needs to be more work done in this area. What do you think Elections Canada could do about hiring local indigenous people as interpreters, potentially, maybe even as cultural interpreters to raise awareness of what the best process is to move forward to engage that population?

I think this is important because this is a measurable outcome. If we can see some action, we can actually say, "This is the percentage of indigenous people who were voting, and now it's this." It's so measurable. It seems like something we should invest in.

• (1255)

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Yes, for sure. That's a great question, too.

I think we've heard some great examples as well, shared by witnesses, including just making sure that Elections Canada has more interpreters who are available, not just for election day but within their staff. I think they need linguists, too, to make sure that they have a better understanding. Cultural interpreters, too, I think are a great idea.

I think it was the NWT elections office that said it would meet with indigenous organizations. The indigenous organizations know who their populations are. I think Elections Canada could meet with indigenous organizations like the Assembly of First Nations and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, these national organizations that work with their people to make sure that their rights are being advocated for.

**The Chair:** Do you have a final comment, Ms. Blaney?

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I don't think I have enough time for my final comment. I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Idlout, on behalf of PROC committee members I would like to thank you for your testimony and your time with us today. As I say to everyone, you're always welcome to send us more information, which we will definitely consider as we continue

with this report. You've been a fabulous addition. Thank you for your time.

**Voices:** Hear, hear!

**The Chair:** Kudos to all committee members for the informative questions.

I will just remind committee members that on Thursday we will meet again. In the first hour we will have Jean-François Daoust, assistant professor, University of Edinburgh; Dwight Newman, professor of law and Canada research chair in indigenous rights in constitutional and international law, University of Saskatchewan; Allison Harell, professor, political science department, Université du Québec à Montréal.

For the second panel, we'll have the Institut Tshakapesh, with Marjolaine Tshernish, general manager; as well as First Nations Education Council, Denis Gros-Louis, who's the director general.

We look forward to continuing this study. With that, I wish everyone a really good day. We'll see you on Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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