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Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)): Welcome to the 51st meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

This evening, we are continuing our study of division 17 of part 3 of Bill C-59, An Act to Implement Certain Provisions of the Budget Tabled in Parliament on April 21, 2015 and Other Measures.

[English]

During the first hour this evening we will hear from Mr. Bradley White, Dominion secretary of the Dominion Command, and Mr. Ray McInnis, director of the service bureau, Dominion Command, both from the Royal Canadian Legion. I want them to note that I'm wearing my legion pin from the friendliest branch in the region, 632.

We will also hear from Mr. Wayne MacCulloch, national president of the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping, as well as Ms. Debbie Lowther, co-founder of the Veterans Emergency Transition Services.

[Translation]

This part of the meeting will end at 7:30 p.m. We will then have a brief pause.

[English]

During the second hour of this meeting we will hear columnist, media personality, and academic researcher, retired captain Sean Bruyca. We'll also hear from Mr. Derryk Fleming, national administration member of the 31 CBG Veterans Well-being Network; Mr. Brian McKenna, representative from the B.C. Veterans Well-being Network; and Mr. Perry Gray, editor-in-chief of VeteranVoice.info. We also have Mr. Michael Blais, president and founder of Canadian Veterans Advocacy.

Are you making four different presentations or just one?

You have 10 minutes each.

The legion starts.

Mr. Bradley K. White (Dominion Secretary, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): Honourable Chair and members of the committee, good evening, and thank you.

I do agree with you, Chair, that 632 is the friendliest branch in all of Ottawa.

It's a great pleasure to appear once again in front of the committee. I'm pleased to speak on behalf of our Dominion president, Mr. Tom Eagles, and our 300,000 members and their families.

[Translation]

This evening, we will do our presentation in English. However, we have provided a copy of our brief in both official languages.

[English]

The legion has been asked to discuss specifically division 17 of part 3, which amends the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act to add a purpose statement to the act; improve the transition process of Canadian Forces members and veterans to civilian life; establish a retirement income security benefit to provide eligible veterans and their survivors with a continued financial benefit after the age of 65 years; establish the critical injury benefit to provide eligible Canadian Forces members and veterans with lump-sum compensation for severe, sudden, and traumatic injuries or acute diseases that are service related, regardless of whether they result in permanent disability; and finally, to establish the family caregiver relief benefit to provide eligible veterans who require a high level of ongoing care from an informal caregiver with an annual grant to recognize that caregiver's support.

The division also amends portions of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act as a consequence of the establishment of the critical injury benefit.

Please note that our comments are directed specifically to this section of Bill C-59 and not to the entire omnibus bill.

The Royal Canadian Legion is the only veteran service organization that assists veterans and their families with representation to Veterans Affairs Canada and the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

The legion's advocacy program is core to our mission, and we have been assisting veterans since 1926 through our legislated mandate in both the Pension Act and the new Veterans Charter. Please note that veterans do not have to be legion members to receive our assistance; we provide it free of charge.

Our national service bureau network provides representation, starting with their first applications to Veterans Affairs Canada and through all three levels of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Through the legislation, the legion has access to service health records and departmental files to provide comprehensive yet independent representation at no cost.

Last year our service officers prepared and represented disability claims on behalf of over 3,000 veterans to VAC and the VRAB. There is no other veterans group with this kind of direct contact and interaction with, provision of support to, and feedback from veterans, their families and, of course, the caregivers.

When it comes to serving veterans and their families, the legion continues to be the only veterans organization in Canada advocating for and providing assistance to all veterans.

The legion recognizes that progress is being made for veterans and their families in this budget and recommends that the NCVA provisions of Bill C-59 be passed as soon as possible. Is it everything we have been advocating for? Does it answer all of the 14 ACVA recommendations? No, it does not, but it is a very positive step forward.

This bill lays out important enhancements that will improve the care and benefits provided to veterans and their families, especially for our veterans who have turned or will be turning 65 in the very near future. We need to ensure that they have financial benefits beyond age 65 for life, including that provision for their survivors as well.

However, we do have many questions on how the retirement income security benefit, the RISB, is calculated, and until we receive and review the complete policies on the RISB, the critical injury benefit, and the family caregiver relief benefit, we will not see how adequate these benefits will be to our veterans and their families.

Our principal concerns remain that the maximum disability award must be increased to be consistent with what is provided to injured civilian workers who receive general damages in law courts. As well, our concern with the family caregiver relief benefit is that it does not adequately compensate a spouse who has to give up a full-time job to become a caregiver. What is proposed is a respite benefit. Most families today are dual-income families and sometimes that service member works two jobs to support the family, so in essence when he gets injured three full-time wages are lost. We would prefer to see something akin to the Pension Act's attendance allowance reinstated.

• (1835)

As I previously stated, Bill C-59, in division 17 of part 3, does not answer all of the 14 ACVA recommendations. The Royal Canadian Legion will not rest until all these recommendations have been addressed and adopted, and we will not cease in our efforts to push the government to honour its obligations.

We have not shied away from making our stance on these issues known. We have shared our position paper, "Veterans Matter", with all Canadians to encourage an informed debate on veterans' issues in the future.

I want to address the issues of communications and accessibility.

The new Veterans Charter was developed to meet the needs of modern veterans. It is based on modern disability management principles. It focuses on rehabilitation and successful transition.

It must be stated that the legion, while endorsing the new Veterans Charter as it was adopted in 2006, has also been steadfast in our advocacy for its change to better meet the lifelong needs of our

veterans and their families. We all have an obligation to understand the complexities and interrelationships, and to inform about and explain the new Veterans Charter for the people who it concerns. Our veterans and their families deserve absolutely nothing less.

The new Veterans Charter and the enhanced new Veterans Charter Act are comprehensive and very complex. Our veterans and their families need to know what programs are available to assist them and how to access them, whether they are financial, rehabilitation, health services, and/or family care programs. The government needs to ensure that resources and programs are in place to meet their needs and to review the accessibility to these programs, while ensuring that front-line staff are available—and knowledgeable—to assist veterans and their families. This can never become a self-serve system.

Most veterans and their families do not have a good understanding of the new Veterans Charter. I would suggest that this highlights the ineffectiveness of the government's communication of the programs and services available under the new Veterans Charter for our injured veterans and their families. What is required is proactive communication to all veterans across this country to ensure that they are aware of the financial compensation, rehabilitation programs, health care services, and the family care programs that are available and of how to access them.

Lastly, it is also time for all of us to understand the new Veterans Charter and the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act. This should be a priority. Our veterans need to know not only the weaknesses of the programs but the strengths behind the legislation: the programs, the services, and the benefits. We, too, can help our veterans and their families.

Since commencing our advocacy in 1926, the legion's advocacy and programming efforts continue to evolve to meet the changing demographics while supporting our traditional veteran community. However, notwithstanding the capacity of the legion, we certainly believe that the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada have a responsibility to ensure that policies, practices, and programs supported through a sustainable research program are accessible and meet the unique needs of all veterans, with a goal of enabling the healthy transition of all our veterans and their families through this very challenging, changing, and sometimes difficult life course.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention our World War II veterans and post-World War II veterans who are now seeking assistance through the legion for access to the veterans independence program. These veterans are often frail, and they are approaching the end of their life. They are a very proud group of people who have never applied to the government for any type of disability benefit assistance, and now, because they want to remain independent in their own homes rather than going into a long-term care facility, they cannot access the VIP and benefits for frailty because they do not have an established eligibility for a disability or a lower income.

Last October, we sent a high-priority list of resolutions to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, including a resolution that all veterans be deemed eligible for VIP benefits based on need, irrespective of their having established disability entitlement or low-income status. We urge the government to action this resolution without delay. We understand that the response to these resolutions will be forthcoming from the department very soon.

We agree that the passage of Bill C-59, and particularly those provisions that affect the new Veterans Charter, is a step in the right direction. Let me thank the committee for the work it does on behalf of our veterans. The legion appreciates the opportunity to come before the committee to brief you on our perspective on issues of concern to Canada's veterans.

I would also at this time like to extend to the committee the opportunity to visit our national headquarters, which we call Legion House. It would be opportunity for us to provide you with a full brief on how the legion is one of Canada's great institutions, and how we support Canadians, our veterans, and our communities.

• (1840)

Once again, thank you. Merci.

The Chair: Mr. White, I want to thank you for the work that you do. I especially want to thank you for the respect that you have for the clock. You were at 10 minutes, right on the dot, and you should be an example for everyone sitting here at this table.

If it's the will of the committee, we will hear from Mr. Mac Culloch now.

[*Translation*]

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch (National President, Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping): Mr. Chair and members of the committee—

[*English*]

thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. Veterans are grateful for the attention you have given to their needs and your work in addressing a number of shortfalls in the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act, commonly called the new Veterans Charter, and its attendant regulations.

The 14 recommendations of your report last summer have provided a significant first step in redressing gaps in current legislation meant to assure the well-being of veterans by dealing with the top issues facing our most severely disabled veterans. While the new benefits for veterans, contained in Bill C-59, constitute another step in the right direction, it is but a small step and does not fully

address the long-standing top priorities of veterans and their associations.

To recap, for the past several years traditional veterans' groups have been unanimous and consistent with regard to their top three priorities: the earnings loss benefit must be improved to provide 100% of pre-release income, continue for life, and include increases for projected career earnings for a Canadian Forces member; the maximum disability award must be increased consistent with what is provided to injured civilian workers who receive general damages in law court; and the current inequality with regard to earnings loss benefits for class A and class B reservists, those with fewer than 180 days, for injuries attributable to service, must cease.

Further key shortfalls to be addressed were outlined in the assembly's latest letter to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, dated July 18, 2014.

The provisions of the new Veterans Charter unreasonably constrain the number of disabled veterans who are able to qualify for appropriate levels of entitlement to this important allowance.

The exceptional incapacity allowance concept, founded under the Pension Act, should be incorporated in the new Veterans Charter. This allowance has traditionally addressed the impact of the disabilities suffered by 100% veteran pensioners, with reference to their difficulty to cope given their overall capacity. Introducing the exceptional incapacity allowance into the new Veterans Charter would augment the limitations of the permanent impairment allowance, particularly in circumstance where a seriously disabled veteran confronts the ravages of age.

In order to recognize the caregiving requirements that many disabled veterans confront to cope with their incapacities, the attendant's allowance provisions of the Pension Act should be added to the new Veterans Charter, in recognition of the financial costs faced by many families in this context. The new Veterans Charter should acknowledge that veterans with dependants should receive a higher level of compensation, either through the augmentation of the lump-sum disability award or through an increase in the earnings loss benefit for such veterans and their families.

Bill C-59, as it currently stands, does not fully address any of these recommendations. Specifically, the retirement income security benefit provides for a maximum of 70% of pre-age-65 earnings loss benefit, which itself is a maximum of 75% of pre-tax, pre-release salary, or, when you do the math, 52.25% of the pre-tax, pre-release salary, without any provision for projected Canadian Armed Forces career earnings increases. A survivor would receive 50% of the retirement income security benefit. This falls far short of the recommended 100% of pre-release salary, with projected career earnings increases.

Let's put some numbers on this. A regular force corporal currently earns \$56,568 per annum before taxes. The earnings loss benefit would reduce that figure to \$42,426. After age 65, the pre-tax amount of the retirement income security benefit would be \$29,700. His survivor would receive \$14,850 annually. Both of these amounts are well below the poverty line.

• (1845)

Note that these are maximum amounts, and under Bill C-59 they would be reduced by unspecified other amounts. What quality of life could the veteran or the survivor expect to experience under these circumstances? This alarming situation will be further exacerbated by other government cost-shedding actions, such as the current readjustment of cost sharing for the public service health care plan, which many veterans depend on for supplemental health insurance. It will be changed from the current 25% participant and 75% government share to a 50-50 scheme. Where will veterans and their survivors find the means to keep pace with this and other cost increases under the retirement income security benefit?

The solution to the quality of life that disabled veterans deserve lies not in what Bill C-59 proposes, but rather in adoption of the long-standing recommendations of veterans. It is our hope that this new benefit is but the first step towards meeting our stated needs. The Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping therefore supports inclusion of the retirement income security benefit in Bill C-59, but calls on government to commit to meeting the full requirement in its next session.

The family caregiver relief benefit is a welcomed addition to the suite of benefits available under the new Veterans Charter. However, at \$7,238, it falls far short of a similar benefit under the Canadian Armed Forces compensation and benefit instructions, article 211.04, which provides \$36,500. This discrepancy has not been explained, and an 80% reduction in assistance cannot fail to have dramatic consequences on the disabled veteran and his or her family. While the association accepts this benefit as another small step in the right direction, it once again calls on government to adjust the family caregiver relief benefit to the amount of compensation and benefit instructions, article 211.04, while maintaining the current breadth of applicability and duration of such payments.

The critical injury benefit is another new benefit available to those who have suffered traumatic injury requiring immediate hospital treatment. While it is welcomed as yet another small step toward improving the quality of life for those injured in service to Canada, the government's rationale for this unexpected benefit has received a mixed response from association members. It appears to exclude those who suffer from operational stress injuries unless those injuries are immediately incapacitating. The history of this type of injury generally carries with it a period of latency, thus denying the benefit's support to its sufferers.

This differentiation would drive a further wedge between those with physical injuries and those with operational stress injuries, both of which have severe impacts on the families of the injured. Previous strides in gaining acceptance of operational stress injuries as a bona fide injury could be nullified by the proposed immediate physical trauma and later OSI distinctions. While still supported, the

association would like further work to occur to close this apparent gap.

I would like to bring a further concern to your attention, namely the frequent references in Bill C-59 to "prescribed sources", the determination of the value of prescribed sources, "prescribed factors", and what constitutes a single and sudden occurrence. These, and similar phrases, leave much of the value of the new benefits in doubt.

As occurred in the permanent impairment allowance, Governor in Council regulations so restricted the availability of the benefit to veterans, and limited the majority of approvals to its lowest level, that it had little of its expected impacts. Veterans would like to be assured that the provisions of the new section 2.1 of the new Veterans Charter will be amply reflected in the creation of new regulations and revision of existing ones.

In summary, the members of the association support the provisions of Bill C-59 that seek to amend the new Veterans Charter, and urge its speedy passage through Parliament to royal assent. However, significant gaps remain in the support that disabled veterans need from government. The association wishes to impress on all parliamentarians the importance of these gaps and the speed with which they must be closed.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1850)

The Chair: That was right on time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chicoine, you have the floor.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Mac Culloch, your French is very good. It's perfect.

The Chair: Mr. Mac Culloch comes from Orleans. He's bilingual.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Absolutely. I had the opportunity to speak a few words with him, but I wasn't entirely sure. Now we have proof.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the clerk just informed me that Mrs. Lowther would like to make some comments.

[*English*]

I'm sorry. I saw you as being together.

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: My wife would object.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I know the parliamentarians are anxious to ask questions, but they'll first be patient and be inspired by what you have to say.

Mrs. Debbie Lowther (Co-founder, Veterans Emergency Transition Services): Well, thank you, first of all, for asking VETS Canada to attend this evening and asking me to speak on behalf of the organization.

VETS Canada is an organization whose mission is to assist homeless, at-risk, and in-crisis veterans of the military and the RCMP. My husband, who is a veteran, and I founded the organization in 2010 after he stumbled across a veteran whom he had served with who was homeless in Halifax.

During the past five years we've had the privilege of helping over 500 veterans across the country. We've expanded from Halifax right to the west coast. In June of last year we were awarded a contract with Veterans Affairs as service providers in the field of outreach to homeless, at-risk, and in-crisis veterans. In the past five years, as I said, we've had the opportunity and the privilege to assist over 500 veterans.

One thing we've noticed is that every veteran's story is different. Every veteran's set of circumstances is different. There's no cookie-cutter solution to helping any one of them. One common denominator we see in our work is that the men and women we've assisted have not made a successful transition from their life of service to their civilian life.

A great deal of effort and rigorous training goes into preparing the men and women to serve their country, and we feel it would be wonderful if they were given the same amount of training and preparedness on the other end, when their career is coming to an end, particularly for those who are being medically released, as it is unexpected.

The reason we're here today is to discuss division 17 of Bill C-59. It's the opinion of VETS Canada that the retirement income security benefit, the critical injury benefit, and the caregiver's benefit are all positive first steps. We do support that they be passed; however, we have some concerns about whether or not they will be the end of the road. It's our hope and our wish that they remain just that, first steps. There is a lot of improvement there.

We feel that the retirement income security benefit could be higher than the 70%. We would like to see the critical injury benefit be more inclusive of those men and women who suffer with OSIs, as these injuries, generally, do not immediately present themselves.

Something that would be nice to see included in the caregiver's benefit would be training for caregivers—and I'll take off my VETS Canada hat and put on my caregiver hat for a moment. My husband had PTSD, and when I was his caregiver—and I still at times am his caregiver—I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. Caregivers need training. They could be doing more harm than good, so it would be nice to see training for caregivers included in that caregivers benefit. Along with the amount of the benefit itself, it would be nice to see it revert to something a little closer to the attendance allowance.

In summary, as I said, VETS Canada does support the passage of Bill C-59, but it is our hope that it remains just first steps and that

there's room for improvement. We like to say: Is it better than what was on the table yesterday? Yes. Is there room for improvement? Yes.

Thank you.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Lowther.

We have a half-hour left in the meeting, and I'm going to give each member five minutes until we run out of time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chicoine, you have the floor.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: For the second or third time, thank you, Mr. Chair. All things come in threes.

I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today. You are the second group that we are receiving as part of the study on Bill C-59, or at least the part relating to veterans.

You all seem to be unanimous and all seem to support the provisions included in Bill C-59, which was previously Bill C-58. This morning we heard from the ombudsman and another group of veterans who described this as a half measure or a step in the right direction.

In a short sentence or in one word, I would like you to give us your understanding, perhaps more directly, of the provisions we are currently studying in the context of Bill C-58 or Bill C-59. Are you encouraged or disappointed when you read these provisions? Obviously, this is the first bill that follows on the report tabled almost a year ago now. How do the members you represent feel about this? Are they encouraged, shocked or disappointed? I will leave it up to each of you to perhaps describe this in a short sentence.

[*English*]

Mr. Bradley K. White: I suppose we'll start it off. Thank you for the question.

[*Translation*]

I'll answer in English.

[*English*]

One of the issues we have is that in 2006, when the new Veterans Charter came in, it came in as a living document. We didn't see any life in the document until 2011, when we had Bill C-55. When it came in it actually put something back into the new Veterans Charter. That was a start.

Bill C-58, now incorporated in this Bill C-59, is another start, we believe, in making the changes necessary to the new Veterans Charter, to make it a document that's alive, that's living, that's meeting the needs of the veterans at this time.

There will be more needs for veterans as we go down into the future. Bill C-59 does not fix all the issues or gaps in the new Veterans Charter right now. It's a start, and we're positive that this start will keep going. We want to see more. The new Veterans Charter has to continue to evolve to meet the needs of the veterans.

Wayne has indicated that PTSD is the tip of the iceberg at this stage of the game. It is the tip of the iceberg. Latent onset of PTSD is going to happen. We have not seen the full extent of what's going to happen with the mental illness problems we have out there on the street right now. We're going to have to take the steps necessary to address those in the future.

• (1900)

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mr. Mac Culloch, what is your opinion about this?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: We are really encouraged. These are steps in the right direction. We hope that it will continue because there are a lot of things left to do but, frankly, we are encouraged.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mrs. Lowther, what do you think?

[English]

Mrs. Debbie Lowther: Our membership is encouraged by the provisions in Bill C-59. As I said earlier, we look at them as first steps.

As Mr. White mentioned, the new Veterans Charter was designed as a living document, and we haven't seen a lot of life in that document. It's nice to see some of the improvements being made. We are encouraged, and we're hoping that they are just first steps. There's still work to be done.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

It's encouraging, of course, but I find it somewhat disappointing in several respects.

Let's start with the retirement income security benefit.

What is included in the bill is not at all what the committee recommended. In the case of SISIP, the committee recommended at least 90% of the bonus for injured individuals. So it was more than 75%. The bill also indicates that this new retirement income security allocation is 70% of the proportion of 75%. So it's very little.

I'm wondering if you're satisfied with this provision. Would you support an amendment that would be proposed asking that this new income allocation be equal to what veterans would receive before age 65?

[English]

The Chair: The four of you together have 10 seconds to answer this question.

Mr. Bradley K. White: Briefly and quickly, the ombudsman said 90%. The veterans consultation group, which the legion hosts, said 100%.

We have 70% of 75% of pre-65 salary. We're not happy with that.

The Chair: Before I give the floor to Mr. Lemieux, I'd like to point out that we have some new visitors, including the minister, who I saw carrying some pizzas.

I assume, Mr. Minister, it's to share.

I apologize to the committee for not providing food at this evening meeting, but it looks like the minister thought of it, and so I think you will be his guests.

Monsieur Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Maybe I'll just start by commenting. Mr. Chicoine said that the ombudsman had said these were half-hearted steps. I want to clear the record; that's not what he said at all. I have his remarks in front of me. He said:

The proposed legislation represents significant progress on several issues of longstanding concern to veterans and their families. Because it is narrowing the gap on needed changes, it is important that it pass quickly and be implemented without delay.

That's what he actually said.

If I heard each of your testimonies correctly—and I appreciate everything you had to say to the committee—when you look at the legislation itself and the key measures contained within it, what I heard each of your organizations say is that you too support the measures within the legislation, that you too recommend that it pass as quickly as possible so that veterans can benefit from what is actually contained within the legislation. Is that correct?

Mr. Bradley K. White: Absolutely, from our presentation, but as well we said we still want to meet those other conditions as we stated from the start.

• (1905)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Sure, absolutely. The minister's here, but if he were not here I would still say that I think it's fair to say that the minister has said that the Veterans Charter does not stand still. It is a living document. There is always work that needs to be done. There are gaps that need to be filled, but these steps are important steps.

Let me highlight one of those important steps. The critical injury benefit is significant, I feel—\$70,000 dollars tax free. And of course it's for a veteran who is injured and suffers that injury from a significant event related to service.

I wanted to ask the legion your thoughts on this critical injury benefit. I don't believe it's something you had asked for specifically, but there it is. It's in the legislation. I think it's a good sum of money to help a veteran cope with having sustained a serious injury in a single traumatic event, but could I have your comments on that?

Mr. Bradley K. White: Very quickly, and I'll turn it to Ray.

We had asked for comparability with what civilian courts were giving out, and that would be a little bit more than \$70,000, but I'll let Ray address the issue.

Mr. Ray McInnis (Director, Service Bureau, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): It's not something we asked for. It is positive—\$70K is a lot of money. It is tax free, but it's going to be to a select group of veterans.

I would like to see a lot of details on it. I know the policies and the regulations are not done yet. It's very confusing when I look at the CIBs to understand who it's going to actually be for. I can read the Qs and As, and I saw what they are, and they give one example.

We want this bill to pass, and then when we see what the policies and the regulations are it will give us a chance to further speak about it.

What I am happy about, though, is that it will not go to a level 1, level 2 review within a department. It's actually going to go to the VRAB process, so we'll have a better opportunity to review the case and to present appeals on it.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Okay.

I'll just comment on your point because it came up in one of the presentations as well that all the details aren't there. I would say it is part of the legislative process, in a sense. There is just sort of a rhythm to how things are implemented.

The first key steps are securing the funding, passing the legislation, and then of course the regulations follow. Before regulations are implemented, there is consultation; they are gazetted, and there's feedback. Actually the regulatory process allows flexibility because I think you might have valid concerns.

If everything were locked down in legislation and the only way you could make a change was to put it right back through the legislative process, you might say that's a bit rigid, can't we have a bit more flexibility to accommodate such and such a circumstance, or such and such a changing situation? I think that's why the regulatory process is there. It doesn't have to go through the full legislative process again. The regulatory process is meant to be very responsive.

So, yes, there will be some details that will follow, but I would say that I feel these initiatives are put forward in good faith, are meant to benefit our veterans, and there's a consultative process that will take place before the regulations are finally promulgated in their published form.

The Chair: Monsieur Lemieux has left you 45 seconds to respond.

Mr. Ray McInnis: I will make one more comment, that we are very open to the department also reviewing the regulations and the application process. My service offices across the country will be completing the applications, so it's important that we see the regulations to fulfill that requirement as we move forward.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Debbie Lowther, did your organization have a chance to look at the critical injury benefit? Did you have any comment you wanted to make on that particular benefit?

Mrs. Debbie Lowther: We did and we do agree that it's not a benefit that's going to help everybody, obviously. But we're of the opinion that if it helps some then it's a positive thing.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I think it's targeting seriously injured veterans.

Am I done, Chair? Thank you so much, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to remind members of the committee that these are five-minute rounds. As you're getting close, keep an eye on the chair if you don't want to be cut off. You also want to be fair to the witnesses so they can answer your long-winded preambles.

Go ahead, Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Sorry about this preamble, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming today. The testimony you've given, frankly, has been very balanced. I'd like to point out to you that the ombudsman also said that this does not mean that the gap has been closed. So while you're trying to get your talking points from these witnesses and everything else, it's important that we recognize that there's balance to this.

Sir Robert Borden said:

The government and the country will consider it their first duty—

—not their second duty, not their third duty, but their first duty—

—to see that a proper appreciation of your effort and of your courage is brought to the notice of people at home that no man, whether he goes back or whether he remains in Flanders, will have just cause to reproach the government for having broken faith with the men who won and the men who died.

That first duty means that it comes before all other priorities. I would propose to you that this government's priority has been to balance the budget in an election year. As a result they've given the minister only a certain amount of money and told him to sprinkle it out there and try to have the most impact visually so we can sell something to our veterans. But I would propose to you also that our veterans don't buy it, because almost every veterans' group that has come before this committee has said that it is only a half measure. While the gap is being closed there's so much more to do. Frankly, I don't know why we didn't just do it.

For instance—and you've talked about this—with the critical injury benefit, you've already said the amount of \$70,000 is not enough, Mr. McInnis. There is no reference to people with PTSD. You both agree that they've been marginalized yet again. I know there are other benefits available to them when PTSD emerges, but so too are other benefits available to those who suffer injuries along the way.

Would you propose that we amend this to include a \$70,000 payment to those people who suffer from PTSD, if and when PTSD emerges? Could I hear from you, Mr. Mac Culloch?

• (1910)

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: Thank you for asking.

The membership of my association would prefer to see the bill pass quickly, and then we will continue to work toward our objectives in the future.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: So you don't think there should be any reference to PTSD in that section?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: I don't believe we should amend the bill at this point. The membership of my association would like to see it pass speedily.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Is that your position too, Mr. White or Mr. McInnis?

Mr. Bradley K. White: We've been at this a long time. We've been at the discussions, and the recommendation has been put forward from the committee. All the way through we've been studying this to death. We have some movement; we need the movement to keep going.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: All right.

Mr. Bradley K. White: In the future when we start talking about that, when you're talking about the \$70,000, as long as it's related to a service-related injury, regardless of when PTSD may manifest itself, that money should be available to the individual. But we have to get moving. We don't know what the policy is, what the implementation is, what the background is going to be on how this is going to be implemented. We need to know that.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: The family caregiver relief benefit is \$139 tax free a week, which is \$7,238. You made reference to it, Ms. Lowther, and I think Mr. Mac Culloch, as also being inadequate and that greater sums of money should be paid. Would you like to see that amount increased?

Ms. Lowther.

Mrs. Debbie Lowther: I agree with my counterparts, in that our organization would like to see the bill pass quickly and then worry about modifications at a later date. At a later date we would like to see that amount amended, but at this time we would just like to see the bill passed.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: It's taken almost 10 years to get to this point. Do you think that somehow in the very near future these sections are going to be revisited, given the history of the changes that have been made, and that somehow these are going to increase, Mr. McInnis?

Mr. Ray McInnis: Mr. Chair, do I have a second on this one?

The Chair: You have five seconds.

Mr. Ray McInnis: Excellent. A family caregiver is actually not in our minds a caregiver. As we said, it's a respite. That's all it is. As you heard this morning, it's not based on \$139 or \$129 a week. It's based on 30 days. They have the money that way, the \$7,200 for a 30-day respite. What we want to see, and we'll go back, is a caregiver. A caregiver can either be borrowing something from the Pension Act on the attendance allowance and/or getting something from the legacy of care where they're getting \$100 a day. That program ends in September this year, but we should be looking at that. That will give at least \$35,000 or \$36,000 a year to a family for a caregiver. This is a respite. Call it what it is. It's a respite, \$7,200. It's not caregiving.

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

Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm glad you really clarified that it is respite. This is the second time Mr. Valeriote has heard that, and guaranteed he'll be asking the same questions later on to try to get an answer that appeases him. But the reality is that the respite is over 30 days, that's \$240 a day.

I look at my particular case, my mother, who is aware of this clause. My father has passed away, but my mother was a caregiver. What she needed at that time was respite so she could have used that money to hire a private caregiver during that time to give her peace of mind because it's gruelling as a family member.

Based on that, I believe that this family caregiver benefit is intended and brought forward for that purpose. Would you agree?

•(1915)

Mr. Ray McInnis: If we called it a family respite benefit, yes, I would agree.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Okay, so perhaps we need a change in terminology.

Mr. Mac Culloch, do you have any comments on that?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: I would prefer to keep the current terminology and actually make it a caregiver benefit because many of the families don't have just a 30-day respite and then the problem goes away. It's with them oftentimes for an extended period of time.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Understood. Would you give me a sense of, in your opinion, how many people you feel will be able to use this family caregiver benefit? We heard from the legion earlier that most families today are dual-income families, so I'm going to ask the legion the same question. How many military families are dual-income families who this wouldn't apply to? I just want to get a sense of how many people would use this benefit.

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: Without the benefit of the regulations, it's very difficult to say because you have to be able to see how it's going to be applied.

Mr. Bradley K. White: I think from our perspective, I agree with Wayne. We don't know how it's going to be implemented, so we have to know what the regulations are to see who it's going to apply to. I think we need to know that.

But as I said in our statement, using the example of the military individual who is working his military job—his or her—sometimes they also work a second job, and the spouse also tries to eke out a living doing another job, so the family may have three incomes. If the wife or spouse loses that job, they go down to two incomes. If the individual is injured, they only have his earnings loss benefit or whatever he's left on at that stage in the game, so there has been a significant drop in that family income to where they are now from where they used to be.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: How's my time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You still have two minutes.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Perfect.

Can you give me a sense of how you intend to communicate the positive items included within the bill to your members? You've all indicated that you want it to pass quickly. I'm concerned that the right messages aren't going to get out there when I hear Mr. Chicoine saying that the ombudsman said they're half-hearted measures. Well, they're not half-hearted measures. There are some very good things here, and you're encouraging quick passage. How are you going to relay that message to your membership, the positive impacts of this bill?

Mr. Bradley K. White: I would ask how the government is going to relay that information to the Canadian public. We said in the last portion of our presentation that the communications aspect of the new Veterans charter has not been well done. People do not understand it. I don't think it is the responsibility of organizations to try to explain government policy. I think it's the government's responsibility to explain its policy and make sure that information gets to the people.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: When the minister appeared at this committee, and direct questions were directed on Bill C-58, that information is available on a link. I think it was very pertinent because all members of all parties asked some very tough questions, and I thought the minister's answers were extremely good.

Do any of you make that information available to your members or, again, are you expecting that it's the role of the government?

I'll ask that of Mr. Mac Culloch first.

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: I personally have distributed to the membership a balanced view both of what was in Bill C-68 and in this bill, and it has gone down to every last person.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Is there time for an answer?

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Mr. Bradley K. White: Yes, the Royal Canadian Legion, after every announcement, makes its own press release. Once we understand the implications of how the bill is going to be implemented or the decisions are going to be implemented, we will make our own press release, put it out to the press, and we'll distribute it through our command network.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I would like to welcome Ms. Moore and give her the floor.

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is very simple, and it is this.

Is there an annual indexing formula geared to the cost of living for the various benefit amounts?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: We usually use figures from Statistics Canada for that.

• (1920)

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay, but are the amounts indexed every year?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: What amounts are you referring to?

Ms. Christine Moore: I'm talking about all the benefits, including the retirement income security benefit and all the other benefits. Are they indexed every year to the cost of living?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: We don't have information on that yet.

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay. Thank you.

My second question has to do with spousal allowances.

When we do the calculation of the 50% of the 70% and the 75%, a wife ends up with a benefit of about 26% of her husband's gross revenue when he leaves the forces.

Let's be honest. A number of veterans are men, and they have wives. So these are women who can have access to these benefits. It often happens that women are unable to work and haven't worked throughout their husband's career. They simply supported their husbands as best they could in the course of his duties.

When these women were younger, they have nothing but this amount, since they aren't entitled to old age security because of their age. Do you think that's reasonable, especially considering the sacrifice that a lot of wives make because of the family situation created by a military career?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: As I mentioned, it equals a gross amount of about \$15,000 a year, which is well below the poverty line. I can't imagine how someone receiving that amount alone could have an acceptable quality of life.

Ms. Christine Moore: So—

[*English*]

Mr. Bradley K. White: I'll give you an example. My spouse served in the Canadian Forces for 11 years. After we had our second child, she decided to get out of the military and follow me with the children. She worked various jobs all the way through because we were posted in various places. And let's be honest, Petawawa doesn't really have a lot of jobs for spouses. So spouses in the military, if they don't have guaranteed employment, don't earn a lot of money, wherever they be. It's very difficult for them, and it's also very difficult when you move around for them to get employment at each base that you're posted to.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore: Do you think it would be appropriate to look further into the situation of spouses of veterans to ensure that the income provided to them is feasible?

Maj Wayne Mac Culloch: Yes, but we would like the bill to be passed quickly. We could then make the necessary changes. There would at least be the start of a solution, which didn't exist before.

Ms. Christine Moore: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay.

In terms of benefits for family caregivers, I would like your comments on the amount that has been allocated. Is it enough and will it really make it possible to do what was set out?

Mr. Bradley K. White: I don't understand the first part of your question.

Ms. Christine Moore: Do you think the amount for family caregivers is sufficient?

Mr. Bradley K. White: As we mentioned earlier, everyone here is in the same boat. It would probably be preferable to receive—

[*English*]

a family attendant's allowance

[*Translation*]

—instead of a caregiver's allowance, which is—

[*English*]

respite allowance

[*Translation*]

We want something like the former attendance allowance, which was paid under the Pension Act.

•(1925)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. White.

[Translation]

Mr. Lizon, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to all the witnesses for coming here this afternoon. It's great to see you here again.

Before I ask a question, I want to make a few points to clarify certain things.

First of all, the veterans ombudsman who was here this morning did not mention half measures. He said, actually, that it was a good step in the right direction. I think it was Mr. Forbes who mentioned half measures.

What I would really like to stress is that we can play political games here and point fingers at each other—I can point fingers at someone—and say, “Do you remember what happened in 1994-95?” But we're not here for this. I am really very proud and happy that I have been able, by my own choice, to serve on this committee since the beginning of this Parliament. I did not grow up here in Canada, but I grew up among veterans. I remember my grandfather on my mother's side—not very well, but I remember that he was missing his right arm. He lost it in the war of 1920, and he already was married and had children. He came back and had another three or four. My mother had 11 siblings.

I heard all sorts of war stories. Growing up, I truly believed that one day I would go to war and fight like these guys about whom I heard stories. It took time to grow up and realize what war was. I realized how fortunate my generation, born after the war, was and how grateful we should be for those who went to fight, those who served after, and those who are serving today—we have some of them at the table here—to protect us: my generation, the generation of my children and grandchildren, and I hope many generations to come.

We may have different political agendas, but we are here to serve the veterans. You gentlemen remember that when we were doing the review of the Veterans Charter, the question asked of many groups that appeared here—and several times the question came from me—was, if you had to choose, what would be the first things you would change in the Veterans Charter?

I'm not pointing fingers at all those members of Parliament in 2006 who decided, without any opposition, to pass the charter. They had great intentions; some things came up. That's why it is a living charter; that's why we have to look at it. Truly, I would not like to feel, after all the work at the committee....

You probably know the story from Greek mythology of the Greek king Sisyphus, who was punished and had to roll a boulder up a hill and never made it: the boulder would roll back. I hope we are going in the right direction and addressing the issues. I hope that's what we've done.

I think that what is in Bill C-59 is addressing the issues that were raised—not all of them—and my understanding and that of those who were at the committee is that the agreement was that it would be an incremental change.

I would love to have you address this and comment on the issues I raised.

The Chair: You have one minute to do it.

Mr. Bradley K. White: I, too, grew up with veterans. My grandfather was a company commander in Dieppe. He served with Lieutenant-Colonel Merritt, who received the Victoria Cross for his actions in Pourville. I knew Mr. Merritt when I was a young lieutenant, and I listened to his stories, so I know them well.

We all hope that what we're doing here is serving our veterans and making their lives better. That's why we do this. We're not politicians. That's why when we address you, we address you collectively as the government, regardless of what party you belong to.

As was mentioned, Robert Borden said years ago that it's the obligation of the government to look after those they send away to serve. We in the legion believe very much that it's the government's obligation to do that. You are all government to us. So our position is to advocate on behalf of those veterans to make sure that after they've served, they're looked after, to make sure that they have a healthy and productive life after they've been injured. That is our aim.

Is it incremental? Yes, it's incremental. But remember, 2006 and Bill C-55 in 2011 were the first steps to improve and breathe some life into the charter. We now have some more incremental steps in Bill C-58, which have been incorporated into Bill C-59, to do that again. We won't stop pushing. We said that in our statement.

•(1930)

The Chair: I thank you very much, Mr. White.

I thank all the witnesses for their enlightening comments this evening.

We're going to take a short break and then we're going to entertain some new witnesses in the second hour.

Thank you.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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•(1935)

The Chair: I want to thank Mr. McKenna for bringing this meeting to order. He has talents that I would like to emulate.

In this second hour of this 51st meeting we have a number of guests. I want you to know that there is a guest who is not sitting at this table, but who will not be silent. He's with us by teleconference. This is Mr. Derryk Fleming, a national administration member of 31 CBG Veterans Well-being Network. He's reaching us by teleconference from St. Catharines, Ontario.

We have here at the table as an individual Mr. Sean Bruyca, retired captain. I gave a lengthy description of all his merits a littler earlier. From Canadian Veterans Advocacy we have Mr. Michael Blais, president and founder. From VeteranVoice.info we have Perry Gray, the editor-in-chief. And of course there's man I admire for bringing this meeting to order, Brian McKenna from the B.C. Veterans Well-being Network.

In order to better manage the time, given that we have a number of witnesses and we only have one hour, can we agree to presentations of seven minutes each? Does this make sense? Who will go first?

Mr. McKenna.

• (1940)

Mr. Brian McKenna (Representative, BC Veterans Well-being Network): Thank you.

It will be seven minutes. I timed it earlier.

My name is Brian Robert McKenna. I'm a resident in the riding of Newton—North Delta in British Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today with regard to these matters.

The issues in front of us are serious ones. I'm honoured both to be here in this great building and perhaps to have a small role in making some progress on these issues. I'll take a couple of seconds to introduce myself and then I'll get going.

I'm a soon-to-be-retired warrant officer from the Royal Westminster Regiment in the army reserves. That retirement is not my choice; it's the military's choice. I come to you today as a representative of the B.C. Veterans Well-being Network.

I've experienced a number of the situations that this committee is tasked to review. My release from the Canadian Forces is due to my inability to meet the requirements of the universality of the service. I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 2012, and also suffered some intestinal damage due to a bug I caught in Afghanistan. While I'll always have pride in my service, there's a large hole in my own self-worth as I struggle today with the realities of losing my connection to the organization I loved. I'm one of the folks you guys talk about. I'm coming to terms with the fact that the organization I risked my life for no longer has a position for me.

I have read the bill in question and I'm filled with a number of thoughts and emotions as I contemplate it's content.

I'm saddened that we are now fixing these problems in 2015 instead of years ago, but I am happy that these issues are finally in the public light. In the fairness of giving credit where credit is due, along with knowing how long it takes to produce in-depth policy, I'd like to give some credit both to the current administration at VAC and to the previous minister's staff, who I'm sure had a hand in these files.

I have to say, the changes being considered are positive steps. I'm optimistic, and more important than that, I am trusting that, through you people, real veterans will see some real improvements on these issues.

I'd like to bring your attention to a few thoughts I had upon reading the points being discussed.

Division 17 of part 3, as described in paragraph (b) of the legislative summary, refers to the transition process and enabling the Minister of Veterans Affairs to essentially engage sooner. I see value in that. The current situation of major engagement being initiated by the department upon release could be described as a football throw. We know in these cases which department is throwing and who is supposed to catch, but in football some passes are incomplete.

What we should strive towards is more of a football running play where the ball is secured in the receiving player's arms before the line is hit, enabling them to hit the line running. I ask the committee to consider that VAC should be the lead agency in the health care of the veteran as soon as the release message is in the hands of the soldier.

So much mental stress is due to the add-on factors that compound the problem originally faced. Ambiguity is a major stressor. In the current situation, the affected service member faces statements like, "may qualify" or "can apply for" and often, "can apply for later upon release." Perhaps we could change some of those to, "will receive" or, "is entitled to," before they leave the Canadian forces and move to the unknown.

I would further suggest that, upon receipt of the release message, the soldier's VAC case manager be assigned. At that point, not upon release, they could begin to apply for the full suite of Veterans Affairs benefits.

This would serve to alleviate conflict and draw clean lines as to who is actually the lead care provider for the member as they transition, instead of the current scenario, which again, is the football pass.

A risk of having two organizations looking at the same case is the likelihood that at some point, in some cases, there may be confusion about who is actually in charge. Establishing a policy of engaging the case manager earlier, when release is known as opposed to when release is complete, has the potential to remove some of the variables in the transition process.

• (1945)

Lastly, I'd like to identify a concern with what is described in paragraph (c) of the legislative summary. My concern is with the surviving spouse in respect to the benefits mentioned.

Certainly I'm happy to see the needs and contributions of the spouse being considered. My concern is that these spousal benefits are tied to the income of the veteran. Both the earning loss benefit tied to 75% of the pre-release salary and the proposed continued financial benefit past age 65 are not received by a veteran who has other forms of income that go higher than the threshold described.

The concern is that when that veteran dies, since the veteran did not collect the benefit because of making too much money, the surviving spouse then does not receive the entitlement.

My suggestion to this committee is that you study and produce a mechanism that delivers the characteristics of the benefit to all those who would have qualified, regardless of whether or not, because of finances, they actually received it. That way we avoid making a second class of surviving spouse upon the death of the veteran.

I'll close my comments by reiterating one point. The symptoms and presentations of PTSD are tough to live with, in some cases completely crippling. Regardless of the effect and severity of mental health conditions, there is a constant: these conditions are worsened by a lack of clarity about what your next few years are going to look like. Facing a mental illness while staring at financial insecurity and potential job loss is the perfect storm to worsen the very conditions we are attempting to treat and alleviate.

Financial stability for veterans isn't just part of mental health, but in some cases it is their mental health. I can only encourage you to dig deep into these proposed revisions to try to flush out as many inconsistencies as possible, so that upon royal assent the detailed implementation of the act matches the intent.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McKenna. You're also an example for the clock.

I wonder if I could have Mr. Fleming.

Mr. Derryk Fleming (National Administration Member, 31 CBG Veterans Well Being Network): Yes.

The Chair: Can you hear me, Mr. Fleming?

Mr. Derryk Fleming: Yes, I can.

The Chair: We'd like to hear you. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Derryk Fleming: I'd like to thank Brian right off the bat. He made three of the four main points that I wanted to express.

I'd like to thank the honourable members of all parties of the standing committee for allowing me this opportunity to speak.

In division 17, I believe that overall the legislation is reasonable and prudent. It will assist veterans and their families who have the most serious needs. It addresses their long-term financial security needs—although Brian did raise an excellent point there—it provides some measure of respite for their primary caregivers, and it establishes the critical injury benefit. Most importantly, it will do much to close the seam between a CF member's release and their accessing services through VAC in a much more proactive manner.

Those veterans most in need will be better looked after by this new piece of legislation. I believe strongly that the standing committee will act in the best interests of all veterans.

More work needs to be done in the transitioning of less seriously injured veterans. Priority hiring in the federal service is [*Inaudible—Editor*], as is the creation of Canada Company. Helmets to Hardhats also can play a vital and important role.

One area that hasn't been discussed and is a very important missing piece is the synergy between the federal government and the provinces. The provincial governments' ministries of colleges and universities have little understanding of the training and experience that a veteran brings to the workforce.

Recently, the British Columbia Institute of Technology has created a process of translating these skills for civilian accreditation purposes, but more colleges and universities in each separate jurisdiction need to be encouraged to follow suit.

Ideally, once a CF member is released both VAC and the member should have a clear understanding of the provincial accreditation that members would already have, guiding their retraining choices and entering into the civilian workforce much more quickly than starting at zero once again. The smoother the transition, the less strain on both the member and the family, and the resources needed to facilitate that transition can be achieved.

To accomplish this outcome requires [*Inaudible—Editor*] initiatives and diplomacy between the federal and provincial levels of government. It will not require vast sums of funding to accomplish this coordination. If successful, it will streamline the transition profoundly, however.

For the sake of brevity, I don't want to repeat some of the main points that Brian has already illustrated; they're actually much better than what I had written. But this is one missing piece, and if we're going to transition the majority of veterans who do not qualify as moderately or severely injured, we don't want to leave them out of the mix as well.

I thank you for the opportunity and respectfully submit, Derryk Fleming, 31 CBG Veterans Well-being Network.

• (1950)

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

Mr. Gray.

Capt(N) Perry Gray (Editor in Chief, VeteranVoice.info): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Like many public announcements, these new programs seem to offer more financial support for the veterans community. Closer examination of each one can raise a host of potential problems.

The one question that this committee can ask VAC about any new financial policy is, how generous will VAC be? VAC has a reputation for being as stingy as Ebenezer Scrooge or Scrooge McDuck. As of 2014, only 227 clients had received 100% of the new Veterans Charter lump sum, out of 46,760 recipients. The CIB lump sum of \$70,000 will be offered on a limited basis and, like the NVC lump sum, is based on a percentage calculated by assessing the severity of disabilities. Initial estimates suggest that hundreds rather than thousands will receive CIB.

The FCRB is expected to provide relief to approximately 350 spouses or caregivers by 2020. Why is this estimated number of caregivers so small? I would think that many primary caregivers would like to take a break, considering the fact that many of them did not expect to have to work for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, because of veterans' disabilities. In fact, the FCRB could reduce the number of divorces caused by caregiver burnout.

The RISB may benefit about 261 clients over the first five years of the program. In my opinion, the RISB also has a poorly justified limit. In addition, it will be 70% of pre-65 income. There are two concerns that I shall highlight. Why is there any decrease in a veteran's financial support because of a change in age? Is it assumed that veterans need less support after the age of 65? Based on the studies of VAC's own Gerontological Advisory Council, veterans are able to enjoy long life but only if they have good support.

In 2006, Greg Thompson, the incumbent minister, provided information on the veterans independence program for this very committee. He stated that 86,000 war service veterans did not receive VIP. He did not offer an explanation about why they did not receive support and added that providing them with VIP might never happen. He did acknowledge that that home care is better than institutional care, and the council also acknowledged that veterans were likely to live longer if they remained in their own homes.

VAC is also aware that most of the health care given to Canadians occurs when we are babies and then in the last months of our lives. This suggests to me that, rather than less money, veterans will need more money to maintain an independent lifestyle, which will likely include support during activities that elderly and disabled people find difficult or impossible.

It should also be noted that the age of 65 will stop being a benchmark by 2023 for old age security. Will VAC also raise the age of eligibility for the RISB? I think that using age as a factor contradicts the spirit of Canadian human rights. Pension Act benefits are awarded in recognition of the sacrifices made by veterans, as are other benefits provided by VAC. Decreasing these based on age is discrimination. Nobody improves with age, unlike wine.

In summary, these three programs are expected to benefit a very small number of the estimated 205,000 clients and their families. The RISB may also result in financial hardships at a time in life when clients may need to pay for more support. Why is VAC developing programs if only a few will benefit?

Thus, VAC seems to be advertising a lot but delivering only a little.

Thank you.

• (1955)

The Chair: Mr. Blais.

Mr. Michael Blais (President and Founder, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): Thank you.

Good evening. My name is Michael Blais. I'm the president and founder of the Canadian Veterans Advocacy. Thank you for inviting me to attend committee tonight to speak to Bill C-59 and the creation of new programs designed to improve the quality of life for disabled veterans.

It is very gratifying to me to note that several of the primary issues that I found at the Canadian Veterans Advocacy in 2010 have been addressed recently. While there is a certain degree of scepticism within the veterans community I serve as to the timing of these announcements and the looming election, I am hopeful that the government is acting in good faith and that there will be merit in these discussions.

I understand there is only so much we can do with the limited time available to us. To that end, I'd like to focus on the shortcomings that I believe can be resolved at this time, if the government is acting in good faith, to ensure the proposals that have been brought forward will be inclusive to all veterans, not only those who have experienced physical trauma.

Critical injury benefit: I believe this is a positive development. However, what is very troubling to me is the fact that many who have sustained mental wounds will be excluded, due to the immediate prerequisite within the proposal. This exclusion is detrimental to our collective objective to eliminate stigma, to ensure that those who have sustained mental wounds are assured that the pervasive health insidious stigma does not relegate the seriousness of their sacrifice, as this does, to a lower state of recognition. There must be equality in acknowledgement of all serious wounds, physical or mental.

I would respectfully remind the committee members that mental wounds are just as lethal as physical wounds. We must acknowledge the grim fact that more of Canada's sons and daughters have died as a consequence of suicide than the nation's sacrifice during the war on terror. Without effective intervention, this number will only rise. Furthermore, we must be cognizant that these intensely tragic numbers speak only to one segment of the issue, as Veterans Affairs Canada does not track suicides within the veteran community. These numbers may be exponentially higher.

We know now that mental wounds, when incurred during an operational period, are often not recognized or acknowledged by the individual until returning home and the cycle of despair begins to ravage the mind, adversely affecting self and the family unit. We also understand that many of our heroes suppress acknowledging the seriousness of the wound, fearful of stigma and career-ending ramifications, until the mental discord appears and finally the treatment is brought forward.

We must consider all serious national sacrifice equally. It should matter not whether you have sustained a physical or a mental wound. Should it not qualify for the prerequisites of the CIB because a mental wound is bereft of the need for immediate hospitalization? Amendments can be made to respect the national sacrifice of those who have sustained mental wounds as a consequence of their service, so that they, too, will be included in this compensatory proposal.

In regard to caregivers, this too is a positive step forward, aligning the NVC provisions with that of the Pension Act and providing annual respite for primary caregivers who have been consigned to a lifetime of caring for seriously disabled veterans.

Once again, however, caregivers who are caring for veterans who have sustained serious mental wounds have virtually been excluded. Spouses who care for their husbands 24/7, fearing the spectre of suicide on a daily basis, are not accorded the opportunity for dedicated respite while knowing their loved ones are cared for.

There must be equality and recognition that the impact that a mental wound bears upon the caregiver is extraordinary, that the threat of the wound manifesting catastrophically is clear and present long after a physical wound has been determined non-life threatening. I would encourage you to recognize the travail that caregivers of those with mental wounds are experiencing. Amend the legislation to include the plight of families who are dealing with mental wounds.

Regarding the retirement income supplementary benefit, this has been the cornerstone principle of the CVA since conception, that is, the plight of our disabled veterans when reaching aged 65. I repeat, it's for disabled veterans, ladies and gentlemen. The foundation of the RISB, a comparative to the average Canadian's post-retirement income at 70% of 75%, negates the disabled veteran's quotient completely. We're not speaking of ordinary Canadians; we're speaking of disabled veterans who are bereft of a lifetime of opportunity to prepare for retirement. Disabled veterans do not retire from being disabled. Indeed, as they grow older, they require additional help.

• (2000)

We believe there should be no reduction and that the 70% of 75% equation does not respect the needs of a disabled veteran. The RISB should ensure the quality of life provisions to which they have been accorded, the foundation of VAC's mandate, are maintained at 75%. We also find it disingenuous to include a permanent impairment allowance—an award that recognizes the fact that seriously disabled veterans require financial support to cope with their wounds in addition to the 75% ELB or SISIP provision—into the harmonization of these income prerequisites. Once again, these are seriously impaired veterans. To negate the PIA mandate through a RISB clawback formula—despite the fact they are still seriously disabled and have already sustained a significant physical reduction—when reaching age 65 will consign them to lives of near poverty.

We also have grave concerns about the proposals to give 50% of 70% of prior earnings to dependants should the veteran pass prior to the spouse. We find this is grotesquely insufficient. There must be equality in recognition of national sacrifice. A serious life-altering wound must be treated with the same level of respect, regardless of whether it's physical or mental in nature.

I have come here today to attempt to convince you to fulfill this obligation, this sacred obligation to the valiant who have sustained serious mental wounds and to their families who have offered such profound sacrifice on behalf of this magnificent nation.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Bruyea.

Mr. Sean Bruyea (Retired Captain, Columnist, and Academic Researcher, As an Individual): Super. It might be seven and a half minutes, but I will proceed.

The Chair: It will be seven minutes.

Mr. Sean Bruyea: Okay. Super, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee, for the invitation. We have much to do so I will skip further formalities.

The proposed programs that bring us here today have been accompanied by an inundation of feel-good political announcements. Does the hype match reality? More importantly, do the programs fulfill identified gaps and address the evidence-based recommendations?

The retirement income security benefit claims it will top up to 70% of what the veteran received from government prior to age 65. However, this is based upon the veteran's earnings loss benefit, as already pointed out, which pays 75% of release salary, inadequately adjusted for inflation. The retirement benefit equates to the veteran effectively receiving 52.5% of their military salary, once again inadequately adjusted for inflation.

It is interesting to note that the ombudsman, Guy Parent, was quick to endorse this program during a partisan political announcement, yet Mr. Parent's office clearly recommended a retirement benefit matching 70% of a fully indexed release salary.

The department has been less than forthcoming as to what will be deducted from this income, but we are safe to assume that CPP, OAS, and the CF retirement pension will be deducted. We must know that OAS, a program for all Canadians, is transparent in its legislation as to how OAS is calculated. Do veterans not deserve the same sort of transparency for their benefits?

What we do know is that the calculation for the veteran retirement benefit does not include these other incomes in calculating the 70% benefit, but then will likely deduct these programs at 100%. This hardly meets the smell test, let alone the fact it fails to provide the veteran with even 70% of what he or she received in Government of Canada benefits prior to age 65.

We also must emphatically remember that the majority of veterans groups that are active in advocacy, the ombudsman, VAC's own advisory group, and this committee in 2010 have all repeatedly recommended that the 75% earnings loss benefit be substantively increased to anywhere from 90% to 100% of release salary, matching typical career progression and promotions.

Implementing this universally supported recommendation would result in a dignified income loss program, which would in turn provide a dignified retirement benefit for our most injured veterans. Today we are witnesses to the consequence of government's repeated dismissal of this evidence-based research and recommendation in this paltry payout from this proposed retirement benefit.

The family caregiver benefit is another puzzling creation. No veteran group, parliamentary committee, ombudsman, or advisory group asked for this benefit in this form. What others have asked for is everything from matching the DND caregiver benefit, which pays up to \$36,500 in any 365 cumulative days, to providing spouses of TPI veterans with their own earnings loss benefit to compensate for their lost income while they're caring for their disabled veteran spouses.

One of the easiest solutions would be merely to open up attendance allowance to new Veterans Charter recipients. However, the proposed family caregiver benefit pays \$7,238 per year, equivalent to the lowest levels of attendance allowance, which pays up to \$21,151.44 annually.

New Veterans Charter clients are prevented, under this legislation, from accessing the attendance allowance. Attendance allowance recipients are prevented from accessing the new family caregiver benefit, yet the criteria for each are different. If new Veterans Charter programs are so good, why is this one closed to Pension Act clients? If the Pension Act so inadequate, why are NVC clients prevented from accessing attendance allowance?

The critical injury benefit will provide a one-time payment of \$70,000 to eligible Canadian Forces members and veterans "for severe, sudden and traumatic injuries or acute diseases that are service related, regardless of whether they result in permanent disability". Countless veterans have come forward, telling us that disabling PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and loss of organ function are being low-balled below the approximately \$40,000 average disability award payment.

How can government justify to a veteran suffering a lifelong disability that their disabling pain and suffering merits far lower a payment than a veteran who temporarily suffered an injury?

This leads to the obvious question on many Canadians' mind: from what bureaucratic orifice did this benefit originate? Absolutely no one in the veterans community, the ombudsman's office, the committee, or advisory group asked for this benefit. We know little of the criteria, but we can guess.

● (2005)

The criteria will be so stringently defined as to restrict the benefits to only two or three individuals per year out of a totally disabled and permanently incapacitated veteran population of 4,000 veterans, and a CF serving and veteran population of 700,000 individuals.

How is this in any manner fulfilling Canada's obligation to all of our veterans and their families? It is not. Why did government not do what we've all been asking and increase the amount of the lump-sum benefit to at least match court awards for pain and suffering? We are inundated by slick PR campaigns and political photo shoots on the importance of military service and of being a veteran, but when it comes to addressing shortcomings for those most in need, government delays deflect, and unfortunately have been lightly dancing on the suffering of our veterans and their families.

Bill C-59 proposes wording regarding an obligation to our serving members, our veterans, and their families, to provide services, assistance, and compensation. It is more encompassing than the construction clause of the Pension Act. However, both offer little substance and are essentially meaningless.

To what end is the obligation? Is it to rehabilitate, to re-establish or offer opportunity, well-being, employment, quality of life or education, or perhaps provide a clear service standard? An obligation without a goal is meaningless. Why does this obligation recognize assistance to only injured members, veterans, and their families? Is Canada not responsible for all veterans? The duty of the minister under the Department of Veterans Affairs Act is for "the care, treatment or re-establishment in civil life of any person who served in the Canadian Forces", and "The care of the dependants or survivors". Is this not what the NVC promised but has so far failed to deliver?

I'm consistently honoured to appear before committee and to have my comments placed on the record. In the past, I have provided over 100 recommendations in original reports with often unprecedented observations, likely more than any other individual or organization. In my last submission, I provided 30 easy and doable recommendations, which would have minimal expenditure and—

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

We have 20 minutes left. This means four rounds of questions of five minutes each. I would ask the members who will be asking questions to have some consideration for our guests, our witnesses, to give them time to answer.

The first five-minute slot will be shared between Madame Moore and Mr. Chicoine.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Moore, you have the floor.

● (2010)

Ms. Christine Moore: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. McKenna.

In the case of long-term disability insurance and the earnings loss benefit, the outcome of this percentage can't be lower than \$42,426.

Couldn't we implement something similar in the case of spousal benefits, meaning a minimum amount that cannot drop below a certain amount? Do you think that amendment might be relevant?

[English]

Mr. Brian McKenna: I guess I'll answer the question this way. I think of the comments of the gentleman who appeared here for the legion, who answered on essentially the same point. If the items placed in front of us today in this bill are going to be enacted and then followed up by a wait-and-see period, then that's not good enough. If the items placed in front of us today are going to be followed up with immediate research into the things that have been presented to you today by us and the preceding ladies and gentlemen you've heard from, well then we're at a good starting point. It's very difficult for me to predict down the road what the appropriate dollar figures are going to be. I guess I have to leave my comments at that.

I would like the committee and the department itself to find out if everything presented here is fact. Leave here today and get to work right away on the improvements to the bill and the improvements to the numbers that have been discussed. But if we leave here today saying, "Okay, this is okay and we're going to wait and see what it's going to be like in a couple of years", then I suggest it's not enough.

I hope that answers the question.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: My second question is for Mr. Gray.

You spoke about reduced incomes after age 65 based on the percentage. I believe it was decided that the amount would be reduced, based on the fact that veterans would also have access to an old age pension.

In your opinion, should the reduced incomes be limited to the amount of the old age pension, meaning that if what the person loses is higher than the amount of the old age pension, the reduction of the retirement benefit would not be higher than the amount of the old age pension that he or she is currently receiving?

[English]

Capt(N) Perry Gray: As I said, if you compare it to the Pension Act, your payments continue until you die. To say that after age 65 you don't need as much income is ridiculous. Your disabilities haven't gone away. Based on the fact the department has been paying out VIP for decades, independence in your own home is going to cost you more as you age, which means you need more money and not less money. As everybody has mentioned here, to ask when you're 87, and unable to do things, if you can afford to live on a smaller amount of money, the answer is no. That's based on most studies.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: So the lack of indexing is also a problem.

[English]

Capt(N) Perry Gray: Yes.

Ms. Christine Moore: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: That's fine. I will now take the time to correct what I said earlier.

In fact, Mr. Forbes is the one who mentioned this afternoon that these were half measures. The previous group seemed to be quite encouraged by the legislative measures. You seem a little more critical than the previous group. I somewhat agree with what Mr. Gray said.

The department introduced a bill that will help the most seriously injured people and people without income after age 65. However, it will benefit a very small number of veterans. I think Mr. Gray mentioned that this measure will benefit only a very limited number of veterans.

Mr. Bruyeca, Mr. Blais, Mr. McKenna, do you share that point of view, as well?

•(2015)

[English]

The Chair: That would be a yes or no answer. Mr. Chicoine ate the time.

I'd like to remind members of the committee we still have on the phone Mr. Fleming, from the 31—

Did we lose him?

A voice: We don't know yet.

The Chair: We don't know.

Mr. Opitz, you're next.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you, I would say—and we had great witnesses today as well, but some of this stuff bears repeating—there's a lot of understanding around this table. Starting with my grandfather, who fought in the battle against Bolsheviks in 1920, and my father—who's still alive at 95—throughout the Second World War from the first date till the last, as well as my mom who had some horrific experiences at the hands of the Nazis, I've lived this my whole life with veterans who returned and were told to suck it up, get on with life, and move on. This is something that from a very early age I was very familiar with in terms of how they dealt with things, and sometimes it wasn't done well.

As the ombudsman and as other witnesses said today, there is still a gap that needs to be closed. I'll tell you this committee will always have work for a long time to come. This will never be ended. As wars change, as we saw in 1917, as we saw in World War II, as we saw in Korea, and as we saw in other places, things evolve from conflict to conflict. At one time PTSD was shell shock and combat fatigue, and then finally diagnosed as PTSD. Now we're working with great organizations, like CIMVHR and DRDC, who work to discover what the markers are for PTSD, try to get ahead of that curve, and work on those things. As some of these very learned and very well educated scientists and academics—

Capt(N) Perry Gray: Excuse me, sir, do you have a question?

A voice: Thank you.

Capt(N) Perry Gray: We have 12 minutes left.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Chair, can I...?

The Chair: We have four slots of five minutes. I have asked the members to give some time to the witnesses to answer, but the five minutes belongs to him.

I invite members, out of courtesy to our witnesses, to leave time for the witnesses to reply.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to address some comments that were made earlier about what this government, this committee, and everybody around this table sees in regard to veterans, which is the absolute point of this. To some of the other comments that were addressed—because I'm trying to address some of that—we do have some communications issues to deal with. We are at the pointy end of that stick. We have to make sure that veterans understand exactly what these programs are, and all these programs fit different veterans differently depending on their situation.

With all of that being said, I'm going to ask a question of Warrant Officer McKenna from a reserve perspective, because we haven't talked too much about reserves. Prior to the announcements made by the Minister of Veterans Affairs, reservists were receiving considerably less in the earnings loss benefit than their regular force counterparts. The minister announced that reservists, as we've seen in Afghanistan—and I see your campaign star right there—would often have sustained similar injuries in similar instances. In fact they all served in the same place. There is virtually no difference, as you all know. They are going to now receive the same earnings loss benefit as regular force members.

I'd like to get your comment on this and what you think will affect the overall wellness of reserve force veterans and, if 31 CBG is still on the phone and heard my question, I'd like to ask him the same question.

Mr. Brian McKenna: Thanks for that.

I guess I approach the question this way. Again, I'm happy to see the change. I think it's a move in the right direction. I'd even say it's stronger than that; it might be the right answer on that file. Where I'm troubled in this is that, as a reservist having lost a friend of mine from the reserves overseas and multiple other friends from the regular force overseas, it seems we had to wait until the death of Corporal Cirillo to go public before this got addressed.

Now I could be wrong and I don't understand the production of policy, so maybe I am wrong. But this is one of those things where not only do you need to do the right thing, but you also have to be seen to do the right thing. The perception was that it took someone dying at the war memorial to identify that there was a difference between benefits for the reserve and regular force, and we think that this should have been identified when Mr. Boneca, the first reservist to die overseas, was killed.

This was also addressed by Mr. Parent when he first took over office and was addressed by Mr. Stogran when he held the ombudsman's office.

So yes, I'm very happy with this announcement. What I'm scared about is how long it's taken us to get here. If we have flaws in this

document that we're looking at in front of us at this moment, are we eight years from the next hearing to implement that? That's my concern, but I do support the change in that benefit.

● (2020)

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

Mr. Valeriotte.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: Thank you for appearing, gentlemen.

I am not nearly as optimistic, satisfied, or gratified as Mr. Opitz is. While this committee does have ongoing work, I don't think that it's the work of this committee to have to continually meet, continually receive recommendations when we've received tens of dozens of recommendations over the last three years, and to have to beg this government on behalf of veterans for what they already deserve. My question is going to be direct.

Mr. Bruyey, what recommendations would you make to amend this legislation on those three particular points? No amendment is going to be accepted, and nothing else is going to pass but this legislation, we know that, but if you could amend it on each of these three points that were made, what would they be?

And, Mr. Gray, I'm going to ask you the same question after Mr. Bruyey is done.

Mr. Sean Bruyey: Super.

I would first of all convert the critical injury benefit to actually raising the lump sum across the board.

Second, on the family benefit, I would just merely remove the family benefit and open up attendance allowance to all recipients, NVC clients.

Third, what I would do for the retirement benefit is essentially scrap the retirement benefit and just extend ELB until death.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: Mr. Gray.

Capt(N) Perry Gray: I concur.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: With all of those?

Capt(N) Perry Gray: Yes.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: Would you agree with me then that the critical injury benefit—and I know it's a specific benefit for a specific event at a specific time—again marginalizes those suffering from PTSD? Mr. Blais, you raised that point.

I'm wondering if Mr. Blais and maybe the others can join in on this. Should there not be a lump sum payment of an equivalent amount at least? We know we're not going to get the civilian award amount out of the government. Should there not at least be an equivalent payment of \$70,000 to anyone suffering from PTSD when they're immediately diagnosed?

Mr. Blais, Mr. Bruyey, Mr. Gray, and Mr. McKenna, you're welcome to join in.

Mr. Michael Blais: I think being diagnosed and attributing it to service is essential. If we have incidents where one guy loses his legs, there's a traumatic incident with 12 guys involved, and three years later the guy who bore witness to all that comes forward, it's attributable. You know he was at that traumatic event. We should be making him entitled, absolutely.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Bruyea.

Mr. Sean Bruyea: We already have a mechanism in place for that: the accidental dismemberment insurance plan. We expanded it to include all ranks back in 2003, and yet this dismemberment benefit does not recognize people who are suffering debilitating psychological injuries. Yet you have situations where you have paraplegics who are able to fully function and work. Yes, their loss is a tragedy, but at the same time you have people suffering from PTSD who cannot work at all for the rest of their lives, and yet they are not awarded that benefit.

I think we've got to have some equality across the board here.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Gray.

Capt(N) Perry Gray: As everybody said, an injury is an injury. It doesn't matter what type it is, physical or psychological, it should be treated the same way.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay. Mr. McKenna.

Mr. Brian McKenna: My fear is that this benefit could essentially create a third class of veteran. My fear right now is that when you look at pre-lump sum, post-lump sum, there's your two, and now we have pre-lump sum, post-lump sum, post-lump sum qualifying CIB as a third. I don't like the separate classes of spouse. I don't like the second classes of veteran either.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay.

The Chair: I just want to check if Mr. Fleming is still on the phone.

Mr. Derryk Fleming: Yes.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Fleming, would you like to answer that question? What amendments would you like to see to this?

Mr. Derryk Fleming: I believe that spousal care should be made available to all veterans, not just moderately and severely injured ones, because the spouses, the caregivers, until this point have not had any support whatsoever.

In terms of the actual transition, I take into account that this is a living document, so Bill C-59, division 17 is just one step of a number of steps.

So specifically I think you can do the most good by closing the seams of the football, as Brian mentioned, and doing the hand-off. I think there is some merit to this bill, specifically the hand-off. I think you're going to see real value come about from this bill in a really proactive manner, which is not to take away from what the other witnesses have said, but in a proactive manner. Having a seamless transition so the guys don't fall between the cracks as they're being released, I think is a strong point of this bill.

Thank you.

● (2025)

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemieux, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you very much, and thank you to our witnesses.

I have not heard a single MP around this table or a single MP in the House of Commons limit future initiatives. I have just not heard anyone give any indication whatsoever that once this legislation is passed, that's it.

I've heard the exact opposite. I've heard it's a living document, and that these are great first steps. Some political football is being played, and just to give you an example, the opposition is asking what has taken so long. We even heard that tonight. The government, through the minister, picks some key initiatives, six, seven, eight of them, announces them, puts them into legislation. Some of them have already been delivered, for example, the better access to the PIA, the respect for reserves. So the minister takes some key initiatives and moves forward faster.

Why aren't you doing more? What's taking so long?

I want to remind everybody on this committee that there's very real legislation sitting in front of committee right now that's going to be back in the House with very real benefits and initiatives for veterans, and there are veterans who will benefit from them. I think we have to keep that first and foremost in our minds, especially if we're trying to put the veteran at the centre of everything, because we can play a little game and say if only it were different, then I would vote for it.

Yes, but what about the veteran who is eligible for one of these new benefits? When this passes into law, are you saying tough luck for him because it wasn't quite the way you wanted it. That's part of the political consideration that has to be, I think, swept aside, so we focus on what is in front of committee and what is in front of Parliament. That leads me to my question.

Mr. Blais, I'll open with you. I'd like to know what your advice is to MPs on this committee about this legislation, these measures that I consider to be very real benefits for very real veterans: to vote for them, to support this, to pass this quickly?

Mr. Michael Blais: First of all, you're making it political in the sense that you have a majority. This is just a dog-and-pony show at the end of the day.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Chair, if I may, there is nothing I said in my statement that was political. I'm talking about very real legislation that is in front of the House, and the legislation is actually in black and white, and it has to be voted on. So MPs are going to have to—

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Chair, a point of order.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It's not a point of order, Frank. Don't waste our time like this.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: It's not taking up your time.

The Chair: I wouldn't like to burn the clock this way.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: I know.

The Chair: I'd like to bring the meeting back to order.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'm just wondering if I can get a clarification on your answer. What would your recommendation be to the committee on how to deal with this legislation here and in the House?

Mr. Michael Blais: Absolutely. And I didn't mean to insult you by saying you were making it political. That was not my intent.

The reality is that the Conservative government has had a majority for the past four years—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'm just wondering what your recommendation would be.

Mr. Michael Blais: That's my recommendation.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Pardon me?

Mr. Michael Blais: Do it. Skip the crap. Let's do it. You say, well, they're doing this, they're doing that.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: That's good.

Thank you.

I'd like to build in Mr. Derryk Fleming's response as well.

Are you still with us, Mr. Fleming?

Mr. Derryk Fleming: Yes, I am.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Good. I appreciate your hanging in there. It's hard when you're not actually physically present in the room.

I would like to ask you the same question. When you look at the legislation that's in front of the committee and Parliament, what would your recommendation be with respect to how that legislation is handled when it comes time to vote?

● (2030)

Mr. Derryk Fleming: I believe you should pass the legislation. I say that in the understanding that it is a living document. As I said, it will close a seam.

I attended the veterans summit last month and heard General Natynczyk speak. They really understand what's going on.

There is more that has to be done—we get that—especially for the majority of veterans who are not seriously injured or are moderately injured. But it is good legislation. There is a good starting point.

I do believe you should pass it.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: I would like to thank all of our witnesses, and particularly Mr. Fleming for his patience in participating long distance like this.

The 52nd meeting of this standing committee will take place here in this room at 6:30 tomorrow evening.

[*Translation*]

This will be our third meeting on the study on division 17 of part 3 of Bill C-59.

[*English*]

This will in fact be the last meeting at which we will be hearing witnesses with regard to the study.

[*Translation*]

Tomorrow, we will hear testimonies from Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones and the Canadian Aboriginal Veterans and Serving Members Association.

[*English*]

We will also hear Jenny Migneault, who will join us in a personal capacity.

[*Translation*]

We are waiting for confirmation from Marie-Andrée Mallette, but it looks like she will be there, too.

[*English*]

Have a good evening, and see you tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.

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