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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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Monday, June 17, 2024

• (1105)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting 101 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** I have a point of order, Chair.

**The Chair:** Let me finish my introduction, please.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, March 9, 2023, the committee is commencing its study on the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would like to remind all members and participants in the room to consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents. So please keep in mind the preventative measures in place to protect the health and safety—

[*English*]

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** On a point of order, there's no interpretation.

**The Chair:** Okay, there's no interpretation.

We're going to suspend for just one minute to give the technicians the opportunity to correct the situation.

• (1105)

(Pause)

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** I call the meeting back to order. I thank the technicians for solving the problem.

I was reminding you to be very careful with the earpieces. We ask that when you have the floor and your microphone is on, you place the earpiece face down in the designated spot. As a reminder, all comments by members should be addressed through the chair.

Joining us today are senior officials from Veterans Affairs Canada, whom I'd like to thank for being with us. They are Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public af-

fairs branch, and Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch.

Mr. Richards has a point of order.

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thanks, Chair.

It would be helpful for there to be an explanation of how we ended up here. People who follow this committee will note that the following motion was agreed to on March 18:

That the debate on [Blake Richards'] motion, as amended, moved on Wednesday, December 20, 2023, be adjourned until the review of the report on the study of the experience of women veterans is completed; that, in relation to the study on transition to civilian life, the committee hold the meeting with witnesses that has been postponed; and, that the committee then resume debate on his motion.

That was the motion surrounding the controversy of the Afghanistan monument, with interference of the Prime Minister's Office. It requested documents to find out what exactly was taking place there.

Those who follow the committee will note that this has not yet been resolved, and here we are for an important motion, but on another topic altogether, the Persian Gulf veterans. That is important, but it's also important for people who are watching and follow this to understand exactly why we are not continuing to work on that motion, which the committee was supposed to be working on until it was completed.

I wonder if you could fill folks in on that.

**The Chair:** Mr. Casey.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** It's on the same point of order, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank Mr. Richards for reading the motion. You will note the motion says that the debate on the Afghanistan monument would be resumed. It doesn't say that it would be resumed to its completion.

It is open to the committee at any time to adjourn debate on a motion to pick up other business. All of those things were not contemplated by the motion to resume. That was simply a sequencing matter such that in the order of business, we would come back to the motion. It doesn't say that we would deal with nothing else. The motion doesn't say that—

**An hon. member:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Excuse me. Nobody interrupted you.

• (1120)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I was just commenting [*Inaudible—Editor*], Sean. That's all.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** The motion does not say that there would be no other business before the committee if the committee so decided. It is a motion to resume, not something requiring the committee to deal with it right through to completion. I expect that's helpful, but the fact is, the notice of meeting says that we're going to deal with this matter and here we are.

Those are my submissions on the point of order.

**The Chair:** Thank you, both of you.

As you said, Sean, with the motion, we can still have a discussion about the monument.

Mr. Richards said that people are following or watching. I know this was in public, but since then, we have had a lot of meetings on committee business in private, so members of the committee could have discussed the situation.

At any time, you can resume debate on that motion and we will come back to it.

I have Mrs. Wagantall.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC):** Thank you, Chair. I appreciate it.

I want to make a comment, as Mr. Casey did, in regard to what my colleague said.

The agreement we came to, which is reflected in the minutes, was very specifically to do what we all needed to do. That was to make sure the women's study was completed and that witnesses who had not been able to give their testimony on the transition study were able to.

In good faith, we had a very significant discussion, and the minutes came out of that. I talked personally with Rachel Blaney about this, because we're the women on this committee, and it was very important that the study be completed. It says very clearly that once those two things were done, we would resume debate—

**Mr. Sean Casey:** We did.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:**—on this motion.

Excuse me. I'm speaking now. Please don't interrupt me. I'm just bringing clarity to what was said.

We did not resume debate. We went immediately in camera to work on committee business with an intent to decide what we would study next. I believe it is very frustrating for the people who have been following this study on the Afghan monument and who want clarity to come forward on what truly happened. In the meantime, we are dilly-dallying because we did not in good faith do what was agreed to around this table.

I want to bring clarity to what was said here. I agree that due diligence was done but not in the right direction, and that is discouraging when this committee is especially responsible for veterans' care and we see all the work we did on the women's study. This does not

reinforce the confidence that we are truly committed to doing the studies that are important to them.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Mr. Desilets on a point of order.

**Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Mr. Chair, I ask that the next 15 minutes be devoted to committee business. I want to introduce a motion, a different one than the one distributed last week.

In connection with your express request, I'd like us to discuss finding a solution to put an end to the constant filibustering and moving our business forward intelligently. I'd like to move a motion that I hope would end the filibustering and allow us to move forward just a little bit. It would be an honourable solution in connection with—

• (1125)

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Desilets, thank you for your intervention.

First of all, I want to apologize to the witnesses, who haven't yet had the opportunity to make their opening remarks. There are a couple of procedural things that we need to deal with.

I'll now come back to you, Mr. Desilets. In order to move to committee business, I need unanimous consent. I must also tell you that you can always move a notice of motion, but that there would be no debate.

Do I have the unanimous consent of the committee members to move to committee business and to hear Mr. Desilets' motion?

**Some hon. members:** No.

**The Chair:** It doesn't look like it.

Mr. Desilets, would you like to move a notice of motion and briefly read your motion?

[*English*]

**Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.):** On a point of order, Chair, I beg your pardon, but I don't believe we can move a motion on a point of order.

We have witnesses in front of us. I'd like us to get to the witnesses, please. None of this has been a point of order.

**The Chair:** He has to wait his turn on the list.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meunier and Mr. Tessier, we're pleased to welcome you. You have five minutes to deliver your opening remarks.

[English]

**Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for letting us be here today.

As the assistant deputy minister of commemoration and public affairs at Veterans Affairs, I'm acutely aware of the important role our department plays in remembering and recognizing the enormous sacrifices made by those who have served in uniform.

[Translation]

These sacrifices are recognized in two ways: through commemoration and through benefits and services. Veterans Affairs Canada is very grateful to all veterans and Canadian Armed Forces members for their dedicated service, including those who served in the Persian Gulf.

We appreciate the ongoing and active dialogue between veterans organizations, the minister's advisory groups, veterans, families, stakeholders and parliamentarians. This dialogue provides important perspectives on how best to recognize Persian Gulf veterans and other modern-day veterans.

[English]

Members of the Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada have asked that their service in the Persian Gulf be defined as war service instead of special duty service. In terms of benefits and services, the authority to designate special duty service originates from the Veterans Well-being Act, which came into force in April 2006. The legislation prescribes that the Minister of National Defence may designate special duty areas and operations. There is no specific legislation that provides the authority for VAC to designate a period of service as wartime service.

The practice of categorizing military service is an internal CAF-DND process done in the interest of providing CAF members and veterans with the benefits to which they are entitled from National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada. This categorization helps to determine the kind of support or compensation they should receive. Modern veterans benefit from a much wider framework of services and supports, such as financial benefits, rehabilitation, case management services, mental health programs and many others. These programs were not available before April 2006. The special duty service classification does not signal any lesser respect for the service of members and veterans, nor is it indicative of a lesser degree of risk on the part of those deployed.

Going all the way back to the South African War at the turn of the 20th century, we have a lot to be proud of and a lot to remember, but not all veterans identify with the stories of military accomplishments that happened well before they were born. While we will always commemorate traditional milestones from the First and Second World Wars and Korea, we're also focusing more on recognizing Canada's modern-day veterans and operations, such as those in the Gulf and elsewhere in the Middle East in 1990 and 1991. I want to highlight that this was the first conflict in which Canadian women in service were set to engage in active combat roles.

In fact, through our CAF around the world programming framework, we're making deliberate efforts to make sure that veterans know how appreciative we are of their service, courage and sacrifice at home, around the world and across generations.

• (1130)

[Translation]

We will continue to ask current veterans to share with us the type of commemorative and recognition activities they are most interested in. They should be able to see themselves in everything we do to honour them.

We also want Canadians to value and recognize the service and sacrifice of those who have served.

[English]

This year, for example, our CAF around the world framework places special emphasis on recognizing Canadian military and peace support efforts in Africa. Earlier this year, we recognized the 10th anniversary of the end of Canada's mission in Afghanistan and 60 years since Canadians joined the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Cyprus. Later this month, we'll be recognizing the 60th anniversary of the end of the UN operations in the Congo, which included 300 Canadians.

We're also making sure to remember and recognize those who served in domestic operations. For example, in recent years, we've recognized the Canadian mission to support the Red River floods, the 25th anniversary of the crash of Swissair flight 111, the ice storm and many others.

The veterans who supported these and other modern-day operations are most deserving of being recognized for their service. It is a profound responsibility we have, and at Veterans Affairs Canada, we are well aware of it and take great pride in what we do.

[Translation]

We will continue to do what we can to ensure that all our veterans are represented and recognized for their service to Canada.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Meunier.

I don't know if Mr. Tessier would like to add anything. No? Okay.

We will now go to the first round of questions.

[English]

I'm pleased to invite Mr. Richards to go ahead for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thank you.

Persian Gulf veterans just want to be recognized as having fought a war. That's what they're looking for. I'll ask a yes-or-no question and I'd like a yes or no answer. Do you consider the Persian Gulf War to be a war?

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** We follow the legislation and rules set out by—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Can you give me a yes or no, please?

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** It's not defined as a war.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That pretty much tells us everything we need to know. That's what they're looking for. Clearly, that's not what we're being told Veterans Affairs is prepared to do. When I asked the minister this same question, she refused to even answer it. I appreciate that you gave an answer. It's the wrong answer, frankly, but it's an answer at least.

Having said that, I move the following motion:

That, given the large workload the committee has on the docket, the committee instruct the Chair to book five meetings during the summer months between July 8 and September 13, while the House is adjourned, to deal with issues such as:

the effects of the cost-of-living crisis on Veterans,

how the poor treatment of Canadian Veterans directly impacts military retention and recruitment,

the scandal surrounding the National Monument to the Mission in Afghanistan,

the growing problem of homelessness amongst Veterans, and

the study concerning Wartime Service designation;

other pressing matters as they emerge.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Witnesses, we have to deal with that motion. It was on notice, so we have to discuss it before going to a vote.

Mr. Casey.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Mr. Chair, I had the floor. I wanted to speak to the motion.

**The Chair:** Go ahead.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** A lot of committee time over the last seven months was needed to deal with a host of issues. First of all, there was the monument to the mission in Afghanistan, which could have been dealt with quite easily and quickly. I'll come back to that in just a second. People saw the Liberals trying every way they could to avoid having a vote on that motion. A lot of meetings were used in an attempt to cover up for the Prime Minister.

There are a lot of things the committee needs to deal with. I've listed some of them. It's important that we deal with them. I believe, given all the time that has been used to cover for the Prime Minister, that we should ensure that we continue to work for veterans over the summer. Veterans don't get three months off in the summer. Their needs never stop. We need to deal with those needs and concerns.

I've listed a few topics. I want to speak very briefly to them. I'm certainly hoping that all members will agree and we can pass this motion and get some meetings scheduled this summer.

First, to start from the bottom of the list, is the study concerning the wartime service designation. I want to point out that two separate motions were brought before this committee that we agreed to study. They both related to wartime service designation.

The first was one that I brought forward on February 26, 2023:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee conduct a study on the difference in benefit allocations for Veterans with designated war time service vs special mission service.

On November 28 of last year, Wilson Miao also brought forward a motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a comprehensive study reviewing (a) the definition of "War", "Wartime Service", and "Special Duty Service"; and (b) the difference, the process of determining, and criteria for Veteran's benefits in respect of "Wartime Service" and "Special Duty Service"; that the committee hold a minimum of 4 meetings on this study; and that the committee report its comprehensive findings and recommendations to the House, the Department of National Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

One would assume that the meeting we're having today is to deal with those motions. However, I note that the study talks about the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans. Nowhere does it mention a very critical aspect of this, which is wartime service. It's the critical thing that veterans of the Persian Gulf War—and it is a war—are asking for. They want their service to be recognized as wartime service, yet nothing in the study we've now begun indicates that it's about wartime service and the recognition of that, which is a very critical element. I know that the Persian Gulf veterans I've spoken to in the time since notice came out are quite upset. They're incredibly upset. They feel like they're being used as pawns.

The Liberal government is trying to avoid dealing with the Afghan monument situation and with the controversy that's been created because of the Prime Minister's interference in the Afghan monument. The way they've tried to do that is by bringing forward this study, which doesn't even address the key point that these veterans of the Persian Gulf War are seeking. We need to get to a study about the wartime service designation. That's something we could be doing during the summer.

Of course, there's the growing problem of homelessness among veterans. This is a problem we're seeing. It affects the entire Canadian population. We're seeing tent cities popping up all over this country in places where you never would have imagined you'd see something like that. With all the effects of the inflationary spending of this Trudeau government and all the effects of the cost of living crisis we're seeing as a result of it, as well as the housing crisis we're experiencing in this country, people are suffering, not the least of whom are veterans.

• (1135)

There are a lot of good organizations out there doing a lot of good work to try to address this issue. I know that we would all agree it needs to be addressed and dealt with. It needs to be done. We need to know what exactly Veterans Affairs is planning to do to be a part of assisting with that and what can be done to ensure that no veteran ever goes homeless.

We should be looking at that. That's something we could be working on. It's an urgent matter, there's no question about it. We're seeing more and more veterans all the time using food banks and without adequate housing or without housing at all. That should never be the case. These people served our country, and we owe it to them to ensure that we take care of them. We need to be looking at that issue.

Of course, I already mentioned the scandal surrounding the national monument to the mission in Afghanistan. We spoke to this at the beginning of the meeting. This is something we all agreed we would undertake to do. They can claim all they want on the other side that we never intended to come up with a decision, that we were just going to discuss it a bit and move on. Come on. Where else in the world and in what other kind of organization would things work that way? It would never fly in the private sector to say we'll have a little discussion about it and then move on; we don't need to make a decision about it. It would never fly anywhere else, and it certainly doesn't fly with veterans.

That's what we should be doing. It hasn't been done, and it needs to be done. We need to get to the bottom of that situation. We need to be working on that.

We can also talk about how the poor treatment of veterans is directly impacting military retention and recruitment. I hear this every single day from veterans. I hear every single day from sitting members of the Canadian Armed Forces about how frustrated they are with the way they're treated, with some of the woke policies of this government and with the fact that veterans, when they get out, are not treated with the respect they deserve. They're not given the benefits they're due. They're constantly facing delays, denials and suggestions that maybe they should consider death.

These are the things that really impact people who are making the decision to serve this country in uniform. They impact those who are currently serving. I hear it every single day, with people saying, "I'm getting out; I'm done. This is just too much. I cannot handle that this government is not showing any respect for either our veterans or our serving members." We have sitting members of the Canadian Armed Forces, current serving members, who are using food banks and who are homeless. That should never be the case. We need to be addressing that issue.

Of course, there are the effects of the cost of living crisis on veterans, the things we all see and hear about every single day from Canadians across this country, but even more so from veterans. If there was one group of people you would think had a priority when ensuring that we take care of every need and that they have what they require to live their lives, it would be our veterans, those who served this country. They were prepared to put their lives on the line and they did put their lives on the line. They were prepared to lay down their lives for their country. The least their country and

their government can do for them following that service is make sure they're there for them and they're willing to provide what they need.

These are all incredibly important issues that we need to be addressing. There have been a lot of meetings wasted in an attempt to cover up for the Prime Minister. It's time that we get down to work. That means meeting over the course of the summer, for five meetings at minimum, I would suggest. We could do even better than that.

That's the motion I move. I hope that it will have the support of all members of this committee. This is an opportunity for the government members to make up for the time they've wasted. This is an opportunity for the NDP and the Bloc to be there on behalf of veterans. We need to know where everyone stands. Are they here to go on vacation with the Prime Minister or are they here to work for veterans? That's what we're going to vote on today.

• (1140)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

We have three people on the list: Mr. Casey, Mrs. Wagantall and Mr. Dowdall.

Mr. Casey.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Out of respect for the witnesses who have come here to present to us and inform us on the topic at hand, I move that debate on the motion now be adjourned.

**The Chair:** I have no choice. I have to go to a vote.

Mr. Clerk, please take the vote on the adjournment of debate.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

The debate on the motion was adjourned.

We'll pick up where we left off with the witnesses.

Mr. Richards, we had three minutes left on the clock.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I suppose that wasn't surprising, but it's certainly disappointing. We need to be working on behalf of veterans this summer. I guess there's an unwillingness among the other parties to do so. The Conservatives were prepared to do the work that's necessary.

Having said that, I would like to move the following motion:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee conduct a study on the effect of Veterans Affairs Canada policies on military recruitment.

I want to make it clear that this is an important study. However, what I would like to be doing is resuming debate on the motion we're supposed to be addressing, first and foremost, based on the agreement we had as a committee: the Prime Minister's interference in the Afghan monument situation and trying to make sure we get the proper respect and recognition for our Afghan veterans. Unfortunately, to resume debate on that, I would have to move a motion that would immediately be voted on. We already know, based on the vote we just saw, that we would have a refusal to do that. That's unfortunate because that is what this committee agreed to do. It's what we should be doing—making sure we show our Afghan veterans the respect they deserve.

Instead, I'm moving a motion that we conduct a study on the effect of Veterans Affairs Canada's policies on military recruitment. That's incredibly important. I just spoke about it. We hear every single day from veterans across this country and from serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces that they are incredibly frustrated with the lack of respect and service they receive from Veterans Affairs Canada. Serving members feel they have a government that isn't providing the equipment and tools they need, or showing them the respect they deserve. In fact, we're seeing many of them use food banks. We hear reports all across this country of veterans and serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces having to use food banks. We hear about homeless serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces and veterans. All of these things have a major impact on the willingness to serve in this country.

We want to pull our weight in the world. We want to be taken seriously in the world. It's unfortunate that under this Prime Minister, every single time there's an international summit or meeting of any kind, we are not taken seriously anywhere in the world. It's because we're not willing to step up and pull our weight. The men and women who serve this country do it with pride. They're among the best military members in the entire world. The quality of the people who serve in our Canadian Armed Forces is absolutely top-notch. However, the way they're treated, the equipment they're provided and the recognition and respect they get are not equal to what they deserve or to what they need in order to do their jobs properly.

Seeing the way veterans are treated makes anyone looking to get into our Canadian Armed Forces question that decision. It makes them wonder why they would want to serve their country. It makes those who are currently serving wonder the same: "Why do I continue to do this?" Of course, most of them will continue to serve despite all those things because it's something they're proud to do. It's something they do to honour their country. They serve their country. Despite what they're seeing from the current government, they're still willing to serve. They're still willing to put their lives on the line, but boy, it would sure be nice if they were given the equipment and tools they need and if as veterans they were given the respect and recognition they deserve.

• (1150)

I'll return to the motion previously at hand about the Afghan mission monument. It's a terrible situation, but it's a great example of exactly what we're talking about.

It's probably best that I give a bit of background on this for those watching this meeting. We have a situation where, despite the fact

that we're 10 years past the end of that mission, there still hasn't been a monument constructed.

Shortly after the mission ended, it was announced by the previous Conservative government that a monument would be built to honour those who served in that mission and, in particular, to honour the 158 Canadians who gave their lives serving our country in Afghanistan. However, here we are. This government has been in power for nine years and nothing has been done.

They announced a competition to award the design contract for that monument, and the jury process set up by the government to do that, which is an internationally recognized process, was completed. Then, in November 2021, that decision was communicated to then minister of veterans affairs and then minister of Canadian heritage. The recommendations made by the two departments in question were that this be awarded to a company out of Quebec, Daoust, and that it be announced as quickly as possible.

Over the course of roughly the next year and a half—maybe a little more than a year and a half, in fact—we were able to receive documents, although there were a lot of redactions, and were able to determine that interference had occurred in that process and that the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office were involved. A number of meetings were held and discussions were had. One would have to assume that whatever those meetings and discussions were about, they led to the decision to change the decision.

The jury made a decision to award the contract, and when it was announced in June of last year, finally, a year and a half later—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. I have a point of order.

**Mr. Bryan May:** My point of order is on relevance, Mr. Chair.

I'm wondering if Mr. Richards can indicate to the committee whether he has a sense of how long his intervention might be, if it is going to continue. Of course, he has the right to talk as long as he wishes, but if it is going to continue at length, I would recommend that we dismiss the witnesses and not waste their time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. May.

As you just said, he has the right to discuss the motion. If he wants to answer you directly, he will.

Mr. Richards, we'll go back to you.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I don't think that was a point of order, Chair, and I acknowledge your ruling as such.



**Mr. Bryan May:** On a point of order, Chair, my original point of order was on relevance. I wonder if the chair can address that.

Again, let's respect the witnesses who are here today. We are coming up to almost 12 o'clock and have not had an opportunity to ask a question. I'm wondering whether Mr. Richards can let us know if we will have that opportunity.

• (1155)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. May.

Regarding relevance, I'm listening closely to his intervention. It's still about veterans and military recruitment.

Stay on that, please, Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I certainly am. I'm speaking directly to the issue contained in the motion, which is the effect of Veterans Affairs Canada's policies on military recruitment.

One of the things we're referring to—and there are a number of them I want to speak to—is the way veterans were treated in relation to the Afghan monument. I'm obviously providing the background to show how that happened. I appreciate that the members on the other side are listening. Hopefully, something I say will be compelling enough to make them realize it's time to stop covering for the Prime Minister and start working on behalf of the veterans who served this country. That is the plea I make, and I hope that Liberal members and all members of the committee are listening, because we need to deal with this issue and a number of other things.

I'll come back to where I was. In the period of time from November 2021 to June 2023, all of this interference took place, and it led to—

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It's not funny. Liberal members are laughing about the interference by the Prime Minister. It's not funny at all because veterans deserve the recognition they're seeking. If you think it's funny that they're not getting it, that's pathetic. I hope you don't find humour in the fact that veterans are not being recognized. That's sad.

Over the course of a year and a half, we saw interference take place, and it led to a different decision being announced. There's been no proper explanation of what exactly took place. What this committee was seeking to do with this motion was get to the bottom of that and ask for documents, unredacted, that would show the communications that took place and exactly why the Prime Minister's Office felt there was a need to change the decision.

One would assume that if there was a good reason for that, it would be a pretty easy motion to deal with. They could provide the documents and show what the reasons were, and we'd get the monument built and move on. Then we could deal with all the other things that are important to veterans. However, that hasn't happened. For some reason, what we've seen instead—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. Mr. Sarai has a point of order.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, we had a lot of committee business when these types of things should have

been discussed—what study to do and the motions tabled earlier. We had quite a few meetings with respect to deciding on those things. Doing that today is a disservice to all those who served in the Persian Gulf. They've been waiting and lobbying us for a long time to discuss and study it. For the Conservative Party to derail their study, talk about—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** This sounds like debate, Chair.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** —something totally different and irrelevant, and then afterwards say why this is not being studied, is very relevant to note.

I saw them come to the Hill and speak to us many times, and I think it's a disservice, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

I'll go back to Mr. Richards. I understand that we have committee business and a lot of studies and motions to discuss, but for now, Mr. Richards has the floor to explain his motion and say a few words.

I have a list of members who'd like to intervene. I saw the light, so I know we're going to have a vote, but let's continue.

Please, Mr. Richards, go on.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That was obviously not a point of order, but it is interesting to me to hear Liberal members say, after just voting down a motion to have more meetings over the summer, that we have all these things to discuss. If you really believe that, why didn't you support the motion to have meetings over the summer so we could discuss them? It sounds incredibly.... I don't think I'm allowed to use the word for what that is, but it's certainly a contradiction in statements. It once again speaks to the lengths the Liberals will go in order to avoid discussing this very important issue and a lot of other ones.

He even mentioned Persian Gulf veterans. I can tell you that the Persian Gulf veterans I'm speaking to are incredibly disappointed because they believe they're being used as pawns. This is what the Liberals always do. This is what this Prime Minister always does. They find a way to create division. They're trying to create division between Afghan veterans and Persian Gulf veterans, because they're not even studying what the Persian Gulf veterans asked to be studied.

• (1200)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Chair, on a point of order, the bells are ringing now.

**The Chair:** I saw that. We can stay until 10 minutes before the vote, but I need unanimous consent to—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** We give consent. Conservatives give consent.

**An hon. member:** The bells are not ringing.

**The Chair:** There was a bell, so I don't know.

**An hon. member:** I think they're just testing them.

**The Chair:** Mr. Richards, I'm so sorry that I interrupted you. Please, go ahead.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's fine, Chair. I appreciate you have to keep on top of that. It's the first legitimate interruption I've had, so I acknowledge that you're on top of it.

Speaking again to the situation, over the course of a year and a half, some kind of interference took place. If was a good reason for it and a need to change the decision to honour veterans, one would assume that all members of this committee would simply support the motion so we can receive the documents and find out what this good reason was.

However, the fact is, they're unwilling to support the motion and have gone to incredible lengths over the course of more than seven months to try to avoid having a vote on it. They've adjourned debate, filibustered meetings and moved amendments that are intended to filibuster. All sorts of tactics have been used to try to avoid having to support that motion. They've tried to change the motion to the point that it's meaningless, because they want to hide most of the documents in question. Why would they do all of that unless their intention was to cover something up? If there was nothing to hide, they'd just support the motion. Then we would be able to find out what happened and would be able to see the monument, hopefully, finally get built.

I'll point out that the last time I visited the site—I don't know if it's changed since—it was an empty field. I don't think that's what the veterans who served in Afghanistan or the families of the 158 who gave their lives in that mission want to see. They don't want to see an empty field. They want to see something that recognizes their service.

If there was an intention to honour those veterans, it would be simple: Pass the motion, get the documents, find out what the reason was for the interference, hopefully get the monument built as quickly as possible and, at the same time, allow this committee to work on a number of other issues that are important to us and that we need to be dealing with. That's certainly my goal. It's the reason I moved the motion to have meetings over the summer. We've seen a lot of time wasted here by trying to avoid a vote. We could make up for that time. We could pass the motion and move to some of the other issues that are incredibly important as well.

Instead, what the government has done is tried to create division among veterans. It's tried to create division between Afghan veterans and Persian Gulf veterans, while doing nothing for either of them. That's the saddest part of this whole thing. It's doing nothing for either of them. It's fine to say, "Let's talk about the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans", but we know what the real intentions are based on the fact that the study doesn't even recognize the important point of wartime service and that designation, which is exactly what Persian Gulf veterans are asking for. It's not even a—

• (1205)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. There's a point of order.

Mr. Desilets, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Chair, I would like to challenge my Conservative Party colleague a bit about the fact that we have two witnesses here who took a plane yesterday and have to eat and sleep in Ottawa. That costs several thousand dollars. Since the Conservatives are so interested in cutting expenses, it would be a good opportunity to save money by hearing from these two witnesses.

I will close by saying that, if my Conservative colleague had not filibustered for so many meetings, it probably wouldn't have been necessary to ask us for five additional meetings this summer. That's all.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your comments, Mr. Desilets.

I understand, and I also want to personally thank the witnesses, because they agreed to come and testify today after a last-minute request from the committee.

However, according to the rules of procedure, Mr. Richards has the right to explain his motion. I'll turn it over to him again.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Yes, it wasn't a point of order.

[*English*]

To make it really clear, it's not the Conservatives who do not wish to see this motion pass. The Conservatives are the ones fighting to see exactly this happen. It's what I've been trying to do here today, even. Members of this committee, particularly the Liberal members and sometimes the NDP member, have tried to do everything they can to cover up for the Prime Minister. That is not what this committee is supposed to be for. The Conservative Party is the one party doing exactly what we're all supposed to be here to do, which is stand up for our veterans.

What I was speaking to was how the Liberal government, as it tends to do with everything, is trying to create division among Canadians. That is always what we see from the Prime Minister. Justin Trudeau is the master of creating division among Canadians. That's how he distracts from the terrible policies of his government and from the horrible effects they've had on our country and Canadians.

This is another example of that. It's an attempt to play Afghan veterans against Persian Gulf veterans without even addressing either of their issues. I spoke to how Afghanistan veterans want to see this monument built. They want to see recognition of the mission they served in. Persian Gulf veterans want to see recognition that what they fought in was a war. They want the designation of wartime service. It's been made quite clear to us, even in the name of this study, which doesn't acknowledge that that's what this is about, that Persian Gulf veterans immediately recognize they are being played and used. It's obvious to them, and we're standing up for them.

We heard from the minister previously at this committee. I asked her if the Persian Gulf War was in fact a war. Despite my several attempts to get an answer, she refused to answer—

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. We have point of order.

Mr. Sarai.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** The member seems to be talking about the Persian Gulf. If he wants, he can probably revert back to that. We can ask our witnesses questions on that. If he's referring to his motion, that has nothing to do with the Persian Gulf.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It does, in fact. Nice try, though.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** I'd like to figure out which one he's talking about.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I will note, Chair, that the study of wartime service is in the motion.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Please keep it quiet. We have interpreters working with us. Do not talk at the same time.

Mr. Richards, you have your motion. Please stick to it, because we still have witnesses with us.

Thank you for staying with us, Madame Meunier and Monsieur Tessier.

Mr. Richards, the floor is yours.

• (1210)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I would encourage the Liberal member to read the motion. The motion talks about one of the things we need to deal with, which is the study concerning wartime service designation. That is exactly what I'm speaking to. Persian Gulf veterans want to see their service designated as wartime service. They don't want to see lip service, which is what they're getting.

Knowing their penchant for trying to cover up for the Prime Minister's Office, I can understand why, when I spoke to the fact that the Liberal Minister of Veterans Affairs was refusing to answer questions about whether this was wartime service, they might want to cover for the minister as well. That's what they attempted to do. It was a poor attempt, but it was an attempt nonetheless. The bottom line is that the minister refused to answer that question.

Today, I asked the officials from Veterans Affairs about this. At least I got a clear answer today: No, they don't recognize it as wartime service. I appreciate that. There was at least a clear answer.

I appreciate the honesty. I don't agree with the answer, and I know that Persian Gulf veterans will feel disrespected by the answer, but at least it was an answer.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. I know the witnesses can't talk right now, but with the way you interpret or say what the witnesses said, I would tell you to be careful because they can't reply to what you're saying. Try to be exact about what Ms. Meunier said in her opening statement, please. Thank you.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Absolutely, Chair.

I don't believe that I in any way mis-characterized what was said. It was quite clearly a no. They don't think it's wartime service. That's what was said. It was quite clear and I'm expressing my appreciation for the clear answer. I appreciate that. It's not what Persian Gulf veterans want to hear and it's not what they deserve, but it's an answer.

All of those things show us that Persian Gulf veterans—and they see it themselves—are being used to cover for the Prime Minister. They're being used as pawns. Their service is being played off against the service of Afghan veterans, and we believe and know that all of these veterans deserve to be respected and appreciated. To see a motion come forward to study something without acknowledging the study on wartime service is dishonouring to veterans who served in the Persian Gulf. It's that simple.

We believe there needs to be a study concerning wartime service designation, and that's what the motion states very clearly. I'll mention again that there are two motions this study is supposed to be based on, and both of those motions—the one I put forward in February 2023 and the one Wilson Miao put forward in November 2023—indicate the needs for a study to be conducted on wartime service. Instead, what we got was a recognition of Persian Gulf veterans.

This is typical of this government. Everything is lip service. Everything is talking points and nothing is about action, doing something or addressing the concerns of Canadians and, in this case, veterans. What we're getting is talk about recognizing them. Persian Gulf veterans want it acknowledged that they served in a war. That's what they're asking for, and there's no doubt they are disappointed.

We could be addressing the real issue of wartime service and could be doing that this summer. The first thing we should be doing is passing the motion to get documents about the interference of the Prime Minister's Office regarding the national monument to the mission in Afghanistan. That's what this committee had agreed to do. We didn't agree to just discuss it, make all kinds of attempts to move in camera, avoid it and do all these other things. That wasn't what we agreed to. We agreed to discuss it. We agreed to deal with it and we didn't deal with it.

Nowhere other than in a setting like this under the government would we see something like that happen. If it were in a board meeting of a company or anything else, there would be a requirement to have a decision before moving on. It wouldn't just be that we talked a bit about Afghanistan veterans while we tried to avoid that as best we could. When I say "we", I'm certainly not talking about Conservative members of the committee, but members in the Liberal-NDP coalition. They tried everything they could to avoid the discussion, and when a little discussion happened, they just moved on. In no context other than under a Liberal government would you see a situation where just some discussion would be enough, where not addressing the issue or doing something about it would be considered enough.

What we need to do is deal with the scandal surrounding the national monument for the mission in Afghanistan, as my motion indicates. We could get the motion passed and, from there, get to the bottom of the situation. Hopefully we'd see the monument get built and get built quickly so that veterans of Afghanistan can feel like recognition was finally afforded to them. Then we could deal with the wartime service designation. That's the recognition the Persian Gulf veterans are seeking, not some lip service and not an attempt to use them as a way to create division among other veterans. That would be the way to honour them. We could honour the Afghan mission, the veterans who served there and the 158 who gave their lives in the mission, and we could honour the Persian Gulf veterans with a proper study of wartime service designation.

- (1215)

There's a host of other things we need to be dealing with, not least of which is the problem of homelessness among veterans. That speaks directly to the effects on our ability to retain and recruit members of the Canadian Armed Forces. They see that among the people who serve this country and have served this country—both cases—there is a growing number of homeless individuals. These are people who served this country and were willing to give their lives for this country, and they're homeless.

How do you think that is going to impact our ability to retain members of the Canadian Armed Forces? How do you think that is going to impact the willingness of new people to step forward to serve this country? We're seeing what it's doing. We have a recruitment crisis in the Canadian Armed Forces, and this speaks to one of the very direct reasons why that's the case. When members of the forces feel like they're not receiving the equipment and resources they need, that makes it very difficult for them to want to continue to serve. When someone looks at a potential future in the Canadian Armed Forces, they ask, "If that's how I'm going to be treated when I've served this country, why would I want to do that?"

A lot of Canadians still step forward because they're that proud of their country. They might not be that proud when they see the treatment of our veterans. They might not be that proud of their government. However, they're that proud of their country that they are still willing to step forward despite all of that. It speaks to the incredible character of the people who serve in the Canadian Armed Forces that despite all of that, some of them are still willing to step forward. However, imagine how much easier that decision would be if they could see those who serve this country treated properly. Boy, would that make a difference. It would make a huge

difference in the willingness to serve and our ability to put our best foot forward in the world.

With respect to some of the mistreatment I see, I've heard from a couple of veterans on that who recently shared their stories and have agreed to have them shared here in committee. One of them is Eddie Kamps. Eddie Kamps is a veteran of the war in Afghanistan. He voluntarily released from the forces while he was silently battling mental stress injuries and PTSD. Despite there being indications that he needed help while he was still serving in the armed forces, he was left to his own devices. Again, this speaks to the treatment we talk about. He was then released with little to no screening, and as a veteran he suffered for almost a decade with no support.

After his release, he received a formal diagnosis of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, which was tied to his service in Afghanistan. That was really clear. That was a formal diagnosis he received. Despite this, both DND and VAC will not retroactively change his release form from "voluntary" to "medical" when it clearly was a medical release. This is even after this type of change had been approved for others in the past.

Eddie has submitted 40 letters to DND and VAC requesting a review of this situation, and he's been ignored. This is a veteran who served our country in Afghanistan. He has mental stress injuries as a result of his service in Afghanistan, and he's pleading with his government for help. He's pleading with them. Again, he has written 40 letters to the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada asking for a review of his situation so he can get the help he needs, and he has been ignored.

- (1220)

When people hear stories like that, it would make anyone wonder why they would serve. There's a question I often ask veterans with children nearing the age where they can serve: Would you recommend to your children that they serve in the Canadian Armed Forces? Almost every time, the answer is, always with regret, "I would have to say no." It's because of things like this. Every single veteran, even if they haven't experienced these kinds of things, knows someone who has. That's the reason they express, regretfully, that they don't think they could recommend to their own children that they serve in the Canadian Armed Forces. These are the people who served this country, and that's how they feel. Then you wonder why we have a recruitment crisis.

I want to speak about Richard Brown. He is also a veteran of the war in Afghanistan, and he's been fighting for access to care. He has been fighting for timely coverage for his medical needs, which continues to fall unacceptably behind. When he was in need of mental health care, he was refused access to specialized care facilities and told to sit, as an outpatient, only to be sent home. He reached out to Liberal MPs for help, as they are the ones currently in government, but he couldn't get any of them to show any concern at all for him. No one would even open up a casework file to try to deal with what he needs.

He suffers from bruxism—excessive teeth grinding—from his PTSD. He is covered to see a dentist for this condition, but VAC would not provide an answer to whether his mouthguard would be covered. Richard left the dentist waiting for his payment, leaving him in an incredibly uncomfortable situation. When submitting other claims, Richard has constantly had VAC officials shift the goalposts on wait times, leaving him waiting months for simple answers.

These are the kinds of things we hear from veterans every day. I know there are a lot of good people at Veterans Affairs who want to help, but something isn't quite working there when you hear veterans with these kinds of stories, like wait times that go not into weeks or months but, in far too many cases, years. A lot of times, veterans are being asked to repeat the incidents that led to the conditions they have. Imagine how traumatizing it is for many of these veterans to repeat those stories over and over again. In many of these cases, they had friends who lost their lives in these incidents. They have to retell these stories over and over again just to try to get the help they need. When you see wait times of not just months but years, and when you see veterans having to repeat stories over and over again and having to fight, even though they have diagnoses, to get the help they need, you can understand why it would make anyone reluctant to serve.

• (1225)

It doesn't have to be that way. There's an easy way to fix this. Many of these instances are just about recognizing that a veteran has a condition related to their service. It seems like we run them through so many different bureaucratic hoops, so much different paperwork and so many procedures and processes instead of just saying, "You know what? You served our country, you have injuries that resulted from that service and we want to help." I'm sure the vast majority, if not all, of the people at Veterans Affairs actually want to help. I don't doubt that, but all these processes and procedures and all the paperwork, red tape and regulatory stuff—all the rest of it—prevent them from being able to do so.

Let's see if there is a way we can eliminate a whole bunch of that and make sure veterans have the help they need. That's what we need to be doing. That's the kind of thing this committee needs to be discussing.

How do we make that happen? What kinds of recommendations can we make to enable that and ensure that veterans get it? We just went through a groundbreaking, historic and incredibly important study on the experience of women veterans. It was long overdue. I think it shocked many of us in that it had never been done before. I can't remember the exact number, but this committee made a lot of very good recommendations. The concern I have, which I believe all my Conservative colleagues share, is that just like all the other reports we seem to produce at this committee, it will go on a shelf somewhere and gather dust. It won't get implemented and changes won't result.

I think about how difficult it was for many of the women who came to this committee—who served this country—to tell the incredibly personal and difficult stories of what they dealt with in the Canadian Armed Forces and what they've dealt with as veterans. It

took incredible amounts of courage for those women to come here and tell those stories.

It's one thing to create a report, have a press conference and do all of the things we did. It's another to take action. The concern I have is that this will be just like all the other reports I've seen in my time on this committee, and I've looked at many of them before. Look at how many of them actually get implemented. If we really wanted to honour the women who came here, told their stories and shared what I can only imagine was incredibly difficult to share, we would take action. The problem is that when we have these studies, we never see the Liberal government take action on them. We see it time and time again.

That is why we need to meet this summer. We need to dig to the bottom of some of these things and make concrete recommendations. Then, most importantly, what we need to see is the government take action.

• (1230)

**Mr. Bryan May:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards.

Mr. May, go ahead on your point of order.

**Mr. Bryan May:** Just for clarification, I think we adjourned the debate on this issue. He's talking about his previous motion and not the motion he has in front of us.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** No, Chair. I'm speaking directly to the motion at hand. I was just getting to the point of why that affects military recruitment, which is what we're talking about.

Those things and the ability to take action, actual action, are exactly what affect military recruitment. I thank the Liberal member for highlighting that his government is doing nothing to take action on the things the government is studying. That's what is having an impact on military recruitment.

I don't understand how they can sit here and listen to some of the stories we've heard from women over the last number of months about the traumatic experiences they've had and about the impacts that the policies of the Canadian Armed Forces, DND and Veterans Affairs have had on their service and their lives post-service.... How could anyone sit here and say they heard that, but think it's good enough that we did a report that will sit on a shelf and gather dust? How can anyone have heard what they heard here and feel like that's enough?

Action is required, and without action, it makes for a situation where those who have served this country feel like they're not being served by their government. They're not being served by their government, period. It's not that they feel that way. It's that they're not being served by the Liberal government. Then you wonder why those who have served this country, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, when asked whether they would recommend their own children to serve as they served, far too often say, understandably and regrettably—they express this regret themselves—that they really don't feel they could recommend that to their own children because of the way they see veterans being treated.

That extends to this committee, frankly. The majority of the members of this committee are culpable of that. They have brought studies forward that had reports and then have accepted that their own government did not take action on those things. I got into public service because I wanted to make a difference, because I wanted to see action, and we're not seeing that from this Liberal government. We see lip service and photo ops, but we don't see any action.

There were a lot of really good recommendations in the study we just did on the experience of women veterans. There have been incredibly good recommendations in a number of studies we've done,

as in the studies on homelessness. Another example is the study we did on the transition to civilian life, which we just completed. It was only a three-meeting study because—

• (1235)

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Richards. I have to interrupt. We have a vote.

[*Translation*]

First of all, I'd like to address the witnesses.

Once again, thank you for travelling and making the necessary arrangements to come and meet with us. It's important to us. I'd also like to thank you for your work.

[*English*]

Members of the committee, we can continue for 15 minutes or we can stop right now. Do I have unanimous consent to continue?

**Some hon. members:** No.

**The Chair:** We don't have unanimous consent.

Because of the time, the meeting is adjourned.

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