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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 77 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), the committee is commencing consideration of the request by members of the committee to undertake a study of the contract for the national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

When you're speaking, avoid bringing the earpiece close to the microphone, since this causes interference that can seriously harm the interpreters. Please be very careful with this.

Remember that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I know that Ms. Blaney has asked to speak. However, I'll start by giving the floor to the committee member who requested this meeting pursuant to Standing Order 106(4).

Mr. Richards, you have the floor.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I assume that even though it was in the letter we sent, I need to read the motion into the record. I will start with that.

Mr. Chair, I move:

That, in relation to its study on the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

(a) invite the Deputy Commander of Military Personnel, Lieutenant-General Lise Bourgon, and

(b) order the production of all memoranda, briefing notes, e-mails, correspondence or any other records of conversations or communications (including text messages, Microsoft Teams messages, WhatsApp messages, Signal messages or other electronic messaging), with regard to the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, transmitted, since November 8th, 2021, between

(i) the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs,

(ii) the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage,

(iii) the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Privy Council Office,

(iv) the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Privy Council Office,

(v) the Privy Council Office and the Office of the Prime Minister,

(vi) the Office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Office of the Prime Minister, and

(vii) the Office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Office of the Prime Minister, provided that these documents shall be provided to the Clerk of the Committee, in both official languages and without redaction, within 21 days of the adoption of this motion.

I move that motion, Mr. Chair, and I'll speak to it.

The situation with this monument is just another in a pattern of disrespect for our veterans by this Liberal government. It started with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's telling veterans that they're asking for more than we can give. Then, think about all the other things they've done to demonstrate that he clearly feels he doesn't want to give to our veterans. Think about how often we, as members of this committee, hear about delays and the denial of service, benefits or supports.

We recently studied the new contract for rehabilitation services. We heard from numerous veterans about how they're finding they can't get the services or support they need from this government. As a result, we hear all the time about stories of veterans who.... It's not just measured in weeks or months, but in years. That's how long it can take for veterans to get the benefits and support they earned and deserve because of the service they have given to this country. It's appalling, frankly, that we have veterans who have, in some cases, given their limbs. They've given everything they have and are struggling with physical or mental injuries. They cannot get the support they deserve or need.

We hear about increasing numbers of homeless veterans. We hear about more and more veterans utilizing the food bank. The Veterans Food Bank in Edmonton recently reported that over the last three years, the need for their services has quadrupled among veterans. We're hearing similar kinds of stories all across this country. We've even heard testimony in this committee about Canadian Armed Forces members sleeping in their cars because the cost of living crisis has gotten so bad that they can't afford a place to live.

Then, of course, not that long ago in this committee, we were seized with the issue of Veterans Affairs suggesting to some veterans, "If all the stuff we put up in front of you to make life difficult has made life so hard, well, we can offer you assistance in dying." Veterans who served this country have been told that by Veterans Affairs.

You see this pattern of disrespect, Mr. Chair. This is just another example. This government has been in power for eight years. Nothing has been done. This monument has gone nowhere. It took them several years—I think it was five—to even set up a competition for a design. Now, because of political interference from the Prime Minister's Office, there is delay.

● (1110)

There is controversy, and now no one knows when or if this monument will ever be built, because of all that delay and all that controversy. That is really dishonouring the memories of those who gave their lives for this country while in Afghanistan.

In that mission, 158 Canadians laid down their lives in service of this country. To think that because of some political interference from the Prime Minister's Office, not only can those who returned not get the service they deserve from this government but now the families of those who gave their lives don't even get to witness a memorial, a simple memorial, which would be the very bare minimum anyone would expect for that kind of service. They can't even see that come to fruition because of this disrespect on the part of the Liberal government.

We think about the memories of the heroes who served this country and what it would mean to their families to be able to see that. Then we listen to the excuses or the so-called reasons the government has provided for why it felt the need to not follow the process that was put in place.

To be really clear about this, Mr. Chair, this is something that has never before been done. There was a jury process set up to adjudicate five finalists for this design, and this is a process that is well known internationally. We heard from experts, members of the jury, the architectural experts, former Supreme Court Justice Louise Arbour in this country and others about the incredible irregularity that occurred here. There has been no precedent in Canada or anywhere else in the world of having a jury process like this set up to choose a design and then, for some reason, the government choosing to completely disregard it.

This is the first time that this has ever occurred. It is unprecedented for this to have happened. What we know now is that in about November of 2021 there was a decision made to go ahead with a design, and it was communicated to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and to the Minister of Canadian Heritage. Then somehow, in the year and a half that followed, between then and June 2023, that decision was changed.

What we know is that there were all kinds of communications going back and forth between the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office. They claim publicly now that their reason for this was that they felt that the one they'd chosen was more preferable to veterans, according to some survey that did not

even have a scientific nature on which to actually determine whether what they were saying was accurate.

In that whole year-and-a-half process, every bit of documentation we have seen thus far tells us that all the advice from both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Canadian Heritage was to go ahead with the design that was originally chosen. If there was going to be a second option, it should have been to start a new process. Nowhere in any of that was there a suggestion that the government should just disregard the process and say it was going to choose someone else as the winner.

To me, this isn't about favouring one design over another, but it seems as though, for whatever reason, it was for the Prime Minister's Office, and no one knows why. It is another show of disrespect to our veterans when they use them as an excuse, when clearly what they are saying is not accurate. It's not true.

There is a minister's advisory group that exists for commemorations. It should have been consulted on a decision like this. To me, if you want to speak to what veterans are saying, that would be a place you could go, and, to be fair, at the beginning of this whole process, they did go to that group and they said they had a couple of options for sites.

● (1115)

They asked them for feedback on some of the criteria around what should be given to the jury. That was all occurring in 2018, in 2019 and even into 2020. Then suddenly this group got left in the dark from there on out. There was nothing in that year-and-a-half period when the government was looking at making a change, supposedly because veterans wanted a different monument: The group that was supposed to represent veterans, to advise the minister, was not even consulted or updated in that period of time. It seems a little bit fishy.

It doesn't appear as though there was any or much consultation with veterans groups that represent Afghanistan veterans. If there was, it didn't really seem like they listened to what they were hearing from those groups. The Canadian Armed Forces itself.... Many of the members who served in Afghanistan, of course, continue to serve in our Canadian Armed Forces today, and it looks as though the feedback that they would have received from the Canadian Armed Forces was disregarded as well.

All of these things tell us that there is something else going on here. Now, no one knows what. All we know is that the Prime Minister's Office has interfered in this process that has delayed, at the very minimum, the construction of this monument. At the very minimum, it has delayed it, and it may even end up delaying it indefinitely.

What we need to know is the truth here, Mr. Chair. Who initiated this change? Why did they initiate this change? How did they initiate this change?

At the end of the day, those who served this country in Afghanistan deserve this monument. It needs to get built, and we need to know why this government has created such a controversy around it so that it's incredibly in doubt now.

That's why we move this motion today—to help us to do just that. That's what we're here for as a committee. We're here to make sure that we do everything that we can do to ensure that our veterans who served are cared for and are shown the respect that they deserve. Getting this monument built is a critical part of showing the respect they deserve to those who served in that mission.

I move the motion, Mr. Chair, and I certainly hope that it will have the support of all members of this committee.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Richards.

First of all, I'd like to welcome MP Pierre Paul-Hus to the committee.

On my list, I have Ms. Blaney, Monsieur Desilets and Monsieur Paul-Hus.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours, please.

• (1120)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

I have absolutely no problem supporting the motion that Mr. Richards has put forward, and I've shared that with him.

I do have some concerns about the notice of motion that Mr. Desilets put forward. I don't think that bringing in staff from the PMO or bringing in former ministers is relevant in this study.

What I think I am most concerned about is the fact that we sat in the space on Tuesday of last week, and the chair asked us if he

could cancel the next meeting on Thursday. There were also commitments that we would come back at the beginning of the session and sit down to talk about all the studies, including the ones that Mr. Richards just brought forward, which I've already publicly said that I would support. There was a commitment that we would have that discussion at that time and look at what the new agenda would be for the beginning of the next year.

I'm very disappointed. It feels as though we missed an opportunity on that Thursday. I would have been happy to come to the committee when I was there. The chair was very clear in what he shared with us.

I want to move forward, but it feels like we're here partly for grandstanding and politics, so I move to adjourn this meeting.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Blaney.

Even though I have names on the list, I have to—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Just to make it really clear, all that's being asked for in the motion is to produce documents—

**The Chair:** Excuse me—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** —so it's not asking for a study. It's just to produce documents.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It's disappointing that—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. I have a motion to adjourn the meeting, so I have no choice but to go to a vote on that. If the vote is no, then we will come back.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

**The Chair:** With that result, the meeting is adjourned.





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