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—
Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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• (1535)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Alexandre Roger): Good afternoon. *Bon après-midi.*

We're here today to elect a chair for the committee, pursuant to the report adopted in the House last Thursday. I'm now ready to receive nominations to that effect. The chair has to come from the government side.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): I move Rob Anders.

The Clerk: Mr. Shipley moves that Mr. Anders be elected chair of the committee.

Are there any other nominations?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): Thank you very much.

The Clerk: I am now prepared to receive nominations for first vice-chair of the committee. The first vice-chair comes from the official opposition.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): I'd like to nominate Brent St. Denis.

The Clerk: Mr. Rota nominates Mr. St. Denis.

Are there any other nominations?

Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): I'd like to nominate Mr. Peter Stoffer—

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): No, this is the election for first vice-chair.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Oh, I'm sorry.

The Clerk: Are there any nominations other than Mr. St. Denis?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. St. Denis elected as first vice-chair of the committee.

Congratulations.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: I'm now ready to receive nominations for second vice-chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): I nominate Mr. Stoffer.
[English]

The Clerk: Monsieur Gaudet nominates Mr. Stoffer.

Are there any other nominations?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Stoffer elected as second vice-chair.

Congratulations.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

The Chair: Do I have to formally gavel the meeting?

The Clerk: No, it's still the same meeting.

The Chair: Okay, fair enough.

I don't know how much business you want to tackle right now. Maybe what we should do is circulate copies of the letter.

Mr. St. Denis, I don't know if you feel comfortable with that; I just gave you a copy.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, Lib.): I will look at it after the meeting and call your office, but at first blush, Rob, it looks fine.

The Chair: That's good to know.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Do you want me to read it out?

The Chair: Do you wish to have feedback from the committee on the letter?

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Inasmuch as we have a few minutes, if the others will indulge me, I'll read it out.

This is a letter drafted by Rob, separately addressed to each of the parents. The information has been given to Rob's office. The letter says this:

On behalf of the Members of Parliament who make up the Veterans Affairs Committee we want to offer you our sincere condolences. We were extremely saddened to hear the news of your son's passing.

His loyalty and dedication to his country will always be treasured and he leaves a legacy which will never be forgotten. Our thoughts and prayers are with you as you mourn your loss and celebrate Glen's

—or David's, as the case would be—
remarkable life.

The letter is signed by Rob Anders, the chair.

I don't think it needs to be embellished, Rob. I think it's straight and to the point. I'm fine with it. I will keep this copy, but if you would have your office finalize that and get me the original, I will deliver those letters to the families at the appropriate time.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I thank you and the committee for your support of our two lost soldiers in my riding.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Perron.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Do you have the French version?

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Yes. I am going to read it, if you like.

On behalf of the members of Parliament who make up the veterans affairs committee, we want to offer you our most sincere condolences. We were extremely saddened to hear the news of your son's (Glen or David) passing.

His loyalty and dedication to his country will always be treasured and never forgotten. Our thoughts and prayers are with you as you mourn your loss and celebrate XXX's remarkable life.

What do you think?

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Perfect. It is very well written.

[English]

The Chair: That's good to know.

We also have the letters for the president and the immediate past president of the Royal Canadian Legion. I'll read the one from the immediate past president first so we'll be in chronological order. You will all be receiving this. It's to Mrs. Mary Ann Burdett:

Dear Mrs. Burdett:

On behalf of the Veterans Affairs Committee, I would like to take this opportunity to commend you on all of your hard work and dedication as Dominion Immediate Past President of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Your contribution on behalf of Canadian Veterans was and continues to be greatly appreciated. It is our understanding you have held all but two Legion Branch offices and were the first woman in the Royal Canadian Legion to hold the office of Dominion President; these are accomplishments to be extremely proud of.

We thank you again for all you've done on behalf of Canadian Veterans.

Sincerely,
Rob Anders
Chair

Veteran's Affairs Committee

We have the *en français* version as well. I hope my colleagues from the Bloc have those. Forgive me, but I won't butcher the language by trying to read it. You can read it in front of you.

Yes, Mr. St. Denis.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I'm sorry to be a stickler on the grammar, but I don't think we should use the contraction you have at the end of the letter to Ms. Burdett. On the bottom line, it might say: "We thank you again for all you have done on behalf of Canadian Veterans."

• (1540)

The Chair: That's fine. Fair enough.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Now you're going to hear from the second grammar teacher. I agree with what Mr. St. Denis said, but I would also suggest you might want to consider saying "On behalf of the Veterans Affairs Committee, we would like to take this opportunity..."

I have no problem whatsoever with your being listed as the signatory, but you might want to list the rest of the members. That would also apply to the letter that's going to the families of the soldiers.

The Chair: I think that's a grand idea. Do other members of the committee feel copacetic with that?

I don't see any opposition. That's great, and I appreciate both those comments.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Chairman, I'm starting to think on a more macro basis here. I attended the funeral of Mark Anthony Graham two weeks ago and was thinking I would like to see a letter like this sent to his parents as well. That led me to think about others who will not be receiving a letter, and that concerns me. Although we're initiating something where we want to communicate heartfelt feelings, the corollary is that there will be some who have not received these feelings from the veterans affairs committee. I thought I'd put that out there for discussion. We've had a number of fallen soldiers.

The Chair: I'll take the opportunity to respond to that. I think it would be nice if we could send it out to as many as we could. It comes down to maybe a logistical issue. I don't know if we have an easy way for the committee to know.

Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I don't think it would be that difficult. I agree with the sentiment that was expressed. Each and every one of these soldiers laid their life down for a greater cause and each family deserves to have the same sort of recognition. Unfortunately, we were gone for that entire summer, and this is something that was simply not raised until Mr. St. Denis raised it and gave us that opportunity.

I would have no problem with that and I don't think there would be that much difficulty getting the names and addresses of the parents. I'm sure that the defence ministry could supply us with that.

Mr. David Sweet: We already started a partial list before, and they simply asked the parents if they could release the address. We shouldn't have an issue.

The Chair: I'm fine with that.

Mr. Rota.

Mr. Anthony Rota: I would have no problem with it if it is from when we were in operation. I think going retroactive doesn't sit well. Going from now on, or from whenever we started sitting, say, in September, or whenever we decide to do it, I would have no problem with that whatsoever.

The Chair: Let me pose that question to the committee.

Do people wish it to carry forward from this date, or to carry forward from September?

Mr. Valley.

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): This committee, for the first time, is stand-alone from when we first sat. Is that not correct?

The Chair: We were stand-alone right from the beginning of the session.

Mr. Roger Valley: That's what I meant. Since our last election, that's what we're talking about. Are we talking about from when we first sat in April? That's our first position.

Some hon. members: Yes

The Chair: So now the question is whether or not it's April or today. Is that fair?

Mr. David Sweet: If we're going to give these two soldiers' families...I think it would need to be the time that we were all in position in this committee.

The Chair: All right, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: As a reminder, we had three airmen lose their lives in a Cormorant crash off Canso in the late spring. That was during our time, and if we could send one out to them as well... They weren't killed in combat, but their sacrifice is equal in the eyes of their families.

The Chair: As long as the parliamentary secretary or the minister's office has no protocol issues with that...

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I recognize that on this particular committee we don't play politics and our hearts are all in the right place. If you would give me time to give a bit of background, to see whether or not we can accommodate all...

You're absolutely correct that this is the first time we've sat as a stand-alone committee. So we do have the right to do some things that perhaps weren't done before when we were under the umbrella of the defence committee. I think everyone in this room would like to recognize the sacrifice of each and every family, and maybe that's the best way to do this.

So if you'd give me bit of time, I'll look into it for you and have an answer by Wednesday.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Valley.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you, Ms. Hinton. I suspect some of the things you're going to run into.

But this is a stand-alone committee; we can blaze our own trail, to a certain degree. The committee will make its mind up, and you'll have advice to provide for us. But I think that as a stand-alone committee, we have the right to make that decision amongst ourselves. The information you bring back may or may not make that easier. But we're here, we can make a decision, and we don't want to step on toes. I know that's what you're checking into and making sure it's all okay.

But your first comments were absolutely right on. We all want the same thing, but we can make decisions here.

The Chair: I sense there is a will for this, and I'm just making sure we're all in good form for doing it.

Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: So we can leave here with clarity, I was only talking about getting all of the names, about compiling a list, etc., and getting the addresses, which is an issue that was raised. I have absolute belief that this is a stand-alone committee, that we determine our own destiny, and that we're certainly in a position to decide as a committee that we want to do this retroactively since we began sitting. So there's no argument there from me at all. The only thing I'm going to go back and look into is how easy it is to access these addresses.

The Chair: Okay, I think we have a general agreement to take this forward as of April, based on the idea of getting the lists available through the ministry, as well as dealing with people who died in non-combat situations. Fair enough.

I'm going to move on to the next letter, which is for the recently elected president. Once again, I hope everybody got copies, and are they *en français* as well? Okay.

This is to Mr. Jack Frost:

On behalf of the Veterans Affairs Committee, I would like to take this opportunity to commend you on your election as Dominion President of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Your contribution on behalf of Canadian veterans is greatly appreciated. I would like to extend an invitation for you to join us at one of our committee meetings in the near future. We look forward to meeting you, and wish you every success in your new challenge.

Sincerely,

Rob Anders

and so on.

Maybe borrowing from the discussion about the last letter, it should read: "On behalf of the Veterans Affairs Committee, we would like to take this opportunity...". Is that fair? Okay.

Are there any contractions that are particularly offensive? I don't notice any.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Are there any other thoughts on the letter? It's pretty straight up. Are people okay with it? All right, thumbs up. Then we'll proceed on all three fronts.

I think that's really the kind of the business we want to get done for the day, unless anybody has anything else they desperately want to raise.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I was mentioning to Madam Hinton earlier an article in *The Hill Times* today written by the Minister of Veterans Affairs about the veterans ombudsman and the new veterans bill of rights that they're proposing, which I think is a good thing. Do you know offhand when the minister will be able to appear before us to elaborate a bit more on his article? Also, you could sort of pick his brain a bit for what type of advice he would be seeking from us. I know estimates are coming, and he'll be in on that, but will he be able to come on that issue alone? I know those are two issues that he and the parliamentary secretary have raised, and it could probably take up a lot of his time just in his presentation and our questions to him.

The Chair: Before Mrs. Hinton has a chance to comment, I'd just like to say that I think the minister is always generally very happy to appear. I know he's always indicated that to me. That being said, for the next few weeks we do have a schedule laid out in terms of the Russian delegation that's coming to meet us that we've made previous arrangements on, etc.

Mrs. Hinton.

•(1550)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I have just an open comment. We talked before the meeting began just briefly. I'm not familiar with the article you're referring to. The minister and I speak on a fairly regular basis, but that part hasn't come up. I'm not familiar with the article; I haven't read it.

I do know that the intent of this committee was to actually sit down together as a group, listen to witnesses, get input from different groups that are affected with regard to the ombudsman part of it, so that we can actually put forward some ideas to the minister that we'd like to see included. The same is true with all the other issues we're going to be looking at.

I think the minister is probably very open to coming—I agree with what the chairman has said—but we do have a rather busy agenda for the next little while. Our job is to actually sit down at these meetings and come up with some firm ideas after listening to a number of groups for whom this will be of great concern. So I'd like to try to move that along as quickly as we can so that we could actually have an opportunity to give meaningful input before the minister makes a decision.

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer, I corroborate that. I know the minister is very, very keen to make appearances at the committee, so I don't think it will ever be a problem for us getting him, in a sense, other than something barring his schedule or something like that. For at least the next couple of weeks, we've got things to deal with. We'll get him in after we have a chance to probe the issue a little bit, I think.

Monsieur Perron, then Mr. Stoffer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Chairman, I may have been asleep at the switch, as we say, but so far the people who have testified before the committee have mostly talked about their associations, and so forth. When we ask them questions about the veterans' ombudsman, their comments become vague. I am alluding here to the representatives of the Canadian Legion.

In the future, when we invite witnesses to discuss the ombudsman, we should tell them that they only have one minute to make their presentation and nine minutes to explain the reasons why they are for or against having an ombudsman, and tell us about the main duties they would like to see entrusted to that ombudsman.

When you send the witnesses an invitation, I think it is incumbent upon the clerk and you, Mr. Chairman, to define the rules of the game clearly and to mention to the witnesses that we will be asking as many questions as possible on their vision concerning the ombudsman and that we will be asking them whether they think there should be one, or not. Those who are not in favour of having an ombudsman must also be given the possibility of explaining why.

Until now, none of the witnesses who have appeared before the committee have really given us any concrete arguments for or against the appointment of an ombudsman.

[*English*]

The Chair: I just found out that Mr. Frost is going to be available on October 16, so just a heads-up for people in terms of his appearance possibility.

To Monsieur Perron, I agree with you. I think I will say in English what you have said in French, in the sense that we want to make clear to the people we invite as witnesses before the committee that we'd like to have them germane to the subject at hand, which is that of the ombudsman, as that most benefits us in terms of recommendations to the minister, etc.

Mr. Stoffer, and Mrs. Hinton on deck.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Talking about writing letters, as you're aware, Jack Stagg, the Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs, passed away over the summer, and I thought it would be appropriate for us to write a letter to his wife, offering our condolences to her.

The Chair: I don't have an issue with that. We'll pursue that, Mr. Stoffer.

Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I never like to disagree with anything my friend across the way says, but we did actually have opinions—fairly strong opinions—from two different groups that appeared in front of us. The Legion eventually said they were in support of having an ombudsman, and the independent group of veterans who appeared in front of us made no bones about how strongly they felt about having an ombudsman. So we did actually get some direct answers, but we need more. We need more input, which is what our intention is all about.

•(1555)

The Chair: Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I really do not want to start a debate with Betty. However, I do not want the people who appear before the committee to simply tell us that they want an ombudsman. I would like them to tell us what they feel his or her role should be.

But they are not committing themselves, they are not saying anything at all. They are not referring to the powers he should be given. I would like them to suggest the powers the ombudsman should have, the role that he should play, etc., which would give us some insight into the type of ombudsman they want. But no one has drawn up that type of profile for us so far. People say they want one, and that is all.

That is my concern. Before our witnesses appear, we must make them understand that they have to give us some idea of the type of ombudsman they would like to have.

[English]

The Chair: Not seeing anybody else who wishes to speak to the issue, I think we have a sense that we will try to keep these people focused and tethered onto the issue of the ombudsman. I understand that and I hope everybody working on behalf of the committee with regard to recruiting our witnesses understands that as well.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Chairman, the only comment I have is that I think that's really why they're coming to us. We're looking for some options, but I think it really does put forward the point of why we

need to make some decisions to go out and look at what is the best scenario for an ombudsman for Canada.

I think we've gone down that road and we need to continue that to get to a finalization. We need to talk to those people who have ombudsmen in areas that we would want to be investigating in order to come up with a way to do it right the first time.

The Chair: All right.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: All the more reason to invite André Marin before the committee; he is the Ontario ombudsman and an expert on the subject. He is a great fellow who has done very good work with regard to National defence.

[English]

The Chair: For your information, Monsieur Perron, as a result of the discussion we had at a previous committee meeting, I believe his name has been added to the list, so we will be pursuing that.

Unless there are any other comments, I think we can safely adjourn. This meeting is adjourned.

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