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—
Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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• (1530)

[English]

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

This is yet another meeting of our Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. There are some stragglers walking in the door. Timing is good.

We're still doing our study on a veterans ombudsman. Today we have Colonel Don Ethell, retired, a liaison officer with the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping before us.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): May we know the name of our clerk?

Mr. Chad Mariage (Procedural Clerk): My name is Chad Mariage. Usually, I am the Clerk of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources. I am replacing Alexandre for this meeting.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, fair enough. I should have introduced our friend Chad. We had knowledge he would be standing in and sitting in for Alexandre.

I generally work it so that our witnesses have about ten or twenty minutes. We'll let you go for twenty minutes. You can have it all combined, sir, and then after that we open up to questions from the floor from the members.

Mr. Ethell, away you go. The floor is yours.

Col Don Ethell (Liaison Officer, Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping, As an Individual):

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members.

It is indeed an honour to appear before this committee. In fact, as I indicated to a couple of members, I've been out of Canada for the last three weeks. I was caught short last week when I finally heard that I was on for November 6, which is coincidental with our activity in the Senate chamber this morning and the release of the Gerontological Advisory Council report to Veterans Affairs at the press conference at 12:30. Notwithstanding that, it is indeed an honour.

The notice of meeting I received is, I guess, a draft because it states, unlike yours, "Liaison Officer, Veterans Affairs Canada". I don't work for Veterans Affairs Canada. I'm a liaison officer for my organization, CAVUNP, as it's known in acronym, and our national president is with us.

To establish a few other credentials, at the risk of sounding a little self-serving, I, as the liaison officer and the past president, and representatives from the other five veterans associations—the National Council of Veterans Associations, the Legion, the ANAVETS, the Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association, the Gulf War Veterans Association, and our organization—worked very closely, in that we were all members of the Veterans Affairs Canada-Canadian Forces Advisory Council, which was established over five years ago.

On this committee of twenty there were academics, members from other departments, and the veterans organizations. Our mandate was to look at the possibility of a new charter with respect to the modern-day veteran, recognizing that the "traditional veterans"—World War I, World War II, and Korean—were covered by the Veterans Charter, eleven acts, which you know more about than I do. Those of us who have served, exclusive of Korea, since the Second World War were really not entitled to medical benefits.

To make a long story short, as you are aware, after our deliberations finished—and a lot of consultations, meetings, committee meetings, visits to the bases, talking to the troops, and so forth—with the consent of DND and VAC, it evolved, with the report being written by our chair, Dr. Peter Neary, and submitted to Veterans Affairs Canada. That formed the basis for Veterans Affairs to draft the legislation and prepare it to move it forward.

We didn't go out of business. When I say we didn't go out of business, I mean the veterans associations didn't go out of business, because the arrangement with Veterans Affairs Canada was that we would continue bilateral and multilateral meetings looking at the draft legislation—I understand there's confidentiality associated with it—about how we were going to approach this problem or that problem. This was looking forward to the window of opportunity—I'm not a politician, obviously—to put it before the House and pass it.

As you know, it was passed in April of last year. The regulatory changes by Veterans Affairs then carried on, working towards a launch date of April 1 this year; it happened on April 3. Throughout the winter a tremendous amount of work went on by many officials at Veterans Affairs, and the bilateral and multilateral consultations continued. Quite frankly, it was amazing to see the six associations come together and support this most important piece of legislation with respect to veterans in the last fifty years.

Are there holes in it? Yes. Are the issues being addressed? Yes.

We knew going in that there were a number of things we would like to see in the new Veterans Charter—lump sum payments, long-term care, and so forth—but we had to keep our powder dry, recognizing there are only so many things they could do with the reality of many things, not the least of which is finances, which we didn't get into. That's VAC and a political problem.

The point I'm making is that we've been involved in this process, and it became apparent during that timeframe that the subject of an ombudsman and the subject of a veterans bill of rights had come up. As a result of the election, as you know better than I, the Prime Minister indicated that these were two priorities. The multilaterals we've had have in part included some discussion on terms of reference for the ombudsman—our thoughts and opinions only—and input as to what should be in the veterans bill of rights.

● (1535)

Just to go back to other activities, I did miss one important thing that we do. I'm a volunteer chair for a joint Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Operational Stress Injury Social Support Advisory Committee of about twenty people—including many from DND and VAC obviously—that looks at providing advice and counsel to the two co-managers from DND and VAC, the co-managers of what they call the OSISS program, which is a program of individuals who are suffering from OSI—PTSDs in particular—to get them channeled into the right facility. We can't call them counsellors. We call them peer support coordinators. At present there are sixteen of them spread across the country. There are also another six family peer support coordinators.

All of them are sufferers and are monitored very closely, so when Bloggins or Smith doesn't want to really go to the clinic, be it at the VAC or on an armed forces base, they can talk to these individuals. To be absolutely frank, most of their meetings are held in places like Tim Hortons, and they provide advice about where to go and receive help.

I mention that because, as you know, we have had many people throughout the years—let alone in Afghanistan—who have seen some terrible things and who suffer mentally. It's cumulative—depending on the number of tours, the Beirut Road in southern Lebanon, Cypress, Congo, Balkans, and now Afghanistan. I'm not a doctor, but I've seen it and experienced it personally; it will eventually catch up to you.

Now there are the casualties of Afghanistan, not only the families of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, but the many wounded—over 200 who are wounded, and the families. I keep emphasizing “and the family”. There's a major problem coming there

now, and it's going to get even bigger because it may take two or three years to come out.

I mention that specifically because when the new Veterans Charter was drafted, it was noted, but to be quite frank, if we knew—we being the associations, and I'm sure VAC would consent to that—that Afghanistan was going to come into the fore and we were going to suffer the terrible casualties that we have, it would have possibly changed something within the Veterans Charter. I can't get into specifics other than that it would have been a sobering process to try to make sure everybody was taken care of.

I'm not denigrating those who were suffering before Afghanistan, because I can give you many examples of people who have had their legs blown off and so forth in Lebanon and the Balkans and suffer just as much as the people who are getting wounded in Afghanistan. I just wanted to mention that. The bilaterals and multilaterals continue to this day.

Regarding the ombudsman and the bill of rights, we were advised by Veterans Affairs, when all six veterans associations had a multilateral meeting, that we would be involved in the process, and we were initially, though we haven't had much input lately. I really don't know the reason for that. We had hoped, and a number of us were saying, “Gee, it would sure be great if it would be announced in Remembrance Week”, i.e. this week. That apparently is not going to happen because there are some other aspects that I don't know about.

We have an idea about some of the terms of reference for the ombudsman, which I'm prepared to share with you, in an hour or as we get into the question period, and some other points, and for that matter the bill of right. Others in this room probably know better than I whether it's going to be a regulatory change—in other words, whether the minister is going to sign off on that—or it's going to go through Parliament and become a legislative change, which means the lawyers get involved and others get involved. It's going to be a longer process and probably, in my opinion, produce a very complex document, which isn't going to do much for the veteran walking through the door of a VAC office and looking at something that's sixteen pages long instead of six or seven bullets long. But that's only a personal opinion.

● (1540)

Mr. Chairman, did you wish me to get into my thoughts on the ombudsman or—?

The Chair: Very much so.

We had an interesting conversation at the last committee meeting on that very subject, so our researcher prepared a series of kind of bullet points, as you've described them, referring to the appointment process, their accountability, their term of office, their mandate, their funding, etc.

Do you have a copy of that, sir?

Col Don Ethell: No. I have my own notes and the notice of meeting. Nothing else. I have a clean sheet.

The Chair: Perhaps we can make sure that Colonel Ethell is provided with a copy of that.

Yes, your thoughts on the structure of the ombudsman would be very valuable to us. I think if you look through that series of questions—and you may want to consider them as you speak—that should give us lots of information. If you wish, you can free-associate off the top of your head as well as.... It's as you wish.

Col Don Ethell: Okay. Thank you for that. It would have made it a little easier if I'd had them last night, but that's all right. I've got a clean piece of paper here.

Remember, these are my personal opinions only.

The ombudsman should report to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. He or she should be authorized to provide a confidential, unbiased, and neutral alternative to the existing redress system of VAC for both the veterans and their families. The ombudsman should obviously be neutral and unbiased and have a great degree of integrity and honesty. He or she should be an alternative to the existing VAC chain of command.

Using the research facilities of Veterans Affairs and other departments, the investigators assigned to the ombudsman's office should work on a specific time line and in accordance with a specific directive issued by the ombudsman. I'll come back to the investigators, because he or she cannot do it all at once and needs a team to do it.

A decision will have to be made about whether the ombudsman is going to look at just systemic changes or problems within the department, or individual cases. As you can appreciate, the individual cases are going to be very important to the individual cases that the DND ombudsman has looked at over the years.

The ombudsman should be responsive to complaints from veterans and their families. I looked at the word “complaints” and I much prefer “issues”.

The actions of the ombudsman should complement the existing systems and procedures in place for the veterans, remembering that the Veterans Review and Appeal Board is also a redress system. I doubt very much that the ombudsman would be in a position to criticize or comment on their decisions because that's almost a judicial system. However, I'm sure there may be some symptomatic things that the ombudsman could look at. So in my simple mind there's a problem between the ombudsman and the VRAB in regard to authorities.

On administrative points, the ombudsman should serve at the pleasure of the minister. All actions of the ombudsman's office should be classified confidential. The investigator's reports should be staffed or vetted through a divisional manager, depending on the structure—one for systemic complaints and one for individual complaints, if we're going to go that way—prior to submission to the ombudsman.

Specific terms of reference—that's an army term and I don't know whether it's used in Parliament or not—for the ombudsman, the directors, and the investigators should be drafted and approved.

Regular status reports should be prepared for the ombudsman, and routine or on-call reports should be provided to the ombudsman for the minister at his pleasure. I recommend that he or she report to the minister.

In addition to the selection of the right individual for the ombudsman, one of the key elements of success is the selection of the team of investigators, as you can appreciate, based on the DND ombudsman. They should preferably have a background of analytical thought and possible investigation—like my friend here, ex-Provost Corps, ex-OPP policeman. They should be neutral, understand they are not advocates, and be dedicated self-starters. They should have the necessary staff training, experience, and skills to operate within the federal government system, specifically the ombudsman's office. They should be prepared to undergo the appropriate training on the organization of programs available to both the traditional and modern-day veteran.

I'll digress a little right now. With the advent of the new Veterans Charter, you can appreciate the workload of the district officers in Veterans Affairs Canada. Sure, they hired 1,400 additional staff, but they're way behind on claims and so forth. You can't really fault them. The training process and workload for the traditional veterans and what they're entitled to, and what the new kids, including me, are entitled to under the new Veterans Charter is significant.

● (1545)

There are people at Veterans Affairs who are cross-trained, some who are new Veterans Charter and some who are old Veterans Charter. Sooner or later they'll be able to play from both sides of the sheet.

A tremendous amount of work has gone into that. The reason I mention that, of course, is that the investigators, if they're working for the veterans ombudsman, are going to have to understand both systems—I am not an expert on either. They should have the ability to work independently with minimum supervision and of course be accountable for their actions.

I think I'll stop there, Mr. Chairman, and respond to any questions you or your committee may have.

● (1550)

The Chair: That's fine.

We're now going to move to our Liberal colleagues.

I believe Mr. Valley is the first up with questions, for seven minutes.

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Thank you, Chairman.

Thank you to our guests for coming today. We learn something every time we have a meeting. You made some very direct statements, and we appreciate that.

I've learned something about you, too. You made the comment that you're not fond of the word “complaints”. I learned a lot from that. I agree with you; it should be “issues”. We shouldn't be putting a negative connotation on anything. If we're starting something such as an ombudsman, he should be dealing with issues. We should never use the word “complaints”—which would be good for us.

I want to thank you for your long service, and your service even after you retired. It's important for us to hear from somebody who knows what they're talking about. I can't even remember how many places you've been, how many difficult situations you've been through, and how many challenges you've had to face.

I have a couple of questions. I'm surprised the forces have such poor medical records...or maybe there are gaps in medical records. If we want an ombudsman to help somebody, he needs accurate information. How did the poor record keeping come about? Through all the different areas you've served in, why are there gaps in some of the service people's records?

Col Don Ethell: It is because soldiers are soldiers. I say that, having come through the infantry throughout my career. It may sound macho, but when you're on a realistic training exercise, or you're jumping out of airplanes, or you're on the back of a carrier or a tank, or whatever, and you fall and have an injury, in a lot of cases it's called suck it up and catch up to the rest of them. Theoretically, a CF98 report of injuries should be written and witnessed and so forth. That's awkward to do in the middle of an exercise.

I'm not knocking the medics or the unit medical officers. When they do have a more serious injury and they get pushed out through the system, once again, theoretically, they should have a CF98 report of injuries. That document is one of the key documents for somebody going forward to receive some type of benefit or treatment as they move through Veterans Affairs. That document and the release medical...where the doctor indicates on the last page that these are the things that possibly could be attributed to military service, and lists them, bang, bang, bang. Doctors are human. For some of them it is a judgment call on their part.

You leap ahead x number of years and some of these things come back to haunt you. You go into Veterans Affairs and say you think you have a hearing problem, or a bit of a problem with your leg from that bad jump you had. At one time, if there wasn't a CF98, a report of injuries, your chances of having it moved forward were very slim.

We've come a long way in the last ten years with Veterans Affairs in regard to talking with people almost from an adversarial approach, to the benefit of the doubt going to the individual, to the extent that yes, that documentation is very important, but—

We've both experienced this when somebody has come forward: "Do you remember that accident where the vehicle rolled over and there were a couple of people killed? I was in the back of that truck and was banged up a little." You say, "I remember it." "Can you write me a statement to give to Veterans Affairs, because that left arm that's a little wonky is starting to bother me?"

Veterans Affairs will accept that. In other words, they need something to hang their hat on instead of an official document.

I've been a soldier all my life, so I can understand where they're coming from when there's not sufficient documentation.

I thank you for that question. I'm just going to carry on for a second. You have me on a roll here.

Mr. Roger Valley: The more you talk, the less I have to.

Col Don Ethell: The closing of the ranks between DND and Veterans Affairs Canada is significant. That, quite frankly, started when Admiral Larry Murray was a deputy minister at Veterans Affairs. He shook things up; he established the Canadian Forces Advisory Council, and we got rolling on how to improve service to the veterans.

Part and parcel of that was that at one time when an individual was in the service...you finished your service and then you dropped off the end of the table. Your documents and so forth went to somewhere here in Ottawa—the microfiche and so forth—and then when Veterans Affairs had to pick up that file, they had to find the microfiche, get the documents, and call them forward, etc.

We like to think that has improved, particularly with the new Veterans Charter, where DND and VAC are like this now. When they get out, including our colleagues coming out of Afghanistan or wherever, they are released from the forces and there is a transition team of not only DND but also VAC. So when Bloggins and Smith get out, it's mandatory they go through this. Are there gaps in that? Are some people dropping through the cracks? Of course. This is a big system and the level of service varies across the country. That's only human nature. For an individual who is getting out, one of the questions I'm sure they'll be asked is, "What injuries did you suffer and are they recorded? What is not recorded?"

We've had a couple of cases where people applied, including some of our members, for some type of treatment-cum-annuity before April of this year. They were turned down. Our answer to that is appeal, appeal, appeal, which drives VAC crazy, but that's just the way it is.

● (1555)

Since then, we've also advised them to go back and apply again, because some of the benchmarks changed with the new Veterans Charter. They're getting picked up, but it's going to take a long time.

Does that answer your question, sir?

Mr. Roger Valley: Yes, it does.

It leads me in a bit of a different direction from some other testimony that we've heard. You may have said this, but I'd like you to repeat it. On the individual we're looking for to be the ombudsman for the forces, we've heard a statement that they should have a little bit of military experience, but they shouldn't have too much, because they get too entrenched in the ways.

Do you have an opinion on that? You may have said it already. Does the ombudsman we're looking for need some military background?

Col Don Ethell: Yes, and he should be an ex-Patricia with fourteen years and tours overseas—and I volunteer.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Roger Valley: I left myself open for that one.

Col Don Ethell: It's a good question. I never thought I was going to be asked that, but it's very similar to becoming a member of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. There are a number of ex-military people, including one from our regiment who was taken on board a week ago in the official announcement.

It's a two-edged sword. One of the points we made during our deliberations in CFAC, when we were "pinging" on VRAB, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, which really was out of our mandate, was that there are not enough ex-military people there. We were then reminded that sometimes when there are military people, as in the past on VRAB, they're even harder on the military than those who haven't had military experience.

In the case of the ombudsman, we're talking about one individual, not a team of thirty, as is the case in VRAB. The selection of that individual is going to have to be very important. I don't think the selection of the individual should dwell on whether he or she has had military experience. It would make life a lot easier for him or her if they understood what a company was, or a platoon attack, or an attack profile by a ship, or something like that.

Having said that, he or she has investigators, similar to the ombudsman from DND. Some of them are permanent, some of them are what I think they term on-call specialists. They, from different walks of the military, could provide advice to the ombudsman who didn't have that background.

That's a long answer that amounts to a definite maybe.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate your comments.

Monsieur Perron, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Good day, colonel.

In your opening remarks, referring to the ombudsman, you said that this man or woman or position must report to the minister. If I were to define the responsibilities of the ombudsman for Ontario or any other province, including Quebec, I do not see how the position could report to the minister, since all ombudsmen in Canada answer not directly to a minister but to their legislative assemblies. Under his mandate, the ombudsman protects people and also corrects errors or injustices committed at their expense, both individually and collectively. Although the term is not accepted here in Ottawa by the government, an ombudsman is a watchdog. How can he be impartial and bite the hand that feeds him? He needs to report to a committee and not to the minister of Veterans Affairs.

• (1600)

[*English*]

Col Don Ethell: Thank you, sir.

I can't respond in French because I'm a unilingual Calgarian.

It's a very good question, and it's almost a political question that you're asking of a soldier. My personal opinion is that reporting to a committee would be awkward. With all due respect to this committee, sometimes committee decisions take forever.

I am led to believe that the ombudsman for DND responds to the Minister of National Defence. There is a thought that the ombudsman from Veterans Affairs should be the same individual as for DND, similar to Australia, I think. I personally don't agree with that, because it's almost a conflict of interest.

With all due respect, sir, I think he should respond to the minister, with the clear understanding that I mentioned—integrity, honesty,

and so forth. But he has to report to somebody, and if it's not going to be the minister, it's going to be a committee or, for that matter, and I'm way out of my depth here, possibly to Parliament.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I said to Parliament or to the House, not necessarily to the committee. This could be determined later, but I could easily see the Speaker of the House being in charge of this committee because the ombudsman would become a senior official of the House of Commons. He would become a senior official. As far as a Department of National Defence ombudsman goes, I should like to recall the case of André Marin. In August 2003, André Marin published a beautiful report on the SISIP, the infamous insurance plan that becomes taxable income once members of the military leave. The report was so well done that the Department—such a supporter of the veterans—told him that it would not renew his contract on July 5, 2005. That is the risk. André Marin dared to bite the hand of the minister of National Defence and found himself elsewhere. Now he has a good job; he is Ombudsman for Ontario. This is the danger I see. An ombudsman may have integrity and be impartial, as you say, but how could he go against his boss? How can he issue a report against his boss or his boss' organization without having his knuckles rapped? That is my concern, colonel.

[*English*]

Col Don Ethell: How about doing it both ways? He responds to the minister, but he cannot be removed from his position without the consent or approval of committee X.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Let's tackle this question in another way. Why should a committee of the House, a committee of some sort, not appoint the ombudsman? Why would an ombudsman, in responding to a job offer, not be required to actually apply? The danger now with this government is that, unfortunately, most of the high-level positions are political appointments. People cannot hide their heads in the sand like ostriches and say that this is not the case. They are political appointments, rewards for friends of the Party. That is the risk here; it is with us and always will be until appointments are made more democratically.

• (1605)

[*English*]

Col Don Ethell: I feel like you've pinned me against the wall here.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: No, no, I am only asking—

Col Don Ethell: You're asking for a political answer from an old soldier, and I don't know what the answer is, other than that I still believe—my opinion only—that the ombudsman should respond to the minister, whatever party is in power.

The Chair: You still have a minute, Monsieur Perron.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I have another concern. How long should the ombudsman be under contract? Five years? Six years? Is this a renewable mandate, or non renewable? There has to be a mechanism for removing the ombudsman from his position if he isn't doing his job properly. Should it be a two-, five-, six- or ten-year mandate, renewable or not? Do you have an opinion on this?

[English]

Col Don Ethell: Once again, I think it would be up to the minister, if not a committee formed specifically for that. I think one year would be way too short, because he's probably still learning his or her job in that timeframe; two years, three years at a minimum, if not five years. Ten years, in my opinion, is too long.

Renewable—I think that would once again be up to the minister of the day or whatever committee is the governing committee, if you want to use that term. There has to be a check and balance. By the same token, the minister and/or committee, if you're going the committee route, should have the capability of removing the ombudsman, because, heaven forbid, regardless of all the honesty, integrity, loyalty, and so forth, sometimes people make a mistake or get into a position where the mistake is not palatable for the veterans.

I mentioned veterans specifically because they're the ones who are going to be served by this individual. They and their families are the ones who will be served by this individual, and to be quite frank, if he or she is not doing the job.... There are many mechanisms other than committees here; the veterans associations are going to come aboard him or her, pointing out the problems in regard to any ombudsman.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: In closing, I would like to say that we, the politicians, have the opportunity to be relieved of our duties every three or four years depending on the frequency of elections. I have no further comments.

[English]

The Chair: His time is over, Mr. Ethell, not yours.

Col Don Ethell: No, that's all right. I found that stimulating.

Thank you, sir.

The Chair: You can respond, if you wish.

Col Don Ethell: Oh, was that a question? The translation was very slow, I'm sorry.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Could you give just a final comment?

Col Don Ethell: Should he or she be removed after three or four years? With just cause, they can be removed anytime. But what you're saying is they're going to do a three- or four-year term and then he or she is going to be replaced.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I was referring to the fact that we could be thrown out of office every three or four years when there are elections.

[English]

Col Don Ethell: That's a political question.

In my personal opinion, I don't think that should be the case. If you're going to remove the ombudsman, for whatever reason, who suffers? The veterans, the things that are on his or her plate. I'm not saying to put the ombudsman above Parliament—heaven forbid, you're the governing authority in this country. But you have to hit a happy balance. If the government is going to change every year for the next five years—don't read anything into that, but I use that as an example—that means we're going to have five different ombudsmen. That is not going to work. And who suffers? The veterans—if not the system.

The Chair: Fair enough, Colonel.

Mr. Stoffer, for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sir, you said you were honoured to be in front of us. I think, actually, we have the honour of being in front of you and your colleague, because you're the ones who actually serve. We thank you for taking the time out to be with us.

• (1610)

Col Don Ethell: Thank you.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sir, how many people are in your organization?

Col Don Ethell: Well, that's a good question, and it's going to be a long answer.

Our organization has a membership of just over a thousand. There are six organizations. The Legion has approximately 450,000; the ANAVETS, 36,000 to 38,000; the NCVA, I don't know—that's a composite of various organizations. We have a thousand; CPVA, the peacekeepers, have a thousand; the Gulf War vets, just under a thousand.

But it's not a thousand, because I'm a legionnaire. I'm a member of the ANAVETS. I belong to three different regimental associations. I belong to the airborne association. It's a lot of osmosis and a lot of contacts out there, and they know that the six representatives are on these various committees and we're representing their interests.

We would love to have a membership of 15,000. We don't have that. It's not a big problem to us. But we'd like to think we represent all of those who have served on peace support operations—and I used that term intentionally instead of “peacekeeping”—throughout the years, be it 150,000.... If somebody has a problem, they're going to come to us.

There are only six of us on these various committees, and somebody has to represent their interests.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, sir.

One of the interesting things about a committee and asking questions is that we learn things, the different nuances. Look, for example, at the situation in Afghanistan. Those in the regular force can come back to Borden, Gagetown, Petawawa, and they'll be surrounded by people 24/7; it's their discussion all the time. But a reservist comes back and goes to Home Hardware, goes to Canada Post, and that person really doesn't have anybody else to rebound to in terms of discussing some of the situations they've gone through that may not be very nice to talk about. There's a peer group at a base, yet a reservist may not have that opportunity. So an ombudsman, or something of that nature, may be something that individual would go to.

You've worked with reservists. From your dealings with them, how difficult would you say it is for them to access services, or even just to find someone to talk with regarding their episodes in theatre?

Col Don Ethell: At one time, reservists did not go overseas. I think when we mounted the operation in Central America, we broke the logjam. If we needed a specific individual, a Spanish speaker, a pilot, and so forth—I was the director of peacekeeping ops—they made an exception to send this class B pilot down there, and that kind of broke the logjam. So today, with what we've gone through in the last few years, there are a tremendous number of reservists out there.

One of the problems with reservists, even before any of this began, is that sometimes they will just walk away. The uniform is gone and so forth. It's difficult to track them. Technically, they can be found and charged, whatever, but that's not the case. They just want to get the equipment back, if possible.

Second, some of the people coming back from overseas, be it in a contentious area or even in a non-contentious area—in a benign situation—come back and say, “That's it. I don't want anything to do with the GD army. I've had my fill. I'm out of here”. And they disappear over the horizon. That can't happen with a regular force individual because they're tied to a contract.

When reservists are employed overseas, they are usually part of an existing regimental system, the artillery or the RCDs or the PPCLI, or so forth. In my time they were always treated as part of the family. Sure, when they went home they went back to their respective units, but because of workload, in some cases, that unit has difficulty tracking them.

Second, from a legal point of view, when that individual goes back to his unit and his own CO and his own regimental sergeant major and so forth, the unit that employed him overseas really doesn't have the right to direct anything to this individual because he is not under its command.

It was a problem we addressed during a Canadian Forces advisory council in regard to reserves and employment in the reserves—guaranteed employment—which is a festering sore across this country. Unlike the United States with the National Guard, our people are not guaranteed employment. In some cases, they are, on a volunteer basis, but some of them are left hanging.

As much as people try, because of the tremendous workload that's imposed on the existing units, particularly when they're coming back

and going through decompression and so forth, sooner or later that reservist is going to move back to his own organization.

Having said that, when that person has gone back to his militia unit, say the Governor General's guards or whatever, one would like to think that the unit says, “We have Bloggins or Smith back, Sergeant Jones, and he has been over there and we need somebody to monitor this individual.” Does the person have any medical problems? Was that properly checked out? Was the person in action? Was the person there when some people got wounded? Does the person need some advice and counselling?

You don't like to use the term “mental health”. It's a dirty word in the military. That's why we've gone to operational stress injuries. “Do you need somebody to talk to? If you don't want to talk to somebody in a uniform, then go talk to one of these peer support coordinators who are in civvies.” They are usually master warrant officers, right down to corporals, who are specifically chosen to talk to that individual, not to listen to the war story, heaven forbid, and not to have a beer, but just to try to channel that individual to the right place, be it the operational stress injury clinics put up by Veterans Affairs, or the OTSSC, as they are called, the equivalent, that are put up by DND.

There's a monumental number, as I've indicated, out there. In the case of the reservists, it's more difficult to track.

I don't know if that answered your question or not.

●(1615)

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer, you're a minute and 53 seconds over. I apologize.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No worries, I'll come back. Thank you.

Col Don Ethell: Did I cut into your question time?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It's all right. We only get five minutes on this.

The Chair: They get a set amount of time. You, sir, carry on. You're giving great testimony, and we appreciate it. You carry on as you wish.

We'll have Mrs. Hinton for seven.

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

I've listened today with great interest to what you've had to say so far. There are a number of things you've said that I completely agree with and a number of things that I question, but this is only my personal view.

You said the ombudsman doesn't serve anyone other than veterans. I agree with you. He doesn't serve the Speaker and he doesn't serve Parliament. His job is to serve veterans. He should probably answer to the minister, because the minister is held responsible by elections, but that's my point of view.

I had to chuckle when you said committee decisions sometimes take forever. I couldn't agree more. One of the problems—and it's your fault—is that you're one of the people who gave us the freedoms we enjoy today. Democracy is a very difficult thing. Everyone must have a say, and we're listening to a lot of different witnesses. There's something to be said for dictatorships sometimes, where you only do what you want to do.

Thank you very much, by the way, for the freedoms I enjoy today. Without people like you, we wouldn't have those freedoms today.

On the Australian ombudsman, you said a couple of interesting things. You said you didn't like the idea that he served both. According to the mandate of the military ombudsman, his job is to deal directly with complaints from serving members of the Canadian Forces. The ombudsman who would deal with veterans would deal with people who were no longer serving and had already served. I know you said you didn't like it.

Is it a problem that the ombudsman would have to serve two masters, Defence and Veterans Affairs? Do you think it's too big a load for one person to handle both Veterans Affairs and Defence? What did you base your comments on, sir?

Col Don Ethell: I think before I answer I'd like to go back to the committee, if I may.

Remember that I went through the army, which is a dictatorship. Those with the highest rank call the shots. When in doubt, you obey the last order.

I appreciate your comments. You're absolutely right. We live in a democracy, and thank God for this Parliament and so forth.

I think they should be split, Mrs. Hinton. I think there'd be a conflict of interest.

There is now a DND ombudsman who is mission specific to the serving member. If that individual has a problem, I would like to think he or she would continue to address the problem, even though the individual has left the service, even though the individual, for whatever reason—you could paint a scenario—may be picked up by the veterans ombudsman, and there would hopefully be a dialogue. If the individual is out of the service, I would like to think the DND ombudsman is not going to drop the issue. It has to move forward.

In the case of the veterans ombudsman, I would think the veterans ombudsman would be concerned with some of the systemic issues. There are gaps in the new Veterans Charter in regard to some of the benefits. There are a number of them. I can't articulate them to you, but I know they're there.

The veterans associations will be going forward on lump sums, long-term care, and that kind of thing. It's an ongoing issue. God bless them. They say to keep “pinging” them because they want to know.

I'm not saying we're an authority on this, but if we can't sort it out, the ombudsman should be able to pick that up. It would be awkward, if not a tremendous increase in workload, in my opinion, if the DND ombudsman were to take that on.

● (1620)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Well, I agree with you once again. I think the charter, the ombudsman's position, and the bill of rights should be living documents. I think they should change as needed, as time goes by. When we recognize there's a problem, I think we need to address it and not wait for it to fester to the point where it can't be addressed. I agree with you that it should be a living document.

There is one thing I would be interested in you elaborating on. I think I heard you correctly. You said you didn't think the ombudsman could overrule or reintroduce decisions of VRAB, and I think they should be able to do that. It sounds like we have a difference of opinion.

I'd like to know why you think the ombudsman shouldn't be able to reintroduce or take a decision back to VRAB.

Col Don Ethell: I was hoping you wouldn't ask that question!

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Oh, oh! Sorry.

Col Don Ethell: Maybe it's a product of my environment, but I believe in the chain of command, and did so in the military. I believe there are administrative processes you can go through in the case of the military; there are redresses of grievances and so forth. It took awhile for many of us old sweats to be convinced that the DND ombudsman was required. He is required; he is another thing that helps, another avenue that helps the individual.

In the case of veterans, I think the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, including the advocates assigned to the individual, is a situation or circumstance or procedure—whatever term you want to use—that is in place and shouldn't necessarily be changed. I'm not a lawyer. Some of the people are lawyers, including the boss, and I would think there is some legality in regard to any infringement of their authority. But I'm out of my depth, Ms. Hinton. I just think they should be left alone.

There may be some issues where a questionable decision is made by VRAB and you say, geez, they really blew it on this one, and are we going to have the capability to go forward? It's not going to be independent because there are going to be other organizations that come into play.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Those are interesting comments as well.

The other thing you suggested was that you had, as part of an organization, sent back the appeals of people who had been turned down; you sent them back to appeal again. So you're probably of the same thought that VRAB should get it right the first time. But could you give me an example of some of the appeals you sent back where you said, go back again and appeal this decision? I've dealt with them every day, hundreds of them, for the last few years, so I would like to know what you're hearing too.

Col Don Ethell: In general, as you know, there are various levels of appeal if the individual is not satisfied with the VRAB. I've never been involved with it, but I understand the individual could also follow this through to a civilian court. I've never seen one; I'm not a service officer for my organization. But he is, I think, with his background.

At the risk of being blunt, I've been turned down by VRAB. I've got some things that came out of the Middle East, and I'm using my personal example here. Am I satisfied with the response by VRAB? No. The advocate in Edmonton is going to get around to it probably sometime in the next year because of the workload. Am I worried about that? No, because I understand they do have a problem. Is it going to go back to VRAB? I certainly hope so, because as I indicated earlier in response to one of the questions here, some of these things should be addressed now that the new Veterans Charter is in place. It opens up another avenue for these individuals to apply.

That's not a very good answer, but it's the best I can do.

• (1625)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: No, it's a very good answer.

The last thing I would like to give you an opportunity to do is to introduce the elusive gentleman at the back of the room, whom we keep referring to and our listening audience has no idea who he is. Would you care to introduce this gentleman, please?

Col Don Ethell: Thank you.

Mr. Ron Griffis is from Nova Scotia. He is the newly elected national president of our association; he took over the mantle. We are delighted he's onboard. His background is in the Provost Corps and the OPP, and as a justice of the peace, if not a trial judge—it's kind of scary to have him as our national president.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Col Don Ethell: We're glad to have him onboard. He participated in the Senate ceremony this morning and of course the GAC announcement at 12:30.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Welcome. Now everyone knows who we're referring to when we talk about the gentleman at the back.

Col Don Ethell: He's also my buddy here.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now over to Mr. Rota for five minutes.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you, Colonel, for coming this afternoon. It's great to have you here. Thank you for your past service. In this week of November 11, I think it's very appropriate that we thank you for that. And obviously I thank you for your present service as well, because retirement didn't really slow you down. It sounds as if you're just as active as ever.

I have a question for you regarding a statement you made about the ombudsman and who he reports to. The military ombudsman reports to Parliament through the minister, if I'm not mistaken. That's the route taken. One of your comments was that the ombudsman should serve at the pleasure of the veterans affairs minister. My question is, how would that differ from an aide or an executive assistant to the minister, where he would be beckoned to the

minister? How would he keep his impartiality when making a decision or when helping an individual? I get the impression of serving the—I was going to say lapdog, but these days you can't say those words in Parliament and get away with it. I look at the situation and I think, if the person is at the pleasure of the minister, how can he detach himself and make individual decisions that would benefit the individual veteran?

The other thing you mentioned is, it was in the interest of a quick turnaround or faster service. I understand what you're saying. It makes a lot of sense; if the individual were reporting to the minister, it would be a lot faster. But I see a bit of a conflict there where there might be a bit of a difference in time, depending on the pleasure of the minister. Maybe you can comment on that.

Col Don Ethell: I'm beginning to think, sir, that I'm a bit naive when it comes to politics. I would like to think that whoever the ombudsman is, when he or she is appointed, he or she and the minister will sit down and have a very long chat as to how it's going to work, if he or she is going to report to the minister. If I were the ombudsman, I would be saying to the minister, "You know, there are going to be some calls here that are going to probably tick you off, or your department, but that's the way it is. If I'm going to be the ombudsman then I'm going to be the one who calls the shots. Sure, you can fire me, but you're going to have to have just cause." If the DND ombudsman—and you educated me, sir—reports to Parliament through the minister, why shouldn't the veterans affairs ombudsman do the same? It's got to be equivalent, in my mind. It's a simple soldier solution: they've got to be the same.

He or she should certainly not be a lapdog to the minister or his or her staff. It should be an independent body: neutral, unbiased, with a great deal of integrity. I use the analogy of the military. When you get the Queen's commission, you take on an awesome responsibility, because as you hear enough, Afghanistan...at a certain point in time, you are going to kill or be killed on order. And that comes with the freight of having the rank, of carrying the Queen's commission. In my case, I said to any officers who worked for me, be they in Lebanon or the Golan or over in Afghanistan, "Don't ever lie to me because if you do I'll crucify you. Your career will be finished." It's called integrity and honesty. "If you get into a problem that wasn't necessarily your fault, I'll be the first guy to back you up, be it versus a Canadian or any other nationality; I'll stand behind you." That's integrity.

And I would like to think that the ombudsman and the minister will come to a meeting of minds with regard to how he or she is going to work. Everybody has a boss, and the ombudsman has to have a boss. In this case, if you're going to make it to Parliament through the minister, fine. But the minister has to be involved, in my opinion.

• (1630)

Mr. Anthony Rota: I appreciate that answer.

You were involved with the Friends of the Colonel Belcher and efforts to replace the old veterans care centre in Calgary with a new modern building. Are there significant differences of housing and health care between the needs of young peacekeeper veterans and the needs of the war service veterans? What kind of role should the veterans ombudsman play concerning the quality of care of these two groups? We keep getting different angles: one from the World War II veterans and one from the post-Korean War veterans.

Col Don Ethell: That's a great question, sir.

Yes, I was involved on the committee. We raised \$2.2 million to provide enhancements to the existing structure, the Colonel Belcher Veterans Care Centre. At one time, with the closure of CFB Calgary, we wanted to build it adjacent to the Museum of the Regiments.

That didn't go very far because the general manager of the Canada Lands Company said, "Great, Don, bring your cheque book. It's going to cost you \$8 million." We had no political clout in Calgary. We didn't have any Liberal MPs and it simply wasn't going to work.

Premier Klein and Jim Dinning, probably the next premier, who was on our committee, said, "We're not going to wait for the feds to sort this out. We're going to give you the land, the old motor vehicle branch site, worth \$26 million." And we built it—we, being the committee and obviously contractors and the Calgary Health Region. That \$2.2 million enhanced each individual room of those veterans in that thing. It's a P-three project. There are 35 non-veterans and 140 traditional veterans.

Many of us who worked on this place have said, you know, none of us is eligible to get in here yet because we don't qualify. A veteran is a veteran is a veteran, but the modern-day veteran is not given access to that.

What did the enhancements do? They improved beds, baths, provided larger rooms, etc. I'm sounding like a Calgarian here, but it is held up as the showpiece. In fact, we convinced the Canadian Forces Advisory Council to hold their meeting in Calgary once. We took them to the veterans care centre and they were blown away.

To go back to your question on the difference between that and other care centres across the country, it is vast. As much as Veterans Affairs pays a certain amount, God bless them, and they're well cared for, there is a variance because you're involving other health authorities. In the case of the Calgary Health Region, you're dealing with provincial authorities.

I don't know if you've been to Ste. Anne's Hospital for veterans in Montreal. They do a great job. In fact, this afternoon I think the minister is opening a new wing or two wings—as we speak, as a matter of fact.

I was there a couple of years ago and there were 600 in there. The wards are sheets hanging between the beds. There is no way we were going to go that way in Calgary. Each individual was going to have a room. So there is a difference.

Sooner or later, and it's on the drawing boards...it was one of the big red flags we were waving when the new Veterans Charter was issued with our colleagues and friends in Veterans Affairs. Don't forget long-term care, because as much as we would love to see all of

the modern-day veterans covered by the new Veterans Charter so they would have access to those beds, it's not realistic.

That's why there's a move by the Gerontology Advisory Council, which includes the traditional veterans and the modern-day veterans, to try to get the people to stay at home and provide the service to them. Those services going to them would move with them, be it from his or her house to the son's house or to a care centre.

At the present time, if they move, some of those services are withdrawn. But that's being positively addressed by Veterans Affairs. I don't speak for them, but I know that for a fact.

By the same token, we're still moving forward on having the modern-day veteran arrive at the same level as the traditional veteran. At one time, it was down here. It's up to here now, but there's still a couple of things we're working on, not the least of which is long-term care.

Does that answer your question, sir?

• (1635)

Mr. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

The Chair: Now to Mr. Gaudet for five minutes, and Mr. Shipley on deck.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you for coming, colonel.

I do not want to play politics, but I think that you are, to a degree, sir. I have trouble when you say that the ombudsman should answer to the minister. Do not forget that the minister is not always the same person. Is the ombudsman going to change every time the minister does? The government has changed three times recently. So there is a complete turnover, ministers, deputy ministers, etc. It does not change quickly, but everyone changes.

Regardless of the government in power, it wants to work with people who agree with it and with its goals. The ombudsman could be named by Parliament for a period of six years. The Speaker of the House of Commons is elected by absolute majority and is accountable to all members of Parliament, but, like the ombudsman, he cannot be ousted overnight. If the ombudsman answers to the minister, I think that there could be some kind of conflict of interest.

I would like to hear your opinion in this regard.

[English]

Col Don Ethell: I don't think—pardon me for answering in English—that the ombudsman should change with the minister. I indicated earlier, sir, using the example of one change in government once every year for five years, that it would be counterproductive. It goes back to the question of who is going to suffer. I don't care about political appointments and so forth. I'm worried about the veterans, and if you're going to change the ombudsman, they're the ones who are going to suffer. Along the line, if the minister changes, the position doesn't change; the individual changes. He still reports to the minister. It's like reporting to the Chief of the Defence Staff. He may change, but the position doesn't change.

Maybe that's looking at it from a simple soldier point of view, a non-political view, but I would be absolutely dismayed if every time there was a change in government the ombudsman changed, because that's counterproductive. That's my personal opinion.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I realize that it is your personal opinion. If the ombudsman were appointed by the members of the House of Commons for six years, two-thirds of the members could decide whether to keep him or not and not the government or the minister of the day.

Personally, I think it would be much better for veterans if he were appointed by two-thirds of members of Parliament. He would be sure of having a six-year term that way.

We met with Mr. Marin the other day; he told us that there were 25,000 complaints a year in Ontario. He has a \$9.6 million budget and is accountable to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. I do not see why it would be different here. I would find it marvellous, because veterans would be better protected then if the ombudsman reported to the minister. If there is another minister and that minister does not agree with the ombudsman, he may not listen to him and choose to disregard him. If the ombudsman were accountable to the House of Commons, I presume that he would be well supported.

As I recall, the last time we studied the new Canada's Veterans Charter—as you said earlier, it wasn't perfect, I agree with you—it was carried by unanimous consent of the House of Commons in 2004. Members in all political parties were in agreement.

This means that veterans are much better protected by the House of Commons than by a minister.

I gave you my opinion. I have nothing against ministers. They do good work, but they have to toe the party line and make decisions based on their election platform and their mandate. That is why I do not agree that the ombudsman should report to the minister.

• (1640)

[English]

Col Don Ethell: Thank you, sir. As I say, I'm not a political animal. Am I allowed to use that term? I still think the ombudsman should report to the minister. If he's going to have a five- or six-year mandate, that's fine. That gives us continuity. That solves my problem, because the veteran is being served. I don't want to get into the politics of whether he should be changed because the party changes and so forth. That's not my call. It's your call. You're the

ones who make the decisions up there. But there should be some continuity. By the same token, I think he should report to the minister. He's got to report to somebody, and I think it would be preferable to report to the minister rather than to a committee.

Does that answer your question, sir?

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: You are entitled to your opinion, but I do not agree with you. In my opinion, the ombudsman must answer to Parliament because, otherwise, veterans will not be protected. Take a look at what happened to the ombudsman—

Is my time up?

[English]

The Chair: You are 31 seconds over.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Mr. Yves Côté, Ombudsman for National Defence, published a report last week.

How many years had it been since the last report? He answered to the department and to the minister. How long had it been since there was a report on veterans? Defence wasn't happy, no one was happy. That is why I am saying to you that if the ombudsman reported to the minister, veterans would be very unhappy.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

The Chair: You're a minute over.

I want to interject at this point. Colonel Ethell, most of us—I don't want to speak for the entire committee—probably don't want the person, as the quote goes, to be a “lapdog to the minister”. I for one believe they should probably be along the lines of the Auditor General: reporting to the committee, etc., something like that.

That being said, I appreciate your point of view, sir. You served for decades for us and you believed in the chain of command. Having that corporate structure worked very well; it would be the only thing that works in war scenarios. I understand where you're coming from on that, sir.

Committees do take a long time. We understand. That is the nature of the beast.

Mr. Sweet, for five minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Colonel, for coming today. I echo the appreciation of everyone on the committee for the sacrifices you and many of your colleagues made.

With the experience you had with the ombudsman with the Department of National Defence, and from feedback from colleagues, have you been happy with the performance of the office of the ombudsman for DND?

Col Don Ethell: Yes. I've had no dealings personally with the ombudsman. I have had dealings with a number of investigators, and with some of the investigations, which they obviously did not explain to me because they're confidential. But we saw the end result—the incident in Edmonton and in Suffield and so forth. They were involved in the investigation, and the result was quite fair.

As I indicated, in the past you could look at whether it was necessary to go to the ombudsman. Why couldn't this have been sorted out through the chain of command? Why wasn't it? Well, it wasn't. The end result was that the ombudsman got involved and forced the chain of command to take the appropriate action, if you want to use that term. The same should happen in VAC.

I can't quote you a specific example.

Mr. David Sweet: No, and I don't need one, Colonel. I wanted to ask you that, because in other conversations we've had over the last while with witnesses...there's also the ombudsman's capability to assert influence to make sure judgments are upheld. It's the difference between legislative authority and moral authority. I take it that the ombudsman for DND operates as the ombudsman does for Ontario, with moral authority only.

As we look at the terms of reference for the new ombudsman for Veterans Affairs Canada, I want to ask if you and your colleagues are happy with that.

•(1645)

Col Don Ethell: I think so.

I don't know how the DND ombudsman works, but one would think that anybody in that position is not working in isolation. First of all, you have a team of investigators—maybe one person, but possibly a team—who are investigating and writing reports and working under the direction of directors, if not managers. They've massaged this issue. They've gone through it. They've looked at it. They've sought legal advice from their legal officers who were on board.

By the time it gets to the ombudsman and there's a round table discussion, it's: "Don't present me with a problem; give me three alternatives and the recommended solution." That's the way we used to do it, and that's how I would like to think the ombudsman works. He would be intimately involved in that he's receiving periodic updates. He's involved—not intimately involved at that stage—and when push comes to shove and he or she has to submit the decision, it's resting on his or her shoulders. He's not working in isolation.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Colonel.

Bev.

The Chair: If the committee is all right with it, there's a minute and a half left on Mr. Sweet's time, and I sense he wants to shift it to Mr. Shipley.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Along with everyone else, Mr. Ethell, I suspect you haven't been that successful in your retirement, listening to what you've been telling us. I think you're very active and continue to carry on with the best interests of veterans at heart, and we all appreciate that as we enter

today into veterans week. I appreciated seeing you there this morning at the service.

I wanted to go back to our discussion about the appeal board, just for some clarification. There were some comments made by Mr. Perron regarding the appointments and how those have maybe been made for political reasons. I want to be really clear that this government is working to make a go—regardless of whether or not they are all Conservatives—of appointments that are based on merit and qualifications.

There's been a lot of talk at this board about the Veterans Review Appeal Board and about how there needs to be a balance there, that it not be all political people. There's a high percentage—over 50%—of those on there now. Those are not the right people to have on it. I think we need to have the balance of those people be with the military, and certainly from the medical and legal areas, and have probably very little political influence in it.

So when we see that, and we have this continued backlog because of some of those things that are there, do you see that the ombudsman, when disputes do come up—and we hope there would be fewer of them because of the right design for the appeal board—would be there only for the awarding of the last resort, or would they be able to intervene if something started to go off the rails?

Col Don Ethell: Just to go back to your point on VRAB, as I indicated a few moments ago, sir, we made a comment in the Canadian Forces Advisory Council that we were not happy with the VRAB until we were educated a little bit. But some of us still took offence to the fact that they were political appointees.

We think it should be based on merit. Based on some of the decisions, and seeing the backgrounds of some of the people who have come out, I don't know how it's happening in the minister's office or at the senior level of VRAB, but there seems to have been an improvement on that selection.

If it's going to continue to be a VRAB appointment, so be it. We have to live with it. We've lived with it for years. If it's going to be a political appointment, once again, we're getting into an area that is really not my area of expertise, and that's how the ombudsman fits into the process in regard to a VRAB decision.

Is he going to have the authority to investigate that decision? I think there could be a case made for that, recognizing I think—and once again I'm out of my depth here—that there's a legal aspect associated with that.

Does that answer the question, sir?

Mr. Bev Shipley: That's good enough for now. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Now, Colonel Ethell, we're going over to Mr. Eyking, with Mr. Shipley on deck if he has more.

Mr. Eyking, go ahead, please.

•(1650)

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd also like to welcome you here, Colonel. Being from Cape Breton, I have to say we made a good choice in picking a Nova Scotian and bringing him here today.

There was some talk today about services in Australia. My question is more about how we compare to the other NATO countries in how we handle veterans. I heard somebody mention once that overall we have one of the best veterans programs when you compare those in all the NATO countries. Now, maybe that's just somebody from within bragging.

What are some of the major differences between our programs and those of the Netherlands or Belgium? Do they have ombudsmen over there too?

Col Don Ethell: I can't answer the question about ombudsmen. In fact, I can't answer the question about continental Europe.

But I do know that in the drafting—and I don't speak for VAC—of the new Veterans Charter there was considerable, if not ongoing, discussion regarding how they develop things in Australia. There's an exchange officer. One or more Australian officers are employed in senior positions within VAC here. Conversely, there are Canadians down there. They looked at New Zealand.

They certainly looked at the system in Britain, where, as you're probably aware, veterans affairs is under the defence department, which is mind-boggling, but that's the way they do it over there. That's their business. If that is the case, then if they do have an ombudsman—and I don't know that they do for sure—it would be one individual.

They certainly have a dialogue with the United States, remembering that there are 1,000 to 1,500 from Second World War ops who die every day in the United States. Their veterans association is massive compared to ours, and I don't know if they have an ombudsman. I can't answer the question.

Hon. Mark Eyking: On some of the services from Veterans Affairs, you mentioned the charter we have in place now. But when you're on peacekeeping duty with these other countries, you must be comparing notes about when you go back home and what the different countries offer. What countries really stand out as having some of the better services for veterans?

Col Don Ethell: I can answer that question, because, first of all, the U.S. has a marvellous system. They're so large that when an individual retires or gets out of the service, he or she has a base near wherever they're going to retire, which provides everything: the continuance of use of the commissary, and of dental and medical care for the veteran and his or her family. Of course, they're a much larger organization; they have veterans hospitals all over the place and so forth. The U.S. system is much more comprehensive than ours. We're peanuts compared to what the VA does in the United States, and I think it's similar too.

I'm trying to think of people I've talked to...the Australians during the Beirut wars; they were well taken care of. We had an incident in southern Lebanon where one of our majors hit a landmine, and he

still has psychological and physical problems to this day. But his New Zealand patrol mate, a young captain, was decapitated, and he had a wife and three kids. From my understanding, the benefits—I can't get into the details, and I'm talking the late 1950s—were very comprehensive. So they take care of their own, at least in New Zealand and Australia.

Most of those from the Scandinavian countries, whom I served with as military observers, were reservists. Back to your point, I don't know how they were taken care of. They're taken on for six months—the Swedish school teachers, Norwegian ski instructors, and so forth—given a uniform, and they go and do their job. Then they go back to something, but I don't know how they're covered. I can't really answer that question either.

The Chair: Now over to Mr. Mayes for five minutes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to say thank you very much for being here today. I really enjoy the fact that orders are concise, and you're a concise man in what you have presented to us. It's not a lot of flowery speech. It's right to the point, and I really do appreciate that, which is all part of your military background.

Sir, one of the challenges Veterans Affairs Canada has is that we have over 7,000 appeals going to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. What I hear from this committee is that we're looking to this ombudsman to help that out and cut those numbers down.

Do you see that as being realistic, or how would this would be done? Would it be for an ombudsman to take on the veterans issues and be an advocate for the veteran during the appeal process? Or do you see the ombudsman being more involved in some of the systematic issues, in what's happening at ground level when it comes to those decisions not to extend benefits or pensions to veterans? Do you think we need to look beyond the appeal to see what's wrong with the program, with the whole system?

•(1655)

Col Don Ethell: Thank you for that.

When they first started the ombudsman, I was of the opinion that it should be limited to systemic problems, particularly knowing that there are gaps in the new Veterans Charter. And who better than the ombudsman to look at it, recognizing that the veterans associations and VAC are looking at some of those gaps? But the right decision may not be made.

So is the ombudsman going to be limited to just systemic problems, or is he going to get involved in individual cases, and who's going to make the selection as to which cases he's going to investigate? Is it going to be the individual's right, or is it going to be the individual making application to the ombudsman? If that's the case, and I'm just thinking aloud here, what process would they go through? Have you been to VRAB? Have you been through the levels of appeal? Have you exhausted your appeals with VRAB?

If in the opinion of the ombudsman and his staff the VRAB decision was correct, then one of the issues would be, is it worthwhile for him or her to investigate that? If there was an element of doubt, you could make a case that the ombudsman could get involved in individual cases.

But I think they have to walk before they run. There's enough work for the ombudsman there in regard to—God bless them—the new Veterans Charter. It was done quickly and pushed through Parliament. We got it through, and now we have to play a little catch-up on some of the systemic problems within the new Veterans Charter.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Would you see any sunset if the role of the ombudsman was to deal with systemic issues? It would be structured so you would see fewer appeals and a department that was more responsive to veterans' needs? Do you see that going on forever, as far as the role of an ombudsman is concerned?

Col Don Ethell: I didn't quite follow you.

Mr. Colin Mayes: If the system were working properly, would you need an ombudsman? That's the question I'm asking. If the ombudsman reviewed the system, the systemic issues, as you said, and came up with some solutions, and those solutions were endorsed by the department, is there a fix here?

Col Don Ethell: With all due respect to the government departments, there's no government department that's perfect. There are only two things that are perfect: God and my wife.

I'm being facetious there, but I think that as much as Veterans Affairs has done a great job—I keep going back to the new Veterans Charter—and having seen what they've done in the last ten years, are they perfect? No, they're not perfect. They have to have a watchdog. They need somebody to say, "Listen, investigate. You have a problem here." And quite frankly, I think they would welcome it. In fact, I know they would welcome it. We need somebody to say that this is not right. We know it's not right, but we can't do much about it unless we have some additional influence.

The Chair: You have ten seconds, Mr. Mayes.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Okay. Then what I see happening, if there is to be an ombudsman, is a real ramp-up of issues and reviews. Then I see fewer things that the ombudsman is going to have to do after those are addressed. There is going to be a levelling off of some of those imperfect things the department does. Would you say that's a good observation?

• (1700)

Col Don Ethell: I think that may be right. It may drop off, but on the other side of the coin, as Ms. Hinton indicated and as somebody else indicated, the new Veterans Charter is a living document. It's a living document in which there will have to be improvements. As I indicated, if VAC had known that Afghanistan was coming up, there probably would have been more thought put into various aspects of the new Veterans Charter.

Is there going to be something else that comes up that triggers additional thought on the new Veterans Charter? Are all the regulations associated with the new Veterans Charter correct? I don't know, but I doubt it. I doubt it. There are going to have to be modifications as we go along, and we need that godfather or

watchdog, whatever you want to call it, sitting there in the event that they need some more influence or push to make those changes.

Sure, there'll be a ramp-up, but I don't think it's going to drop down, no. I'm not saying they're going to be a make work organization. There will be a lot of business out there. In the same way, the number of investigators can fluctuate. As I indicated, there will be some permanent people and others that will be called forward to investigate a specific case based on an area of expertise of some sort.

The Chair: Now we're over to Mr. Stoffer for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

One of the concerns here, if you take, for example, the VIP package, is that a lot of veterans, of course, aren't part of any program because they are so independent, and they say, "No, I don't need government to help me." Then Buddy goes out and shovels the driveway, has a heart attack, and dies. His spouse is left behind. Now what does she do?

One of the concerns of an ombudsman is serving veterans. I'm just asking your opinion here, but shouldn't family members or spouses of deceased veterans or very disabled veterans, who may not be able to speak for themselves, be able to have access to the ombudsman to register concerns or issues they may have?

Col Don Ethell: Yes, and I say that knowing that there are, what, 134,000 out there—who hopefully will be addressed with regard to VIP and so forth—who have fallen through the cracks. Once again, it's a personal opinion.

Some of these things can be transferrable from the individual to the spouse. There are cases where the spouse is receiving some VIP benefits, and hopefully in the months to come, in the near future, VAC will have reacted accordingly and moved that over. It's tied to the GAC report that was tabled today, where they are looking at a single point of entry. Remember that term?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sir, when you say GAC, for the record—

Col Don Ethell: The Gerontological Advisory Council report, which was presented to the minister this morning—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I know what it means, but it's for Hansard. We're different.

On the other issue, sir, I will play the devil's advocate on this one. I know that consultation is so very, very important to organizations such as yours, the Legion, and others. But someone said to me out in the hall a while ago that wouldn't an ombudsman then—I'm just playing the devil's advocate here—give the government the excuse to not consult as much? If you have an issue or a concern, you can go to the ombudsman and raise your issue with the ombudsman, instead of having the open door you had before and the consultation with the veterans.

I'm not saying this current administration would do that or that anyone would do that, but it may offer that level of bureaucracy. Whereas before you could speak to the minister and the department on issues and get them straightened out, now they push you towards the ombudsman and say, "Well, we have an ombudsman. We're paying him millions of dollars. Go and see him." Are you not fearful of that at all?

Col Don Ethell: No, I am not really, because I like to think... Remember, there are the big three, as I indicated, the veterans association...the little three as we call ourselves. We've been involved in the process because we represent a different group from the Legion and the veterans, generally.

And I don't think that's going to change. I really don't think it's going to change, even if there's a change in government—and I'm not saying there's going to be one, obviously. Since we started CFA we've gone through four ministers. Ministers come and go. God bless the current one, who's doing a great job, as did the previous one, and so forth.

The continuity, of course, is with the department. We had two great deputy ministers, and not the least was Jack Stagg, may he rest in peace, and Verna Bruce is carrying on as the acting deputy minister. We deal with them and the ADMs through there. The minister is there, and they're all accountable to him, or her, as in the case of Minister Guarnieri. They know that and we know that.

I don't think there's going to be a cop-out, to use that term, to say, okay, we have a problem here, take it up with the ombudsman. I don't think so.

• (1705)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay. Very good.

My last question for you has been brought up before, and it's sort of a sidetrack to what we were talking about today. There are veterans who have had the opportunity to be married for a long, long time, and that's a real blessing. But for some of them, of course, their spouses will pass on and they'll remarry in their late fifties, for example. And then when they pass on, their second spouse will be entitled to their benefits. If they remarry past 60, they're not entitled to anything. That was called the gold-digger clause, which I'm sure you're aware of.

I'm just wondering if you could offer your opinion. There are some of us on both sides of the House trying to change the so-called gold-digger clause. I'm just wondering what your view is on that.

Col Don Ethell: To what?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The fact is that if you remarry after 60, when you pass on, your second spouse should be entitled to any pension benefits that you incur. Right now, if you were to remarry after 60, your second spouse would be entitled to nothing.

Col Don Ethell: If she's 23 and good looking, what's wrong?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It comes from the Boer War.

Col Don Ethell: No, once again, that was an inappropriate remark on my part.

How many cases are we going to have of that?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Not many—

Col Don Ethell: And once again, you have to give the minister some latitude here. I think the minister should be in a position to say, to put it bluntly, yes or no: "Present a case to me of this and I will make a decision based on the recommendation from my senior staff", and so forth. That's one way of getting around it. It may sound like a bit of a cop-out, because I wouldn't like to see that in black and white, personally.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: So you would be against the gold-digger clause or be in support of it?

Col Don Ethell: Case by case...halfway between. Give the minister the authority to make the decision.

Mr. Roger Valley: You're able to be a politician now.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, you're getting to be a politician now. You know that, Don. You came in here as a soldier and you're leaving as a politician.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Col Don Ethell: So when do I start my job as the ombudsman?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks, Don.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

Okay. We have two more people, Monsieur Perron and Monsieur St. Denis.

It's the Conservative side right now, so I'm going to take my position as chair and use that prerogative to ask you a question.

When Mr. Cliff Chadderton was appearing before us, I know Mr. Epp who was previously here asked this question and I found it was very informative and enlightening. I've enjoyed your presentation so far. He asked about Mr. Chadderton's service and asked him to give us a sense of where he'd been, his story within the Canadian Forces.

I'd like to add an addendum to that. Maybe tell some stories in that five minutes of where you think over the years we as Canadians may have let our soldiers or their families down in terms of provision and looking after them.

So your personal story in terms of your involvement with the forces over the years, and then if you can think of any stories of things, just generically, where you think we could have done a better job as a country—

Col Don Ethell: I'll go back to when our battalion was in Germany, along with a very heavy brigade, from 1960 to 1963. This was a time when the Berlin Wall was going up, not down. It was during the Cuba crisis, when the world came the closest it has ever come to nuclear war.

We were deployed, meaning we were on what they called bug-outs, to our alternate general defensive position in the Fulda Gap. Very frequently there was a division alert, a brigade alert, a battalion alert, whatever—we were on the go. Where did that leave the families? The only contact my wife and our newborn babe had with the Canadians was Roulke, a soldier, who was the milkman. It was the same with the others who were living out on the economy.

Sure, the regiment did what they could, but we know now that we were canon fodder to delay the Russian hordes coming through the Fulda Gap, with our soft-skinned vehicles, the three-quarter tonnes, making them look like APCs, and so forth. We know that now. The families were hung out to dry. The government of the day provided a lot of troops and as many amenities as they had, but it went back to, "You've got to do your job first."

We have come light years from that to what the Canadian Forces does now, particularly when there's a casualty. The families of those who pay the ultimate sacrifice have a tremendous support team. If there's a wounded individual, what facility is he in? The University of Alberta Hospital had a whole raft of them there from the 1st Battalion and the 2nd Battalion Patricia's, and right across the road was the rehab centre. There has been no expense spared in taking care of the casualties.

That's a long way from a soldier getting killed or one of the dependants getting killed over in Germany: "Right. Take them to the burrow and bury them. If you want to send him home, you pay for it. A lead-lined coffin is going to cost such and such." "If you want to go home to see your sick mother, pay for it." That doesn't happen any more.

Similarly, in the bad old days, as they called them in the EOKA campaign in Cyprus, when people were killed, they were buried there. There are cemeteries all over this world where Canadians are still buried. There are some down in Kantara near the Suez Canal. There are some in Beirut. There are Canadians buried in the Commonwealth cemetery in Gaza. A bunch of Canadians go to these spots every year on November 11 to remember them.

So we've come a long way from the days when the armed forces was very large. As I indicated, in Germany in the sixties and late fifties a tremendous number of Canadian flyers were killed—106 Sabre pilots alone were killed in training accidents and so forth. You didn't see the Governor General showing up when those people were killed. God bless her when she went to meet the aircraft in Germany with the four who were killed by American actions.

We've come a long way from when Corporal Mark Isfeld was killed by a land mine in Croatia and three people were on the tarmac to meet the body. There are now troops and honour guards, and the minister is usually there, along with the Chief of Defence Staff and so forth. We've come a long way.

Life has become very precious to us—that's something Canadians can be very proud of—unlike other countries where we have served where life is not precious. You can think of a number of countries where we've served, like the Balkans and certainly Afghanistan, where life is not necessarily as precious as we Canadians see it.

Those are just a couple of examples. The people we had serving in Cambodia saw the same thing. The ones we had in Somalia—never mind the incident—did an outstanding job, but they were let down by the system. The regiment was let down, as were the soldiers, and they were tainted by that forever, unfortunately.

So we've come a long way.

•(1710)

Does that answer the question, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: That does. I appreciate your input on that.

Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I would just like to add a few words in closing.

Let's talk about the ombudsman who was accountable to the minister during the Gulf War in 1992. He told soldiers to be careful of the air they were breathing over there, that it could be hazardous to their health. In 1994 and 1995, he said virtually the same thing. Then, in the report Yves Côté tabled in October 2006, we learned that nothing was ever done and that the medical records for every case of exposure during the Gulf War were destroyed.

I cannot understand how the citizens of Canada did not find out about this, that is, that the three ombudsman's reports had been hidden somewhere.

In 2006, the government changed. It is a lot easier to hand in a report where you say you were supposed to follow the instructions of the ombudsman, but of which no trace can be found. It was to get the best of both worlds, I suppose. I don't know.

This is why I think an ombudsman answering to ministers is worth what it's worth, which is almost nothing. There is an old saying in Quebec. When I was young, my father always said to me, "Never bite the hand that feeds you."

How can ombudsman, in doing his job, not be a little more pro-minister than pro-veteran?

Thank you, sir.

You may answer if you wish, but I am not expecting any comment or response. The choice is yours.

•(1715)

[*English*]

Col Don Ethell: The selection of the individual is key, and there's a great deal of integrity. You said he's going to bite the hand that feeds him. If he doesn't like what the minister is saying, he can resign. I'd like to think he's not going to do that. If the minister doesn't like it, he can say, "You're finished; you're fired." But I think the minister would be very hesitant to do that because of the flak, if it were done without a lot of justification.

With all due respect to what they say in your home province and so forth, I like to think that across this country there's a great deal of integrity associated with the appointment of the ombudsman.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I would like to ask a question.

How was the ombudsman for National Defence appointed, Mr. Yves Côté?

[*English*]

Col Don Ethell: I don't know.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: He was a friend of the party—a lawyer representing National Defence.

Col Don Ethell: I understand that, but it's not my place to say.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: It's what we're living now.

The Chair: I think this wraps up that aspect of the discussion.

Mr. St. Denis.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much, Colonel, for being here—with the incoming president, I understand.

There are levels of issues within the question of what an ombudsman's office should look like. Minor issues like how long the mandate is and the budget and so on are important questions. Among the major issues is the reporting question, and that's been covered quite a bit today, so I'm not going to go there. Also among the major questions is access to documents—what access to documents an ombudsman would have to pursue a particular issue and so on. As well, one of the major things would be on what the mandate is. Is it a broad mandate, including the pensions and appeals process, or is it constrained?

It was actually our colleague Colin Mayes who was probing the issue of whether an ombudsman would be more involved with systemic issues, issues of general concern that are impeding veterans' access to one program or another, or whether the ombudsman would get involved in individual cases. That's a debate we will continue to have.

I'd like your comment on, for example, a recruit who entered the military going into World War II—and as you're well aware, there are declining numbers of veterans around from that time—versus a recruit going in now. I'm assuming that between the recruit 50 or 60 years ago, or the recruit going in for Korea, and a recruit now, the recruit now is a lot more aware of what's going on simply because there is more information available.

Would it be a role for the ombudsman to account for that difference in the level of naïveté, say, of a recruit 50 or 60 years ago versus a new recruit coming in now who later becomes a veteran? Would it be the role of an ombudsman to deal with the different levels of record keeping? The records 50 and 60 years ago were maybe as good as they could be at the time, but presumably record keeping is better now.

Finally, there are generally, if I could simplify it, three broad categories of injury; there is the physical wound; there is the trauma or stress kind of injury; and then maybe a chemical type of injury. There may be other categories, but those are three big ones. Would an ombudsman need different levels of expertise, given the three different general areas?

In the few moments remaining, could you comment on old records versus record keeping now, naïveté for recruits a long time ago versus now, and the general areas of injury?

• (1720)

Col Don Ethell: Record keeping.... In the army, we used to have what we called an ITR, an individual training record. It had a pay book. Heaven forbid if the company lost your ITR because that detailed all your courses and so forth. Yes, there'd be a hard copy of

course reports, and yes, you could lose your pay book. It's a chargeable offence, because then somebody has to go through the pay office and find out what they owe you. That doesn't happen today. It's all automated and it's direct banking and so forth.

Let me leap ahead to 1967, where, as a sergeant, I was posted here to National Defence Headquarters from a battalion—why me, God?—to the personal management information systems study group on how we were going to integrate the three records from the army, navy, and air force because they were all different. To make a long story short, we came up with what they call a CF490, which is the automated Canadian Forces record of service, the old punch card business. I only lasted two years here and then I went back to the battalion. So that's the way it has progressed.

Nowadays, I don't know the system intimately, but it's all automated in regard to records.

As for the soldier, it's come light years from...we used to have an expression in the infantry that the best infantry platoon you could have was a bunch of grade five Saskatchewan farmers. They were all strong; they didn't need to be particularly well-educated.

When I joined the army—I had a grade 11 education, and obviously I brought it up—I was the highest educated guy in my company of 130 people, exclusive of the officers, of course.

Nowadays, these kids are smart. A lot of them have at least one year of university. They're very worldly. They're computer literate. They know what's going on so you're not going to be able to snow them. Not that you would get snowed in the old days, but there is light years from Corporal Bloggins joining in 1956 to the kids coming in today. Great talent, higher educated, of course, in one part, because of the sophistication of the weapons systems they have to use.... With all due respect to grade five Saskatchewan farmers, you can't employ them on a sophisticated weapons systems, a LAV-III or a tank, or whatever. So they've come a long, long way.

So there is a difference.

In the old days, sure, some people would grab a hold of themselves and move forward in the ranks and so forth. However, as a young soldier, you were more concerned with what the sergeant or, heaven forbid, the sergeant major was doing. You really didn't know the officers, and you could care less because you were very isolated in your own little world. That's changed, when you look at what's happening in Afghanistan with our troops as they move through an area as a cosmopolitan group of very well-educated and well-trained people. There is light years of difference between the two.

• (1725)

The Chair: It's now one minute and fifty seconds over time.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Basically, I can conclude by saying that an ombudsman who is dealing with issues of today would have to also recognize that issues for the older veterans.... There's been a tremendous change in not only the record keeping but in the level of naïveté of a recruit from a long time ago and now.

Col Don Ethell: I didn't answer the question. I'm sorry. There is a difference, as I indicated earlier on, sir, between the traditional veteran in World War II and the Korean veteran, and their training, background, and issues, compared to the modern-day veteran. Remember, for the modern-day veteran, the people coming out today, the average age is 36, plus there is a bunch of older people who are "modern-day veterans" who are in their sixties.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you, Colonel.

The Chair: Colonel Ethell, I want to give you a commendation, in the sense that these committee meetings can be two hours long. Rarely do they last a full two hours because we usually have other business or sometimes the questions wrap up before then. You, sir, have managed to enthrall us for the full two hours. I've appreciated

your frank and experienced background in answering the questions today. I've thoroughly enjoyed it. And like the other members of the committee, I want to thank you as well for your years of service where you made the country better.

Some hon. members: Hear, Hear!

Col Don Ethell: I return the compliment, sir, because it was an honour. I didn't know what to expect, coming to this committee. It was an honour and, to be quite frank, an enlightening experience. Some of the questions, as you may have gathered, were difficult for me to answer. But that's what this committee is all about. If they'd all been easy, I would have been disappointed.

So I thank you, Mr. Perron, and others.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your time, sir. All the very best.

The meeting is adjourned.

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