Carrying the can

The job description for interpreters includes being a scapegoat among other things.

You remember when you were a young and exquisitely keen interpreter you would get upset when problems at a meeting were pinned on us. For example a delegate would say, “I didn’t get your point, perhaps there was a mistake in the interpretation”.

It sounded to youthful ears as if they were casting aspersions on our dedication and skill. They might announce that the meeting had to finish because the interpreters needed their lunch or to go home, when we could easily have stayed another hour. Or the meeting was halted because the interpreters had reached the end of their shift, when everyone knew full well that the town’s bars were full of idle interpreters translating beer mats to keep their eye in.

Older and wiser hands recommended unruffled serenity, explaining that we provided the perfect excuse: if delegates are cutting up rough over a given document, tell them the interpreters are all leaving in an hour; if there’s a sticking point on the agenda, take an early lunch break and use the interprets as an excuse; if the meeting secretary has simply forgotten to book a relief team, well that’s the interpreters’ fault too.

As that experienced interpreter said all those years ago, it’s part of what they pay us for; we are easy targets that can’t answer back. The tactic can however backfire. At one meeting the chairman told a delegation that they’d not understood his point and that there had no doubt been a problem with the interpreting. Then someone in the room piped up, “But you were both speaking French”. The chairman had no choice but to gamely join in the laughter.

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