

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**Thursday, October 30, 2003**

**Committee Room 1**

**Organizational Meeting**

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## **VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Michel Samson (Chair)  
William Langille  
Cecil O'Donnell  
John Chataway  
Jerry Pye  
Gordon Gosse  
David Wilson (Sackville-Cobequid)  
Harold Theriault  
Stephen McNeil

### In Attendance:

Darlene Henry  
Legislative Committee Clerk



**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2003**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**9:00 A.M.**

CHAIR  
Michel Samson

THE CHAIR: Good morning. I would like to call the committee to order and welcome all of the members to the Veterans Affairs Committee. This is our first meeting since the last provincial election. I certainly want to congratulate all the members of the committee, certainly it's an honour to have been chosen to be the chairman of this important committee. I'm certainly aware of the history of the committee and the many achievements that have taken place in this province in regard to our veterans. While we all know that veterans are a federal issue, there is certainly a big role for the province to play and for us as MLAs on that issue.

I will just ask the members to introduce themselves and their ridings, just so Hansard will have a record of everyone who was present.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: As the first item to deal with - we're going to have a few things that we need to decide - I guess it is customary to choose a vice-chairman for the committee. I would now be interested in entertaining any motions. Mr. Chataway.

JOHN CHATAWAY: I nominate Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I will decline. I was chairman for four years, and I believe it should go to someone else.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Langille. Are there any other nominations?

CECIL O'DONNELL: I would nominate David Wilson.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson, you're prepared to serve? Are there any other nominations? Hearing none, I would congratulate David Wilson, the member for Sackville-Cobequid, as the Vice-Chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee.

Next on our agenda today - it's an organizational meeting - is to determine who we would like to see as witnesses before the committee. I've provided, on behalf of our caucus, a few names there. I am curious as to what comments either of the other caucuses have as to who they would like to see come in before the committee. Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: If I may, just for clarification for the new members here, we are the only Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs in Canada. None of the other provinces have a committee. We're here to serve the veterans. We don't have any clout, except letter writing and showing our support for them, as far as federal Veterans Affairs is concerned. However, we can do things provincially, and we've done them in the past. It's our sole purpose to serve the veterans. The Provincial Command of the Royal Canadian Legion, they represent the veterans in the province. I guess that's all I have to say, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Are there any other comments, from the NDP caucus? I understand it's customary, especially at this time of the year, that the local Royal Canadian Legion does come in and make some representations, following a national meeting where different concerns are discussed. I guess I'm wondering whether the committee would want to see the offer be made to the Legion to have them appear before us as our first witness. Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: If I may, I believe they contact us first, when they want to come in. Is that right?

DARLENE HENRY: Yes, after their Dominion Command Conference that they have every year, they usually contact the committee stating that they would like to hold a meeting with the committee. Then I contact the committee members, saying they have this date in mind, is that okay.

THE CHAIR: Yes, and I guess in this case we may want to take the lead and contact them following today's meeting and indicate to them that we did meet and that we would be pleased to have them here as our first initial witnesses of this committee during the session to discuss some of the issues. So is it agreed we will have the Royal Canadian Legion as our first witness?

It is agreed.

On the list that I provided, what I also suggest to the committee is I think it would be important that while we recognize it is a federal issue, we all know, as MLAs, that people often contact our office on federal issues, municipal issues, sometimes even international

issues. So there's no real definition as to the issues that we deal with specifically. I know for my own purpose, I think it would be very interesting if we could get the Department of Veterans Affairs, the regional office here in Nova Scotia, and ask if they could come in and maybe provide us with a binder or some information as to the programs and services that are available to not only veterans, but their families and their children, so that we would have a better understanding ourselves as to when we get approached by veterans, and even when the Legion will come in here, they will talk about, I'm sure, some programs and some issues which more than likely we may not be all exactly familiar with.

So what I would suggest is that after we have the Legion in, we make some representation to the Department of Veterans Affairs, asking if they could have representatives from the regional office in just to provide us with a briefing and answer any questions the members have. Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: I was just wondering if there's an organization out there for widows of veterans. Have any widows of the veterans ever appeared before this committee?

THE CHAIR: If I could address that, Mr. Gosse, that might fall under the third suggestion that the Liberal caucus has provided which is the Veterans Independence Program which is a program I would like to see the regional office of Veterans Affairs discuss more with us. It's the program that's available to veterans, I guess to make it as plain as can be, that offers them assistance with the lawn care, winter maintenance and, you know, some other . . .

GORDON GOSSE: Shovelling the driveway . . .

THE CHAIR: One of the concerns, and I know members might recall, there was a resolution passed in the House and I believe it was under the name of our Speaker, Murray Scott, which called upon the federal government to allow the Veterans Independence Program to continue following the passing of a veteran. What's happening right now is that widows of veterans, they have one year I believe after the passing of a veteran and then they're cut off following that. So the resolution was passed in the House unanimously and I think it's an issue that this committee certainly should be advocating to our federal colleagues of the interest in there. I know I have a local lady, Joyce Carter, who many of you may have seen some of the letters, many letters she has put in local papers and advocating to have this program continue and, you know, Mr. Gosse, you have indicated you have five in your riding and I'm sure almost all of us would probably have widows who fall under that.

So I don't know if we want to have that as a separate committee meeting, or if we want to first raise it, I guess, with the Department of Veterans Affairs when they do come in here and then decide at that point as to where we want to go with it but, as Mr. Langille said, we can do some lobbying from this committee and I think the fact that we are the only province that has a Committee on Veterans Affairs, I think it's something to be proud of in

that we can certainly be an advocate on behalf of the veterans and their families here in this province. Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: There are over 20,000 widows in the country right now who are falling under that program. So I think there is a movement in the federal Liberal caucus here to do something with this before the House adjourns in Ottawa, I'm not quite sure, I haven't heard anything lately.

THE CHAIR: It's certainly an issue that the federal Minister of Veterans Affairs is well aware of. I've seen a lot of correspondence that's gone to him and I believe you're correct there. So it may be timely to discuss that program with this committee and make some representations to our federal counterparts on that very issue. So if I have it clear, I think we're agreed to have the Royal Canadian Legion in first and then have the Department of Veterans Affairs and, based on that, look at the Veterans Independence Program and maybe any other issues that may arise out of that. Mr. Chataway.

[10:45 a.m.]

JOHN CHATAWAY: I think I certainly support seeing these people, that's for sure. Of course, the other thing is, from what I understand, in Afghanistan, 20 per cent of the people come from Nova Scotia, but this province doesn't have 20 per cent of all Canadians. I think this committee is very important. As well we should, with widows, et cetera, and veterans, and all that stuff. Also, of course, there's a great commitment to many people in Nova Scotia, to our armed services. We are a very important committee.

THE CHAIR: The other issue now is when we would like to have our next meeting. I would ask for suggestions from the committee as to when we would arrange that. Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: If I may, Mr. Chairman, I think I would suggest that we meet when the Provincial Command of the Royal Canadian Legion wants to meet with us, at their convenience. There's also another issue I would like to bring up, if I may. It was just brought to my attention this morning. The last five years - actually it was started by Gordon Balser who didn't want any publicity over it - we had a postcard thanking a veteran, which was sent out. We always had a press conference and so on. What it was, the Grade 6 students - they were printed by Veterans Affairs Canada and sent to us. The Nova Scotia Teachers Union was the sponsor for the last five years. I guess that's a dead issue this year, for whatever reason.

It was a great initiative. I know the veterans really appreciated getting these postcards from Grade 6 students. The whole thing is to remember the veterans and to remember why we're here as a democracy, and thanking a veteran. I understand that issue is dead this year, and I don't think it can be resurrected, as I understand.

THE CHAIR: Am I correct in understanding that you are saying there will be no

postcards this year at all?

WILLIAM LANGILLE: That's my understanding.

THE CHAIR: We may want to look into the reasons for that. I'm aware of a few schools in my riding that had taken advantage of it, and I've seen some of the postcards that were sent out. I fully agree, it was a great idea. I'm not quite sure why that may have been ended. I know the Department of Education had a role in that also.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: The Nova Scotia Teachers Union.

THE CHAIR: The Teachers Union. I think we will certainly undertake to find out for the members why that program has ended, and see what steps can be taken by us as a committee to possibly bring that program back. I'm not sure if we will have time this year, considering that Remembrance Day is just around the corner. I think it should be something that we look at.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: The reason we brought in Grade 11 compulsory history was for the veterans to teach them about the wars. That's why it's compulsory. For five years, it seems a shame that we are now in a position where we're letting this die. I don't know if it can be resurrected. What do you think, Darlene?

DARLENE HENRY: I will certainly look into it for you . . .

THE CHAIR: I think we will look into it and see what the cost involved in it was and see what was required. I think it's clear, around the table here, that everyone would agree that it's something we should look into, and possibly see about getting it back on track. Any ideas committee members have or that your other colleagues in caucus have, by all means, bring them forward. We will see what we can do as a committee to help implement them. As I said, there have been a lot of gains made here in the province, because of the initiatives coming from this committee. I think there are certainly other opportunities out there for us to be able to advocate for some new initiatives. Any ideas that any of you might have, by all means, feel free to raise them with myself and we will bring them forward to the committee.

Other than that, I guess what we will do is give notice to the Legion that we are prepared to meet with them once they've had their meeting. Also, we will give notice to Veterans Affairs, the regional office, that we would be interested in getting a briefing from them, possibly a binder with information, and it might even be possible that they would send that to us prior to their appearance, so that members would actually have a chance to review the information and ask questions based on what they receive. We will undertake to give notice to them, and we will inform the members as soon as we receive that.

Overall, does the committee want to give any indication now as to how often the

committee should meet, or should we wait until we hear word from the Legion and proceed at that point?

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Usually we meet about twice a year.

THE CHAIR: Twice a year?

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Unless there's something urgent.

THE CHAIR: I think we will certainly look at getting the Legion in first, and then we will decide from that point forward, how quickly we want to meet with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Other than that, is there any other comment? No. I would entertain a motion to adjourn.

GORDON GOSSE: So moved.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse has moved the motion.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:52 a.m.]