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Chair

Mr. Gordon Brown

Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gordon Brown (Leeds—Grenville, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. I call to order meeting number 41 of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. Pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, November 5, 2014, today we will be dealing with Bill C-597, an act to amend the Holidays Act, regarding Remembrance Day.

For the first hour, we have with us three individuals. Wilma McNeill is with us here in the meeting room. By video conference we have, both as individuals, Donald Stewart, president of the veterans council at the Sunnybrook veterans centre, and Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Stevenson, retired.

Each of our three witnesses will have eight minutes.

We will start with Wilma McNeill. You have the floor for eight minutes.

Mrs. Wilma McNeill (As an Individual): My name is Wilma McNeill, and I have fought a battle for 25 years to get the politicians in Ontario and Quebec to unite and honour our veterans for the sacrifice they made so we can live in a free democracy. Shouldn't the whole of Canada be in unison when it comes to honouring our veterans?

The Parliament of Canada must take the first step and show that it doesn't consider Remembrance Day a lesser holiday.

This bill does not create a day off. Remembrance Day is already a statutory holiday, by virtue of its being in the Holidays Act, but is considered a lesser day, by the wording. Raising its status to that of Canada Day and Victoria Day does not create a day off. In fact, Victoria Day has the same status as that of Canada Day, yet there are four provinces that do not recognize that as a day off either.

I personally would love to see it as a day off, but that's not why we're here today. I have fought for the day off for over 25 years, ever since the Ontario government decided in 1989 that the liquor stores would remain open on November 11.

NDP MPP Howard Hampton said in a statement that the decision to have the liquor stores open was one of callous disrespect for the 60,000 Canadians who died in the 1914-18 war and the 42,000 who died in the Second World War. Conservative MP Ken James was also a big supporter. He signed the first petition, along with John Stewart, president of the Air Force Association. Interim Ontario PC leader, Andy Brandt, after receiving and presenting the first batch of nearly 2,000 signatures said, "Shut the stores for the day."

After Bob Rae's NDP came to power on October 9, 1991, I received a letter from him saying the liquor stores would be closed on November 11. Of course, I was delighted and called the press. Unfortunately, his assistant called the liquor control office in Toronto and they informed him that the stores would be closed, but this was not the case. They had the wrong information. The premier did not even see my letter or the answer. It was signed by auto-pen. Following this, the headline in the local *Gazette* came out, "Elated Now Deflated".

Then I moved my battle so that all the stores would be closed.

NDP MPPs Bob Huget and Ellen MacKinnon also supported my efforts.

Conservative MPP David Boushy introduced his private member's bill and on December 15, 1995, it passed second reading. Not one member spoke against it. I presented 5,000 cards to Mr. Boushy. I remember being in the legislature when it passed. Heartbreakingly, before Mike Harris called the election he told MPP Boushy not to bring it to third reading or he would defeat it. It died on the order paper.

MP Ronald MacDonald introduced two private members' bills regarding November 11. The first one the Conservatives defeated. Prime Minister Chrétien said the Conservatives were petty for doing so. Despite that comment, the Liberals defeated the second bill. No mention this time about Liberal pettiness, likely because they held a majority.

On October 25, 1994, I mailed 10,000 cards to Liberal Lawrence MacAulay, the then veterans affairs minister. He said he received 4,650. Liberal MP Roger Gallaway introduced Motion No. 298 in the House of Commons in May 2001, with 160 students from Maple Grove and their teacher Joe Bishara in attendance. They were hoping to meet with Prime Minister Chrétien, but that didn't happen. MP Gallaway did, however, meet with them.

Conservative MP Inky Mark introduced his private member's bill on September 26, 2006, seconded by our own Sarnia-Lambton MP Pat Davidson. I presented over 2,000 signatures to MP Pat in her office to be presented to Prime Minister Harper.

PC MPP Joe Tascona introduced his private member's bill on April 12, 2007. I again gathered more signatures, but no luck. PC MPP Bob Bailey took up the battle when he was elected and Shirley Kelly, president of the Air Force Association presented him with 5,000 cards on November 17, 2010. PC MPP Lisa MacLeod introduced her private member's bill on November 4, 2010, to make Remembrance Day a statutory holiday in Ontario. I gave her my support by making a statement for her campaign.

I have written to all incoming premiers and prime ministers across Canada. Positive comments overall have been received from them.

This has been a long journey for me. As you will note from my review, there are highs and some lows. I have remained consistent in my determination because it is such an important issue to be resolved. Family Day was adopted, but still remains very ambiguous. I agree with interim PC leader Jim Wilson that this day could be eliminated and Remembrance Day reinstated without any extra expense for anyone.

• (1535)

But we're not here to discuss a day off. That's truly up to the Ontario legislature.

Today we're here to support another PMB, which has been introduced by NDP MP Dan Harris. The bill is not about giving another day off, but it is instead to give the day the respect it deserves. It's an insult to veterans, young and old, that, by law, we still consider the one day a year that we honour them to be of lesser importance than Canada Day or Victoria Day. Without their sacrifice, Canada likely would have crumbled, and these other holidays would likely have disappeared.

I ask you to support the bill and finally give the veterans their just due and respect that they deserve. Last fall, Canadians united to honour Sergeant Vincent and Corporal Cirillo after their tragic deaths. I ask for all of Canada to unite once again. It is time to make this right, lest we forget.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. McNeill.

We will now go by video conference to Toronto, where we will hear, for up to eight minutes, from Donald Stewart.

You have the floor.

Mr. Donald Stewart (President, Veterans and Community Residents Council, Sunnybrook Veterans Centre, As an Individual): My name is Don Stewart, and for those of you who don't know me, I'm the president of the Veterans and Community Residents Council at Sunnybrook Veterans Centre. On this very important day regarding Armistice Day, I am pleased to say a few words on behalf of the almost 500 veterans living at Sunnybrook.

Originally from British Columbia, I moved here to join a family. Sunnybrook's beautiful campus and veterans facility has been my home for the past six years. There is tremendous history at Sunnybrook, and I can think of no better place to be than the wonderful care, rich programming, and quality of life provided by Sunnybrook and Veterans Affairs Canada.

Along with currently serving as council president, I have been an active member of the Royal Canadian Legion for almost 70 years. It's hard to believe how quickly the years have passed. In 1945, after the war, immediately on my return to Canada I joined the Legion. Shortly before Armistice Day, I was at a ceremony at a local school with 800 children taking part in a remembrance program in the gymnasium. It moved me to see our youth engaged and so intent on learning the battles and our war history. It is my hope that the youth will carry on forever the message and pledge of the phrase, "Lest we forget". This phrase is a promise to Canada's war veterans, as well as a pledge to learn and to never forget the lessons learned in two world wars and in the Korean War.

The majority of veterans I have spoken with at Sunnybrook are in favour of making Armistice Day a statutory holiday. By making Armistice Day a statutory holiday, this will underscore the importance of remembering all of the sacrifices that have been made for our country.

Thank you kindly.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now hear from Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Stevenson.

You have the floor for up to eight minutes.

LCol Michael Stevenson (Retired, As an Individual): Thank you, sir.

Bonjour. Good afternoon to you all.

My interest in the armed forces goes back a long way and has given me a good deal of respect for November 11 and Remembrance Day.

After 20 years in the British Army starting with the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, I immigrated to Canada and served 27 years in the Canadian militia with the Queen's York Rangers in Toronto. As chief instructor of the military staff school I prepared majors for their promotion to lieutenant-colonel.

During this time I became very familiar and friendly with World War I, World War II, and Korean War veterans. Some World War I veterans shared our Christmas dinners and were guests in our house. When veterans had outlived their family and peer group, sometimes I would even arrange their funerals. As a member of the Fort York Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion and a 20-year volunteer three times a week with the Sunnybrook veterans hospital, I am still in close touch with veterans.

Only last week a 94-year-old veteran from the Queen's Own Rifles told me of the exploits on D-Day when they landed on Juno Beach. In a matter of minutes nearly 50 of his comrades were killed when they took their first steps against Nazi Germany in the cause of freedom and democracy. My friend survived the war and still considers it a miracle.

There are many stories like this, of loyal Canadians dedicated to their regiments and their country. These warriors were the heroes who made a tremendous contribution to Canada as the Vimy Foundation today is trying to tell us.

Very sadly, little history is taught in our schools any more, so most schoolchildren, especially new immigrants, have very limited knowledge about the service and heroism of our veterans on land, sea, and air during past wars, and the cause of justice and freedom. These exploits are the reason for a minute's silence on November 11.

Leading up to this silence is a great Royal Canadian Legion publicity effort. By selling poppies to a determined nation we will remember them. This silence is very dramatic and emotional and is best at the cenotaph at Ottawa with our country's leaders present and setting a fine example. Large numbers of veterans attend and our armed forces are well represented to add distinction to this memorable event.

These ceremonies take place across Canada in all the major cities and towns. For those too old to attend these events or separated by distance, there is always the opportunity to see the events at their best on TV, hopefully without advertising. In Toronto a very moving ceremony takes place not only at the City Hall cenotaph but also at Sunnybrook after elaborate planning for a spectacular event. There is even a flypast of vintage World War II aircraft. At the University of Toronto hundred of students attend the solemn ceremony at Soldiers' Tower, a truly impressive gathering of young people.

In the business world, which I survived for nearly 30 years, the event depends largely on their culture and leadership. Older companies that lost employees in the wars tend to make a better effort. Some businesses broadcast the last post and reveille combined with a minute's silence. Some quote *In Flanders Fields*, which is always impressive.

Some businessmen do very little, which is sad. Some employers take time off, perhaps as much as an hour to attend the local cenotaph ceremony. In my view the business world could do better with a little thought and imagination. With so many new immigrants in the workforce this would be a bonding experience to an important part of Canadian culture. The post office and banks take the day off, and it would be of interest to do a survey to find out what their employees actually do at 11 a.m. on November 11.

• (1545)

We have mentioned the lack of history in the school curriculum, and certain schools and education authorities could do a much better job of telling students what it is all about and planning a meaningful school ceremony with full attendance. Some schools do better than others, but my very recent inquiries indicate that private schools do a far better job for their students. Very often the teaching would regard any form of remembrance services as a glorification of war and do as little as possible.

Some churches, despite sacrifices made by former members of their congregations, give very little time or respect for November 11 or have services held on a Sunday nearest this date. However, some churches make a special effort, and a sermon, hymns, organ music, and the minute of silence all add together to make an inspiring service in memory of all those who died. Grace Church on-the-Hill in Toronto deserves a special mention.

When these events take place, all share a sense of purpose, communion, and participation in a solemn ritual at the 11th hour, lasting little time; and then we all disperse.

If it were a statutory holiday on November 11, would things be better? There is seldom a problem taking an hour out of a normal day, or even taking five minutes out of the workplace to quietly remember. But if there were a statutory holiday all those office workers, schoolchildren, and students might well be staying at home instead—perhaps even in bed. There's also the fear that a nationally mandated holiday would provide opportunities for ad hoc causes and sales events and other non-memorial activities.

Consideration should also be given to the economic effect of another holiday, particularly with small businesses which are struggling to survive as it is.

Of the 50-some friends whom I consulted over the last few days, there was a general feeling that there would be more to lose than to gain with Bill C-597.

The present system is not perfect and could and should be improved, especially in the public school system and by leaders in the public, academic, and business areas, by showing more leadership and inspiration. Most of us could wear a poppy—in fact, all of us could. Also, perhaps a national lottery could be organized by Veterans Affairs to support those who served and are in need, or whose families are in need.

My friends mostly share the views of Captain John Thompson, a former Queen's York Rangers officer and a director of the Royal Canadian Military Institute. He said that if there is to be legislation affecting November 11, he'd prefer it was to mandate something along the lines that all Canadians have the right to take an hour off from work to attend a nearby cenotaph ceremony or to give five minutes at work and reflect.

So might it be.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to the questions, and we will start with Mr. Young for seven minutes.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses today for taking the trouble. We much appreciate Mrs. McNeill for travelling to Ottawa today, and gentlemen, for your time on the teleconferencing.

Retired Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Stevenson, I was very intrigued by what you just said. Also, I have to tell you that the vast majority of my veterans in Oakville, whom I've spoken to in the past on this issue, both recently and as a member of provincial Parliament when Dave Boushy introduced his bill, have taken your position.

But you had an idea there that was intriguing, and that is to allow people time off work, as necessary, to attend a ceremony, or to take five minutes of personal time to have their own personal memorial—and I'm just paraphrasing what you said. It occurred to me that there is a precedent for that, and that is on voting days employers are required to give people time to vote if they're otherwise working.

I wonder if you could expand on that idea a little bit, perhaps. Also, you talked about more leadership on how to celebrate our veterans' service and remembrance and to practise Remembrance Day if it just remains as it is now.

LCol Michael Stevenson: I think that, particularly in the towns, there's usually a church with a memorial outside or a cenotaph quite near to allow those who wish to go outside and stand by the cenotaph. Often it's involved in some Christian ceremony. Those who don't want to do that can stay in the office for five minutes and have something a little bit more than just the last post, or reveille, or an announcement.

In my own company, which is a big insurance company in Toronto, they played the last post over the speaker system for the whole company, over 1,000 people, and a minute's silence. Then a piper played the Lament and then they had the reveille. It was very moving and everybody stopped work and just thought for a few minutes. I know that in Israel, when they have the Holocaust commemoration, the whole of Israel comes to a grinding halt and for two minutes no traffic moves, nothing. They all respect that two minutes of thought for what happened in the past. My experience with a big insurance company was the two minutes of silence, even in the building, meant a lot. A lot of people were involved, nobody moved around, and those who wished went across the road to St. Paul's church, a fine old church, and had the cenotaph service as well.

It depends upon the leadership. If the leadership wants to bond people together in a company to make it a great company, the president, the CEO, and the board of directors have to say, "Gentlemen and ladies, we have to do something about this. We have to do something about this to remember all these sacrifices that people made, including people who were in own company", and instigate an orchestrated, well-planned small event. Use a bit of

initiative and imagination. If anybody wants a bit of helping doing it, I'll certainly tell them. If Margaret Thatcher were in charge of things here, she would mandate it. You only have to see the ceremony in London, or the Queen present, to see what a magnificent event it is, and indeed in Ottawa as well.

It can be done, but in companies, in businesses, and in schools things have to be done better to teach people about this event and why we hold it for two special minutes.

• (1555)

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you very much.

Gentlemen, I wanted to also thank you both for your service before I go further along.

Mr. Stewart, thank you for your testimony. This is a difficult issue for parliamentarians because everyone in Parliament wants to honour our veterans and we would like to find better ways to do that. The question is how to do that.

Currently, many of our veterans visit the schools, the public schools, and even some of the high schools. They explain the horrors of war to children, many of whom never forget it. They inculcate those values and the cost of freedom, which is an invaluable lesson.

Do you have any concerns that if the schools were closed they wouldn't be able to do that?

Mr. Donald Stewart: We have on a weekly basis different schools coming to Sunnybrook and bringing these students. There are as many as 10 or sometimes even 15 veterans. They sit there and talk to three or four of the schoolchildren, and the kids are asking questions about the war and different things. I've noticed going to the different schools, over and above those at Sunnybrook, that most of the schools here would love to be able to go to the cenotaph. Some of the veterans that I have talked to at Sunnybrook and across Canada agree with the same thing, that schoolchildren are the ones now that have to carry on as the future generation of this country.

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you.

If Remembrance Day were a holiday, would the schoolchildren go to the cenotaph or would they sometimes sleep in or sometimes go to the shopping mall or sometimes go away with their parents for a mini-vacation? That's the question we're trying to answer.

Mr. Donald Stewart: Yes, I know it's a tough one to answer. The way I see it, if it's promoted the right way, I'm quite sure that the kids would attend. I've noticed since being at Sunnybrook each year it gets bigger and bigger. There were 1,600 people there this year at the memorial.

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Nantel and Mr. Harris. You have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I'll speak in English now as it will be simpler.

I first want to tell you how touched I am when I hear the witnesses and their stories. Both Mr. Stewart and Mr. Stevenson, and Mrs. McNeill as well, you remind me so much of my section 266 of the Legion in Boucherville, in trying to evoke the sacrifice you made and evoke, through your connections to the local Legions, the intention to ensure that we don't forget and that all your colleagues, even though they're non-active, are well supported and well remembered. All this you have tried to instill in the kids today, that the best way to salute your efforts and your sacrifices is to get involved and do good in society.

Mrs. McNeill, I can see from here that you still have your volunteer pin you received from the Governor General. Clearly, you guys send a great message. I am not a specialist on the issue, as my friend Dan Harris is here, but I wanted to say how much it's appreciated. I think we all have to find a good way to be in solidarity and have the good intention to make the best response we can to you in a parliamentary way.

[*Translation*]

While I have the floor, I would like to make sure that the study on the film industry will be on the committee's agenda, so that there is at least an interim report. I am quite worried. I see time passing and I am afraid that the testimony we heard on the film industry will go unheeded. I would like us to discuss a solution, so that we do not see a repeat of what happened to the report on the digital era in Canada, which disappeared into oblivion in 2011, before the election. That is what concerns me.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Harris.

• (1600)

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Nantel.

[*English*]

Thank you to all the witnesses for your presentations and for coming today.

Thank you, Ms. McNeill, for coming here.

I'll start very quickly with Mr. Stewart.

It's a fantastic community at Sunnybrook. Certainly, the spirit will never be lost there. My great-grandfather, Harold Riley, and my great-uncle, William, or Bill, Riley, were both among Sunnybrook's earliest patients when it opened shortly after the Second World War.

Mr. Stewart, you said you support a statutory holiday for Remembrance Day, but you do understand that this bill doesn't, in fact, do that. Is that correct?

Mr. Donald Stewart: I understand.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): [*Inaudible—Editor*]... to ask any of the witnesses. I know Mr. Harris went down this road on Monday.

I don't know if Mr. Harris has checked out his website recently but when he refers to this bill he actually states, "Make Remembrance Day a National Statutory Holiday for All Canadians!"

If you're going to ask people what they think and whether your bill is statutory or not, you shouldn't mislead them. You said it 11 times

in your speech on November 3, in *Hansard*. It's recorded right here, your speech. If you look at it, I don't know, maybe you changed it last night, but this is what it was last night. I don't think it's really fair to be putting witnesses on the spot and asking them a question that you, yourself, obviously don't know the answer to because of what your website says and what you've said in your speech on November 3.

A voice: Mr. Chair, this sounds like debate.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Harris, please.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Stewart.

Certainly, whether I desire to have it as a statutory holiday or not is actually separate from what the bill itself states. All the bill does is elevate Remembrance Day to the same status as Canada Day and Victoria Day, the other two holidays listed in the Holidays Act. That is the one simple change and it seems to me that the other side, after having voted for it, seems to want to add all this confusion.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. I'd like you to rule on this.

Mr. Harris can have his opinions. I understand that. I have no issues with that. The point he is making, about whether or not people on this side of the committee table are going to support the bill, it is up to them individually.

What I will say is that you cannot make statements and claims in speeches and on your website about your specific bill, and then come in here and indicate you don't actually have that position or that's not what your bill represents. He's misleading witnesses with respect to the bill. If he wants to do what he's saying, that's fine. But I don't think he should put witnesses in the position of having to state or claim what his bill means, because he certainly wants his bill to become a national statutory holiday for all Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dykstra.

While I appreciate your views on this, Mr. Harris does have the right to use the time as he wishes. If he does what you say he's doing, that is up to him.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

On that point, even though I disagreed with your ruling on Monday, you did rule on this specific issue that is was a matter for debate, so both those points of order, I think, fell under that.

Ms. McNeill, you have explained how hard you fought over the years for this day off, and then explained that this bill doesn't do that.

Why then do you still support the bill?

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: I think the bill itself is a matter of respect for veterans. I think that's very important. The Holidays Act doesn't necessarily respect the veterans the way it should. Therefore, I can support this. I think it's a good thing because the veterans deserve the highest respect we can give them. That's what I've been fighting for. What I like about this bill is that we're going to respect them and make sure they are looked after. I think this bill will do that if that's what you're aiming for.

•(1605)

Mr. Dan Harris: Great.

On Monday, with regard to Victoria Day, which is a national legal holiday equal to Canada Day, it was argued that the holiday has lost its significance in Canada for many. In fact, not all provinces do recognize Victoria Day as a holiday.

Do you think that might be the case if Remembrance Day got equal standing to Canada Day?

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: I didn't get all your questions, Mr. Harris. I'm sorry.

Mr. Dan Harris: I was asking about Victoria Day, which is a national legal holiday equal to Canada Day. It has been argued that, perhaps for many, its significance has been lost. In fact, it's not even recognized in all the provinces as a holiday.

Would you be concerned that this would also become the case for Remembrance Day if it were given the same status as Canada Day?

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: When you talk about Victoria Day, I think there are four provinces that don't really honour it. The province of Quebec uses another name for Victoria Day.

What was the question at the end there?

Mr. Dan Harris: Do you think there would be a danger of Remembrance Day losing its significance?

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: I don't think it would lose its significance. If we're trying to have the day and the veterans have the respect, I think it will work out if we get approval for the bill.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you.

Very quickly, Lieutenant-Colonel Stevenson, you mentioned, in regard to time off and the statutory holidays, that more leadership might be required. I think that was very appropriate with respect to leadership. This day has its importance only because of the meaning we impart to it. I think there would be an opportunity, certainly, to continue to improve that.

Do you have any suggestions about how we could better honour Remembrance Day?

LCol Michael Stevenson: Yes. It's unfortunate, in my mind, that the educational system in Canada today is so diluted, and in different provinces. Just to take a simple example there's the math problem: Quebec is successful; the rest of Canada, apart from Alberta, is not very good.

The authority has to come down from the federal government to encourage all provinces to respect this tradition. It might even be that each province is invited to send a senior representative, maybe the lieutenant-governor, to Ottawa to take part in Remembrance Day there. It's some inspiration, and getting people involved and encouraging them.

There are two things. At the provincial level, the government there takes a more active role. At the educational authority, which is not the preference of the federal government, they encourage them, through the provincial governments, to take more interest in schools. This is not like my friend here, who is just going to a lecture on

Remembrance Day, or before it, but to get it involved in the education system. The Vimy Foundation does this.

Also to encourage more people to participate in Poppy Day—

•(1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to have to move on. We're going to give you a chance a little bit later. There are going to be more questions.

We're going to have to move to Mr. Valeriote for seven minutes.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): I want to thank you, Mrs. McNeill, Mr. Stevenson, and Mr. Stewart, for attending our committee today.

I serve on the veterans committee. I've been asked to attend this committee because I serve on the veterans committee.

I've learned over many years, as you no doubt know, there is no amount of compensation that can be given to our veterans that would adequately recognize their sacrifice, the sacrifice of those who died and those who returned to tell their stories. There's no amount of commemoration that can be undertaken, not only on November 11 but also on other days of the year when they ought to be honoured and memorialized for their sacrifice. While we could do more, we can never do enough as far as I am concerned.

That being said, however... I'm quoting Michael Blais, who was here before us a couple of days ago. He's the head of the Veterans Advocacy. He said that never should Remembrance Day be considered a lesser national holiday. Interestingly, Mrs. McNeill, these are the words, essentially, that you used, that it should never be relegated to a lesser national holiday.

You are absolutely correct in your observation that this bill does not create a statutory holiday. For anybody who is uncertain, not only does it not create a statutory holiday—that means a day off work or out of school—it couldn't create a statutory holiday even if it were to direct the provinces to let everyone out of school and out of work, because letting people out of school and out of work is provincial jurisdiction, not federal jurisdiction.

That being said, knowing that no statutory holiday will be created if this bill is passed, do you think this bill should be passed as quickly as possible, with due dispatch, so that Remembrance Day receives the same, equal consideration the other two national holidays receive under the Holidays Act?

I'm asking this first of Mrs. McNeill. Then I'll ask Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Stewart.

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: I have written many times that Remembrance Day should be right up there with Canada Day, in particular. I believe that with all my heart. I am hoping that if this bill did pass, maybe we could have the veterans up where they should be, so they have all the respect they deserve.

People say that the children should be in the schools on Remembrance Day. Well, I am sorry, but they couldn't be in the schools on Remembrance Day if we had the holiday. If the Legion, in particular, said that they should be in the schools on Remembrance Day, then they have to go to the education and have the education say, "We'll open the schools on Sunday so the students can be in the schools on Sunday", because that's their biggest argument.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Right, but that is something for them to work out with the schools and the provinces.

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: Yes.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Stewart, do you think that this bill should be passed with all dispatch, given that it does not create, nor could it create, a statutory holiday?

LCol Michael Stevenson: I'd like to point out that it is a bit confusing when it says "statutory holiday", and they didn't explain to me in the first place that statutory holidays don't have any impact on the provinces. The question, as it was put to me about four days ago, is now becoming more confusing. I'll say this. The further you get away from war, the less people remember it. We are at a stage now where Victoria Day is insignificant. It's a nice holiday. Making it a holiday can diminish it, as opposed to a real Canadian belief that you have to get your butt down to the cenotaph, or you have to get the education system working properly to educate people about Canadian traditions and their history, which is much more important.

I am not sure that this statutory holiday business is going to solve that problem.

•(1615)

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Just to be clear, the bill doesn't say "statutory holiday"; it says "holiday".

Now the other gentleman, would you like to respond?

Mr. Donald Stewart: If it's going to be a holiday, in my personal opinion and that of the veterans I have talked to, they would like to see it as a statutory holiday. I think that, with a little bit of supervision and whatnot, the bill that you have now in session would be all right.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay. I have no further questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Valeriote.

We'll now move to Mr. Weston for seven minutes.

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Lieutenant-Colonel Stevenson, Mr. Stewart, and Mrs. McNeill, you honour my father today, and you honour hundreds of thousands of other Canadians. My father was captured in Singapore in 1940. He served in the expedition of the bridge on the River Kwai and came back having lost half his body weight. His appendix was removed by a doctor using only a razor blade, and he contracted every jungle disease you can imagine, but he survived. In honour of him and countless other people, we are all together on this. We all want to honour our veterans.

I am confused. I am a parliamentarian, and I am hearing it's a statutory holiday and it's not a holiday. I heard a good suggestion from you, Lieutenant-Colonel Stevenson, that there could be

something parallel to what we see in our Elections Act, which requires employers to give dispensation to people who want to mark an important part of our citizenship, and that is to go and vote.

Mrs. McNeill, I admire you tremendously for your efforts. You named so many legislators you have interacted with, and you have been involved personally in dispatching thousands of letters. You are a wonderful human being and, by the way, you are represented by a wonderful MP. What do you think about this idea to ensure in legislation that employers and others are required to let people go and mark the day, but not confuse us by suggesting that it would lead the provinces to declare a holiday, perhaps because they would also be confused in thinking that this is now a requirement, given this new law?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: On a point of order—and I'm sorry—I really appreciate Mr. Weston's question, and I honour his recognition of the efforts of the witnesses, but he's suggesting something to the witness that cannot be done in this legislation. It's constitutionally impossible for the legislation to require or have the provinces or any employer or school consider any such thing as he's suggesting.

It's quite misleading when he poses the question—

Mr. John Weston: As a constitutional lawyer, what I would say is that you could create a framework that provinces could opt into—

The Chair: One moment, please.

There is some debate here on different viewpoints from both sides of the table. It's my ruling that when members have the floor to ask the questions, they have the right to ask the questions as they so choose. That's my ruling on this. There are different viewpoints on this from different sides, which is clearly debate. My ruling is that the member who has the floor has the right to ask the questions as they see fit.

Mr. Weston....

Mr. John Weston: To make it even more evident, some of us are going to our Legions to ask for guidance, because we need it.

What do you think about a change of direction that would allow us to maybe take the spirit of what Mr. Harris wants to do but make it clearer, so that people would be able to go and celebrate Remembrance Day without any indication that it proposes a day off?

•(1620)

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: You've mentioned the Legion. The biggest thing that's said about the Legion is that they're the biggest military organization, but the Legion members themselves are divided. Some of them want the kids in the schools and some of them don't want the kids in the schools, and they don't want the holiday. Other military organizations are very supportive of the day.

To answer your question on this bill, I think that if it passes maybe it will give the veterans the respect they're looking for, and maybe it will evolve. I've just written to the new Ontario premier and to the labour minister. I did receive a response from the labour minister, the Honourable Mr. Flynn. He said that not all military groups want the holiday or that they recognize it, so....

There is a lot of division. We're thinking that maybe this bill will create unity and more respect—

Mr. John Weston: The Legion representatives we heard from earlier this week said they were against passing the bill, not because they disagree with the spirit, but because they want to make sure that people are induced to commemorate Remembrance Day and not just take a day off.

What I don't understand is why you think there is a lesser status around Remembrance Day because it's not included in the same act as Canada Day. I don't see that one follows the other, necessarily.

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: Well, I know that when I talk to some of the Legion members in Sarnia, they are very divided. How can you support if you're not representing all the members and their decisions?

Mr. John Weston: Can we go back to you, Lieutenant-Colonel Stevenson? Have you had a chance to reflect further on this idea of yours that got us thinking about creating some provision that's parallel to that in the Elections Act?

LCol Michael Stevenson: I don't think you can dictate what people will do with such a thing as Remembrance Day, but you can encourage them. I think it would be much more acceptable to all provinces if somehow in this act you could.... I understand that now you can't dictate to the provinces, but perhaps there's some way of getting the message over. An hour off, companies can afford. Small businesses could even close down for an hour, if they so wish, or have five or 10 minutes of silence within the confines of their business.

I'm quite sure that if you make it so that all the provinces, if possible, take a day off, it would be counterproductive to the spirit of getting to that cenotaph, to thinking about what it's all really about. People would drift away, left to their own devices. Getting the message over to businesses, getting the message over to churches, particularly to the education systems, is a challenge that has to be met if we want this thing to work properly, and with true depth of feeling, and not let it be another Canada Day, Victoria Day, or even Simcoe Day. They have that on the first Monday in August in Ontario. He was famous when it started, but now there's no respect at all, and he was a great leader.

We have to be very careful how we handle this thing. The spirit that drives people is an important thing.

Mr. John Weston: Let me just thank you again for venerating our veterans, all three of you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Harris for a maximum of five minutes.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much.

This conversation with respect to how we can best honour the tremendous sacrifice that's been made for our country over the years by countless individuals is certainly an important conversation to have, and to continue to have, in terms of how we can best commemorate. Of course, with Remembrance Day itself, it is a holiday for federal employees. Certainly the banks are closed as well, because they're federally regulated. Six provinces and three territories currently have it as what would be considered to be a traditional statutory holiday.

I have pointed repeatedly to the examples of Manitoba and Nova Scotia. They have chosen their own paths. In Manitoba, businesses

are shut down until 1 p.m. so that people have the opportunity to go and commemorate. Nova Scotia actually passed its own Remembrance Day Act, stating who would and wouldn't be working that day so that they could have employees be off, yet still have the schools open. That's certainly something I'd encourage every province that currently doesn't do anything for Remembrance Day to go and look at.

Even if I might desire to create a statutory holiday, we do not have that power federally. For me, this was about correcting what I think was a mistake when the Holidays Act was in fact first passed.

Just to briefly correct Mr. Weston, Canada Day and Remembrance Day are both in the same act, the Holidays Act. The only difference is that Canada Day and Victoria Day are listed as legal holidays, whereas Remembrance Day is simply listed as a holiday. That is why we've heard many people talk about it as potentially being viewed as a lesser holiday than Canada Day.

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra, on a point of order.

• (1625)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: If you're going to keep going down this road, Dan, like....

Let me read from your speech.

Mr. Dan Harris: This is debate.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: No, it's not debate. This is your speech from the House of Commons, where you state what your bill will do, "Bill C-597, an act to make Remembrance Day a national statutory holiday". You claim right in your speech that this is what it will do.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): The chair has ruled on this.

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra, once again, I appreciate what your position is on this, but this is debate. I have ruled that members have their time and they do have the right to ask the questions.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Chair, you can't make a statement in the House of Commons, and state that this is what your bill will represent, and then come to committee and say it represents something else.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: We're running out of time, Mr. Chair, and you've ruled on this already.

The Chair: Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, could we just ask Mr. Harris to explain the contradiction? I would appreciate it.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: This is debate.

Mr. Dan Harris: If you had the floor you could.

The Chair: Mr. Weston, Mr. Harris is correct. He has the floor and he has about two minutes left.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much. My apologies to the witnesses for all the inside baseball going on and attempts to sow confusion.

Again, what I was saying was that the most important thing is how best to commemorate. We all come from the same place with respect to wanting to enrich and enhance that commemoration. Certainly, I saw in November, when we actually had an all-party agreement to fast-track this bill to committee and we had a vote in the House of Commons that was 258 to 2, including members of the committee who are now complaining about contradictions, and who in fact voted for the bill at that time.

It's taken a long time to get to committee and now we have a 30-day sitting extension, which is going to make it very hard for this change to actually be made before we head into an election. There is a good chance, unless the government actually wants to move things along, that this will die on the order paper like so many efforts before it.

Ms. McNeill, having seen this happen before, what is your opinion if we let this opportunity pass us by?

Mrs. Wilma McNeill: When it happened in Ontario, Mr. Boushy didn't tell me that the premier had spoken to him. He told me about six months after the election.

I said, "Why didn't you tell me that? I would have gone to the press and asked why Mr. Harris was interfering with this. He's not on the committee." He was the one who told Mr. Boushy to not take it to third reading because he would defeat it.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification.

On that note, thank you to our witnesses.

We will briefly suspend.

• _____ (Pause) _____
•

The Chair: Good afternoon once again, everyone.

We're going to call meeting number 41 of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage to order. We are dealing with Bill C-597, an act to amend the Holidays Act, regarding Remembrance Day.

With us at the committee room, we have Mr. Brian Ray, and by video conference, from Kitchener, Ontario, we have Mr. Harry Watts.

We will start with Mr. Ray, for up to eight minutes.

Mr. Brian Ray (As an Individual): Mr. Chair, and fellow committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Brian Ray. I am president of Branch 114, Oakville, Ontario.

I would respectfully request that when the minutes of this meeting are published, the words "veteran", "branch", and "member" or "membership" be capitalized, please. There is such a motion within the Oakville Town Council as such, as an act of respect to those who fought for the freedoms we enjoy today.

The Royal Canadian Legion's act of remembrance from the Ritual and Insignia Manual, which is part of our opening ceremony for every meeting within the Legion, has only the chairman stating:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

All members present recite in unison:

We will remember them.

That is what we do Remembrance Day and we do not need any directive from Dominion Command to remember. It is a day of remembrance and reflection, not for politicking.

Factually, Remembrance Day is held at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month at the national cenotaph and every cenotaph within our great country respective of time zones. It is not at the 11th minute as suggested by a previous speaker.

At last evening's meeting, where I was chair of the branch general meeting, I informed the membership I would be appearing here today and asked for the opinions of the veterans, those who served Her Majesty. There were six present. One was with the British Army from 1953 to 1955, two were reservists, one with NATO, one who saw no theatre, and one who is still serving, a lieutenant-colonel. These are real people, not Facebook people, that I was speaking to last night.

The consensus was that they did not want Remembrance Day to be lost as a day at the mall and they wanted students to be in schools remembering. The most compelling comment was from the NATO veteran who wanted to ensure the two minutes silence was observed. It undoubtedly would be lost with people's busy schedules and a day off work in my opinion, and exhibit a lack of respect to the fallen and those who remain.

The mission statement from Ontario Command's website focuses on remembering those who gave their lives for freedom, and looking after the needs of veterans, their dependents, and those still serving. The Legion does this by accepting donations to the poppy fund. We do not sell them. We offer them freely and someone may make a donation of any size they choose.

It commences on the last Friday of October and runs through until November 11. Those funds are strictly controlled as to how they may be distributed.

If November 11 were to become a national holiday, it could mean one less day of donations to support those veterans. I've heard of the debate between the national and statutory holiday, and I've clearly heard more of it today, and whether it would enshrine a day off work. However, this is wordplay. Perception is reality and if the public hears of a recognized national holiday they expect a day off work with pay.

I'm going to speak off the cuff now. Our cousins to the south recognize Memorial Day, which occurs the weekend after Victoria Day for us on the long weekend. What do they do? They have a car race. The Indianapolis 500 is held on Sunday of their Memorial Day weekend. What memories does that create?

You also have the students who are ingrained with remembering about how the Canadians liberated Holland 70 years ago. They do that by having them in school and teaching it to them, not having a day off.

With these points in mind, I would respectfully urge you to reject Bill C-597.

Thank you.

•(1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ray.

We're now going to go by video conference to Kitchener, Ontario, to hear from Mr. Harry Watts.

Welcome. You have the floor for up to eight minutes, sir.

Mr. Harry Watts (As an Individual): Thank you very much.

My name is Harry Watts and I'm not a member of any of the Legions, not because I don't support them but because when I was working I never had time to be what I would call a good member and take part in things. When I retired I became involved with the Memory Project, so I've become a speaker taking the story to the young people in the schools about what the veterans did.

I try to do one school a day, but on Remembrance Day I always do two because they want to hear the stories and they want to know what it's all about. At one school in particular, there were 15-year-old and 16-year-old grade nine students who didn't want to go to school. They had truancy problems. I would go and take them to the cenotaph for 11 o'clock, and we would stand as a group to know what was going on and what it was all about. Then I would go back to the school and talk to the young people, have lunch with them, and they would know that it was a day of remembrance. It was a day when you took your two minutes of silence and remembered that way. There are so many things that I disagree with about having a national holiday. As they said, the first thing you have to do is have a parade, you have to get the fire trucks out, and maybe a few veterans riding on the trucks or something, but it's not the same. It's those few minutes of silence.

I had a job where I travelled through Ontario for several years and wherever I was, whatever small village, I could always find a spot where Remembrance Day was being observed and I would take my few minutes of remembrance for those who didn't come home. It's just such a special moment for people to observe and remember.

I think of the first Remembrance Day of 1919, which happened in Manchester in England. At 11 o'clock two old soldiers—well, they weren't too old, I guess, at that time—all of a sudden realized what time it was and they just came to attention on the sidewalk, and the next thing you knew, a truck stopped, and the teamsters stopped, and everybody stopped for just two minutes.

That's where it all comes from and that's the way it should be. If we could just get two minutes of silence even in the stores.... A few years ago I was in one of the big malls and it just happened to be that time of the day, and a few minutes before 11 o'clock there was some jazz music being played. I found the manager and suggested that maybe at 11 o'clock they could just shut it down. It's funny because that same year a chap wrote *A Pittance of Time*. It's funny that we

were both on the same wavelength. He wrote a piece of music to go with that.

That's all it is. It's just a pittance of time but it's so important for our young people to remember a pittance of time because we're not going to be around forever. I was in two schools two weeks ago just answering questions from young people, so it isn't just on Remembrance Day that they want to know what we did, why we did it, and how we did it, but Remembrance Day is that special day. It's such an emotional day for me and for the young people. I wouldn't want to see it enacted as a holiday. It would lose the whole emotional meaning of what Remembrance Day is all about.

Thank you.

•(1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Watts.

We're going to move to the questions, but with the help of Madam clerk, and for the benefit of members, I just want to read a specific part of the rules for committees. I think it will clarify why I made the rulings that I did. It says:

There are no specific rules governing the nature of questions which may be put to witnesses appearing before committees, beyond the general requirement of relevance to the issue before the committee. Witnesses must answer all questions which the committee puts to them. A witness may object to a question asked by an individual committee member. However, if the committee agrees that the question be put to the witness, he or she is obliged to reply.

I think that covers the questions in terms of those points of order.

On that note, we will now move to the questions and we will start with Mr. Young for seven minutes.

•(1645)

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, both for your time and to Mr. Ray for travelling the great distance today.

Mr. Ray, I'd like to read you some comments regarding this bill and then ask you a question, if I may.

This is from a debate in the House on the bill. There's a reference that says it's an act to make Remembrance Day a national statutory holiday. There's another reference that says it would have "the same legal status as Victoria Day and Canada Day, the two legal holidays listed in the Holidays Act." It says, "I am far from the first to suggest making Remembrance Day a national statutory holiday." It says, "Canadians I have spoken with wish to be able to attend ceremonies to pay their respects", in other words, refers to a day off.

It says, "There are also arguments against making Remembrance Day a national statutory holiday", and then it says, "Some believe productivity would increase if their staff had another day off." There's a reference made to a CEO who said, "Consumers only have so much money to spend. If they cannot spend it today, they will spend it tomorrow". That refers to a day where the stores are closed, otherwise known as a holiday.

It says, “The most compelling argument I have heard for not making November 11 a statutory holiday is that kids should be in school to observe services.” It says, “I am also drawn to what happens here in Ontario, where it is not a statutory holiday, though it used to be”. There's a reference to a ceremony in Scarborough, where a service is held on the Sunday night before November 11, and once again in reference to it being a holiday. Then there's a reference that says “Just as the decision whether to observe November 11 as a holiday rests with the provinces, so does the curriculum.”

The puzzle, I think, could be answered in further comments from the same debate. Here's what it says:

The federal government passed a bill to make it a holiday within federal jurisdiction, and all 50 states passed their own bills so that its application is universal across the United States of America. We can achieve the same here in Canada. A united voice from Parliament would be a big encouragement in that regard, while still respecting each province's ability to choose for itself.

There's one other reference here at the end, “[I]t is time to make November 11, Remembrance Day, a national statutory holiday.”

Now, the words that I just read to you from the debate were all made by Mr. Harris who conceived and presented this bill in the House.

What does this speech tell you about the intent of Mr. Harris with regard to this bill?

Mr. Brian Ray: To me personally, and clearly to the people from Dominion Command who have spoken to it as well, it would now enshrine a day off with pay. That's what that would lead me to believe.

Mr. Terence Young: Would it lead you to believe that it would be a holiday where businesses are closed?

Mr. Brian Ray: Yes, and when the questions were put to the membership, as said by the other members from Dominion Command, that was the impression they were also under.

Further, at my branch meeting last night, Tuesday night.... But on Monday night I chaired an election at the other branch in Oakville, Branch 486, Chris Vokes and I asked that question while there was a count. I asked it with no preamble, and the assumption was that it would be a day off with pay. Naturally, the people who were there—there were 66 people there representing their branches and there were six guests, five of us and one other caretaker—probably two thirds to one third were for the national holiday. But these people are all retired. Every day is Saturday to them, so it wouldn't make any difference.

Further, when I looked at the one third who were for not recognizing it as a national holiday, those were the veterans.

Mr. Terence Young: So the veterans there were against making it a day off with pay as a national holiday.

Mr. Brian Ray: That is correct. In my opinion, yes.

Mr. Terence Young: Okay, Mr. Ray. I don't know if you're familiar with this, but I wanted to share it with the committee and ask you a question as well.

At St. Dominic Elementary School in Oakville, a Catholic elementary school, there's a gifted teacher named John MacPhail and

under his leadership the children began writing letters to the parents of Canadian veterans who had lost their lives in the service of Canada, our fallen soldiers.

The children conceived the Bronte Veterans Garden, and I want to quote what their purpose was: a visible and lasting tribute to Canadian veterans and their families. They came up with this idea after the visit of Carol Mitchell, who is a mother of a fallen Canadian soldier, and I have to say this connection is beautiful to behold. It's so touching and it's so important. The relationships that inspired this action and the conception of the garden happened in school. They happened when the children were in school while this mother visited them in school, and this is what I've heard from veterans.

Would you care to expand on what you and the other veterans do on Remembrance Day in the schools to inspire children to understand the cost of freedom?

• (1650)

Mr. Brian Ray: We actually, at Branch 114, Oakville, do not go out to the schools on November 11. We would send some of our veterans out to the schools in advance of that, when they're asked to speak. When we're doing our ceremony on that day, it starts very early. We're setting up the wreaths, making sure the town is setting up their sound equipment for us correctly. There are a lot of things to do. We don't have time to be going to them on that day, November 11, but we could be prepared to send some of our veterans, once they've recognized the day, in the afternoon.

One of the other things we did recently in the afternoon was at one of the larger Catholic churches in Oakville, where we were asked to be a colour party at an all-faith musical event. I was told by some of the people in the congregation that the colour party is what made that musical event worthwhile to them.

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you.

Could you comment on why you think the opinions of the veterans with regard to how Canadians remember their sacrifices are the most important to listen to, why this group's opinions are the most important?

Mr. Brian Ray: I would say those are the people who have experienced the fears of war and those are the ones who need to be listened to in regard to the decision on this bill. You want to hear from the veterans, not just the general public and the politicians.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Harris now, for seven minutes.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much, and thank you to Mr. Young for repeating some sections from my speech in the House, where I did, in fact, clearly outline that the power to create this day off rested with the provinces, and that the education the kids receive rests within that provincial curriculum. That's certainly not something that I would contest to change. This is how the division of powers is laid out in our constitution, and the provinces do get to decide which days are and aren't off.

Now, Comrade Ray, I notice, and it's quite sensible, that you don't send folks from the Legion out to the schools on Remembrance Day because you have a lot to accomplish on that day. That actually was another one of the arguments I made in my speech, that I thought there would be a greater opportunity for more veterans to be in schools at the schools' ceremonies if the ceremonies took place the last school day before Remembrance Day. As you just mentioned, you do send people out beforehand.

Remembrance Day itself is a solemn occasion, but wouldn't you agree that it should definitely not be the only day on which the kids learn about the tragedies of war?

Mr. Brian Ray: It's clearly not the only day, no. But November 11 is the day that is most significant to our veterans, when they can come back to their branch. As a branch president, I invite everybody who attends the cenotaph on Trafalgar Road, just north of Lakeshore, back to the branch and offer them a free drink, if they choose to come back. There are a number who do, and they have a lot to say to each other.

But I can tell you, when I held the ceremony last year, I was speaking off the cuff and it was important to me that.... Help me out here; you folks are the politicians. I can't remember his name right now, I'm just drawing a blank, but he said that bad things will happen if good men do nothing.

A voice: It's Edmund Burke.

Mr. Brian Ray: Thank you. The average politician.... I actually made that quote at our branch on November 11 last year. My point was that we had a hall full of good men and women in that facility, and they must not sit back but get back to their politicians and demand some security for our veterans and for Canadians.

I was overwhelmed by the extra coverage that the Halton police tactical services gave us for our ceremonies in both Bronte and Oakville—men with AK-47s, plainclothes people with sniffer dogs walking through the crowd. It was exceptional. Unfortunately, that was because of the two lives we lost previously in October.

• (1655)

Mr. Dan Harris: The tragic events of last fall certainly reverberated through Parliament as well.

Now, I wanted to also just follow up because you talked about Remembrance Day being a national holiday. Would it surprise you to know that it is in fact already a national holiday, and that the Holidays Act does list Canada Day, Victoria Day, and Remembrance Day? But it lists both Canada Day and Victoria Day as legal holidays and Remembrance Day as just a holiday.

Mr. Brian Ray: This is just surprising but I already commented on it. This is politicking and this is wordplay, and I'm going to offer you this without an expletive.

That's all that is.

Mr. Dan Harris: It's, I think, a mistake that was made in 1972. Adding the word "legal" to Remembrance Day simply gives it the same status as the other two holidays without in fact creating a day off.

But I wanted to move on to Mr. Watts. You spoke a great deal about teaching kids in school. I would argue that teaching the next generation is probably the most important act of remembrance that any of us can engage in to make sure that future generations understand the tragic sacrifices that have been made. You mentioned having gone into schools a couple of weeks ago and teaching kids about that. Do you think that if school ceremonies took place the day before Remembrance Day that more veterans might have the opportunity to both go into schools and to attend their local cenotaph ceremonies?

Mr. Harry Watts: Well, funnily, Remembrance Day to me.... I get requests from schools nine months of the year. But in November, of course, Remembrance week is always special, and several times I'm asked to go to an assembly in the morning. I'm not a Catholic, but I was asked to open a Catholic assembly one morning. It's really not just for the kids. It's the idea of.... It's not disrespect, but people just go about their business, to shopping malls and everything else, when maybe just two minutes of silence, just a pittance of time to show some respect....

I wish I could show you the notes and the poetry from these young people. I just published a wonderful book of poetry that has been given to me over the past 20 years. I've already given away 200 of them. I've read it many times and I still find it very difficult to read it and not shed a little tear with what these young people got from the message I brought to them. I guess I'm thinking about that special two minutes of silence to show respect and honour for those who didn't come home. That's really, I guess, the long story.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

We're going to move to Mr. Valeriote. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Thank you, Mr. Ray and Mr. Watts, for attending today.

I come from Guelph. I'm on the veterans committee. While it may not rival the commemorations in Oakville or Bronte or Kitchener, we also celebrate Remembrance Day quite vigorously in Guelph. We start by meeting at Colonel John McCrae's home in Guelph on Water Street, and then we move to the IODE statue beside our train station and speak there. Then several thousand people gather at the Sleeman Centre and we commemorate there, including the firing of guns, speeches, wonderful music from our local orchestra, marching to colours, everyone from the.... If it wasn't for the members of the Legion in Guelph, Colonel John McCrae Branch, it wouldn't happen. It's really that simple.

So we are grateful to the members of the Legion and everyone who's served. I've said this before, no amount of commemoration will adequately honour the sacrifices that have been made, and no amount of compensation, frankly, could properly compensate those who died and those who came back to tell their stories.

When this bill came out, the first thing I did was I went to Mr. Harris and I asked if this created a statutory holiday. He said, no, and asked why. I said I was going to be honest, the people in Guelph don't want a statutory holiday. Most of the people I talked to didn't want it to be a statutory holiday, meaning schools and businesses are closed. All for the same reasons you folks have cited today.

Having said that, I checked with the library. The Library of Parliament is very kind in helping parliamentarians like us around the table who don't always understand words that are written in law. They said the Holidays Act does not entitle employees to a day off with pay, even with the use of the word "legal".

I'm as confounded by that as you are, but I understood that it doesn't create a statutory holiday. So I went back to the people I'd spoken to who don't want a statutory holiday and I asked how they felt if it didn't create a statutory holiday. They said that made sense.

You were here, Mr. Ray—I know Mr. Watts wasn't—when Wilma McNeill spoke earlier today. On Monday, Michael Blais from the Canadian Veterans Advocacy spoke, and he said that what's important to them in this legislation is that Remembrance Day is never considered a lesser national holiday than Victoria Day or Canada Day, which is in the legislation.

This elevates it not to a statutory holiday but to a day of recognition as important as Thanksgiving and Victoria Day, which I think it deserves, if not more.

Having said that as parliamentarians, knowing that it's not going to be a statutory holiday, we will elevate the day to be as important as Thanksgiving and Victoria Day. Other provinces and territories have statutory holidays because they make the law on that, but interestingly I've been advised by the Library of Parliament that it's not a statutory holiday in Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, or Manitoba. It's up to those provinces to decide whether schools and businesses are closed, so far they've done other things.

Knowing what you know now that we could elevate this to a holiday of recognition, not of days off work, don't you think it behooves us to honour our veterans and elevate that day so it has the same profile legislatively without giving people a day off work or school? I'm not trying to wordsmith and I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, I just feel compelled to say it deserves that. Others have told me that, knowing no day off school or work.

•(1705)

Now, Mr. Watts, can I ask you and then I'll ask Mr. Ray what your response would be?

Mr. Harry Watts: It's all about respect and memory. How do you legislate two minutes of respect? That's something that.... I am old enough to remember when the streetcars in Toronto used to quit running for two minutes and when the factories would shut down for two minutes. We can't do that anymore, I believe, but that would be a tremendous moment with two minutes of silence.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Could you support this bill knowing now what you know that it doesn't create a statutory holiday?

Mr. Harry Watts: Absolutely.

As I say it makes no difference to me or the kids in the school; I'm there. Sure.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Ray.

Mr. Brian Ray: As I said earlier, and as I've said in the branch last fall and in the branch seven years ago last fall, Remembrance Day is a day to remember and reflect. It is not a day for politicking.

What you folks over there are doing is politicking and wordplaying, and I'll add the expletive if you ask me that question again. No, I do not believe it will enhance the program.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay, very good.

I have no further questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Valeriote.

We'll go to our last questioner, Mr. Yurdiga. You have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Thank you Mr. Chair, Mr. Watts, and Mr. Ray.

You know over the past number of weeks I've been talking to many veterans across my riding. They have a feeling that if you attach a holiday to Remembrance Day, it's telling our youth that it's a day off, it's a time to go out to the pool, it's a time to go out doing their own activities. That's what their concern is. It's not about the remembrance part; it's about the holiday. I think that's a dangerous slope that many veterans are concerned about.

Do you feel that by making Veterans Day a holiday it will diminish Veterans Day? Do you think it will just be another holiday to our children and our grandchildren?

Mr. Brian Ray: Absolutely, it's a slippery slope. If the wording is that it's a recognized national holiday, but not necessarily a day off, the provinces are potentially going to make it a provincial holiday and it will just be another day off with pay that the folks can do the things that they want to do and they won't remember. If they're in school they're more likely to, in my opinion.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you for that.

Can I ask the same question to Mr. Watts, your perspective on attaching a holiday to Remembrance Day?

Mr. Harry Watts: The schools make a wonderful effort to present Remembrance Day to the young people. The schools make it a special day. It's not going to happen if it's going to be a holiday and the kids aren't going to be in school. All the schools make November 11 as a special day. In Kitchener I know they do. There's only one of me and I can't be at all of them, but I would certainly like to.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you very much for your response on that.

Given the importance of consulting with veterans, do you feel that we spent enough time consulting with veterans? Do you think that we put our best foot forward to get a sense of what our veterans across Canada are feeling about having Veterans Day a holiday?

•(1710)

Mr. Brian Ray: I can't answer that because I don't know what foot you put forward to ask the veterans other than myself and some other people from Dominion Command, and some other people who may be misleading you and misinforming you.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Mr. Watts, same question.

Mr. Harry Watts: I feel that kids should be in school. The schools at present are doing everything they can to promote Remembrance Day. At lots of the schools I go into before Remembrance Day, everything will be set up special. I won't be there, but the kids and the teachers will use that special day as remembrance of the guys that sacrificed their lives so they can have the freedom to go to school and live in Canada. It's important that we leave the kids in school because the schools want the kids there. That's the way I feel about it.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Mr. Ray, I have one final question. Do you think there's anything wrong with how we celebrate Remembrance Day as it sits, without this Bill C-597 being passed?

Mr. Brian Ray: As I said earlier, I don't see that the bill would enhance anything. I think what we're doing now to remember the veterans is probably the best we're going to do. I do my best to encourage all my branch members to get involved and ensure that they get out to the branch and get out to the cenotaph that morning.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you. I have no further questions.

The Chair: That will be the end of the questions.

Witnesses, thank you for coming today. If you have any other input you'd like to put into the bill, please get it to us right away.

Mr. Dan Harris: I was going to ask if maybe Mr. Watts could send us those poems.

The Chair: Mr. Watts, are you prepared to send them to us?

Mr. Harry Watts: Harold Albrecht, Stephen Woodworth and Peter Braid all have copies of my poetry. The next time I see them I'll give them a few extra copies to bring to Ottawa for you.

Mr. Dan Harris: I was actually asking if you could perhaps submit them to the committee, so that we could receive the copies for the entire committee as part of the study.

Mr. Harry Watts: I'd be happy to send them to you.

The Chair: We are going to move in camera to committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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