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Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Thank you, everybody. We'll come to attention and get on with business, and I apologize that we're a few minutes late. We got held up a bit at Parliament.

I want to welcome Minister Fantino. We are, in fact, dealing with the estimates today.

Minister, if you're prepared, we'll ask you to make a few opening comments. Of course, as you know, there'll be some questions from the members of the committee.

Thank you for coming.

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members, good morning.

I'm joined today by Deputy Minister Chaput.

Let me begin by thanking you for the opportunity to be here to present on something that we all regard as very important to the well-being, care, and support of our veterans and their families.

Indeed, the task before us is a great one. The situation of Canada's veterans is changing and evolving, and of course so too are the expectations and the kinds of things we need to offer them. Therefore, Veterans Affairs must change to meet their evolving needs and challenges, and we are well over halfway through a transformation initiative that has eliminated millions of steps that used to be required for veterans to spend hours interacting with Veterans Affairs on the day-to-day business.

Just over 18 months ago, veterans still had to submit to Veterans Affairs a receipt for \$20, for instance, to be reimbursed for snow-clearing service. All of that, we figured, was a waste of time.

Veterans have said they want less time in an office building waiting in line for services. That's why My VAC Book and My VAC Account aim to provide those veterans with the services they need, so they don't have to travel to Veterans Affairs offices. For those who do, we have an increased network of front-line medical facilities and office locations to help veterans rehabilitate and transition to civilian life.

Much is always said about economic benefits and they no doubt play an important role, but all of that is beside the point if a veteran cannot get the medical care he or she needs. Our focus has been, and

must continue to be, on the medical and rehabilitation services available for our Canadian veterans.

I am pleased to report that veterans in our country receive the best medical and rehabilitation treatment available anywhere. For example, we celebrate the 31 integrative personnel support centres, where Veterans Affairs and National Defence staff work hand in hand for the first time in generations. Together, they provide much needed care and support directly to Canada's serving members, veterans, and their families. There are the 18 operational stress injury clinics, where provincial partners deliver world-class rehabilitation support for serving members and veterans, both military and RCMP, under the guidance of Veterans Affairs' National Centre for Operational Stress Injury. These services combined with our country's strong universal health care system ensure that Canadian veterans and their families have access to one of the best health care systems in the world.

On financial benefits, much of the discussion surrounding the new Veterans Charter has been linked to the lump sum, and much of it, I'm afraid, is mostly misunderstood. Too often I hear stories of a seriously injured veteran where the media report erroneously implies that they only receive a lump sum. In fact, a seriously injured veteran is eligible for thousands of dollars each month, up to and including after age 65. Mr. Chair and members, in some cases a veteran can receive over \$10,000 a month in financial compensation. This is in addition to two major tax-free award payments totalling in excess of up to half a million dollars.

Colleagues, this is all separate from the veterans independence program that will install a lift in your house, retrofit your car, or provide free medical care and rehabilitation support to veterans and their families, but I say this sincerely: more can and must be done.

Colleagues, my commitment to Canada's veterans did not begin last July, when I was appointed by Prime Minister Harper to this position. In fact, it is a mission I have been dedicated to for my entire professional life. I was a long-time tenured member of both the national and the Ontario boards of the Canadian Forces Liaison Council promoting and supporting the Canadian Forces reservists program. I was also the Department of National Defence associate minister, during which time I interacted widely with our military men and women in theatre and at home.

•(1110)

As well, during my four-decade career in law enforcement, I was proud to recruit Canadian veterans to policing, including at the Ontario Provincial Police and the Toronto Police Service. I wanted to recruit them because I knew they had the world-class training experience and management skills that best suited the kind of work that law enforcement agencies do on the front lines.

Maybe that's why my focus has been to see veterans' transition to civilian life enabled by well-paying jobs in the private and corporate sector, and as well, of course, in the public sector. While we may disagree on how to go about this, I believe it is irrefutable that Canadian veterans are assets to any Canadian business, and they believe that as well. The recruiting that's now going on widely in Canadian businesses is indeed encouraging. That's why, as a government, we continue to support the hire a veteran program, which matches qualified veterans to well-paying jobs. Furthermore, we have introduced the veterans hiring act, which is before Parliament as we speak.

While politics will play out, as it unfortunately must, I certainly hope I can count on every member at this table to support moving injured veterans' issues forward, moving them to the front line for federal public service jobs.

I want to be clear for a moment on this legislative proposal. The veterans must be qualified, and if they are, and have been injured in the line of duty, colleagues, those veterans should be at the front of the line. It's as simple as that.

I will now take a moment to speak about the estimates themselves.

In 2005-06 the former Liberal government approved main estimates totalling \$2.85 billion. Today, you are being asked to approve main estimates totalling \$3.58 billion. This means that spending at Veterans Affairs Canada this year will be \$724 million higher than it was just nine years ago. That is an extra \$724 million to fund everything from enhanced financial benefits to comprehensive medical, psychological, and vocational rehabilitation services for injured veterans and ill veterans.

Equally important to remember is that all of these new investments have occurred at a time when there are actually fewer veterans requiring Veterans Affairs Canada support and during a time when we've experienced a recession and government-wide cost reduction exercises. That is, I believe, a testament to the commitment of our government, the people of Canada, and all of us to ensure that our veterans are assisted as well as their families.

These main estimates reflect how we haven't just been spending more, but we are spending smarter to serve veterans better and faster than ever. I believe this is exactly what veterans and their families and all Canadians want and expect from us.

Lest we forget, Mr. Chairman and members. Thank you.

•(1115)

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

We'll now go to our round of questions. As usual, we'll start with the NDP.

Mr. Stoffer, please.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister, for appearing today, and to all our veterans in the room, thank you very much for coming today.

Minister and Deputy Minister, I have three questions for you. Because my time is limited, I'll give you the questions first and then you can respond when you have an opportunity.

First, the briefing notes on page 2, in section B, part 1, paragraph a, refer to pensions and benefits under the Pension Act decreasing by \$96 million. I wonder if you can elaborate a bit more on that and how you've come to that figure. I know it refers to war veterans, but I'd like to get a more enhanced appreciation of that figure.

Second, as you know, the government did announce, and we thank the government for allowing modern-day veterans access to the Last Post Fund. Minister, as you know, in 1995 the then finance minister, Paul Martin, cut the eligibility for the Last Post Fund from an entry level of \$24,000 to \$12,000. As far as I know that figure is still at \$12,000. Even though modern-day veterans may be eligible for the Last Post Fund, if you do not increase the eligibility for the entry level income of \$12,000 to at least 1995 levels, many, many veterans will still not be eligible for this particular program.

Basically, what that extra money would do for those veterans who are eligible, instead of getting the \$3,600 they received in the past, they would get close to over \$7,300. Isn't it unfair that the entry level for the \$12,000 is still there, and not at least at the 1995 level? If you include inflation, that figure should be at about \$40,000 entry level to the Last Post Fund.

My third question for you concerns a fair number of complaints I have received regarding the recent advertising on television. I understand this figure may be up to about \$1 million. When someone calls the 1-800 number provided on the television, there is no response. The calls I have received are from people complaining that this is more political advertising and is not necessarily to help veterans.

I appreciate the fact that the government wishes to reach out to the veteran community, because many veterans, or their families, or RCMP members don't know what benefits are out there. I notice as well that you didn't mention the RCMP in the ads. The government made the decision to cut the nine offices across the country, and then did this rather expensive advertising. I must say that perception-wise, I don't think it fits well within the veterans community.

I'd like to have you respond to that, and I do thank both of you for coming today.

Thank you very much.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

Let me start with the advertisements first. These are done with the clear intent to bring awareness to the veterans and if there is an issue with that telephone number, we'll look into that. But it's a way of reaching them as well as it is reaching Canadians who are, as you know, exposed to a lot of information back and forth about what is or isn't being done with respect to veterans. We feel it's justified. It's simply one more way of reaching out to veterans, their families, and Canadians.

On the phone number issue, if that's what's happening, I'm concerned about it, as you and others obviously are, and we'll look into it.

On the issue of the Last Post Fund, I believe the top-up was some \$108 million of recent date. I think you make a good point. We should be looking at the more comprehensive response to that particular need or entitlement or benefit, if you will. I'm quite prepared to go back and revisit all of that. In fact, it's been on the list of things to do to try to bring a balance to all of these issues to current time. As we make other adjustments, we obviously need to make adjustments on the whole platform of benefits and services to veterans.

I will let the deputy answer the first question you posed, if I may.

Ms. Mary Chaput (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): You're quite right, Mr. Stoffer. The estimates do reflect a \$96 million decrease in the amount for disability pensions and death payments. Those figures fell from \$1.6 billion in the year previous, to \$1.5 billion in these estimates. It's a direct function of the fact that traditional veterans are among us in smaller numbers and therefore their use of these programs goes down as that population goes down. It's a simple function of fewer traditional veterans still being among us in Canada and a lower draw on the associated benefits. It doesn't mean that any veteran who comes forward for those kinds of benefits would be denied; rather, it's an estimate of how many we expect to be in the program in the current year.

• (1120)

The Chair: Do you have a brief question?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I think I'll pass.

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

We'll now go to the government.

Mr. Gill, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Mr. Chair, I also want to take this opportunity to thank the minister and deputy minister for appearing before the committee.

On our side, Mr. Chair, Mr. Hawn has a couple of questions. Then we'd like to pass our time to the opposition, because we may be interrupted for votes, and we want to make sure the opposition has an opportunity to ask their questions.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you both for being here.

Through you, Chair, to the minister, on the expenditures for the earnings loss benefit, that more than doubled in the last two years, from \$105 million in 2012-13, to \$204 million in 2014-15. There were a number of recommendations made in a previous study. In

round numbers, there were about 250. Of those, 50 were regulatory or legislative, and about 200 were administrative. A number of the regulatory or legislative ones have been accomplished; the majority of the administrative ones have been done.

My question is, how much of that increase in earnings loss benefit payout is due to those regulatory or administrative changes being made, and how much is just due to increased demand from veterans?

Hon. Julian Fantino: I'll ask the deputy to give you those specific details.

Ms. Mary Chaput: I would double-check for you, sir, but based on the fact that the numbers you're citing come out of our quasi-stat vote, our vote 5, my immediate answer is, that increase you see that is worth \$61 million is money that is flowing directly from the department into veterans' pockets. Whether it's a function of legislated or regulatory change, I don't have that split.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It would be hard to break that down anyway, so it's probably, I would suggest, a combination of easier access and greater demand, meaning greater knowledge.

Ms. Mary Chaput: Precisely, yes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay.

Minister, we heard a lot recently about the use of psychiatric service dogs, and so on. There have been a number of events in the last couple of months to bring more attention to that, to assist veterans with mental health issues, particularly PTSD. Could you talk about some of the actions we're taking to assess the benefits of those dogs, to quantify what the actual benefit is? Obviously, that would lead to more programs, presumably.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for that question.

Certainly, during my time at Veterans Affairs I've had the opportunity to speak to people in the clinical field, the scientific area, the sciences area, and to many veterans themselves about the benefits of service dogs to their well-being, if you will, and the kind of support for those who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or some other form of mental health issue. There's quite a bit of literature, actually, quite a bit of information about this very issue, but it hasn't really been quantified in a way that we can speak with authority about the benefits with some rigour, if you will. Obviously, it does provide a benefit to those who are experiencing those particular issues. It may be anecdotal, but for them it's real.

We decided to pursue a pilot project, a very comprehensive study, that will be headed by Dr. Aiken, at Queen's University, and Dr. Gillet, and people from our own department. There will be 50 veterans with service dogs. The pilot project will run for about two years. It will be one of those scientific approaches with all the rigour and benchmarks. At the end of that, we hope to have some clarity about an issue that is very much in a topical domain right now, not only here in Canada, but elsewhere in veterans communities. I feel the only way to go forward with these kinds of items is to actually do something that you can justify and give some credibility to these kinds of programs, so we can advance them, if they work out, as a program response to those kinds of issues.

• (1125)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: A big part of transition, obviously, from the military to civilian life, or from injury to a fully functioning life, if you will, is retraining and a job.

Can you talk a little bit about the retraining assets that are being made available? What have we done, or could we do, to make them more easily accessible or more flexible for the veteran or the family?

Hon. Julian Fantino: We all agree on the need for a smooth transition from active military service to civilian life in the context of a good job, the whole benefit not only to the veteran but also to the family, and the kinds of confidence it instills in people to proceed with their quality of life issues in a way that all of us expect. But obviously there are some barriers and some challenges.

How do you transition a career in the military to some other job? I think we have found a match with policing, for instance. We find that veterans who transition to a police career do exceptionally well. They're highly valued for their skill set. They are disciplined. They have problem-solving abilities. That's why we've encouraged police services across the country to look at veterans as quality people to be recruited into policing, but we're finding that we need to do more to enable them to qualify for those jobs.

If on-duty injured veterans are wanting to migrate into a profession or a job of some kind for which they don't have the immediate skill set or training, there's a program that enables them to do that. There's up to \$75,000 to enable them to access one of those jobs.

All that said, though, we need to also ensure that corporate Canada as well as governments are receptive to veterans, that they actually create an environment whereby qualified veterans are able to get into quality jobs.

I'm very pleased to say that we can enumerate for you the number of corporate Canada entities that have stepped up now to actually promote and also recruit veterans into their workforce. It's very encouraging indeed. We see more and more of that happening.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We go to Mr. Valeriote, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, Minister Fantino and Ms. Chaput, for coming before the committee today.

Minister, you mentioned recession in your speech. This is merely an opinion on my part, and I hope you share it.

You know that there are many groups within Canada that are somewhat recession-proof. We know of those professions and groups. If there is any group that is more worthy of being recession-proof, if there's any greater expression of our social covenant, our sacred contract and obligation with our veterans, I would hope that you would agree that our veterans should not suffer. Their benefits should not be reduced by this government by reason of recession.

Having said that, I know you didn't come here expecting to receive softballs from the opposition. I've heard a concern expressed by many Canadians generally and specifically from veterans about advertising. I see from your operating budget there's now a \$4 million increase, in fact a brand new expenditure for advertising initiatives.

I'm wondering how much of the multi-million dollar ad buy currently running throughout the NHL playoffs is funded through that item? Can you or Ms. Chaput tell me that?

• (1130)

Ms. Mary Chaput: Yes. I couldn't isolate for you, sir, precisely the amount that's associated with the portion that's running.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Could you undertake to this committee to present those numbers to the clerk and to the chair so we can look at those?

Ms. Mary Chaput: Certainly.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Can you tell us how much those ads cost, which currently run during the prime-time playoff slots?

Ms. Mary Chaput: That I'll get for you as well.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: You'll get that for us as well.

Having said that, and being advised that there's a \$4-million increase in your advertising initiatives, I learned through one of the briefings which you gave me on the estimates—and I thank you for that—that there is an estimated \$296,300 spent on career transition services. This was increased by only a mere \$11,000, I think. I'm wondering how you can justify for us your department spending more on advertising, a \$4-million increase in advertising, and less on the actual programs themselves.

Ms. Mary Chaput: What I would explain in that regard is that the \$296,000 you refer to, sir, are 296 grants of \$1,000 each. They go to single individuals who use that grant money to secure advice, counselling, and coaching in the preparation of things like their own personal CV, how to prepare for an interview, etc. You can divide that number by 1,000 and it touches 296 veterans in this given year.

The money on advertising, on the other hand, reaches and touches far, far more people than that. Our Facebook reach runs at 17 million. In the course of last year, during our ad campaign around and before Remembrance Week, the number of visits to our website went up from about 7,500 per day to over 23,000 per day.

Yes, \$4 million is a higher number; however, the reach of that \$4 million is far, far greater than the \$296,000.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Ms. Chaput, with respect, I hardly think you can equate social media exchanges and contacts with meaningful investigation about programs when people are often, in those exchanges, expressing emotions about Remembrance Day or their experiences in battle.

You cannot equate the, I think, \$8 million that was spent on pushing these ads out—and not your own office, but hiring independent people to push these ads out—and consider that kind of exchange as success in your programs.

Ms. Mary Chaput: We see commemoration and communication to veterans and Canadians to be as much a program and a benefit as any other program and benefit we offer. Commemoration and remembrance bring to certain veterans, who are still struggling with their military service and things they saw and things they did, a lot of emotional closure. We've heard this from veterans themselves. It has a very salutary effect from the point of view of mental health and reconciliation on a personal level with what has transpired.

The mandate of the department is not just benefits and programs. Commemoration is also considered a key part of the mandate. Moreover, in our view, anything that informs veterans of the programs and services we offer them can only be a good thing.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Well you in fact have argued, Minister, in question period, when I subtly probed the questions to you, that you're doing it to reach out to veterans.

Statistics I've seen suggest that only 6% of people who look at these ads respond to them. Many of them are expressing their anger at the fact that the government is spending money on promoting itself instead of promoting programs.

Frankly, if you're relying on social media as the strongest form of counselling and psychological rehabilitation, and touting that, I think you're making a drastic mistake. Not to devalue the value of that kind of exchange, but there are far better programs that can be used.

I guess I'm going to ask you again, what effort are you going to make to stop advertising yourselves and promoting this government, and start spending that money on our veterans and their programs?

• (1135)

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Chair, if I may, it's not a one-stop shopping approach that we're taking. The ads are one component. The social media is another component. There are many other platforms, portals, and direct relationships that one has to inform, educate, answer questions, and be open to criticism, round tables, you name it.

I don't see the ads as the end all. It's one means by which we communicate, whether it's 6% or 60%. One hopes that you reach those who care enough, who are interested enough, who need the information and act upon it, and that it be a response to their issues.

The other thing I wanted to also allude to is that coming into this portfolio, I have found that there's a huge amount of misinformation, miscommunication, confusion, the lack of awareness even by veterans themselves about what benefits are available to them.

One of our major challenges.... We hope that you and others are conscientious enough, as I know you are, to be helpful in that regard, because we are faced with the bantering that goes back and forth about what is or isn't, what facts and what non-facts are. Also, there's the fearmongering. I talk to veterans all the time who are concerned about the public play at their expense. That's the other thing we need to be conscious about.

Mr. Valeriote, it's not about advertising on behalf of government. It's just trying to reach those who we are committed and dedicated to serve and help. If it reaches 6%, that's better than nothing.

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

We now have Monsieur Chicoine, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I also want to thank the minister and the deputy minister for coming to answer our questions.

I have only one question, which may have been brought up by my colleagues already, but I will ask it in French.

An increase of \$4 million is planned for additional advertising expenses. That has been heavily criticized. In the context of budget cuts, all this advertisement and commemorations are being funded. Funding is allocated to increase the number of commemorations of past wars, and so on.

How do you justify all these additional expenditures for advertising and commemorations? Some of the minister's trips have also been criticized. How can all that spending be justified in a context of budget restraint and last year's office closures? As for veterans, I think the best way to honour them is to provide them with the services and benefits they are entitled to. Obviously, much criticism has been levelled against all this spending.

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino: I guess we have different points of view on this very issue. I believe that if a nation or a society is not able to commemorate, remember, or pay tribute to those who have sacrificed so much, we as a society probably don't value the quality of life that we enjoy here, the freedom, the respect for human rights, and the rule of law.

I guess I move to also argue back. I don't know if the member has been to Vimy. There are over 11,000 names of Canadian soldiers who fought in the First World War, Canadian soldiers, young men, some as young as 16 years of age, whose gravesites are unknown. We don't know where they're buried. There are 11,000 just on that Vimy memorial. I can enumerate cemetery after cemetery in Europe where our young men are buried, who fought for a cause: to enable us to enjoy the quality of life, the freedom that we have in this country.

I think commemoration is not a trivial thing. It's not a waste of money. It's a duty and a responsibility we have. I'll make the point even more profoundly, if you will. We have upward of 100-and-some World War II veterans who landed on June 6, 70 years ago, on the beaches in Normandy, who are going back to commemorate that experience. It will be the last in-decade opportunity those folks will have to revisit the place from which so many of their colleagues never came home.

I'm sorry, but November 11 to me is a sacred day. Visiting a war cemetery is a sacred opportunity to commemorate their sacrifice, whether it's in South Korea, in Italy, in Germany, in the Netherlands. It's a duty we have. It's certainly not a waste of money.

I'm sorry you see it that way. I can't understand that thinking.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: I did not say that this was a waste of money, but rather that the number of commemoration days was being increased.

Regardless, I would like to move on to another topic, which has to do with the way veterans are honoured.

As I said, those acts of remembrance are important. I agree with that. However, I think that providing veterans with the benefits they are entitled to is the best way to compensate them for the sacrifice they have made for their country.

This brings me to the Equitas Society. I read this week in the *Hill Times* that this organization was prepared to drop its case if the New Veterans Charter was significantly improved. As I was saying, the honouring of those individuals could be a bit more meaningful if they were provided with more adequate compensation, if they were treated better and if all the shortcomings were remedied under this new charter. Would you be prepared to work with the Equitas Society to enhance this new charter?

We have almost completed our study and will soon submit a report. Are you prepared to improve the new charter or will you rather let this case go to civilian courts?

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for that.

We obviously have a difference of opinion with respect to what I believe veterans expect from commemorations, but I think we're on the same page when it comes to making sure that we absolutely do the best we can for our veterans and their families.

Going forward with respect to the new Veterans Charter, obviously I was motivated to the extent that I felt a more comprehensive review was justified than just the usual dust-up, if you will, and that's what the committee is doing. I'm anxiously awaiting the outcome of that work, your deliberations. I want to thank you for it, by the way. This is not an easy exercise. I'm sure it has been a labour of love, with a whole lot of regard and conscientious effort on your part. I look forward to the recommendations. Yes, we will move to do what we can to implement what we can, however we can, going forward.

Obviously, none of us get our own way on every issue, but I think, as a personal commitment, we want to do the best we can for our veterans. I know you do as well. I think the outcome of the review will no doubt address some of the shortcomings in the charter. The charter was thought to be the be-all and end-all back in 2005-06. I'm told everyone agreed it was the thing to do. For some it worked. For some, by the way, it still works, and no doubt will continue to work. What we want to do, and what I believe you're trying to do in your deliberations, is to find a way to make it more inclusive, more comprehensive, and more effective or more beneficial to veterans. I'm committed to do that as well.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We go to Mr. Rafferty, please, for six minutes.

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Thank you, Minister and Ms. Chaput, for being here today.

I'm going to concentrate on face-to-face service with veterans.

The nine veterans offices have been closed. You have been fond of saying, and your ministry continues to say, that in exchange for that, they now have 600-and-some service points across the country where veterans can receive advice and services, and so on. In theory I suppose that works, but I just want to relate a very quick story that happened recently. I think you'll agree it's unacceptable.

A Korean War veteran who was looking for help with some paperwork and getting some benefits—he doesn't have a computer, and he didn't get any satisfaction with the 1-800 number—went to the local Service Canada office. He waited in line, of course, with everyone else. They were looking for EI benefits, CPP, CPP disability, and so on. I say he stood in line. He leaned on his cane in line while he was waiting. He finally got to the receptionist, and she told him there was no one there who could help him, that he'd have to go to the Legion. Going to the Legion of course for that kind of help, which legionnaires try to give as best they can; it's not really their job.... He didn't get any satisfaction.

I'm just wondering if we can get a commitment from you today that at these Service Canada points across Canada there will be a trained and dedicated person on staff who will be able to deal with veterans' issues so they truly do become 600-and-some service points for veterans.

I hate to think that these offices disappeared, and then just on your say-so or the ministry's say-so these 600-and-some points will be able to serve these veterans. I wonder if I could get your thoughts on that.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for that.

When the closures of the offices took place, we also—

The Chair: Excuse me just for a second, Minister, I see that the bells are ringing. We'll finish these questions. Did I not see the thing flashing?

A voice: Yes, you did.

The Chair: Okay, I'm not seeing things.

We'll finish the round of questions. I'm going to ask the committee to stay behind because we do have to vote on the estimates.

I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted everybody to be aware we're going to continue for a few more minutes.

Hon. Julian Fantino: I'll be quick.

In regard to the locations where the offices were closed, five of them by the way are in the same building as the Service Canada office. We also moved a Veterans Affairs person into those offices and they're still there.

We also undertook to train the Service Canada office personnel in those 600 other offices to deal with Veterans Affairs issues. We may not have got to everybody, but that's a program that has been going on. It was part of the transition, if you will, but these one-off cases and these things that fall through the cracks, we would appreciate knowing about them because our intent is to intervene and to solve problems. If we know about them, we can obviously do that very quickly.

I should tell you that in looking at the walk-in situations in those areas where the offices are closed now, the walk-in traffic is minimal, because people are being served by caseworkers who go to their home, who meet with veterans who are not able to travel. We don't expect them nor do we want them to travel to an office. So, yes, there are some adjustments being made, in fairness. We want to deal with these issues, these things that fall through the cracks, these one-offs,

but it seems to me that people are adjusting. It may not be an ideal circumstance, but we don't want veterans to travel to offices.

• (1150)

Mr. John Rafferty: Regarding the training in these Service Canada service points for veterans, it's my understanding that there's an hour and a half or so online course that they take to help them to become qualified to help veterans. I'm not sure that's enough. I'm not sure that you can continue to claim that these 600-and-some points are fully serviced. Anyway, we'll see.

I have one other quick question. Minister, you continue to talk about the shrinking number of wartime veterans as justification for cutting some costs. However, there's a growing number of modern veterans, particularly since the end of our involvement in Afghanistan. Many will not access Veterans Affairs offices for six months, five years, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years down the road.

With these cuts, and I'm assuming continuing cuts, are you concerned that Veterans Affairs will be unable to provide appropriate services in the future as the numbers of modern veterans continue to rise?

Hon. Julian Fantino: I appreciate the question. The adjustments are being made based on demographics, so it's not cuts as we would interpret cuts to be. It's just a lessening of the workload, if you will, for the obvious reasons.

Our intent at Veterans Affairs Canada going forward is to continue to improve services and benefits and the kinds of things that we can do or should do for veterans. That's why we're working very hard on the issue of modern-day veterans transitioning into a good quality job. There's the training aspect. There's so much of that going on and more to do.

No, there's no looking to shortcircuit or shortchange modern-day veterans in the future, not at all.

The Chair: That is our time.

Thank you very much, Minister and deputy, for joining us.

We're going to do our votes right now.

I want to let everybody who is visiting, all the veterans with us, know that once the vote is done here, we will go to the House because we're being called for votes there. That will be the end of the public session. We'll be going in camera to deal with a report. So once we're through here, we're all going to leave together.

What I'm going to do now is call the votes. I want to do this properly. John's going to keep an eye on me.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Department

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$855,453,817

Vote 5—The grants listed in the Estimates and contributions.....\$2,685,987,300

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Are we in camera?

The Chair: No, not for the votes.

Shall votes 1 and 5 under Veterans Affairs carry?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: You've got the majority, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll say yes then.

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$9,478,024

The Chair: Shall vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Under protest.

The Chair: Under protest and division.

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's a different story altogether.

The Chair: I'll leave that to you to work out.

Shall the chair report votes 1 and 5 under Veterans Affairs and vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Is that all I have to do?

Ms. Chloé O'Shaughnessy (Procedural Clerk): That's it.

The Chair: Peter, are you here tomorrow?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Tomorrow is Friday. No.

The Chair: Normally the chair would report it, or the vice-chair if the chair is not there, or the second vice-chair. The three of us won't be here. I'm going to suggest, if in agreement, that the parliamentary secretary report this tomorrow.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's fine. We don't have a problem with that.

The Chair: Okay, so he'll be reporting it. That sort of says some of us aren't going to be here tomorrow; I hope that's not recorded.

The committee will return after the vote. It will be in camera. We will be dealing specifically with the finalization of the report.

We are in recess until 12:30.

- _____ (Pause) _____
- _____

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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