



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

ACVA • NUMBER 006 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, June 8, 2006

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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): I'd like to welcome everybody here to our meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Hello, all our people in bright shiny faces, all in their places.

We are very lucky today to have the Minister of Veterans Affairs here with us, and some of his officials as well.

Without further ado, I wish to turn the floor over to the Minister of Veterans Affairs for his presentation.

Mr. Thibault, sorry.

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Chair, before we get into the presentation of the minister I'd like to ask the committee's indulgence, once again. I wish to defer the motion I have on the order paper that would be dealt with at the end of the meeting to the next sitting of the committee.

The Chair: That's understood, Mr. Thibault. That's perfectly fine with me, as long as the rest of the committee members are all right with that.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Mr. Minister.

Hon. Greg Thompson (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I get going, Mr. Chair, I want to introduce my colleagues. At the table with me I have my deputy, Jack Stagg, to assist me; assistant deputy Verna Bruce; and our Veterans Appeal and Review Board chairman, Victor Marchand.

I might as well continue. We have Rick Hillier, Brian Ferguson, Bob Mercer, and others who I may not identify.

We just came back from a little road trip, so we're a bit weary. We were actually in Newfoundland this morning and came back, Mr. Chairman, for your meeting. I think we're none the worse for wear, but I want to begin, Mr. Chairman, by thanking you, and it's a pleasure to be with you.

I would also like to congratulate each of you around this table for being selected to serve on this new committee.

I've already had a chance to speak with several of you, and I know your first priority is the best interests of our veterans. Together I think we represent a new beginning in the way we treat the men and

women in uniform who have served and continue to serve our country with such courage and distinction.

Our veterans have given this nation their very best, and we have a duty to match it with our own best efforts. Few ministers have a more noble or humbling mandate. That is why I am proud to be here as Minister of Veterans Affairs. Our new government has demonstrated from the start that we understand our duty to Canada's veterans. The creation of this committee is just one obvious example.

Our implementation of the new Veterans Charter and our pledge to appoint a veterans ombudsman and to adopt a veterans bill of rights are further evidence of our determination to do the right thing for our veterans. With your help we want to do even more to recognize and repay our veterans for their great sacrifice and achievements.

Before we look at the budgetary figures in front of us, I would like to speak a little more about the initiatives I've just mentioned and I would like to share with you some of the other work under way in the department.

As you know, the new Veterans Charter offers the most sweeping changes to veterans benefits and services in more than half a century, but this is not the end of our work. I'd like to refer to the new charter as an open book, a living document that will evolve with the changing needs of our veterans.

When the original charter was written 60 years ago it was designed to help veterans returning from the Second World War, and then Korea. It may surprise you to learn today that the average age of Canadian Forces members being released from the military is 36 years old. By almost any measurement, 36 years of age is the prime of life, and starting over in your prime is not always easy.

The new charter is meant to serve as a bridge to help veterans and their families make the transition from military life to civilian life. That's not all it does, however. In fact, let me be very clear: the new charter is designed as a fresh commitment to our veterans and their families that this country will stand by them for life.

This strategy includes a new dual award approach that is far more generous than the single award disability pension it replaces. Under the new charter there's both a disability award, which is a lump sum tax-free payment of up to \$250,000, and an earnings loss benefit equalling 75% of a CF veteran's pre-release salary. As well, there are a number of other services, including expanded health care and rehabilitation programs, and vocational training and support.

No less important, however, is the simultaneous commitment we are making to our veterans' families. The fact is that we never know when a military career is going to be interrupted when we send our soldiers on high-risk missions. They need to know we're also going to be with them and there for their families if things go tragically wrong.

The new charter does that. It provides immediate financial support to our veterans' survivors and dependent children, and then delivers long-term help. The charter includes specific measures for spouses to go back to school or to obtain other job training, if or when they decide they are ready to join the workforce.

The new charter also ensures that we are there when any dependent children want to pursue a post-secondary education.

As well, the new charter recognizes that not all injuries are necessarily physical. More than ever, CF members are being deployed on longer and more dangerous missions, and they are being asked to serve on subsequent missions with less time to recuperate from the last one.

Members of the RCMP also face unprecedented stress with modern-day threats and conflicts, both at home and abroad. We witnessed some of those in Toronto last week with the 17 arrests in connection with the alleged home-grown terrorist cell.

All of this has led to a sharp rise in the number of mental-health-related cases. The number of VAC pensions for post-traumatic stress disorder has jumped more than 350% over the four-year period ending March 2005. In fact, Veterans Affairs Canada has nearly 9,000 clients pensioned for mental-health-related conditions.

We realize this is the new reality facing our troops, and we're working with the Department of National Defence to provide the kind of comprehensive mental health care and support our veterans need. Last month, for example, we opened a new operational stress injury social support facility, which is located off-site from CFB Gagetown. The location is almost as important as the treatment itself, because it recognizes the discreet and sensitive way mental health issues need to be handled.

Too often, troops suffer mental illness in silence. As some experts have pointed out, there is still a social stigma attached to mental illness that leaves some soldiers hesitant to seek help in the full view of their fellow troops. We're trying to address this full range of issues and needs.

I've distributed among you some examples to help compare the differences between the benefits and services available under the new charter and the old system. If you like, I would be more than pleased, with my officials, to walk you through the examples when we move into the question-and-answer portion of our meeting.

I'd like to emphasize, however, that these improved measures for modern-day veterans take nothing away from the care and support our war service veterans have come to expect from us. Just the opposite is true. This is an important point. Of the 837,000 veterans in Canada, 258,000 are war service veterans, and sadly, about 25,000 of our war service veterans are passing away every year.

We owe it to them to make sure their final years are as rewarding and comfortable as possible. That includes helping them to live independently for as long as they can, in their own homes. And when our elderly war service veterans do need to enter a long-term care facility, we want them to be confident they will get the specialized health care they need and deserve. That's no small consideration when we currently have almost 10,600 veterans living in long-term care facilities.

We are bringing this same level of commitment to the other issues our department is tackling. The Agent Orange issue at CFB Gagetown is a case in point. Our new government is determined to address concerns raised by CF members, veterans, civilians, and area residents about herbicide use at the New Brunswick training base.

In fact, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is the first national leader to deal with the problem head-on. He wants a resolution; it is a commitment our new government has made. As a result, my department, which has taken the lead role on the compensation side of this issue, is studying a variety of options and models. And I feel very good about the support I've been getting from my colleagues and individual MPs, many in this room and many in opposition, Mr. Chair.

We are making progress, and we will see the results either this year or early next year. I'm sure if you asked any veterans, they would tell you that all they want from their dealings with the government is fair, equal, and effective treatment. This is a major reason why we have embraced, for example, a more open process for inviting applications for appointment to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Veterans deserve to have their cases reviewed by an independent, fair, and professional tribunal. They also deserve to have their cases heard in a timely manner, which is why I'm looking for ways to clear up a backlog of about 7,500 cases. Such delays are simply unacceptable.

•(1540)

I wish I had more time, because I'd like to elaborate at some length on our work fulfilling the Prime Minister's promise to appoint a veterans ombudsman and adopt a veterans bill of rights. Let me just say we are consulting extensively with our veterans organizations, individuals, and other clients to make sure we get both initiatives right the first time. If we do, we will properly demonstrate this government's commitment to openness, transparency, and accountability.

We will also be getting to the heart of what defines this department. At the end of the day, our sole interest is the care, well-being, and health of our veterans, and to keep the memory of their achievements and sacrifices alive for all Canadians. It's no more complicated than that.

In carrying out this simple and honourable mission in the coming year, the Veterans Affairs portfolio is seeking approval for a total of just over \$3.2 billion in the 2006-07 main estimates.

At this point, I need to stress that these main estimates tabled on April 25 are based on the previous government's budget in 2005, and do not provide a completely accurate reflection of the current government's spending priorities. Briefly stated, the main estimates amount to a \$350 million increase over last year's budget, and \$250 million of this is directly attributable to the more generous new charter. It is a price worth paying, however, to make sure our veterans are treated with the respect and dignity they've earned.

I'll just highlight some of the big numbers now, and if you have any questions about the details, I'll be happy to answer them at the end of my remarks.

By far the majority of these funds, some \$2.1 billion, or almost two-thirds of the total, will be paid directly to veterans and their families as pensions, disability awards, allowances for disability and death, and other economic support. Of this amount, \$250 million will go to disability awards and allowances, earnings lost in supplemental retirement benefits under the new charter. I'm pleased to say only 7% of this departmental spending is for corporate services and program delivery costs. Health care benefits for our veterans and their families account for most of the remaining one-third of the department's budget.

The largest single expenditure on this side of the ledger is the approximately \$368 million spent on long-term and nursing-home care for veterans, including the operation of Ste. Anne's Hospital near Montreal. I was at that hospital last week, and I can tell you our money is being well spent. Ste. Anne's is one of those government success stories we hear too little about. I had a chance to meet many veterans there, and they are as fine and distinguished a group as you could ever hope to be with. I did the same thing last week at Ridgewood in Saint John, New Brunswick.

In fact the several hours I spent there made for one of the most rewarding, emotional days in my first four months as the Minister of Veterans Affairs. When the veterans are shaking your hand and not wanting to let go, they're really saying thank you for the exceptional care they're getting. It's their expression of gratitude to a grateful nation. In turn, they filled me with even more determination to make

sure we honour and serve our veterans with the respect, the dignity, and generosity of spirit they deserve.

St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words." I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead to make sure our actions on behalf of this country's veterans match our words.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

•(1545)

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

Now we open it up to questions. Mr. Thibault for the Liberal Party, you are first.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I want to thank you for being here. I hope that this is the first of many such occasions when the committee has a chance to interchange with you, either formally or informally, and that we work together towards achieving the stated goal of service to our veterans.

I want to congratulate you on your appointment. I know that you have a personal commitment to the service of veterans, and I wish you well in that position.

I congratulate you on your start. I think you have the responsibility for implementation of the charter, which has been a six-year process of work by the staff at your department, in consultation with all the associations and organizations committed to veterans.

We've heard from the Royal Canadian Legion this week. We were very pleased with the consultative process that led us here.

Now is the implementation phase. Many ministers worked through that process, including the late Ron Duhamel, who would have been the minister when this process started. He was a great member of this House.

I know you take the job of implementation very seriously, and I congratulate you on the first step, which is that the retroactive awarding of benefits is now available to Canadian veterans who were lost overseas between the time of the royal proclamation and the implementation. I think that was a very good move by yourself and your colleagues, and I congratulate you for it.

There are many questions I would have for you in this short period of time. I'd like to talk to you about the flag at half-mast. I'd like to talk to you about Agent Orange and rolling out the money as quickly as possible. I'd like to talk to you about November 11, and the question of whether it should be a national holiday or not. About these, and the bill of rights and the ombudsman, I am sure my colleagues and the colleagues opposite will raise many points.

One of the more important challenges I would like to raise with you, Minister, is the question of the famous CPP clawback to pensioners, both RCMP and military. There's a very fuzzy understanding of that, and there has been some maybe misleading information given to veterans about how it would apply, if we could do it.

The House will be dealing with the private member's bill. It will probably be my duty to support this bill, so that it comes to committee and everybody can fully understand it. I know it will have no effect for veterans or RCMP pensioners, unless there is a royal warrant from government, because it would mean new spending.

However, there are some very important points as to how we should accept the basic principle of the bill being put forward. Even if it can or can't be retroactively applied to people already on pension, let the choice be given again to the people who are now contributing, so that when their retirement day comes, they would have the ability to have the Canada Pension Plan above their regular superannuation pension. We know that is the case for the RCMP and the veterans, but that would apply to anybody, I suppose, on the superannuation plan.

But the opinion or suggestion has been put out there that it's a stroke-of-the-pen possibility for government to implement such action: to retroactively end the so-called clawback for all veterans. I have a lot of pensioners in my riding, and if that is in any way possible, I can assure you I'd like to have that happen, because I'd like to have them see that money.

What I think is most important, Mr. Minister, is that there be a full understanding by each and every pensioner of what is the process, how did it happen, and what is the art of the possible in this question. I think that's a great challenge for yourself and for your officials.

• (1550)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Robert—I mean, Mr. Thibault; I should be more formal.

Hon. Robert Thibault: No problem.

• (1555)

Hon. Greg Thompson: You had an interesting introduction, but you've gotten into an issue that is a rather tough one to publicly explain, because you're basically talking about a pension where some of the benefits are clawed back, and you articulated what those are.

I guess one of the things we have to remember is that there are two groups who actually pay into that pension plan, the employee and the employer, and usually, in this case, the employer—the government—is paying in more than the employee. It's not as if it's only one individual contributing to the plan.

At the end of the day, as with anything else, there would be a cost to government of eliminating that clawback.

I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that clawback will apply to you and me upon our retirement as well.

From a human point of view, you can argue as to why government should do this, but at the end of the day it has to do with the costs we incur. It reaches across many branches of government.

I think the other thing you have to consider is that if in fact the clawback were eliminated, the cost to government at some point would have to be incurred by some other group. You could argue that even the pension plans themselves, as they operate and function, and given how the actuaries' projections and the costs extended over a number of years are calculated.... It would mean that at the end of the day if the clawback did not occur, the pensions would have to be reduced. In other words, at the end of the day there has to be a consolidation of all those facts in terms of what the net benefit would be to the recipient, the pensioner.

I guess what I'm telling you is there's no easy answer to it. I think everyone in this room, regardless of whether they're an accountant or were the President of the Treasury Board, would be sympathetic at a human level to the issue that occurs. But at the end of the day, it would have a huge impact on governments.

What I will tell you is—and “you” would be as a former cabinet minister and a member of the crown, if you will—that this is an issue the previous government has dealt with as well, unsuccessfully. At the end of the day, it's going to be a cost incurred by government, and I would argue that when everything is considered, in terms of the level of pensions received today and the fact that there are two contributors to the plan, it's much more complicated than it looks. I don't expect any federal government is going to step into that void in the near future. That would be my belief, Mr. Thibault.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Now it is to Monsieur Perron, with the Bloc, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): I would like to call you Grégoire, but decorum requires that I call you Mr. Minister. So, Mr. Minister, I apologize if, in the course of conversation, I use “tu” or address you on a first name basis.

You know about my background and my language; I am a Quebecker. So let's talk about Hôpital Sainte-Anne, at Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, which is in my backyard, just on the other side of beautiful Lac des Deux Montagnes, which you must have seen. You've seen my riding.

I would like to find out what the status of construction is there. Is the construction work on schedule? It's supposed to be completed by the end of the year. Will it be the case? Is it on budget? Are we under budget or, on the contrary, has the building budget allocated been exceeded? How many new beds will it provide?

Let's begin with these questions. I will ask others later on, as we move on.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Gilles.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: I was down to Ste. Anne's, as I mentioned in my opening statements, the other day. I guess words really can't describe the feelings of going through that hospital, seeing the care that our veterans get, and the dedicated staff.

We've set aside about \$104 million for that project, and I believe the contract was let for about \$67 million. I did actually walk through the new pavilion the other day, and it's well on schedule, and it's on track. I was quite impressed by the team leaders down there who are leading that project on behalf of Veterans Affairs. They really are in command and are doing a great job, and they're paying a lot of attention to detail.

The pavilion will result in the modernization of 446 beds. I don't have at my fingertips the amount of new space that's being provided in the pavilion, but I believe it's in the order of 40 units. I'll have my deputy check that number out, Mr. Perron.

It is on schedule.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: It will bring up the total to 285 beds.

Hon. Greg Thompson: The modernization project in total will bring up the number to 446 beds. The number I'm searching for—which we'll have here in a minute—is how many would be provided in the construction of what they call the new pavilion, which aside from the tower... I'm sure you've been in the tower building. Of course, that's going to go through some extensive renovation as well when the project is completed.

But I can tell you that the project is on schedule, and the work being done is extremely good. And they are paying a lot of attention to detail. So I'm pretty pleased by what I see at Ste. Anne's.

Of course, as you well know, under the new charter there will be an expanded role for Ste. Anne's as well.

There is some controversy regarding some of the property owned by Veterans Affairs down there as well, which wasn't part of your question. Veterans Affairs own 65 acres in addition to the buildings, and a nine-hole golf course, enjoyed by some of the veterans in the past. It's a beautiful piece of property and is being managed very well by our officials down there.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Minister, you'll have noticed that my introductions are very short. I'd like the answers to be short too, so that we can cover as much as possible.

Yes, the people told me that you went to Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue. They also told me they enjoyed meeting with you, and that you were very warm. I have some concerns, however. I think there was not much discussion, except for a few handshakes with the young veterans, that is, those struggling with post-traumatic stress syndrome, or PTSS. You didn't talk much with them and you said very little to them about the services you would provide for them. I'd like you to tell us a little more about PTSS.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Again, I did talk fairly extensively to some of them. I was there half a day, and I'm more than willing to go back. That's one of the areas we're paying a lot of attention to.

I mentioned in my opening remarks, as you know, Mr. Perron, that 9,000 veterans are presently pensionable, or are in a pensionable condition under the old charter, as a result of post-traumatic stress, occupational stress, injury, and so on. It's an area that's going to be increasingly prevalent and growing simply because of the stress situations some of our soldiers are in.

Again, I go back to Roméo Dallaire, who says that he believes we have the best system of any country in the world, going into the future in terms of dealing with that specific disorder. He's quite convinced that we're doing the right thing and that we're on the right track.

We're watching that very carefully. We know there's going to be a definite increase in post-traumatic stress syndrome and the accompanying diseases—mental illnesses, alcoholism, drug dependency, and some of the silent diseases that we often don't deal with effectively, and I think the department is well on the way to doing that. I'm quite encouraged by what I see.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: My ten minutes is ending. I'd simply like to remind you that you should check your information with Hôpital Sainte-Anne. In fact, at that hospital, four beds are reserved for people suffering from PTSS. There are not 25 or 50 out of 485. There are only four beds for 9,000 patients, 9,000 future clients. Again, I think we are neglecting the young people who suffer from these problems. This is a serious illness caused by what has occurred on the battlefield and elsewhere. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is an illness.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Your concern is real and it's genuine, Mr. Perron, and I will tell you that in the new pavilion there will be a section set aside for that very malady that you're suggesting. It is a challenge for the department; it's one that we recognize, and it's one we're going to continue to improve. But I take your comments very seriously. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Thank you, and I hope that we'll have the opportunity to meet again soon.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

Now we'll go to the NDP.

Mr. Bevington, I thought when you first walked in you were crossing the floor on us, but I see you've regained the NDP spot over there.

You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Minister.

I'm just filling in for Mr. Peter Stoffer, of course, who's very active in this area and certainly has a passion for this.

I was interested in the discussion about the clawback, because it certainly has come up during the election campaign. People are concerned about that issue.

You talked about the cost of changing this so that it would work better. Do you have some studies or information that you could share with us on the cost of what this would mean to the government to take a different tack on the clawback?

• (1605)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Well, I don't. I could get that figure. Actually, today, in looking over my notes, I can't recall looking at that cost, because it extends way beyond the Department of Veterans Affairs to all government departments. But I'm sure that the Department of Finance, Minister Flaherty, could provide that figure, because obviously anything like that has an impact on the treasury. The finance minister would have those numbers available, and I'll certainly request those and get those and provide them to you. I'm sure that Treasury Board would have those numbers as well. But for the individual department, I haven't seen those numbers, anyway.

The cost is real. I can't tell you what it would be, but we know it would be substantial, or governments would just simply do it. In referring and speaking to Mr. Thibault on the same question as a minister of the crown, it is something that previous governments have all grappled with but have never done.

I do know the member you're replacing, Peter Stoffer, does have a private member's bill before the House. That's the bill that Mr. Stoffer...I don't want to use the word "habitually", because it doesn't sound as positive as it should, but it's a cause that he has had for a number of years and it's a bill that he throws in every year. It's one of the first things he met me on when I was sworn in as minister.

But I'll get some precise numbers for you. I think it's only fair that I do that. So I'll just leave it at that for now.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Okay.

Are there any other courses of action that could be taken to alleviate the impacts of the clawback without it becoming such a government-wide endeavour? Is there some way we could look at relief to these veterans that would be restricted to the armed forces and to the police?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Veterans Affairs does a number of things. For example, we do not claw back disability awards. When you take a look at the benefit that would go to the widow or spouse of a soldier killed in action, it's \$250,000 that is tax-free. If it's a permanent disability, it would be \$250,000 tax-free. Other benefits that flow from Veterans Affairs are real benefits to the families.

It's a tough one to argue in public, because all of us want to do the best we can, but at the end of the day the government and taxpayers have to pay the bill. I'll get the numbers so that we can more intelligently go through those numbers, but at the end of the day it would be a cost incurred by the taxpayers of Canada.

I will tell you this. In the way that any of the programs work, the argument would be that if we are going to do that, the pension benefit would have to be somehow altered to allow it to happen. Part

of the equation that you and I as individual citizens sometimes forget about is the fact that in all of the pension plans, if you will, or in any of these benefit plans, the employee and the employer always pay into them. It occurs for unemployment insurance premiums as well. We often forget that the employer is paying more than the employee, at a ratio of two to one. Pension plans are somewhat the same way, and it's not only moneys contributed by the individual. An adjustment would have to be made along the way if that in fact happened.

As we say back home, there ain't no free lunch. That's not to say we would not like to see it.

I'm not saying this in a pejorative way, but when you take ownership of government, your views on some of these things change. At the end of the day, you're responsible for balancing the books and spending in appropriate ways that are consistent with good practices. I'm suggesting it's one that responsible governments grapple with, and my reply to Mr. Thibault is the same thing. We've never come up with a satisfactory answer.

I'll leave it at that for now, Mr. Bevington.

• (1610)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, gentlemen.

We'll go to Mrs. Hinton for seven minutes.

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing today. I very much appreciate that you came.

Congratulations on your appointment. I must tell you that it's a pleasure to work with someone who is as caring as you are regarding veterans issues.

Minister, I would like to ask you about our campaign promises and how you plan to fulfill them during your tenure as a minister.

The first and the biggest promise we made was for a bill of rights and an ombudsman for veterans. These initiatives would amount to some pretty sweeping changes with regard to the services that veterans receive from the department. We've heard from witnesses both from your department and from the Royal Canadian Legion on this topic. There still seems to be a lot of room for discussion. Can you tell the committee your thoughts on how the bill of rights and an ombudsman for veterans will proceed under your leadership?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

That question is one I've been asked a fair amount by a lot of veterans groups, and you're absolutely right, it's a commitment we made during the campaign that we would deal with these two issues and bring in an ombudsman and a bill of rights.

Obviously, those are two commitments we made that we're going to honour. Now we can speak specifically of the ombudsman and the bill of rights, but I will tell you that we will consult with our veterans groups. In fact, this week the department met with all the major stakeholders, if you will, and individual veterans. So we're consulting very widely and we're examining other jurisdictions so that when we do it, we'll get it right.

Some of those jurisdictions have a great reputation in terms of how they deal with their veterans, as does Canada. Some of those countries do have a bill of rights and some of them do have ombudsmen. Among those jurisdictions that have some of the models and that the department has already consulted are Australia, United States, and Great Britain. They've gone to some of those jurisdictions to examine what they have versus what we might consider.

What encourages me.... The other night we met with the veterans groups and we broke bread together, as I often say. We had a chance in a setting somewhat like this to sit down over a meal and talk about some of the challenges there. We met with the Royal Canadian Legion president, Mary Ann Burdett, and most interesting of all, with Cliff Chadderton, who was actually involved with the committee stage back in the Parliament of Canada some 40 years ago, when it discussed how the office of an ombudsman would work, if you will. It's quite refreshing that time doesn't change a lot of things. There have been a lot of changes in 40 years, but some of the proposals they were considering back at that time are still relevant.

In the talks we have engaged a lot of people, and what we say is that nothing is etched in stone. I do know it is something the committee is going to look at as well, so we need your input. And, Mr. Chair, I know your committee is focused on helping us on that issue.

As we say, the book is still open. When we do it, we want to get it right, and we will get it right with your help.

Thank you.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Another promise we made during the campaign was a resolution of the Agent Orange issue. I know how near and dear this is to your heart.

Minister, as you know, there are people who got very sick as a result of Agent Orange spraying back in the 1960s. Successive governments have failed to address this issue since it first came to light. The Prime Minister said during the campaign that full and fair compensation will be given to those who got sick from Agent Orange.

Can you tell us what your department is doing to live up to the campaign promise we made on this issue?

• (1615)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'm getting all the tough questions from the woman who is supposed to give me the easy ones. I thought this would be the question coming from Mr. Thibault when we started, because he's been after me on this one a few times.

The truth is it's a very complicated equation. As you well know, we are dedicated to a resolution to it, in all fairness, Mr. Chair. As you well know, this is an issue that's been around for fifty-some years, going back to the early days of CF Base Gagetown in New Brunswick, the spraying of herbicides and defoliants over the course of some of those years. Some of them are registered, some of them are not. But it's one where we're not going to be like successive governments, and I'm not saying that in a pejorative way either, because not all governments were Liberal and not all governments were Conservative, but the fact is that none of those governments in that fifty-some-year period dealt with it. Why? Because it's complicated and it's a difficult issue, so governments sometimes prefer to walk away from difficult issues. It's one we're not going to walk away from.

As you well know, our mandate is to deliver the compensation package to the veterans and civilians who were exposed. DND's role in this, the Department of National Defence, is that they're going out on a fact-finding mission, if you will. There are a number of tests that are ongoing, and the results of some of those tests have already come in. They've been delivered to us, if you will, for examination, and to the Department of National Defence. So we're working very cooperatively with National Defence on this file.

What I say, and have consistently said, is that a resolution to this is going to be knowledge-based, because previous governments have had a terrible habit of announcing programs and compensation plans and what not without thinking it through to its logical conclusion, if you will. Again, I'm not pointing fingers at individual governments. But we don't want the proceeds of a compensation plan to flow to lawyers and get tied up in a lot of legalese and roadblocks, which sometimes occur at all government levels when you get into a plan that has not been well thought out and knowledge-based.

By knowledge-based, I mean we're going to make sure that we have the scientific and medical evidence on which to build our case and build the plan, and we're going to make sure that we do the research necessary in terms of the human involvement, in terms of tracking the soldiers and the civilians on the base. It's very complicated, and I don't think I have to state any more than that, because all of you, I think is what I'm trying to say, understand just exactly how complex it is.

Veterans Affairs has a number of compensation models we're looking at, and I still believe we'll be in a position to present probably two cabinet compensation models sometime late in the fall, early new year, providing something doesn't unexpectedly happen at the base. There have been a few surprises in terms of some of the medical results or scientific results coming in, but for the most part we're pretty comfortable.

I have some of my experts with me from the department. This is where Veterans Affairs is really good in delivery of these types of programs. So we can tweak them or fine-tune them as we go along, but basically we believe that we can take a proposal to cabinet sometime later this fall or in the new year. So we're well on the way.

If any of the members want to get into the specifics on Agent Orange and the U.S. model and our model, and so on, I'll do that, because it gets complicated when you're talking and comparing a pension plan versus a compensation plan. Given the time, I'm more than pleased to get into some of the nitty-gritty detail or the differences in some of those plans, if you will.

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

Now over to our Liberal friends. Mr. Rota for five minutes.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming out, Minister.

I have two questions. I'll ask them both and then let you run with both of them, because I know if I just ask one, we'll run out of time. This is my way of getting it in.

One of the most heartbreaking parts of being an MP is being in your constituency office and having a widow or a caregiver come asking for help because they've run out and they're at a point where they can't support themselves any more. At this point there are approximately 94,000 veterans' widows and primary caregivers who receive the veterans independence program. It's known as the VIP, as you well know. But some 250,000 survivors do not receive these benefits.

While extending VIP to widows or caregivers of veterans who died before 1981 is one option—one that I think we should seriously consider—are there any plans of giving widows or other caregivers of veterans access to a greater range of VIP benefits, other than the ones just for housekeeping and grounds maintenance? There's a two-pronged question there. Are we extending it, and are we expanding it?

I have a second question. Only widows or caregivers of veterans receiving VIP benefits are eligible for them at the time of their death. So if you weren't receiving them when your spouse who was a veteran passed away, you don't get them later on. But many of these people are of another generation, in which the spouse normally stayed at home and kept a family going. Now all of a sudden they're older, and they probably didn't get a job that paid a lot; they sustained a family. And now they don't get those benefits.

Is there any way of extending it beyond those who passed away prior to 1981? That's the second question.

• (1620)

Hon. Greg Thompson: It's a good question. Actually the department, including me personally, has paid a lot of attention to that.

The VIP program, as you well know, is in one sense a cost-saving measure for the Government of Canada, because it's a good program that allows veterans to live at home in dignity, postponing, if you will.... I guess living at home might be a better way to express it; the care they get at home is always much better than institutional care. So it's a program that's a great success.

In terms of extending the program, those are numbers that we have gone over. In fact, we've had a number of meetings on what the

Government of Canada can do if you extend it this far, extend it logically out to where you would like to see it extended.

I'll just give you some numbers here, Anthony, so that you'll know. We have 86,000 war-service veterans who have overseas service who are ineligible for VIP service. That's a big number. The estimated cost of providing VIP services—including home care, long-term care, community beds, and related treatment costs—to all of those currently ineligible, including the widows and caregivers, would be \$500 million a year. So again, it's something that we all, I think, would like to do. It's a case of how you manage that cost and how far out you want to extend it.

I do know that previous governments have moved it along a little, but we're still not where we want to be on it. Let's put it that way, to be very honest with you. So at the end of the day, I guess the short answer to your question would be that the cost to the government would be about \$500 million a year to extend it to where people like us would like to see it. That would be at some point a decision that the government of the day would have to make.

Again, going back to the previous government, those are some of the decisions the previous government made in terms of the affordability of the delivery of that program.

Mr. Anthony Rota: I agree with you. It's something that's very expensive. When you talk about \$500 million, you're talking figures, numbers. But when you get a widow sitting in your office, and she doesn't have the services and she doesn't have the means to sustain herself because she put the interests of her children and her husband ahead of her own over the years, statistics don't mean a darn. And that's where it really hurts.

I'm just wondering, is there any way we can make this happen? Because it would be a very worthwhile program, and I know it would be very appreciated, regardless of the cost.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I think we can. I can't answer when any of this will happen, or if it will ever happen. I do think that we can do some of that in incremental steps, where we can bite off smaller pieces, if you will, and address some of the needs, because again at the end of the day, if you're going to Treasury Board for an additional \$500 million, that's a fairly significant amount of money.

I believe the last big change, if I'm not mistaken, was in 2005, when the previous government extended the program out somewhat, but not probably enough to make either one of us happy, Anthony, in terms of that widow who is coming into the office. We've all experienced that and we all get into situations.

Some amendments made in 2003 cost the then-government of the day \$170 million, and the projected five-year cost of some of the amendments back earlier were something in the order of \$67 million. So there is a price tag to all of this. As the Minister of Veterans Affairs, it's something I do think about, because we want to provide those widows and their families with the best care possible, but at the end of the day there is a price tag to it.

I will say this: we do better than most, if not all, of the western countries in the world in terms of our right to appeal. We give our veterans one of the best support systems in the world, and again, it would have to be just a critical look in terms of what is affordable by the Government of Canada. Those are real numbers that I'm throwing at you, and those are real people who you see going into your office as well. So we're going to try to make the two meet in terms of how we better deliver some of those programs.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Now over to the Bloc. Monsieur Gaudet.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Minister. I am pleased to be part of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Earlier you said that, when the government changes, there is a new vision. Do we have a real Minister of Veterans Affairs or do we have a minister who is under the control of the Minister of National Defence?

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: I missed the first part of that. I apologize, Mr. Gaudet. I just got the tail-end of that question. Something happened there.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Repeat the question.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: With pleasure.

Mr. Minister, earlier you said that, when the government changes, there is a new vision. Do we have a real Minister of Veterans Affairs or do we have a minister who is under the control of the Minister of National Defence? Under the other government,

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Obviously, there is a separation of powers here. I can't understand the question, because I don't think there would be any indication there that we're in any way under the control of the Minister of Defence, because we deliver a service independently of National Defence. We have a lot of cooperation between the two departments.

We set our own agenda, and we are dealing the best way we can with veterans. We have a budget, which is a stand-alone budget, and I went through some of those numbers today. So we're committed to the best delivery service for our veterans, respecting what DND does. But they're definitely two separate departments, with mandates given by the Prime Minister to the respective ministers.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

At the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, 7,500 cases have not been heard. What are your solutions, in the short term, to eliminate these delays?

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: One of the things we're doing, as you probably know, is to advertise nationally in all the Canadian

newspapers—the *Montreal Gazette*, and not only English-speaking, but French-speaking newspapers in Canada—for people to apply for positions on the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, because we want qualified people on that board. Going back, successive governments over the years have had some difficulties with the make-up of the board. We want the best people we can find in Canada to sit on that board. There are some vacancies on the board presently. We're going to establish a good working board. I know they do good work and they take their work very seriously.

All I can tell you is we're committed to having the best Veterans Review and Appeal Board possible, and I think we're well on the way to that. I think Mr. Marchand is doing a very good job under very difficult circumstances. We're going to build up his board to an operational level and get on with hearing some of those cases. There is a tremendous backlog; there's no question about that.

• (1630)

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Thank you.

This way, there would be no more political appointments. A follow-up procedure would be used instead.

I have another question. What power and what mandate would the Minister of Veterans Affairs like to grant the ombudsman once he is appointed?

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: We've had a Prime Minister say this: none of us wants to be in the appointment process. The only thing I'll guarantee is that we have to have the best people possible on that board, and that's really what my commitment is—the best people, the most qualified people, and the same with ombudsmen. We have to have a system that the Canadian people and people like you, members of Parliament, have confidence in.

Really, at the end of the day that's what we have to do. I'm convinced if we have the best-qualified people and an open and transparent process, that's important for the government, important for you, and important for our veterans. So that's the process we'll use. It's going to be open, it's going to be transparent, and at the end of the day we're going to have the best possible people as ombudsmen and as the men and women who make up the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to be moving to the Conservative Party, with Mr. Shipley, for five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I also want to congratulate and thank the minister for being a part of this discussion today. I want to tell you I'm impressed with this committee, Mr. Chair and Mr. Minister. We're all here, with partisanship mainly aside, to do what we can best do for our veterans. We had Mr. Marchand here the other day. He spoke well in trying to educate us about the review process, and obviously that has raised questions because of the backlog, which you've tried to address to some extent today.

But if you wouldn't mind, I'll go to a general context we've all touched a bit. From time to time we have veterans come into our offices who are concerned and sometimes a little frustrated about a process, whether it deals with a disability, pensions, or a number of the issues veterans have. I'm wondering what direction you might be looking at, or what fine tuning may be looked at, so that these folks get to a little lower level of frustration.

Mr. Rota brought up the financial impact, and I appreciate that, because it's so important, but I would just like to hear from your heart, because I know you have a real sense for this. Could you talk to us just a little bit about what you have in your mind on some of those things we may have to do some fine tuning of?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

Everyone in the room, every member of Parliament, in a way, is almost an ombudsman for veterans, aren't they? I'm always amazed at how many letters I get, as the Minister of Veterans Affairs, from individual members of Parliament. There is a connection between members of Parliament and veterans for the very obvious reason that they fought for the democracy and freedoms we enjoy as one of the best examples of democracy in the free world. So there is a natural connection to members of Parliament and obviously between members of Parliament and our legions and veterans groups, because they work with our veterans very closely, as well.

I think that really goes back to the new Veterans Charter. We work through that. At Veterans Affairs, we have extremely talented and very dedicated individuals with huge caseloads who are trying to work through a system....

I believe I am correct in this number: I believe that five years ago we had approximately 9,000 applications a year before Veterans Affairs. Prior to the new charter, we had 35,000 applications per year before Veterans Affairs. That is just an astronomical increase. It's a 400% increase in applications. All those people are human beings, and there are families attached to those decisions. It shows you just how difficult it is to manage all that.

On top of that, we have an appeal process that truly is the best in the world. If a veteran is denied, we have an internal review process within the department to take another look at it. If we go to the appeal board, we have pension advocates—professional lawyers—who will represent the veterans when they appear before the tribunal, the quasi-judicial body.

So we have an appeal mechanism unlike any in the country. I guess if we were living in a perfect world, we wouldn't have as many appeals as we have, or the answers would be quicker and more forthcoming. But there have to be checks and balances in the system.

That was one of the things that drove the government to move to a new charter, to a new way of dealing with veterans, because in the old system, the only doorway for veterans to qualify for any level of service for anything else that might come their way was to have a pensionable condition.

I think one of the failings under the old charter was that we didn't concentrate on the wellness of the veteran and his or her family. A veteran might have been successful in getting a 20% pension, if you will. What we should have been doing, in my opinion, in hindsight—but hindsight is always 20/20, and we learn as we go

along—is more than just hand out a pension. It is like the old axiom: give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

That's a little of the philosophy behind the new charter. What we're saying is that the age of a veteran coming out of the Canadian Forces is 36. That means that by definition, he has about 29 years of work ahead of him or her in the workforce.

Under the new charter we're really addressing, Mr. Shipley, that frustration level, because a 20% pension, and I'm not trying to be crass and I'm not saying this in a pejorative way, is almost a prescription for poverty. We would see a lot of these veterans coming in and their only hope of getting ahead was to get more pension and get the pension from 20% to 40%, 50%, 60% or 70%.

If you talk to any of these veterans, they say that the best thing we could have done for them was provide them and their families with an education to get beyond where they were. There are some veterans that can't. We know that, and we have the permanent disability program for them. We have all those types of programs for veterans who can't be rehabilitated, if you will, and are totally disabled.

● (1635)

For the average veteran, I believe the disability award or the pensionable range was somewhere around 30%. You could ask yourself, "Could I live on that amount of money"? Well, the answer is no. So under the new charter there is emphasis on the family. For example, if somehow the veteran himself or herself could not be retrained, that same retraining and the funding to do that would be extended to the spouse of the veteran. I guess the fancy socialists would call it the holistic approach, but it's really a family approach to dealing with veterans, because it's more than just the veterans; it's their families. I hope over time this will ease some of the burdens that are placed on families.

I can remember coming to Veterans Affairs and sitting beside Brian Ferguson. I was pushing him hard on some of the same questions you're giving me. He said, "You know, we'll never give up on a veteran." We will never give up on a veteran. We're going to do everything we can for that veteran and their family. So if this fails, we'll try something else.

Going back to Mr. Perron's question, and I guess Mr. Thibault's—it's sort of a theme here today—as many of you know, when we launched the new charter it was right here with the Prime Minister on April 6, sort of the kickoff of the new charter. Roméo Dallaire was in the room that day, and he was talking about building this bridge. I had met with him two days prior to the launch, and it was one of the best meetings I could have had. It was one of those days when I had a lot on my mind and was wondering whether I was doing the right thing or not. He said, "What you're doing, Mr. Thompson, is building a bridge that will transition us from military life to civilian life." He thought that bridge was well constructed and well engineered, and said, "You're not going to take just the veteran across that bridge; you're going to take their family, which is something that has never occurred in the past."

I don't want to run on and take up all of your time, the chair's time, or the committee's time, but I think that's really fundamental to what we're doing at Veterans Affairs. It's sort of a new approach, knowing that the old charter had sort of done its deed, if you will. If you examine some of the programs that existed following World War II and how successful they were, I guess with time they kind of wore themselves out.

I'm pretty confident that what we're doing is the right thing. At the end of the day, we're going to have better programs for our veterans and better opportunities to get them through some of the difficulties they experience.

As I often say in my speeches, it's not just bullets and bombs that affect our soldiers. We're talking about some of the stresses they're under when they're in extremely high-risk missions. Whether it's our RCMP officers in some of the streets of our downtowns, as witnessed last week in Toronto, or a young soldier in Afghanistan, the stress of that type of work and being away from your family is something that most of us can't imagine. So when they come back, we'd better have a wide range of tools and support systems to help them and their families. That's why I feel pretty good about what we're doing.

As we say, we're not going to get it perfect, but what we have is an open book. We're going to depend on people like yourselves to help us come up with better ways of dealing with it. I guess what I'm saying is I feel pretty good about it.

• (1640)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Thompson, and you actually answered my second question.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, you'll be honoured to know that your five minutes turned into ten.

Now we're over to Mr. Valley for five minutes.

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Thank you. Do I get ten minutes too, Mr. Chairman? Probably not.

The Chair: Mr. Valley, it's at the discretion of the chair.

A voice: You're a Liberal.

Mr. Roger Valley: I'm a Liberal. I'm pretty low on the totem pole here.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I don't mind ten minutes, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you very much for coming here today. Minister, I heard you mention an awful lot of times—and it surprised me—what a good job we're doing. We've had that education since this new committee started. We've heard many times that we've got a lot of things right, and we're trying to improve the things we don't for the very reasons you mentioned—to make sure that veterans are the ones who benefit from our work.

It's also clear that as minister you've taken ownership of the new veterans charter, and I commend you for that. I have a very quick question, and would like to ask you another question after that. You spoke very passionately about Ste. Anne's Hospital, so if we have time I'd like to get to that.

Is there any difference in the charter from what we passed unanimously in the House to what was launched on April 6?

Hon. Greg Thompson: The interesting thing about the charter... And I know the chairman will probably get upset at Mr. Thompson, but these are interesting questions, and they deserve interesting responses. One of the weaknesses of the charter, as you well know, is that it was never debated in the House of Commons. That's not a reflection on the government. It's not a reflection on individual members or the minister. It was embraced by all parties, so it wasn't debated in the House.

The knowledge level of the new charter, which normally all of us would have known more about simply because you are in the House, it's being debated, it's being reported by journalists, and there's always that back and forth we see in the House of Commons... Some days, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to the public, but the whole process is educational. That's been one of the difficulties that really has been a challenge to the department, where the knowledge level that would be held by all of us as individual members of Parliament and even the press gallery itself wasn't there, because it wasn't a really exciting debate. The debate simply didn't occur.

We can identify some areas in the charter that may need some fixing or fine-tuning as we go along, but I think the model is pretty good and probably will withstand the test of time. But real changes can be made. I say it's an open book, and it is open to debate in some areas. I have identified some areas I might be uncomfortable with, but we'll have to see how it plays out. Some of these areas we'll have time to fix in terms of how the benefits would flow to a spouse or a widow, if you will. And often we have to be careful when we are talking; we often say a widow, but it could be a widower, or a family.

I think time is on our side in terms of some of the areas we might have to revisit. That is the beauty of a committee like this, Mr. Valley. The committee can take a look at the charter and take the time to deliberate and do some of the things like a careful examination that didn't occur in the last Parliament.

• (1645)

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you. Some of us also felt it should have been debated, not necessarily to change, but to get on the record how we felt about it.

I'll be very quick, because I know I'll be cut off, but thank you for recognizing the value of that. And thank you for the opinion of an open book, because in my short time in government or on the back benches of government, I found it very difficult to keep an open book on anything, because the Department of Finance doesn't like that. I'm sure you'll have to fight that battle.

You spoke passionately about Ste. Anne's Hospital and the \$368 million that was spent there. I believe this is the hospital that has the ombudsman.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Yes.

Mr. Roger Valley: You spoke about visiting it and the quality of care, the excellent care that they're getting. You feel that's partly because of the ombudsman, because it's the only facility with one, as I understand.

I'm wondering if you can elaborate on that. Is that part of your drive: an ombudsman for all of them? I understand that particular person deals with health care.

Hon. Greg Thompson: That's interesting. That's the first time that question has been put to me. I hadn't thought of it myself. As Mr. Thibault would tell you, when you are appearing before a committee, you're trying to sort out what some of these questions might be, anticipating some of them, and just guessing about some of them as well. That is one I hadn't thought of. Thinking in terms of the question and your reflections on the ombudsman, I would say that it is.

I believe in openness and transparency in how information is transmitted. Just for an individual or a patient to know that person is there to serve them and the operation of the hospital overall probably would be enhanced by the ombudsman.

It's like Parliament. I believe Parliament works when we have openness, when things can be openly debated, and if you have a complaint, there's a place to take it. It creates another level of openness that otherwise might not occur.

There are facilities where ombudsmen aren't present. That is a huge facility, but it appears to be working well. If I'm not mistaken, it's one of the areas the Royal Canadian Legion initially identified as a model of the ombudsman working fairly well at Ste. Anne's Hospital.

It's a point well taken, Mr. Valley, and I think it's an example of how an ombudsman can do good work for all of us.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you.

Do I have time for another?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Valley, but you'll be happy to know the minister was also tight on time on that one.

Now we're over to Mr. Sweet of the Conservative Party, for five minutes.

• (1650)

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

I will pick up where Mr. Valley left off.

Thank you for coming.

I just wanted to say—and it's already been alluded to—that both Mr. Marchand and Ms. Bruce, the last time they were before the committee, gave a very cogent and complete presentation that really educated me. So I'm seeking some more education here.

How many institutions like St. Anne's do we have across the country?

Hon. Greg Thompson: St. Anne's is the only major institution of its kind presently under the direction of Veterans Affairs. Over the years a lot of these types of facilities have been integrated into other

provincial systems, if you will, but it's the only veterans hospital that we have in Canada presently.

Mr. David Sweet: But there are other facilities under contract, where we have a certain number of beds?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Presently in Canada, we have about 11,500 long-term-care beds in the country, and St. Anne's would only be one of those. So we're working with the provinces, for example, where we have stand-alone facilities. For example, we have them in my home province of New Brunswick.

I did look at the numbers, but I believe that aside from St. Anne's, where I think there are 449 beds, the other 11,000 beds are in institutions outside of St. Anne's. They are facilities under our care, but St. Anne's is one of a kind in the country.

Mr. David Sweet: And the ombudsman at St. Anne's, I have to assume, is a full-time position?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Yes, it's a full-time position. That's correct.

Mr. David Sweet: So the ombudsman for the entire Veterans Affairs is going to have his or her hands full.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Right. The ombudsman for Veterans Affairs will be a full-time position, and obviously there are staff associated with that. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that the department has costed this out at somewhere around \$10 million per year.

Would that be correct for an ombudsman, Mr. Stagg?

Mr. Jack Stagg (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): I think DND currently pays around \$10 million internally for their ombudsperson, but also pays about another \$7 million or \$8 million for preparation on the other side, for materials for the ombudsman. They have approximately 150,000 clients; we have about 700,000, potentially, out in the market.

Mr. David Sweet: I like the analogy of a bridge for the Veterans Charter. One of the things that concerns me—though all things concern me around veterans—is the invisible injuries of mental illness that aren't evident. I'm wondering, as part of that bridge, is there some cooperation for early recognition of these kinds of conditions? I know there's already cooperation between the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs. Are the chaplains trained? Do we have other people who will be aware of these things, so we can catch them early and mitigate, if we can, even deeper pain that a soldier would feel from these kinds of incidents that happen in fields of conflict?

Hon. Greg Thompson: That's correct. That is actually happening today. There was an announcement last week in my home province of New Brunswick... In fact, in my opening remarks I referred to one of these facilities going off-base into the community. It's still a factor. Sadly, we still haven't accepted mental illness as a disease. But we are doing that early intervention and working with DND very closely, so that when it's recognized, it's dealt with earlier. Of course, that's the secret; early intervention is the secret. We're having great successes in those areas. From what I know—and I don't pretend to be an expert in that area—I'm really encouraged by what the Department of National Defence is doing in cooperation with our department in recognizing early intervention and how we can work to avoid a bigger problem down the road.

In my talks with Roméo Dallaire.... He's really pleased. You understand his own personal story. I think every Canadian probably recognizes him as a hero. He has been very open, and he has probably done more for that type of ailment than any Canadian I know of. As I've said, and I repeat this, he sees what we're doing in cooperation with DND as probably the best system in the world now. We have the facilities across the country. Part of Ste. Anne's, which is examining best practices across the country and across the world, will be training a lot of our people who will eventually go into the field.

I think we're not only ahead of where we were, but I think we're ahead of most of the western world in terms of how we're dealing with it. Again, I think we can take a lot of pride in Veterans Affairs Canada for our lead in that.

•(1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Just so the committee knows, we're at an interesting juncture. In terms of the order of precedence, next we would go to the NDP, then the Conservative Party, then the Bloc, and then Mr. Thibault.

We have a couple of things. A colleague with the Bloc has requested that we move to the budgetary votes on the estimates. I'm okay with that because we have quorum right now to get that through it. That's fine, but Mr. Thibault has asked if he could ask a 30-second question, with the unanimous consent of the committee. Then we can move to the estimates and also allow Mr. Shipley's motion.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Yes, if it's agreeable to the committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I hope the Minister can wait for us. We could continue this meeting for a few hours, if he wishes, or even after we have...

[English]

The Chair: I don't mean to cause any difficulties for the minister. We're certainly happy to have him here. He would probably like to see the budgetary estimates dealt with as well.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I'm at your call, because I enjoy it. If you want, I'm more than willing to stay. We set aside the whole day, so I'm not worried about the time.

The Chair: Mr. Thibault, I will take you at your word with regard to your question.

Hon. Robert Thibault: I have one quick question for the minister. If he can't answer today, I would ask that he give us the answer in the future. I am asking for a clarification of what he was saying earlier.

It is my understanding that before assuming office, the current Prime Minister promised that upon becoming Prime Minister he would extend the VIP program to all survivors and spouses or widows or widowers of survivors. I would certainly hope that we could look forward to a timeframe for that.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Mr. Thibault, I don't believe that was in our platform. I don't believe it was. I'm not sure if I've ever seen that quote, but in fairness, I know that's one thing we had all hoped we'd be able to do. But again, having been a member of government, you

know that at the end of the day, budgetary restraints on everything is always the big consideration.

Hon. Robert Thibault: I will refresh your memory.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Maybe we can do it in a piecemeal fashion, if you will.

Anyway, I do know that was not part of anything the Prime Minister has ever said. We made a lot of commitments, and some of those have been articulated here today by some of the members of the committee and by me. We're in the habit of honouring our promises and we'll do every one of them.

The Chair: Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: It is literally a 30-second comment.

The Chair: Mrs. Hinton, I'm going to beg you that we move to the budgetary estimates and read Mr. Shipley's motion just to save some difficulties in this committee, please.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: All right.

The Chair: Okay. On the budgetary estimates, on the first, shall vote one, less the amount of—

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Chairman, if it will assist and speed things up, I think we are agreeable to all the votes on the estimates.

The Chair: I'm just reading them through, Mr. Thibault.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Well, I thought you might not need to.

The Chair: Okay. In other words, you want to vote on them all in one group.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall votes 1, 5, 10, and 15 carry?

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Veterans Affairs

Vote 1—Operating expenditures, upkeep of property, including engineering and other investigatory planning expenses that do not add tangible value to real property, taxes, insurance and maintenance of public utilities; to authorize, subject to the approval of the Governor in Council, necessary remedial work on properties constructed under individual firm price contracts and sold under the Veterans' Land Act (R.S.C. 1970, c.V-4), to correct defects for which neither the veteran nor the contractor can be held financially responsible, and such other work on other properties as may be required to protect the interest of the Director therein.....\$856,769,000

Vote 5—Veterans Affairs—Capital expenditures.....\$31,956,000

Vote 10—Veterans Affairs—The grants listed in the Estimates and contributions, provided that the amount listed for any grant may be increased or decreased subject to the approval of the Treasury Board.....\$2,264,415,000

Vote 15—Veterans Affairs—Veterans Review and Appeal Board—Operating expenditures.....\$9,401,000

(Votes 1, 5, 10, and 15 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates to the House? Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (1700)

The Chair: Okay, the estimates are done.

Because Mr. Thibault also made that condition with regard to Mr. Shipley's motion, let's just quickly get to that. We have it in both French and English.

Mr. Shipley's motion is that this committee invite all interested stakeholders to the committee table in order to gather their input and provide the committee with their guidance on veterans affairs, the veterans bill of rights, and on a veterans ombudsman.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Now we'll revert to the previous order, which would have been the NDP, the Conservative Party, and the Bloc. Since we don't have an NDP member, I now revert to Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm only going to use about ten seconds of it. There are just a couple things I wanted to point out.

Mr. Valley made a very valid point regarding the Veterans Charter. Having sat before on this committee, as did Mr. Rota and Mr. Perron, I would just like to point out that there were several changes made to the charter before it received first, second, and third reading in one sweep in the House. The changes were the reason the previous minister had very little resistance, because she was very open and she listened very carefully and she made a number of the changes without having to go through a series of manipulations to do so.

I'm going to have one last question. It's a pretty easy one. You can answer any way you wish. What is the one driving issue that you would like to deal with as the Minister of Veterans Affairs?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Really, at the end of the day, we just want to do the best we can for our veterans, working within all the budgetary restraints that all governments are subjected to.

When I go to the veterans hospitals and meet veterans.... I was down to Ste. Anne's. I will get on to the Ste. Anne's story.

I could actually talk about Ridgewood. In my opening remarks I talked about shaking the hands of veterans when they don't want to let go. I can remember one of the administrators said "See, they really like you", and I said, "No, it's more than that. It's not me. It's you. You know, it's the men and women, the nurses that make up those veterans hospitals, and the janitor keeping the floors clean, and the men and women that just make the institution work." Because if the institution wasn't working and I was in there, they wouldn't want to shake my hand.

It provides comfort to me, just seeing that we're doing a good job. And we can do better, and we know that. We always have little problems here and there popping up. I think for the most part we deal with them quite nicely, and always work to resolve them. I guess that's the most rewarding thing.

Most of the issues we've talked about here today we have to deal with incrementally. We can't do them all tomorrow. But I think at the end of the day, we do give it our best shot. I know that this is a line that I often use, but we do know that our men and women in uniform, when they take on a mission, give it 100%. Our Canadian soldiers, men and women in the field, are the best in the world. They are the best soldiers in the world, and they deserve the best treatment

in the world when they come back home, when they really need us. We could argue that they've done their job, and now it's up to us to do our job to the best of our ability.

So I guess at the end of the day, I just want to see an improvement of services, knowing that Canada is very blessed to have men and women who will put on the uniform, who devote themselves to the freedoms and to all of the things that we take for granted in a democracy, like the rule of law, and the right to gather like this and debate issues. We sometimes take that for granted in the House of Commons when we're back and forth in debate.

The truth is we'll just keep doing what we're doing, and we're going to do our best to get over those little challenges that we see along the way, and surpass them.

I'm very pleased to be Minister of Veterans Affairs, and I thank you for your support here today.

Mr. Chairman, we'll work with the committee to achieve some of those good things for our men and women.

Thank you.

The Chair: We still have one minute left for the Conservative Party, if somebody on that side would like to....

Mrs. Betty Hinton: If it's one minute, I'll do it really quickly.

I'd like to thank you very much once again for being here today. I've been through three separate Ministers of Veterans Affairs—you're my fourth—and it's very nice to be on the government side for a change, I must tell you.

I find your openness and your willingness to put it all on the line for veterans very refreshing. I hope this continues and that we actually accomplish the goals that we've set out to achieve for veterans. I know the people on this committee will work very hard to make sure we do achieve those goals and I know they will give us the kind of input we've been asking for so that we can make the ombudsman and the bill of rights the best they can possibly be.

Thank you.

• (1705)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

I'll conclude, Mr. Chairman, by saying that when I was given this job by the Prime Minister, I had many former members of cabinet and other politicians say, "He gave you the best job in the world." It is. It's a great department. As you can see here today, we have men and women who are absolutely dedicated to providing the best service, so it makes my job easy. The fact is that the Department of Veterans Affairs has had that reputation over the years, despite transfers of government and everything else. We have a really great group of men and women and they're dedicated to the mission. That's what our veterans deserve and that's what we're going to deliver.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. I appreciate it.

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

I take it you're not leaving just yet. That was a thank you from the Conservative side, and we're still carrying on to the end of the meeting, aren't we?

Monsieur Perron of the Bloc for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Chairman, since the minister is not in a hurry, we could have 20 to 25 minute rounds. Nevertheless, I will try to keep within the five minutes.

Mr. Minister, as you are no doubt aware, young people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder are dear to my heart. I think of them as my sons because they have the same age as my sons. Seeing these individuals come back from their mission in a sometimes pitiful state breaks my heart.

I urge you to lobby the Minister of National Defence in order to better prepare these young people for the stressful situations they will experience in theatre or on mission. If these young people were better prepared mentally, and not just trained in how to use their weapon or work out, I think they would come back in better shape. This comment comes from the bottom of my heart and it is my most sincere wish.

Now, let's talk about the Veterans Independence Program, the VIP, or the PAAC in French. I think it's a good idea to try to keep veterans at home as long as possible and provide them with home health care. Since the 1980s, Quebec has had a system, which we call the CLSCs, that specializes in providing care to sick seniors in the province. It might be worthwhile to try to reach agreements with the Government of Quebec, which has some expertise in this field. This could be a cost-saving measure and could help a greater number of your 7,500 veterans waiting for care. I am making this suggestion only in passing; I don't necessarily want to get into a debate.

I am happy to learn that you will try to resolve the issue of appointments to the board. I don't know whether we can call this a problem. In my opinion, it is, but my friend Victor will say that it isn't. Appointments need to be made, and more of them. In my opinion what is important is that the veterans' representative be a pro bono lawyer or paid differently by the department, or I don't know what, because military personnel who appeal their decision feel a little ripped off, whether that's true or not. They know that the judge is a government employee, that the defence lawyer is paid by the government and that the lawyer defending them is also paid by the government. You can't bite the hand that feeds you. This is something that could be improved.

Those are the main points I wanted to raise. We have to be human; we have to love these people. Perhaps we need to better educate our young people and show them the misfortunes that these veterans experienced, are experiencing and will experience. Along with the Department of Veterans Affairs, we can try to ensure a better world, one at peace.

We need to change our education and advertising system so as to reach goals like that. It's not just about money, it's also about showing humanity and having your heart in the right place.

Those are my comments. Greg, let me reassure you that if you ever need a hand, I will be there, but not necessarily to go to war, however!

• (1710)

[*English*]

The Chair: Now we have a chance for the minister to respond.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I can't find anything to disagree with Mr. Perron on; I think we're on the same wavelength. We want the best for our veterans. Some of the examples you used, of post-traumatic stress syndrome and occupational stress injuries, are important issues to us, and I think probably one of the biggest challenges to the department in the coming years, because of the conflicts our young men and women soldiers find themselves in.

At the end of the day we have to find a way to do it better, which I think we are doing, and improve as we go along using the best models we can find from other parts of the world and from calling in the experts, which we do.

So there's not too much room to disagree there, Mr. Chair. I thought it was a pretty good statement by Mr. Perron.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I would like to thank you for your appearance here today in committee. I know many members from the various parties wanted to have you in so that they would have a sense of your vision and what you're up to, and I think you've provided that here today. You've certainly taken time to answer all their questions.

I congratulate you as well, sir, on your appointment. We'll be working with you in the future. We're glad to have approved your budgets so that you and your staff can carry on your good work, sir. We'll probably have you in at some time in the future again.

Thank you very much.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank the committee. I appreciate it.

The Chair: We're adjourned.

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

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

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