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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): This is another meeting, of course, of our veterans affairs committee. Today we have a video conference dealing with the study of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board selection process.

Today we're going to have Victor Marchand, the chair, and Dale Sharkey, director general—and oh, look, there you are. Well, that was fast. I'm quite impressed.

The way it generally works here is you have 20 minutes to present, and then after that we begin with questions on pre-selected rotations from the various parties.

So for 20 minutes, as you choose to split it up between the two of you, the floor is yours.

Mr. Victor Marchand (Chair, Veterans Review and Appeal Board): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Translation]

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your invitation.

[English]

I'm pleased to have an opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and to give you an overview of the past year and the year to date, and to answer any questions you might have.

With 12 new members starting with VRAB in 2006-07, and six new members appointed in 2007-08, this has been an intense time, with significant efforts going towards training new members and integrating them into the board's work. As you know, VRAB is an independent quasi-judicial tribunal that operates at arm's length from the minister and reports directly to Parliament through the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

The majority of our claims are represented by the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, which is separate from the board. Our mandate is to provide an independent appeal program for disability compensation. Since 1995 we have adjudicated over 108,000 claims, and of the 175,000 disability compensation recipients, approximately 6% have had a VRAB decision.

We make every effort to try to provide as timely and efficient a process as possible, but the reality is that some cases take longer than others to process due to their complexity. To help appellants better understand our process, we have developed a brochure that outlines

the process and answers key questions that applicants may have. We will be sending your committee copies of these brochures in December.

Here are the latest statistics. During the last 16 months there has been a significant decrease in the review claims pending a hearing; there's been a 50% decrease at review. At the same time, there has been a 25% increase in the pending appeals claims. In the last fiscal year of 2006-07, the BPA received 15,000 claims, of which 43% were counselled out; and VRAB finalized 7,132 decisions. For the year to date, we are on par to hear another 7,000 cases, maintaining the high volume of cases that were heard last year.

We have been doing a lot of analysis on the length of time claims are in the system with both the representatives and the board. The timeframe for applicants from the day they contacted BPA, or another representative, to the day they received their decision is, on average, 7.5 months for a review and 10 months for an appeal. You should know that for much of that time the claim is with the representative and not in the control of the board. Representatives are often challenged to obtain relevant documents, such as medical reports, and to prepare a case.

VRAB does not have any significant backlog of cases ready to be heard. With full membership now, the board has a greater capacity to hear cases than ever before. We have been working with the BPA and the Royal Canadian Legion to try to bring as many cases forward as possible to be heard.

For 2006-07, the favourability rate was 60.7% for reviews and 37.5% for appeals where the decision was varied in favour of the applicant. These numbers have to be put in context. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs rendered 24,000 first decisions in the last fiscal year, and of those, we finalized over 5,700 review claims. As you can appreciate, we're not varying every departmental decision.

The member selection process was reformed in December 2004. We were one of the first agencies to have a revamped selection process that's both effective and transparent. We have now been doing this for three years, thus we have experience, and we are now taking the time to reflect on whether we need to make adjustments to any of our criteria. The process is in three stages. First is the screening committee, then the written assessment, and finally the interview and reference check.

From December 2004 to the present, nine cycles were held, 659 applications were received, 446 were screened in, 397 wrote an exam, 239 passed the exam, 234 applicants were interviewed, 197 passed the interview, and four withdrew. Out of all these numbers, 25 were appointed from the pool. There are presently 168 qualified candidates in the pool. In 2006-07, 12 new members were appointed. In 2007-08, six new members were appointed.

The board currently has 28 members on VRAB. All have permanent status. Fourteen are deployed: there are three in British Columbia, one in Alberta, six in Ontario, and four in Quebec. Fourteen members are stationed in Charlottetown. Of all these members, 13 are bilingual and eight are female.

Before I conclude and defer to the director general, I would also ask you to note what I think is an important highlight of our objectives in this year: the institution of a new complaint process.

Dale, please go ahead.

•(1110)

Ms. Dale Sharkey (Director General, Veterans Review and Appeal Board): With the advent of the bill of rights and the new veterans ombudsman, the board realized that we should have perhaps a more formalized process for individuals dissatisfied with the manner in which they were treated by VRAB employees or members, and one that would also give them an opportunity to provide us with feedback or input into our process, so we put in place a process that is relatively formal but at the same time flexible in allowing individuals to initiate a complaint in a number of different ways, whether by phone, by email, or through the forum we have made available through our Internet site.

We implemented this process in October 2006. To date we have received 21 complaints that we would call formal. All these complaints are given time and are investigated; depending on our findings, we will take appropriate action, and of course each and every individual will receive a written reply from the board.

There is a range in terms of the kinds of complaints we receive. They generally include the manner in which they were questioned at hearings, the length of time for the claims, and the questions that members may have asked at the hearing relating to the credibility of evidence or the applicant's testimony. They may feel there was a lack of professionalism at the hearing or that all the evidence they have was not examined and thoroughly canvassed.

Of course, this complaint process doesn't address someone who is dissatisfied with the outcome of their decision. That, as you know, is the whole reason for the board; in the cases of those individuals, we educate and inform them on what the next level of redress would be and make sure they're aware of their options.

So far we've had some good success, and we hope it will complement the introduction of the ombudsman's office.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Victor Marchand: Mr. Chairman, in conclusion...

[*English*]

The Chair: You just said you were finished. Is that right?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Victor Marchand: I would like to thank you, once again, for this opportunity. If you have any questions for either Ms. Sharkey or myself, we are at your full disposal.

[*English*]

The Chair: No problem. We notice there is a significant lag when you switch languages, that's all.

In terms of our list of questioners, Mr. Valley with the Liberals is up first for seven minutes.

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Marchand and Ms. Sharkey. You are becoming frequent guests at our committee. I think this is the third time you have been here recently, and we're running out of questions to ask you. Last time many of our questions circulated around the appointments that hadn't been made to the board or the shortage on the board, and through your report we now know that you are full.

I asked you a question back in September or February, on one of your last two visits, and maybe you will have a chance to answer it now or can answer better now that the board is full. It is about the number of board members. I think you said it's 28; you just reported on it briefly a minute ago. Is that enough to cover all the decisions, because you have no backlog? Are you confident now?

You were confident before that 28, if you ever got to that number, would be enough. You are at that number now, and you just said you have no backlog, so will that do the job?

•(1115)

Mr. Victor Marchand: Yes, indeed.

Mr. Roger Valley: We always have concerns about appointments, to make sure they don't become partisan and to make sure that the best people are on the board. My questions to you in one of those two meetings—I'm not sure which one—were on some of the concerns about the process. You mentioned that with respect to the cities, you do hold hearings throughout Canada. I forget how many different sites again. Could you repeat that?

Mr. Victor Marchand: There are 33.

Mr. Roger Valley: But when those hearings are heard, the next appeal process always goes back to Charlottetown, does it?

Mr. Victor Marchand: Yes, as a general rule, but not necessarily. We've held appeal hearings on occasion outside of Charlottetown, for instance, to accommodate the Legion in Ottawa. We will be initiating a new process, and this is BPA's initiative. They will be fanning out some of their appeal work to their regional lawyers. Most of the appeals will nonetheless be heard in Charlottetown but will be argued by BPA regional lawyers in the months to come. We're trying to spread the appeal work across the BPA system.

But as a rule, and to answer your question directly, appeals are heard and held in Charlottetown.

Ms. Dale Sharkey: And we'll use video conferencing for those lawyers who are spread out across the country.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you for making the effort to get out into the regions, because that has always been a concern, being from northwestern Ontario, that we can get to where the people are. It's costly to travel and everything else, and technology is going to allow us to use this method. I encourage you to continue with that. I hope you have a fine success in getting on into the regions, because it's important, as you know. First of all, when they come to you, they're coming for a reason. They're upset about something. And then the process happens and the appeal is that much more stressing. So I think it's important to provide the service wherever you can, although we realize the restrictions of travel and everything else.

One of the questions that has been talked about is the war service veterans. The number of decisions are decreasing. I assume that has a lot to do with the fact of their advanced age and that we're losing a lot every month. The other side of it is that the number of decisions you're making is greatly increasing. Is that because you have a full complement now? You have all your people in place.

Mr. Victor Marchand: We have all our people in place. I think there was, just at the beginning of the implementation period of modernization, back in April 2006, a sudden increase in claims and applications being filed at that time. That bubble of cases has been processed, and that was in fact the reason for which we were extremely busy over the past year, year and a half. And we will continue being busy because of that influx of applications in April 2006 for a while longer.

Mr. Roger Valley: Can you refresh my memory why the bubble was...? Obviously you were short of board members.

Mr. Victor Marchand: There was a bubble and we were short of members, so it was the worst-case scenario for us at that time. We initiated a very—how shall I call it—courageous program of asking our board members to sit alone all throughout last fall, which not only helped us to process our regular work, but it allowed us to process 500 more files at that time. I think the organization was

flexible, and we adapted to the situation and we faced the situation. It turns out it was the correct strategic action to take at the time, and we're proud of that.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you.

We talked about the bubble, and I'm not sure why it happened. We've heard in this committee before that the veteran who's retiring now from the force is much younger, more sophisticated, more knowledgeable. Was that part of the bubble or do you foresee another one coming in the future?

Ms. Dale Sharkey: I can perhaps speak to that.

In the department, when they introduced the new Veterans Charter, which changed for the modern-day veterans to go from a pension to an award, they had a great influx of applications coming in prior to the introduction of the disability award. People wanted, I think, to perhaps be part of the pension regime or did not understand the process. So in that particular year they received about 35,000 applications, which was thousands more than they would normally have projected to receive in any given year. I think from discussions with departmental folks, in the subsequent year they perhaps received fewer applications because many people got in the door earlier on, before the new Veterans Charter. That's the bubble we're talking about that's now moving its way through the various steps in the system.

● (1120)

Mr. Roger Valley: Lastly, we talked about getting out into the regions and how to serve some of the far-flung corners of Canada when these appeals happen.

Are there any other plans? Now that your board is full—you've dealt with that issue—are there any other plans on changes to deal with any of the things you may face in the future? Are there challenges we don't see right now that could bring that other bubble in or could increase pressure on you? Is there anything you can plan out into the future on providing service?

Mr. Victor Marchand: The system in my mind is functioning and performing correctly. There are some improvements that can be made in the time it takes between the registration of a claim to the board and the actual hearing of the case. We'll be working over that very specific part of the process.

So the waiting time between someone registering with us and getting their hearing will be worked on. That, I think, is the challenge of the upcoming years.

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

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

Now we move over to the Bloc Québécois, with Mr. Perron for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Good morning, Mr. Marchand. I have an interesting question for you. Can you hear me?

Mr. Victor Marchand: I cannot hear you, but I can hear the interpreter speaking the language of Shakespeare.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: You know my views with respect to the VRAB. I would like to put a question to you that I have never asked before. How is the Chair of the Board selected?

[English]

Mr. Victor Marchand: The chair, as a rule, to my knowledge,
[Translation]

has always been chosen from among Board members. By definition, I imagine that

[English]

the chairman has experience and knowledge of the organization and the field of work that he will be directing for the years to come. I personally was asked whether I was interested in my name being put on a list—before anything was decided, I assume—and eventually I was told that I would be invited to be appointed as chair of the board. To my knowledge, that is what happened in my case.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: This is my last question, but I would have appreciated receiving the answer in French.

Mr. Victor Marchand: If I answer you in French, I hear the interpreter speaking English, which makes things somewhat more complicated. I will answer you anyway, and just try to ignore the interpretation.

In my case, as was the case for my predecessors, the Chair of the Board is selected from among the members. I see this as a wise decision, because the Chair is familiar with the work of the Board and the organization he will be required to lead. In my case, I received a phone call and was asked if my name could be placed on a list of potential candidates. Subsequently, I learned that my name had been selected. That is how it worked in my case.

• (1125)

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

My question is a simple one. How is it that there are so many appeals? Does that mean that the first time veterans meet with

departmental representatives regarding their pension entitlement... Is it because some people are not doing their job, or because it is complex?

Mr. Victor Marchand: Well, I really don't share your view of this.

For example, as of April 1, 2006, I believe the Department had received some 30,000 claims. However, when you look at the situation as a whole, it is clear that only a small percentage of those cases are appealed. Considering the number of applications we process, I can easily say that of those 30,000 claims, for example, not more than 20% were appealed to the VRAB. In fact, it often happens that these appeals are connected to the same cases—which reduces the numbers even more.

Every case comprises several claims. The percentage of cases that are reviewed or appealed to the VRAB rarely exceeds 10 or 15%, depending on the number of pending claims. No, there are not a lot of appeals to the VRAB. However, there is a large volume of claims filed with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I was not giving you an opinion; I was stating a fact. This week, a physician told us that the satisfaction rates were 90% and 96%. If I establish the rate at 80% in the general population, it seems to me that is low. If 5,000 or 6,000 out of 30,000 claims came to you, I wonder whether some people are not doing their job or whether there is a personnel shortage.

Mr. Victor Marchand: I can tell you that within the Department, as a general rule, the favourability rate varies from 60% to 70%, at the first level. For example, in relation to a nominal figure of 30,000 claims filed with the Department at any given time, 60% or 70% are resolved. That leaves between 10,000 and 12,000 cases, and they are brought to the attention of the Bureau of Pension Advocates. The BPA declines to review some of those, which means that, at the present time, between 6,000 and 7,000 cases end up at the VRAB.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I agree with you, but what we see here, in a table for 2005-2006, is that 4,870 cases were reviewed and 1,532 were appealed. That means that 1,532 out of 4,870 cases were once again appealed. Is that correct? Some 222 cases were reconsidered. Would you not say that it is a lot of bureaucracy? Is there not something in all of this that isn't quite right?

Mr. Victor Marchand: No. What you have to do is prepare a table comparing all the current systems for compensating individuals for bodily injuries, including Lloyds, in England, or the various workmen's compensation boards in Canada, which fall within provincial jurisdiction. That will allow you to assess the performance of all these systems. If, ultimately, the system rejects between 10% and 15% of all the applications that are made, that means that it is within the appropriate parameters and that it has done the job it was asked to do. The number of reconsiderations is 222 out of a total of 30,000 claims submitted originally to the Department. Think about it: that is a minuscule amount.

• (1130)

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I will have other questions later.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Monsieur Gaudet. You've run out of time, so now we're over to the Conservative Party, with Mrs. Hinton for seven minutes.

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

Welcome to Mr. Sharkey and Mr. Marchand. It is lovely to see you again. I, for one, appreciate the fact that you've been here three times. You've kept us very well updated, and I think your news today is excellent news.

I recall the last time we spoke you had an 8,000-case backlog, so kudos to you. That's wonderful, and it's great news for veterans. We'll start off on that note.

The second thing I'd like to mention is that this is an unusual circumstance today, because generally speaking, we have the written presentation of what the presenters are going to say. I know I'm not alone at these tables with the very speedy writing here. We were trying to get down all the information because we had nothing to go back to. That's just an aside.

You've had some very serious changes and some great progress. I personally appreciate the hard work that your committee is doing.

Perhaps I could follow up on a question that was asked by Mr. Perron—I believe it was Mr. Perron. You said you were originally appointed as the chair. I understand the circumstances under which that happened, but could you tell me how long you've actually been the chair?

Mr. Victor Marchand: I was appointed in October 2003 and my term is up in December 2008. I was a board member first for three years and then was promoted to deputy chair. I was then acting chair and was appointed full-time chair in October 2003 until December 2008.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Well, thank you. That clarifies that for me.

Now, I'd actually like to ask you a couple of questions about some of the processes that are ongoing with the board. Could you answer this for me? What is the percentage of veterans who take advantage of the free legal aid provided by VRAB, and what is the success rate of the cases that make use of that service?

Mr. Victor Marchand: The veterans rely on the legal services of BPA almost exclusively. The number of self-represented cases is minimal. We have between 15 to 25 self-represented cases a year. I'd be surprised if we get more than that.

All the success rates quoted are in fact in all cases, if not exclusively, where BPA acted as the representative.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Okay. I'm sure I don't have to remind you that I have been one of the more serious critics on the issue of the membership, on who was appointed to the board in the past.

I know you can't talk about anyone specifically, but I wonder if you could maybe give us an overview of the diverse experience and the background on some of these new appointees and what the qualifications are, because in the past my concerns have been that many of the people who served on this board had never actually served in the military.

There were, in my opinion, too few with medical backgrounds. So I'm wondering if you could just touch on the overall experience of the new members who have come forward and just enlighten us a bit as to the qualifications.

Mr. Victor Marchand: Okay.

It has always been an operational requirement of the board to maintain the best balanced complement of board members. By that, we mean a variety of backgrounds, gender, language, as being the most important, and then finally geographical distribution. It is our experience that if you ensure a variety of backgrounds, you ensure an open and complete view or culture installing itself at the board. In other words, yes, you do want lawyers, but you also want military. You also want people who have medical backgrounds, nursing, psychology, and to that I would even add educational as being part of the social sciences sector, if you wish. I think it is also important to have people who have backgrounds in life in general, who have had a long and hardy life experience in any given sector, to be part of the board. So I think it's important to have people from all walks of life in Canadian society, and that includes, of course, the military.

One area where we've had difficulty in finding candidates to join the board is from the field of policing, because as you know, we do the RCMP.

That's what I think is the important thing, having some military, some legal, some health field people, and from the general population.

• (1135)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Well, I certainly wouldn't disagree with you that the university of life is probably the greatest teacher there is, and I think it needs to be considered when getting board members into these kinds of positions. But I specifically asked you, has there been an improvement in the medical side of it? Are there more people with medical backgrounds? Are there more people with military backgrounds who've now been appointed?

I wrote your numbers down here. You said you had 659 applications, so there's obviously a keen interest, and that you had 239 who had written exams and passed through all of the criteria. So are there more medical people now than there were before, and are there more military people than there were before?

Mr. Victor Marchand: Well, there are more people from the legal background presently. We need to concentrate, over the next year, on more military and more from the health field.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Now I'll ask you a really blunt question, and I apologize for the bluntness.

After all of these people have applied, have gone through the exam, have been accepted, how are they actually chosen? I mean, does someone decide you have so many lawyers, you don't need any more; you have so many medical people, you don't need any more? How does that process work?

Mr. Victor Marchand: The first priority is making sure our operational requirements are met, and that is x many members in a given region, x many members being able to function in either official language, and then you have a preoccupation and priority with gender, and if you can meet simultaneously what I consider to be good proportions of health field, legal, and military, so much the better.

What I'm saying now is that we could do a bit better in the military and health fields, because we lost one military member this fall. We had four. We try to stick to about 10% in each area. So we could concentrate there and try to make an effort to draw in the military and health fields.

How these choices are made is at the entire discretion of the minister. At the board, we're in the business of providing the minister with qualified candidates. We can identify the background of these individuals. We will identify where we need people, and from that point on it is at the discretion of the minister.

• (1140)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you.

He cut me off, so that's it for me.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Hinton. It's just one of those things we arrange sometimes ahead of time, and that's the way it works.

Now we're back to the Liberal Party, with Mr. St. Denis for five minutes.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Marchand and Ms. Sharkey, for helping us out today.

All of us as members of Parliament probably have had cases where, when it comes to CPP disability applications by constituents, we often find that the government appeals favourable decisions made at the appeal level. A constituent may have lost at the first level of a CPP disability application, won it on appeal, and then the government would often appeal that second-level favourable decision. It seems to be a CPP policy.

Does that happen much—if you're aware—with your board's decisions, that a successful application at your level is appealed by the government lawyers?

Mr. Victor Marchand: To my knowledge, never.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: That's good news.

Mr. Victor Marchand: What has happened in the past—and I'm not sure which cases were involved—is that there were at least one or two instances where the veteran was successful on judicial review, and that was appealed to the Federal Court of Appeal.

To my knowledge, never has a veteran won his case with the board and had that decision taken to judicial review. I can't remember that.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you for that answer.

We now have in place a federal ombudsman for veterans. It's my recollection of the ombudsman's mandate that he is not to involve himself in your board's activities. I don't really debate that.

I know the position is new, it hasn't evolved yet, but do you anticipate some kind of helpful exchange of information between your board's operation and the ombudsman's office? Not that he can involve himself with cases in your office, but do you see the potential for some helpful liaison between the two?

Mr. Victor Marchand: Oh yes. I'm a great fan of portfolio management. We will make sure that this new ombudsman is fully informed about our operations, and ideally, we will eventually build a working relationship with him and his office and his staff to be able to work out problems, if we can, as rapidly as we can.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you.

If I have time at the end, Mr. Chair, my colleague Mr. Valley has just a short question.

I'll conclude with this question. Now that the backlog, happily, has been cleared, hopefully the percentage of successful results reflects the historical. In other words, in the rush to complete them, there was equal oversight, equal care taken in each of the cases. I assume that's the case.

Mr. Victor Marchand: If I may add, sir, the busier the board member, the better the decisions.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Okay. Well, that's good to hear. I've asked similar questions before of other witnesses.

The kinds of cases that came out of the World War II veterans cadre, the cases that came out of the Korean veterans cadre, and those following.... I'm assuming that the types of cases were different as the demographic changed, as circumstances changed.

Do you track the changing nature of the kinds of cases you're hearing so that you can forecast the needs for different kinds of expertise to serve the board's needs? Do you track at that level?

• (1145)

Mr. Victor Marchand: Yes, we do.

There are some significant differences in the nature of the cases stemming from active force service versus regular force service. There are fundamental differences there.

The effort the government and the board have put into having a selection process that aims for the best-qualified candidates has been a wonderful response to this need.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. St. Denis has also run out of time.

Now we go back over to Monsieur Gaudet with the Bloc for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Marchand, you talked about performance, which bothered me a little bit, because I don't like to hear people talking about performance with respect to veterans. I believe we should show humanity towards the people who defended our country. I would not like to see veterans being compared to the system used by the CSST or any other board. I mention the CSST only because I am familiar with that particular organization in Quebec. I want to be sure that we're not talking about performance in that sense. If that were to be the case, I would not be very happy about it.

Mr. Victor Marchand: By definition, the very nature of the work that we are asked to carry out on behalf of veterans clearly shows that we are talking about a mandate and an initiative of the Government of Canada, something that is very evident in the means that are being used to meet our targets. I can assure you that it is the case.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Have you had an opportunity to meet with the new ombudsman to discuss your work?

Mr. Victor Marchand: No, I have not met with him yet, but I intend to do so. We have prepared a presentation that we would like to make to him as early as next week. We will brief him on our activities, so that he has access to the best possible information. I am especially anxious to develop a professional working relationship with him that will allow us to resolve problems even more quickly, if need be.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Under the new Veterans Charter, do you think there is a significant difference between the old and the new table of disabilities used by the Veterans Review and Appeal Board?

Mr. Victor Marchand: The new table of disabilities is completely different from the previous one. The new table is far more rigorous and technical, whereas the former one allowed for much more latitude when assessing cases. Some conditions were not listed in the former table of disabilities, which meant that we had to find comparisons, whereas the new table covers all cases.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Does the benefit of the doubt still count?

Mr. Victor Marchand: Anyone required to manage evidence is faced with the challenge of introducing the benefit of the doubt in all cases. It is not always necessary to rely on that, because more often than not, we have all the necessary evidence to render an enlightened decision. The principle of the benefit of the doubt is intended to help us where evidence is lacking and we have to rely on the credibility of the testimony and the reasonableness of the claim. That is where the benefit of the doubt comes into play.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: On November 11, I met with an 87 year-old veteran who had been granted his pension at the age of 85. He told me that it had been quite a difficult process. But, as you say, I suppose that he was given the benefit of the doubt, because he had a problem with his hearing. That's why I asked you whether the benefit of the doubt is still a factor. I was surprised to hear that this veteran had fought in the First World War and had only found out that he was entitled to a pension at the age of 85.

Mr. Victor Marchand: The important thing is that he got it.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Are you doing enough advertising aimed at veterans? I am wondering whether the Legions are not just social clubs, because you don't see many veterans there.

This gentleman I met with was extremely humble and was even hesitant to tell me about his World War Two experiences.

• (1150)

Mr. Victor Marchand: I hope that he ultimately won his case.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I told him he was entitled to other services, including help with housework and tending the lawn, as well as during the winter season. I'm not sure that he was aware of any of that.

Mr. Victor Marchand: I think you should pass on those concerns to the Department. We are only responsible for reviews and appeals. Your question would probably be better put to the Department, which provides all those basic services.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gaudet.

Now we'll go over to Mr. Shipley of the Conservative Party for five minutes.

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

Thank you for joining us, Mr. Marchand and Ms. Sharkey, on the teleconference today.

I just wanted to follow up a little bit on what my colleague, Mr. Gaudet, said in terms of the issues that fall around benefit of the doubt.

First of all, I do want to congratulate you. To know that the backlog has disappeared is certainly a positive step forward. That's important, and I guess that happened under the full membership that you now have in place on the board.

I was a little late because of another committee. I'm not just sure when you got full membership. Is it because of full membership that you were able to clean up the backlog?

Mr. Victor Marchand: In the fall of 2006, when we endeavoured to hold single-member panels, by then we had a group of at least 10 new board members who were in training. So in other words, when the new people were arriving, the senior board members were striving to keep up the rhythm, and I was able to tell them that reinforcements were coming. I think that's what kept them going all through the fall. Beginning in 2007, the new board members could kick in and take over the load, starting at the beginning of this year.

Mr. Bev Shipley: That's good to hear. I'm looking forward, down the road, in some sort of an audit, to see the number of appeals that you hear in relationship, now, to the number of the full membership. That is always going to be kept intact, I guess.

The other part I wanted to follow up on from Mr. Gaudet, and it always comes back, is about a number of elderly vets—I'm not talking about the new ones—because of the benefit of the doubt, mostly because they've not had health records available. When they were in active duty, health records weren't kept. They did things that were not reported. Even if they were, they weren't transferred. It just seems that when there seems to be clear evidence, from time to time, of individuals I've known, they always seem to be battling the benefit of the doubt. I wonder if you can comment beyond what you said to Mr. Gaudet on that.

Mr. Victor Marchand: I think it's important to give you an idea of what a board member could face in these circumstances.

On any given morning he can have before him an 85-year-old veteran of active force, with nothing more than his service docs that go back 60 years. The next case can be a regular force infantryman who is claiming for chondromalacia patella and has his medical attendance records. The board member can see that he complained that he was treated for his knees over a period of six weeks, six months, or six years, sometimes, and he has the medical opinion of an orthopedic surgeon who supports his claim to the effect that he got his chondromalacia patella during regular force service.

So the board member is faced with a dilemma, in a sense, because in one matter he is afforded an incredibly high-quality level of evidence. But he has to rule on an active-force 85-year-old veteran who can sometimes remember the circumstances of his accident back in 1943 in Italy and there is nothing on file to support or corroborate the occurrence of the accident. So the board member has to exercise an incredible amount of judgment in ascertaining what to do, and he has to decide that morning.

• (1155)

Mr. Bev Shipley: And I don't take away from that judgment they have to make. Always remember that these are veterans who likely don't have a good reason not to tell you the truth.

Mr. Victor Marchand: I agree fully, sir.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have just one other point.

As we're going through the whole appeal, getting ready—and you've just talked about the case when you have a veteran who comes forward of later years.... First of all, they're likely struggling about how to get there.

I'm wondering whether you have some comments about the newly appointed ombudsman and how that might be helpful—

The Chair: Time is up.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Oh, I'm sorry.

I guess you get to give a short answer then. I've just been given the time out signal.

How would that ombudsman be of benefit to you?

Mr. Victor Marchand: We dwell in the world of recourse, evidence, rights, and regulation, and how we can humanely and compassionately apply them. What the ombudsman will be able to do is handle the needs of people. If we can communicate regularly about problems and claims he may receive based on needs, our job will be that much more enriched.

I think there is going to be a need there for a working relationship. We may understand things, with the ombudsman, that we could not perceive in our realm of evidence and administrative law and rules and regulations and onuses. That's an asset for us.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to the Liberals now, with Mr. Valley for five minutes.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you.

I won't be taking my full time, so I'll pass it on to my colleagues.

You mentioned a number of times, and with good reason, that a large part of your focus has been on making sure board members are bilingual and making sure they provide services in both official languages.

In my riding—and I've probably said this before, because I say it quite often—60% of my population is first nations, and language is an issue: it's a barrier. I deal with it every day when I'm in the north, simply because of health care issues. Language is a problem.

Can you tell me, realizing that there are only two official languages but that there are other problems out there, how would a board member—or do you have a board member who...? I guess you can't have a board member who would possibly understand every dialect that's out there, but how would you proceed with that? Would someone be hired, or would somebody be allowed to accompany this individual, whether it's in a first appeal or at Charlottetown? How do we deal with someone who can't speak one of the languages?

Mr. Victor Marchand: This is a very good question, because most board members are confronted with four languages when they take on this job: there is French, English, military, and medical. So they have to develop an acute understanding of communication tools.

From a very practical point of view, board members must rely on steady and constant quality information to do their job. In the case of language per se, whether it be for first nations or any other group, we provide them with all the necessary translation services available. We have all those services available to us.

So far, in the years I've been with the board, to my knowledge we've never encountered any problem with that.

•(1200)

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you for that answer. I believe I have asked that question before, but I like to have it reaffirmed. It gives me confidence, when I have to deal with aging veterans in my own area, that they'll have the services they need when they have to come to you. So thank you.

Mr. Chairman, that's all I have for questions. I'll pass on my time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Valley.

Mr. Shipley, you're very lucky, because I know you weren't quite finished your line of questioning, and lo and behold, there's a Conservative spot. So sir, you have five minutes to continue.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have just one further question, and then I think that's all I have.

Under the new Veterans Charter, veterans can now obtain a disability award, and it comes in a lump sum rather than being taken out in a pension. How has that been received, and how is it working?

Mr. Victor Marchand: We have heard new cases under the new system. The board members have, with ease, ruled on those cases. I have not heard of any board member having any difficulty making those rulings.

Our experience is still relatively limited in this area. I could possibly provide you with a number of cases heard under this new system, but no complaints have been filed with us, as far as I know, in the handling of those matters.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

I don't have anything else.

The Chair: We're now going to move over to Mr. Sweet, I believe, for the remainder of that time.

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

Thank you very much for your presentation. I was particularly happy that the complaints against VRAB are now acceptable in any form. Is that correct that, from what I heard, they could basically fax in, phone in, email in, or is there an actual restriction on the format in which they present their complaint?

Mr. Victor Marchand: None whatsoever.

Mr. David Sweet: Fantastic. That makes me very happy.

I'm also looking at the numbers from 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07. We have the luxury of having them juxtaposed in front of us. I noticed an increase in reconsiderations from 2004-05 and 2005-06, but then a dramatic decrease in 2006-07. Also, on a straight line, the appeals seem to be diminishing as well, from a high of 1,756 in 2004-05, to a low of 1,271 in 2006-07. Can you give me an idea about what you would attribute the declining numbers to, and particularly the very graphic one that's cut in half, the reconsiderations?

Mr. Victor Marchand: If I may, I would defer to Ms. Sharkey on this.

Ms. Dale Sharkey: With respect to the reconsiderations, I think when you look at the timeframes there, the chair referred to the fact that we were probably not working with a full board membership,

and we were really trying to focus much of our effort on the very first level of review, where many applicants had not had a chance for any kind of redress, and our second priority came to the appeal. The reconsiderations were the last priority for us. So during that year it happened that we heard less. However, once we had more members and we had the time, we were able to recapture that backlog and were caught up. There's no backlog. And I think you'll see the numbers for this fiscal year will be very similar to what they are in the past history.

With respect to the increase in the reviews from 2004-05, we're referring again to that bubble of work that was moving through the system. So, naturally, the more first applications that are rendered there obviously would be more proportionate on favourables and then more individuals wishing to have redress at the first level. At the second level, when you look at the decrease, we talk about how there was a 25% increase in the volume of appeals, and I think, if anywhere, that's where representatives have some challenges in bringing forward many of the claims. As a result, we've seen a bit of a fallback there.

I can also say that from this year, when we talked about reducing our backlog in general, representatives put a great deal of effort into moving forward many of their review claims, and that certainly contributed to the 50% decrease there.

I know you're looking at me, puzzled with all these numbers.

•(1205)

Mr. David Sweet: No, it wasn't puzzling at all. I was actually marvelling at your humility in not saying that this is the great expanded work of VRAB, but I know that's part of the attribution and I just commend you for your humility on that.

You've mentioned that the backlog has been cleaned up now. Could you tell me then, when do you call a file pending, and how old does it have to get before it moves into the area of being identified as backlogged?

Ms. Dale Sharkey: That's a challenging question, because in the first part of the process, whereby applicants come in and contact their representatives and wish to have their cases prepared, so many factors are not within the control of the representatives. It takes a long time to get a medical opinion. They may be trying to get archived documents.

In the past we were setting some standards around 120 days at review, where we would like to see the whole process from point of contact with the advocate to the hearing date, but in recent years there have been many more challenges. Seventy percent of applicants are from the Canadian Forces now and they're seeking opinions outside the military to justify their claims. As well, there have been huge improvements in obtaining their historical documentation, but even if they're still serving, sometimes that's a challenge. They're moving around and their files are moving around with them, so that first part of the process becomes challenging, but we certainly have great cooperation with the advocates.

Everyone realizes the most frustrating part for someone is waiting to have their claim heard, and we're all really trying to find ways to see if we can shrink that. As the chairman mentioned, one of our priorities this year is how we can work together and find more effective ways to hear them sooner.

Mr. David Sweet: Exactly.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I don't know if the NDP wishes to contribute?

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): I can understand the question because I came in very late.

I'd just like to ask one very simple question of our guests, and that would be this. I've just heard you talk about the delays in claims being moved forward. Is that because of staffing problems and cutbacks?

Mr. Victor Marchand: No, it's a question of reorganizing our work. From the veteran's perspective, the veteran, rightfully so, sees the department as one entity, and when he files for an application he doesn't really think of BPA as the next step if he wants a review, as being something entirely different from the department, nor does he see VRAB as being something other than part of the portfolio. So I think the challenge is going to be for all for us within this portfolio to get together to work toward putting forward a much better, more efficient tracking and track of treatment of a veteran's claim. Whether that is upfront with the lawyers or with BPA afterwards, we have to get that track running just plain faster.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marston.

Now we will go over to the Conservative Party, Mr. Ron Cannan, for five minutes.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests. You've presented a very informative and a positive and encouraging story to us this morning.

I just wanted to elaborate and to clean up a few points that have been mentioned and add a couple of additional ones.

Your presentation alluded to the review timeline of about seven and a half months and the appeal of about ten months. Do you see that timeline coming down now that you are at full capacity?

•(1210)

Mr. Victor Marchand: Yes, definitely, and we are going to pursue a working group with BPA to get those files moving.

Mr. Ron Cannan: Part of it is the decline in the appeals. Do you have any sense of why they have declined? Possibly the veterans are satisfied, or more satisfied now with the Veterans Affairs programs?

Mr. Victor Marchand: The favourability rate at the department is rising.

Mr. Ron Cannan: That's very positive and encouraging.

On the provision you have for benefit of the doubt, as a couple of colleagues have mentioned, I represent Kelowna—Lake Country, in the interior of British Columbia, where we have a lot of seniors and a lot of veterans. Sitting down with them in my office and going through some of the stories...I had one specific appeal where you gave one-fifth. So sometimes on the benefit of the doubt you might only give a percentage of an award. Is that correct?

Mr. Victor Marchand: That's correct. Partial awards can be based on either aggravation—in other words, there was a pre-existing condition, so you can have a partial aggravation of a condition—or you can have a partial cause of a condition, and they're awarded in fifths. Full pension is five-fifths.

Mr. Ron Cannan: It's good to know it's not all or nothing; in other words, sometimes there's some compromise or reasonable benefit of the doubt.

With regard to your earlier comments in your presentation, you talked about how many people are going through your application and selection process. Maybe you could elaborate a little bit more on the benefit of this new process and how much more stringent it is.

Mr. Victor Marchand: In fact it is rigorous and transparent. I think both the applicants and the board are satisfied with the outcome. In other words, the quality or qualified nature of the applicants ending up in the pool is true. Those applicants who don't succeed initially can come back; they can reapply and provide better or more information. So even those who don't make it the first time can return or come back.

The end result is the objective, that is, having a pool of qualified candidates.

Mr. Ron Cannan: That's excellent—open, honest, and transparent. That's what we're all about.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Committee members, I notice that we seem to have exhausted our official speaking list, so unless anybody has something they wish to add at this point, we do have a motion to consider today.

I don't see anybody who wants to put their two cents in, so I would like to thank our witnesses very much for their presentations this morning by video conference. All the best.

I'm very impressed, by the way, that you've gone through the backlog, as alluded to by other committee members as well. That's good progress.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Victor Marchand: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Now we're on to the notice of motion from Mr. Shipley. I'll just read it into the record, and then probably allow Mr. Shipley to speak to it and start off things.

The motion is:

That the Committee on Veterans Affairs work with Veterans Affairs Canada to arrange a study tour of Canadian bases and their operations as part of our discussion on Health Care and the Veterans Independence Program.

That being said, I'm going to open it up and allow Mr. Shipley to speak first, because he's the originator of the motion.

A couple of people have mentioned that there may be some members of the committee who would wish to refer to last week's in camera discussion. I would say that if you want to refer to the decision, it is permissible within the procedures or rules regarding what can be referred to from in camera meetings. However, because it is a matter of national security, and if people are intent on making that trip, I would advise them to be judicious in their comments. And it is not permissible to refer to what was said by given members during that discussion, because it was in camera.

I have just prefaced that for whatever debate there will be.

Mr. Shipley.

• (1215)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously, the motion I put forward is a follow-up to our last meeting in which we had discussions that focused around our veterans and some of the issues they face, either when they come back or sometimes when they come back and they have a concern about when they are being deployed, and then focused around our health care and our VIP, our veterans independence program.

The last discussion was around the motion on whether we would take a tour and have those witnesses and visits in Afghanistan. In my opinion, I believe, and it's why I put the motion forward, we have an opportunity here, because all of us, regardless of where we sit or what party we are on this committee, are concerned and want to get the feedback that we can from our veterans on some of the issues they face. They may be mental; they may be physical.

I believe we have an opportunity here that we should not avoid or miss, and that is, by visiting them from where they're deployed and

from where they return, on our own soil, in Canada, by visiting our bases. I think that could be done. One of the most rewarding—and all of us acknowledged that last year, in our last term—was when we brought in families and we brought in members who came to our committee through formal...and then through an informal evening, where we actually sat down with them and talked. They talked to us about some of their issues. Their family members came in and they talked to us, and I think all of us agreed how valuable that was.

I think this is much closer to an extension of that type of service, where we could garner the information we need to fulfill and to move along quickly, quite honestly, with our health care and our veterans independence program.

That's why the motion is put forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Shipley.

Now over to Mr. St. Denis, with Mrs. Hinton on deck.

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

Bev raises an important and helpful issue, speaking for myself and maybe my colleagues, but they will speak for themselves.

This could be a helpful part of the review, and Mr. Marchand said in his testimony a little while ago that there are indeed two general categories of cases, those that come out of the domestic operations and those that come out of the international operations, if I could characterize it that way. So it certainly makes sense to have, at a minimum, those two separate points of view.

I see the committee's decision to take an international view of this. It fits nicely into having a view of the domestic side. I don't think we have to go to every base, every operation, just like we don't have to visit every overseas operation. So a reasonable sampling of both, I think, does make sense.

In fact, the travel could even be not tied together in terms of time, but linked in terms of it not being too far apart, so that we have binocular vision. So I don't see that we would object, but I don't want this to be seen as putting aside a decision to visit some overseas operations. I see this as a complement to that, and any planning for this should include both, as much as is reasonably possible.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Now it's over to Mrs. Hinton, with Mr. Valley on deck.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to commend Bev for putting this forward. I think it's something that's very valid, very important, and I'm sure most members of this committee, like myself, have probably not had the opportunity to visit a base in Canada to see how things are actually happening here.

It's hard when we've had one discussion in camera and another one now in public, but one doesn't eliminate the other, and this one, I think, is close to home. It will actually enable us to not only meet with those who are being deployed, but there's an opportunity here as well to actually meet some of the family members, which I think is also very important.

We have talked at this committee about the impact on the family of deployed members, and I see this as an opportunity to expand our knowledge as a committee about what in fact happens, not only to the member who is being deployed someplace, but what the ramifications are to the family as well.

I have to be honest enough to tell you that I get very nervous when I notice that we have two people who have never sat on this committee before brought in because there is going to be a vote. That indicates to me that the opposition side is not going to support this, and I think that would be a real tragedy.

● (1220)

Mr. Brent St. Denis: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

That's totally irrelevant. It's out of order. We are entitled to our complement of members here. Regardless of what motive the member opposite might impute, we are fully entitled to our complement. So it's totally irrelevant to the discussion.

The Chair: I am going to take that as a point of debate. The member, Mrs. Hinton, can raise whatever she wishes.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I really don't have anything further to say. It wasn't intended to raise the hackles on the back of anyone over there. It's simply that as an observer and a people watcher, I find it rather unusual that people are coming in who have never had the benefit of any of the discussion that has gone on before. I think this is a very important motion and should be handled in its own context, which is a motion—no one has read it out loud yet—that says:

That the Committee on Veterans Affairs work with Veterans Affairs Canada to arrange a study tour of Canadian bases and their operations as part of our discussion on Health Care and the Veterans Independence Program.

I think it should stand on its own, and I'm obviously going to support it.

The Chair: Just on this matter, I'm going to comment as impartially as I can. I don't think that what was raised was necessarily a proper point of order. That being said, some of the things that were alluded to by the other member's speech, which brought on the questionable point of order, may not be helping her own case.

Anyhow, I leave it at that.

Now Mr. Valley, Monsieur Perron, and then Mr. Simms on deck.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. At some point you people are going to ban me from having this book in which I write everything down, because I like to keep notes.

I'll take us back to May 17. By the way, this is not the first time a member of this committee has put forward that we should be talking to the people who are serving currently. When we debated the issue on the 17th, a decision was taken later on, the same decision we made last week. We were told over and over again that this is not our mandate; our mandate is not to talk to people who are serving. I disagree with that totally. And I disagreed with it at that point.

We won the vote back in May. We won the vote last week. Our job is to serve veterans. All those people who are wearing uniforms right now we will serve, and I think any opportunity to speak to them is important, whether it's here in Canada or overseas.

The issue with the motion—I agree with it. I spoke to Mr. Shipley last night. I think we should be going to some of the cities where some of the veterans are. Currently, we have a lot of them right here in this city alone that we could be talking to.

I'll also take you back to a comment Mr. Shipley just made about an evening with members and families. I'll draw back everybody's attention. That was a very poignant night in all our careers. It was an amazing night, but also it was with a lot of currently serving people. They were still in uniform. So it's our job, I believe—and I've said that right at the start of this committee—that we need to talk to the people in uniform.

We have no problem with this motion as long as this motion doesn't try to undo what we decided last week. That decision has been taken twice by the committee, and we were all under the impression that it was under way. It got changed for a number of reasons that you explained. Prorogation may have moved it right off the table. The decision has been made again. I have no problem participating. I think this is what we should be doing. But in light of that, it's what we should be doing after we fulfill the obligation we took last week in the meeting.

I'll remind everybody that there are qualifications to the decision we made last week, and it's part of the national security issue you mentioned. We're fully aware of that, and if you reread the motion from last week, you'll know that we need to have cooperation of one of the departments. This is a good idea. I think we should be doing more of this, but not until after we fulfill what we agreed to last week.

Thank you.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Valley.

Monsieur Perron, with Mr. Simms on deck.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Chairman, my opinion has not changed since last week. I like to be consistent in my way of thinking. As you may recall, I asked last week whether General Hillier, who is in charge of the Canadian Forces, was the one who didn't want to see us there. If that is the case, I would like my friends opposite to have the courage to say so. If it is not the case, I see no reason for them to oppose this trip.

That's why I am really in a bind here. Once again, I know and I understand that National Defence or the Canadian Forces may not be particularly interested in seeing a lot of MPs go over there, because it could cause them some problems. There was a very close call when the Minister of National Defence, Mr. MacKay, visited recently.

I understand the situation, but...

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Perron, I understand where you're going, but please try to keep your references with regard to the—

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: The name of the riding?

The Chair: No. I'm asking you to take into account national security considerations with regard to how much you divulge.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I don't think anything I said was particularly incendiary. I accept your decision, even though I do not agree with it.

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Perron, I'm just saying that by the references you're making, if I was reading through Hansard, I would know what was up. And we have to keep in mind we're not the only ones who read Hansard.

I'm asking, with regard to your place references, that you be careful.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I maintain that it would be a good idea to show support for our people who are over there, whatever the theatre of operations.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Simms.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** First of all, thank you for having me on short notice.

I just wanted to let you know that I'm here to replace Mr. Todd Russell. He is an MP for a large base, as you know, in Labrador. I represent the other base.

My contribution to this...I think that in arranging this...Newfoundland and Labrador, historically, has always contributed quite a few soldiers, given our lower population. So on a per capita basis we've been one of the biggest contributors in this nation.

So I'm here on his behalf. I only say that because the reference was made about a last-minute replacement. Indeed, there was

nothing last minute about this, the fact that I am representing Mr. Russell, who, unfortunately, is sick and could not be here.

I would like to add that as my two cents, and hopefully I will, by the end of this meeting, add much more.

I just wanted to set the record straight.

The Chair: I don't have anybody else on the speakers list, so at this point I would probably...

Mr. Valley.

Mr. Roger Valley: I would ask, through you, the mover of the motion if it's clear that this is not trying to circumvent the decision we made last week. That's my question.

The Chair: All right.

I'm going to allow Mr. Shipley his motion—

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'll speak last, so if anyone else—

A voice: You can answer the question.

A voice: Just answer the question.

The Chair: No. I was turning to him to speak last as kind of the hammer on his motion. He can address that question, but does somebody else wish to speak to it before he does?

Mr. Ron Cannan: I'd first like a clarification on the question.

The Chair: If this committee is all right with it, maybe I'll ask Mr. Shipley to speak, and he can answer that if he wishes.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Clearly, from listening, everyone is on board about wanting to have a clearer understanding, quite honestly, from those who are defending our country in many ways and who have been inflicted, or may be inflicted or have the potential to be inflicted, with some physical or mental issue. There's no doubt about that.

My resolution will stand as it is, though. I believe that we need to....

When I listened to Mr. Simms in particular... And I respect those numbers, because it's very true. It has happened in World War I and World War II. I don't know the numbers now. But I think that lays out the significance of being able to visit in Canada. Also, it doesn't preclude going to Afghanistan at some time. I'm just saying—

• (1230)

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm sorry—at some time. Buy right now this is about visiting our bases, through Veterans Affairs, within Canada. We can talk later about whether it will be different cities. I used our bases because that's where people get deployed from and where they come back to. It's a great place to start and understand, not only our bases but to meet our people—

The Chair: Well, we try.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I would hope people will support that.

The Chair: I recognized Mr. Shipley as the last speaker, to be the hammer on his motion. I have others who wish to speak. I'd like maybe a straw poll of the committee here.

Do you wish to continue to carry on conversation on this measure?

Mr. Roger Valley: He was answering the question, Mr. Chairman; he was not the last speaker.

The Chair: Well, all right, since we do have time, go ahead.

Mr. Cannan is next, then Mr. St. Denis, and then Mr. Valley.

And please, don't make any more references to locations.

Thank you very much, Mr. Cannan.

Mr. Ron Cannan: I support the motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. St. Denis.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Just very quickly, it's our intention to support the motion. I just want it on the record that any travel outside the country, as previously decided, is not to be compromised by this.

The Chair: I would take it that way. I don't see one precluding the other.

Mr. Valley.

Mr. Roger Valley: Just in slightly different words, we support the motion with the caveat that the committee has been given direction

twice. The staff has been given direction and we want it carried out. We'll support this motion because I think it's important, as I've said many times in this committee, to talk to people in uniform, not just the people out of uniform.

The Chair: Understood.

At 1 p.m. I go to the liaison committee to present the committee's case on the previous decision.

Mr. Scott Simms: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I'll do what I can. It worked last time.

Without seeing any other speakers, we'll go to the motion.

I'm going to read it again. It's Mr. Shipley's motion:

That the Committee on Veterans Affairs work with Veterans Affairs Canada to arrange a study tour of Canadian bases and their operations as part of our discussion on Health Care and the Veterans Independence Program.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I'll carry the case on the previous motion to the liaison committee.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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