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Thursday, May 14, 2015

—
Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (0930)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)): Good morning, and welcome to the 49th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[English]

Members, I want to thank all of you for your cooperation at our 48th meeting. We had two rounds of questioning and we were able to get quite a bit of information from the witnesses.

I want to pay a special tribute to Bryan Hayes who, as usual, was the only one who had an internal clock that kept him strictly to the time that he was supposed to use, others not so much, and some managed to punch in three questions in 30 seconds, which of course causes some trauma.

As a result, I was not the perfect chair that I'd like to have been at the last meeting, and there was a vote I wanted to take that I wasn't able to because we ran out of time, so we're going to have that vote right now.

[Translation]

The Chair calls vote 1 under Veterans Affairs.

[English]

Shall votes 1 and 5 under Veterans Affairs carry?

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$855,502,774

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$2,639,248,000

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to)

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Are we having a recorded vote?

The Chair: This vote was not asked to be recorded, so it's carried.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Can we have a recorded vote?

The Chair: The Chair calls vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): The amount, which I think is more than \$9 million, for the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, that particular one we would be voting against.

The Chair: Right now I am calling for the vote on vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$9,460,756

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

[Translation]

Shall the Chair report to the House votes 1 and 5 under Veterans Affairs and vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board, less the amounts granted in interim supply?

[English]

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: No. On division.

The Chair: I have received notice that the parliamentary secretary wants to make a comment.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Yes. Thank you, Chair.

We're done with the votes.

The Chair: We're done with the votes. The votes have carried.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Right. What I wanted to discuss briefly was, of course, the budget implementation act with the veterans clauses that are coming to committee. I believe that the finance committee referred those clauses earlier this week, on Tuesday.

I think, as we discussed at previous meetings, that type of legislation takes priority over other work and other studies. I believe that there are two meetings that we would be able to schedule, two regular meetings is what I'll say, within that timeframe on the normal Tuesday and the Thursday before we have to report it back.

What I'd like to offer to the committee, of course, is that we have a few extra meetings, if members are in agreement. If they would like more time to study the clauses of the budget implementation act that are coming from the finance committee, then I want to make that offer that we're certainly open to do them.

I would propose two additional meetings, but it could be one, as well. That's the offer I would make, Chair. I think it would give us more opportunity to study the clauses.

• (0935)

The Chair: Do you want this discussed now or while we are discussing the business of the committee a little later in camera?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: We can discuss it now.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Sure.

The Chair: If the committee agrees with him, we'll discuss it now.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer, you're first.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much for that.

We would just bring the whole bill here and we can discuss the entire thing. Obviously, it's not necessarily for us; it's for the people this bill is going to affect.

First of all, I'd like to see the ombudsman and at least the Royal Canadian Legion here, and then at least some caregivers. Those would be the three witnesses I'd like to have. I know you can't have every witness out there, because it would bog this down and it wouldn't get done, but we could have those three witnesses in one day if we really wanted to. It's a matter of time in regard to getting the bill through. At least we could have some semblance of oversight from people outside of ourselves: the ombudsman, the Legion, and, say, a group of caregivers.

The Chair: That would be the Royal Canadian Legion.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, you are correct, sir, the Royal Canadian Legion.

There's no reason that we can't have a three-hour meeting and have them all in one day if time is of the essence in that regard. If we were to have that, then at least we could say that we had some oversight, that there was some discussion, and you can link that with previous discussions. Then we could at least show to the veterans community out there that there was some sort of discussion on it. It might not be as thorough as you would like, but it's at least something.

The Chair: With the committee's assent, I'll get the parliamentary secretary to respond right now.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: That's fine.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, all I was going to say was that I think we definitely would have witnesses come in. These measures would have an impact on veterans, their families, and also serving Canadian Armed Forces members. I think it is important to have witnesses.

We have a normal process whereby the opposition parties and we as the government submit names of witnesses to the chair, and the chair arranges them for meetings. I think that's a fine process, and I recommend that we continue to follow it.

I think a three-hour meeting probably would be problematic, because what I have experienced before is that the MPs around the table end up having other committee meetings, and they just can't stay an extra hour. If we can get the work done.... If you're proposing that we get the work done in the two regular meetings, I have no problem with that at all, if that's the will of MPs around this table.

If we feel that we need additional meetings, that was my offer; we'd gladly have additional meetings. My proposal would be, based on previous experience, that those additional meetings be held at night after votes, maybe in the window between 6:30 and 8:30, because generally then it doesn't conflict with all of the other things that we have already planned in our schedules, and the commitments that we can't necessarily get out of—

A voice: Except dinners.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Yes, except dinners.

Anyway, that's the point I wanted to make. I would look to committee members.

The Chair: Frank.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Thank you, Chair.

I'm pleased with Pierre's openness to hold additional meetings as we deem necessary.

I just hope that in regard to Peter's suggestion—and I don't think Peter meant this—our witnesses aren't restricted to just caregivers, the Royal Canadian Legion, and the Veterans Ombudsman. There are others who we would want to appear before the committee as well, others who have received or not received adequate benefits, in their opinion, and who we may want before the committee as well. Otherwise, I'm content.

The Chair: Peter.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's great. An extra meeting wouldn't be a problem at all, but you'd need at least three. You'd obviously want one to report back to the finance committee on what you're doing. You have to draft a letter and say yes or no, and there may be the odd amendment that we would propose, and we need to discuss those as well.

I would say two meetings for witnesses and a wrap-up meeting to send it back. Normally the process would be that the government introduces legislation, such as Bill C-58, and then it goes to second reading, has a vote, and comes to a committee, and we discuss it then. It normally doesn't go as separate legislation and then is thrown into a budget implementation bill like that. But that's okay. We've talked about that now, so this would be good: two meetings for witnesses and one to wrap up and send it back.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: If I'm hearing correctly, Chair, what we would have, for example, when the House starts sitting again after next week, is that on Tuesday we would have a meeting with witnesses. Then we would have one nighttime meeting with witnesses, and the regular Thursday meeting would be to discuss what we send back to the finance committee. Is that what I'm hearing?

● (0940)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sure, we can do that.

The Chair: I love this committee when they get along.

What I hear is we have this consensus as described by Pierre.

Is there anything else to discuss?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Could I ask when would they want witnesses submitted to the Chair?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Jean-François Pagé): As soon as possible.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Shall we say before...today is Thursday....

The Clerk: Tuesday morning, I guess.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: By Tuesday morning.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Chair, are we finished our business and are we about to adjourn? I would like to make a brief comment.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Whatever you want.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: I had the opportunity to go to the Netherlands with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Veterans Affairs. I had gone last year with the then minister of veterans affairs to walk the Remembrance Trails.

I did not grow up in a military environment of any sort. I don't know if I've said this before, but to see even now some of the green trucks leave our armoury and drive down the street in Guelph, it's a phenomenon in Guelph. I mean everybody stops and marvels at their presence. That's about the closest we got despite the fact that John McCrae was born and raised in Guelph. While we celebrate that, the reality of the work and sacrifice of our forces is not brought home enough to those that live in our community.

I have to tell you what a remarkable experience it has been for me not just to be on this committee, but to have had the opportunity to go to the Netherlands and march with so many people. I remember one evening particularly we were in Groesbeek. We met at the city hall. We had no idea what was to follow, other than we were going to march. Erin and I, and all the other members of our delegation, assembled at the front of this line and we started to march about three kilometres to the Groesbeek cemetery. We marched through the small, narrow streets of the village and then out into the countryside.

We got to the cemetery and I could not resist turning around to see how long the line was. I could not see the end of the line. There were more than 3,000 people, Dutch and Canadians alike, who had joined into this march. Not a word was spoken. We were instructed not to speak. I have to tell you it was one of the most overwhelming experiences I have ever had, to see the commemoration, the respect, the love, and the gratitude the people in the Netherlands have for the Canadian effort.

I'll end with this. What really hit home was that we live in Canada where in our lifetime, and for many preceding generations, we've never felt the real threat, not the real threat, of losing our freedom, because we're on the other side of the pond. The Netherlands was a country that was occupied. They lost their freedom and had to fight to get it back. It suddenly struck me that it's a whole different experience when you have suffered what they've suffered for as long as they suffered, and had to fight to regain their freedom, and had others from around the world come to their aid to do it. Wow. It was an overwhelming experience.

I want to thank everyone for the opportunity I was given to go over and experience that. Thank you.

The Chair: I'm glad I gave you the opportunity to share that with us. I'm quite moved by it and I thank you very much. I have not had that experience. I hope that when we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the liberation in five years this committee will want to instruct the powers that be to send me, of course, as the chair of the committee and the MP for Orleans.

Go ahead, sir.

• (0945)

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Chair, if I could add a footnote to that, I've been a number of times.

Frank, I don't know if you noticed, but there's one grave marker over by the fence. Did anybody point that out to you?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: No.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I can't remember the fellow's name, but he was the guy who looked after the cemetery for decades. He died and there was special dispensation—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's right.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: The only people who could be buried there are Commonwealth or war greats. He got special permission to be buried with his boys.

Also, the fondest wish of the current caretaker—and he means it sincerely—is that he be killed by one of the trees at Groesbeek falling over and hitting him, so that he can be buried there too. That's the depth of love.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, it's really something.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: I'll close, but on the cenotaph there was this Latin writing and I had it interpreted. It too really brought it home for me. It said, "We live on in the hearts of those for whom we died." It's exactly the purpose of all of these commemorations.

I don't want to overstate it. I just have to tell you, it was a very emotional and overwhelming experience.

The Chair: Thank you for saying it, and I want to tell you that you did not run over time.

Do you have something?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I do.

Since we're here on future business, we have been discussing a transition process. I think before the House rises on the 23rd, we should have some form of either a letter or something, to both ministers, indicating what we've heard and what advice we can give the two departments in order to assist in the transition process. We should do something. Otherwise, it's two months and we've listened to people, but we didn't really conclude it in some way.

I know that the discussion on transition takes more than just a few months. It's quite a long process, but we've already done our report before on it. I think if we had a letter that went with it saying that we the committee, from what we heard, recommend or advise a couple of things in order to assist in the transition process, it would be helpful to sort of wrap that up.

I leave that with you.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I think that's a fine suggestion.

What I would recommend, Mr. Chair, is that we should get to the end of the work that we're about to do. We have that Thursday meeting where we're going to be discussing what we send back to the finance committee. We could use a portion of that meeting, of course, to map out the work we want to do in the remaining meetings before the end of the session.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: If he hasn't already, could the analyst be instructed to prepare a report? At least we will have everything as current as we possibly can, so that if we have to quickly review this, it will be ready.

The Chair: He has received this instruction.

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher): It will be delayed a little because of the budget implementation bill, but you'll get the whole thing.

The Chair: John, you haven't made any noises.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): I hear him breathing.

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): I'm the alter ego to Wlad Lizon.

The Chair: Let the record show that John Carmichael did not cause a disturbance today.

Has everybody had their piece?

An hon. member: Yes.

[*Translation*]

The 50th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs will be held on Tuesday, May 26, here in this room, from 8:45 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.

The meeting is adjourned.

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