

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**Thursday, February 13, 2014**

**Red Chamber**

**Organizational/Agenda-Setting Meeting**

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## **VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Pam Eyking (Chair)  
Ben Jessome (Vice-Chair)  
Patricia Arab  
Stephen Gough  
Keith Irving  
Hon. Pat Dunn  
Larry Harrison  
Hon. Dave Wilson  
Gordon Gosse

[Patricia Arab was replaced by Joachim Stroink.]  
[Stephen Gough was replaced by Gordon Wilson.]  
[Larry Harrison was replaced by Alfie MacLeod.]  
[Hon. Pat Dunn was replaced by Eddie Orrell.]

In Attendance:

Darlene Henry  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Legislative Counsel



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2014**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**9:00 A.M.**

CHAIR  
Pam Eyking

VICE-CHAIR  
Ben Jessome

THE CHAIR: Okay, we're going to call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I am Pam Eyking, MLA for Sydney-Victoria. (Interruption) Victoria-The Lakes - I've been saying that one for 14 years. Thank you, Eddie.

Today's meeting is an organizational meeting. The committee will be setting its agenda of witnesses to appear before it.

I'll now ask the members to introduce themselves. We'll start with Mr. Jessome.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs is established for the purpose of considering matters pertaining to the veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Legion. The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs meets on the second Thursday of the month, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

The committee will call witnesses to appear before it to provide presentations on topics that fall within the committee's mandate. Members will have an opportunity to ask questions of the witnesses, once their presentation is concluded. Members wanting to ask a question will signify to the chairman, who will maintain a list of those who wish to speak and the Chair will direct the questioning. Questions should be directed through the Chair. The Chair will recognize members and witnesses prior to their speaking.

The red tally light on your microphone will be lit when you are speaking, to record your comments. The Chair will reserve time at the end of the meeting to deal with any committee business.

We will now introduce the letter from the Commissionaires. We received this correspondence and the Commissionaires of Nova Scotia would like to appear before the committee. Are there any questions? No? We all agree then.

We will now move on to the selection of witnesses. On that list the Halifax & Region Military Family Resource Centre and Major Tim Dunne. Any questions? We are all in agreement. Okay, we'll move on.

We're now going to introduce a motion for an emergency meeting on Veterans Affairs. Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I would like to introduce a motion to encourage this committee to consider having an emergency meeting in Sydney, Nova Scotia on February 17<sup>th</sup>. As we are all aware, the federal government has closed Veterans Affairs offices across this country, leaving veterans vulnerable - especially those veterans who have been injured mentally or physically.

I realize that the recent federal budget offers additional support for the veterans, however, the fact remains that offices are being closed and these offices are relied upon by our veterans. I believe it is incumbent upon this committee to hear the concerns from those who represent the brave men and women who fought for our country, and also to hear from those who have made these decisions. Therefore, I would like to move that veteran Ron Clarke and federal Minister of Veterans Affairs, Julian Fantino appear before this committee on February 17<sup>th</sup> in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on that motion?

Mr. Wilson.

HON. DAVID WILSON: We appreciate this motion. We were going to bring a similar one forward. I might request just to add maybe the Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs, Mary Chaput, just to cover all our bases, if that is okay with the mover to maybe just add deputy minister of the office.

THE CHAIR: Is that agreed?

KEITH IRVING: Yes, I think that would be very helpful.

THE CHAIR: Is everyone in agreement? That is an amendment to the motion. Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I am agreeing with this motion. I think it is a good thing to do. I do think, quite frankly, that the Liberal caucus has been playing a little bit of politics. There was a press release issued yesterday talking about how nothing has been done by the Progressive Conservative Party of Nova Scotia, and is calling for this meeting next week, which is great - we'll be there - but it is interesting that you as chairman have been in the position of Chair for 77 days and haven't thought that this issue was important enough to call a special meeting of this committee to get those other special meetings that you want started. I find that quite unbelievable considering how you say that doing nothing is not an option, yet as Chair for the last 77 days, you've done just that, nothing.

You talk about wanting to get this done and I think it has to be. There have been opportunities in the past for people and MLAs to go to Ottawa to speak to the minister and to speak about this issue and the member for Northside-Westmount and myself have done that. We've actually gone to Ottawa and sat down and had a discussion with the minister. Could I have a show of hands of the other members of the Veterans Affairs Committee who took that initiative to do that? Oh, I see there aren't any.

Then to put this out yesterday - and the member who put it out is not here today - I take it as an insult to myself and to my caucus to say that we're not concerned about the veterans. As you probably know, Madam Chairman, and certainly I know from other members who are sitting around the table, that at different times as this has been moving on, there have been parades of concern in Sydney, which were attended by our caucus. I've seen you there, Madam Chairman, and I've seen the honourable member for Sydney-Whitney Pier there and others, the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal was there.

It is important that we have this meeting, no question. It is important that we talk. I think we all realize that there is some political gaming going on here. To say that you're going to invite the federal minister on a Thursday to show up in Sydney on a Monday, seems - I think we should be asking for that meeting to be whenever we can make it happen and as soon as we can make it happen.

I'll just give you an example of why I think that might be a little bit unrealistic; I called on Tuesday of this week to see if I could meet with two of the provincial Cabinet Ministers who are here in Halifax, who are roaming around Halifax. I am here in Halifax and they don't have time to get me into their schedule, so it's just a little bit ironic that we think we're going to be able to get this done. Maybe we should be going to Ottawa and asking for a meeting right there and talk to him.

If this is so important, I still question, Madam Chairman, why it took you so long to get this committee to sit to talk about this issue. We will be voting in favour of the motion of going to Sydney and hearing from Mr. Clarke who, by the way, the member for Northside-Westmount and I have already met with on several occasions. We will be doing everything we can to try and help the veterans because without the veterans, none of us would be sitting around this table, none of us would have the rights and the freedoms and privileges that we have.

It is about the veterans and I think we have to remember that. It's not about the jobs, not about the offices, it's about the veterans. To play this silly game of politics with this press release, I feel bad that had to take place because there is a joint effort by all of us who are concerned about the veterans - not just the people on this committee, but every single member of the House of Assembly, I am sure, is concerned about what is going on with the veterans and how we can help them. Anyway, Madam Chairman, that's what I had to say.

THE CHAIR: Okay, good, point taken. We are all concerned about the veterans and that's why we're pushing to have this emergency meeting in Cape Breton before the regular scheduled meeting. Any other comments or discussion?

Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: You spoke a lot there but I think the point that this is about the veterans is all you really need to say. This is something that we're all in agreement on, we want to move forward on this. We want to try and hear what all the concerns are and that's the bottom line, so anything else was just extra. Let's move forward, let's do this.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Jessome. Anyone else? Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you again, Madam Chairman. No question that it is about the veterans. Let's move forward. Nobody has answered the question why we never called this committee together earlier to deal with this issue. If it has been such a priority of your government and your caucus, why was this committee not called earlier to deal with it?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Madam Chairman, I think it's a fair statement but I think it's a fair statement for all of us. There's nine of us here who could have talked to each other and called a meeting so I think it's incumbent on all of us to be conscious that we should be using this committee, when needed.

This is our first meeting for some of us. We're learning the process but I do recognize that any of us, including the members opposite here, could have contacted the chairman and suggested let's sit down and work on this.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Irving. Any more discussion? Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you again, Madam Chairman. Just to your point, the member for Sydney-Whitney Pier actually did put a request out. I think we can call on him to mention the date but he did put out a request that there be an earlier meeting and that this committee meet with the federal minister. He had our full support when he did that.

Again, it is about the veterans. If this press release had not come out yesterday playing the silly game, we wouldn't be having this discussion. Your caucus apparently decided that you wanted to play silly games rather than really deal with the real issue.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. MacLeod. Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: Thank you. To the honourable member, yes, I did feel at that time when I sent the press release out that the committee did need to be called back to order and shortly afterward the government did send out a press release about three hours later saying we were going to have this meeting so that's why we are here today. We're here to do something for the veterans who did something for us so it's time that we stand up for them.

I think it's a good thing that we're going to Cape Breton. If the minister and the minister's staff can't make it, Mr. Clarke, who led the charge to go to Ottawa on behalf of the veterans would be a capable witness, and possibly Brenda LeBlanc would have been the other lady there who was the head, working 27 years for Veterans Affairs Canada, who is no longer employed, either one of those people would be sufficient. I know it's short notice to do that, but I think it's important that we do that and do bring it there.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Gosse. Any more discussion? Okay, we are going to discuss the next meeting date. No? Sorry. Can we have a seconder for the original motion? No seconder? Legal counsel says no seconders, yes. So I will call the question of the next meeting date and it was stated here that it would be . . .

GORDIE GOSSE: I wanted to make a motion also.

THE CHAIR: Okay.

GORDIE GOSSE: So that motion's all finished, voted and passed?

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: I, too, would like to make a motion to the committee. I would like to make a motion that the committee support appointing a provincial veterans advocate for the Province of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on that motion? Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I just would like to speak in favour of the idea of having someone who is working full time. In the past we did have some people who worked for the office, military liaison, and it's important. Again, if we're serious about what we're doing here we should be looking at a position like this for at least the short term to make sure that this does not fall behind and it's on the front burner. We'll be voting in favour of this motion.

THE CHAIR: Any more discussion? Mr. Wilson.

GORDON WILSON: I think it's admirable, the motion and the suggestion, the idea, but I do believe we should call a recess to discuss this. This is something that could have maybe a little more thought put into exactly what it's all about before we go further with a vote.

THE CHAIR: Any more discussion on that? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: My colleague to the right has asked for a recess. Could we have a recess, please?

THE CHAIR: Yes, we'll take a short recess to discuss this.

[9:24 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[9:35 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I call this meeting back to order. Could Mr. Gosse please re-introduce the motion?



GORDIE GOSSE: I move that the committee support appointing a provincial veterans advocate for the Province of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: We're going to discuss that motion of supporting a provincial veterans advocate in Nova Scotia. Is there any discussion?

Mr. Wilson.

GORDON WILSON: We appreciate the thought about the veterans and certainly we do recognize that the veterans need more support and advocacy. That obviously does fall with the federal government and also in saying that, we can't support it mainly because we don't feel that it is appropriate for this committee to be just appointing more staff at this time. It falls under the Premier's Office with Military Relations and unfortunately we will not be supporting this motion at this time.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

HON. DAVID WILSON: I thank the member for his comment. We understand that this committee has no financial resources. What we're asking for is that the committee support the government on moving forward on an initiative, so we understand that, but I think that over the last few weeks and months that a lot has been said around the issue of the closure of the Veterans Affairs office in Cape Breton and we recognize as a Party that a lot of changes have happened on the federal level.

As the former Minister of Health and Wellness, a lot of the services have been downloaded to the province and when we're dealing with veterans who come back from wherever they have been posted, whatever conflict they've been involved in, they have some serious issues. We know that there is a high level of mental illness, but they need support for what they have gone through and we feel it's appropriate that the province needs to step up. It's not that we should - we need to. This committee should support the idea. We're not saying that we would appoint somebody. All we're asking is that the committee support the idea of having a veterans advocate for the province.

I understand the position the members opposite are in, but I think it is important for this committee, that is the only committee in the country - the only province in the country to have a Veterans Affairs Committee is Nova Scotia. We should be proud of that. This is one small way that this committee could hopefully make some difference in the lives of veterans. I'm disappointed that the government caucus won't support this, but we will continue to move forward.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: I think the recommendation is that this goes back to Military Relations or the military affairs part of the government to see if this is possible to come up

with. The press release that came out yesterday said “doing nothing is not an option”. Here we are trying to do something and it is being shot down at the committee level before it even gets to the level of government where there may be a possibility of looking into hiring somebody, even part time, to get through this difficult time for the veterans. I’m disappointed that it’s not going to go through and we will continue to support it as best we can as well.

THE CHAIR: Is there any more discussion? Mr. Wilson.

GORDON WILSON: If I take this right, I believe the original motion was to have this committee support the creation of this position. Again, I don’t think at this point in time - not only do we not have enough information on this, I don’t think that’s our role to do that. It would be pertinent, if you don’t mind, that we would take this to the Premier for advice and have them look at it and bring it back to another meeting later, if that would work.

Again, I say the suggestion, the idea, is admirable. I think certainly there is more support needed there. We all agree with that. I don’t think at this point in time we all know what that should look like - whether it’s a provincial advocacy. I think it’s a little premature for us to think that way, but again, the idea isn’t a bad one. We wouldn’t mind, if you don’t mind, taking that on advisement, taking it to the Premier, do some work, look into seeing what opportunities are there if there are any and then come back to the committee for discussion.

THE CHAIR: Any more discussion? Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: So does that mean we’ll have an answer on Monday at the special committee? We don’t have a lot of time and doing nothing is not an option, how long does it take to get to see - I’m sure you can get to see the Premier in a short period of time, much quicker than we can get to see some of the ministers.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

GORDON WILSON: In all fairness, I think, to the importance of this, I don’t think it’s a decision that you make on a weekend. I think it’s something that should have some thought, seriously, it should have some thought.

ALFIE MACLEOD: We expect the federal minister to be here when we can’t make a decision that quick.

THE CHAIR: Any more discussion? Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: I would still like to see the motion go forward for a vote today and if the committee members want to bring this forward at a later date on this issue, I’m

grateful to have that happen. But I made a motion and I'd like to see the vote on the motion today.

THE CHAIR: We will now vote on the motion. Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

I agree with Mr. Wilson, I think really because of the seriousness of it and to serve the vets the best that we can, we need to put a lot more thought into it. So it's Nay.

The motion is defeated.

So we are going to go back to the original motion and talk about a time for the emergency meeting in Cape Breton. The time that was brought forward to me was 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Monday. Is there any discussion on that? They are working on the venue for that and it's in Sydney, Cape Breton. So 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Also, I need to ask the committee if the federal witnesses can't appear do we still go ahead with Mr. Clarke? Okay, agreed.

We will talk about the next meeting date. The proposal for that was March 27<sup>th</sup>. Is everyone in agreement for that? The clerk will decide on one of three witnesses and an agenda-setting meeting at that time.

March 13<sup>th</sup> falls during March Break, so we're moving the date to March 27<sup>th</sup>. Is there any other business? Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: I'd just say, we're scheduled for Monday, at Monday's meeting are we going to have who is going to be presenting on the agenda on the 27<sup>th</sup>? Have we decided who is going to do that or are we going to have another meeting for selection of witnesses?

THE CHAIR: It will be one of the three witnesses already chosen.

GORDIE GOSSE: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Is there any more discussion? Mr. Orrell.

MR. ORRELL: So the Liberal caucus witness is going into the emergency meeting, does that mean one of the other two witnesses will go in that meeting on the 27<sup>th</sup> from the PC or NDP caucus?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

EDDIE ORRELL: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: I now call the meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:45 a.m.]