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Chair: Mr. Bryan May



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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Order. Welcome back, everybody.

Dane, I believe you want the floor.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the co-operation in getting this meeting out of in camera. I'd like to put forward my motion. I believe everyone has a copy of the motion in front of them and the translation is adequate.

I'll move forward with my motion:

Given recent media reports that family members of veterans are being denied ongoing coverage for previously covered mental health treatments. The Committee immediately invite the Veterans Ombudsman and officials from Veterans Affairs Canada to give testimony and answer questions related to changes in mental health services for families of veterans.

The Chair: Darrell.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Again, I'm not trying to be difficult at all. We don't have a problem supporting this, but the thing is, we are doing exactly what the committee has decided. What you have there is the intent of the subcommittee, from my understanding, which is that they're going to bring the department in on Thursday for an hour. We could have the ombudsman on Thursday afternoon or the following Tuesday. This motion is achieving nothing more than what our committee is putting forward today, and on all the questions around that issue, which is very concerning, you'll have the opportunity to ask the ombudsman, but also the senior department staff, about that.

We're achieving.... We're not changing anything, so I don't see the validity of the motion at this time, because we're going to achieve it through our focus.

The Chair: First up, we have MP Lalonde.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): I've read the motion, and I'm very sensitive to the issue, actually, but I'm just concerned that for every news outlet out there, we're going to be responding and deviating from the work that we have agreed to in the subcommittee in terms of going forward. I'm not saying that this is not important or relevant. Actually, I think it's enormously relevant, but I do believe that by achieving the subcommittee report, we will be able to address the concerns that the media and others, including the veterans ombudsman, have raised.

I'm new, so I'm just wondering if this is how committee work is done and whether every time we'll pause for a news outlet or something, instead of continuing to drive an agenda that we collectively

want to improve upon in presenting reports to the minister and the Government of Canada. I need clarification on that. I'm surprised.

The Chair: We have MP Ruff.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): I'd like to address both points made by MP Samson, the parliamentary secretary. This is specifically not about getting those same witnesses here. It's to cover a specific issue about denial of coverage. I think that's the issue. We haven't set up.... We're here to discuss what our priority of work is going to be, but even prior to that, we have something here that is actually talking about a potential denial of service to veterans' families. This issue is something that I think is very timely, and we should be addressing it as a priority.

From our perspective over here, this isn't something that we're saying is going to occupy our whole time. We're saying, "Let's nail this down." It's something that we can get out of the way, and then, as we will establish over the rest of the meeting today, we can focus on the work that as a committee we're going to try to solve over the coming months.

The Chair: MP Lloyd.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I don't think I could have said it much better myself. I appreciate your points, Parliamentary Secretary; however, I think this is a specific issue. I think we would like to see a report on this issue, even if it's a brief report, based upon the testimony we get from written submissions from people, but specifically for the one meeting that we're asking for, with testimony from the veterans ombudsman and the departmental officials, because they have brought this up as an urgent issue.

As you know, we don't know what the specific mental illnesses or mental traumas are that these families are facing. This could be a very timely issue, and if we don't act now.... I mean, I'd hate to see if anything negative really happened. I think we should move forward with this. We're asking for one meeting this coming Thursday to discuss this motion, and then we can have a report come out over the next few months, based on written submissions, so that we can deal with this matter.

The Chair: Arnold.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Yes, I would echo my colleague's comments. In the motions that we have coming forward, I don't see where the ongoing previously covered treatment would be covered under any of the other motions, so to bring them in to have them discuss that.... Unless we tip them off beforehand and say, hey, we're going to be discussing this, they're going to be coming here with the backlog concerns, not necessarily ongoing treatment that has recently.... I've been in this place now for four years, and committees are one of the places where we can move nimbly and address things that happen in real time.

I think it would be incumbent on us to deal with this one. It's breaking news at this point. If we can jump on it, get the ombudsman here and let him clarify what he's talking about in his recent op-eds, that would be great.

• (0910)

The Chair: Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): I just can't stress enough the importance of this issue. I don't agree this is something that is captured in the motions for studies we have presented at this time. We're going to be talking about supplementary estimates and then about the backlog—the first two on this list—and then we're going to be talking about service dogs.

It's not really talking to the specific issue of members of a veteran's family, the services they receive, and the importance of that issue. I remember having a conversation with one veteran in my riding, Max. He told me he felt that his wife was getting post-traumatic stress disorder from having to live with him. This has a huge impact.

To come back to your point, this is not about just responding to breaking news; we're not just going to jump in there every single time. This could have significant long-term impacts. It's very clear there's an issue here. It's been identified by the veterans ombudsperson. It behooves our committee to get a grasp on that as quickly as possible. One day to touch on this is not too much to ask. That will allow the committee to know if there's further work needed at a different point.

I will be supporting this motion. Everybody's pretty clear on this. Again, it's so important. When we see these kinds of articles, hopefully we could send something that will help veterans' families across this country. We have a responsibility to address that.

The Chair: Mrs. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Samson specifically mentioned that he's aware of this issue in his riding. I can say the same with regard to a number of veterans with whom I have relationships. We have an opportunity, as a committee, to react very clearly and decisively to a serious concern that is out there with our veterans and their families.

A great deal of angst is taking place right now, because there has been mixed messaging. It behooves us, as a committee, to do this, take one day and get that clarity for them, so that we can move forward. They will know right off the bat that we're here working on their behalf.

The Chair: I don't see anybody else raising their hand, so if I can jump in here, I have some logistical things to discuss.

First of all, this is an issue with regard to procedure. The first sentence is a preamble. The beginning of the motion would be the second sentence. You would need to either eliminate that first sentence or actually put it at the end, which is fine; however, the direction to the committee is where the motion should start.

Second, and more important, the clerk actually reached out to the ombudsman, anticipating the motions that are before us today. I have some notes. On supplementary estimates (B), the earliest date the minister is available to appear is March 10 or March 12, which is after the break week. On the first study in the report, the ombudsman is not available to appear this Thursday, which is what we had actually considered for the report anyway. The earliest available date is March 26. We're going to be calling back to get clarification on that, as we understand he is not available until March 26.

Obviously, that is a concern, given that this is the key witness you want to have appear. As has been stated, we do have officials coming on Thursday. We have two hours. Originally, we were going to see the minister for an hour, and the department officials for an hour. I'm wondering if we can break that up. We're not going to have the minister. We can either have the full two hours for the original study at hand, or we could break it up and have the hour exclusively regarding this study with officials, and then go into the second one. In any case, I know we're not going to have the ombudsman on Thursday.

We have Mr. Lloyd, and then Mr. Ruff.

• (0915)

Mr. Dane Lloyd: One point that you made, Chair, was that the ombudsman made his decision based upon the notices he believed would be coming forward. I respect that he might not be available for that. However, given that the ombudsperson has raised these issues this past weekend, he might have a different availability, and maybe can come on Thursday. Can we reach out to him to see if it's possible for him to come on Thursday or, at the latest, Tuesday of next week?

The Chair: If we were in camera, I would be comfortable telling you why he is not here. We are not in camera. He is not going to be here on Thursday. I can tell you later if you wish. He's not available.

Mr. Ruff.

Mr. Alex Ruff: I was going to almost echo a little bit of what Dane was saying, but technologically, can he call in? Again, if he's not available this week, then at the earliest possibility, so that we can do—

The Chair: Before this meeting even started and I saw that note, I was surprised by the lateness of the date as well. I've already instructed the clerk to follow up with his office to see if something like that is even possible.

As I said, I have the idea of having the department officials come Thursday for the full two hours. Then we can break it up very specifically between the two studies.

Dane.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Since we do have a notice on the floor, I will accept the friendly amendment about the preamble. I think, given that the veterans ombudsman is not available to come in on Thursday, I would want to amend the motion to say, "That the committee immediately invite the Veterans Ombudsman, at his earliest convenience, and officials from Veterans Affairs Canada to give testimony and answer questions related to changes in mental health services for families of veterans."

That way, once he makes clear to this committee what his availability is, we can, as a committee, flexibly plan around his schedule to make sure that we have the earliest meeting possible.

The Chair: Do you want to have the department officials this Thursday for this study? Okay.

I have Darrell, and then Cathay.

[Translation]

Mr. Darrell Samson: That is exactly it.

I would just propose that we hear from the officials from the department on Thursday for two hours and ask them questions about the services. One of the key people who will be here is actually the one who provides the services. So a key person will be able to answer the questions.

Let's continue with our plan to have officials from the department here for two hours rather than just one, and let's ask questions about the services available for mental health issues. If we are not satisfied and feel that we do not have enough information, we can pass another emergency motion to achieve our goal. We will also be able to invite the ombudsman as soon as possible to answer our questions. At the end of the day, we will achieve our goal one way or another. Like you, we want answers. However, if the ombudsman is not ready, we will not achieve our goal.

For now, I would simply suggest that we move forward with the process we have put in place and have departmental officials here for two hours rather than just one, and ask them the important questions. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Cathay.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'll pass my comments over to Dane, please.

The Chair: MP Lloyd.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I appreciate the words of the parliamentary secretary. I'm comfortable with Thursday's meeting being a more general meeting with Veterans Affairs Canada. However, I want my motion to stand so that, at the earliest convenience of the veterans ombudsman, we can bring him in, as well as bring back Veterans Affairs Canada officials, just so that we can have the two sides of the story so that we can examine it. We don't necessarily need to talk... We can ask the Veterans Affairs officials questions on the subject, I assume, but I'm comfortable having our next meeting on

Thursday be related to backlog issues and general issues. Then, at the next available meeting when the veterans ombudsman is ready, we can bring back department officials with him to do a specific meeting just on that issue.

Can we get this called to a vote?

• (0920)

The Chair: Yes, I just want to make sure that we have the language clear in the amendment. It would be, "That the committee immediately invite the Veterans Ombudsman, at his earliest convenience, and officials from Veterans Affairs Canada to give testimony and answer questions related to changes in mental health services for families of veterans."

Do you want to insert that first sentence or just eliminate it?

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Yes, let's put the first sentence in the second half.

The Chair: Okay, the first sentence was, "Given recent media reports that family members of veterans are being denied ongoing coverage for previously covered mental health treatments."

Sean.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): I would like to propose an amendment to the motion, to add the words "and that no more than one meeting be dedicated to this inquiry".

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I appreciate MP Casey's note on this. I don't believe it's going to go over one meeting, but I don't want to put it in the motion to restrict ourselves, because if the veterans ombudsman or Veterans Affairs Canada does cite some things that we think are issues, then we want to be flexible to say that we might need to have a second meeting on this. That being said, I don't believe it's going to go over one meeting. I don't accept the amendment, but I appreciate where it's coming from.

The Chair: For clarification, this Thursday, we're not discussing this motion. The "one meeting" threw us for a second there.

Go ahead, Will.

[Translation]

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): I would like to ask Mr. Lloyd the question again, because I think it's an important one.

I would like to vote in favour of the motion, but I do not think we need a blank cheque in order to move forward. We have already discussed what we want to do at the subcommittee meeting. In my opinion, if we want to have more than one day, we should have a completely different discussion.

I think that is the best way to move forward and that we will have full support if we agree to do the study in one day.

[English]

The Chair: We do have a motion for amendment in front of us.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I appreciate MP Amos's thinking on this. Unless there is something that just glaringly needs to be addressed by a second meeting, I can say for myself that I won't be pushing for a second meeting on this. I am asking for a bit of a blank cheque on this one, but I hope you will trust that we're not going to try to turn this into a two- or three-meeting thing. We just want to deal with the issue at hand. If there are serious issues, I think it will be self-evident to the entire committee that they need to be dealt with. I think that, as a committee, we can work collectively on this.

The Chair: In order to move forward, I will remind MP Lloyd that he can do that after the fact if there is something that comes out. There's no reason you can't move a motion at that point as well.

We have the amendment in front of us from Mr. Casey, which would include that "no more than one meeting be dedicated to this inquiry".

(Amendment negated [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Now we go to the main motion as previously amended.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The clerk will do their best to try to get some clarification on when the first available opportunity would be to bring in the ombudsman and the officials on this.

We'll suspend to go back to the original committee business and get back to the report from the subcommittee.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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