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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We have the honour today, with our Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, to have the honourable minister with us.

Mr. Minister, I don't know if you've been told, but I think you probably have 20 minutes to do with as you please, sir. Then after that we have a pre-arrangement in terms of how we go through the rotation of the questions, sir. We are honoured to have you in our presence, and the floor is yours.

Hon. Greg Thompson (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members. It is nice to be with you and nice to sit down with members of Parliament who really have demonstrated a clear, unwavering commitment to our truest heroes. I want to thank all of you for that

. I do have a prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. I'll go through it and then I'm at the disposal of the chair, and I am sure we will get into questions and responses.

Mr. Chairman, as I've mentioned, you and your committee have stood shoulder to shoulder with our veterans, both in this committee room and at our monuments and cenotaphs. As I often say, few things unite us like our veterans do, and I'm speaking of course of members of Parliament. I've seen it again in recent months, with your support of our OSI clinic announcements and your attendance at our minister's commendation ceremonies. It really doesn't matter which side of the House you sit on, your devotion to our veterans is genuine and it is steadfast, and I want to thank all of you for that.

Before I go any further, I'd like to introduce the individuals with me today at the table. I'll begin with Suzanne Tining, Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs. Thank you for being here, Ms. Tining.

Also with me is Victor Marchand. Victor, as you know, is the chair of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, and he will be here to answer any questions you might have regarding the board's activities.

Today our work is very specific. We are here to talk about budgets, expenditures, and of course numbers. And we'll also talk about statistics. We'll talk about the approximately 800,000 Canadians across the country who are veterans. We'll most likely talk about the 220,000 who are clients of Veterans Affairs Canada.

We all know our true focus is much more than that. It's much greater than any of the main estimates or the supplementary

estimates, and the people we serve are not merely numbers, as you well know. We are reminded of our real duty each time we stand quietly for the playing of the *Last Post*. We are reminded each time we listen to one of our aging veterans recite the *Act of Remembrance*. And we are reminded in a life-changing way each time we walk the rows of white headstones in our cemeteries around Europe's battlefields. As you well know, Mr. Chairman, most of us are simply overwhelmed and overcome by that sight, that experience.

We are the inheritors of a great and lasting debt, an eternal debt that we know we can never fully repay. We owe this debt to those brave men and women who ask so very little of us. And all of this is captured in eight simple yet powerful words inscribed above the final resting place of a 20-year-old Canadian buried in a cemetery just outside the city of Dieppe, in France: "Grieve not, dear mother, my task was done".

Of course that's why we're really here, because our task begins anew each day. We must remember and honour those courageous Canadians who have always served our nation and who have always served us, generation after generation. Each of us has our own opinion about whether or not we're doing enough. I argue that we'll never be able to do enough, but I can say with considerable pride that under our government, Canada is doing more than ever to take care of our veterans and to honour their sacrifices and of course their achievements.

The numbers in the main estimates demonstrate that. In just three budgets we have set aside an additional \$1.6 billion to improve our programs, our services, and our benefits for Canada's veterans and their families. And we've done it in a fiscally responsible way that reflects the dual wishes of Canadians who want us to be both generous and just with our veterans and cautious with our tax dollars in these uncertain economic times. Obviously that's a very difficult balance, but I think most impartial observers—and I can't argue that any of us are impartial in this business—would agree we've done a pretty good job at it, and we have been somewhat successful.

For example, no matter where you stand on the political spectrum, creating a veterans bill of rights was the right thing to do—and long overdue—just as appointing Canada's first veterans ombudsman was the right thing to do, and long overdue. We sometimes lose sight of just how important these accomplishments are, but our veterans haven't. They've realized that they suddenly have a new and very real champion in Colonel Pat Stogran.

I hear it everywhere I go, and I'm sure that many of you hear it as well. Our veterans and their families are happy with what we have done. They're very pleased to have their own ombudsman, to have another sympathetic ear and a powerful voice representing them. I want to thank all of you for the very important work you did in this committee in making those achievements possible.

We have come a long way. In just two years we have successfully implemented the new Veterans Charter, we've improved programs, we've increased benefits, and we've expanded services. Some of these measures are entirely new, like the *ex gratia* payments to deal with the testing of Agent Orange at CFB Gaagetown some 40 years ago. Others are an expansion of existing programs, such as our doubling of the number of operational stress injury clinics across the country, and of course our expanding of the veterans independence program.

In everything we've done, the focus has been squarely on our veterans and their families. You've seen some of these improvements as you've travelled the country and toured a number of military wings and bases. You have also seen where we could be doing more, where we have to do more. And of course your work here at the committee is going to help us get there.

In the short time I have for these opening remarks, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to touch upon some of these issues and talk about some of the issues that we are hearing about from our veterans and their families.

For example, we recognize that there are still some gaps in how we help Canadian Forces members make the transition to civilian life. And we recognize that there are still some gaps in how we make them aware of the help available to them from Veterans Affairs. That's why we are treating the new Veterans Charter like an open book. We want it to evolve with the changing needs of our modern-day veterans without sacrificing, of course, the many good things we're already doing for our traditional war service veterans.

Perhaps during your questions we can talk about some of the specific facts and figures, like the 6,000 disability awards that have been granted under the new Veterans Charter and the very high approval rate for providing rehabilitation services within the new Veterans Charter.

What I can tell you, however, is that our new approach is working, whether it's through such things as the earnings loss benefit or our new job placement program. The new Veterans Charter is working well as a bridge to help our young men and women make the successful transition to civilian life.

For those CF members and veterans struggling with disabilities, they finally have a comprehensive strategy to help them, and of course their families, deal with the physical, emotional, and financial challenges they face. The question is whether it is enough. Can we stop there and consider our work done? Of course we cannot.

You may have heard me talk in recent weeks about the rising number of operational stress injuries we are seeing at Veterans Affairs. The numbers, Mr. Chairman, say it all. In five years, the number of OSI cases has jumped from 3,500 clients to 11,000 clients—in just five years. That's why we're doubling the number of OSI clinics we operate across the country. We're going from five clinics to ten. We recognized that early in our mandate.

In fact, this past Friday we officially opened the new OSI clinic in Fredericton, New Brunswick. In recent weeks we've announced agreements to establish other new clinics in Vancouver, Edmonton, and Ottawa, and we hope to announce the location of the fifth clinic this fall. Many of my colleagues, as you know, have taken the time to come out to some of these announcements, and I thank them for that.

These new clinics are part of a comprehensive national strategy for mental health that we are jointly implementing with the Department of National Defence. We are trying to do everything we can to help our men and women overcome the very real psychological trauma that comes with their dangerous and very difficult missions. And we're trying to raise awareness about the signs of an operational stress injury. We're doing more to try to prevent them, to diagnose them sooner, and to treat them faster and in a more complete way. That is our responsibility.

If we are going to ask our men and women to serve Canada, then we have to be equally prepared to serve them. And I believe that we are.

● (1540)

In the past, Canadians weren't always able to do that. We didn't, of course, understand OSIs; instead, we lumped them together as battle fatigue or shell shock. The result was often tragic, as we know, and our men and women were often confined to suffering in silence. Some of us are old enough to remember the years following World War II and the Korean War, and we remember classmates and friends whose families were shattered by a parent returning home with an undiagnosed OSI.

Back then, our veterans were often too afraid or embarrassed to step forward to get the help they needed, and their families had nowhere to turn. We are changing that. One of the ways we're doing that is through the operational stress injury support systems, or OSISS program. It's a program based on peer support, a program that helps our CF members and veterans get better through the support and care of other men and women who have endured their own operational stress injuries, men and women who understand the anger, the frustration—the utter frustration—that comes from witnessing things so brutal and so inhumane that most of us simply can't begin to imagine them.

And equally important to this program is that we are providing the same support and care to their families and loved ones, who are also trying, of course, to cope with the pain and suffering. That's why we announced earlier this month that we have hired eight family peer support coordinators to work alongside the twelve peer support coordinators at National Defence.

We can help, we can make a real difference, and we are. The people, of course, going through those programs are telling us that and are telling many of you that.

While we are adapting to the demands of today's missions, we also remain committed to our traditional war veterans and their families. At the end of the day, it's always about the family, isn't it? As you know, we set aside in our February budget another \$282 million over the next three years to extend the veterans independence program to as many as 15,000 veteran survivors. Of course this is good news for our veterans. Widows, in some cases, have waited more than 25 years for this help.

With this announcement, we are supporting those survivors who need it the most and who, as we know, can least afford it. In all, we're helping about 35,000 new clients to live independently in their own homes longer. That means a better quality of life for the twilight years of our veterans and their spouses. That's what our government should be doing, and what we are doing—helping those who need our help.

Before I close, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to talk about one last item, and that's commemorating our past.

As you know, we have a sacred duty to remember and to pay tribute to what our veterans have sacrificed and what they have achieved for Canada and us, for our way of life. We need to remember the extraordinary things they did to protect our shared values in defending peace and freedom. As I often say, Mr. Chairman, they are ordinary men and women who did extraordinary things. When you talk about our older veterans, that's one of the things that weigh heaviest on our minds: will future generations remember them and, most of all, will we help keep their vows never to forget their fallen comrades? I don't have to tell you how important that is, because you already know.

I often say that the greatest gift we can give a veteran is the gift of remembrance. You experienced it again when we recently marked the 65th anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic. Many of you participated in those ceremonies across the country, and I thank you for that. We will see it again when we hold ceremonies this year for the 55th anniversary of the Korean ceasefire and the 90th

anniversary of the end of World War I. If it all goes as planned—thanks to Brent St. Denis' private member's bill—we will mark our first national peacekeepers day in August.

This is what we mean by keeping faith with our veterans. It is what we mean by keeping the torch of remembrance burning brightly. We must never take our freedom for granted. We must make sure that future generations never take it for granted, that we always remember the immense debt we owe our veterans. Our veterans have earned it. They deserve this from our grateful nation. As the English poet James Allen once said, “No duty is more urgent than that of returning thanks”.

• (1545)

Lest we forget, I say thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Now we're going to turn it over to questions from some of our committee members. First is the Liberal Party of Canada for seven minutes, Ms. Guarnieri.

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

I am sure, Minister, you're aware that a recent study by the Rand Corporation indicates that at least 20% of U.S. soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq are already suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and some estimate this rate will rise beyond 30% due to repeated and extended tours of duty. Other studies indicate the suicide rate among returning veterans is a rising cause of concern and is a significant and tragic addition to the official casualty rate.

Clearly, the mission in Kandahar since 2006 has placed Canadians in circumstances where they too may suffer dramatically higher rates of PTSD than was the case with the mission in Kabul and the Gulf War or our peacekeeping missions around the world. As Sean Bruyey and Louise Richard are very keen to remind us, 18 years have not healed the operational stress injuries suffered by many veterans in the Gulf War.

So clearly we're facing a very long-term struggle where just the loss of productivity and potential employment will average at least \$10,000 per affected veteran per year. I wonder if you could give us some idea about the long-term planning with respect to budgetary considerations, among others, of the department, and whether the department has adjusted to accommodate the inevitable results of a five-year mission in Kandahar and potentially several thousand veterans who may need PTSD treatment for decades to come.

●(1550)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you. I think you've capsulized it well in terms of some of the challenges we face. As the former minister, you know full well that those challenges are real and ones we must meet and hopefully exceed. But I think in fairness, when you form a government that's one of the things you recognize early on. And of course that's why we doubled the number of OSI clinics, which in itself won't do the complete job in terms of your reference to the numbers, but the numbers are real, as I mentioned in my opening remarks. The numbers we've identified have escalated from 3,500 five years ago to 11,000 today, and they can't be argued.

That's one of the reasons we've doubled the number of those operational stress injury clinics across the country. In addition to that, I've talked about the support programs we have. Some of the good news out of all the bad news.... I want to say Albina, but I guess it should be Ms. Guarnieri—

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: That's fine. That's my name.

Hon. Greg Thompson: We're so used to talking on an informal basis most of the time.

I understand your concern for that. I know your concern is very real, and it's one that's troublesome for all of us who look at the men and women. As you well know, the missions we send our men and women on are tough missions. We've had those debates in the House of Commons, and I'm pleased with the support you've provided the government in terms of continuation of that mission, because the mission obviously isn't complete. Those numbers are real. We've doubled the number of operational stress clinics. We have a lot of the peer support programs up and running, and I do know that people like Senator Dallaire, who suffers himself from the very injuries we are speaking of, consider some of those programs to be the best. He believes that they are working, that they are making a difference.

On top of that, I might point out as well that when we're talking about men and women who are in the forces, who are suffering from this, DND itself deserves some praise as well in terms of what it's doing. Part of it is early identification. I think everyone in the mental health field—and I know some of you at the table have had experience with that—feels that early detection is one of the keys to it. Sometimes it could play out as something like excessive drinking or drug use, possibly prescription drug use.

Early identification and early treatment are part of what we have to do and are doing. In fact, when you take a look at the numbers—I know that the 11,000 I referred to is a very big number, and it's a real number—many of those people are receiving treatment, and they're still functioning within the military because early detection and early treatment have allowed them to continue their careers.

So when I'm mentioning those numbers, I don't want members to think they have all been confined to hospitals or institutions. Many of them are still functioning simply because of early detection and some of what we have put in and some of what the former government had put in, in recognition of this problem.

But I don't think we can lose sight in the long term, because I think it's something we have to watch. I think, if necessary, we have to put more resources into them, but I'm satisfied with what we're doing, and I think we're making a real difference.

●(1555)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Minister, you're making a case for what you are doing currently, but my question was focused on long-term planning. Is there any consideration? Are you making plans to accommodate the volume of soldiers who may be returning with PTSD symptoms?

I for one would certainly support adding more OSI clinics to provide local and permanent support for as many veterans as possible. And I do recall that in the spring of 2005, when Deer Lodge was opened and plans for the Calgary and Fredericton clinics were announced, the Kandahar mission had not yet been announced, and resources had not been scaled for the sixfold increase in casualties. So I guess my question really pertains to how you envision dealing with a potential challenge there.

I also have another question, which pertains particularly to the volume of women who may require specialized treatment for post-traumatic stress. It wasn't as evident in my day as it is today. What plans exist to provide similar and separate in-patient post-traumatic stress disorder programs for women, as our allies have done in past years?

The Chair: Time is way out.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: It's a legitimate question. I hope you will allow the minister to answer it.

The Chair: Ms. Guarnieri, you're allowed to ask legitimate questions. I do ask that you stay to the time, that's all.

Hon. Greg Thompson: It's a good question. I think the professionals we have on the ground recognize the gender differences and how treatment might apply to a man versus a woman, so I think we're very sensitive to that.

The other thing I might mention to the member, Mr. Chairman, is that of course when we were referring to Deer Lodge in 2005, the new Veterans Charter hadn't been implemented. I do know that your fingerprints are on the new Veterans Charter. Part of what we set aside in the new Veterans Charter is that new suite of programs—\$744 million out of the \$1.6 billion that we budgeted since having taken office. I should say that we're spending more. That's probably not the most accurate way to put it.

A lot of that is going into the very things you're mentioning, and of course the new Veterans Charter recognizes that, because there is a plan to move forward, which recognizes some of those difficulties you've outlined.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Now we're over to the Bloc Québécois and Monsieur Perron for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It would have been nice to be able to call you by your first name, Greg, and to have you call me Gilles. But, on page 2 of the speech that you have just read to us, you insult me and you insult the members of the committee. On the subject of the ombudsman, you say "And I want to thank all of you for the very important work you did in this committee in making those achievements possible."

Give us some credit, Mr. Minister. You will recall that a unanimous report from the Committee on Veterans Affairs was tabled in the House. All the members of the committee here present worked hard on that report. We asked that the ombudsman's position be created under an act and report to the House.

Witnesses as distinguished as Mr. Marin had their backs in the same seat as yours is in at the moment, asking for the ombudsman position to be created. The only ones to ask that the ombudsman report to you, dear Mr. Minister, are the following. There was the ombudsman from the Ste. Anne's Hospital. When we questioned him, he spent more time singing the praises of the director general than addressing the problems that the hospital was facing. Mr. Côté, the National Defence ombudsman, who is no longer in office, also said that the ombudsman should report to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. The third was a witness from Australia whose name I really do not remember. He came to tell us that the ombudsman should report to you, but that was very clumsy on his part, because, at the time, he had a part-time contract position in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Minister, do not say that you cooperated with us. You completely ignored the report and the work done by all members of the committee, including your friends on the other side of the table. That work was conscientious, non-partisan, and had only the welfare of the veterans in mind.

The same thing happened with the Veterans Bill of Rights. We were in the last stages of our report when, with great fanfare, you announced a Veterans Bill of Rights. Mr. Minister, you did not cooperate with the Committee on Veterans Affairs. You did what you wanted, you did whatever you chose.

Thank you.

• (1600)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I'll just inform you that the question was not particularly pertinent to the supplementary estimates, but you can answer it if you so choose.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I'm more than happy to answer that question.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Perron is not completely happy with the ombudsman, I guess. First of all, he has to examine the individuals. Colonel Stogran I think is an exceptionally good—

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Do not go there, Mr. Minister. I have not mentioned Mr. Stogran directly and am not questioning his abilities.

I am questioning the way in which he was appointed and the way in which things were done. It went completely contrary to the committee's work.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Perron. You're obviously telling me that the choice was a good one, and I absolutely agree with you.

The interesting thing is that, as a parliamentarian who's been around this place for so long, I think you're underestimating the power of Parliament, because you're correct. You're talking about a legislative mandate, and in many of the countries in the world where the ombudsman works well and is very effective, it's the same model that we've adopted. And we can disagree on that.

But the beauty of our system is that every day the minister, whether it's me or somebody else at this table, will be there. There will always be a Minister of Veterans Affairs who has to respond to you and other members in the House of Commons in terms of how we're responding to the ombudsman. And the report that he will table every year will have to be tabled in the House of Commons, so it will be there for you to examine.

The truth is the model that we've adopted, that other countries have adopted, is very effective. One of the things that I believe in... because I've been around this place for a while. I think, with the exception of the official critic for the Liberal Party, I've been here probably longer than most of the other members. I'm not saying that's a good thing or a bad thing, but I do understand the power of Parliament, of an individual member of Parliament, and how important it is to go into that place every day when you believe in something, where something's gone wrong, when you've identified a problem, and the minister has to stand in his or her place and defend their position. That's the power of the ombudsman and the power of tabling that on the floor of the House of Commons. And I would say God help any member of cabinet who disregards Parliament and the power of that very institution we're all a part of.

I'm a believer in parliamentary democracy. I'm a big believer in the power of individual members of Parliament. And I'm absolutely satisfied that the model that we brought in will do the job. And I'm convinced, Mr. Perron, that if we're sitting here a number of years from now, after that first report, the second report, the third report, we'll all agree with that. It's a model that works in other jurisdictions. I'm absolutely convinced it will work in Canada.

And you're absolutely correct that Mr. Stogran is a good choice. He comes with high reviews from men and women who knew him in the military and from our veterans communities, which we're all here to serve.

I have absolute confidence that the model we've adopted will work. We did not disregard what the committee did. We honoured much of what was stated at the committee; we'll just disagree on the model. You might want to drive a Ford and I might want to drive a Chevrolet, but at the end of the day they're both going to get us down the road.

I believe this one will serve Parliament and the veterans community well.

•(1605)

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Let us get back to what we are supposed to be doing, because the chair has called me to order.

On page 11, we see an expense amount of \$3.8 million for the infrastructure funds at the Ste. Anne's Hospital.

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Mr. Perron, Mr. Chairman, the sound system is not working here. We'll have to back the clock up for Mr. Perron.

The Chair: Ironically, his time is up, because it's now seven minutes and fifteen seconds.

Hon. Greg Thompson: We'll have to give him another kick at the can, because I know he's eager to get answers.

The Chair: Knowing Monsieur Perron, I'm sure he will take another kick at the can at another opportunity.

Hon. Greg Thompson: We'll make it up for him in the next round.

The Chair: There we go.

Now it's over to the New Democratic Party, Mr. Angus, for five minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will know that as soon as the translation cuts off, my seven minutes are up. You have an incredible little system there.

A voice: It's five minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Five minutes. I see.

I had the great privilege of touring the Veterans Affairs building in Kirkland Lake and meeting the staff. They do excellent work; they are dedicated. They do whatever they can there. They see themselves as advocates for the veterans.

What I'm interested in, though, is that the nature of the work is starting to change dramatically as we start to have a young generation of veterans, with very different issues from the ones the widows have, the pensions. We're seeing a greater need now to deal with the new kinds of cases, and that will put a strain on the department.

What allocation of resources do you have to ensure this transition from the period when we were looking at basically our World War II and Korean War veterans to now, where people are coming back from the field with—as we talked about—stress, other related injuries, and other needs?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Angus. That rather fits in with one of the other questions I've had here this afternoon.

The truth is, that's one of the reasons the government moved to a new Veterans Charter. As you well know, we stood in the House and supported it. I think there was unanimous agreement and all-party support in the House of Commons, with virtually no debate.

It is something the department had worked on for a number of years, and it was really in response to the very question you're raising. There had been basically no adjustment to how Veterans Affairs did business from World War II on. They could see the changing needs of modern-day veterans, if you will, and this was a response to them. Basically, the whole approach to how we treat veterans has changed as a result of this new charter.

The new charter, as you well know, is supported by all veterans organizations in Canada and by all parties in the House of Commons, including your own. That's really the point of the new charter: recognizing the new-age veteran.

In a nutshell, the old system really wasn't achieving what it should with our new modern-age veterans, in that those who qualified would get a pension, then be kicked out the door and be forgotten. I hate to make it that short and be that blunt, but it really wasn't serving them or their families well. The average age of these veterans coming out was and is today 36 years of age, and that small pension basically, in many cases, to be very honest with you, kept them in perpetual poverty. There was no thought to retraining them, no rehabilitation. The only way they qualified for any programs was if they had a disability.

For all of those reasons, we basically changed how we deal with the new force veterans. Part of it, of course, is a recognition of some of the differences in the new veterans coming in, and a big emphasis on mental health—there's no question about that—and rehabilitation.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I wanted to ask about that, because I wanted to follow up on my colleague's question about women veterans. I am somewhat younger than you, but I think—

An hon. member: I wouldn't say that, but good-looking.

Mr. Charlie Angus: And much better-looking, yes. But I remember in my own community and extended family the impacts of the war, of people who came home and lived much shortened lives. At the time, we didn't know. We look back and we see obviously the huge impact that stress injuries had. But we were dealing with basically male soldiers of a certain age group, and we can see a pattern.

We're in an entirely new context now, with women who are in active combat. We have no idea, really, how they will respond in terms of stress injuries, mental stress problems. They're also the family caregivers at home, so there's a whole new realm that we're dealing with.

How much is the government taking this as a priority, in terms of speaking with the U.S. military about the Iraq veterans who are coming back who are women and of ensuring that we have special operational stress clinics to deal with the issues that women veterans are going to be coming back with? We are really moving into new territory.

•(1610)

Hon. Greg Thompson: I appreciate where you're coming from, and it fits in with one of the earlier questions.

Each client, whether a man or a woman, is given what we call “case management”. The programs are actually designed with each individual soldier, or in this case veteran, in mind. We're very sensitive to the needs of women veterans and the individual needs of male veterans—men and women. There is a difference. Among the professionals who deal with our veterans, that is recognized, and the programs are adjusted according to the needs of the individual.

I have every confidence that the men and women who operate these clinics are very professional and have a very professional approach. I believe that with close examination, Mr. Angus, you'd agree that the programs are very sensitive to the needs of our female veterans and very sensitive to the needs of our male veterans, both men and women. The beauty of the system we have is that cases are very individually managed.

I'm not saying you're new to the committee, but I think those who examine that question closely would agree with me that we're very sensitive to the needs of the female veterans.

The Chair: You've done very well. It's six minutes and five seconds, so you've exceeded the five.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Actually, he did very well. Six minutes and five seconds, and I got only two questions. But he's the minister.

The Chair: Well, that's the way these things work.

All right, now we're over to the Conservative Party of Canada, Mrs. Hinton, for seven minutes.

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

Welcome to the committee, Minister. I'm going to do something unusual and ask you questions regarding the estimates, which is what you're here for.

I'll give you an opportunity to answer a few questions. In the most recent budget it was announced that the veterans independence program will be expanded. Can you please elaborate on this? How many more widows and caretakers will now be able to take advantage of this program, and why was it essential to improve upon and expand this program?

Hon. Greg Thompson: One of the things we are really focused on is the aging veterans. Again, other members have mentioned the needs of the aging veterans.

We're keeping in mind how we deliver programs to that group of veterans, and spouses—partners who have waited so long. As I said in my opening remarks, we've identified the ones who needed it the most and who have waited the longest.

The \$292 million we've budgeted for that new group will bring 12,000 to 15,000 new entrants into the program. It allows them to remain at home longer. It takes care of some of their basic needs, maintenance of their home and so on. I guess it's the same thing all of us have to deal with as we age.

There's that little bit of help to those who need it the most and who have waited the longest. The number comes down to somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000 people who will become part of a program they were left out of in the past.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: With respect to the operational stress injury clinics, we have all recognized for many, many years that there weren't enough of them and that they needed to expand, so I'm very pleased to see what has happened.

I wonder if you'd like to elaborate a bit on the number of different provinces that are actually going to have an OSI clinic now. Rather than having the veteran go to a clinic...it will at least be in his or her own home province.

Could you give us an example of what they're going to be dealing with, what kind of professional treatment will be there, and a bit about the reasoning behind the choice of some of the areas that have been selected?

•(1615)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

While I'm answering the first part of the question, Ms. Hinton, I'll ask my officials to make sure I'm accurate on the number of new locations and existing locations, so people can get a sense of how we've strategically located those across the country. While I'm talking, I'm sure they'll be busy coming up with those place names.

We just recently opened up a new one in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Of course, one of the reasons for that is our big military presence in Gagetown, CFB Gagetown, a huge military presence. In fact I believe it's the biggest geographical training area in the Commonwealth nations and one we're very proud of. We've identified those areas where there's a huge community of veterans and active service members as well. So Fredericton is one of those places we've chosen.

And this is what we'll have across the country when we've finished. Obviously in Montreal St. Anne's is basically our crown jewel in terms of OSI and training and new methods and treatment, and obviously a lot of work is going on in conjunction with McGill University. We have one in Quebec City as well and one in London, Ontario. We just made announcements in Winnipeg and Calgary. Did we do one in Edmonton as well?

A voice: Edmonton and Vancouver.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Yes, those are some of the examples across the country. So we're locating them strategically in areas, and staffing them with professional psychologists and psychiatrists who really can do the job that's necessary.

The good news in this—and officials have told me this—is that we've had no trouble recruiting those professionals to do the job. This is good news because that's one of the things I think we were worried about, but they tell me we've had no trouble recruiting the professionals to do the job.

One of the concerns I had in terms of the one in Fredericton.... It's a great facility and they're very nondescript, so the stigma that's attached to any of this.... We don't mind talking about a broken leg or a broken arm, but when your spirit is broken or you're suffering from operational stress injury, as I say, we often suffer in silence and always there's a stigma attached to any sort of mental illness or addiction problem. So these are sort of walk-in clinics that are, as I say, very nondescript. You can walk in. Some of them are located on the second storey of a shopping mall, for example. So you can go in with some level of comfort and not have the embarrassment of having to walk into a clinic to seek the help you're really seeking. There shouldn't be any stigma attached to it, but unfortunately we're still living in a society where all of us, even in civilian society, suffer in silence, don't we.

So the good news is that we have staffed those professionally across the country, and in conjunction with the peer group support it's working well. Actually, it was less than a year ago that we announced the one in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and I was told by one of the people who operate the centre in Fredericton that the biggest delay in the opening there was actually getting skilled tradesmen to build the facility, to renovate the facility it's being held in, which is sort of symptomatic of what's happening in other parts of the country in terms of skilled tradesmen.

We'll have to have the Minister of Immigration in to talk about how we're dealing with that at her level. But the truth is that was really the only impediment to getting that up and running. It was only a little later than we anticipated. I think we were hoping we'd have it up and running three or four months ago, but it is open now. And it's the same across the country. We're expecting all those that we've announced. The doubling will be completed in early 2009.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm very pleased to hear you have not had much difficulty recruiting people, because a number of the witnesses who appeared in front of this committee expressed the concern that there is such a lack of professionals in terms of psychologists and medical personnel across the country, just for normal, everyday people, that it might be an issue with the military.

• (1620)

Hon. Greg Thompson: I'm pleased to announce it hasn't been an issue with Veterans Affairs, and the deputy is nodding in agreement, which is always a good sign that I'm right.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go back over to the Liberal Party of Canada and Mr. Russell for five minutes.

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister, and certainly to your other guests as well.

Just to start off, I had a great opportunity to spend some time with you and some of my other colleagues on the 90th anniversary of Beaumont-Hamel, in France, a couple of summers ago. It was indeed, as your words reflect in your address, a very moving experience and one that will never be forgotten for anybody who attends such events. It was remarkable. I'm glad I got to share in some of those acts of remembrance during that particular time.

I want to change the focus a bit. I come from a northern and remote area. Some people classify it as rural. A disproportionate number of people who serve in the armed forces, at least currently, and I believe historically, come from areas that could be classified as rural or northern or remote, at least on a population basis. I believe a veteran should have the opportunity to go back home and live in dignity and live with certain services that they require.

I note that much of the focus, and for good reason, as well, is in urban areas where there are large population centres, where there are large numbers of veterans who are either living in the cities or in urban areas, or who are in close proximity. But we can't forget those veterans who choose to live in rural areas. In our report we tried to concentrate somewhat on that.

I'm just wondering what the department's vision is for delivering services and for enhancing services in rural and northern areas in Canada. In particular, I come from Labrador, where, population-wise, there's a high number of people serving currently and there have been a number of people who served in the past. We've had testimony that there's not even a bed available to a veteran. There are no Veterans Affairs personnel within my riding, and very few within the province generally. There's such a lack of services in some of these areas.

What is the vision for enhancing VA services in rural and northern Canada?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Mr. Russell, it is a concern, and I'm comforted by what we're doing. It goes back to the questions on the OSI clinics, as well, in terms of the outreach and how we reach some of these rural areas. But we do have caseworkers on the ground.

I remember one of the issues.... You're always preparing, as a minister, for unexpected questions in question period. There was a question about some four-wheel-drive vehicles we bought, and maybe you could argue that they're not green because they are four-wheel-drives. But recognizing the uniqueness of some of the areas where our veterans do live, these men and women who serve them have to have vehicles to get to them. These caseworkers obviously go out of their way to get to them.

So we do have people on the ground in all of these areas. Some of them are remote. You're right that there is a disproportion—if that's the way to say it—of rural people who enlisted in World War I, World War II, and Korea. I'm not sure how the statistics play out today, but you are right, many of them are still living in these remote areas, so we are doing that. We have men and women on the ground. We do also have contracts with some of the veterans organizations that have service people on the ground as well, who deal with our clients, in addition to our caseworkers.

On top of that, one of the questions that we had in terms of the OSI was how do we reach out, but we also do teleconferencing. It is somewhat ironic that when you are setting up these OSI clinics, you could argue why is it in Fredericton, New Brunswick, versus some other smaller area, but it's recruiting the professionals to staff these that is always the problem, as you well know. That is one of the difficulties that rural Canada experiences. But we do have men and women on the ground, and we have this program support for them.

We make every effort to try to keep a lot of these veterans at home with our VIP program, with professional people who will come to their homes to provide those services to them so they can live with a relative degree of comfort. And we make every opportunity to get them into a long-term-care bed, if necessary. That is something that most veterans try to avoid. In fact the VIP program is pretty successful in keeping them home.

Again, at the end of the day, the more veterans who can stay at home because of the services that we provide on the ground, the more money the Government of Canada saves, and the veterans are much happier. But it's all about providing that service on the ground to them, and I think we're doing a pretty good job in the rural parts of Canada.

If you can identify areas in your riding.... And I know that we have corresponded on some of those problems. As a member of Parliament, you never have any difficulty writing to me or crossing the floor to talk about it.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Greg Thompson: That is not on a permanent basis, just for a chat. We're prepared to take a look at them.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will go over to

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gaudet, from the Bloc Québécois, has five minutes.

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

Mr. Minister, I would like to thank you. Last summer, at the 60th anniversary of the Dieppe Raid, you asked for all parties to be stand with you at each of the ceremonies. I thank you for that.

Now let us move to the serious business. Yesterday, the new ombudsman, Mr. Pat Stogran, held a news conference and I brought back some documents that seem to contradict each other. First, we read:

The Veterans Ombudsman shall...review systemic issues related to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB);

Three lines later, we read:

But the Veterans Ombudsman shall not review...any decision of the VRAB, or any decision of Veterans Affairs for which there is a right of appeal to the VRAB;

I am not sure that veterans will understand that document. In one place, it says that they have certain rights, and in another, it says that they do not. This is in the same booklet.

What do you think about that? I will show you.

An Hon. Member: In French?

Mr. Roger Gaudet: They have it in English on the other side.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

Now, I'm not a lawyer, and I think a lot of people are probably breathing a sigh of relief that I'm not a lawyer, but I do know that Victor Marchand, who I introduced as the chairman of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.... That's a quasi-judicial body. It has to be at arm's length. This is a man I never talk to.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Lucky him.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Right, lucky him.

I was going to compliment you on the shirt you wore today in question period, Charlie, but now I'm not going to.

It's a quasi-judicial body. I think we have some lawyers at the table here. It's basically hands off; we can't interfere. It's quasi-judicial. It would be like criticizing a judge for a sentence that has been handed down, if you will, in the real world of the judiciary.

This is one group I don't talk to and that I'm not allowed to talk to. In fact, when I meet some of these people at the airport, they probably think I'm rude. I just say hello and keep going. There is always the risk that I'd be attempting to interfere in a decision they have handed down.

So the ombudsman will not be able to interfere in those decisions when they've gone through a procedure, which, at the end of the day, on pensionable issues, they have a right to appeal. We're depending on the men and women on that body to make those judgments based on the legislation. We can't interfere in those decisions.

One of the things we have done since taking office, I believe, is strengthen the board. There's a qualifying test that has to be done for individuals to be on that board. Victor was appointed by the previous government. In the time we have been there and that he has been there, and I don't have any hesitation in saying this, he has done a good job in reducing that backlog. And I think he has a very credible board that's doing good work.

That's really why the ombudsman can't interfere in those types of decisions. Now, at the end of the day, they can also appeal to the Federal Court if they're not happy with the decision. We had one of those cases this year that dated way back to 1966 or 1968, and it was finally resolved by Veterans Affairs.

We have a process that works pretty well, but the ombudsman won't be able to interfere with those judicial decisions.

•(1630)

The Chair: I apologize, but we're over five minutes, so Mr. Gaudet will have to continue on at another opportunity.

It is over to the Conservative Party of Canada. Mr. Shipley, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for appearing.

Quickly, in terms of the ombudsman, in the estimates it has sort of been flatlined at \$5.8 million per year. The office is opened and going. I'm just wondering if the \$5.8 million up to 2010-11 is just until you get a better feel for what those costs might actually be. Or do you feel that the office up and going is at its potential with the \$5.8 million, without any changes?

Hon. Greg Thompson: This is a question I didn't expect, to be honest with you, in terms of focusing on the future in terms of... I think what we have done on this, Mr. Shipley, is that we set aside enough money to get him up and running with a good complement of staff. I think he has a staff of about 45. To those of us who run businesses, it seems like an awful lot of staff for an ombudsman. But of course we have a lot of clients, don't we? I went through the number of clients we have in my opening remarks.

I think he has adequate resources and human resources to do the job. I think we budgeted fairly accurately what he'll need. But at the end of the day, I guess that will have to be assessed as we go forward in terms of whether it's enough. I think we've pretty well agreed that it is enough.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

This next question might be for Mr. Marchand. He's had a quiet time today. Thank you for coming here, also.

When I look at the supplementary estimates, there has been an increase of \$2 million, I believe. It sounds like your claims may have increased. I'm just not sure what that increase was over the last year, but you're talking about a reallocation of \$2 million and an operational shortfall. I know that you've had to build in a number of members. On your website, you talk about your members "who represent a diverse experience and background from the public at large". With that on your website, can you talk to me about the correlation between that statement on your website and the \$2 million that is actually needed to go back into your budget?

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

The increase in funds addresses specific needs in the areas of transportation and training. Over the years the board has not had any substantial increase in its budgets, and over the years we've been utilizing most of the salaries that were available, because we were running with a low complement of board members. So we were able, over the years, to function that way.

We now have a full complement of 29 permanent board members. I think it's the first time in the history of the board that we do have that full complement.

So there have been increases across the board, literally, in operating, transportation, and whatever expenses, and we required an increase at this time. We were afforded one through portfolio reallocation.

With regard to the selection criteria or the system of selection criteria, no, there is no correlation between that and the increase in budgets, although the selection process in itself requires a substantial amount of money. It requires somewhere in the area of \$100,000 just to run that selection process every year.

•(1635)

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have just one more question for the minister.

I just want to recap a little bit. We had the opportunity to go to some of the military bases, and obviously part of what the committee wanted to do was to talk about the transition from the military to veterans. This goes back to some of the comments from some of my colleagues. Particularly in Petawawa and Valcartier, there were clearly both men and women presenting to us when we talked about the transition of how to deal with people with stress injuries of all kinds. I think we found that to be pretty important, because of the number of women who are in it now.

In terms of the transitional funding, when you talked of the doubling of the number of operational stress injuries, obviously that is looking out, in my mind, to the future.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, please wrap up.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Could you just make a comment about transitional funding for the operation of those?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I'm glad you talked about the transitional issues, Mr. Shipley, because we have really focused on them in working very closely with DND. These transitional issues are less seamless than they used to be, in terms of a client coming over to us when they leave the military.

I basically want to thank DND; they are really standing behind their men and women in uniform. They are never giving up on their soldiers, and many of them now are being retained and retrained within the military. Rick Hillier has gone out of his way to make it known to his own soldiers that they are valued, that though they may be wounded or injured, the military wants to keep them to contribute to Canada and the well-being of the Canadian Forces. So DND deserves a lot of credit for what it's doing, but when these soldiers do become our clients, it is less seamless than it used to be. We continue to work on it and work very closely with DND to make that transition even easier for our men and women in uniform.

That's the short answer.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for being here with your officials.

Along the lines of Bev's questioning on the effort to make this as easy as possible for our soldiers who become veterans, as we've all come to recognize, a veteran is a veteran is a veteran, whether they're a veteran from the Second World War or Korea, and that is an important group of traditional veterans. We're making new veterans every day when a service man or woman leaves the military because of retirement or illness.

So is there a task force? Is there a proactive effort being made by DND and Veterans Affairs to improve the linkages between the two departments at every stage of the process? I appreciate that you have to have silos and envelopes for budgetary reasons. There have to be parameters for and definitions of what one department does in the other, but we can always do better.

• (1640)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

In my opening remarks I mentioned some of the work you have done. It looks like a new day to commemorate veterans.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: For some anyway.

Thank you for making the reference. I'll be using it tomorrow at the Senate committee. They should approve the bill as well.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Those are good things to put in the householder, when someone from another party or the government recognizes some work that has been done by a member in opposition. But it's good work, and I appreciate it, as all members do here. We've had a good relationship over the years.

We do have a steering committee made up of DND and VAC officials. I don't know how many, and I don't know if the deputy does or not, but we have a team engaged with DND, and it's chaired by Brian Ferguson, the assistant deputy minister, who has worked on that committee over the years.

We've made a lot of gains, simply because I think over the years that transition was pretty rough where they get caught in the.... In the military I think they have a zone called no-man's land. When you're in a combat situation, you never want to get stranded there. I think a lot of our veterans had that feeling. They left the military and then no one picked up or was there to make the transition as easy as possible.

So we're doing that, and we're interviewing these young men and women earlier as well. We have a transition interview with individuals to make it less cumbersome for them and for us, so the transition is smoother.

I think we've made huge gains. I'll also reference that, as I did with Mr. Shipley, the tremendous effort DND is making working with us. I think the relationship is much better than it's ever been. We also recognize the value of those men and women in uniform. We want to retrain them to keep them in the military as long as possible. That has a huge impact on the psychological well-being of our men and women in uniform. We're talking about those who've been injured, who get the feeling the military wants to discard them, and that's not the case today. So it's made a huge difference to those men and women in uniform.

Recruitment has never been higher in the Canadian military. I think a lot of that is the result of what DND and VAC are doing for them. They feel that when they serve, they serve their country 100%. They do everything we ask of them, and when something goes wrong for them, they want to know instinctively that the Government of Canada will be there for them. So I think DND is doing an exceptional job of that, and it's recognized in the recruitment, the number of young men and women who are stepping up to enter the military.

I also think it's reflected in the programs we have for our veterans as a result of the new charter. It goes back to Mr. Angus's question on what we're doing and looking at for the new veterans in the future. At the end of the day, I think there's been a complete mindshift in terms of recognizing those needs and responding to them.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you. If there's time later, maybe—

The Chair: Mr. St. Denis, that's five minutes and 26 seconds.

Now we're over to the Conservative Party of Canada, and Mr. Sweet, for five minutes.

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

Thank you very much, Minister and Deputy Minister and Chairman of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, for being here.

I was analyzing some of the numbers. I notice that from 2005-2006 to 2006-2007, there's a \$146 million increase—that's from actuals. Then, from main estimates there's a large spike of about \$350 million, and then \$21 million. That's a substantial sum.

I'm looking at page 2 of the analysts' report on those figures.

Mr. Marchand was in about six months ago saying they had made substantial progress in reducing the backlog. I think it had been almost completely caught up. I want to make sure there's enough in that total budget to ensure that we can avoid those backlogs again and that the veterans will be served in real time on an ongoing basis.

• (1645)

Hon. Greg Thompson: My belief is that we have budgeted enough for it. The numbers speak for themselves. I'm satisfied that we've set aside enough for that.

I can go on, Mr. Sweet, a little bit more. It was brought to my attention that I said something I have to clarify here. One of my wordsmiths just came to me and said, "Minister, you said the transition..."—we were talking about transition—"was 'less seamless'." But, he said, "You might want to clarify that to the committee."

I should have been saying "more seamless". When you're talking about more or less than seamless, it gets rather—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Greg Thompson: Anyway, I just want to make sure I correct that mis-speaking, because any time I mis-speak, it's always brought to my attention rather abruptly. I apologize to the committee for that.

Let's just use the word "seamless". We're attempting to make it seamless. How's that?

Mr. David Sweet: It's going better.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Anyway, I think, Mr. Sweet, that we have budgeted appropriately for it and I give Mr. Marchand full credit for working through that backlog. I think it's manageable now, and our goal is to get the number down even more. With the full complement, I think he's making great gains there.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, to my colleague Mr. Parent, I have to disagree with his comment. I have felt a very strong, solid working relationship between the minister's office and this committee.

I know you have staff who monitor the blues from the committee, so I know you're well apprised of what we're discussing on a regular basis.

On that note, with the new veterans ombudsman and a new Veterans Bill of Rights, could you tell me what kind of feedback you're getting in your office from the veterans organizations and individual veterans, now that those two things have been established?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Again, it's something veterans have for a number of years been asking for. I do know the committee has paid some attention to both of those issues. In terms of the bill of rights, there was a lot of input on what was in that bill of rights. I hope I thanked the committee for their work on that, Mr. Chairman. The members of your committee did a lot of work on that.

The bill of rights is basically enforced by the ombudsman. I really believe that at Veterans Affairs we have men and women who are committed to doing the best thing for our veterans. Obviously, it's a pretty good-sized department.

The bill of rights, in my opinion, just provides a level of comfort to the veteran. It's a little wallet-sized thing they can carry with them. Many of you have asked for the original document or the ones that we've sent out. I think now they're in just about every legion, and all the veterans organizations across the country have a copy of it. I think all of us here collectively can take some pride in it. It's something they were asking for, and we just did it. We went down to Kitchener about a year ago with the Prime Minister, and we announced it.

It has such basic rights as service in the language of your choice, being treated respectfully, and so on. I think more than anything it provides a level of comfort for veterans so they know what they can expect from the departmental officials. That goes along with the ombudsman, because at the end of the day, you have to have something to enforce it, something outside of the minister of the day. I'm the minister today, but you could argue that I may not be here tomorrow. Who knows? That's the nature of politics.

No matter who the minister is, I think the stuff in terms of the ombudsman is the right way to go. It will be that one more check on the government of the day. Again, I'm a big believer in the power of Parliament, and the power of individual members of Parliament to bring these issues to the floor of the House of Commons when they've been outlined by the ombudsman, when he can identify systemic problems within the department or a case where veterans aren't being handled properly by the department, or whatever. Basically, regardless of whether it's legislative or otherwise, it's going to hold the government and the minister's feet to the fire to do better. And that's what we're there for—to do better.

I think the model we have set up and adopted is a very powerful model, and in those jurisdictions that have that model it's proven to be very successful. Again, at the end of the day the strength in that ombudsman is going to be the men and women surrounding this table who will never hesitate to either cross the floor on a temporary basis to talk to the minister, to give the minister the devil, or stand up in the House of Commons and just tear a strip off him. Because when that ombudsman's report is tabled in the House of Commons, you're the people—whether it's the Conservative Party, Liberal Party, NDP, or the Bloc—who are going to be there demanding some answers.

I'm very confident that it will work, and I'm pleased that we were the government that brought it in. I think at the end of the day it's going to pay huge dividends to our veterans community.

•(1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now would be the turn for Mr. Angus, with the NDP, but I think he is otherwise disposed. So if he returns, we will revisit that issue.

Now it's back over to the Conservative Party of Canada. Mr. Cannan, for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Mr. Minister. You are the minister of the day, and you're doing a fine job, I might add.

I appreciated your coming out to the community at the sod turning for our cenotaph. It's now dedicated and well respected by the community and appreciated by all veterans, young and old. I know my colleague from the south, Minister Day, just had an announcement last week, and the veterans were greatly appreciative of that. So thank you to you and your department for the great work you're doing.

I also just wanted to make note of a personal issue in the riding. May 8 was a flag-day ceremony in my community, and my wife was there representing me. There was a horrific accident. A member of our community, a veteran in his eighties, was making a turn off the highway into the memorial service. He was a member of the colour guard. He got hit in an accident and died. So Mr. Robinson, rest in peace. It was a tragic incident.

We think of the men and women who are serving and the work that they do, and coming back from our travels I think of the great country and freedoms that we take for granted. So I thank you for all the work that we do in the community as a committee.

One of the things that we've done—and I know it was elaborated on by Mr. Sweet, who briefly touched on it—is that in April 2006 the Prime Minister announced the new Veterans Charter. I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on some of the programs now offered under the new Veterans Charter.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Okay. Let's step through them. There are many, obviously.

If I just wanted to capsulize it and talk generally about it, one of our officials often used that term “a whole suite of programs” to basically make that transition to civilian life easier for the veteran and their family and give them the support they needed in terms of complete disability.

I was expecting a question on this. Whenever the new Veterans Charter is attacked, I don't think it's attacked in a fair and accurate way in terms of some of the criticisms we come in for—the new charter versus the old system, if you will. Again, the new charter was supported by every party here at the table today. It was introduced by the previous government and supported. I give full credit to the previous minister for the work she did on that and to all parliamentarians on the new charter, and to the department officials.

We came in and we were very honoured to have introduced it and made it a reality. We did our share of the heavy lifting as well. But it's really designed for a whole suite of programs to the veterans, to help them and their families. It's all based on wellness and it's all based on support for the veteran.

As I often say, for the average veteran coming out—the average age is 36—they have about 30 years, if we're assuming the average age of retirement is 65. Of course in politics we never know what the age of retirement is going to be. That means they have about 30 years of productive life ahead of them, in order to support their families and advance their careers, and so on. And I think we're obligated, for a whole lot of reasons, to allow them to make that transition back to civilian life. They did everything we asked them to do. Now it's our turn to help them.

The beauty of it is that under the new system, the veteran doesn't have to be disabled to get that wide suite of programs. The programs are available.

Now, if you're totally disabled, we have a tax-free.... I will ask the deputy to get the correct word. The lump sum payment is what I'm looking for. I always hate using “lump sum payment”, but that payment is there tax-free for the veteran's family to help them out. Our critics always overlook that there is 75% ongoing support to that family in case of disability, based on their earnings when they left the military.

In addition to that, there's a medical program. There are complete rehabilitation programs to reintegrate them, and retraining, including university, if qualified. And on top of that, if the veteran is unable to make the grade, that retraining is available for his or her spouse. So we've really focused on the family.

I often say that if a veteran is suffering, the whole family suffers. Men and women in uniform come back and they have to be transitioned to civilian life. If that transition doesn't go well, it doesn't go well for the entire family. Most veterans are married with

family members. That means there are a whole lot of people who are suffering.

I think the programs that were designed and approved by Parliament were well thought out and they are actually playing out pretty well in terms of what we expected. And again, as we often say, the new charter is a living document. It can be changed and we can modify it as we go along when we see the need to change it, which we did with the OSI clinics, for example. We saw an up-spike, a rise, and we were able to respond very quickly to it.

Most members, on examining it very closely, are pretty proud of what we were able to do as a Parliament when we passed that and implemented it.

● (1655)

We do have a comparison chart here. This what I was actually looking for, which I'll make sure all the members get. Actually, I'll have Brian Ferguson, assistant deputy minister, make sure that all the members have one of these. We'll send it out, because it basically compares the old system with the new system. With any system—as you all know—you can sort of cherry-pick, right? You can say there are some parts of the old one that I like better. But I think in 95% of the cases, most of us would argue that the new Veterans Charter is working better than the old system.

Having gone to some international meetings with our counterparts in other countries and other jurisdictions in the world—and I think that's something the committee is going to take a look at, comparing our system to others around the world—I think our system is the best. I really do. And I think we unabashedly state that we basically cherry-picked from a lot of systems when we focused on the new Veterans Charter a number of years ago.

We've got a system that works. It responds well to the modern-day veterans and doesn't forget our traditional veterans for one moment. So I'm pretty pleased with it.

The Chair: Mr. Cannan, I think you have to be happy with a five-minute question session and getting seven minutes and forty-five seconds of answer.

[*Translation*]

Now we are going to hear from Mr. Perron, of the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Perron, you have five minutes.

● (1700)

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Minister, I will ask my questions and you can then answer them all at once.

I would like to see the breakdown of the expenses. It seems to me that the budget for the Ste. Anne's Hospital has gone done. Is that true or not?

Page 11 gives us adjustments for expenses not included in the main estimates. You are dividing \$3.2 million between the Ste. Anne's Hospital and the restoration of monuments.

Page 12 shows the summary of information, anticipated expenses, and human resources for Veteran Affairs Canada. The financial resources are shown in millions of dollars. The VRAB gets \$138 million and human resources gets \$147 million. As I see it, those figures are not compatible.

Finally, on page 13, you list the portfolio priorities, of which there are seven. It seems to me that it would be interesting if you gave an indication of the costs. How much does improved program delivery cost? It is listed as a priority. How much do you plan to spend on improving these programs? How much for each item? You could simply indicate the present status and your forecasts. As an administrator, you surely calculated the costs of these improvements, did you not?

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: The deputy appears prepared to answer that question in the detail that's probably necessary, so I'm going to turn it over to the deputy on that, Mr. Perron.

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

[Translation]

I will try to answer your question. Let me start with the \$138 million that you refer to on page 12. I have to tell you that there is a mistake in the French version that has been subsequently corrected. We have set aside \$13.8 million for the review board. I am sure that you know that, in English, this is written 13.8 and in French 13,8. Unfortunately, there was a translation error and the amount that appeared was \$138 million. That error has been corrected.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: That brings me back to earth.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: It brings you back to what Mr. Marchand...

We have \$13.8 million for board operations.

Your second question referred to...

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: It was about the budget for the Ste. Anne's Hospital.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: The budget for the Ste. Anne's Hospital has not been reduced. As you know, a major modernization project at the hospital will be completed next year.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I see that \$1.8 is left for that.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Exactly. The entire plan for the Ste. Anne's Hospital costs over than \$100 million, \$107 million to be precise. The work will be complete in 2009-2010, and the difference that you see in the costs are transition costs. Clearly, as the renovations and the modernization work is completed, the significant transition costs go down.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Is the construction going to need more money?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: We expect to be on budget and on time. We have every reason to believe that the work will be done by the scheduled date and that the budget will be met.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: My final question dealt with page 13 and the portfolio priorities. I wanted to have a calculation, an estimate, an idea of the costs of the improvements.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: I can send the committee the details of each of these priorities. You'll notice that they are portfolio priorities. You see that the first three priorities are included in the departmental mandate, which is to provide programs and services to traditional veterans, and to a new generation of veterans, especially through a mental health strategy. That is the second priority. The third priority is to ensure that remembrance activities engage all Canadians. Another departmental priority is to enhance organizational effectiveness.

The first four are departmental priorities. The three others, the fifth, sixth and seventh, apply to the board. So there are three priorities for the board and four for the department.

I can send the clerk of the committee the amounts budgeted for each of these priorities.

•(1705)

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Thank you, madam.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

Now we'll go to the Liberal Party of Canada and Mr. Russell for five minutes.

Mr. Todd Russell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I want to sincerely thank you for your language and the way you have attributed some of the successes we've seen for veterans to all parties and the efforts they have made. It's very refreshing to see that, and it's certainly welcome.

I'm going to be very specific. You'll have to teach me a little bit here. Down in Labrador, and Happy Valley—Goose Bay in particular, the province is building a new long-term-care facility. Can the Department of Veterans Affairs purchase a bed or set aside a bed in that facility for a prospective client? What budget would that come out of, and how would I go about doing that?

Hon. Greg Thompson: You're talking to the right person.

Mr. Todd Russell: Hopefully you can write the cheque this evening.

Hon. Greg Thompson: You're right that in many of these facilities across the country we do exactly that. The request comes forward. There's a measurement of what the need might be in that veteran's community, and if the need is there it goes forward. I don't like the term "go forward", but everyone's using it these days, and it seems to work. But as we go forward, if the need is there we respond favourably in most cases to that.

We have to be very careful in this business. You never say yes until it's been done, but the fact is that's exactly how it usually plays out. There's a need in a particular community. Newfoundland—Labrador is building the facility. We usually make every effort, if the need is there, to make sure we have some beds set aside for our veterans.

Mr. Todd Russell: I thank you for that. I'm sure you will be getting a formal request, if this is not one already.

Where a veteran locates is sometimes dependent upon the existing services. So when you ask if the need is there, the need is there if we have people serving in the military now. Do you see where I'm going with this? The need is there if we've had people serving in the military who already reside in Labrador, for example. Because if there wasn't an existing bed...and I know that's not the long-term solution either. We like to keep people mobile from the cradle to the grave, so to speak. But when a bed is available and a tangible service is available, people have a greater propensity to go back to the rural and remote locations because they know that assistance is there.

So there might not be a veteran who needs that bed right now, but I can guarantee you that with the number of service people we have, and those who have already served, we will need that bed. We've seen in the past where we could have used it. So I'll make the case for need on that basis.

That's the whole argument I'm getting at when we come to the mobility of a veteran. The more services we have—even prospective services sometimes—that will determine where they sort of spend the rest of their days.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Yes, there's nothing I can really disagree with there. I think you're right. That's one of the things we attempt to do. We have a number of community beds and contract beds in Newfoundland, as we do in all the provinces.

We all have our own individual cases. We're talking here in this room about ombudsmen, but I often say the veterans' greatest ombudsmen are individual members of Parliament. I don't think there's any other department of government that has as much correspondence with individual members of Parliament as Veterans Affairs, because everyone has veterans. As I said, it's one of the things we all agree on, the treatment of our veterans. We'll disagree on certain things, because we're all politicians, but they truly do unite us. We want the best for them. Those families will not hesitate to contact an individual member of Parliament to come to their defence because you'll walk a letter across to me, as all members do and will always do regardless of who the minister is.

I get those kinds of letters too. This is interesting, Mr. Anders, because I had a veteran's family, a woman I went to school with and her dad now in his eighties, and he's in a hospital and has to go into a veteran's bed. They want to keep him as close to home as they possibly can. There's a bed available now in another community, but they don't want to go there for obvious reasons, because it means his wife, who is also in her eighties, will not be able to travel that 20 or 30 miles. So we're hoping against hope that a bed becomes available, which winds up being in my home community, so he can in fact go to that particular bed. That's really the point you're making: making every effort, so these veterans can have as much comfort and be as close to home as possible. That means the veteran's wife can stay in her home town.

I often say that. In Saint John, New Brunswick, we have a 102-year-old veteran, a woman, and I grew up in the presence of this woman in my community. Most of them do want to stay as close to home as they possibly can in their closing days, because of friends and relatives and all the comradeship and the social activities that come with this. They still want to be close to family and friends, so we make every effort to do that.

We'll see what we can do in your particular case. Hopefully, it will help.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

I know Mr. St. Denis was indicating he would like to split time. Unfortunately, there's nothing to split. Seven minutes have been taken, so we're going to put Mr. St. Denis' name down for later on.

Now it's back to the Conservative Party of Canada and Mrs. Hinton for five minutes.

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

On a committee, you get to know people rather well, so I'm sure Todd will appreciate my comment. Goose Bay was actually going to be closed down under the previous government, so you should be very grateful that it hasn't closed down and has the spaces—

Mr. Todd Russell: Don't start, Betty.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Anyway, those are the facts.

Mr. Minister, I'm going to ask you a very general question, very general. Which of the programs offered by the department are the most utilized?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I'm getting all the tough questions from my own party.

For the most utilized, I'm going to have to search my brain, because there's such a wide range of services, and they're all utilized. I suppose you could say which one costs the department the most money, if you will, but...

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I want the most popular. What's used the most?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Sorry, I didn't hear that, Betty.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: More along the lines of what's the most popular, I suppose would be a good way to phrase it. Which one is used the most?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I'm perplexed in terms of how to answer that. It sounds like a really easy question, but.... The way it's broken down, if you take a look at it.... I'll answer it this way, and if you're not satisfied, I'll go back at it.

There's about \$2.2 billion a year that goes out of Veterans Affairs for pensions, awards, allowances, and disabilities. There's \$1.7 billion for disability pensions alone, traditional disability pension payments. There's \$1.2 billion for health care and re-establishment of benefits and services; \$266 million for home care and other home support services; \$383 million for long-term care and nursing home care, including VIP in communities.

The list keeps going on and on and on. I don't want to bore you. We can make sure you get provided with that detail, with some of those copies. The list is pretty long in terms of benefits and expenditures. We do about \$51 million a year for remembrance-type services. We have remembrance outreach programs totalling about \$14 million. That's sort of a thumbnail sketch of where those moneys go.

● (1715)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm not trying to trip you up on any of these things; it was simply a curiosity question.

The other thing I have always admired is the fact that we are including young people in these visits to war memorials and to these very important services. Some of the programs that have been happening where, for example, a student chooses a specific soldier, learns all about the background on that soldier and makes a presentation are incredibly moving.

I noticed a specific direction to start to add more students to this. Is this something you'd like to see followed up? Do you want to pursue that avenue and bring in more students and perhaps fewer bureaucrats when we go on these kinds of missions? No offence meant to bureaucrats.

Hon. Greg Thompson: That is such an important part of what Veterans Affairs does—the remembrance side of it. I'm not sure whether I invented this line or not, but I use it a lot. I often say the greatest gift we can give a veteran is the gift of remembrance. And as I often say in a speech—and I'm not sure whether I invented this line or somebody else did—freedom is never free.

We sometimes forget that we're living in truly the best country in the world. And why? It's because of the men and women who were prepared to stand up for freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Those are the men and women we honour. We cherish their service, so we can't forget what they have done.

In all fairness, I think Veterans Affairs, in the last 10 to 15 years, is doing a lot better job in connecting with schools and others than they did a number of years ago. We're doing a better job now in realizing that we can't forget the sacrifice of these people and what they have done for us. That is playing out, and more people now attend remembrance ceremonies than ever before.

I think it's the realization, Betty—and excuse me for using your first name again, but we see each other so much, all of us in this room, on an informal basis, I guess we can't get away from it—that we have about 200,000 what we call “traditional veterans”, World War II veterans, left. And we're losing about 20,000 a year.

I think we realize now that these people are, in a sense, a national treasure. Those are the men and women who put themselves in harm's way for what we take for granted in the House of Commons when we can get up and debate things freely, and for all the things we enjoy as Canadians. Most of them are probably in the last ten years of their life. Today, as Peter Stoffer often mentions, there will be 80 veterans who pass away. Some of them will be in your community; some will be in mine.

I think it's in all of us that we do our very best to honour them, and I think we're doing a lot better job than we've ever done. I think part of it is the troubled world we're living in. We're very blessed, as a

nation, and now we're realizing these are the men and women who made it possible for us to live in the best country in the world.

One of the most rewarding things I have done since being minister—it's a very small thing, and it was not a great cost to the Government of Canada, other than sending me and a couple of others to Spokane, Washington, which was supported by everyone here, every member of Parliament—was when we returned the citizenship to Canada's oldest veteran, Mr. Babcock. We have one remaining World War I veteran. He lost his Canadian citizenship—to be very accurate, I'd say British citizenship—through no fault of his own, because of the circumstances he was caught in.

It was one small thing. We restored that citizenship to him. It's one of the very few things in government we can do that really doesn't cost anything. It's an appreciation for what he did—that generation, Canada's greatest generation—for our country.

I think we're realizing that we have just one of these people left. There's only one left. He's 108 years of age. When he passes away, that will be the last of his generation.

Most of us in this room are old enough now that we have mothers and fathers who are still at that age, and for some of you who are younger than I am, grandparents. We have a deep appreciation for what they have done. I think that is somehow etched more firmly in our minds, our psyche, as Canadians than it ever has been in the past. That's basically because of the troubled world we're living in.

So when you go to these ceremonies and see these young people who go out of their way, and the teachers and educators who are really focusing on what we should be doing for our veterans, that's actually playing out on the main street of every community.

And there are communities that apply for restoration of their monuments. We have a little program, where we'll match up to \$25,000 from the community to help restore their monuments.

● (1720)

There's a big interest in those types of programs. Citizens who will raise money in schools to send children over to Vimy Ridge.... I mean, how many children did we have go over? We had a huge contingent of young people actually go to Vimy Ridge, because they raised their own funds to go.

It is quite heartwarming when you see those types of things happening. That remembrance part of what we do is a really important part of what Veteran's Affairs does. The other night I was watching what was going on down in Washington, as it was their Memorial Day. I think the entire free world is more aware of what is going on than it used to be. I think probably we've learned some lessons from some of those European nations. Some of the friends and neighbours close to us have done a pretty good job over the years. But I think we're doing a better job than any of them, to be very honest with you.

The response we get to some of what we're doing, when we're going across the country, has been really quite rewarding. I have to say that I have the best job in government. So we'll just keep doing it together, as I say, and collectively do the best we possibly can for those men and women.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Mr. St. Denis, with the Liberals, for five minutes.

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

Some of us had the opportunity to visit with the new veterans ombudsman yesterday when he did an update. We know that Mr. Stogran started the process some time ago to establish his office. He didn't get into specific numbers, at least in the time I was there. He may have with others. I think it would be a fair assumption that he is going to be very busy. His office will be very, very busy, because as you suggested in your notes, this is something that veterans have been looking forward to for quite some time. So realistic or not, there will be huge expectations that his office—and he did allude to this in his remarks—can do miracles. Of course, he won't be able to. That said, there will be many cases, and whether they have merit or not, they will still require considerable human resources to vet them and to at least say to an applicant that this is not a situation we can deal with. They will still require processing.

Are you satisfied, Minister, that the budget allocated for that position and the office is sufficient, especially, as has been raised by a number of members, including my colleague, Ms. Guarnieri, with the great number, sadly, of new OSI cases we can expect in the years ahead? I think they will trigger a great proportion of the inquiries. Are you satisfied? We can disagree—we'll put it aside for this discussion—about whether the ombudsman should report to the minister or to Parliament, but that aside, are the resources there for the future?

• (1725)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Within the ombudsman's office, with the structure we have and the resources he has—as the deputy has confirmed, there are about 45 staff—I think we have set aside, Mr. St. Denis, the resources for him to do his job.

The other thing, of course, is that within Veterans Affairs not everything will be dealt with, as you well know—I think you alluded to that—by the ombudsman, because the appeals process and internal reviews will be ongoing as well. Even today we are dealing with some internal matters within the department that we recognized probably long before the veterans ombudsman ever heard about them. So we have those checks and balances within the system today to make sure that our men and women are doing the job and that the process is unfolding as it should.

He'll focus on some of those systemic problems and on making sure that the bill of rights is honoured and so on and so forth. But I don't want everyone to be led to believe that it will only be him doing that. All of us at this table are doing part of what he'll be doing in a very formal way: recognizing a difficulty, responding to a concern you have as an individual member of Parliament, and making the necessary changes within the department. That's what you people do very well, and you never hesitate to come to see me when you believe it can be done better. So that's going to be ongoing.

The short answer is that I really believe we have the resources necessary for him to do his job. But guess what. If we don't, we'll hear about that too, won't we? We'll be prepared to respond to that if the case proves to be that he doesn't. But I think from what I see, I'm pretty satisfied, and I think he is, as well.

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

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Greg Thompson: And I might say, Mr. Chairman, before I finish with Mr. St. Denis, that I'm really impressed with some of the people who have gone internally from within the department over to work with him. I mean, these are really qualified people who I think even former ministers would agree are exceptional people within Veterans Affairs who really understand the system. I think he's got a lot of talent there with him that really will allow him to do a good job in his role as ombudsman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Now we're going over to the Conservative Party of Canada and Mr. Sweet for five minutes. That being said, Mr. Sweet, the committee wraps up in three minutes.

Mr. David Sweet: I just have one question. That's it.

You've mentioned a number of times that we're all united around veterans, and one of the issues that I think unites us in that environment for veterans is the desecration of monuments or the lack of dignity and respect for monuments everywhere across the country, but particularly this one here, our National War Memorial.

Certainly we cannot prevent vandalism everywhere across the country, but I know it's a concern for all of us, because the memorial here stands for and commemorates everything we've discussed here today, along with the men and women who served.

I just want to ask if the department is considering looking at new measures for signage to identify exactly what it is, so when people are tourists they don't use the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as a bench, and also for security for those people who would use less than dignified behaviour around it.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

It's troubling to all of us when we see that happening, and I do know many members have suggested some of the things that could be done to improve security, and some of those things actually have been done. One of them is adding ceremonial guards during the summer months, when it's much easier. I shouldn't say this, because I don't know for sure, but I think generally speaking most vandalism occurs in the summer months, when it's easier to be outside, than in the middle of January, if you're going to misbehave.

We also have commissionaires now who patrol the site from May to November, during the busy months when folks are out on the streets celebrating more than they should.

Also, I believe surveillance cameras have been installed.

I didn't see this in any of my briefing notes, but I do know that one of the things that.... My wife has a business, and I remember the RCMP telling her that one of the best things you can do is have proper lighting. I can't tell you whether we have improved the lighting there or not, but if it's a well-lit area where it's pretty obvious what somebody is doing and it has cameras, those things are deterrents.

But you're right. How do you legislate good behaviour? It's something most of us find offensive when we hear of something like that happening, and it does occur in so many public places. So I guess vigilance is part of it, and taking as many precautions as we can, but you can't legislate against.... What's the term we often use? I guess they say you can't legislate against stupidity and you can't

legislate against ignorance. But those who do this violate the sensitivity of just about every Canadian, so we have to do the very best we can to stop that sort of thing from happening.

Thank you.

● (1730)

The Chair: All right. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we have come to the end of two hours.

Mr. Minister, thank you very much for being with us here today and being frank and forthcoming with your questions.

The meeting is adjourned.

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