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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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• (0910)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We have another meeting of our Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. This morning, without further ado, we have the honour of having the Minister of Veterans Affairs with us.

Sir, you have as much time as you like. It is usually 20 minutes, but we have some discretion, and then we will have questions from the committee members. The floor is yours, sir.

Hon. Greg Thompson (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

It's a pleasure to be with you this morning to discuss the veterans bill of rights, and other issues, I'm sure.

I would like to actually thank the committee for the good work you have done—all members on all sides—because there is no question that you have done good work and will continue to do good work. We take your work very seriously.

Before I get into my formal remarks, I want to introduce Suzanne Tining, who was appointed deputy minister less than a month ago, actually on January 22.

Suzanne, thank you for being here this morning. I know you will have remarks as well.

Prior to Suzanne's appointment, she was the associate deputy minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the executive director and deputy head of the office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada.

I would also like to thank Verna Bruce, who is with us this morning, for her sound and steady leadership during the past few months. The Prime Minister acknowledged that on the day Suzanne was appointed. The Prime Minister thanked Verna on behalf of the Government of Canada. Verna will continue in her role as associate deputy minister, of course.

As you well know, it is pretty difficult to talk about deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers without thanking Jack Stagg for his tremendous contribution to veterans affairs. He was our former deputy who passed away last summer. I know that I speak on behalf of all members of the committee in thanking Jack Stagg for his commitment to veterans and our country.

Early on in my tenure as Minister of Veterans Affairs—I guess on the first day—I was given some pretty sound advice by the Prime

Minister and those who coach new ministers, namely, that I should listen very carefully to Jack Stagg because he would serve me well, he would serve the Government of Canada well, and he would serve our veterans well, and that I would have an opportunity, knowing that Jack's days were probably limited in terms of being with us, to learn from the best. I thank Jack Stagg and I thank his wife, Bonnie, and family. That was acknowledged in the House of Commons by Peter Stoffer as well. I just want to put that on the record, Mr. Chairman.

At this point I'll turn it over to Suzanne, our new deputy minister, so that she can have a chance to put a few comments on the record and introduce herself to the committee, with your agreement, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Suzanne Tining (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you.

I won't take much of the time of the committee. I know it is an important time to be here, and I know you will want to engage with the minister and myself on issues that are of concern to you, but I want to thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to make a few remarks.

As the minister mentioned, I was appointed just a month ago. I have worked with the federal public service for over 30 years, both in traditional line departments and central agencies, as well as in policy development and program delivery, so I was very pleased to be asked to serve as Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs.

I am proud and honoured to be the Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs because this is a very special and meaningful department with a very special and meaningful mandate. I know that committee members have a really vested interest in making sure we deliver on that mandate.

I'm told that the department has an unofficial motto, which is to take care of those who took care of us. As you all know, the people in the department are very committed. They are very dedicated professionals who put the service of the veterans at the front and centre of their daily work. In the last few weeks I have been very impressed by the sense of commitment that I feel in talking with staff, people who have a deep personal interest in seeing that we do right by our veterans. I know that the members of this committee also want to make sure that our veterans and their families get the benefits and services that they so very much deserve. I will add my efforts to those of everybody in the department to make sure we deliver.

[Translation]

Over the past few weeks, I have learned much about the history of the Department and the evolution of its policies and programs. I am very excited about the new Veterans Charter and its early success in meeting the needs of younger veterans and their families.

This is an entirely new generation of veterans who have very different needs from the veterans of the world wars and the Korean war, and I think this new charter will enable us to really target the new needs of those veterans.

I was also privileged to attend the unveiling of the ice sculpture. I met some of you at that event during Winterlude, and this year, we'll be holding special commemorations in Vimy, in Ottawa, and in a number of regions of the country, marking the nintieth anniversary of this historic battle.

[English]

As we move forward with the veterans bill of rights and the veterans ombudsman, as well as with continuing to implement the new Veterans Charter that was promulgated last year and with meeting the needs of our traditional war veterans, 2007 promises to be a very busy year. I know the members of this committee will continue to be very active in your consideration of veterans issues. Let me assure you that Veterans Affairs is also committed to working with this committee and other parliamentarians on issues affecting our veterans, and I look forward to working with you.

Once again, thank you for this opportunity.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Suzanne.

A few days ago, Mr. Chairman, I and some of you had the privilege of attending an unveiling ceremony of an ice replica of the Vimy monument. We know well the story of the battle and its defining role in the history of our country. The ceremony was an occasion to recall the massive contribution that Canada made to the war to end all wars. Out of the more than 600,000 who enlisted, more than 60,000 made the ultimate sacrifice, and our history tells us that our nation was not prepared to assist veterans returning from the trenches of France and Belgium.

The experience was markedly different following the Second World War, when the Veterans Charter provided an array of programs to help the rehabilitation and reintegration of those who had answered their nation's call. Through the years, those programs have evolved to meet the changing needs of our veterans.

In April 2006, the coming into effect of a new Veterans Charter, the most sweeping transformation of veterans programs since the end of the Second World War, marked a significant advance in Canada's care for our veterans. It had the unanimous support of all political parties, in keeping with the constructive way in which this committee has traditionally approached issues affecting veterans.

I realize this committee has recently devoted considerable time to the study of the veterans ombudsman. I'm delighted to tell you today that I'm awaiting the recommendations of the committee on this very important issue. However, today I believe we're going to focus primarily on the bill of rights.

As members of Parliament, we receive calls from those who feel they have not been treated fairly or in a respectful manner by the federal government. Those calls could have come from our veterans who felt they did not receive benefits to which they may have been entitled. That's why we promised, during the last federal election, to establish a veterans bill of rights that will ensure that our veterans are always treated with the respect and dignity they've earned.

The committee has been briefed by departmental officials on the work that they have done and that we have done over the past year. I wanted to ensure that we took the time to get it right. Let me talk specifically about our consultations with the veterans organizations.

As you all know, the department works closely with veterans organizations, and this was no exception. In the words of Winston Churchill, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

In November and December, the department met with the Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association; the Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans in Canada Association; the Royal Canadian Legion; the National Council of Veterans Associations; the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping; and the Gulf War Veterans Association of Canada. I understand that the committee has received a summary of the feedback provided by these organizations. Their specific comments and advice are being carefully reviewed as we move forward on this initiative.

Our stakeholder groups have indicated their strong support for the veterans bill of rights. In my view, the bill of rights will not be a long, drawn-out paper. The veterans bill of rights will provide veterans and their families with a clear statement of their basic rights and what they can reasonably expect in their dealings with the department—plain language, in other words.

Specifically, a veterans bill of rights will increase the department's ability to respond quickly and fairly to veterans' concerns. In my view, it will complement the department's work by ensuring that all clients, regardless of their point of contact, receive the appropriate service in a consistent manner. It will build on the service standards that currently are in place. In plain language, in a visible and transparent manner, a veterans bill of rights will reaffirm our unceasing commitment to treat our veterans with respect, dignity, fairness, and courtesy.

I also believe the veterans bill of rights is very timely because it will support the implementation of the new Veterans Charter. As we well know, the new charter is a comprehensive package of programs that is designed to provide younger veterans and their families with the means to make a successful transition to civilian life.

● (0915)

Today, as we better understand the more complex needs of our clients, their confidence in our programs is especially critical. I believe the veterans bill of rights will serve to reassure those clients that the department is there for them and their families. The bill of rights will provide veterans with an additional mechanism to ensure that their needs are being met and that they will have an opportunity to take a complaint to an ombudsman if their rights are not upheld.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, our veterans have served Canada with selfless dedication and commitment. The Prime Minister spoke to those values on National Flag of Canada Day, when he announced that Canada's new government would be providing \$5 million over the next decade to support the operation of the Juno Beach Centre in France. In remembering the service and sacrifice of those who fought on Juno Beach, we also recognize that those values continue to inspire the members of the Canadian Forces.

A few weeks ago, I was at CFB Gagetown to take part in a send-off to soldiers now serving in Afghanistan. Standing on the stage, I couldn't feel anything but pride. I knew I was looking out upon the most professional men and women in uniform you could ever hope to meet. As I often say, we have the best soldiers in the world, and every one in this room will testify to that, Mr. Chairman.

I was also proud of the Gagetown community that came together to offer support and solace to those troops who were about to be deployed to Afghanistan and to the families they were leaving behind. At that moment, I was reminded that our soldiers and their families need more than just words about a country standing with them. They need to know that Canada will always be there for them. As I often say in speeches, Mr. Chairman, they have to know we are as committed to them as they are to the mission.

Canadian soldiers are always committed 100% to the mission, and this speaks directly to the importance of what we do and how we do it. For this reason and others, I am firmly convinced that a veterans bill of rights will be a significant step forward in improving our service to veterans.

Again, I thank the veterans organizations for their strong support—some of them are with us this morning, Mr. Chairman—and I hope the members of this committee will also endorse this initiative.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you again for this opportunity to meet with your committee, and I welcome your comments and questions.

Thank you.

● (0920)

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

It's also good to meet the new deputy minister, and we thank her for appearing.

We will now go to our round of questions, with Ms. Guarnieri being up for seven minutes.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me extend a welcome to the minister, and certainly a hearty welcome to the new deputy minister, and offer a note of nostalgia as

I fondly recall the civil servants who made the department, VAC, the most respected of all government departments.

I know the minister is blessed to have a department that brims with the enthusiasm of volunteers and certainly the professionalism of the soldiers and veterans they serve. I do know the minister will continue to convey the committee's high regard for the work they do every day.

But that work continues to change. When I was the minister, we were seized with the challenges of operational stress injuries, and that was actually before we suffered 36 fatalities in 2006, dozens of life and physically changing injuries, and probably hundreds more individuals who will have to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder. I wonder if the minister can tell the committee what new measures the department is taking to meet the challenges faced by the veterans of Afghanistan suffering from operational stress injuries.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, that's a very appropriate question because that's an issue of great concern. In fact, yesterday in the House of Commons they had a question on that very issue.

One of the things we have done is set up new clinics. In fact, in the last year we've opened new clinics across the country for our soldiers, for our veterans, for those who serve. Those clinics have been opened up in areas like Calgary and Quebec City, for example. We still have Ste. Anne's Hospital, which plays a leading role on issues like this, which has been there to play the leading role for a number of years, as you well know, Mr. Chairman. We also have a 24-hour hotline service for veterans, which is an important function as well, that is manned by very dedicated professional people to help veterans work through these issues.

In addition to that, Mr. Chairman, we're working closely with DND to more clearly identify those issues before they occur, in the sense of trends that might lead to this. I think we're working more closely with DND than we ever have in the past. I believe we're getting results from that close relationship with DND. We're committed to that very issue.

The question is, are we doing enough? I believe we are, because we know this is an issue. Not to say it hasn't been dealt with effectively in the past, but as we move forward in terms of deploying our soldiers in very dangerous missions across the world, I guess we'd expect this would be something the department would have to deal with. I believe this was envisioned by the department during your tenure as minister, moving forward, knowing full well that with your government's commitment to Afghanistan this would be something we would have to address, so I think the department was well prepared for that. I believe we are doing exemplary work in those particular areas.

One of the other things we have done, and I think the former minister would be aware of this, is that we have moved many of those utilities off base into the community, where it's much easier for a soldier or someone dealing with that difficulty to approach it. Unfortunately, in Canada we still have a resistance to dealing with anything to do with mental illness as openly as we should. As you well know, even outside of the military, people with mental illness, as we often say, suffer in silence.

One of the pins I normally wear, when I don't have a veteran's pin on, is that of the Canadian Mental Health Association. It shows the phoenix rising from the ashes, in the sense that there's always hope, there's more that we can do, but the way you do it is to address it head-on and work constructively with your clients. I think we're doing that, Mr. Chairman.

● (0925)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: We certainly wish you well in these challenges. It's obvious we can never do enough for our veterans.

On a more thorny subject, I have here a well-worn copy of a very important promise made. I have copies for the minister and members of the committee, although I understand every one of us has seen this many times. It is a promise that came long after costs were well known to this committee. I would ask the minister to address all veterans and widows as to exactly what they are to make of this letter on Stephen Harper's letterhead saying that a Conservative government would, and I quote, "...immediately extend Veterans Independence Program services to the widows of all Second World War and Korean War veterans...".

Can the minister tell veterans in a straightforward way whether there are plans under way to implement this promise or whether the letter is a forgery? Or is it simply going to be a broken promise?

Hon. Greg Thompson: "Forgery" is a word I'm not accustomed to using, Mr. Chairman, whether it's addressing a member of the committee or a member of any political party.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: But do you recognize this letter?

Hon. Greg Thompson: It's not a very kind word to use, but I will tell you that the former minister is pretty clever in her choice of words, because she mentioned it was written on the Prime Minister's letterhead but was not signed by the Prime Minister or the former leader—

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Minister, did someone steal his stationery?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Excuse me, but I didn't interrupt the member when she was speaking. I would urge her not to interrupt me when I'm speaking. But if she wants to run interference, I can let her talk, and when she's talked herself out, I'll respond.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: A point of clarification, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I agree with you on this.

Ms. Guarnieri.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: A point of clarification, Minister. Did someone steal his stationery?

The Chair: Ms. Guarnieri, your time is up.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: No, I don't think so. I was noticing on my clock it's not over.

The Chair: Yes, it is.

Hon. Greg Thompson: In terms of the word "steal", her party would understand that word more clearly than I would, Mr. Chairman.

But I will tell you this, I'm not here to pick a fight with the former minister. The truth is that the letter was not signed by the Prime Minister, who at that time was leader of the opposition. It was not written by him. And it was never a promise that we made in the campaign, Mr. Chairman. But the truth is that in terms of the delivery of that service, we're committed to improving that service and committing services to all veterans.

As she well knows, there are about 94,000 individuals now receiving that service, and 258,000 survivors do not receive it.

In terms of her record on taking benefits away from veterans, it was her government that took away benefits from our allied force veterans, Mr. Chairman. So her record is not exactly sterling in her treatment of veterans and their families.

● (0930)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: I understand why the minister feels defensive.

The Chair: Ms. Guarnieri, your time is already over by a minute, so it's over.

Now on to Mr. Perron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Chair, pardon me, but I had the floor; I'm taking it.

I'm extremely surprised at the turn things are taking this morning toward dirty politics, at the tone of the questions and at the dialogue between the minister and the members. I believe there's another place than here, if we want to engage in dirty politics. So I'd like my colleagues to try to remember that.

Don't calculate the length of this speech, Mr. Chair, because this is a lesson I was giving people.

To begin, Ms. Tining, welcome. We wish you good luck. I know that you have the assistance of one of my friends, Verna Bruce, so that will go well.

Minister, I have some questions, and I'd like to have a talk in the form of a question-answer dialogue. So I ask brief questions, and people give me brief answers.

My first question concerns the position of ombudsman. Our report should be published this week or very soon. I hope you intend to establish or table the legislation in the House of Commons as soon as possible so that the ombudsman position is created. You know the situation of this government as well as I do; we never know when there will be an election. It would be lamentable for us to have worked so hard and for that to fall into oblivion. I would appreciate your comments on the subject. Please be brief.

[English]

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

I couldn't agree more with the member. It is important that we move on this, and we will. It was part of my mandate letter from the Prime Minister that he wants this done. It's part of what I have to do as a minister. It's very important to me. It's important to members of the committee, and more importantly, it's important to veterans. I await the report from the committee, Mr. Chairman, because we will move on it very quickly. At the end of the day, we want the ombudsman to be as constructive as he possibly can be to serve veterans. We're well on the way to doing that, and I look forward to the report of your committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: My second point concerns the veterans bill of rights. At times during our work on the ombudsman, representatives have mentioned the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the veterans bill of rights. Perhaps I'm under an illusion, but I thought I saw that this veterans bill of rights should be short, well made, included in a document that we can keep close to hand and that veterans can obtain. I think that, if we somewhat followed the example of Canada's Food Guide, that might be a style to adopt for the veterans bill of rights.

I'd like to hear your comments on the subject.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Again, I think the member is on the right track in terms of what it should do, what it should include. It's a bill of rights, and basically it would set out the standards that we'd expect to meet in terms of our service to veterans. I could step through some that I know you'll have considered. I'll just mention some of these, because it's very much in keeping with what the member is speaking of, Mr. Chairman.

It includes the right, for example, to be included in the discussions that affect their health and well-being; the right to have family and community recognized as important to their well-being; the right to receive information about services and programs, programs like, for example, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board; the right to know what redress mechanisms are available to them; the right to have their privacy protected; the right to receive services in the official language of their choice; and the right to receive benefits and services according to published service standards.

Those are examples of what might be in a bill of rights for veterans. There are others as well. I mean, the list could be fairly long. But again, I think the key is that veterans know what their rights are, that it's very clearly written, in plain language, and as short as possible. Also, what I'd like to see—and I'm not sure if this is possible—is a card that veterans can carry with them, in addition to a lengthier version. It gives them that reassurance that the Government of Canada will be there for them, that Veterans Affairs will be there for them.

Again, the key is to have it in very precise, clear language. We don't want it in the type of legal language that we're used to around this place. We want it so it's pretty clear—

● (0935)

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Minister, pardon me for seeming to want to interrupt you, but five minutes is so short. Now I'd be tempted to ask you to leave the table and to speak with the deputy minister.

Deputy minister, I know that you have good intentions, and I believe that you're going to do a good job. However, I have one very great concern. It seems that the department hasn't made a lot of progress on the transition between old veterans and new veterans, which I call NVs.

Unfortunately, every year, every month, a large number of our veterans die of natural causes. And our young veterans of 34, 35 and 36 aren't ready to die tomorrow morning.

In his address, the minister spoke of a sweeping transformation. I don't want to cast doubt on his remarks, but I find it hard to believe that the transition is going that well, when we know that only five beds are available for new veterans at Saint-Anne-de-Bellevue Hospital.

I'd like to know your position and your overall plan on the transition between old veterans and new veterans.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Thank you for that question, which goes to the heart of the transformation the department has been facing in recent years.

We have acquired sound experience in treating the veterans of the world wars and the Korean war. Everyone agrees that our programs and services were well adapted, in terms of both disability pensions and health care. I believe we know our clientele quite well.

However, the average age of the new generation of veterans is 36, compared to 83 for our old veterans. These are men and women who are in mid-life and must continue leading an active life. We have to help them return to the social and economic life of this country.

You said that the department was facing a major challenge and that you were somewhat concerned about the speed at which the transition is taking place. I can assure you that, when the government put this new charter in place, in mid-2006, additional resources were allocated to the department. Last night, I looked at a table, dated this week, a copy of which Verna Bruce gave me, which shows the results of the new charter. The prediction that these new veterans had rehabilitation needs more than disability needs is corroborated by the high rate of acceptance of rehabilitation requests: 93 percent of those requests have received a positive response, and the average response time is 39 days.

That shows a need not only for disability pensions, but also for rehabilitation services. The department has put in place what it needed to process those requests promptly, within a processing time of 39 days.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Can we have a copy of that table?

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Perron.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I just want to request a copy of the table she just referred to.

● (0940)

Ms. Suzanne Tining: With pleasure. We'll send it to the committee.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: We could immediately make a photocopy, if you wish. We have people who can do that.

[English]

The Chair: All right, fair enough.

Normally we would have our NDP colleague chime in at this point, but *c'est la vie*.

Now we'll go to Mrs. Hinton for seven minutes.

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

I'd like to begin by echoing the comments that came from my Bloc colleague. This is probably the most non-partisan committee on the Hill. It would be a serious shame to taint this committee's mandate with personal innuendo and negative comments.

Having said that, Mr. Minister, I would like you to please explain, if you could, what are all the things that VAC has implemented under your current role as the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada.

Before you answer, sir, could I please also take a moment to welcome the new deputy minister? We see each other in passing, and it's wonderful to actually have you here with us today. Hopefully all members of this committee will have an opportunity in the near future to spend a little more time with you and get to know you a bit better. We welcome you to your new role; it's wonderful to see you here assisting veterans.

Mr. Minister, please answer, if you would.

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

I think the most important thing, which we touched on, as did other members, is we implemented the new Veterans Charter. As you all know, the charter was passed in the House of Commons in May 2005. We went almost an entire year under the previous government without its implementation. So that was one of the first things we did within two months of taking office. We implemented it very quickly.

As the deputy attested, it's basically on target and working according to plan. The interesting thing is that it's an open charter. As needs arise and changes occur we can adapt the charter to meet the needs of our veterans. That's the refreshing part of the charter. In addition to that, we spent \$352 million more on veterans than the year before—\$250 million on the implementation of the new charter.

I'm really pleased about the small announcement we made last week with the Prime Minister on National Flag of Canada Day about the commitment we made to the Juno Beach Centre. As you all know, the invasion of Normandy was one of the pivotal events in the history of World War II. It changed the whole complexion of the outcome of World War II; in other words, we won and the Nazis lost. Canada never had a lasting memorial to those veterans, where we landed on the shore at great sacrifice. Veterans stood up and took it

upon themselves to build this centre without assistance from the Government of Canada. They just simply did it themselves, as veterans often do. When the job has to be done, they just go out and do it.

So they've sort of struggled over the last number of years. They've had some corporate sponsors. The government, on an intermittent and unpredictable basis, has stood up to help them marginally. So the announcement last week will basically guarantee them success of that centre in perpetuity. With corporate sponsors, I think it will be there for many years to come. In fact, 18,000 individual Canadians stood up to help these veterans build this centre, in addition to some corporate sponsors. It's a good-news story that has gone largely untold over the last little while. Our hats go off to Garth Webb and those veterans who took it upon themselves to build that lasting memorial. We're now there as a lasting partner.

The other one was the *ex gratia* payment we extended to widows—those individuals and dependants who basically fell through the cracks between the passage of the Veterans Charter and the failure to implement it by the previous government. We extended \$250,000 tax-free to widows who otherwise were ineligible simply because of the lack of implementation of the Veterans Charter. It was passed in the House but never implemented quickly. We quickly implemented it and made up for the failure to implement it by the previous government by extending those *ex gratia* payments to those widows. It was very gratifying personally to do that, with the help of many of my colleagues in cabinet and the Prime Minister.

The other one was the process we put in place for the VRAB. I think it's a very professional board now, with certain standards and criteria. You have to be qualified to be appointed to that board. I think that's very gratifying. The board is pretty much at a full contingent now, to catch up on the backlog that existed simply because the board was not up to a full contingent when we took office.

I think we've made a lot of progress on the Agent Orange file. As I say in this business, you never brag about anything or assume that anything is completed until it's finally completed and delivered. But it's one that I've worked very hard on. My colleagues, many of you around this table, have been very helpful to me on both sides of the House on that file.

●(0945)

The department has worked extremely hard on this file, and I've driven myself fairly hard on it. They've risen to every task that's been asked of them. They have devoted many hours to this, knowing we had to deal with 40 or 50 years of failure to act on it. I'm very pleased with the progress we're making, and I think at the end of the day it's going to be done. We're talking today about a veterans bill of rights and an ombudsman, so we're making progress on that as well.

I feel pretty good about our first year. I guess in the course of a normal mandate of four to five years...considering that we've done quite a bit in one year, I feel pretty good about it. But there's more to do, Mr. Chairman. We're committed to the mission, and we're going to continue to do more for our veterans.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: What's the approximate timeframe, from your perspective, to put the bill of rights and the ombudsman in place?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I think part of that is maybe in your hands, Mr. Chairman, in terms of the committee getting some of this out. If I'm not mistaken, I believe the committee is pretty well finished on the ombudsman. We're just awaiting your report. Based on the work we have done with veterans organizations and the committee, we'll be well-positioned to act very quickly on it. The same applies to the bill of rights.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Cuzner for five minutes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister, and congratulations on your post, Deputy Minister.

I'll ask two questions, and I want you to understand that in no way do I question the commitment of the minister to his mandate or to the veterans of this country. That being said, I feel obliged to go back to the VIP program. I don't want to get into whether it is a forgery or anything like that. That's not what it's all about.

There was an intent to extend, and there was an expectation that the program was going to be extended. The first reference to it was in October 2005. I know I asked the question in June 2006. The reference in 2005 was that the benefits would be extended immediately, and the reference on June 9, 2006, was that we were going to act on this very quickly.

Where is the extension of the benefits to the veterans? How do you see those benefits being extended? Perhaps the minister can respond to that.

●(0950)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Mr. Chairman, I think the member framed it very fairly, and I think on that basis I want to answer fairly as well. The fact of the matter is that we can debate who wrote the letter and who signed the letter. That's, I guess, not important in the overall context of what we're trying to do. I think the member would agree with that. So that's sort of an academic argument, if you will. But I do know that this is a concern of this particular member. He's raised it in the House. He's raised it nationally on many occasions.

One of the things I did, Mr. Chairman, upon becoming minister, in the first week I was minister...I wanted a health care review done by the department in terms of how benefits are extended to our veterans

and their families. Some of what I found was...I won't say shocking. For example, we talk about 94,000 people in the VIP, but there are 258,000 dependants left outside of it—I think I'm correct in that—and that's a huge number. But we also have thousands of veterans, Mr. Chairman, who are left outside of it. We actually have veterans who do not qualify for the VIP, let alone their widows. I'm told by the deputy that there are 166,000 veterans who don't actually qualify for the program.

You could actually say that the wheels were off the program from the get-go, if you will. So it is not only the widows issue that's an important issue. That's an emotional issue. We have veterans, who served their country well, receiving a program, and upon their death they want to know that their wives and their families are going to be taken care of. I mean, it's an emotional argument that nobody wants to fly in the face of or attempt to win or lose. The fact is that the program has to be reshaped and revamped.

In addition to that, Mr. Chairman, many of the programs our veterans have today, that they enjoy today, for example, the priority access beds and the high level of care we provide to, I believe, 11,000 veterans across the country, a most expensive form of program delivery.... Believe it or not, some veterans qualify for the most expensive programs and don't qualify for VIP. Regardless of what political side you're on, does that make a heck of a lot of sense? It makes no sense when they qualify for the most expensive delivered programs and they don't qualify for one that saves the Government of Canada money.

So considering all of this, that's why I asked for a health care review, so we can fix many components of the program, not just attempt to identify, or sort of like a herd of cattle.... How would you call that out in Calgary, sir? You know more about cattle ranching than I do. But you're not trying to syphon off or suction off a little....

So there are many parts of it, Mr. Chairman, that are broken. And I do know that I want it fixed, to be very honest with you. I want it fixed, and I don't want any sense of our saying that we're ignoring a commitment you made. Give your head a shake. We want that program extended. We're working to do that. I'd love to be able to sit here today and tell Mr. Cuzner that it is fixed and that we're moving on. But the fact is that I want to do it right. Would it be fair to fix one part of it and find out that there are still 166,000 veterans who have served who are left outside the program?

We have to be very careful in how we do it, Mr. Chairman. I know that in terms of promises made and who said what, that's the debate that none of us really wants to get into. All I wanted to tell you is that I want to get the thing fixed, and we're going to do it properly, because I don't want to do it in what we call an ad hoc way—a little bit today, a little bit tomorrow, but at the end of the day we still have a confused and convoluted system of delivery of the program. So it has to be consistent with the good management of government.

At the end of the day, we have to consider the veterans and their families. And when we're talking about families, the widows are an important component of those families. There's no question about it. When someone goes off to serve, you have a mother raising young children at home. They get older and they need the Government of Canada to be there with them, and we should be there for them. There's no question about it.

So I take your comments seriously, Mr. Cuzner, and I just want you to know that I'm committed to doing my best to implement some of those changes as quickly as we can.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Just so Mr. Cuzner knows, we're at six minutes and 32 seconds.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I got half of my two questions in.

The Chair: That's the way it works, sir. But it's nice to see the Liberals so spirited this morning.

We'll go to Monsieur Gaudet of the Bloc for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Good morning, minister.

I'd like to make a brief remark in passing: it's been 140 years since Confederation, and it's been 140 years that either the Liberals or the Conservatives have been in power. Whether things go poorly or whether things go well definitely depends on those governments, but I don't think we're here for that this morning; we're here to move matters forward. In any case, you won't be able to blame the Bloc or the NDP, since we've never exercised power. I think we're here in order to advance good causes.

Minister, I'd like to know whether the veterans bill of rights is foolproof. I'll explain. Currently in Canada, for example, we have the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which is immutable, which we can't change one iota.

My question is simple: will we have a charter to which we can make improvements any time so that it can evolve through time? Let's get this straight: I don't mean every week, but let's say once every five years or so. I believe that the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms is outdated today and that people use it too often to defend personal interests. I'd like to have your opinion on that point.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, that's a very appropriate comment, in terms of responsibilities of government regardless of what political stripe we choose. At the end of the day, we're here to do the best we can for our veterans, and that's really what the bill of rights is all about.

It's not a stand-alone document in isolation of our Charter of Rights or a stand-alone document in isolation of other safeguards we have within the delivery of programs. Within the program delivery, there are certain rights and charter rights that veterans receive today that are not unlike in other government departments—for example, the right to have services in the official language of your choice. That's very important, I know, to the Bloc members. It's very important to any government. So those rights are not stand-alone in a

bill of rights. The bill of rights has to be consistent with our charter and has to be consistent with the delivery programs we currently have within Veterans Affairs.

I guess at the end of the day it has to be in that plain language, so you'll have a veteran who's 80 years old and he'll know clearly where Veterans Affairs stands in terms of his rights as a veteran or the rights of his family. Again, I think the language is very important, but I think the intent of the bill of rights is something we can all take some level of satisfaction from, because the work you have done on the ombudsman will work hand in glove along with the new charter.

If you look at the Veterans Charter in isolation, alone, and compare it to that of other jurisdictions, for example, the GI bill in the United States of America, you'll see that basically, the GI bill in the United States is a bill of rights and their charter combined into one unit, if you will. Ours will be somewhat different. If you take a look at some of the other countries as well, it's somewhat the same.

Canada will be like a forerunner in terms of a stand-alone bill of rights for veterans. It'll be unlike in any other jurisdiction. I think it's refreshing that we want to do that, and I think at the end of the day it'll be embraced by veterans organizations, because in our consultations, we've listened to them and we've listened to you. So some of your concerns and those of your colleagues you'll see reflected in the bill of rights.

I think at the end of the day it'll be something that veterans will take an awful lot of comfort in. I think at the end of the day we can all be very proud as parliamentarians that we did the right thing for veterans.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Thank you, minister.

Congratulations on your appointment, Ms. Tining. Earlier you said that 93 percent of responses given were positive, that people were pleased, but could you tell me what the remaining seven percent consists of? Does that represent rejections, or is it because people are too far away from the centres? I'd really like to know because seven percent of 10 persons isn't a lot, but of 1,000 persons, that's something else; that represents 70 individuals. It's important to know this so that we can give our veterans correct information.

• (1000)

Ms. Suzanne Tining: As I said, Mr. Gaudet, it's a table that was presented to me this morning. These are very preliminary figures because I wanted to get an idea of how things had been going since the Charter was introduced. I don't have an answer for you this morning, but what we can do is to send you this document and answer that question with the copy we'll send you. I don't have the details in front of me; I only have one page, which essentially indicates the applications and those that have been approved. I'll make a request; we'll get the answer and sent it to you.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Without it being exhaustive, because...

Ms. Suzanne Tining: No, we won't send you a long report. We'll try to tell you...

Mr. Roger Gaudet: That's it; we want a summary

Ms. Suzanne Tining: ...generally which elements were rejected.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: We'll be receiving that soon?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Yes.

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

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gaudet.

Now on to Mr. Shipley for five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome, Minister. Ms. Tining, congratulations on your appointment. It's nice to have Ms. Bruce back also.

I just want to reiterate a couple of things, actually. Mr. Minister, we're at the stage where we are now because this committee has worked very well together. I'm new on the committee, as some of us are, and I guess I would have to say to you that this committee has taken the view that, as you've said somewhere in your brief, it's all about "taking care of those who take care of us". I don't think there's anything better said than that.

As we've gone through the choices on where we would be at today, this committee sat down and, rightfully so, started to look at what was important in terms of the charter that had been passed. Then we wanted to move to the ombudsman, and we're having that discussion, and that report is coming shortly. It will hopefully be put out this week. That has taken us next to the bill of rights, and that's where we're at right now. Through that discussion, this committee also said that the VIP and health care review was something that needed to be looked at.

Mr. Minister, I want to say that I'm glad that you recognize and understand the significance of what this committee has to do in terms of that. I think it's going to be a more complicated discussion, quite frankly, than the bill of rights. So I would ask that when the committee starts to look at the VIP health care, those recommendations that will come from there would be certainly looked at seriously by you and your ministry. Do you have any comments on that?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think this fits in with Mr. Shipley's comments in terms of individual MPs, whether on the committee or otherwise, and with what Bev has said about our commitment to veterans. One of the things that we're aware of around this place, the House of Commons, a parliamentary democracy, is that we wouldn't be serving if they hadn't served. That is basically what Bev is saying. That's something that we are always aware of. We have one of the greatest democracies on the face of the earth, and whether it's the Prime Minister or an individual member of Parliament, we're here because they stood up for us and what we believe in, in terms of freedom, democracy, and rule of law. Many of those families have sacrificed themselves and are still sacrificing themselves to those very values.

I want to thank individual members of Parliament. Although we're sitting formally in a committee this morning, many of you will know—and my chief of staff, Jacques Dubé, will tell you this—that the number of individual members of Parliament we talk to every day is almost amazing. I have a parliamentary liaison person, Bev

Desjarlais, who is a former member of Parliament, and other members will tell you this on both sides of the House—and this is anecdotal, not scientific—but without question we have at least 15 to 20 members of Parliament a day, every day, coming forward to talk about issues or concerns that involve veterans in their constituency or sometimes in some other part of Canada. Truly, there's no one issue that unites parliamentarians more than veterans, regardless of political stripe. It's one of the very few things that does that. Actually, when I was appointed, everyone in cabinet said, "The Prime Minister gave you the best job in Canada." One day I made the mistake of saying that out loud in front of the Prime Minister, and he said, "No, no, the people gave me the best job in Canada."

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Greg Thompson: The truth is, it is a very gratifying job, Mr. Chairman, and the fact is that we're here to do a better job. I think we do have a very high client satisfaction rate, up in the high eighties. Our objective, though, is to get it higher. That's one of the concerns we have: how can we work together as parliamentarians to make it better for veterans? Again, at the end of the day, we have to be as committed to them as they were to us, and still are to us, in terms of this country. That's basically it in a nutshell. We're just working hard to get it better.

• (1005)

Mr. Bev Shipley: One other question. One of the things when we're dealing with a bill of rights is that a bill of rights always seems to raise a flag because it gets into the legal mumbo-jumbo of meeting all the requirements of the Constitution and our Canadian bill of rights. The concern is that it will get tied up before people can make use of it and access it. To paraphrase you, we want to keep it very simple, in ordinary language, on a card they can carry, that would be acted upon in a very timely manner. Do you believe that can be accomplished?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I think so, Mr. Chairman.

We're talking about an ombudsman and a bill of rights. The strongest ombudsman for a veteran will always be his or her member of Parliament—there's no question about that in my mind—and our respective legions, support groups, and veterans organizations. It's hard to define which one is more important to a veteran, because they're all important.

There's no question there's a special relationship between veterans and their members of Parliament, regardless of political stripe. Probably the strongest support veterans will ever get is from their individual member of Parliament. They know they'll always have the ear of government. I'm not saying that because we are government, but I think it's always been the case. When members of Parliament go into the House of Commons, I think they always feel pretty comfortable crossing the aisle to talk to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, because there's a commonality there that is very seldom evident in other government departments.

The bill of rights is almost a support document for that reality. When you hear a complaint—and I'll hear complaints as well, it's not all good news I hear—you respond to it as quickly as you possibly can in defence of a veteran. That's the way the department works. If we hear a complaint, it's investigated immediately.

This veterans bill of rights, where a veteran could look at his little card and say he's entitled to be treated fairly, decently, and with respect.... Even if something like respect is not part of the equation in terms of how a veteran is treated, the department immediately responds to that. I know we've had instances in the past where we had complaints about employees. Those complaints are immediately investigated and, if necessary, dealt with quickly. It's something we don't belabour or talk about; we respond quickly, as the former minister will attest.

It's something Veterans Affairs has done consistently well over the years. At the end of the day, we're not serving 1,000 or 2,000 people, we're serving hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families. Mistakes happen in a system that big. Think about it. You've got 11,000 veterans in priority access beds, contracted beds, across the country, veterans who are not capable of functioning without the assistance of that high level of care. Mistakes can happen, but incredible as it may sound, the complaints in terms of treatment of veterans is minuscule in terms of the overall delivery of these programs.

The truth is, we're doing a pretty good job, but we can do better. We can take a further look at some of those programs to make them better for veterans and their families. That's what we're committed to.

• (1010)

The Chair: Over to Mr. Valley for five minutes.

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair and Mr. Minister.

I feel I have to lighten it up a little. You mentioned the people of Canada and the Prime Minister giving you the best job. I notice the people of Canada tend to correct your mistakes.

I have a very serious question, and you may want Ms. Tining to answer because of the field she came from. It has to do with the first nations and Métis veterans who came back after the Second World War. I grew up on stories from my father of how difficult it was to access the re-establishment fund. This was a fund that was paid to veterans when they returned, to go into business, to buy land, to buy a home, or whatever. There were tremendous problems with the first nations and Métis accessing that fund. To this day, we still have issues over it. When I was on the aboriginal affairs and northern development committee, we had a delegation from the Métis trying to access this fund. I'm wondering how the bill of rights is going to help these individuals.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Do you want me to answer the question?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: I would like to suggest, if it's okay with you, Mr. Valley, that Verna provide the background.

Frankly, I haven't been through all the briefing documents yet, in my first few weeks. I know we had a special consideration for first nations veterans, but I don't know the details of how it was implemented, so if—

Mr. Roger Valley: Maybe I'll take 30 seconds and set it up for the committee.

The difficulty was in the remote parts of Canada, where they didn't have access to the department, as people in Winnipeg or Toronto had. In Lake Dryden, a community of 6,000 people, my dad had a

hard time. The first nations and the Métis had a much harder time, through language difficulties, and so on. That's really where the problem started.

Ms. Verna Bruce (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): As part of the work that was done around taking a look at what happened to aboriginal veterans when they came back at the end of World War II, we looked at first nations, Métis, and non-status.

Your question is with respect to Métis. We've done a fair amount of work with the National Métis Veterans Association, which received a substantial amount of money from the government to do a study on what happened to Métis veterans when they came back at the end of World War II.

They gave us a list of about 163 names of Métis veterans, and we did very exhaustive file reviews. I must say that Veterans Affairs has files going back to 1918, and everything is in the files.

As we looked at all of those files, we couldn't find anybody who did not receive the benefits they were entitled to at the end of World War II.

So the minister made the commitment that if a Métis veteran believes that they didn't get the benefits they were entitled to at the end of World War II, by all means come to the department. He's made the commitment that if we find somebody who didn't get the benefits they were entitled to, he would consider looking at providing them a payment, similar to the one to the first nations.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you for that.

My point was to make sure that in the veterans bill of rights we have that it's not only for new veterans, but for the veterans concerning whom we still haven't solved some of those issues.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You still have a minute and forty seconds, if you like.

Mr. Roger Valley: I will give it to my colleague.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, Lib.): There may be time for a full round, but I can start with a minute if you want. Please keep me on the list.

I'll take this minute to make a comment and then come to questions later.

I have to admit to feeling a little empathy for the minister. I think we all know he's an honourable man who finds himself in an awkward situation with said letter. I don't think any of us would want to be in the position of defending the indefensible.

You might want to check the Conservative Party's website, since the letter's contents are there, and we can give you copies of that reference if you need it.

If I was in your shoes, I know I might be trying to find a way to disassociate myself officially from the letter, and trying to find out if Salpie Stepanian is still around. Maybe he or she would be willing to say, look, I had no proper instructions to deal with that.

Get it off your website, so that you won't be facing these awkward and difficult questions in the future.

I'll just make that comment, since I think it's only fair to the minister that he be made aware that it's on his party's website.

When I come back, I'll be asking about something else.

● (1015)

Hon. Greg Thompson: May I respond to that, Mr. Chairman?

Mr. Chairman, that's one of the realities in politics.

I can't resist saying this, but it's something like his party's commitment in 1993 to eliminate the GST—we're still waiting. So who made that promise and commitment?

I don't suggest for a minute that we're going to ignore the VIP issue. I know he's being very kind in how he's phrased this, and I'm going to be very kind as well in my response.

This is just one of the many challenges we have in Veterans Affairs to enhance the program, to do it consistently and not in an ad hoc—make it up as you go along—way. That's why I asked for a health care review, which is about a year to a year and a half away from completion. But there are some things we can and will do in the meantime.

Mr. St. Denis, we're going to make incremental progress on some of these files. We're going to advance some of them more quickly than others, but we want to do it as consistently and expeditiously as we can, in terms of delivery to the greatest number of people.

The Chair: That'll be our time with regard to those five minutes, which started with Mr. Valley.

Now we go to Mr. Sweet for five minutes.

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

Thank you for the opportunity to subject you to some questions, Mr. Minister.

For the record, you know I've said this to you directly, but I want to say that I've had a number of opportunities to interact with your department.

In the greater city of Hamilton we have the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and the Argyle Highlanders. They have had a long tradition of dedicated military service over the last century in Hamilton. They continue to attract a lot of military participation, and we in fact end up having a lot of volunteers.

We've had some tough cases. Your staff has not only weighed in to deal with those cases in their department, but they have been very effective at liaising with other departments. I want to give you and the staff kudos for that. I appreciate it, and I'm glad you're there.

We had Mr. Marchand testify here last week, and he was describing some initiatives that are being taken to clear up the backlog of these thousands of cases.

Mr. Minister, are you dedicated to continue to allow him to do that, and to give him the resources to do it, so we can get this backlog cleaned up and begin to hear these cases in real time?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you again, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Sweet has a good point. In terms of the backlog at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, the backlog looked almost insurmountable when we took office.

The board was short a number of members. We've filled those vacancies—let's put it that way—to catch up and to get up to speed with the process. At the end of the day, it is important to veterans, because you're basically arbitrating.

As you well know, Mr. Chairman, this is a quasi-judicial body that is at arm's length from the minister. They're appointed, and the minister does not interfere. In fact, even when I meet these people at the airport, I sometimes don't want to say hello. You do not interfere in the process. It is a judicial process, and they have a very important role to play.

The truth is we are catching up. At one point, I believe we were behind several thousand cases, if you will. The number would probably shock you, but the fact is we've made 11 appointments to the board. The board is almost up to a full contingent, and we can move through those cases more efficiently. "Expeditiously" is the term we often use.

I'm very confident we'll catch up. In terms of the contingency of the board or the makeup of the board, we're pretty well up to speed there as well.

Mr. David Sweet: Good.

I mentioned the number of veterans we have, and I've interviewed a number of them. I've had cases of very seriously wounded veterans, which you've helped me with, as well as those who have come back physically whole. Surprisingly, in between those two spectra, one of the things I've noticed is there has been a difference this time in psychological health.

In the last interview, I asked a number of questions. They told me about the interaction Veterans Affairs has on the ground with DND, making sure that as they come to the end of their action in Afghanistan, in this case, they're aware of a number of options to, in my words, "psychologically decompress".

Can you share with the committee the options that some of the soldiers have, as they come to the end of their tour, so they come out with the least occurrences of any kind of stress-related inabilities afterwards?

● (1020)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you.

That's an important issue and one that we have spoken a little bit about this morning.

Just as background, Mr. Chairman, one of the interesting Canadians I have met on this job, who is very supportive of me personally and is many times supportive of the government, is Senator Dallaire. He is one of these rare individuals who speaks openly and honestly about his challenges and how he has had to deal with those challenges. As the minister, one can learn a lot by talking to people like General Dallaire. It's not that we're going to agree on everything, but we do agree on this particular issue and the approach to it. I'm very confident that the department has taken extraordinary steps to recognize the situation early, Mr. Sweet, because it's real and it's occurring.

How you really deal with it effectively is to see the early warning signs of members who are presently serving, so that when they do leave the military, it has been identified, hopefully, properly dealt with, and that counselling can be ongoing. When members do leave the services, whether by injury or by choice or by retirement, counselling is made available to them immediately and in fact in a lead-up to their retirement.

That was one of the weaknesses prior to the new charter. As we mentioned, it had to be updated to recognize some of these realities today. Some of those realities are present in the everyday workforce, if you will. There are mental issues, mental strain. Maybe it's the pace we find ourselves running at in the 21st century.

One of the points that some military people—Canadian Forces members now serving or veterans—have made to me over the years is that it's not just the bullets and bombs that we worry about. Sometimes a physical injury is easier to repair than a mental injury.

I am absolutely confident that we're moving in the right direction. We monitor those programs very carefully. We are always there to serve the veterans in those very special need areas. That's definitely one of them, no question at all; there would actually be no debate on that.

Mr. David Sweet: I have one question about the bill of rights and your thoughts on it.

It seems to me that in the veterans community—and this would go right across the entire spectrum now—there is a feeling that Veterans Affairs may not be the only one, but certainly that it should be a significant player in being the champion in remembering the sacrifice of those who have served for Canada.

What is your opinion, Mr. Minister, about including in the bill of rights that a veteran would have the right to rely on Veterans Affairs to be the stewards of the memories of the sacrifice of those who have served?

Hon. Greg Thompson: That, again, is a powerful message—hearing it from you, Mr. Sweet—because that is one of the things that I think we have to constantly remind ourselves of the great sacrifice made by so many Canadians and of the act of remembrance.

I know in the speech I gave last week, when we were talking about the Juno Beach Centre—and it is sometimes hard to articulate this within 30 seconds or a minute and a half. One of the things that really troubles veterans who came back from these areas of conflict, and still come back, is why they safely returned home and their friend didn't: why did he die or she die and I'm still here? Sometimes there are these psychological issues that veterans deal with

effectively internally, and for others, because the circumstances are more poignant, they're more real, more horrific, if you will, the internal processes they use to deal with that are not enough to get them through it.

One thing that every veteran wants, and more important, almost, at some levels than anything else, is this sense of remembrance—remembering the sacrifices made by their colleagues who never returned home. On this idea of remembrance, the department does a much better job today than they did many years ago when I was a student. They're doing a better job with the schools, in terms of that educational process, so that we as Canadians will always remember the sacrifices of those who came before and not take any of this for granted.

We sometimes maybe worry that we take democracy for granted, that we forget about the sacrifices that those young men and women have made in the past and are still making today. So that act of remembrance is something that I think the department does very well, and we never want to lose that. We have to continue to reinforce that sense of remembrance in the greater community, because, as you well know, none of us can do it ourselves. There has to be a sense that this is what we do as Canadians.

I think we're doing a much better job of that within Veterans Affairs than we did even that many, many years ago when I taught school, and even those more years ago, if you will, when I was a student. And of course, in today's international climate, I think it's even more important.

• (1025)

The Chair: I will just let everybody know that we allowed for about 10 minutes on that side because normally we would have gone Conservative, NDP, Conservative, but such is the way of life today.

Now we're going over to Monsieur Perron for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Minister, I have two questions to ask you, and I'd like your answers to be brief enough to fit into the five minutes available.

Let's start with the backlog at the Appeal Tribunal. In my view, you're not going to solve the problem by adding staff, but rather by improving this service within your department. I spoke to you about the case of Armand Pilon. I don't understand how you can tell that man and his wife that you believe their testimony without changing the decision rendered. These people deal with this kind of case every day. Mr. Pilon has been fighting since 1987. The only and dirty solution remaining for him is to take his case to the civil courts and to fight your department, simply because, at the Appeal Board, they can't or don't want to give him the benefit of the doubt.

I believe in Mr. Pilon. I believe in what he, his family and his children tell me. He came to ask me for help because he couldn't get any from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The problem stemmed from the Appeal Board. That's where the problems arise in the majority of cases, and that's why this department has such a backlog. Now I'd like to hear your comments.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Mr. Chairman, that is one I have spoken to the member on, and of course, as you well know, I'm not going to talk about individual cases this morning. I cannot do that.

• (1030)

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: That's an example.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: There are privacy laws. We know that, and the member knows it as well. We respectfully agree on that show.

One thing we have in Canada is an exhaustive process, which many jurisdictions don't, whereby we have an internal process of review. Eventually it can reach the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, where we actually provide legal advice to and support for the client. No other jurisdiction, no other country in the world, does what we do in terms of attempting to get a favourable resolution for the veteran. In many of these cases I would like to see a different outcome, but it is quasi-judicial, and we have to go by the act as it is written. Sometimes it would be a matter of changing the act to make the outcome different.

At the end of the day, you're dealing with thousands of cases, and most of us know full well, because we're all human beings, that we'd love to see a yes to every one of them. I would, personally. But in the real world we know that's not possible. What I can take a level of satisfaction in is knowing that we have a process that works, that it's exhaustive, and that it's better than that of any other jurisdiction in the world.

Every one of us in this room is a human being, and we're not perfect. And the system will never be perfect. That's what we have to work hard to achieve. In some of those individual cases where members of Parliament have intervened, there's still a possibility that they can be changed or the outcomes altered, depending on what stage they're at, because of new evidence that comes forward. That's one of the things we're often reminded of, that sometimes in cases that go to the Veterans Appeal and Review Board, if particular evidence had been present during the initial application, the outcome could have been and would have been favourable.

That's what happens when you work on individual cases. I know the level of frustration the member is experiencing. He's human, he represents these people, and he cares about them.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Minister...

Hon. Greg Thompson: Yes?

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Pierre Allard, of the Royal Canadian Legion, is in the audience. He's from my riding. I'd like Pierre to confirm for us that, at the legion, 80 percent of the problems of service officers are associated with the Appeal Board. We simply want to tell you that things aren't going very well at that board.

As regards post-traumatic stress, I agree with you that it is often easier to repair a severed arm than psychological damage. I can see that point. However, new clients recently seem to have appeared. These are individuals who fought in the First or Second World War

and who suffered shellshock. That's like post-traumatic stress. These people have always treated themselves with gin. Some of them see that Veterans Affairs Canada is specializing in these matters, because of the young people, and are asking me whether they can seek assistance from the department. People 80 years old ask me that, and I tell them yes.

We're going to have to start reorganizing. I invite my friend Suzanne to think about people 70, 75 or 80 years of age who have been drinking since they came back from the war and are dealing with alcoholism. That's because we never solved the problem in their heads.

I wouldn't want the same thing to happen to our young people, our sons who are 34 and 35, and for them to deal with that problem until they die.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: No. I agree, Mr. Chairman. We can't and we're not. We're really focused on that issue. There's no doubt in my mind that we are. Again, we've opened up a number of centres across the country, and we continue to focus on that issue, knowing that it's real and it's not going to go away. We have to work, as the member said.

I can remember one of the most interesting talks I heard with regard to this was General Dallaire—who I've mentioned. He talked about the importance of going to the Legion on the east side of Montreal with his father when he was a kid, about the camaraderie, where one minute they'd be laughing and the next minute they'd be crying and hugging each other, and sharing that kind of information. That was the only help they had. He said that the Royal Canadian Legion probably saved more members than you can imagine, and other veterans organizations were.... I think we're better at dealing with that as a department at a human level. Early intervention truly is the key to it, and professional counsellors who are the best in the world.

St. Anne's, which is less than half an hour's drive from your riding, Mr. Parent, is a world-class facility that's almost, in a sense, leading the rest of the world in terms of what they're doing at that facility, right in your home town, if you will. A lot of what they do at St. Anne's is disbursed, if you will, in terms of training and techniques across the country to those other centres. That is like the centre of the universe, if you will, in terms of what we're doing on that particular issue, which is such a concern of yours. I do know that it is a concern of yours because you've sincerely approached me on these issues a number of times. I just want to convey to you that we understand your concern.

On the VRAB, just to pick up on your previous question, and to emphasize this as well, the people who are going on that board today are highly qualified. We want competent people on that board, and we've gone to elaborate lengths to make sure that competent people are on that board. In fact, some of the recent appointments would indicate we're doing exactly that. I think the appointments have been generally well received. The individuals who have been placed on that board are well received in their communities, with professional backgrounds that will add a level of professionalism to the board, which I think all of us at the end of the day will appreciate.

Just so you know, when we're talking about those World War II traditional veterans, we're losing 23,000 of them a year now, succumbing to old age and sickness, dying, if you will—a word we don't like to use. We're bringing about 4,000 new CF veterans into the system, with an average age of 36. So we're losing 23,000 and bringing in 4,000 new veterans a year into the system.

The needs of those veterans have changed over the years. That's why we responded with a new veterans charter, and some of the issues that you've identified are the very ones we're responding to.

At the end of the day, which is kind of sad when you think about it, as we're sitting here we only have three remaining World War I veterans. In fact, I think I'm travelling to Toronto on Saturday to see one of them on his birthday, just to go down and say hello. I guess you're entitled to a visit by the Minister of Veterans Affairs when you turn 106. I've met all three of them. All you have to do is the math—20 years between World War I and World War II, or thereabouts. Twenty years from now, other members of Parliament—you may still be here, Mr. Parent, but I'm not sure if I will—will be sitting here talking about the last three or four remaining World War II veterans. We've got 20 years. They have 20 years left. Most of them would have five to ten years in terms of statistical evidence and the actuary charts we know so very well.

We have a very few short years to get it right for those who are remaining, so that's what we have to focus on. You're absolutely right. Some of these people have suffered in silence for many years and we don't want to forget about them. You're absolutely right.

•(1035)

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

Now, on to Mr. St. Denis for five minutes.

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

I'll officially thank you, not only for your presentation earlier today but for that of Ms. Tining, and I offer best wishes on your time in the department, which I hope will be lengthy and fruitful.

Before I go to my question, I'll ask for a quick clarification. If I heard correctly, the minister mentioned that this government had picked April 1 as the implementation date for the Veterans Charter. In fact, it was under the previous government's watch, and I believe the information is well established that April 1, 2006, was always the date. That date had been determined in the previous year as the implementation date. That's just to correct the record, if indeed I heard the minister say that.

On the question of the bill of rights, you mentioned in your opening remarks that you're looking forward to this committee's

reporting on the ombudsman. We'll be looking forward to a thorough but expeditious consultation by the department to implement—first of all, to get a bill in place so there won't be a long delay in the implementation of an ombudsman. Do you see the business of studying a bill of rights as in any way delaying work on an ombudsman? In my mind, yes, you can find a relationship, but they are still mutually independent in terms of initiative. In your mind, is there any reason to delay the work towards an ombudsman because work on a bill of rights is still going on?

•(1040)

Hon. Greg Thompson: No, Mr. Chair, I don't see any delay or impediment to delivery of either of those. As you well know, we're waiting for the report of your committee, and in terms of the work that has already been done with veterans organizations, input from various members of Parliament, and input from others, I think we're well on the way in terms of a bill of rights as well. I don't think any of those, you might say, intellectual debates is going to impede in any way the implementation of either of those. We have hived off part of the department—or a team, rather—to work very closely with veterans organizations.

I know Mr. Perron indicated who's behind me here in terms of some of the veterans in the room, but they were definitely consulted, as I mentioned in my remarks. A lot of that work, in a sense, has been done for us by veterans organizations and some of the people around here as individual members, regardless of what side of the House they sit on, in terms of what they'd like to see.

We've listened and we've consulted, and I think we're going to act wisely in the sense that we're going to act on the recommendations that the very people in this room and others have made.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you.

Related to this, some members in the House, including me, have had the honour and the sad duty to be involved in the funeral and memorial services for a couple of soldiers killed in action recently in Afghanistan. It was a very unsettling, sad experience for me.

I'm wondering if the bill of rights shouldn't include families who have had a loved one killed in action. When was that soldier ever a veteran? They didn't become veterans; they were killed in action. Are the families to be treated as the families of veterans? Consider the debate we held about a year ago on what to do when a soldier is returned to Canada—the flag issue, the return ceremony, and how to treat the families. I was very impressed, by the way, with the support the families had in the community around the services. I was very impressed with that.

In your opinion, should this bill of rights include issues in that nebulous grey zone around the death of a soldier, the return, and the eventual settlement by the family of whatever benefits are available to them, or do we wait until some time well after that before we treat them as a veteran's family?

Hon. Greg Thompson: You're talking about the transition between the active duty of a soldier and the death of a soldier, male or female—because we never know. We have a lot of young men who have lost spouses in conflict zones. At the end of the day, you never know, do you?

But all the families are included in that. I know the transition period is one that is handled very well between DND and Veterans Affairs, Mr. St. Denis, because a veteran is a veteran is a veteran.

Of course, when we're talking veterans, we're talking about their spouses and we're talking about their families. That will be, actually, part of the bill of rights: recognition of the veteran and his family. That will very much be part of the bill of rights.

• (1045)

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Do I have a few seconds left?

The Chair: You're at six minutes eight, six minutes nine.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Just very quickly, then, much has been made by you, here and elsewhere, of the \$350 million to be spent on veterans. We would say much of that was committed under the previous government's watch, including about \$250 million for the Veterans Charter.

How much of that \$350 million is new money that could be genuinely attributable to initiatives of this government?

Hon. Greg Thompson: All the moneys that are apportioned, as you well know, are voted upon by individual members of Parliament—either yes or no—but the truth is those are moneys being delivered by this government today and not by the previous government. Governments have a choice about whether to spend money or not, and we've chosen to spend \$352 million on veterans, over and above what the previous government spent. There was a deliberate decision by our government to do that, and we have done it. Over \$200 million of that, as you've indicated, goes to the Veterans Charter.

It was spent under our watch, and that was a deliberate choice on our part.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mrs. Hinton for five minutes.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you very much.

Mr. Minister, there are so many things I could touch on. You've raised a number of issues today, but one of the issues that was raised, aside from post-traumatic stress, which is a very difficult thing for all

of us to handle.... I always call it “invisible wounds”. It's quite easy to identify someone who's lost an arm or a hand from war, but it's quite a different matter to actually judge by looking at someone what's happened to their psyche from being in war. So I'm very pleased with what we're doing to try to make things better for those with post-traumatic stress.

You also gave some statistics that showed we're losing 23,000 World War II veterans a year. That's a very depressing figure. It seems such a shame. But since the subject of remembrance was raised, I wonder if you'd like to make a few comments regarding a few things that have happened in the last couple of weeks and about something that's going to happen in the next month or so.

I was able to participate in a program that was called Valentines for Veterans, which had young schoolchildren creating valentines and giving them to veterans one to one. I watched the faces of the veterans who were receiving the valentines: they broke into grins from ear to ear. And I watched the children, who now had a better understanding of what it was these people sacrificed and what it is that they enjoy today because of those sacrifices. I found that very heartening.

I also had the opportunity to attend a tea with the nursing sisters, which was, again, another real eye-opener. These are ladies—I'm sure they wouldn't mind my saying so—who are in their eighties, incredibly feisty, and excellent examples of the kind of care that veterans have received from back then up to today.

Those are all positives, but what I really would like to talk about is something I don't understand. It's something that has been bothering me for a number of years, and that is that when we make these pilgrimages, as a government, we bring in a number of administrative people—I have no problem with that, but we are not bringing in enough students. I think if you're going to have remembrance and you're going to have an appreciation, students are a very important component of that.

I understand, Mr. Minister, that we're going to be bringing 5,000 students to Vimy this time, and I wonder if you could elaborate on that. I've witnessed a couple of ceremonies in preparation for which students actually had to do research on one of the veterans and then tell their stories. It was probably the most moving thing I've ever seen.

We've now got 5,000 coming. Could you please elaborate?

•(1050)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Well, it is. When you're talking about the number of students that will be going to Vimy, I just wanted to confirm that number with the deputy, because every time I say 5,000, I always ask, "Is it 5,000?". Of course it is. It's a staggering number. I believe, if I'm correct in this, they've raised their own funds to do that. It just shows you the dedication of these young people and their teachers and their schools. But that's the big number, and they will be travelling to Vimy. Again, it's like the outreach to the schools through Veterans Affairs and tying in with the schools and with young people. It will be a fascinating experience.

One of the things on these pilgrimages is that the department has to be very careful in how it balances this, because in years past, and through no one's fault, sometimes there haven't been enough veterans included in the trip and there has been a sense that too many department people were going. So it's a really critical balance. In the House of Commons I would like to see it possible that every member of Parliament who wants to go, can go, but we know that's probably not going to happen and won't happen.

However, they're expecting at the rededication ceremony at Vimy somewhere in the vicinity of 25,000 to 30,000 people, and maybe more. Actually, the French government just told the department yesterday, in talking to the deputy, to expect a huge group of people there. It's going to take a contingent of Veterans Affairs personnel there to manage that and work through. Again, from the ones I have been on, I would argue that we're not taking more than we need; we're taking what we need. We have care and concerns for some of those veterans who will actually be travelling with us.

I think it will be a fairly good balance of veterans and caregivers and young people and so on. It will be a big event in France. Anytime you get 30,000 people to an event, I guess you could call it a big event.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I guess the one thing I would say is that I'm glad I'm not going to have to chaperone, and I have nothing but empathy for the teachers who are going to have that chore.

But having watched students on other occasions on these pilgrimages, they behave very well. They're there for a purpose. They're there to hear history firsthand. I commend the schools and the teachers for putting this initiative forward, and I commend the government for actually putting some meaning to "Lest We Forget". The way to teach children about the past is to have them be involved in it. I think this is a wonderful experience that they're going to have. It's something they will never forget. I know from having dealt with children for a number of years that when they go back home—we may be bringing up to 5,000, or 5,000 may be coming—they're all going to tell their friends as well. So the numbers will spread, the word will spread, and their appreciation of what kinds of sacrifices were made will also spread.

I commend the government for going in this direction.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

One of the things I should have picked up on, which you had mentioned, is that there are some tasks that they're required to perform in terms of research of our veterans and so on. It's really part

of the educational process, which they do a good job on. When you're talking about these little notes and valentines and so on that schools send to veterans, they're pretty touching. There's nothing like an eight-year-old student, or a six-year-old, writing a note to a veteran. I think they're more poetic than the best of us.

In terms of the nursing sisters, that's a group of veterans I don't think we overlook, because there is one of my favourite group of veterans in the nursing sisters, and any time I go to Charlottetown I want to have tea with the nursing sisters. We did have tea with the nursing sisters this year on Valentine's Day. They're a remarkable group of women, and you can learn so much, even as members of Parliament, when you're talking to these people because they remember everything so clearly and distinctly, and I guess they're so appreciative of what we do for them. Sometimes we say, are we doing enough? I guess a little tea, in terms of recognition from time to time, is the least we can do.

•(1055)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to let everybody know that we are very tight on time here. We've got another committee that's meeting right here at 11, and I can see some of them already assembling and taking off coats in the back. I think we're pretty much up on our time. I apologize. I know there are some people who wanted to get some extra questions in, but I think operationally we're done.

I just want to thank the minister for his appearance and thank the deputy minister and the officials.

We have a press conference. I'll be tabling the report with regard to the ombudsman at 10 o'clock on Thursday morning. Therefore, we thought it would be wise to book the press conference right after, at 10:30. There are two ways to go on this. One, we could have the entire committee there. The other option is that if you had one member from each party, it makes it easier in terms of the logistics. I'm flexible on this matter. I think some people are thinking that it would be better to have one because it's tough to fit that many people in that space.

Are there any thoughts on that?

Mr. Brent St. Denis: My initial reaction is to make sure everybody feels welcome to come. We don't have to have everybody speak, but if people wanted to be there to be around the chair for the photo and that, we would sort out among ourselves who would make comment.

The Chair: I think that's a good measure. What if we have one member from each party able to speak and everybody is welcome. Is that fine?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I think it's a nice accommodation.

All right. So that's that. We'll see you all on Thursday, hopefully. Thanks very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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