



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

ACVA



NUMBER 071



1st SESSION



41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, May 21, 2013



Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Tuesday, May 21, 2013

• (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Good morning, everybody.

We had set aside two meetings, as you know, to discuss the subject matter of clauses 156 to 160, with regard to the Pension Act and the War Veterans Allowance Act, in Bill C-60, An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on March 21, 2013 and other measures.

We have presentations this morning. I will say that the Legion was invited to be one of the presenters. They've sent us a letter saying that they support what's in the proposed changes; they're supportive of the bill as is and decided they didn't need to appear to make that point. Other than that, we have our witnesses, who we'll get to in a moment.

We start this morning with a face that is familiar. We'd ask Mr. Bernard Butler, director general in the policy division of the department, if he'd open with some comments, and then we'll do our usual round of questions. Away we go.

Good morning.

Mr. Bernard Butler (Director General, Policy Division, Department of Veterans Affairs): Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and thank you very much.

[Translation]

Good morning everyone. As usual, I'm pleased to be here with you.

[English]

Mr. Chairman and members, I'm pleased to be here to speak to part 3, division 8, of the budget implementation act, and in particular clauses 156 through to 160 of that piece of legislation, which essentially propose amendments to the Pension Act and the War Veterans Allowance Act, a function of which, if implemented, would no longer see disability pension benefits payable under the Pension Act being taken into account when determining eligibility and calculating benefits provided under the War Veterans Allowance Act.

What is the War Veterans Allowance Act? Essentially, it provides for a program that provides assistance to low-income veterans of both the Second World War and the Korean War, as well as their survivors. Eligibility for the program and the range of benefits provided depend on a recipient's income, so it's an income-tested program to support eligible veterans and their survivors.

Under the terms of eligibility for the current program, a veteran's total income includes the disability pension provided under the Pension Act through Veterans Affairs Canada. The pension is automatically deducted from the amounts of benefits available to veterans and survivors through the war veterans allowance. As I indicated, with these proposed amendments, those benefits paid under the Pension Act will no longer be factored into the calculation of income.

To provide a quick bit of context, you will recall that in the spring of last year the Government of Canada announced that it would end the deduction of VAC's disability pension payments from a number of VAC's programs. On October 1, 2012, we ceased the deduction of these disability payments for our New Veterans Charter programs, the earnings loss program and the Canadian Forces income support program. We were able to make those changes relatively quickly because they were regulatory in nature and not legislative.

On February 5, 2013, the priorities and planning committee ratified an MC regarding the cessation of these benefits being calculated for WVA purposes. Essentially we are now seeking Parliament's approval through the BIA to cease those deductions.

As I indicated, the war veterans allowance is essentially a financial assistance program for low-income veterans who served during the Second World War and the Korean War, and their immediate survivors. Under this program, dating back to 1930, a VAC disability pension has always been treated and considered as income. As a consequence, any WVA recipients who were receiving disability pensions had the amount of allowances paid under the War Veterans Allowance Act reduced accordingly by that amount.

It's a significant move forward in the sense that not only does an individual or an eligible veteran or their survivor qualify for income support, but the war veterans allowance program also serves as a gateway to a number of other Veterans Affairs programs, including the veterans independence program, the so-called VIP, long-term care benefits, and health care benefits.

Essentially, to cease the deduction of VAC's disability pension from war veterans allowance, these amendments are required to both the War Veterans Allowance Act and to the Pension Act. The changes to the War Veterans Allowance Act will simply exclude disability pension benefits from the definition of income, so it's a fairly simple legislative amendment. Changes to the Pension Act will stop the withholding of disability pension payments to WVA recipients in order to avoid a WVA overpayment. Once the legislative authority is obtained through the budget implementation act, there will be some very positive outcomes for this group of low-income clients.

Essentially, based on our assessment, about 200 recipients will actually receive an increase in their war veterans allowance payments. Just over 3,000 veterans and survivors will qualify for the allowance. Seven hundred more veterans will qualify for Veterans Affairs Canada health care benefits. About 2,000 veterans who are in long-term care will receive a greater subsidy for their care. Finally, basically over the next five years, the government will incur expenditures to support these changes of approximately \$95 million.

Mr. Chair and members, that's a bit of an overview of the proposed amendments. I'm pleased to turn the floor back to you.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you. You kept it very succinct. I appreciate that, Bernard.

We will start with Mr. Chicoine. Go ahead for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Butler, thank you for having come to explain these changes.

Regarding the income replacement allowance, why was there no retroactivity provision in the agreement that was concluded between the government and the veterans' groups? I would like you to explain that to us.

[English]

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thank you. That's a good question.

What I can tell you, Mr. Chair and members, is that the Government of Canada has yet to decide on how to proceed with respect to the retroactivity of various benefits. At the moment, these legislative provisions, similar to the regulatory changes implemented in the fall of 2012, are targeted at implementing the future course of the cessation of the payment of these benefits.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Fine.

I don't know if the other members of the committee have had the same experience as I have had regarding this, but many of the veterans who have contacted me think that they are entitled to a retroactive payment.

Mr. Butler, will you be conveying your decisions in the near future, in a clear and specific way, to all of the parties in this class action suit? A lot of these people are expecting this retroactive

payment. Will you contact these veterans' groups to explain your decisions in a clear and specific way?

As I have already pointed out, many of them think that they will be receiving a retroactive payment and they are expecting it, but the situation is not very clear to them.

[English]

Mr. Bernard Butler: Indeed, the communication strategy regarding these provisions of the budget implementation act will be very clear about what implementing the act will mean for veterans who are receiving these benefits. It will also be clear in the shorter term that these particular provisions do not target or address the issue of retroactivity.

I certainly appreciate and welcome your comments in that respect. We have certainly heard a number of questions raised, and a number of concerns expressed likewise, and all of that feedback will certainly be considered by the government in determining the way forward.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Excellent. Thank you.

Concerning the new wording included in the act, was a complete verification done so as to eliminate all possibilities of class action suits?

Has there been an exhaustive check of every clause to verify whether there are still opportunities for class action suits regarding the deductions?

[English]

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, as with all legislative amendments of this nature, the Government of Canada applies a fairly rigorous process to assess them, and that includes a very comprehensive legal risk analysis by the Department of Justice so that whenever any change or a change in regulation or legislation is contemplated, it goes through that rigorous assessment and legal risks are assessed into the future.

In the normal course, the government does not move forward unless that legal risk assessment is favourable. That certainly would be the case here. We believe this is a very positive initiative, and that is not really an issue for us at this time.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Fine.

I might have another question, but it would be too long. I may ask it during the next round.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Adams, go ahead for five minutes, please.

● (0900)

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Thanks very much.

Mr. Butler, could you tell us how long the disability pension has been considered income with respect to the war veterans allowance?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Indeed, Madam, the disability pension has been treated as income really since the inception of the program, which dates back to 1930.

Ms. Eve Adams: So that's about 83 years.

Mr. Bernard Butler: It's been a while.

Ms. Eve Adams: This would prove to be a very significant change to the program.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Indeed this is a marked change in how benefits are calculated and how eligibility is determined. There is no doubt that it would have a positive effect on clients in this category.

Ms. Eve Adams: For the first time it would dramatically improve the war veterans allowance.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Indeed.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thanks.

Do you think the amendments to the WVA address the concerns of the Veterans Ombudsman? Do you feel as though the government is responding to his suggestions and recommendations?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, I think it's fair to say that the offsetting of disability pensions from Veterans Affairs Canada programs has been an issue over some years. There's no doubt this is one area that the ombudsman has expressed concerns about, and this should certainly address his concerns on that issue.

Ms. Eve Adams: Moving to the expediency with which we need to look at this issue, I think it is reasonable to assert that given the advanced age of war veterans allowance recipients....

Mr. Butler, do you believe that all parties in this room should act quickly to implement these amendments to ensure that veterans and their families receive the support they need?

Mr. Bernard Butler: With the greatest respect, Mr. Chair, I would not presume to advise members of Parliament on how they ought to cast their vote in support of proposed legislative amendments. But from a departmental perspective and a policy perspective, I can certainly say this is a positive move forward. This will benefit low-income veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War, and it should be seen as a positive amendment to the legislation.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you.

Mr. Butler, the war veterans allowance is one of the services and benefits available to Canadian veterans, but there are others who are receiving the allowance and they may have access to other health care benefits as a result. Can you share with us what these other health care benefits are?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Indeed. As I indicated in my opening remarks, this issue of offsetting not only affects eligibility to the program, because it is an income-tested program, but it also has a flow-through effect on a number of programs that veterans receiving WVA are eligible for. Essentially what that means is that it will improve access for a group of veterans in this category to VAC's health care benefits, and that includes things like the veterans independence program, our long-term care program—in terms of the subsidies that are paid to veterans who are in the facilities—and to health care treatment benefits as well.

There is a flow-through effect of these changes that is fairly broad.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Butler, all parties recognize the significance of veterans who are receiving long-term care, and our government is determined to take action for veterans requiring long-term care. Will the changes to the war veterans allowance provide any additional financial support or subsidies for long-term care to veterans?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, based on our assessment, there will be about 2,000 veterans who are currently in long-term care facilities who will receive a greater subsidy for their care as a function of these amendments.

Ms. Eve Adams: Those are individuals who are already receiving the WVA.

Can you tell us how many more veterans and survivors will qualify?

Mr. Bernard Butler: We think that overall there will be about 3,000 or more veterans and survivors who will now qualify for the allowance as a function of these changes.

• (0905)

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Adams.

Mr. Casey, now, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Butler, in preparation for many of these meetings, we receive a briefing note from the Library of Parliament.

I don't know whether you've had a chance to read it.

Mr. Bernard Butler: I haven't seen it, no.

Mr. Sean Casey: The very first sentence in our briefing note says, "The amendments introduced by Division 8 of Part 3 of Bill C-60"—that's what we're talking about today—"result from the Federal Court decision dated 1 May 2012 in the Manuge case."

Do you agree with that?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, the Manuge decision, as you know, was related to a SISIP insurance policy. In the decision, the court did pronounce very clearly that it did not have a direct impact on Veterans Affairs Canada's Pension Act, because in the terms of that piece of legislation, as I understand the court ruling, it was within the authority of the government to be doing the offsets under the pension legislation.

The Government of Canada at the time—you'll recall the announcement back in the spring of 2012—and our own minister made it clear at the time that notwithstanding that nuance, if you will, the Government of Canada would nonetheless move forward to ensure harmonization between Veterans Affairs Canada programming and the SISIP programming, which was certainly the subject of the Manuge case. To that extent, it's indirectly connected, I would agree with you fully.

Mr. Sean Casey: If the government, after being forced by the court to compensate veterans who were SISIP clients, then treated the veterans who are covered by these changes differently, you would agree with me that this would put the government in, at minimum, an unpopular and certainly an untenable position, considering what the court said in Manuge.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, I would think this strays well beyond my expertise and competence, if you will, before this committee to comment on that. But as I say, I think it was clear in the Federal Court ruling that it was very specific to the SISIP policy, and that evidently the Government of Canada made the decision at the time that it would move to ensure harmonization between Veterans Affairs Canada programming and SISIP.

Certainly, as this committee would be well aware, both of those programs service Canada's veterans, and harmonization would certainly be an important outcome.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Butler, you'd agree with me that if the court weren't so critical of the government's position in the Manuge case, there would have been very little motivation or incentive to make these changes.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, I would again suggest that this is a question that I'm certainly not able to comment on or not prepared to comment on, believing it to be outside my scope.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay.

At the same time as the Manuge case commenced, the same law firm commenced an action on behalf of RCMP veterans with respect to clawbacks. These amendments do not ameliorate the complaints set forth by the RCMP, do they?

Mr. Bernard Butler: That's correct. They do not address those issues.

Mr. Sean Casey: What legislative changes would be needed in order to make right the complaints that are alleged in the RCMP litigation?

Mr. Bernard Butler: On that very issue, Mr. Chair, all I can tell you is that we are looking at that very issue ourselves right at the moment and trying to better understand what are currently the implications of that proceeding. So right at this moment in time I can't give you an answer, because I really don't know. But we are looking at it to better understand it.

Mr. Sean Casey: Are there other federal or provincial statutes or programs that reduce the amount paid under the war veterans allowance or the pension? I guess that's my question: if a vet is in receipt of, for example, workers' compensation benefits, CPP disability benefits, employment insurance benefits, or provincial social security benefits, are they set off?

● (0910)

Mr. Bernard Butler: That's a very good question, Mr. Casey, and offhand I'm not sure of the breadth of the offsetting of these various programs. That was actually on my mind as I came in here this morning in anticipation of a question of that nature. We can get the answer for the committee if it would be helpful. We'll look at it.

Mr. Sean Casey: I'd appreciate it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Mr. Hayes for five minutes, please.

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm hoping you can help me out a little, just in terms of the implementation plan again, and you can clarify that process for me. Mr. Chicoine touched on it. I'm hoping you can elaborate on that a little more for me, please.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, effectively, in terms of implementation, assuming the legislation is passed by the House and by the government, we will be proactively looking at all the files of all of the WVA recipients currently. We'll be doing a comprehensive review to ensure that every current recipient who qualifies for any of the flow-through effects of these changes is notified in writing, and their accounts will be adjusted accordingly. It's an effort basically to proactively manage the impact of these legislative amendments. We did touch on, earlier, the issue around a communications strategy. So that will be included, too, to ensure that Canada's veterans are aware of these changes to the legislation, to encourage them to come forth as required.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: I'm curious as to the timeline for this to happen.

Mr. Bernard Butler: I don't have a timeline in front of me, Mr. Chair, but I can tell you that in the implementation plan for the process, it's fairly aggressive. We're contemplating, within the first, literally, weeks and early months of passage of the legislation, to engage in that process and to be ready to go. If we look at this population, it's an elderly population in the normal course. They are a low-income group. They are the remaining veterans and survivors of the Second World War and the Korean War. They're a group we really need to get to. We understand that, to ensure that they benefit as quickly as possible from these improvements.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: At the risk of being repetitive—and I'm sorry if I'm asking you to be repetitive; you explained yourself very clearly in your opening comments. Once again, I want to understand the relationship between the war veterans allowance and the Pension Act. Just clarify that for me one more time, if you would, please.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Essentially, under these legislative amendment proposals, one will simply say that under the War Veterans Allowance Act there will no longer be a deduction made for disability pension benefits. In other words, the references to the Pension Act will be essentially removed. So it will not be taken into account when the department calculates what is allowable income for the purpose of the WVA.

On the Pension Act side, there would be sort of a similar type of adjustment to the act to make it clear that benefits paid under that program, because they're not going to be offset any longer, have to be managed in a slightly different way than they have in the past, particularly as it relates to withholding disability pension benefits when they are awarded back in time.

Under the Pension Act as it's currently constructed, you could make application today for a disability pension. If you were a traditional war veteran, as an example, you could actually be paid back in time up to three years to the date of application. Under the act currently, there is a withholding provision to avoid overpayments of the war veterans allowance. Those will now be removed because there will be no need to do that. So these are simply adjustments to the legislation, all focused at removing any reference to withholding of disability pension payments and calculating it for purposes of WVA benefits.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Last in this round, we have Mr. Chicoine for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to share my time with Ms. Mathysen.

I have a general question for Mr. Butler.

I remember reading the decision in question at the time. It was quite difficult to understand. We know that there will be no further deductions for income replacement.

Would certain parts of the Supreme Court decision we have not discussed today enlighten us on the decision that was handed down?

● (0915)

[*English*]

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, I think if I understand the question, there's reference to a Supreme Court proceeding in this context. To my knowledge, the Government of Canada actually had made a decision to honour or respect and recognize the Federal Court decision. In fact, no appeal was taken from that ruling, so effectively the ruling of the Federal Court is binding and will be applied by the Government of Canada as the way forward. So there will not be an appeal of that Manuge decision.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Today we discussed several aspects of that decision. I don't have it here, but I would like to know if certain points in that decision need to be clarified. After all, it's drafted in legal language which is fairly difficult to understand.

[*English*]

Mr. Bernard Butler: As I was suggesting earlier, the decision was focused on offsets of Veterans Affairs Canada disability pensions paid under the Pension Act against the SISIP program. This is a program of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, and it hinged on a very complex discussion of the provisions of that policy. It's an insurance policy, and that's why it was so complex.

As to the effect on Veterans Affairs Canada programming, the comments were fairly straightforward. As I understand it, and I stand to be corrected, I think what the Federal Court ruled when they looked at Veterans Affairs Canada's approach to the Pension Act was that the legislation is actually very clear in how it's worded. The rationale is very structured and the offset did not offend the legislation, and therefore it left open the question of what the government would do in respect of that.

In the end, the government simply made a decision that it would honour the spirit and intent of the decision and cease offsetting these benefits on the Veterans Affairs Canada side. That's essentially what led to the regulatory changes in the fall as they relate to earnings loss and Canadian Forces income support, and what has now led to the proposed legislative changes to the War Veterans Allowance Act and the Pension Act.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

I will now yield the floor to Ms. Mathysen.

[*English*]

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thanks very much.

Since I have a very limited time, I have a couple of quick points. First, we have some concerns about clause 156—Mr. Casey alluded to it—and the reality of offsets where there are provincial programs in place. You've agreed to provide a list of these, but do you have any plans to discuss this with the provinces? It seems to me that our veterans are certainly not getting rich on these pensions and they need all of the support they can get.

The second point I wanted to raise is that there seems to be a consensus among the government members that there is a need for expedience to get this particular part of the budget bill passed. Would it make sense to separate it out so that we could deal with it more directly and effectively, rather than making it part of an extremely cumbersome budget bill?

Mr. Bernard Butler: With respect to clause 156, I can tell you that this legislation is within the jurisdiction and mandate of Veterans Affairs Canada. That's what we are focused on and that's what we're targeting. We do not intend to go into provincial jurisdictions to look at how they do their programming, and I'm not sure how they manage this income issue.

As to the second question you raise, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the strategy of bringing this forward. I can tell you that because it did require legislative amendment, this is certainly one way of bringing it forward to the House and having it dealt with within this current timeline.

● (0920)

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

I understand this will be the end of the questioning of this witness.

That being the case, Mr. Butler, I want to thank you very much for appearing this morning. As always, your testimony was very succinct. If there's a future detail you want to send along to the committee, I expect that you will provide it in writing.

Mr. Bernard Butler: We will indeed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will suspend for a couple of minutes. We have new witnesses coming forward, so we'll allow them to join us. We'll have about a two-minute break.

Thank you.

● (0920)

(Pause)

● (0925)

The Chair: You know why we're here. I think the clerk explained we'd like your opening comments, and then we'll go to questions from the committee.

If I'm correct, you're starting, Mr. Thibeau, if you're ready to go.

Mr. Robert Thibeau (President, Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, honourable members of this committee, fellow veterans, and ladies and gentlemen, I thank the Creator, first of all, for the opportunity to be here on behalf of our aboriginal veterans. I also wish to acknowledge that we are meeting today on non-ceded Algonquin territory.

I am Robert Thibeau, president of the Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones. We are an organization that is recognized throughout North America, and our membership includes allied aboriginal veterans. The AVA is a young organization, which has a three-stage mission.

The first is to advocate: to advise and provide support to all aboriginal veterans and their families regarding all issues pertaining to veterans' needs and rights; to advocate for and provide support on behalf of aboriginal serving members.

The second is community service: to promote, engage in, and provide support to the community by encouraging contributions to our society and to future generations; to provide the most positive influence to our aboriginal communities and youth, by both traditional teachings and strong leadership development through a variety of sources.

The third is remembrance: to honour and perpetuate the memories and outstanding deeds of our fallen comrades who gave their lives to preserve the freedom for all. In honouring those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, we will act at all times with respect and dignity.

Although we are a new organization by name, our members are known and respected in their local communities. We have, in a short period of time, become well known with other veterans organizations from across Canada, and we are still in the process of working with other veterans organizations in North America.

We are veterans, but we are also aboriginals who view our culture as our strength. This is one of the reasons I wear the regalia you see me wearing today. It is my way of displaying the pride I have in my culture, as well as the pride of serving in Canada's military forces. Our expression of culture is evident at the many aboriginal community activities that take place nationwide, and our participation is an example of not only the pride that we have shown to Canada, but the positive influence we give our communities and our future generations.

AVA has secured memorandums of understanding with First Nations Veterans of Canada, which are the veterans under the Assembly of First Nations and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. Hand in hand with both of these national organizations, it is our goal to work towards positive results on issues affecting veterans and their families.

Today, I have the honour to also speak on behalf of Chief Percy Joe, president of the First Nations Veterans of Canada.

I must commend this committee on their hard work and their efforts on behalf of the many World War II veterans and Korean War veterans, and their families, as this shows you are beginning to have

an understanding of the sacrifices that veterans and their families have endured for many years.

Thank you. *Meegwech.*

• (0930)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Thibeau, for those opening comments.

We'll now hear from Mr. Black, from the Air Force Association of Canada.

Perhaps you'd like to begin, sir, please.

Mr. Dean Black (Executive Director, Air Force Association of Canada): Good morning, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for this opportunity. I bring greetings from Colonel Terry Chester, our national president, who couldn't be with us today. I think it's because he's in British Columbia and perhaps the weather's much nicer there.

I understand that comments that reflect on the purpose of the association would be helpful to the members. Forgive me if members are already aware of some of these details.

My name is Dean Black. I'm the executive director of the Air Force Association of Canada. I'm a retired helicopter pilot with 30 years of service. It's a pleasure to be here with Mr. Thibeau, whom I only recently met at the Veterans Consultation Group at the Royal Canadian Legion. He informed me of a friend of his, a member of his association, who also flew helicopters during the 1960s Vietnam War, and I'm looking forward to meeting Mr. Thibeau's friend.

The Air Force Association of Canada, formerly the Royal Canadian Air Force Association, was formed by an order in council on 21 May 1948. The formation of the association was certified by letters patent issued in May 1951. The association helps members understand the significance of their contributions to the security and well-being of their country. The association accomplishes this goal by providing members with a venue in which they gather to share their common identity and experiences. The process of sharing helps members understand the scope of their individual contributions in the wider context that is an enterprise known as an air force. These are the means by which we can inform new generations of Canadians about the accomplishments, value, and importance of their country's air force.

The association devotes limited, member-funded resources toward three goal areas: heritage, youth, and advocacy. In respect of youth, we recognize the importance of the Air Cadet League of Canada and the work they do with young Canadians aged 13 to 18. It also acknowledges that the integrity and quality of a nation's air power is enhanced the longer individuals participate and gain experience in this very complex sector. Air power, civilian and military, is a technologically demanding domain that requires a concerted long-term effort by, and investment in, people. By encouraging the cadets to develop an early interest in an aerospace career, again civilian or military, the association only hopes to do its part to contribute to the integrity and quality of our nation's aerospace industry or air power.

Heritage is a goal that speaks to our effort to help air force members, serving and retired, deal with the wider context of their individual air force career contributions. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, as many of you know, many young men and women in the throes of demobilization were struggling to understand the nature and scope of their contributions, as well as integrating back into Canadian society. The association did its part to bring them together so that they could all share in both burdens. The sharing of identity, experiences, and ideas helped all of them, and it continues to do so to this very day. One only needs to reflect on the meaning and impact of the recent unveiling by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, our association's patron, of the Bomber Command Memorial, a tremendous testament to the 55,573 men who lost their lives in the strategic bombing campaign, and to the strategic bombing command veterans who survived what must have been a horrible time in their lives.

The Air Force Association of Canada remains forever indebted to the Canadian government, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Honourable Steven Blaney, and the Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Peter MacKay, for their unflagging devotion to the care of our strategic bombing veterans throughout this incredible year. Since 1977, the association has published *Air Force Magazine*, the primary heritage means by which we share members' experiences across the association, currently 8,000 members strong.

Finally, advocacy is the mission area that provides members the opportunity to inform Canadians still in uniform and those in the aerospace industry of the challenges and successes of their careers, and how to improve upon and leverage those challenges and successes for future generations. A vast amount of experience is gained following a 35-year career in one's air force, as I'm sure you can appreciate, and much of it involves technical skills that are not easily replaced. The process of advocating for a well-equipped, well-prepared, and well-trained air force is facilitated through the participation of knowledgeable, talented communicators whose ideas and views serve to inform those civilians and military officials charged with responding to modern and future challenges.

• (0935)

The Air Force Association is not a veterans group per se. While we do strive to provide assistance to air force veterans, the material, the solidary, and the purposive benefits we offer are different from those offered by other important groups, such as the Royal Canadian Legion, the National Council of Veteran Associations, and some of those that are represented today.

It's for this reason that we defer most of the veterans needs issues to those groups, especially the Royal Canadian Legion. To that end, the Air Force Association is an active member of the veterans consultation group, chaired by the Legion. We see this group as an effective way of bringing much needed focus for the benefit of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

There are too many issues requiring answers too quickly. An individual veteran's expectations remain, in some cases, far too high when it comes to modern-day challenges. We can only hope that our collective participation and collaboration with like-minded veterans groups will help reduce, to a manageable number, the most important

issues on which we depend on the Minister of Veterans Affairs for help.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

We turn to our third group. Mr. Michael Blais, it's good to have you here again. I see you've brought along Jerry Kovacs. I welcome him to join us at the table.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs (Member, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): If I sit here, I can watch everyone. Body language is 80% of communication.

The Chair: Mr. Blais, you're on your own.

Mr. Michael Blais (President, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): Thank you for the invitation, Mr. Chairman and ladies and gentlemen.

First, permit me to express the Canadian Veterans Advocacy's satisfaction that the government has fulfilled their pledge to harmonize war pensions and allowances with the recent SISIP legal decisions.

By definition, those requiring this allowance are experiencing substantial economic duress, and the end of the clawback is certain to have a definitive impact on their financial quality of life. Accordingly, we would acknowledge the government's efforts on these proposed changes.

There are issues, however, that I would like to address today: the harmonization of war pensions and allowances; retroactivity with the SISIP decision; the financial criteria of the allowance; and the allowance's legislated exclusion of thousands of disabled veterans who served this nation in Korea after World War II—veterans who are disabled, veterans who are clients of Veterans Affairs Canada and who, having reached the age of 55 for the ladies or 60 for the men, meet the allowance's age requirements.

The first issue is of great importance, and as no decision has been rendered on the earnings loss benefits retroactivity, I would have you consider both issues, as the war pensioners' allowance legislative changes have been motivated by this government's efforts to harmonize these problems with the SISIP decision.

I am a member of the SISIP class action. I have been a victim of this unjust clawback for 20 years. As such, I cannot tell you how important the issue of retroactivity is to me and my colleagues. Those who have sustained a similar financial discord as a consequence of reductions to their war pensioners' allowance or the earnings loss benefit must be accorded the same level of respect and retroactive compensation as was applied through the SISIP decision if the principles of harmonization are to be attained and—equally important—if justice is to be served.

The second issue is the allowance's financial criteria as they reflect on the establishment of a harmonized foundation determining precisely what level of annual income is required to ensure veterans are accorded the basic tenets of life, such as shelter, food, and clothing. The ELB and the SISIP programs have been harmonized. The poverty threshold has been clearly defined. Yet this threshold has not been applied to the war pensioners' allowance criteria. Consequently, the economically unrealistic financial threshold has been perpetuated, one that denies veterans who, when assessed under the new SISIP or ELB poverty threshold standard and benefiting from the non-inclusion of their Veterans Affairs Canada disability award, would be deemed eligible for this allowance.

The third issue, the exclusion of veterans who served in Korea after World War II is growing particularly problematic. At this time as a nation, we must be cognizant of Canada's military history since the cessation of hostilities in Korea. We must acknowledge, not dismiss, the commitment of hundreds of thousands of Canadians who have served at sea, in the air, or on the ground for prolonged periods in Europe during the Cold War and/or on dozens of United Nations or North Atlantic Treaty Organization-sponsored special duty areas. These men and women may not have experienced the same number of catastrophic casualties or fatalities as the nation has sustained in open conflict. However, these multi-generational, high-stress operational deployments have been plagued by a plethora of non-combat injuries very similar to what we have borne witness to in Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia. The sacrifice these veterans have made on behalf of this nation cannot be dismissed or ignored. Canada's obligation to them must be fully embraced, not discredited through exclusionary protocols.

The budget implementation plan also includes provisions to include the Last Post burial fund allowances to approximately \$7,400. This is a positive development, yet regrettably does not address the restrictive issues that have resulted in an unreasonable denial rate of 67% or an exclusionary policy that denies eligibility for a dignified interment to veterans who served in Korea after World War II.

● (0940)

The \$12,000 threshold, when put in the context of the government's harmonized ELB, insists its poverty-level determination does not reflect the economic realities impoverished veterans are confronting, and we would encourage the committee to take advantage of this opportunity to amend the Last Post burial fund threshold to respect and reflect the standards the government established and legislated through Bill C-55.

Equally important, the deceased veterans disability pension must be excluded from the Last Post burial fund's means test, as it has been excluded from SISIP and ELB and the war pensioners' allowance. The issue of inclusion of veterans of all eras is similar to our position that we have identified through the war pensioners' allowance, and as an advocacy, our position is resolute: one veteran, one standard.

Thank you.

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

We'll now turn to the committee members for their questions.

We'll start with Mr. Chicoine for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all of the witnesses for having come here to share their positions with us.

I would like to know if all of you have studied the proposed amendments. Do you have any concerns regarding any part of the wording in the bill that is being submitted to us today, or are you in complete agreement with it?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Blais: I think there's a problem in one sense that we haven't identified, and that is the inclusion of war pensions from other nations. By definition, these war pensions are identical to the Veterans Affairs Canada award. Those pensions are allocated for pain and suffering, yet they are still included in the criteria when veterans are approaching through the means test or whatnot. We don't think this should be included. If they are pensions for pain and suffering, not income replacement, they should have no bearing on an income replacement or income-based criteria.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: I would like to ask the other witnesses if they have any concerns or any comments they would like to have taken into account, or whether the text of the bill suits them.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Thibeau: As I was sitting here earlier, when the member from Veterans Affairs was here...I understand clearly what the proposal is. I understand it's the World War II vets and the Korean War vets, and now my colleague here is bringing up the other issue. But as the issue sits right now, I understand it completely and I do support it on behalf of the World War II vets and our Korean War vets, of which we have a number.

In that context, I also have to agree with Mr. Blais regarding what's going to happen on the front with our veterans of today. Is this something that is part of this committee's commitment under this proposed legislation? I don't know. That's something I can't answer. Only you, Mr. Chair, can answer it for me.

● (0945)

The Chair: And I won't try, so you can carry on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

Mr. Blais, you referred vaguely to expectations regarding retroactive payments. No decision has yet been made on that.

I would like each one of the groups to tell me what their expectations are concerning retroactive payments and what this represents to their members. No decision has been made yet. This whole issue is rather vague. I would like you to come back to that and tell us precisely what your expectations are, and what would be acceptable to the groups you represent.

[English]

Mr. Michael Blais: I think our expectations are very clear, and they have been established by the judge in the SISIP ruling. We have a government. God bless them, they want to harmonize with this legal decision. But harmonization must be complete. We can't cherry-pick through the issues we'd like to present, i.e., such as that we'll start the payments as of this date with no retroactivity, but if we're harmonizing to a program where retroactivity has been accorded, where the dignity has been accorded, we're creating a level where there are two standards. That's not acceptable to us. We believe that one veteran, one standard, should be the principle for all foundations through Veterans Affairs Canada.

We believe it is discriminatory, first of all, to exclude modern veterans, those who served in the Cold War. It would also be discriminatory were we to have a different policy for ELB or war pensioners' allowance when the government's primary objective is to harmonize these two programs with the SISIP decision. We expect full retroactivity—no more, no less.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

Mr. Blais, in your opening statement, you also talked about your concerns regarding age-related criteria. I would like you to tell us more about that. This concern you mentioned is not entirely clear to me. You spoke about this briefly and I would like you to expand upon it.

[English]

Mr. Michael Blais: Certainly.

We have a situation now where through the ELB and the SISIP program the government has correctly, I believe, identified a threshold that provides for the basic dignity of life, that being food, shelter, and clothing.

Once this threshold has been identified, it must be applied through all harmonized projects, or so we believe. If we have this harmonization of a standard of poverty threshold, for lack of a better description, of \$40,000, then that \$40,000 criterion should be applied during the war pensioners' allowance application process. Many people are living well below that. By definition, they're applying for this war pensioners' allowance, and as such, many are being denied.

This carries over to the Last Post burial fund too—\$12,000 is a ridiculous.... No one sitting at this table expects a veteran to live a productive and dignified life earning \$12,000 a year. It's not possible. Nor can we expect him to save money for a dignified burial.

I believe this harmonization of the poverty threshold must be applied equally to all programs that are being harmonized.

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

Now Mr. Zimmer, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Thank you for coming today.

Recognizing all the veterans in the room who have served our country so well, I thank you for your service.

Mr. Black, I want to ask you a few questions first.

I'd like to say, first of all, that my son is in the air cadets. I've said this often before this committee. He's envious of what you've had to do in your life or what you've been able to do in your life. So again, thank you for your service.

I just want to speak specifically to long-term care. With what we've talked about in the BIA and what we're talking about in the amendments, from what I understand more than 2,000 veterans in long-term care will receive a greater subsidy for their care.

On account of this, do you think that all parties should move quickly to pass the legislation? What is the incentive, at the end, to pass this as quickly as possible?

● (0950)

Mr. Dean Black: Well, I believe the incentive is to answer the needs that have been articulated out there, and to add to the importance of dignity of life as veterans approach the end of their lives.

We have not received any specific observations from our veterans, and I don't want to speak for other veterans' representatives here, but I can only think that it's a positive response, and a necessary one.

The economic situation changes, and the conditions under which veterans continue to try to live change; the challenges are greater with each passing day. So I can only say that those changes to which you refer have to be considered as positive.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Thibeau, I heard you talking in your opening statement about how you're an advocate for veterans. On this committee, whether we're government or opposition, I think we'd all consider ourselves to be advocates for veterans. We have a job to do, and this is legislative, but we advocate for you, and I think the actions are being played out in this with that effect. I would like to just start off with that.

And thank you for being an advocate as well.

With the amendments that we discussed—and you have talked to them specifically—would you say the changes we've talked about here, such as the Last Post one, doubling the amount, and especially the allowance, are supported by veterans in your organization?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: I'm going to speak on behalf of Chief Percy Joe at this time, because I feel that the first nations group has probably been the one that's been affected more by some of the discriminatory practices of years and years gone by.

I spoke to Chief Percy Joe last night—and I apologize to the committee, Mr. Chair, for not having all this information available. I was informed last Wednesday of the meeting here today. I did as much research as I could, and I also spoke to an advocate of first nations. Chief Percy Joe is the grand chief of his band, but he's also the president of the First Nations Veterans. Some of the issues that have been brought out that I'd like to bring out...and this is from a phone call last night at midnight, when I spoke to Chief Percy Joe. I really feel that the first nations issue has failed to be dealt with appropriately over the past, and it continues up to the present.

Returning aboriginal veterans from World War II and Korea were not treated the same as the counterparts they served with and fought alongside. An individual who joined the military had to enfranchise, and when some of those people came back, they were no longer Indians by the definition of Parliament. Aboriginals found in some cases that they had lost their status as Indians, and those returning to the reserve did not receive the benefits that non-aboriginals received under the land compensation act. The land given to natives was land that was already on the reserve. In other words, the land didn't belong to that person; it belonged to that band or that council.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Thibreau, can I...?

I completely respect the topic you're discussing, but I guess specifically today we're talking about the BIA and about the war allowance—we're talking about those specific amendments. I guess I was asking you whether your organization supported those amendments as stated.

Mr. Robert Thibreau: Yes, we do support them, as well as First Nations Veterans of Canada, if I can speak on their behalf.

• (0955)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I probably have 30 seconds or less, so this is the last question. Were these two issues the top two issues for your organizations prior to their being addressed in the legislation? Were these the top two, or would they be among the top two?

Mr. Robert Thibreau: I would have to say no, they weren't.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Black.

Mr. Dean Black: I would agree with that. No, I don't believe they were among the top two.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you. That's all I have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now to Mr. Casey for five minutes, please.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to pick up on Mr. Zimmer's last question. If these issues weren't in the top two for your organizations, what are they? If the Government of Canada were to address the two most serious grievances facing your organization, what would they be?

Mr. Robert Thibreau: For the aboriginal veterans, we're looking at the points that Mr. Blais brought up regarding today's veterans. Again, we certainly agree, because we also sit on the Legion consultation board, that one veteran equals one veteran. A veteran is a veteran.

We are trying to get away from the distinction...and one of the points I'm trying to raise here in that earlier talk about first nations is

the fact that there has been a discriminatory act against aboriginals in the military.

I'll give you one short example. In DND they say there are about 4% aboriginals. That's 4% of the people who self-identify. That's not the case. There are more than 4%. So we're trying to get that pride back as well.

But the top issues on the table right now are dealing with the issues of today's veterans.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Thibreau.

Mr. Black.

Mr. Dean Black: None of the issues that have arisen have been articulated by veterans, members of the Air Force Association. As I indicated in my opening remarks, we defer to the Royal Canadian Legion. With over 300,000 members they tend to have an ear to more voices. The veterans that our organization serves are particularly quiet on most of this stuff. They don't seem to be as affected.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Blais, I know very well the issues that your organization advances. For the benefit of those here, if the two biggest issues facing veterans today were addressed, what would they be?

Mr. Michael Blais: A lump-sum award has to be the priority for all veterans organizations and veterans advocates who are sitting here. We have young men who have been viciously wounded, suffering mental and physical calamities, who have been forced by this government to turn to the courts for justice. What do they want? They want the same level of justice that was provided to World War II and Korean War veterans. They're not asking for anything more. This has to be the priority. Discussion and dialogue must start on this issue shortly.

We all know that there are different opinions. The Legion wants a lump-sum award. Other organizers want this. Older fellas want the lump-sum award because they're experiencing hearing loss. The point is, without dialogue, without addressing these issues, it will always remain the number one issue. Those people who have lost legs, who have lost their souls, who have lost their minds, are making it the number one issue.

The second important issue is the way we're treating our widows under the New Veterans Charter. There is a discriminatory standard there. They are not being provided the care and comfort that this nation owes to people who have sacrificed so much.

Third, long-term disability is becoming an important issue. As we've noticed through the Sunnybrook situation, the federal government really does not have the oversight required to ensure that the quality of life for these veterans is upheld. The provincial government is now paying for those beds. They're responsible for long-term care, and there is somewhat of a disconnect here. This situation is brewing at Sunnybrook, and you'll hear about it later this week in the news.

Where do I go, as an advocate? I've turned to the Minister of Veterans Affairs in good faith. God bless them: they've launched an audit and things were done, but things haven't been fixed. Here we are in a situation where those veterans who are in the dementia ward, those veterans who need the most care, are still sitting in their soiled diapers for way too long, still eating food that's mush, because it hasn't been served to them quick enough. We have an obligation. Where that obligation takes us is something this committee has to decide, especially on long-term care, now that the downloading has been completed and there is this grey zone.

• (1000)

Mr. Sean Casey: I want to ask you about clawbacks. This partially addresses clawbacks, but old age security, relief, and employment assistance from the department are still subject to deduction, even after these changes are made. What is your reaction to that, Mr. Blais?

Mr. Michael Blais: I think that's unfair. The reality is, veterans are confronting very serious financial discord when they reach the age of 65. There's a bridging clawback, a loss of their long-term disability benefits, whether it be ELB or SISIP. There's a loss of CPP. There are serious issues that will have a profound impact on their lives. This is something that we discussed at the ombudsmen consultations a couple of weeks ago. What happens to these guys after they're 65? Does our obligation end just because they've reached retirement age? I think it does not. I would suggest that we have to take effective measures to ensure that the basic \$40,000 poverty threshold is met.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. O'Toole for five minutes, please.

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to echo the comments of Mr. Zimmer and thank you all for your service and your presentations here today.

I'm going to ask only two of your questions. I feel as an ex-air force guy I should ask the air force guy a question. But unfortunately, Mr. Black, I'm going to focus on the other witnesses.

Mr. Thibault, you've referred to the first nations veterans, and you said that your organization is a new group. Mr. Black mentioned that the Legion is trying to take leadership by bringing veterans advocacy groups together to prioritize needs and to collaborate. As a new organization helping aboriginal veterans, how are you coordinating with the first nations veterans?

We've heard today from Mr. Butler that the changes in the budget implementation act will mean that over 2,000 veterans will now have access to a greater subsidy for long-term care. I think he said there will now be 700 who will become eligible for health benefits. How is your organization taking these developments and making sure your

members, or aboriginal Canadians, know about them and gain access to them?

Mr. Robert Thibreau: Mr. Chair, that's a very good point. We have the memorandums of understanding with first nations and with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, so we can get the word out regarding all of these changes that are coming.

Communication is a serious obstacle. It was mentioned by Mr. Butler this morning. I am certainly hopeful that since we are dealing with each of our provincial directors, the word will get out to our veterans and others.

I have a serious case right now of a Korean veteran who passed away last year. I think his spouse certainly fits into the new portion of this. I don't know if he was collecting that pension, but I know he was collecting a disability pension, so there might have been a clawback on that. That's something we're certainly going to look at.

There is the ability for communication among first nations, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and our own organizations through our provincial directors. That word is going to get out. Maybe that 3,000 will increase in numbers. I don't know.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: I think historically aboriginal veterans have been a group that has not accessed some of the benefits that have been available. It's good that there are probably more groups making sure that they have access.

Thank you for your more than 30 years. I see your CD with two clasps, so thank you very much.

Mr. Blais, I have a question for you. You had a comprehensive overview. You were very passionate, and I respect that. But you were comparing some of these changes to the \$12,000 threshold for the Last Post fund. I'd like you to comment on the changes made to the Last Post fund in the budget. Specifically, the \$12,000 is not an income, as you described it in your remarks. It's an assessment of assets to see whether someone qualifies as an indigent veteran. It's important to add that the \$12,000 asset test does not include house or car. So if you're looking at an estate to determine whether a veteran is impoverished and needs the assistance of the government to have the funeral services taken care of, and the car and house are not included in the assessment of assets, and you don't feel \$12,000 is fair, what would be a fair amount?

• (1005)

Mr. Michael Blais: Well, to be fair, I think dialogue has to happen on that, Mr. O'Toole. It's not fair for me to come here as Mike Blais and say I need you to make that \$40,000. You've got to balance that. That's not the object; that's not my intent in bringing these issues up. My intent is to start a dialogue, understanding that, yes, we have made a determination of what basic funds are required for the basic courses of dignity. Well, \$12,000 is \$28,000 short of that, right? That's the number they use.

I understand there are many veterans who do not own houses at the end of their lives and many who do not own cars. It's kind of a double-edged and maybe irrelevant point. The point is that we can focus on what their income is and use that as a determination of whether they need support for a dignified burial. I think when we look at a \$12,000 margin, and we understand the good work that's being done by identifying poverty-level thresholds, we have to bring this into sync. I'm not saying \$40,000 is the number. These guys are retired. There are issues here. Maybe it should be \$30,000. Maybe we should have a dialogue to determine that and have people come and discuss what is needed, and have funeral directors come in.

Right now there's confusion. We want to get it right. It's the same with the legislation on the WPA. We want to get it right. We're not here to berate you or force you to make decisions. We're here to enlighten you, in the sense that there has to be a standard here, that your obligation as members of Parliament is real. We have an opportunity now. Through this budget implementation, these issues are being revisited in a legislative manner.

Why can't we take the time—if it takes another meeting or two to identify these problems—and effect positive change? When we talk about what the minimum should be, that's your decision. My job is to tell you that the minimum is too low right now and that many veterans are not being provided that dignified burial they require because of it.

We have funeral directors picking up the slack. This is not an unknown quotient, but it is an unacceptable quotient when we have veterans who deserve dignity at the end of life.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now Ms. Mathysen for five minutes, please.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for bringing the information to us. It does put things into perspective. I very much appreciate your candour and your experience in regard to this.

I have some questions that I think have already been asked, but I want further clarification. I'll start with you, Mr. Blais.

In talking about this whole issue of veterans managing in their last years, there is the very fact that the Last Post fund has increased the amount payable but at the same time it has failed to improve the \$12,000 threshold. When the government says it doesn't include the house or the car—if it indeed did, if those were not exempted—it would seem to me a lot of families would be left with nothing. You mentioned that many veterans don't have that kind of asset at the end of their lives. But if they do, if there's a widow, if there's a family left behind, what on earth happens to them if those assets are not exempted? It seems to me that the government is trying to portray these changes as something far more than what they really are.

You mentioned the need for discussion and dialogue in terms of how we square the circle around all of the veterans, particularly modern-day veterans. I quite agree that there does need to be further discussion. But at the same time, the government is talking about quickly passing the amendments we're looking at today, and how important it is that they be passed quickly. Yet they're lumped in with an omnibus bill, a huge bill that is many pages in length—I think it's

approaching 400, or perhaps in excess of 400. Would it make sense to separate this out, to look at it more carefully, to understand it better, and perhaps to have the opportunity to pass it expeditiously once we have looked at it in a more thorough light?

• (1010)

Mr. Michael Blais: I think that's one of the most important things. It's nice when veterans are recognized and there are implementations brought forward. But we're in a position here now, and veterans are very aware of this, where the Conservatives have a majority. If they wanted to fix these issues that are in the forefront...they could have inserted this in the omnibus bill.

Now, conversely, in the manner of dialogue and comprehensive discussions, it serves nobody to rush through a bill without addressing the issues in good faith and with the time required to come to adequate results.

In a perfect world it should be separate. Not only should the war pensioners' allowance and the Last Post fund be discussed, but the lump-sum award and the issues that are confronting veterans should be discussed. You do have an opportunity to make this right before veterans have to go to court.

Veterans are disenfranchised. They are not living the quality of life that they were given to expect when they signed that oath of allegiance, when they swore allegiance to this nation. We have an obligation. I'll go back to that as many times as necessary. It is sacred. Our obligation has to be to those men. Nothing would make me happier than if the government were to come forward and say, "Okay, we've heard veterans' voices." I hear that often. Now let's see some action: "We've heard veterans' voices; we are going to assemble the team. We're going to address the issues. You may not like the end result, but we're going to engage in dialogue. We're going to have witnesses come forward. We're going to hear your story, and if warranted, we're going to fix it."

Now, I think it's warranted. I'm biased, of course. You have to have an independent, open mind. I think that by the time that process is completed, you would be feeling very much like I am, that the cost is not that much, considering that in the grand scope of Canada there are not that many disabled veterans. There are not that many veterans over age 60 who need care compared to the general population. We can make this work. It takes willpower on all parties' behalf, however, and a sincere effort to work together to make the lives of these veterans better.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The question was about three minutes, so you only had a couple of minutes to answer. That's the end of our question period.

I'd like to thank our witnesses very much for appearing today, and certainly I think you've added a lot of dynamic to what we're looking at.

I would remind all members that we have one more witness appearing next week, the Korean vets, and that will be the end of the witnesses. If there are suggestions or amendments, they must come in next week—sorry, next meeting, Thursday.

I would also remind you that we are obligated to respond back to the finance committee by Monday. So after Thursday's meeting, I have to send a letter, on behalf of the committee, outlining the thoughts and concerns, or recommendations, whatever the case may be. So be prepared to do that on Thursday. We'll also take a little time to do some committee business, looking forward, and so on.

Thank you very much.

We're adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.parl.gc.ca>