

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Tuesday, February 21, 2023

COMMITTEE ROOM

Agenda-Setting

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Chris Palmer (Chair)

Danielle Barkhouse (Vice Chair)

Larry Harrison

Tom Taggart

Nolan Young

Hon. Ben Jessome

Hon. Tony Ince

Gary Burrill

Lisa Lachance

In Attendance:

Tamer Nusseibeh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Karen Kinley
Legislative Counsel



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2023

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

2:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Chris Palmer

VICE CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: I call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs to order. I'm Chris Palmer, the MLA for Kings West and Chair of this committee. Today we're not hearing from presenters. We will be holding an agenda-setting meeting - and we all are aware of that.

Please turn off your phones at this time and put them on silent. In case of emergency, just a reminder that we would use the Granville Street exit and walk up to the Grand Parade.

For the record, I'll now ask all committee members to introduce themselves by stating their name and their constituency. We'll begin with MLA Barkhouse.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. For the purpose of Hansard, I'd like to recognize the presence of Legislative Counsel Karen Kinley to my right, and Legislative Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh on my left.

Before we move into our agenda setting, we will just address some committee business. We'll do that first today, and then we'll move into our agenda-setting to conclude our meeting this afternoon.

Just a note that our meeting for March 21st may or may not happen - obviously with the House being called back, it probably won't happen. That's just a note to remember.

The request for a financial barrier reduction to access peer support services has been sent to the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada, the honourable Lawrence MacAulay, as was directed by our committee.

The request for recognition of the Fort Massey monuments, the time limit concerning the application, and an extension for the respective date, have been sent to the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada, the honourable Lawrence MacAulay, as per the direction of this committee.

The request for the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services to connect with the Last Post Fund has been sent to Deputy Minister Joanne Munro. The department has confirmed receipt of that letter, as was directed by this committee.

Were there any questions about any of those pieces of business? Seeing none, I was reminded by Legislative Counsel that from our last meeting there is still a motion on the table put forward by MLA Jessome. Maybe just quickly for the record here this afternoon, we will ask MLA Jessome to repeat his motion and then we'll go from there.

MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, committee members, for your indulgence. As we see from today's correspondence, last meeting we collaborated and worked together and asked some questions that hopefully we'll get some answers to. I appreciate the spirit that we were able to achieve last committee meeting.

In that same spirit, I hope that we can continue to collaborate. I know we've been over it a number of times at this point. I will read it into the record another time:

“Whereas the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs considers matters related to veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Legion; and

Whereas matters pertaining to the Canadian Armed Forces predominantly fall under the jurisdiction of the national government; and

Whereas on June 14, 2022, the Minister Responsible for Military Relations and the Nova Scotia Government, the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services met with provincial and

territorial delegates in Ottawa to ratify the Terms of Reference for the Seamless Canada initiative; and

Whereas the objective of Seamless Canada is to strengthen federal, provincial, and territorial collaboration to improve the relocation experience of CAF members by sharing information and best practices among jurisdictions and stakeholders; and

Whereas Seamless Canada has focused on matters pertaining to military families including:

- improved health care access for CAF families;
- securing essential worker status for CAF members;
- a review of education barriers for students relocating between jurisdictions; and
- leveraged employment and training support services for military spouses through the Military Spouse Employment Initiative and the Military Spousal Employment Network;

Therefore, I move that the Nova Scotia Legislature's Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs expand its mandate to include matters related to presently serving military families, as was ratified on June 14, 2022, by the minister responsible for Military Relations and the Nova Scotia Government."

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Jessome. I'll allow for a brief discussion on this. MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Although this is absolutely a worthwhile issue, the agreement was just signed in June. We think we should give it some time to see how it functions and coordinates throughout the country before we make this change to our committee. That's not a no - just not right now. It's too new for us to start changing mandates.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I think I just have a couple of comments on this. I actually think it's perfectly legitimate to look at the mandates of legislative committees to make sure that they're functioning well and doing what we need them to do. However, I think for that to be done, I'd be much more comfortable with a little bit of study around what exists in other provinces and territories, what they cover, how they function so that we are actually building - we're not just making this up as we go along.

I guess I would disagree, however, with MLA Barkhouse around the question of whether its too soon because of the Seamless Canada initiative. Realistically, we wouldn't

be coming back to this question until it's been a year, and I think that's plenty of time to start thinking about how we're actually going to work within that new mandate.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Just for the record, I didn't expect to land this plane right out of the gate, and I do appreciate that committee members do want some additional time to contemplate. I will say, as a member of this committee, having served on the committee for more than nine years now, I genuinely believe that it's time for some expansion of scope.

As indicated in my motion, the jurisdiction of military affairs certainly - and almost completely - falls under the mandate of the national government. Over my time on this committee, we've had the opportunity to hear from witnesses, ask questions, learn about their organizations, and often offer our services and our MLAs' offices to help spread the word about what their respective organizations are trying to accomplish. I believe that a move to incorporate military families would give this committee more teeth - more ability to actually serve Nova Scotians directly.

I believe that there has been an indication from our Minister of Military Relations through signing the terms of reference for Seamless Canada to play an active role in how we best serve our military families. I will add that while it certainly is new for a number of people, I personally attended two meetings of the Seamless Canada initiative during my time on the government side of the House. While it continues to grow, it is something that has been active for a number of years at this point. I think that's important to state for the record as well.

I want to thank all committee members for their consideration.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Jessome. Seeing no further discussion, we'll put it to a vote.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

We will now move on to the agenda-setting part of our meeting this afternoon. You can see that our clerk has left us a little overview here of our topics. We will begin with the PC caucus. MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I move that the first topic for the PC caucus be peer support, community facilities, with representatives from the following facilities as witnesses: Rally Point Retreat, Landing Strong, RAS Retreat, and the Atlantic Centre for Trauma.

THE CHAIR: It's just been requested that you just expand on the RAS Retreat, Replenish Around Shipmates, for our clerk to know who to get a hold of. MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Replenish Around Shipmates, is that what you're asking? It's a Navy-oriented veterans retreat place.

THE CHAIR: There is a motion on the floor. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We'll move on to the next topic. MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I move that the second topic for the PC caucus be True Patriot Love veterans' virtual hub, veteran volunteerism, with True Patriot Love representatives as witnesses.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on that motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The third topic for the PC caucus. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I move that the third topic for the PC caucus be the War Amps, with Mr. Tim Verney, Nova Scotia region representative, as witness.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We'll now move on to the Liberal topics. MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Our first topic for consideration - in response to today's motion being defeated - is an expanded mandate of the committee review. We haven't requested specific witnesses, but in the spirit of collaboration, I would invite committee members to comment on individuals who may be able to perhaps support us in that endeavour.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the floor. Is there discussion? MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I have a question. In my notes, it speaks directly to Seamless Canada, but in this motion that you just made, it's just basically opening our mandate up to see if we wanted to change it. Is that correct?

[2:15 p.m.]

BEN JESSOME: I think that the motion is intended to be broad to give us some latitude to discuss what might be appropriate. I personally think that it's important for us to maintain the element of the committee mandate that pertains to Veterans Affairs. I believe that military families and some of the topics of discussion that the Seamless Canada initiative is covering would be a positive addition to our committee mandate - not necessarily tied specifically to Seamless Canada, but things like spousal employment, health care, family relocation, what have you.

If there are other suggestions on how to expand and improve the ability of this committee, I would be open to those suggestions. I believe that an expanded committee mandate - the language in the motion gives us the flexibility to have that conversation and come up with a collaborative approach to moving forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: As I said earlier, having a look at the mandate of the committee, seeing what other jurisdictions do broadly in terms of veterans affairs, but it would also be timely to have a look at how other jurisdictions are responding to the Seamless Canada initiative.

I guess in terms of resources, can the committee clerk be part of doing some of that research or working with the Legislative Library in terms of doing that jurisdictional scan? I don't know if that falls within the purview of the clerk's role, but it would be great to have. If I think of federal parliamentary committees, the clerk would go away and compile some information and bring it in to us, and then we would have a chance to review it and have a discussion about it.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion in response to MLA Lachance's comments by anybody?

MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just that we have a lot of good topics here. We have a lot of good witnesses here. The committee doesn't meet as frequently as some of the other committees. I'd like to stick to some of the topics and have witnesses come in to the committee.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome, I'll let you wrap it up.

BEN JESSOME: That would be our primary topic objective. Hearing some of the comments from committee members opposite, I believe there to be an openness to have this discussion. If not during one of our committee meetings, when should we expect to have that conversation? I'd like to hear from other committee members about when that day would come.

If not, we've elected to take this and sacrifice - if you want to call it that - one of our opportunities to engage witnesses. That's a decision that we're choosing to make. I believe that it gives us at least one opportunity to have a preliminary conversation and see where it goes.

My question - if not at a regular committee meeting, then do we need an additional committee meeting to have that discussion?

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everybody, for your comments. There is a motion for a topic: expanded mandate of the committee review on the floor. I guess we'll vote on this motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: The second item for a topic would be the impacts of the health care crisis at Camp Hill. We'd be looking at, as witnesses, the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, and Veterans' Services and Geriatrics - the director.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Is there any discussion on the motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: To round out our topics, I'd just like to add a quote from Tuesday, November 16, 2021, Hansard:

MLA Tom Taggart: "I don't believe I have any business whatsoever in determining which - maybe I'm wet behind the ears, you know what I mean? I'm not sure I have any business deciding what topics either the Official Opposition or Third Party bring forward. I may be

wrong, but I think that's the decision that those caucuses make. I'm not going to vote on them, or I don't plan on it."

We're here today. We just watched one topic get voted down by the government party after we just had a pretty fair conversation about the mandate being expanded of the committee. That was shut down contrary to what the honourable member stated previously at this very committee.

Therefore, the Liberal caucus selects for their second topic Medical Coverage for Veterans. We'd like to see representatives from Blue Cross Atlantic and Veterans Affairs Canada appear before the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Jessome. I would ask that you table what you just read. That would be great. Thank you.

The motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We will move on to MLA Lachance for the NDP topics.

LISA LACHANCE: Our first recommended topic is looking at the question of the Use and Availability of Veterans Affairs Long-Term Care Beds in Nova Scotia. A number of our members, and perhaps some of the other caucuses, have received letters from Legions expressing concern about the long-term care beds that are allocated to veterans being seen as superfluous or available to be filled and being filled. There's a concern that the understanding that we have is not being followed. I can read one of the letters, if that's helpful.

"I'm writing on behalf of all members of the Royal Canadian Legion Somme Branch No. 31 to express grave concern for the decision of the Government of Nova Scotia to convert Veterans Affairs designated spaces to help create more bed capacity and support patient flow in the area of long-term care in this province. The ministry of Seniors and Long-term Care has informed the Royal Canadian Legion that these Veterans Affairs Canada contracted spaces are considered by the Province to be chronically vacant. This statement and intended undertaking leads us to believe that the Government of Nova Scotia is unaware of the longstanding inequity around limiting criteria of eligibility for Veterans Affairs contract beds in this country. The Royal Canadian Legion has long advocated the eligibility be expanded to allow all Canadian Armed Forces veterans, regardless of when

or where they served, access to designated Veterans Affairs Canada contract beds. Yours truly, Richard McCarthy.”

We also received one from another Legion as well expressing similar concerns. I think, particularly, it would be really important for us to have a look at this issue. Also, I would encourage it be done in a timely fashion because I think this is a real-time issue that we’re hearing about in our communities.

THE CHAIR: I would ask that you table the email that you sent - probably forward it to the clerk, and then he can distribute it to the committee from there. Thank you.

There is a motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That would fulfill the NDP topics.

That concludes our agenda-setting. MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: We have our deck stacked for committee business and witnesses, topics for consideration, and Q&A. I appreciate the nature of all of the topics that we’ve been fortunate to select and choose.

I would like to make a motion. In hearing that the government did not intend to approve the changes to reflect the mandate of Seamless Canada at this committee, and hearing that they were subsequently not interested in having a discussion about improving the mandate of this committee at a regularly scheduled committee meeting, I move that we as a committee have a special meeting to have a conversation about changing, improving the mandate of this Veterans Affairs Committee.

THE CHAIR: Did you just put a motion forward?

BEN JESSOME: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I didn’t hear it as a motion, but if you could please succinctly state your motion so the committee can hear it.

BEN JESSOME: The motion would be to have an additional committee meeting to consider an expanded mandate for the Veterans Affairs Committee to improve the way that we do business here.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on the motion? MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I'm curious how it's any different this year than it has been for the last 8, 10, 12 years. How are these committees operating differently now than they were before that would cause you to suddenly suggest that they're not operating properly?

THE CHAIR: I'll allow MLA Jessome to respond to that, and then MLA Barkhouse, you have a comment after that.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you to the honourable member for that question. My intent would not be to suggest that the active business that has been conducted by this committee during the last several years, and perhaps preceding it, was done incorrectly or inaccurately. What I'm suggesting - and I frankly did hear supportive comments from members opposite - is that there should be an opportunity to have that conversation about how we improve business. This committee has always been one that has been very non-partisan. We've been able to conduct business in such a way that has always been genuine and thoughtful of how we best serve the veterans in our communities.

I've mentioned that I've sat on this committee for nine years, and I'll say it again - it's important to get updates from witnesses, but we have seen similar witnesses come and go from this committee. Their messages are important, and it's important for new members to be able to ask questions of witnesses who have appeared before the committee previously.

I don't know the precise time that this committee was started, but I'm saying I've been on this committee for more than nine years now. I believe in the interest of making improvements, being progressive, being intentional about modernizing committees and doing our best to serve veterans or people related to military families, that it's fair to ask that question. It could result in a meaningful change for military families.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I think back to when we did our last agenda-setting meeting, and I asked for Seamless Canada to come back to our committee. There was a bit of a kerfuffle with that, saying, we just had them here. I think back to that.

My feeling while sitting here - it's not that we're against it, but I'm wondering if the clerk can do a scan maybe, and come back to committee for us to review before approving the motion. Again, we're not against it. We just want to ensure that the mandate falls within the provincial jurisdiction, because as you know, most of this is federal. It's just dipping your toes in, if you will. If that could be done, that would be great. Then we would know what we're working with.

THE CHAIR: That's similar to what I think MLA Lachance said, and I think it's good reinforcement of that suggestion. I've just been consulting with the clerk. I think that's the approach I'm going to suggest, with your permission, that the clerk do a scan of

other jurisdictions and look at practices there. That was your particular suggestion as well, MLA Lachance. MLA Barkhouse, thank you for that.

[2:30 p.m.]

I know there's a motion on the floor. We'll deal with that, but that is something I was going to direct. MLA Lachance, did you have another comment? No. MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I believe that's a reasonable first step. What I would ask in response to that suggestion is: When should the committee anticipate the completion of that jurisdictional scan or review of possible committee mandates? Does it require that we have a special meeting to cover what the clerk finds? How will the information be disseminated to committee members?

THE CHAIR: I think this can be dealt with in committee business at a future meeting that we would have. I can consult with the clerk to find out how long a jurisdictional scan and that type of information-gathering can take. It's not going to be next week or anything like that obviously. Personally, I don't think there would be a need for a special meeting. I think it could be taken care of in committee business and get a little report form our clerk at such time that would be completed and go from there. MLA Barkhouse, did you have a comment?

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I just think we need to remember that the House sits on March 21st. That means we might not actually have our next meeting, but I'm sure that gives us all time to ponder what the scan says for the following meeting.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: The experience in trying to deal with the motion that I put forward at today's committee being consolidated into committee business following the presentation of witnesses made it challenging to deal with that motion. In fact, it took three meetings to get that motion across the line - four meetings if you count today. I know that, while the intention is there to hear from that, I don't believe that tagging it into the finite time that we have to deal with committee business after a presenter would do justice in having a proper discussion about the expanded scope of this committee.

THE CHAIR: If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I say this with all due respect. It's ironic that your statement before this was that we get through everything quite easily and we're all very together in this committee and everything is great. Although I do see your frustration on four meetings to talk about Seamless Canada, it's usually not like that. You're the one on the committee for nine years, and you actually had stated that this is a pretty harmonious committee. Our first session, for example, when we come out of the House sitting, if it's

not a contentious topic, we should have enough time. We can always set the amount of time when the questions start and end and what-not.

I do not feel that this should be a special meeting, because I do trust and believe that we can get through it, because the information will be on paper for us about what each province does. I just don't feel that this is as contentious as maybe your last statement said. I do get your frustration over Seamless Canada, but I feel that we can get through this.

THE CHAIR: I think we have a fairly good compromise going forward about how we're going to address this topic. We've had a good discussion on it, but I think I will call the vote.

BEN JESSOME: You think, or you will?

THE CHAIR: I think I will call the vote. We had a good discussion on this. We do have a motion we have to tend to on this, and then we have another method of moving forward.

On the motion that's tabled: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'd like to make a motion.

THE CHAIR: You'd like to make a motion? MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'd like to make a motion that the committee - I guess I would say the clerk - do a scan for MLAs to review other provinces and what their mandates are, and if it does or does not fall within our provincial jurisdiction.

I could clean that up if you're looking off to the side. (Laughs)

THE CHAIR: There is another motion on the table. MLA Jessome, comments on that?

BEN JESSOME: I guess I figured that we would have an opportunity to maybe do a little brainstorming session and figure out where people's heads were at and what might be valuable. I'm sure committee members recognize that this is the only veterans affairs committee in the nation. I think that the information we seek should reflect our own province and the different arms of our own provincial government that could benefit from our ability to ask some questions related to military families or veterans affairs.

THE CHAIR: We'll address this motion. Are there any other comments?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Is there any other business? That concludes our meeting for today. Our March 21st meeting is cancelled, so our next meeting - probably May - will be the impact on military families amidst a cost of living crisis. That will be our topic - pending confirmation of our witnesses, of course, but that will be our next meeting.

Other than that, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 2:38 p.m.]