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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. I'll call to order meeting number 21 of the Standing Committee on National Defence.

Today we have some special guests. We're very pleased that they took the time out of their busy schedules. It's a long way to come to visit with us. We appreciate that you made the effort to do that.

I think there are some key points our visitors have that they want us to comment on. I'll just have them introduce themselves, then if we could, we'll go around the table and start with our usual format and have people introduce themselves and where they're from. Then we'll get into the gist of the matter.

Welcome, Madam Tobias. I'll just let you have a few minutes to introduce your people and maybe give us a little background on why you decided to come to visit us.

Ms. Thandi Vivian Tobias (M.P., Chairperson, Portfolio Committee on Defence, Parliament of South Africa): Thank you very much, Mr. Casson.

My name is Thandi Tobias, and I'm the chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Defence, from South Africa. Here with me I have my three colleagues.

This a multi-party delegation. On my left we have the Honourable Oupa Monareng, who is a member of the Defence Portfolio Committee and also a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Defence. On my right is the Honourable Somangamane Benjamin Ntuli, and he is also a member of the Portfolio Committee and the Joint Standing Committee on Defence. To his right is the Honourable Velaphi Ndlovu. He is also a member of the Portfolio Committee and the Joint Standing Committee on Defence. We also have our two staff members, E.T. Lourens and Mfanelo Zamisa, from the Ministry of Defence, a parliamentary liaison officer.

Let me briefly take this opportunity to thank you for accommodating us in your hectic schedule, so we can be part of today's meeting. The South African delegation is here on a fact-finding mission to come and learn a few things about how Canada is able to effectively implement your oversight mechanism over the executive. In South Africa, the relationship between Parliament and the executive is not a punitive relationship. There is a separation of powers in terms of responsibilities, so we oversee the work of the executive. The Department of Defence accounts to Parliament, and the Secretary of Defence reports on an annual basis and on the finances, so we vote on the budget of the Department of Defence.

We are having a discussion about the ombudsperson. I know here you call it ombudsman, but we are very sensitive to gender issues in South Africa; we prefer to call it ombudsperson. Currently, the ombudsperson in South Africa resides in the office of the public protector. A debate was being entertained that he or she must be in the Department of Defence. We then decided to go to countries that operate almost the same as South Africa to see how they have modelled the issue of the ombudsperson.

We will be having presentations as part of the program this week. We'll be meeting on Wednesday, I think, to hear a presentation on the ombudsperson.

Thirdly, our interest is with the military academy. As we all know, we need to rejuvenate the army, the military, and all the forces on a continual basis. We want to learn from you how you train your forces and also to have some relationship between South Africa and Canada in terms of exchange programs. That's another aspect that will also be entertained during the course of the week. We also want to learn from you about peacekeeping missions.

South Africa is involved in the African continent, in SADC, the NEPAD program. Currently, we are in Burundi, the DRC, Sudan, Darfur, Ethiopia, and so on. We also know the history of Canada in terms of peacekeeping missions, and I've read some information regarding your priorities. We realize you've been doing a good job, so we also want to learn how you have been doing it, and how we can improve.

That's basically why we are here today, to learn and share experiences with our counterparts, and also to be more effective in our oversight mechanism.

Without any further ado, I will rest my case and allow a discussion.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This, too, is an all-party committee. We have members of the opposition and members of the government. Right now, we're in a minority government situation, so the opposition holds the balance on the committees, as well as in the House, if they all work together. We're in an interesting scenario right now.

If we could start with each party, you can all introduce yourselves, then comment on some of the issues that have arisen here.

We'll start with the official opposition, the Liberal Party, then we'll move to the Bloc Québécois, then to the New Democratic Party, and then we'll move across to the government. Then we'll have a back and forth.

Let's do a five-minute round.

We'll start with Mr. Dosanjh, from the official opposition.

• (1540)

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you for visiting us. I'm Ujjal Dosanjh and I'm from the west coast of Canada—from Vancouver, British Columbia. I'll let my colleagues introduce themselves and then we can carry on after that.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Good afternoon. Welcome; my name is John Cannis. I represent a riding from the city of Toronto, Scarborough Centre. Welcome, and I apologize for being a couple of minutes late.

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): My name is Joe McGuire. I'm from the eastern coast of Canada, from the province of Prince Edward island.

Hon. Andy Scott (Fredericton, Lib.): I'm Andy Scott, the member of Parliament for Fredericton, New Brunswick, also on the east coast of Canada. I represent the riding that has, geographically, the largest military base in Canada.

The Chair: Do you want to carry on?

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): You'll need your translation device. I'll be talking in French.

There are two official dialogues in Canada: Inuit and French.

An hon. member: And Bachandais.

An hon. member: Don't forget the Newfies.

The Chair: Okay, you should be able to hear the interpreter in English.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: My name is Claude Bachand. I am the member of Parliament for Saint-Jean. The Saint-Jean constituency is located 25 kilometres south of Montreal. I am a member of the Bloc québécois.

You mentioned training. The only training base for recruits in Canada is in my constituency. All those who join the Canadian Armed Forces must spend 13 weeks at the Canadian Forces Base Saint-Jean.

Go ahead, Robert.

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): I am Robert Bouchard, member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord. My constituency is located in Northern Quebec, 200 kilometres from the City of Québec. There is a Canadian air force base with F-18s in my riding. There are two places with F-18s in Canada: Cold Lake, Alberta, and Bagotville, in my constituency.

[English]

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Good afternoon. My name is Dawn Black, and I'm from the New Democratic Party, the only one from that party on the committee. My riding is in beautiful British Columbia, on the west coast, on the Pacific. I represent New Westminster—Coquitlam. In terms of armed forces, we have a very old and proud regiment there, the Royal Westminster Regiment, which is a militia regiment. I welcome you all here; I think we can have an interesting dialogue about the different ways. As another aside, I have traveled to South Africa as well. Welcome.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Welcome. My name is Blaine Calkins. I'm the member of Parliament for a constituency called Wetaskiwin, which is in central Alberta. Unfortunately, I don't have any military bases in my constituency, but they're all around—at Wainwright, at Penhold, and at Edmonton. I'm surrounded on all three sides. I'm very glad that you're here today, and I look forward to hearing your comments.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): I'm Cheryl Gallant, member of Parliament for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, which is 100 miles west of Ottawa. Our committee had the privilege of visiting it. We're home to CFB Petawawa, home of 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group. We are the training ground of the warriors, and our soldiers are the finest in the world, so I can understand why you'd want to have an exchange with them.

• (1545)

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): She's right.

My name is Laurie Hawn and I represent the riding of Edmonton Centre, which is in Alberta. This is where most of the oil and gas is in Canada, and you may hear about that from time to time. I spent 30 years in our air force as a fighter pilot. There are no military establishments in my riding, but I'm very closely connected with the large army base in Edmonton and the large air force base in Cold Lake, Alberta, as well.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): My name is Russ Hiebert. I'm the member of Parliament for a riding that's close to Vancouver, British Columbia, on the west coast. You've heard a number of my colleagues talk about being from Vancouver; just to give you a perspective, it's three time zones away, and I think all of us were on the same five-hour flight last night to come to Ottawa. It's a great distance away. I'm also the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence.

The Chair: Thank you, committee.

I'm the chairman, Rick Casson. I represent the riding of Lethbridge in southern Alberta. We have the 18th Air Defence Regiment in my riding. They are now a reserve regiment, and we're working on some changes there hopefully in the near future.

I don't know if Mr. Hawn mentioned that he is a former fighter pilot in the air force; if he did, I missed it.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I did, but feel free.

The Chair: When he doesn't back himself up, we do.

The oversight mechanism is your first issue. Does anybody have a comment on the process that we go through as a government with the relationship between the military and Parliament, and how that works?

Go ahead, Laurie.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I can take a stab at that.

Obviously, there is civilian oversight of the military, and that's the way it has to be. The military is there to serve the policies and objectives of the nation, but they're there as servants. They don't set policy; they carry out policy.

The government's obligation, in my view, is to provide predictable funding over the long term and to support a plan that supports the national objectives, whatever they happen to be, and our individual objectives in conjunction with our allies. The military needs to take that funding and plan and, in my view, develop combat-capable forces above all else, because you can do less demanding missions with more capable people, but it's very difficult to do more demanding missions with less capable people. You have a level of training you need to be at; it almost doesn't matter which mission you do.

The other thing you need to do—you talked about things like military colleges and so on—is develop a leadership model that brings people into the military, whether it's the enlisted ranks and up through the enlisted ranks or the officer corps and up through the officer corps. You need to develop leadership. You do that through a training model through professional development in things like military college, staff school, staff college, National Defence College—there are various levels, all the way up.

You take the people who have demonstrated leadership potential and make sure you give them the extra training that's needed to develop that potential. Over a period of time you wind up with strong leadership throughout the chain of command. Again, they are in the best position to carry out the objectives of the government, to whom they are always responsive and responsible.

The Chair: Go ahead, Cheryl.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: In terms of parliamentary oversight, tomorrow evening will be a fine example of one of our practices. It is something we implemented, something the Conservatives felt necessary when we were in opposition, and that is a committee of the whole, in which we'll have four hours to question the minister on the estimates, expenditures, and what not.

The Chair: That's a way for parliamentarians of all parties to have access to the minister for four continuous hours. Questions are usually fairly wide-ranging; we try to focus in on what the issue is. His duty as a minister of the crown will be to respond to the questions that arise in terms of holding the government to account in relation to servicing the military.

It's an interesting process. If you have time, it will be from 6:30 to 10:30 tomorrow night, if you want to come and sit in the chambers or turn on a TV and watch. It might be an idea that would merit a look.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Part of the oversight actually happens in the House itself, where you have to answer tough questions in question period for about an hour. This committee is actually mild compared

to what happens in the House. This committee tries to function, to the extent it can, in a non-partisan way in order to advance the collective interests of the nation. Partisan politics does enter into it, but we try to ensure that we don't get carried away.

I have a question to ask once others have made a comment. I want to ask a question about your country on a different issue, but one that is related to the military. Maybe I could pass to others, and then you could come back. I'll ask the question then.

● (1550)

Mr. John Cannis: I think one of the most enjoyable things in our parliamentary system, as I'm sure you're aware and as the chair touched upon, and Mr. Dosanjh as well, is the committee work.

I have experienced over the years I've been a parliamentarian that a good portion of mostly non-partisan work is done here in committee—not just with the Department of National Defence, but with all the various ministries. It's an opportunity in which there's a process whereby the opposition and all the other government parties get to question the minister, and the bureaucrats as well, at any given time.

I'll close with this. Our committees here in Canada are basically what we call masters of their own doing, Mr. Chairman, if I could use that word.

I'll pass it on.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Scott.

Hon. Andy Scott: Thank you.

I think the civilian oversight here, through a combination of historic parliamentary traditions that I'm sure we share—and the opposition critic has mentioned question period and other processes.... The idea of having the minister appear for four hours on estimates is a new phenomenon and, as Cheryl said, was a proposal that was put forward by the government when they were the official opposition.

I think it's a bit of a work in progress, frankly, but in my experience—I've been a minister, not of defence, but a minister of the crown—and with the structure that is employed by National Defence, with a civilian deputy, a chief of defence staff, and others briefing the cabinet regularly on questions related to defence, the balance that is struck here is an enviable one, born of some application of modern governance concepts and the historical parliamentary piece.

With those two things together, I think it serves as a model for modern governance in terms of civilian oversight—in the case of defence, but also in the case of the police and of other, similar entities that serve the country. One needs the expertise, but at the same time, I think the civilian oversight is critical.

The Chair: One other thing is that right now when we're heavily involved in Afghanistan, the Department of National Defence is coming to us every other week, giving us an update and a briefing on what has transpired in Afghanistan over the last period of time.

We've had our first one, and it brought us up to speed, and now every couple of weeks we'll get another one, and they'll be informing us. So there is an opportunity there for us to have an understanding about what the military is doing in an operation.

Claude, did you have something?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I would add that there exists a certain relationship between the minister, the spokespeople and the Standing Committee on National Defence. The Constitution of Canada enables the minister or the Cabinet to decide to go to war or deploy forces. The relationship between the department and the Standing Committee on National Defence is always a little more difficult. The committee is independent, but we cannot have the minister appear every week to question him. However, he is before us every day in the House of Commons, where we can question him, which is rather interesting.

I have always been an ardent supporter of better control by the Standing Committee on National Defence. I say better control because we are members elected by the people, and it is important that there be a close relationship between the department and us. The Department of National Defence is often accused of lacking transparency. Our goal is that as many things as possible be public. In this respect, we are very happy to have convinced the minister, when he appeared before us, that there be briefings on the Afghanistan operations every two weeks. This is a victory of the committee, one of the first ones I've seen, I must admit.

Otherwise, we work independently, and the minister makes decisions independently. I believe that the closer the relationship between the department and the Standing Committee on National Defence, the better it will be for the taxpayers, who have the right to know what's going on, how their money is being spent, because they're the ones who pay. The committee's contribution is important in this respect.

• (1555)

[English]

The Chair: Very good.

Ms. Black is next.

Ms. Dawn Black: I've listened to what my colleagues have said and I support what each of them has said. I think we do a relatively good job in Canada, but I think there are ways we could make improvements too. I'm delighted that you're here to look at the Canadian system. I'm wondering if you're travelling to other countries as well; maybe I can get that from you later.

I've met with some of the people from the European countries to discuss with them how their parliamentary oversight works and how their relationships work with both the ministers and the departments—which are separate, here in Canada; the department is separate from the Minister of National Defence and has its own leadership, although at the political level it's the minister who's meant to make the decisions.

In some European countries they actually assign a person from the department—a senior civil servant from the Department of Foreign Affairs or the Department of National Defence—to each of what

they call in Europe the “parliamentary groups”. These groups are what we call our parliamentary caucuses. When I asked about that, because it seems like such a different way of doing things, they were very strong about it. They felt that the direct link from the opposition parties to the department really fostered a better understanding by the opposition parties of the key issues and of how the department worked.

They did say, however, that there had to be a very high level of trust from both the bureaucrat who's assigned to the opposition party and from the opposition party in relation to that bureaucrat. It was an interesting concept to me. They felt that it gave a much better nationwide approach to things like national defence and foreign affairs.

I don't know if you're travelling to other countries, but that's one thing.

Tomorrow night we will have four hours in the House of Commons to question the minister. I think questioning on expenditures is the basis for it. It will be an interesting process, if you're around to watch some of it.

Also, I was interested to know that you're here to look at how the military is trained in Canada. It's top-notch. I think someone said it's the best in the world, and I think that's an accurate reflection. Canada is fortunate to have a multicultural, multi-ethnic population, which I think gives us an advantage in terms of working internationally. Maybe we have a little higher degree of sensitivity to other cultures—I hope we have that, and I think we do—and other languages as well. I think all of us are proud of the training that's provided for the military in Canada.

On the other point you talked about, the ombudsperson, I agree with you about the language. When I was first in the House of Commons, the chair of a committee used to be called the “chairman”, and when I was chairing the committee I didn't feel very good about that, so we've progressed in terms of committee chairs: now we say “chair”.

I hope you're meeting with the ombudsman here. He's new. This is a position that hasn't been around a long time in Canada, but some very effective work has been done. I think you have an opportunity to learn a great deal. If there is any way we can be of help, we would be delighted to do that.

If you get an opportunity, I'd like to hear about how things are going in the African Union around the DRC and in the campaigns and missions you're working on in Darfur in the Sudan. I know that there are some very difficult situations going on there.

Thank you very much.

• (1600)

The Chair: We have some other issues they want to hear about, so let's go to Mr. McGuire, and then we'll try to get into some of the other questions they have before we open it up for a couple of questions from Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Joe McGuire: I'd like to say something and then jump to the question.

As you know, this is veterans week, and 60 years ago Canadian regular soldiers and soldiers from South Africa fought side by side in many battles through Europe. We shared a lot of the same military traditions of the regular forces. Of course, those were different regimes. We found it difficult sometimes to be officers, too, when we were integrated into the British army, particularly in the First World War.

Since Mr. Mandela became your president, have you set up any military training schools or universities that are different, or modelled on the ones that we have or the ones that the British or the Americans have? Have you progressed on the training side as far as your military is concerned?

Ms. Thandi Vivian Tobias: Thank you, Chairperson.

In fact, the intention from our leadership was to ask more questions than answer questions. I thought maybe today it was our day, but I will attempt to answer some questions, and our members will also respond to some questions. I will also request that they, at some point, be given an opportunity to ask questions.

Let me start with the issue of the minister's intervention on the estimate of our expenditures, the E and E. In our case, the accounting officer, who is the DG, whom we call the secretary for defence, is the accountable officer. He is the person who will come to present the budget at the beginning of the financial year in the committee, and we'll vote on that budget. Coupled with that he will have to present a strategic plan for the department so that we may link the financials to the objectives.

On that basis, the committee will sit on its own after the presentation and check on whether they agree with the budget and will vote on it. Then it will be processed through the National Assembly.

The role of the minister becomes a political role, not necessarily the accounting role; hence the minister, in our case, will answer questions in the chamber, not necessarily in the committee. He does come to brief the committee on specific issues that the committee has identified. But because we avoid at all costs micro-managing the department, we avoid that kind of interaction except to ask specific questions in the chamber. The only time the minister will come is maybe when meeting to present the bills to us. The briefings we get from government officials, in most cases.

In terms of issues of transparency, a member has said that opposition parties will have to have a direct link with departments. In our case, we try to minimize the interaction, so that it is an organized interaction. Members of Parliament have an opportunity to raise issues in the portfolio committee, which we process through the office of the Speaker to the department for answers. In that manner, we are able to have information at our table in a channelled way and avoid unnecessary debate in the committee, which we can confirm.

I want to cite an example. If a member of Parliament says to me, "Chair, I have interacted with the department on the statistics and I want us to discuss this," I will not have a basis of discussion, because I will not have seen those statistics on any matter. It will be better if the member is in the portfolio committee; then we'll compile the statistics from the department and enter the discussion. That's how we operate in South Africa.

On the issue of the peacekeeping mission, I will reserve comment for now, because we still want to interact more on that one.

In terms of integration, yes, the South African Defence Force, which was SADF, was disintegrated, and an integration process established around an African lifestyle defence force where, as you will know, in terms of policy we wanted the SANDF to have civil leadership, where you integrate civilians into the force. We were able to integrate the liberation movements into the South African National Defence Force, including some members of the South African Defence Force.

We integrated after 1994. We have a force that is professional—it's not based on conscription—and hence we have established the South African Military Academy, where we rejuvenate our force on a regular basis. That is linked to the University of Stellenbosch, which has prepared more youths to be students.

I also do not want to get deeper into that, because it's one of our intentions to look at the model from this side. Let me also allow members of Parliament to respond.

Mr. Oupa Ephraim Monareng.

• (1605)

Mr. Oupa Ephraim Monareng (M.P., Portfolio Committee on Defence, Parliament of South Africa): My name is Monareng—"buffalo". It's a nice name.

I'm just trying to check on.... For example, you raised the issue that the minister is responsible for the deployment of forces. In our situation, it is different. The president of the country is responsible for deployment, because it's a political decision that has to be taken. When that position has been agreed upon by cabinet, then the president can deploy forces. But that deployment should be with the approval or sanctioning of Parliament.

That is why the Joint Standing Committee on Defence has to be informed by the president. The committee has to sit to look into the reasons that have made the president and the cabinet deploy forces anywhere, especially on peacekeeping. So our system is different.

The issue around civilian oversight is actually, in short.... I assume—I'm not sure, but what I can detect from what you are saying is—that your system is still very militarized. It's still very militarized in the sense that the minister of defence is left to deal with many different issues.

But in our situation, political decisions have been taken, so we have the chief of defence on the one side, who is responsible for operational matters—command and control—but the secretary of defence is actually responsible for making sure there is civilian oversight over the military, precisely because the history of the military in our country is a very terrible history. To ensure oversight and to check on the military, the civilian authority, through the defence secretary, has to make sure there is an assurance of checks and balances.

In that way, all the issues spanning our situation are motivated by political decision-making, which comes from cabinet and goes to the president, and when deployment has to take place, it does, without any problem.

Then, we shall have to ask about your experience, because historically, in our situation, we didn't have a clear role for women in the military. I'm interested to know, because I was informed reliably that you are moving in other directions.

We have since 1994 made sure that there were women integrated in the army, in the air force, in the navy, in the South African medical services. So there is a great deal of progress. And we have, through our oversight in the committee, from time to time when we get an annual report, asked the Department of Defence how they are progressing in terms of representivity: how the women are represented. And the issue of colour and issues of race are problematic there. So we've coordinated a graph, which from one first year to.... I'm sure that there are targets they want to have.

So I'm saying maybe you can share experience with us. Then there are a whole range of issues around peacekeeping that we will be interested in.

On the issue around the military academy, in our situation we want to extend it to Africa, as one academy of excellence like West Point and your French academies and the Canadian ones. But we do have what we call a military academy. We still have a military college.

• (1610)

I should make a distinction there: we also have a war college, so we have three institutions that deal with training, but the military academy is meant to be an academy of excellence. It's meant to be a professional academy.

It's meant to benefit not only South Africa, but the whole of Africa, and if it becomes a part of Africa, then we can have interactions throughout the world. That is why we are interested in pushing our military academy to greater standards, such that we are participating in Africa and the world.

The objective is not to be a military institution. We call ourselves peacekeepers, and I'm told that in the Canadian experience, you are also peacekeepers.

Those are the issues we think we're interested in.

The Chair: If there are other members who want to speak, please go ahead. Are there any other comments?

Mr. Somangamane Benjamin Ntuli (M.P., Portfolio Committee on Defence, Parliament of South Africa): Thanks—to both chairpersons, in this case.

I have a few more questions.

Concerning your military academy, what I want to find out is.... There is a new concept. The thinking out there is that you don't want to equate it to your normal universities—you know, the academic standard—but that you have to infuse or inject some military aspect into it.

What would be of interest to me is how you view that particular view. What must be the balance? Should the development be more academic or more military? That would be my first question.

The other one is linked to your.... I do accede to the fact that you say you are also multicultural, but I want to find out about your language policy, because I notice that French and English are used very much.

To my knowledge, I know that at home we've got more than ten languages. We've then come to the point where we say that even though that is the case, at least there is a way for all groups to be accommodated. They are accommodated, but as we develop, at every moment remember that we are coming from the time when Afrikaans was the dominant language. Now we can almost say we can fairly deal with English, because it forces us that way. It is not that we're anti-Afrikaans, but at least we understand it. At the moment we are managing command and control, instructions, and so on and so forth, through one medium—English.

In your case, I want to find out if you are sticking only to the two. Then what happens to the other cultural groups' languages, in terms of your language policy in defence?

Third, I also want to find out about the ombudsman. Normally, if you look at the matter of the military ombudsman, there is a view on the one side that in our case, when we look at a military ombudsman, yes, we have explained it to ourselves; I am also saying that there are still questions we are still going to have an opportunity to ask him directly, but I am hearing that the military people here....

What will happen in most cases is you'll find that banks will have a bank ombudsman, and so on and so forth. The idea is to say that in addition to the command and control lines that are there and available in your command and your Parliament to the ordinary men and women in the defence force, there will be issues that will actually still perhaps not be adequately dealt with within that system, such that then the military ombudsman would be appropriate to deal with that.

Would you say it's still a matter that would not undermine the authority of your command and control, the line of command and control of defence?

I will rest there. Thanks.

• (1615)

The Chair: Canada is officially a bilingual country, both French and English, and as far as being multicultural is concerned, certainly we are. But when it comes down to it, it's French or English. Services are offered in both. People are accepted in both. To be able to advance in the military, you have to be bilingual to get to a certain level. Maybe others will want to comment on that.

Because Laurie has been in the military, maybe I'll get him to comment on the issue of the military academic balance and how that works out in a minute. But John was first with a comment or question.

Mr. John Cannis: I just wanted to comment on how important the role of the ombudsperson or ombudsman is.

The ombudsman is appointed by our minister, but is not selected by the minister. There is an extensive pre-screening, if you will, to select that person. As the chair clearly pointed out, we are officially a bilingual country, French and English.

Once a short list is created, the minister moves forward, and this committee also has and always takes up the opportunity to bring in the about-to-be-appointed ombudsperson or the candidate. We feel, have always felt, and will continue to feel that it is a very important position that is independent, on its own, and does, from what we have heard from other countries, an excellent job in the way of the system. So that's the way we select our representative.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, would you want to comment on the military and academic balance?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Royal Military College is a fully accredited Canadian university. It grants degrees in a variety of disciplines. Most military officers now have degrees and most have a capability in French. At Royal Military College, though, it's not just an academic education. There's a heavy emphasis on the military as well. They're in uniform, they're drilling, and they're practising military disciplines and learning military culture and socialization and all those kinds of things. So at the end, they come out of RMC with a degree that's equivalent to one from any university in Canada.

They also have a very strong grounding in military and foreign affairs and "officership", if I can call it that. Their summer training is taken up with professional military training, whether it's pilot training or trades training within the navy or army environment. So it's very much a mix.

Just on the issue of the ombudsperson, there are a couple of sarcastic expressions, including the idea that the military is there to defend democracy, not practise it. There has to be a chain of command, and there has to be discipline. When push comes to shove, there have to be heels together, yes, sir, and away you go.

At the same time, people have individual rights. That's where the ombudsman comes in. The ombudsman is there to make sure that, as much as the military needs to have a strong command and control system, there also needs to be a capability of an individual being able to make sure his or her rights aren't being violated in some way.

It's always a tough balancing act, but since that position has come in, I think we've seen historically that the person has done a very good job. In fact, we're looking at expanding that to an ombudsperson for veterans as well, because it has worked quite well.

• (1620)

The Chair: We have ten minutes left. I want to make sure you get the answers to—

Ms. Dawn Black: I was the one who raised the issue of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity in Canada. I wasn't raising it in terms of language spoken within the Canadian Forces. What I was saying was that it was a reflection of the Canadian military when we go to do peacekeeping operations. We may have people who speak both French and English or just one of them, but they may also speak other languages that are invaluable when you're dealing with peacekeeping or peacemaking situations in other parts of the world.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Thandi Vivian Tobias: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know you are tempted to ask about other things that we might deal with. My interest is more in an oversight mechanism. We want to understand your relationship as a committee of Parliament with the department and entities that account to Parliament. We want to know the strength of Parliament in terms of its oversight, in the event that we find ourselves in a situation in which government becomes stronger than the other parts of the state. In our context, we have three arms of government. We have Parliament, government, and the judiciary. In a way, the executive, the cabinet, is accountable to Parliament.

I want to understand the strength of your committee in terms of monetary policies of government, without necessarily micromanaging the department, without necessarily calling the accounting officer every five minutes. What is the relationship? Where is the separation of powers? To what extent are you a formidable force in terms of being a decision-making body of government?

Government makes policies, but Parliament monitors whether those policies are implemented, especially as it relates to the mandate you're given from your constituencies and what the people want to see the department be. I want to look at those issues.

The Chair: Andy, do you want to comment? No?

Does anybody else want to jump in on what our guests are looking for in terms of the relationship between the committee, oversight, Parliament, and the ministry?

Mr. Dosanjh, do you have any comments?

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I'll be rather frank with you. I don't think the committee per se has a relationship with the department. The committee is, in a sense, an all-party organ of Parliament, and it is not supposed to have a legal or other relationship with the Department of National Defence. Therefore, as I've said, we try to function in a non-partisan fashion, but sometimes it should be almost an adversarial process if we don't like collectively or partially what the department might or might not be doing.

We have a cordial relationship. Obviously there are protocols as to the briefings that we talk about and other information that we might want. For instance, we're now doing a study on Afghanistan. They do some of the research for us and the committee does research on its own. They can provide information to us. If we are able to go to Afghanistan, they will assist us with security arrangements and the like. In that sense, there is a relationship, but there is no legal connection per se, like the one the minister has with the department itself. We don't have that.

The Chair: One thing we do is the estimates and the budget. The committee deals with those in most instances. The committee of the whole, which is happening tomorrow night in the House, is going to replace us in terms of looking at the estimates as a committee. We can look at the estimates and we can move motions to have the line items changed or reduced. So there's a process there whereby we have some oversight.

The budget is prepared by the government and brought forward. Within that will be the budget of the Department of National Defence. That all becomes part of the entire global budget.

As far as the committee is concerned, I agree with Mr. Dosanjh. We can study whatever we want, and right now we're doing Afghanistan. If we prepare a report with recommendations, that goes to the government and they have to respond within a certain period of time. But we're on our own and we can branch off in any direction we want. When it comes to the dollars and the oversight there, though, that's something the committee does have some control over, along with any subject that we want to deal with.

The authority that the committee has—and this is a debate that has gone on forever, and still will go on forever—in terms of what influence we have over the department or the functioning of the military is pretty much up to the government. We can make recommendations, and they need to respond, but how the government proceeds is actually up to the government.

• (1625)

Ms. Thandi Vivian Tobias: We have two members who want to ask questions, including Mr. Ndlovu.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Velaphi Bethuel Ndlovu (M.P., Portfolio Committee on Defence, Parliament of South Africa): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairperson.

I just wanted to ask about your experience with peacekeeping. We are new in the field, and you are very old in the field. What are the nitty-gritties that need to take place? We know that countries have different positions on how they want to do it, but what is the Canadian position on peacekeeping?

The Chair: Did you catch the question, Laurie?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: My perspective may be a little different from that of others, having been in the military. We don't do very much of what you think of as Canadian peacekeeping any more, because we're not involved in a lot of situations in which there are two sides who want a peacekeeper in the middle. Mostly, we're in places where there are people who want to kill each other, or there are people like some in Afghanistan who want to kill the civilian population, and we're trying to prevent that. I suggest that it would be similar to what's perhaps going on in Sudan, in Darfur. You have innocent people being massacred, and somebody needs to step in and try to stop that.

To be good peacekeepers, in my view—again, I'm probably a little bit biased—you need to have forces that are combat-capable, because it may go from peacekeeping to war fighting within a matter of minutes. That has happened to us in places where we have been peacekeeping, like Bosnia, in the Balkans. We were sent there on a peacekeeping mission, but we wound up in full-blown combat on very short notice.

So in my view, you need to have people and organizations that are fully combat-capable. They can do a less demanding mission, but it's very difficult to send in people with blue berets and no combat capability, and then have them wind up in a situation in which they're getting shot at.

So first and foremost, in my view, you have to have people who are capable of fighting. That may not be their mandate when they go there, but they have to be capable of it, because they may be faced with it very quickly.

The Chair: We're quickly running out of time, and we have other witnesses here too.

We have a couple of minutes for you to wrap up, and if there's anything that you want more specifically, you can get us a letter or a note—I think you have to some degree already—and we can follow up and maybe get our researchers just to respond in a very precise fashion to the questions you're asking.

Ms. Thandi Vivian Tobias: Thank you very much, Chairperson.

We welcome the opportunity to be allowed to share in this experience. I hope this interaction won't end at this level. We'll have the opportunity to interact at a particular stage.

Of course, we're here for the whole week. We'll also meet other people from your military headquarters and the military academy, with the ombudsperson, and so on.

I think this is the starting point of a relationship that we'll be taking to certain heights. I'm humbled by the opportunity for us to come here and interact with you.

Thank you very much.

• (1630)

The Chair: Very good, and we appreciate you doing that. I know there are parliamentary associations. I'm not sure if there's a Canada–South Africa one or not, but I know from my experience of having been on a couple of those that they're very worthwhile. The creation of that might be something about which you might want to approach our government.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Can I just thank you for building the Nyala, as well? That vehicle has saved a lot of Canadian soldiers' lives in Afghanistan, so thank you for that.

Ms. Thandi Vivian Tobias: Thank you.

The Chair: Very good.

We'll take a short pause. We'll suspend, change our witnesses, and thank our guests.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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