

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Tuesday, February 20, 2024

COMMITTEE ROOM

Agenda-Setting

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Chris Palmer (Chair)
Danielle Barkhouse (Vice Chair)
Larry Harrison
Tom Taggart
Hon. Steve Craig
Hon. Ben Jessome
Hon. Tony Ince
Gary Burrill
Kendra Coombes

[Larry Harrison was replaced by John White.]

In Attendance:

Tamer Nusseibeh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

2:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Chris Palmer

Vice Chair
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I'm Chris Palmer, MLA for Kings West and the Chair of the committee.

Today, we'll not be hearing from presenters on any topic, but we'll be instead holding an agenda-setting meeting - we'll be selecting our topics for the next round. At this time, I'd like to ask everybody to please put your phones on silent. In the case of an emergency, we will use the Granville Street exit and walk up to Grand Parade.

I'll ask the committee now to introduce themselves and their constituency. We'll begin with MLA Barkhouse.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For all those watching out there, I'd also like to note the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb to my left, and Legislative Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh to my right.

We will begin with our agenda-setting portion of our meeting. I'll begin with the PC caucus to put forward their topics.

MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I move that the first topic for the PC caucus be an Update on Veterans Trade Programs, with representatives from the Nova Scotia Community College, Helmets to Hardhats, Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency, and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

I move that the second topic for the PC caucus be Veteran Entrepreneurship, with representatives from Prince's Trust Canada and alumni from their Veteran & Military apprenticeship program; and

I move that the third topic for the PC caucus be an Update on Veterans Affairs Canada Program and Supports in Nova Scotia, with - and please apologize if I get this wrong - Moussa Dramé, Area Director of Nova Scotia as the witness.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Barkhouse. You put all of your topics into one motion. There is a motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The PCs have selected their topics. We'll move on to our Liberal caucus.

MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: I move that we put on the agenda for topic: The Desmond Fatality Inquiry Final Report and Recommendations. I request that we could have members from the Department of Justice: Deputy Minister Candace Thomas and other representatives from the Department of Justice; also, representatives from the office of Military Relations, please.

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

MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: I wonder if the Liberal Party would be open to including in the list of witnesses, representatives from the Department of Health and Wellness and the Nova Scotia Health Authority, both of which are implicated in the implications of the inquiry.

TONY INCE: I would be agreeable to that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: I would not be agreeable to those two additions. I would be, though, agreeable to adding Office of Addictions and Mental Health, which I think would be more appropriate in this particular case when it comes to the particular topic at hand.

THE CHAIR: There's an original motion on the table. MLA Burrill, I recognized you first. Do you want to make an amendment to the original motion?

GARY BURRILL: Certainly. I move that the motion be expanded to include representatives from the Department of Health and Wellness and the Nova Scotia Health Authority.

THE CHAIR: We will vote on the amended motion. (Interruption) Sorry, on the amendment to the motion. Thank you.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

MLA Craig, would you like to put an amendment forward to the original motion?

STEVE CRAIG: Yes. I would like to move that we add to the list of witnesses for this particular motion the Office of Addictions and Mental Health.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion around that? None? We'll vote.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We'll now vote on the amended motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: For our second topic for another time, I'd like to bring back the discussion of updating the committee's mandate. At a previous agenda-setting meeting, we had discussed bringing it back at a later date. There has been some discussion on whether that was the intention at the time, but I'm happy to table the correspondence from Hansard if necessary. I do believe that we did have consensus at the last agenda-setting meeting that this would be discussed at a future meeting, and I would like to submit it as a topic for the Liberal caucus in this round of agenda-setting.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table from MLA Jessome. Is there any discussion around that?

MLA Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: We've talked about this - the honourable member across - for many years. Expanding the mission - the mandate - I think is not relevant at this point. We've canvassed other legislative bodies and they've come back basically in the negative - that they don't have the mandates within their area, that it is a federal area.

I think it is good work that this committee does under the current mandate. I would like to not entertain having a topic added like this.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I'll just take this opportunity to read previous comments from the Conservative Party into the record.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome, I just want to make a correction. It's the Progressive Conservative Party.

BEN JESSOME: Excuse me.

At our previous meeting, MLA Barkhouse said, "Although this is absolutely a worthwhile issue, the agreement was just signed in June" - referring to the terms of reference for Seamless Canada. "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 discussion further goes on - referencing comments made by MLA 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 say that because I will refer to a later comment from MLA Barkhouse: "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."

The Chair goes on to further state, “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.”

I go on - this is referencing a comment I made - “I believe that’s a reasonable first step. What I would ask in response is: When should the committee anticipate the completion of that jurisdictional scan or review of possible committee mandates?” Then the Chair: “I think this can be dealt with in committee business at a future meeting that we would have.”

All that to say - I’m kind of jumping around a couple of different things, but I’m happy to table this for clarification. It is in Hansard. We’ve done a bit of a jurisdictional scan, which I think was agreed upon by everybody at the time as a reasonable first step. I don’t think that there’s any reason why this is not a thoughtful thing to do after any period of time. We can always try to do better; we can always try to improve the way we function as a committee.

As agreed upon by and through the terms of reference with respect to Seamless Canada, there is a role for provincial government to play with respect to the ongoing support and oversight around issues related to military families.

I really believe that this is an opportunity for us to do some good work here, expand what this committee has the capability to do and the issues that we cover. We can continue down the road of saying that things don’t fall under the provincial government, but I don’t believe that’s in the best interest of the Nova Scotians we have the ability to serve on this committee. I’d just like to remind everyone for the record of the previous transcript, and the fact that we were all in agreement at one point in time on this.

THE CHAIR: I’m not sure if you’re suggesting that we were all in favour of changing the mandate or in favour of the conversation. I just wanted to ask you again if you could table to document with the clerk.

MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I’ll start by saying that I understand the member’s passion for active-duty serving members. I absolutely agree with it, but that’s a federal government issue. As much as it’s a worthy cause, it’s a federal government issue, and it’s clear to me that they could do a better job, given the trouble they’re having recruiting - but I won’t get into that. Some of the things that have been brought up in this committee, they should probably listen to.

I do recall a Veterans Affairs Committee meeting not too long ago that was totally dominated by the conversation about active serving members and housing and the ability to

feed themselves, and that sort of thing. I made my feelings known at that time with respect to who was responsible, and I didn't believe it belonged at this table. Like I say, it's a worthy cause. It does make sense for this committee to be meeting on a regular basis about an issue. It does not make any sense to meet on a regular basis about an issue that we have no control over.

These are my personal thoughts, so I don't want them associated in any way with anyone else. Veterans are very important to me. I think history has shown that we as a society, as governments, as folks in positions of responsibility didn't do a great job looking after veterans when they came home from World War I and World War II. We all know a lot of veterans who have come home from places of conflict and different situations that we've sent them into that probably none of us could ever even imagine. Those - what I refer to, and this is the wrong wording - newer veterans, we recognize how they've been struggling and where they need help.

I personally am not interested and will not support a change in the mandate that takes this committee's focus away from veterans and moves it to active-duty serving members. I need to reiterate I have the greatest respect for them, but they have a government that is completely responsible for them. It's my view that this committee should remain as the Veterans Affairs Committee.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: I'm struggling with expanding the scope of this committee - I truly am - where we don't have any authority, where we are the only province that does this. We're either very progressive, which I think we are, or we're fine where we are here doing what we do.

I wonder, Chair, if the member could just expand a little bit more on the reasoning behind this? Yes, I know that the member has a passion for this and has talked about this quite a bit since the first time he was on this committee - being a dependant and being from a military town - it's really important that we do serve those who serve. There's no question about that. From an organizational point of view, I'm trying to wrap my head around it, and I need to understand why we would expand this further if we don't have any authority to actually make a difference. If we're going to be a sounding board so people can talk, that's one thing. We're a legislative committee. That's where I'm really having difficulty in understanding what it is we're trying to achieve here.

We can certainly open it up to dependants. We can open it up to RCMP members. We can open it up to so many things. At what point do we lose laser focus? I don't know what that is; I don't know the answer. Maybe the member has some of that information, too, which would help me in deciding which way I'm ultimately going to go on this.

[2:15 p.m.]

To simply expand the mandate of the committee without a specific goal in mind, I think, is wrong. We should always examine what we've done in the past, what we're doing now with the ability to improve. Improvement doesn't always mean expanding the scope. It could also mean doing things, of what we're doing now, better. That's where I'm struggling here.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Craig. If I interpret what you're saying, you're asking MLA Jessome - your topic title is Updating the Committee Mandate. I think what MLA Craig is maybe asking for is something more specific around that, MLA Craig?

STEVE CRAIG: Yes, Chair, that is it, especially in light of the fact that we have gone out to other legislative bodies in Canada, provincial and territorial, and it is a federal mandate. The other groups have the veterans covered off in other committees and committee structures, and do not bring it together in a specific focal point.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome, maybe you have Updating the Committee Mandate. In response to MLA Craig, I'll ask you to be more specific about your topic, exactly what your topic might be there.

MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for the interest and the question. When I initially brought this forward, it was a focus on the work that Seamless Canada does specifically - having to do with military families and spouses. There was discussion, I believe it was - I'll reference my notes that are over there - in February of last year. We seemed to have some discussion that it wasn't a change that we were willing to make on the fly. With that specific directive, we've had a chance to look at some other jurisdictions.

I think that the point of applying it to this agenda-setting process is so that we can have a fulsome conversation around what the future of the committee could look like. The reason for leaving it open ended was because of that feedback that we received from the NDP, from the PC caucus, in that February meeting. There was agreement to bring it forward at a later date from the Chair, from the member opposite. I'm just trying to get it back onto the agenda so that we can have perhaps a more robust conversation around what it could look like, just a little bit of feedback.

The provincial government has a preferential hiring policy for retired military personnel. The provincial government has made changes to things like credentialing for physicians in the recent past. I think that it's not unreasonable to suggest that there is a distinction between the serving active members and their families. I believe that we would all agree that they serve with their spouse or their military member of the family. I think that based on that acknowledgement of the issues that do fall under the roof of the

provincial government, as agreed upon through the Seamless Canada terms of reference, there is a lane for us as a provincial government to take some ownership for these issues that fall clearly under the roof of the provincial government.

I can happily bring back another, more targeted motion at a later date to try to tighten up the ask, but it was open-ended based on the feedback that we had received at a previous meeting - the work that we have undertaken to look at what other jurisdictions do - and have a more fulsome conversation about what next steps might look like. Perhaps it doesn't change down the road, but at least it gives us an opportunity to revisit this.

I've said on many occasions, I've been on this committee for a little while. I think there's an opportunity here. I'll humbly admit that it wasn't something that I had looked at too significantly prior to the last couple of years, but Seamless Canada has been a group that's come on more recently. The work that they do is, frankly, work that does interest me and I think interests the people we serve. The Province does absolutely have a role to play in serving military families and spouses. I'll just leave that for feedback.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Jessome. I have MLA Ince and then MLA Taggart.

TONY INCE: If I may, I want to thank my colleagues across the floor first because nobody said no. What I'm hearing clearly - and you can correct me if I've gotten something wrong - is feeling that we have no jurisdiction over certain aspects of my colleague's ask, you don't think it's pertinent or it's really relevant to bring to this table, because - as my colleague, MLA Craig, had mentioned - we don't want to be a sounding board.

I believe my colleague, MLA Jessome, has been trying to express that he'd like to discuss it a bit further. Like MLA Craig had mentioned, he'd like a little bit more direction, advice, or clarity on what it is that my colleague is asking. It seems that that future discussion we were talking about, we're having today, which is great. I would stand by my colleague to say that I would love the opportunity for us to have a further discussion. I would take the liberty to say that we can go back, dig a little deeper to bring you something on the table so that it's a little more clear for you as to what it is we are wishing to discuss.

I thank you all for your passions as well, your connections with the military service, and those who have served on all levels - MLA Taggart and everyone else.

I say all that to say I stand with my colleague. I would love the opportunity for us - because we are the only committee in the country - to have a deeper discussion on this issue. I would support my colleague, and we could go back and bring you something that's a little bit more clear, if that is what would help us bring this to the table.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I first want to say that comments by different members of this committee do not represent a commitment by this committee. That's not just what's inferred in this discussion, but it's what was said in a previous discussion, that we had made a commitment. I'm not aware of that commitment.

I guess I won't say a lot here, just that as sure as I'm sitting here, if we include active-duty members - who, again, I absolutely support; I have a lot of friends who are active-duty. I also have a lot of friends who are veterans who are struggling, but just as sure as I'm sitting here, if we include active-duty in this committee, veterans will be the losers. I'm not prepared to support that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: We did commit. We've been a year and a half now kicking this can back and forth to looking at it. We got back, I think, two or three letters - I'm not too sure how many letters we got back - from other Provinces in regard to this. I have trouble piecing some of this together. You had stated that the Province has preferences to hiring retired military personnel. I can't quite connect the dots and whatnot to it.

How can I put this? Well, we actively engage in the way that works best to address issues that are important to military members and their families with the federal government and the Canadian Armed Forces. We do this. I think we do this well. I won't speak for the others, but I do believe we do this well. I believe that when we have witnesses here, we have a wholesome conversation. We've talked about families before. We have talked about - well, it was never a topic, but it was brought up in situations from my memory.

I don't know. I guess we're just - what's the word I'm looking for? I guess we just keep going back and forth on this, and I think today we're probably here where we stand.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I only reference, for example, the hiring policy as an acknowledgement that there is a role to play for the provincial government. I have been specific about the issues as they pertain to military families.

The government minister of the day has signed on to the Seamless Canada terms of reference as an acknowledgement that there is a role to play for the provincial government with respect to issues that are facing our military members and their families.

We're not talking about making a decision today on what the committee's mandate could look like. What I'm asking for is to add it to our committee's agenda for a later date so that all parties can make suggestions on how this committee's agenda can improve.

[2:30 p.m.]

We have discussed it on a number of occasions, simply because there was an appetite to bring it forward at a later date, but we have not set that later date. I'm not saying that is a firm commitment on changing things from the government. As a matter of fact, it is an opportunity to discuss it at a later date. If we do that, then all parties have an opportunity to put forward suggestions on what improvements can be made. I don't frankly agree that it takes away from the issues of veterans. I think that any veteran would agree that serving the interests of their families and active service people would be a reasonable and acceptable step for the change of this committee.

I don't want to go too far down the road. If the government is not prepared to accept it as a topic - at this point, I won't belabour it - but again, it's specific to a discussion that we had some agreement on at the previous agenda setting meeting where we were going to undertake a jurisdictional scan to see what other provinces do. We were going to have a subsequent conversation, which I think we can all prepare to do at a later date, as per the process that we're following here today, and adding it to the agenda for a later date.

THE CHAIR: I know a few comments have been made about the jurisdictional scan - the responses you received. We still have to hear from three. We have now heard from eight total, I think. (Interruption) Four more, I'm sorry. We've heard from eight. I just wanted to add that into the conversation.

MLA Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you, colleagues, for this conversation. It's important that we, I think, consider and look at all aspects of this. I note in the motion that there are no witnesses. I would be comfortable in the proponent of this if we vote yes, that the member would bring back well-reasoned, well-thought-out, well-prepared, well-presented reasons why the existing mandate, and why changes and what those might be - similar to what the honourable member would have been responsible for in a report and recommendation, not simply: We have this letter and the rest of it. Well-thought-out, well-documented for discussion - rather than having many members come in and prepare for this particular topic.

It is important. Again, I'm struggling to understand, yet I'm willing to listen to well-reasoned, well-presented arguments as to what it is now, and how that fits in the scope of other federal, provincial, and territorial governments, and the roles and responsibilities associated with it. When it comes down to a mandate, I think it's very important that we are spot-on, and we know our reason for being.

Some might argue that there's no reason for a committee like this - a legislative committee. Others argue it is. I'm not taking one side or the other at this point.

Certainly, I've always believed in process improvements and relooking at things. To that, if the member and the Liberal Party would stand behind that and make sure that declaration is done, and it's presented in such a way that we're not left wondering if they've covered off all the factors - they know what it is we do now, they know why it is we do it now, and where we are going with any particular changes or no changes: change in focus, changes in emphasis, whatever that might be.

To put a final point on this conversation until the next time - under probably the next Legislature - I'd be prepared to support that if that's what the member and the Liberal caucus would do.

THE CHAIR: I think we're getting close here. Did you have your hand up, MLA Ince? MLA Ince, I'll give the floor to you.

TONY INCE: It's going to be very quick because my colleague across the floor, MLA Craig, has basically taken the wind out of my sails on what I was about to say. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: It's quite a day, isn't it? (Laughter) MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I'm happy to do that, and I would suggest putting it on the agenda for a future date. That's the intent behind this. I would invite all members and all parties to reflect on the scope of this committee, and how we all might see it improved or changed. If we're comfortable with where it is today, then status quo is just showing up to the meeting. If we place it on our agenda for a future date, that gives our caucus the ability to have that conversation to present that case - the NDP and the PC Party as well.

If I'm hearing - if it's not an official agenda item, then when are we going to have the conversation again? What's the format for that? I think we're almost taking away from another topic to get this at committee for further discussion. I think that another committee meeting as part of - put it on the floor for our agenda item. We can vote on that, and if it's not an acceptable next agenda item, we have a follow-up motion to make, but I think that's the preferred mechanism. I'm happy to present it at a later date in terms of the rationale for changing the mandate, and would invite others to do the same.

THE CHAIR: MLA White. I want to give everybody their opportunity.

JOHN WHITE: As a substituting member here, I'm open ears. I'm listening. I'll be honest with you - what I've heard so far, if I was to cast a vote now, I would vote no. I would vote no for this reason. I see us as a provincial committee, and I see us using time to work on things that we can have an impact on. When I look at your three motions that you have here, I see one with no witnesses. I'm questioning what the committee is actually doing.

I realize what you're trying to say. I get it. I understand you're trying to develop more thought. It's certainly a place that's worthy of shining a light in the corner and seeing what's in there - let's look at this. But I see it as taking away a topic that does have witnesses, that could be functional. I think MLA Taggart touched on that - about taking away the opportunity that exists with this committee.

I put my hand up because I think - I'm taking my lead from this side. How they vote is what I'm going to vote. I want you to know that because I'm not a sitting committee member, but I didn't hear an argument enough to make me in my own head, sitting here today say, "Yes, that's changed." I think there's a solution in what MLA Craig just offered - to come back with more details of what it is you want to look at.

I put my hand up to ask this: Isn't it possible for you to hold off on your second choice right now and do that during committee business in your next meeting? It gives you a month instead of kicking it down the road to another agenda-setting meeting, which is six months down the road. Can you not come back next month with a better argument to help us understand exactly why you want to do this, and put your second topic in at that meeting? I know we've done it at other committees.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Again, based on feedback that we had discussed at a previous agenda-setting meeting, we needed to do more and come back at a later date to discuss it. Frankly, based on the level of conversation that I think is positive that we've had today, I don't believe that without embedding this as a part of our agenda for a future date, that the last 15 minutes or less of the committee provides enough opportunity for us to have the conversation that I feel it warrants. I think we are going in circles a bit here. Is it okay to bring it back as part of this committee's agenda? It's our call to put our . . .

THE CHAIR: Yes, I think there is a call to put the question. We're voting on MLA Jessome's topic motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: We put forward for the committee's consideration the issue that spouses of veterans who marry after the age of 60 are not entitled under the present regime to the automatic survivor pensions that are available to the spouses of veterans who have married prior to the age of 60. This is an issue of great concern in the veteran community. It's been much a part of the discourse of veterans' associations. It has been canvassed by

the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. It has a big impact in Nova Scotia. I move that we bring this topic before the Veterans Affairs Committee.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table. Is there any discussion on MLA Burrill's motion? Seeing none.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That concludes our agenda setting for the next round of topics for our committee. We'll move on to committee business. Just a discussion around some correspondence from Deputy Minister Melissa MacKinnon regarding a request for information from our December 19th meeting regarding veteran identifiers in departmental programs. We would have all received that.

Is there any discussion on that correspondence? MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Just note that this is excellent information, I thought. I think we all stand to benefit from seeing that there are actually, in fact, identifiers from different departments. It is public record. Perhaps this is something that we should potentially follow up with. I guess I can do that personally, but we had a couple of previous committee presenters talk about the value of data and their effort to try to collect more data. Perhaps there is a benefit to sharing this interdepartmental scan of what data they might be able to receive with an ask to the Province.

Bottom line, this is helpful. I appreciate the committee entertaining this and the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs for putting this together.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Jessome. No further discussion on that? We will move on to further responses that we have received by the clerk in our sending out requests to other jurisdictions around their Veterans Affairs, or do they have any committees. We received some more, as we discussed earlier. There are still four more to receive. Is there any discussion around the responses received?

Seeing none, is there any other business?

Seeing none, our next meeting will be the Use and Availability of Veterans Affairs Canada Long-term Care Beds in Nova Scotia. Our witnesses will be from Camp Hill, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, Royal Canadian Legion Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, Veterans Affairs Canada.

Other than that, I guess we'll adjourn the meeting. Meeting adjourned. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 2:44 p.m.]