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## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Rob Anders**

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• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)):** Good afternoon, committee members.

I just want to show you a lovely little chart based on Monsieur Perron's motion, which I can now follow. It's much easier than what I was doing last time with my pen, pointing it like a sundial at the various people coming up to speak. Anyhow, these little advancements we make are all good.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we have a study on the veterans bill of rights. We have our witnesses today from the department, who have come by and are gracing us with their presence. We have Verna Bruce, the associate deputy minister, and I'm going to leave it to her, because I think she wants to introduce her colleague.

So the floor is your, Ma'am.

**Ms. Verna Bruce (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like just to say it's a real pleasure for us to have the opportunity to be with you this afternoon. Obviously, our whole goal is to be here to serve Canada's veterans, a job that we're very honoured to have, and we feel very proud that we're a part of the Veterans Affairs Canada organization.

We wanted to spend some time this afternoon on the work we're beginning on a bill of rights and an ombudsman. To set the stage, we are just barely beginning. So we're in the process of understanding what the options are and what may be required here.

Keith Hillier has the day job of being our assistant deputy minister of corporate services, as our money man, but we've also asked him to take on this file. It's a very important file for us, and we needed it managed at the assistant deputy minister level and needed it done by an assistant deputy minister who did not have direct responsibility for delivering services to clients, so that we wouldn't be in a situation of potential conflict—if you're trying to design a bill of rights for services that you're also delivering.

So without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to Keith. We have a presentation, and, Mr. Chair, we'd happy to take questions at your direction.

**Mr. Keith Hillier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to appear before the committee. I thank you for this opportunity to acquaint members with two important initiatives being undertaken by Veterans Affairs Canada.

If I may, I will make a brief statement outlining the rationale and the progress to date on developing a veterans bill of rights and establishing a veterans ombudsman office, after which I'd be pleased to take any questions from the honourable members.

The creation of the veterans bill of rights and a veterans ombudsman office are of significant importance to the Government of Canada. The government provided the department with a mandate to proceed on both of these initiatives shortly after it took office, and since then, the staff of Veterans Affairs Canada have been working diligently to move forward on these two files. The bill of rights and the veterans ombudsman office will strengthen the government's commitment to our veterans.

At the moment there are a number of separate pieces of legislation, policies, and service standards that address the rights of veterans. The veterans bill of rights would not change any of these; rather, it would provide veterans with a clear and unequivocal statement in plain language of what veterans and the department's other clients can reasonably expect in their dealings with Veterans Affairs Canada.

The veterans ombudsman office will focus on service-related issues that cannot be resolved to the client's satisfaction through the current mechanisms for redress. It will provide an additional level of accountability for the department in upholding the veterans bill of rights.

Currently we are in the process of looking at various ombudsman models, both in Canadian institutions and other jurisdictions around the world. This is an important part of our research in developing a model that best meets the needs of Canadian veterans and all Veterans Affairs clients.

Veterans Affairs Canada takes great pride in its relationship with its partners, and the department values their input and support. Meaningful and ongoing consultation with the major veterans organizations are essential to achieving this endorsement and to ensuring that the veterans bill of rights and the veterans ombudsman office represent a genuine improvement in service to our veterans.

The process of consultation on the bill of rights is well under way. To date we have held discussions with each of the major veterans organizations, and I am pleased to report that the response has been very positive. The comments and input received so far indicate strong support for the creation of the veterans bill of rights. Their feedback tells me that veterans organizations very much see the ombudsman and the bill of rights tied together and moving forward as one initiative.

We are still examining varied and differing views on the purpose and operation of an ombudsman office. Therefore, without a clear model to discuss, our meetings with stakeholders to date have been intended to solicit their general views on the creation of an ombudsman. It would be premature to talk about any sort of consensus at this point in time.

I would be seriously remiss if I did not mention the importance of achieving the endorsement of a second group of stakeholders. The involvement and support of the staff of Veterans Affairs Canada is equally critical to the success of these initiatives. This reflects the simple, yet essential, recognition that it is the staff of the department who provide the day-to-day programs and services to our veterans, their families, and their caregivers.

At Veterans Affairs Canada, we take great pride in the fact that the department consistently ranks above all other Government of Canada departments in terms of client satisfaction—a clear demonstration of our ongoing dedication and commitment of our staff throughout Veterans Affairs. The bill of rights will serve as a reminder of this ongoing commitment to serving Canada's veterans.

We are confident that these initiatives will increase the department's ability to respond quickly and fairly to veterans' concerns and ensure that veterans' grievances with the system will be dealt with quickly and fairly.

I understand that Minister Thompson is scheduled to appear before the committee next week. I am certain that he will include a discussion of both the bill of rights and the ombudsman's office from his perspective at that point in time.

I thank you again for this opportunity, and I welcome your comments and your questions.

**The Chair:** All right. Well, thank you very much.

I'm gazing over at our Liberal friends, wondering who the keenest of the bunch is.

Mr. Rota.

**Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.):** Actually, we got a request from Mr. Stoffer. If it's okay, I'd like to pass the question on to him. He has to leave early, and I know he has some wonderful questions. So in the spirit of cooperation, I'll pass that on to him.

If he's just going to ask a very quick question, I'll come back.

**The Chair:** Mr. Stoffer, I'll let you know that's a quid pro quo, because he took your spot the other time. All right, fair enough.

• (1540)

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** I was here, though.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP):** Oh, that hurt.

Mr. Rota, thank you. Mr. Chair, thank you.

I want to let everyone know, especially our new members of Parliament, that the three people you see here, along with Louise in the back, are some of the finest employees Canada has when it comes to a department. I have dealt with them on many issues over the years—on veterans' issues, on legislation—and every single time the calls are returned, and they'll tell you straight up that it can be done, or it can't be done, or this is the approach you should take. I just want to congratulate you on that. The new Veterans Charter wouldn't have happened without their support in that regard.

My question to you, though, is with regard to the ombudsman's position. Looking at the military ombudsman, many times situations come up in which we're confused as to which person we should go to. If you look at Agent Orange, for example, we're told it's Defence, but we're dealing with veterans who have that issue on a personal note.

Would it not be at all feasible to expand the role of the military ombudsman to include a military/veterans ombudsman and allow that person the additional resources and manpower to do both, instead of having a separate bureaucracy on its own? Are you considering at least looking at the possibility?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** I'll start off with that. We certainly are looking at it as one of the options. There are a lot of different ombudsmen in the Government of Canada. That's one. Others would be possible examples. It's too soon to say at this stage of the game what the final direction will be, but we've been spending quite a bit of time, and Keith has had numerous meetings with the Defence ombudsman to understand how they work, how they operate, how they're structured, and how they get their mandate. He's been extremely helpful.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Thank you. I'm sorry to have to leave again.

**The Chair:** That's fine, Mr. Stoffer. Is that the extent of the questions?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** That's it.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Then the five minutes remaining go to Mr. Rota.

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** Very good. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There are a lot of different ombudsmen positions that we have to look at around the world. Australia's and the U.K.'s come up most frequently, Australia's in particular. It's not an ombudsman strictly for the military or strictly for veterans; it covers pretty well everything. In all fairness to Mr. Stoffer, the question I had in mind was very similar to his: at what point do we stop creating new departments or new ombudsmen?

Please explain it to me, because I'm looking at VRAB and how that works, and that's a kind of ombudsman situation in itself; when somebody doesn't find satisfaction, they go to VRAB and get some kind of solution.

Could you explain to me the difference between the ombudsman's position and VRAB, and where we're going with it? I understand we're still in the very early preliminary stage, and knowing what I know makes it difficult to actually put a question together, but maybe you could just compare the two situations. One would be an encompassing ombudsman who would cover all issues, as in Australia, and the other would compare VRAB to what we hope to get out of a new ombudsman.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Sure. I'll deal with your second question first and turn your first one over to Keith.

With respect to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, you're absolutely right. We have a separate independent tribunal. We have a staff of lawyers who actually represent cases for clients in front of the tribunal. We are the only veterans affairs department in the world that provides that service—but it is only for disability pensions.

Clients also receive a wide range of health care benefits from Veterans Affairs, ranging from drugs to the veterans independence program to placement in a long-term care facility. At present the mechanisms we have for people who are unhappy with decisions on those services are all internal. There may be an opportunity for an ombudsman to be involved in that particular area.

There may be more general issues that people have as well—issues with how they feel they've been treated by staff in the department perhaps, or broader issues that could not be part of the mandate of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board but could in effect be some of the things we might look at with respect to the mandate for an ombudsman.

That answer would be for your second question. I'll let Keith take your question about the Australian model.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** You're quite right that some of the models we've seen—and we haven't been travelling around the world, but have been talking with some colleagues and doing some website searches and what have you.... It's an interesting question, and one that has to come up through the options that ultimately have to be reviewed by cabinet. There are a number of ombudspersons right now in the Government of Canada. As a matter of fact, just yesterday I met with representatives from a couple of departments on that very same issue.

It certainly has to be an option. Whether or not it will be the option at the end of the day to have an ombudsman for all of Canada is.... We're doing the research, doing some work, and putting together some options, and ultimately the minister and cabinet colleagues will have to decide on the direction it will go.

The Australian model is quite interesting. Obviously, you've done a little bit of work there. You'll see also, when you drill down into some of this stuff, that the ombudsman for Australia is also considered the veterans or the defence ombudsman as well. They seem to wear multiple hats.

We've looked at that particular model, but we've also tried to understand what's going on in Canada today. Correctional Service Canada has an ombudsman. Service Canada has an ombudsman-like function. Then, on a government-wide basis, if you look at the Privacy Commissioner or the Commissioner of Official Languages, while they're not called ombudsmen, the reality is they perform an ombudsman type of service on behalf of all Canadians.

It's in the mix, but certainly we have to look at.... When we go into this, particularly when you start consultations, you have to go into it with an open mind, because if you go in saying to folks that you have decided this is what it looks like, then the other side of that coin is, "You could have saved my time and yours, if you've already made up your mind."

• (1545)

**The Chair:** You have twenty seconds.

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** I'll make a quick comment then.

I'm glad to hear what I just heard, because the concern I had was about what I see as an ombudsman for every department, almost, and what I would see happening is a lot of duplication of administration, and possibly silos being built. You're going in with an open mind. I want to compliment you on that.

Maybe it's something we can push up and then maybe spread out countrywide, so that there is just one department of the ombudsman, with different divisions; maybe that would be a possibility. It's just nice to see that you have an open mind and are going in that direction.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Welcome to our committee; welcome to your committee.

My first question will be brief and simple. What is an ombudsman? You have three minutes to answer.

[*English*]

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I think Verna says it's yet to be defined.

Interestingly enough, when I have talked with veterans organizations, just at the preliminary stage, I have asked them to tell me what they think an ombudsman would look like, and I think it's fair to say there's a fairly significant diversity. When the word "ombudsman" is used, there is a fairly significant.... Different images come into people's minds, different thoughts.

At the end of the day, one of the key functions of an ombudsman is really to be someone for those who feel they haven't received the proper service from a department. Ombudsmen generally deal with service-related things, where someone feels they haven't been treated fairly by the department and I guess at the end of the day disagree with a decision by the department, etc.

After you go away from that basic premise—and I'm sure that over the course of your hearings, veterans organizations will be here and making their positions known to you, so I don't want to speak on behalf of them—I can tell you there are some differences, but fundamentally, veterans organizations I think generally agree there will be an ombudsman. They have very different views as to how that role may operate, and that's really the reason for the consultative process, but I think everybody wants the same goal, and “the same goal” for an ombudsman is to improve the level of service for veterans either on an individual case basis or a more system-wide basis.

There are differing views. I couldn't tell you today that there's a consensus among veterans organizations, or even probably in our own place, as to what the actual role will be.

[Translation]

**Mr. Gilles-A. Perron:** You're taking too much of the time that's been allotted to me to ask my questions. Your answers are too long.

May I briefly give you my definition? Isn't an ombudsman a watchdog, a defender of widows and orphans, as we say in Quebec? Isn't he a person who plays the role of defender of the oppressed, of those in trouble? That's my definition. I don't know whether you would make it yours.

To whom does the ombudsman report? Who will be his boss? He can't be under the minister's responsibility, because he can't speak out against the person who feeds him. You don't bite the hand that feeds you. So he'll have to report to the House.

● (1550)

[English]

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** There are generally two models. Again, just using the Canadian situation, the ombudsman in some cases reports to the minister, and in other cases, if you look at what I would call a more systemic ombudsperson, such as the Commissioner of Official Languages or the Privacy Commissioner, they report to the House. As part of our development of the model, those are the types of options that would be put on the table as to the reporting relationship.

[Translation]

**Mr. Gilles-A. Perron:** We have good proof of that before us: the case for former ombudsman André Marin. He defended the military so well that the minister told him his contract wouldn't be renewed. But he did a very good job.

[English]

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** From my standpoint, I can't comment on that position, but having said that, the reporting relationship is one thing; there is also the issue of how an ombudsman is created, whether it's created by statute or by regulation, or what have you. There are as many models of that as there are ombudsmen, but that is again part of the consideration.

[Translation]

**Mr. Gilles-A. Perron:** I have another problem. I have a lot of them this afternoon; things are not looking good for you.

There's the Veterans Charter, which was passed in May of last year; there's the Veterans Bill of Rights, which you're working on;

there's the ombudsman, a position you're examining; there's the Veterans Review and Appeal Board; and there's the Federal Court of Canada.

But how can we fit all that together and make it work smoothly?

[English]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** That will be part of the review process. We have to make sure that whatever we do with an ombudsman, it doesn't create more problems with the formal part of the system—and that will be part of the review.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Gaudet, there are still two minutes left, if you'd like.

[Translation]

**Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ):** If a veterans ombudsman is appointed without being affiliated with another ombudsman, will the office have enough resources to handle all the complaints filed by veterans, while remaining independent of the minister?

Perhaps I'm asking the same question as my colleague, but this is a concern for us.

[English]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** The goal we would have is that when we come up with a design for an ombudsman's office, we would look to have sufficient funding to make that work.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** If I could just add to Verna's comments, in terms of looking at the resourcing, first of all you have to nail the model down, but we've really looked at resourcing with a two-pronged approach.

It's important for the office of the ombudsman to have independent resourcing from the department, so that they can have their own financial controls, etc. It's also just as well to recognize, particularly in the start-up phase, that there are probably going to be significant numbers of inquiries directed at the ombudsman's office, so it's very important that the department has the resources as well to be able to respond to those types of inquiries that would come forward.

For example, if you have a situation where a veteran is complaining to the office of an ombudsman about the length of time it's taken for a benefit to be obtained, or a service, or what have you, and then they write to the office of the ombudsman and find that the turnaround time with the office of the ombudsman is slow—either because they don't have sufficient staff, or there is insufficient staff in the department to do what needs to be done with a résumé of the file, or what have you—then in fact we've really accomplished nothing. The veteran would become, I would think, rather cynical, and at the same time would say, “The ombudsman's office is really not much better than the group I'm complaining about.”

It's really important that we get it right, and I think we should be realistic that there's probably going to be a bit of a surge at the front end, as there typically is in these things.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now we're going to have Mr. St. Denis for five minutes.

•(1555)

**Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here on a very important subject.

I'd like to start off with a few comments about the office of ombudsman for veterans. I listened carefully to my colleagues, and I agree that we want to avoid the silos and the isolating of one ombudsman from another. Not only does it add cost, but it also maybe prevents the sharing of best practices and so on.

That said, I personally believe there should be an ombudsman dedicated solely to veterans, and that function should not be added to the Defence ombudsman, simply because veterans' issues are different from those of active service personnel, and the full attention of an ombudsman I think is required.

Although whether in support of an ombudsman at Veterans Affairs and an ombudsman at DND and an ombudsman in the different departments, there needs to be some kind of an ombudsman's secretariat or ombudsman general, I don't know. I think fundamentally we need to have one dedicated to the veterans, and then the issues of how we resource them, to me, are important but secondary after we focus on the veterans.

Among the different models you've researched elsewhere, have you seen both a DND/veterans ombudsman and a veterans-only ombudsman?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Not to this date. What we've seen generally is a department-specific ombudsman or a government-wide ombudsman. If you look at the Australian model, it is one of the examples where there is a general ombudsman but there are specific things relevant to defence and veterans.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** I'm hoping that Canada will go towards a dedicated ombudsman for the reasons stated. There are a lot of specific issues, and you would develop a body of knowledge and experience on those issues that would improve and make service better as time goes by.

I'm new to this committee so maybe this has been raised before. Does the funding for veterans' advocates, the fine folks who travel around to the legions and whatnot, come from Veterans Affairs Canada? How does that network support it?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** It depends on who you're talking about. If you're thinking about the advocates or the lawyers who represent veterans and friends of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, they're departmental. You may be thinking about some of the people who work for the legion. I see we have Pierre Allard here from the Royal Canadian Legion. I'm not quite sure who you're speaking of.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** Again, I'm new to this area. Constituents of mine will say, "The advocate was through town recently."

I have a large rural riding. Is that program fully funded by the legion?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** No. I think if your constituents are using the word "advocate", that refers to a group of lawyers we have. They're part of the department called the Bureau of Pensions Advocates.

They represent the veteran at no cost to the veteran in cases of a pension adjudication.

The Royal Canadian Legion has service officers who do the same function, but that's a matter within the legion. They are not employees of the department. The word "advocate" refers to our lawyers who are deployed regionally across the country.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** Okay. I'm glad to have that cleared up.

Then, based on that response, there will not be even a dotted line relationship between an ombudsman's office and these folks. Advocate suggests advocating for the needs of a veteran; ombudsman suggests the role would include advocating for—I'm not sure, I guess they're supposed to maintain an unbiased view—in a sense, the veteran, because the veterans come forward with a complaint. Anyway, I'm glad I have that cleared up.

The final point, a point I raised the other day with another witness, was that the veterans from World War II and Korea, who obviously are a much older group, and the new veterans we create with each retirement of our current personnel are not only different generations, age-wise, obviously, but also their experiences are vastly different. The World War II and Korea experiences were much different from the kinds of experiences our personnel are having now. They come from different paradigms.

When you design an office of an ombudsman, do you factor in that you're going to be hearing from people who are from different paradigms? An example I used was a veteran who was injured in training when he was maybe 18 years old in the first days or weeks of his being enlisted back in 1943. That's different from another ombudsman's professional requirements. Do you factor in the different paradigms that the veterans will be coming from?

•(1600)

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** That would be a part of it for sure, and with the new Veterans Charter we now have a suite of five new programs that Canadian Forces veterans are eligible for. As we build the mandate for the ombudsman, you're quite right, those are the kinds of things that need to be taken into account.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Now we have Mrs. Hinton for seven minutes.

**Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC):** Thank you, and welcome.

The Veterans Charter was meant to do exactly what you've just described, and the objective of the bill of rights, in my opinion anyway, is to provide veterans with a service guarantee as to what they can expect when they deal with the Department of Veterans Affairs. To me they're tied. The bill of rights and the ombudsman are linked together. If you don't have a bill of rights, then what can the ombudsman pursue? That's my line of thinking anyway.

In your discussions with the veterans organizations, what are the most important items to them that they want to see in this bill of rights? For example, what areas are they focusing on when you ask them about the bill of rights and what it should look like when it's finished? That's one question.

Secondly, I know this initiative is still in its early stages, but to get down to a specific issue regarding the ombudsman, how will this person be chosen? Will they be appointed or will there be a competition?

Now I'll wait for the answers.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** On the second point, it's way too soon to tell. Until we know what the mandate is and how the ombudsman's office is going to be created, we have no idea how that's going to happen, so that will be part of the consultation process.

With respect to comments from veterans organizations, it's difficult for us to say who said what. I'm sure you're going to want to hear from the veterans organizations, but I'll ask Keith to give you a general view, without attribution, in terms of the kinds of things he's hearing.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** It's quite interesting. We've been in contact with the six major veterans organizations and I've done bilaterals with five of the six organizations. I think there are a couple of messages, and they can speak for themselves, but certainly when I sit back and reflect, they're talking about, first of all, keeping it simple: keep it very simple, in common language; make sure veterans can actually understand what it is. They're saying it's a place to be able to pull together the service standards we have, the this and the that, and it's all in one place.

I can say that there's agreement on things such as that veterans should be treated with respect, there should be speed of service, and our communications should be simple and clear. Those are some of the key elements. There are other areas, obviously, of some disagreement, and that's what consultation is about in terms of being able to move forward.

I think most veterans organizations are of a view that it is a stepping stone to the ombudsman, and certainly it's seen that one of the roles of the ombudsman would be to uphold the bill of rights, as you suggested. The Veterans Charter was the start of a process; the bill of rights is another step; and the ombudsman is but another step on that journey.

**Mrs. Betty Hinton:** Thank you.

The charter was about programs. The bill of rights is about what veterans can expect from their government. At least that's my opinion on it. And the ombudsman has a serious role to play in this. We have a lot of groups in this country that have done the very best they can for veterans, but they don't have any legislative ability, and I'm assuming that the ombudsman would have powers to do some of the things that we want to see happen.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** With respect to the powers of the ombudsman, of course those have not been developed. What the powers or the responsibilities of the ombudsman will be will form part of the consideration. That will be part of developing the model.

**Mrs. Betty Hinton:** In a more general view, I'm curious to find out what these new initiatives will mean for Canadian veterans. I'm

aware of several countries that have either had an ombudsman or a bill of rights in place for some time, but it seems to me that initiatives like these fell by the wayside under the previous government. What will instituting these initiatives mean for bringing our veterans' services into the 21st century?

• (1605)

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** I think the view of our minister would be that veterans do deserve to have the very best services that we can provide, and a bill of rights and an ombudsman are both very clear in terms of part of the focus. We'll be doing what we can to make sure that they do provide a better level of service to Canada's veterans.

**Mrs. Betty Hinton:** Thank you.

Is there time left, or shall I share?

**The Chair:** You have two and a half minutes left, if somebody else would like to go.

**Mrs. Betty Hinton:** Go ahead, Mr. Shipley.

**Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC):** As one of the things that came to mind, I go back to the idea of the work flowing. In terms of preparing an initiative, how do you help determine what that will be? When you're going to set up a department, how do you determine what is going to be needed in terms of the resources, the space, and all those other things? Do you go back in history, since we don't actually have an ombudsman?

In terms of the efficiency and how we're going to operate it, I'd like to have some comments. I know you're at this early stage of it, but obviously you know a lot more about it than we maybe do, and I wouldn't mind having some grasp of those initial thoughts.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** In terms of the general way we would approach this, once there's a decision taken in consultation with the veterans organizations and government in terms of what the ombudsman will look like—what they will do, what their responsibilities will be—we have statisticians who, based on all of that, will help us work with our client caseload to get a general understanding of how many people are likely to come forward and what the workload is likely to be. People will be coming to the ombudsman; he'll need to have staff who can do the research. They'll be asking questions of the department, so we'll need to have staff who can answer the questions. Then you build it from the ground up, based on how much demand you think you'll have.

Keith, as ADM of corporate services, can tell you a bit more about how some of the actual calculations are done, if that's of interest.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** At the end of the day it's your best professional judgment. You'd certainly need to do research in terms of volumetrics that other people are getting, looking at the type of client base and at what the volume was on start-up. From that standpoint, the first thing is to really understand how many could come in, but it's also very important, particularly for start-up, to build a system that has some elasticity in it, because you may find that the volume may be greater, notwithstanding how good your research is or how good you thought your professional judgment was when you made those decisions. You may need to be able to expand.



On the other hand, if you don't get the volume you had expected, then in terms of good, efficient use of government resources, you need to be able to move in whatever way you have. There are going to be certain fixed costs in setting up an office; those things can be somewhat time-consuming, but they're doable. I can say that, because I've been around the government for quite a number of years and I've been involved with setting up new operations. There are specialists who can do that sort of thing for us. My sense would be that you would probably err on the side of making sure you had enough capacity to deal with the volume.

**The Chair:** Mr. Shipley, I apologize deeply. We will get you, I'm sure, in a later question period, but now we're over to Mr. Valley.

**Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for coming here today. It's my first opportunity to meet you and to ask you some questions.

I appreciate your comments about the challenges this new office is going to bring and how you have to get it right, because we have heard and do hear in our ridings about the veterans who are unhappy. You mentioned the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We know through time, especially when you're dealing with Second World War vets, that they're unhappy with the way their cases are handled. You lose credibility if you do that, so I'm happy to hear that at the start you're trying to get this right and trying to stay free of influence and make sure this is independent.

I note that the ombudsman for National Defence and the Canadian Forces pointed out to the committee in 2005 that they have access when they're in the forces and nothing when they get out. So it's timely. I don't know that I agree with Ms. Hinton, but the fact is we're here to get something done, so I hope this moves forward quite quickly.

I have a question about Ste. Anne's Hospital and the information that they already have an ombudsman to deal with health care. Can you explain if there would be interaction between these two ombudsmen, or do you see one taking over from the other? Can you enlighten me on exactly what this ombudsman does?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** This ombudsman would have a role very different from the one at Ste. Anne's Hospital, which is very focused on resident care, but how the two would fit together is not yet decided.

Keith, you may want to jump in here.

• (1610)

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** No, it certainly hasn't been decided. The one at Ste. Anne's has a very specific role. It is the only departmental hospital we operate, and it's very specific to the residents. The ombudsman we're looking at in terms of Veterans Affairs is much more general and would serve not just the people who are currently clients of Veterans Affairs Canada, but also those people out there who may feel they should be clients of Veterans Affairs Canada but who may have been refused a service or a benefit, etc.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** You mention a number of stakeholders and all the people who are going to be involved in this. Has there been much work put into talking to the people who will become veterans? I'm not sure if you would approach that group—you may have—but all the people who are serving in the armed forces are going to be our veterans in the future. I'm wondering if they have an impact on our

discussions, because they have an ombudsman who serves them right now while they're in the forces. Are they part of the stakeholder group you would speak to?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** At present we've been dealing with the major veterans organizations. With regard to people who are members of the forces, we haven't developed a full consultation plan. As a matter of fact, we are going to be meeting...I have a multilateral meeting with veterans organizations next week. We're looking at some sort of outreach to members of the Canadian Forces through an electronic means—a bulletin board, in some sense—because there are tens of thousands of members in the Canadian Forces who potentially could be clients. We're looking at whether we can come up with some sort of electronic means of engagement in that particular area.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** I certainly hope they become clients, because the only way they won't be your clients is if they're not with us. So we're hoping they're going to be your clients.

We do see that there are comments that have been made. Anytime you try to start something, we all know there can be problems with it and discussions and controversy. How do you deal with the controversies? Is it through more engagement with, say, the legion or any of those who have concerns about what's coming? I think most of us would think this is a positive step and that we need to move forward on it, but when there are controversies in the development of any program, how are they approached, and how do you make sure people are engaged?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** We actually have a very clear standard in Veterans Affairs Canada that we really don't do anything without consulting with veterans organizations. So we have very well-established relationships. We meet with most of those organizations on a very regular basis, and through the years we've been involved in a lot of different issues, where perhaps people have had slightly different points of view to begin with. But through the consultation process, which we're getting good at by now, we've generally been able to bring people together around a common core, at least, of consensus. We do have staff who are quite used to doing that, and we have worked on building good relationships with the veterans organizations—but it will take a lot of work.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** I congratulate you on your efforts. When we see the results, I'm sure we'll have more questions, but thanks for trying to do this, and let's get it done.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Gaudet.

[Translation]

**Mr. Roger Gaudet:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You must be somewhat familiar with the organization chart of the ombudsman's office. How many employees can there be, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100? What's your opinion on that subject?

[English]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** You mean currently in the Department of Veterans Affairs?

[Translation]

**Mr. Roger Gaudet:** No, I'm talking about the staff surrounding the ombudsman.

[English]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Oh, the ombudsman. We haven't gone that far yet in terms of even identifying how big it would be, because we are just beginning. We do have to be clear about what the role is, or what they're going to be expected to do. Then we'll take a look at what resources will be required to make that happen.

At this stage of the game, we don't have anybody in that role. We do have Keith and a couple of people working with him to do the consultations with staff, and that seems to be fine so far.

Does that answer your question?

[Translation]

**Mr. Roger Gaudet:** To a certain degree, yes. I imagine you know that those who appear before the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and don't obtain satisfaction will be going to see you. Even if the Board agrees to pay a pension, for example, if people aren't happy, they'll be going to see you. So you'll almost have to have as big a staff as the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. That was my question.

•(1615)

[English]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** I hope it never gets that big, but it may.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I can share a thought with you. As Verna has mentioned, we haven't got any estimate of numbers, but at the end of the day—and I think there will be an initial surge—if we end up having to put more and more people in the office of the ombudsman, that's not necessarily the right direction to go, because it may be indicative of other issues.

If we ever got to the point where in fact everybody who came to us for service ends up with a complaint to the office of the ombudsman.... I'm being a bit extreme here to make a point, but the point is not to add more people to the office of the ombudsman; it's to understand the systemic reasons why people feel they have to go there.

There is always going to be a certain group of people who will feel they haven't gotten a fair shake, if I could put it in those terms, for any type of service or benefit in society. But certainly the goal of the department is to get it right, up front, and then to deal with cases, unfortunately, where something either did go wrong, through human error or what have you, or where there are people who will not accept a decision if it isn't in their favour, which there will always be.

[Translation]

**Mr. Roger Gaudet:** Will you be travelling across the country, or are there two or three specific places where you may go? Will people all have to go to the same place?

[English]

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** That decision hasn't been made, but it would have to be part of the organizational model. Again, from some very early research, there are offices of ombudsmen that are virtual offices in terms of having people who work for the office of the ombudsman in various geographic regions. There are others that are very centralized.

I think the first step is to understand exactly what the mandate of the ombudsman is going to be, and what that may mean in volumes of work, and then try to spin out where we should be located across the country, whether we're centralized or not. But we're nowhere near making those decisions.

[Translation]

**Mr. Roger Gaudet:** From what you say, it might be better from the ombudsman to report to the House of Commons so that he's not in conflict of interest with the department or with veterans.

Will you propose that you be accountable to the House of Commons?

[English]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** That could be one of the models. I would just say here, because we've heard the minister say it before, that he really believes that all MPs are currently ombudsmen now, in one sense, for Canada's veterans. That would be a model you could take a look at, along with many others.

**The Chair:** There are only 15 seconds left.

**Mr. Gilles-A. Perron:** I need that fifteen seconds.

I want to ask you a question.

[Translation]

I'd like to ask you a question. Would it be possible to ask Michel to prepare a list for us of all the veterans associations in Canada? That would be good for everybody. I think there are about 30 of them. Could he do a good search on the subject?

[English]

I lost my 15 seconds.

**The Chair:** I'm just looking...there's somebody who's nodding around the table and I'm assuming that somebody has that list. Oh, bless you.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** We of course have that, and we keep it updated on a regular basis. We could make it available to the chair or the clerk for distribution.

**The Chair:** That makes it a lot easier for us. Otherwise we're nervously looking at staff, thinking, does anybody want that monkey? Thank goodness you already have that monkey solved. Excellent.

I thought I'd just make a couple of comments. Monsieur Perron's question of who guards the guards reminds me of the Roman guards, the praetorians, and then Monsieur Gaudet's question with regard to travelling the country reminds me of Alfred the Great's courts, the first establishment of...anyhow, that's where the mind travels on history when I get caught up in these things.

Mr. Sweet for five minutes.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome.

Mr. Hillier, I want to ask how long you have had a chance to work on this file now. I didn't catch that in your opening remarks.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** It's been several months now.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Several months. I understand the magnitude of your job in trying to consolidate all these models, but is there any estimated timeline about when a decision might be made down the road? Just an estimate.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** No, I really wouldn't be able to give you that estimate today. I think the consultation process is extremely important, and I certainly do not want those who are going to be consulted to feel that this is something that's being thrown at them. It's very difficult, and depending on what model is chosen at the end of the day, it might have a relationship in that regard.

• (1620)

**Mr. David Sweet:** I wrestle with two feelings. One, as some of my colleagues have said, is getting it done, and the other one is making sure you do it right and that you don't have to do it again. So I appreciate that.

We've talked about the older veterans and the younger veterans. From some of the meetings you've had, can you share a little bit about what the significant mindset differences are that you're going to have to consider as you go forward with this?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Certainly from having met with veterans organizations—and even some of what I might say are the longer-established veterans organizations do represent some of the modern-day veterans through their membership and through various affiliations and associations—what I see from talking to people is the fact that the modern-day veteran lives in a bit of a different world. Generally speaking, many of them are younger and have come up in a different society. They're career soldiers and in fact have been involved in multiple deployments.

That's certainly not to take anything away from what we'd call our traditional veterans. I see some differences in terms of what their expectation is in how they should be dealt with. I'm not sure if that really gets at it, but it is different. I have seen differences. For example, just last weekend I met with the peacekeepers association, and those people have been involved in the Gulf War or what have you. They have a certain perspective based on their experiences. Other organizations have perspectives based on their experiences.

**Mr. David Sweet:** The reason for my question is that if they're like some of the other things we see that are morphing in our culture, they're less likely to join in. I didn't know whether that correlated with young veterans. If so, then that would seemingly make your job more difficult. You'd have to have more independent focus groups

because there'd be no catchment in official organizations. Would that be the case?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** I think it's fair to say that we know there are many young veterans who aren't part of official organizations, so part of our consultation package will be looking at doing some kind of focus group that can touch those folks.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Okay, good.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** All right.

We have a minute-and-some left, if Mr. Mayes would like to get in some questions.

**Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC):** At our last meeting we discussed some issues with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and the numbers they were dealing with. My concern is that it's obvious there's quite a workload there. They mentioned that almost 60% of the appeals are upheld. My concern is if there's a way we can cut that volume down.

The ombudsman would be an advocate for the veterans, but wouldn't have any ability to vet the issues, and maybe lessen the load on the appeal board.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** You'd have to be extremely careful. The Pension Act, which is the existing legislation, is very, very clear about how we have to handle anything related to veterans' pensions; there's no flexibility there. It is the Veterans Review and Appeal Board that handles the pensions. The ombudsman would not be able to supercede or interfere in any of those processes, but there are other issues that could be dealt with by the ombudsman.

**The Chair:** Now, who is our next keenest Liberal?

Mr. Rota.

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** I just have a quick question, Mr. Chair.

I know we just did the Veterans Charter last year, but regarding the term "bill of rights", is that part of the Veterans Charter, or where does it come from? I'm just wondering where it suddenly appeared from, or has it been developing over the years?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** It's interesting that it is something that has been available through different government departments, some of whom have bills of rights. As we started working on this, it was interesting to discover that the legion, unbeknownst to us, was also working on a bill of rights. So it seems that as government begins to focus on how we're servicing clients, there is an interest in looking at bills of rights, which are really service standards of what people can expect. You even see them when you go into banks sometimes, in terms of the bank saying, our clients can expect...

•(1625)

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** It was just something that I didn't remember seeing too often—in Canadian government anyway. It seems to be something in the U.S., but not really here. I thought the wording or nomenclature was an interesting change from what we normally do.

The other question I have is that if we have an ombudsman, will that take away from the powers the minister has? Let's say it's something that requires ministerial intervention. Would having an ombudsman interfere at all in that, or would the minister still have the ultimate say on what's going on?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Again, it depends on the model you choose, but you have to be really careful that with anything you do with the ombudsman, the minister is also bound by legislation. You can't create an ombudsman who's going to take away the authorities or responsibilities of a minister, unless you do it very deliberately—but I can't imagine anyone doing that. So you have the existing legislation that governs the minister, and then the ombudsman's authorities would have to fit within that.

Again, there are different models. An ombudsman may make recommendations to a minister, and then it's up to the minister to decide what to do. So there are different models that can be explored there.

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** Sorry for asking questions here. I guess at this point they're a little more difficult to ask.

One last question. I mentioned VRAB earlier, and I guess a possibility would be to dismantle it and merge it into the ombudsman's office, or keep it separate. You don't have any preferences at this point, I take it.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** The mandate we've been given hasn't been to get rid of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board; we're looking at a mandate to create an ombudsman that fits within existing processes. That's the current focus we have.

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** Okay, very good.

**The Chair:** Mr. Valley.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** I can see a problem with that. When the decisions are made at the review board, how do you propose...? I don't want to put you on the spot too much, but if you're going to have an ombudsman and an appeals process...or do you foresee having a review board and then an appeals process and then they go to the ombudsman?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** The ombudsman wouldn't have any authority over the decisions made by the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Depending on how you design the ombudsman, you could give the ombudsman the opportunity to deal with the people who think the process is taking too long, who could complain to the ombudsman. But under the current legislation, the ombudsman doesn't have a role and wouldn't have a role in decision-making around pensions. The role would deal more with health care benefits, or whatever.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** As you've said, you are looking at this very carefully and very deliberately, which I applaud. Has anyone thought to the point that maybe the ombudsman could take over some of those roles? I'm not saying there's anything wrong with what they do, but maybe it's a way to put it together so that it's one-stop shopping. The process doesn't take too long, as we were told earlier

this week about the appeals board and the review board. Has anyone thought to the point that maybe this ombudsman could have part of those duties and maybe it would lessen some of the bureaucracy?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** It's certainly not a part of what we're looking at now, but we'll take it back.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** I have one last question, if I still have time. I'm sorry I didn't finish my question on Ste. Anne's Hospital and their ombudsman. We have health centres all across Canada for veterans. Does that one ombudsman deal with health issues all across these centres, or does he or she just strictly deal with the issues in the one hospital?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** As far as I'm aware, it's just Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue. It's very much focused on people who are residents or patients, as they call them, of Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** Of the one organization?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** The one organization, yes.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** I can see that we need an ombudsman if we are only providing for one specific group. Regardless of the reason they're in the hospital, whether it's dementia or anything else, the others in similar centres don't have that service. That's what you're saying.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** That's correct.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Yes.

**Mr. Roger Valley:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** We have 19 seconds, if Mr. St. Denis wants to—

**Mr. Roger Valley:** He'll wait for his own time.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** I'll wait.

**The Chair:** Now we're over to Mr. Mayes, I think.

**Mr. Colin Mayes:** I'm finished.

**The Chair:** Okay. Next would be Mr. Stoffer with the NDP, but he's not here.

Mr. Rota, because you were so kind to Mr. Stoffer, maybe you want to allow Mr. St. Denis...if he wants to ask his questions.

**Mr. Anthony Rota:** It would be a pleasure to pass my time on to Mr. St. Denis. He's a wonderful man.

**The Chair:** All right.

Mr. St. Denis.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and Mr. Rota.

There appears to be a great sincerity behind these initiatives. Is there a preferred timeline, and I apologize if I missed it, but I had to take an urgent phone call, whether it's a regulation or a bill—I hope it's a bill, and if it's a bill, I hope it goes through the House quickly—and will they both be done at the same time in the same set of regulations or the same bill? Do you know?

•(1630)

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** It's probably a bit soon to say if they'll be dealt with together. That would be part of how the system unfolds.

In terms of timeline, in a response to a question earlier, we need to make sure we take the time to do it properly, but there's no question that the minister has asked us to move quickly on this one. We'll be working as quickly as we can to come up with something that makes sense.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** Will the resources come out of existing budgets? A few million dollars a year I am sure could run something like this. Are the resources notionally set aside in the department or will this require extra funds, which I am sure we would certainly support in any event?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** I'll let our chief financial officer speak.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** The way the process will work is that obviously the minister will have to take options and recommendations to his colleagues. It would be our intention to try to identify costs around that. When we move forward, whether it be through regulation or through legislation, as you mentioned, we would be identifying the cost both in the department and the cost of setting up the office of the ombudsman. We would hope we would get support for that, and then that would, in turn, translate in us going to Treasury Board to get additional funding.

That's the mechanism, whether or not it actually plays out that way, but certainly the intention would be to move forward and identify additional resources. The risk of going the other way would be taking resources away from services that are currently being provided to veterans.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** Back to the parameters within which an ombudsman might work, and I know this is a work in progress, is it imagined that, for example, a member of Parliament would be making an inquiry on behalf of a constituent to the ombudsman, which we do all the time to Canada Pension, to EI people, and so on? Is it anticipated that members of Parliament would have access to the ombudsman on behalf of constituents who presumably would have granted permission, authorization, to do so?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I would see no restriction with that, but that certainly wouldn't take away from an honourable member's prerogative of actually writing directly to the minister on behalf of a constituent for whom they have a concern.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** I have a final point, Mr. Chair.

One of my happier experiences with an ombudsman was a bank ombudsman for one of the five main banks. Very briefly, it was a constituent who had assets on the side that weren't the usual things but were still marketable things. He collected *Star Trek* collectables. They were limited edition things. He had quite a bit of this stuff, but he and his wife were starting a business and he had a hard time getting a loan from the bank. I called the ombudsman and I was amazed that the ombudsman called the bank manager and things started to happen, because it really shouldn't have been a problem from the get-go.

One of the things that occurs to me is that—I don't know what the bank's procedures are—they didn't object to getting involved. Whatever stage the loan process was in, I wasn't told, "You can't

ask us to look at that problem now because it's still on the manager's desk." We got good cooperation.

Is it imagined that a veteran going through an appeal would be allowed to access the ombudsman through the process, or would they have to wait until all the processes have been concluded before they could access an ombudsman? Could they anticipate a problem? I'm trying to imagine the situations that may fall under this category, but I'm just wondering if you anticipate putting barriers or hurdles, maybe necessary ones, to when a veteran could access the ombudsman in the process.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** You would have to do that particularly around the pension process, which is again the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, because the pension process under the Pension Act is so clearly defined that there is no legislative possibility for an ombudsman to be involved there. You'd have to keep that process very separate.

**Mr. Brent St. Denis:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Mayes, I believe you had some other questions.

•(1635)

**Mr. Colin Mayes:** It says the veterans mistrust the system and believe they need an ombudsman. That's the statement I have before me. Do you think that's a failing of the department?

I agree with what Mr. Stoffer had said earlier, in that I am the son of a veteran and my father has had great experience with Veterans Affairs. They've taken care of him very well. That's what surprised me, and once again I get back to the volume of appeals. Are the people who are there now providing a service maybe using a different sense of discretion in favour of the veteran to minimize the number of appeals and the need for an ombudsman? If that's the case, and if, as you've said, it's because they distrust, that's not a very good indication of the sense, or is it just that veterans don't know how to take the word "no"?

That's the challenge I see. Do you have an answer for me?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Sure. We do regular client satisfaction surveys, and we actually have very high rates of satisfaction from our clients, but there will always be people who aren't happy with what we do—and we do have to say no.

As you're aware, the pension process is complicated. While you could get, yes, you do have a pension, you may get, no, you're not getting 100%, you're only getting 60%. Even though you've got a yes for 60%, you've got a no for 100%, so maybe you're unhappy.

None of us is perfect, and we try not to have our staff be cranky, but they're human, so there will be occasions where people are concerned about the level of service. It's important for them to have an ombudsman and a bill of rights that would deal with the concerns that may raise.

We do have many stories like yours in terms of the service we provide to Canada's veterans, and we take very seriously the quality of service we provide. We're very proud of it.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** If I might add, I would hope that some of those comments you referred to were comments made prior to the new Veterans Charter. I think there has certainly been, for certain categories of veterans, significant frustration that we didn't have the tools or the programs to meet their needs, particularly for the modern-day veteran. I would argue that some of what we may call the mistrust or some of the general unhappiness was a frustration that somebody was ill and needed service. Until we got the legislative authority, we weren't able to make the type of intervention that needed to be made for that particular individual.

**The Chair:** Mr. Mayes, does that wrap up your questions?

Okay, we have about two minutes left. I'm just wondering if either Mr. Shipley or Mr. Sweet have any other questions.

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** I do.

I guess I'm really happy. I think one of the things is we're all here for a purpose—to serve the veterans. We heard the other day that it needs to be fair and fast and friendly, and that's regardless of whether it's going through an appeal or through an ombudsman.

All of us will have some interpretation, as you've mentioned. Basically there have been only one or two occasions with that...and they try to facilitate, to provide the answer to, where do I go? People understand you can call an ombudsman and they will help you, facilitate for you, give you direction, give you good help in that way. I think that may be one of the interpretations.

Is that something you're looking at? Can you talk a little bit about that? Is that still all part of what you're looking at—the definition? Are you also looking at the breadth of the scope of what they will do? Are there some ideas on that?

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Those are both things we're looking at. You have to take a look at what it is we're going to be looking at and how an ombudsman would do that. So you're right, those things—

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** That also makes a large difference, has a significant impact, obviously, on your office and how it works—all that.

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Exactly.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Now, Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gilles-A. Perron:** First, as you move forward in creating this new ombudsman's position and in your efforts to ensure compliance with the Veterans Charter, I hope you'll have the decency to keep us committee members regularly up to date on your progress.

Mr. Chairman, I hope we'll be able to schedule meetings for this purpose in six months or in a year. You're doing a good job. I think you're on the right track.

I have another problem, which I believe is a moral issue. I'm not claiming that the Veterans Review and Appeal Board is doing a bad job, far from it. However, it has a very, very bad reputation, particularly among those who lose their cases. I understand them,

because, when they appear before the Board, they say to themselves that the lawyer representing them is paid by it. We can't bite the hand that feeds us. I feel the ombudsman should correct this appearance of conflict of interest with the Board. I sincerely believe that the ombudsman's position should not come under the wing of the Minister of Veterans Affairs. An effort should even be made to ensure that he is housed elsewhere than in your building in Charlottetown, to prevent people from getting the impression that the whole thing is biased. The position should be taken out of the minister's hands, and the ombudsman should report to the House committee or another entity. You're smart enough to find a solution.

I'd like our committee to be involved and to go see the various associations to ask them for their opinion. He's doing a consultation, but we could conduct another one, at the same time as his. Two heads can work with more determination than one. I think it would be a good idea to ensure the ombudsman's appearance of freedom.

Do you want to make any comments? I've made mine in good faith and without malice.

• (1640)

[*English*]

**Ms. Verna Bruce:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** If I may, Mrs. Hinton, I think, has something to respond to Mr. Perron on that matter.

**Mrs. Betty Hinton:** Oh, I could certainly wait for the answers, but I just want to say that I agree with you wholeheartedly.

I think this committee is master of its own destiny, and if there are consultations that this committee wants to be involved in, then that's exactly what this committee should be doing. If we're going to be acting in the best interests of veterans, then we should be talking to a lot of the user groups, as you're saying, and we should be having some consultations and we should probably be looking at other models of what's happening around the world. Otherwise, how are we going to get the best model for our own people?

Yes, I agree with you wholeheartedly.

**The Chair:** If I may, because there's still a minute left...

**A voice:** I'll give it to you.

**The Chair:** You're a kind man, sir. Bless your heart.

We've alluded to some other places, and I note the work here of some of our staff. The United States has the GI Bill of Rights, there is the Strategy for Veterans in the United Kingdom, and there is the Service Charter of the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs. I would be very keen on finding out more about those and how they compare to what we're coming up with, and then doing a bit of compare and contrast, for whatever that's worth.

Now it's Liberal time. Do we have anybody who wants to speak? All right, that's absolutely fine.

Is there anybody on the Conservative side who has more to add? No, okay.

Are there any more from the Bloc? Mr. Gaudet? No, okay.

I would like to thank our witnesses very much for appearing today. You were very generous with your time, and we appreciate that.

As Monsieur Perron said, "I think it would be very valuable for you to engage with us as you go through this process."

Thank you very much. The meeting is adjourned.

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