



# Interview

Whose faces appear on television screens the most during Question Period? It is not Brian Mulroney, John Turner, Ed Broadbent or even Speaker John Bosley. That distinction belongs to Christine Wilson on the English channel and Micheline Martineau on the French network. They are the ladies who appear in the upper right hand corner of the screen to provide simultaneous sign language interpretation of Question Period for the deaf. They discussed their unique occupation in an interview with the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* in April 1986.

## Sign Interpretation of Question Period:

### Christine Wilson and Micheline Martineau

#### Tell us a bit about your background?

WILSON: I was born in Ottawa. Although not deaf myself I learned sign language because both my parents were deaf. It was the first language I learned and friends tell of the amusing sight of a toddler gesturing madly with its hands. I eventually studied to be a registered nurse and later worked in a centre for mentally retarded adults. I have also worked for the Canadian Hearing Society and served on their board of directors. I obtained my Comprehensive Skills Certificate from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and have passed the Secretary of State examination. I started a sign language program at Algonquin College and taught there for seven years. All together I have worked as an interpreter, part time, for 18 years.

MARTINEAU: I was born in Hull and lived in Farm Point before going to Montreal to attend *l'Institut des Sourds Muettes* for twelve years. When I started to work in 1973 there were virtually no French sign language interpreters in Ottawa. I have been with for the CBC Parliamentary Network since sign language interpreting began in 1979.

#### Have you always been interested in politics?

MARTINEAU: Most people do not realize how difficult it is for deaf people

to follow the news. For one thing little emphasis is given to teaching politics in schools. There is little opportunity to watch translated or captioned television in Canada. Services for the hearing handicapped are available to a much greater extent in the United States. Like most deaf people I tend to watch more American programs than Canadian ones.

WILSON: I used to watch question period and always found it fascinating. Since I have been interpreting I follow the news very carefully to prepare myself for work. I have noticed that the

press reports do not always reflect what happens in the House and I find this particularly frustrating.

#### What exactly is sign language?

MARTINEAU: The deaf, like any cultural group, have their own way of perceiving things and it is not the same as for those who are able to hear. American Sign Language (or the French equivalent *Language des Signes Québécois*) has a grammatical structure of its own and does not necessarily follow the English sentence structure. Body language and facial components



Micheline Martineau interpreting Brian Tobin, MP. (Jean-Marc Carisse)

are very important and are used to express emotion. Some questions and answers are sad, funny or angry but most are not. Hearing people think that the deaf learn American Sign Language or *Langue des Signes Québécois* in school but that is not the case, it is something that we teach each other.

Sign language is a series of hand "signs" representing words, concepts and ideas. It includes finger-spelling whereby proper names and places, are spelled, letter for letter. Unlike spoken languages where there is a comparable word for each word of another language, sign language is actually limited in the extent of vocabulary, having fewer signs than a spoken language has words. But signs can represent different concepts when used in different ways and the interpreter must understand the concept and context of what is being said.

WILSON: A sign language interpreter must really "interpret", not just translate. For example, when the Speaker says "The Hon. Member for Sudbury", it is not signed because the member is identified on the screen. When the questioner says "Through you, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Transport", as most questions begin, we sign "Question - Minister Transport". This type of interpreting gives us time to finish up the previous question and answer, as carefully as possible, before beginning the next question. It does take some mental gymnastics. I often finish five or six seconds after the person is speaking. The hearing impaired audience do not get the audio clues that signal changes in speakers so the interpreter must visually demonstrate these changes by "resting" between speakers. Incidentally, the interpreter also "signs" the laughter and uproars that we "hear" off-camera and occasionally the cat-calls too. A good understanding of the topic covered by the speaker must exist before the interpreter chooses appropriate signs to explain the idea being expressed.

Many are foreign names and often spoken less than clearly. It is sometimes impossible to interpret fully when visitors are recognized by the Speaker who may say, for example, "A delegation from Zimbabwe on International Relations, headed by Mr. so and so". This might be interpreted as "welcome to a group from Zimbabwe, here to discuss international relations". The deaf are unfamiliar with terms such as parliamentary privilege so I try to explain what they mean.

MARTINEAU: Often some completely new name comes up like Chernobyl

and I have to check newspapers the next day to see if I spelled it correctly.

#### **How do you deal with the use of French and English in debate?**

MARTINEAU: They are completely separate sign languages. The meaning and structure are different just as different languages have different grammar. There are also regional differences. For example some sign interpreters would spell out names such as Mulroney. Others might adopt a simplified sign by pointing to the chin.

WILSON: If a member is speaking French I must wait for the English translation which takes a second or two. Micheline who is in an adjoining studio, watches me on TV and then signs for the French Network. A French speaking spectator may actually be getting the question and answer fourth hand - from a French MP to an English interpreter to English signs to French signs.

#### **Why is sign interpretation limited to question period?**

WILSON: Sign language interpreting is very tiring. It is possible to sign for one or two hours when the assignment has breaks in it but the interpreter is quite exhausted if it is continuous. Question Period is generally quick paced but there are some breaks. If all parliamentary proceedings were to be interpreted, far more interpreters would be needed.

#### **Do you interpret any other parliamentary debates?**

WILSON: We did the last federal budget but it was very difficult. For one thing it is extremely hard to interpret so many abstract concepts, facts and figures. It also made me wonder how many deaf viewers could assimilate and understand this complex information particularly since we interpreted the Minister's Budget Speech but not the comments of the analysts who explained the budget to the hearing audience. If we had attended the pre-budget lock-up and briefing perhaps it would have been easier but that was impractical since we would have had to leave at 2:00 for Question Period.

#### **Do you think the interpretation service is appreciated by the handicapped?**

WILSON: That is something that should be addressed to representatives

of the handicapped. However, I do wonder sometimes if we are making the best use of limited resources for their benefit. For example, would there be more interest in spending the same amount of money in providing explanations such as John Warren gives before Question Period? Or perhaps it would be more interesting to provide more captioning for programs like the CBC National News (which is currently captioned), the *Journal* or other public affairs programs. I would like to make a video glossary for signs relating to Parliament and political matters. But I think we have to ask the deaf what they want.

MARTINEAU: I agree, however, one tends to forget that when someone is deaf they have never "heard" the National News or many other programs so they have no way of knowing what they are missing. In such circumstances it is very difficult to say what are the most important programs to make available. Someone has made a decision that it should be Question Period. It is, of course, a very interesting show and both of us have become Question Period addicts.

#### **Do you have any direct contact with Members of Parliament. Have you testified before committees concerning problems of the handicapped etc.**

WILSON: During the year of the disabled I acted as interpreter for a number of groups which appeared before the Special Committee on the Handicapped. But I did not make any presentations to the committee myself. I am now chairperson of an organization called Total Communication Environment. We provide group homes for deaf multi-handicapped individuals and I speak on behalf of our clients to various government bodies. However, I keep my role as an interpreter separate from this advocacy role.

#### **What do you see in the future for the hearing impaired?**

WILSON: CBC has a mandate for captioning programs for the hearing impaired. If and when committees are televised perhaps there will be captions.

MARTINEAU: Very few deaf people are working in this area but I think the deaf are interested in informative and instructive television programming which is quite rare. I hope the CBC will continue and perhaps increase the services offered to this group of spectators.