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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 86 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Some members are taking part using the Zoom application.

As usual, remember to avoid putting your earpiece close to your microphone when speaking. This causes feedback that can result in serious injury to the interpreters. Please take note of this.

Before starting, I would like to inform the committee members that the draft report on the experience of women veterans was sent to them today. On Wednesday, we'll continue the study on the transition from military to civilian life. The witnesses have already been informed.

I also want to let the committee members know that we need to set our work schedule. We have six studies in the queue. The motions for these studies were passed. The committee members moved at least 26 motions. When we return from our two weeks in our respective constituencies, I would like to provide instructions to the analyst and the clerk so that they can help us draw up our work plan for the remainder of the session.

In addition, we need to look at the supplementary estimates (C) 2023-24, the main estimates and the departmental plans.

Mr. Richards, you raised your hand. You have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to see us return to where we were at the last meeting. Unfortunately, it seemed to be a bit of a filibuster on the part of the Liberals, but I would like to move the motion that I put on notice on December 20 in relation to the production of all the documents around the Prime Minister's interference in the monument to the mission in Afghanistan. I would move that motion once again so that we can carry on the debate with that, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

As this motion has already been moved, I believe the appropriate thing to do would be to move to resume debate, which would require an immediate vote.

The Chair: Exactly. We're going to have to vote on that and come back on that motion.

I'm going to ask the clerk to take the vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The motion moved by Blake Richards was passed.

I want to remind the committee members that, at the last meeting, Mr. Miao moved an amendment. Before continuing the discussion, I would like to ask Mr. Miao to read out the amendment and tell us why it should be passed.

[*English*]

Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I moved and presented an amendment at the last meeting. Let me read this out for the record.

That, at the end of paragraph b), section (vii), the motion be amended by replacing the words "and without redaction" with the words "using the principles of the Access to Information Act and Privacy Act".

The reasoning is that it's important to follow the principles of the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act and protect personal information. The long-standing approach taken by successive governments has been to reconcile the exercise of House of Commons privileges with other fundamental constitutional principles, such as the rule of law, parliamentary sovereignty, responsible government, and the separation of power.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Chair, it's my hope that we can... This has been going on for months, and we're trying to get a vote on this. We think it's important. Obviously, we have veterans here in the room with us today who served in this mission. We have veterans watching from across the country who served in this mission, and they just want to get some answers. I think they feel disrespected by the fact that this has been pushed off and off, and by the fact that there's been political interference by the Prime Minister's Office. This is something that is a real slap in the face to the veterans who served in this mission, and to those family members who lost one of theirs serving in this mission. It's time we get to a vote on it.

Having said that, I do want to make a couple of comments quickly on the amendment that's been moved by the Liberal Party. You all heard the so-called rationale for that. Let me interpret that for anyone who wasn't clear on what it really means. It really means that the Prime Minister's Office told the Liberals, "I don't want to provide these documents, because I'm hiding something." They're standing here today to cover for him. That is what this means.

The idea that you can black out a bunch of the information that's in these documents... These are just documents that talk about what happened in this period of time. I'm not going to go on at length about this, but on November 8, 2021, the decision of the jury that was set up to decide on the design of this monument was communicated to the Minister of Canadian Heritage and to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. Somewhere in the period of time between November 8, 2021 and June 2023—almost a two-year period—there was some kind of an effort by the Prime Minister's Office to change the decision that was made by the process they set up. It was political interference, plain and simple.

These documents are just designed to try to get to the bottom of that. If anyone believes that wanting to black out and redact some of that information is anything other than trying to make sure that anything that incriminates the Prime Minister and his office is prevented from coming out to be seen by the public, and to be seen by veterans who served in this mission, they're mistaken, because that is exactly what this amendment is about.

We are firmly opposed to that amendment, but we do believe this motion needs to get passed. We need to get to the bottom of this for our veterans, and for the family members of those who served in this mission.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Chair, Mr. Richards is quite right that a significant amount of time has been spent on this. There is other business of the committee. As you indicated in your opening remarks, we have witnesses lined up on Wednesday.

I don't know how long the debate is going to be today. I wonder if we could get the unanimous consent of the committee to actually go ahead with the agenda as planned on Wednesday, and not have those two witnesses be required to stand down. That would be my request, that there be unanimous consent of the committee to proceed with hearing from witnesses this coming Wednesday.

• (1115)

Mr. Blake Richards: Should the Liberals decide not to filibuster so we can get to a vote on this, we would have no problem doing that. However, I can't give consent until I know they're going to stop their filibuster.

The Chair: Okay.

I want to say that, in the last meeting, we had witnesses there, but we had committee business. We postponed those witnesses until this Wednesday. We already invited them. They will be here next Wednesday. It's up to the committee to decide. I heard that some people are having some trauma and things like that, so we'd like to be careful on Wednesday with that.

Other—

Mr. Blake Richards: I would encourage the Liberals to end the filibuster. Let's get to a vote on this. Let's not redact these documents. Let's get to the bottom of this. Then we can move on and have our witnesses on Wednesday. It's quite easy.

The Chair: I have no other interventions on that amendment, so I'm going to put it to a vote.

(Amendment negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: Next up is Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I have an amendment to the motion, as well: In paragraph (b), remove item (iii), item (iv), item (v) and item (vi), and remove, under item (vii), "the Office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Office of the Prime Minister".

My reasoning is this: Before we look to request even more documents from the government, let's look at the facts of what came out of the documents we have already received. The documents have shown that the government deviated from the established procurement process against the advice of Canadian Heritage officials. They showed the department pushing to listen to the feedback of veterans at every stage—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Richards has a point of order.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry.

First, I'm a little unclear on what the amendment actually is. I know it's an attempt to try to remove some of the documents that would be produced. Obviously, all of these documents are incredibly important, but I don't understand which ones the Liberals are trying to hide the most vociferously here. Maybe Mr. Sarai could indicate what exactly his amendment is. I'm still unclear.

Second, I wonder if they could indicate how many more amendments they have in trying to delay this even further.

The Chair: Mr. Sarai, could you please read this amendment again?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: The amendment is that, in paragraph (b) of Mr. Richards' motion, we remove item (iii), item (iv), item (v) and item (vi), and remove, in item (vii), “the Office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Office of the Prime Minister”.

• (1120)

The Chair: Can you explain the rationale?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I was about to do so.

First, I want to know if the clerk is clear on what I want to remove. Under paragraph (b), remove item (iii), item (iv), item (v) and item (vi), and remove, under item (vii), “the Office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Office of the Prime Minister”.

The Chair: Okay, good.

Now we'll have the rationale. After that, I have Mr. Richards on the list.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Sure.

Look, they showed that the department was pushing to listen to the feedback of veterans from a very early stage. The Minister of Veterans Affairs took the decision to listen to the voices of veterans based on the overwhelming response received in the survey and a strong desire to put the feedback of veterans first.

These documents show that the PMO and the PCO were informed of those decisions, which makes sense, frankly, given the fact that the department was looking to deviate in a significant way from an established procurement process. The last document request from this committee included PMO correspondence, which the opposition neglects to mention came back as a “nil” response, so this has been asked before. I have a hard time seeing how that would justify such an expansive motion on producing documents.

It is possible to disagree with the government's decision on the matter, as some have expressed. However, the government was transparent with team Daoust regarding the decision and how it was made. The government informed them of their options for recourse. At the same time, the government made it clear that, based on the clear feedback it received through the online questionnaire regarding the five finalists' designs, the veterans and their families had a very clear preference.

It wasn't just veterans, actually. The Stimson design was preferred with majority support across all questions. Team Daoust was presented with the options for legal recourse in this matter through the trade tribunal, among others. They appear to have chosen not to go down those roads, and that is their right.

The fact that the government continues to move forward with the project now shows.... To some, this may not come as a surprise, since veterans continue to say that they want this monument completed as soon as possible without more delays. Even if Mr. Richards had spoken to this previously, we should move on with this.

The production of documents from the PCO, Mr. Chair, has been demanded by the opposition Conservatives in the ethics committee, where it was voted down to produce documents from the PCO and the PMO. A similar production of documents was demanded in a multitude of committees: the ethics committee, the foreign affairs

committee, the public accounts committee, and the citizenship and immigration committee. All demanded the production of these vast numbers of documents, which frustrates the system. Our minister has appeared here. Multiple meetings have been held. The department came and has agreed to a production of documents. The process was given. Reasons for the decisions were given.

It's quite clear. Yes, there was a jury. It made a recommendation, but a comprehensive survey of veterans was done. It expressed a different perspective, particularly that of the veterans and their families. The minister decided to respond to the opinion of the veterans, full stop. That's the end of this.

That's the rationale. I think it's futile to keep going on this. We have a lot of very important studies that we wish to move on. Some of those are from the opposition parties. Everyone, I think, should move on this, in the interest of veterans.

Therefore, I move this amendment so that we can speed up this study and move on to topics that really affect the lives of veterans—such as their day-to-day transition from the CAF to VAC and their medical and other needs that need to be studied—as well as complete the many studies that we have done, including the women's study, which need to be put into text and formally submitted to the House.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

Next on my list I have Mr. Richards, and then Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Chair.

I'll keep this brief as well, now that the Liberal member has finished reading the talking points he received from the Prime Minister's Office about why this Prime Minister, who was once all about openness and transparency, is trying to cover up this political interference.

I want to make sure that what this amendment does is clear. Essentially, what it does is remove all of the documents that get at the whole heart of the question here, which is, what was the Prime Minister's Office interfering in this for? Why did they interfere?

Despite the claims made by the Liberal member, the documents we previously received indicate to us that there were meetings that took place in the two-year period after this decision was communicated to the two ministers involved, where the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office were involved in meetings and where they seem to be driving a process to make changes to this. Nobody knows what the reason for that interference was, and that's what these documents are seeking to produce. Removing all of the documents that relate either to the Prime Minister's Office or to the Privy Council Office removes the ability for this committee to get to the bottom of what actually happened and why there was political interference. It's quite clear that what this is attempting to do is to just cover up for the Prime Minister once again.

I certainly would agree with the Liberal member that there are a lot of very important things that this committee needs to get to that relate to changes that need to be made in how veterans are treated and dealt with by their government and by this department and how we constantly see delays and denials in the basic services and supports that veterans need.

We need to get to that as well, but we need to get this passed. We need to keep all the documents included in this so that we can actually find out why the Prime Minister's Office was interfering in this. If you remove all the documents that relate to the Prime Minister's Office, clearly you're making sure that this can't happen.

The Liberal Party has been given its marching orders by the Prime Minister's Office to help him cover it up. Hopefully, other members of the committee will see that and we can vote this down quickly. Then we can move on to a vote and get this motion passed.

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

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney.

You have the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

This has been a frustrating process. I know that I brought forward a notice of motion putting everybody's wishes in it so that we could try to get this done. I heard a lot of backlash, especially from the Conservatives, so I'm letting it go in trying to get this done. I was clear the last time we were here that I was hoping we would get this finished. It feels like we're just going in circles. You know, what's sad is that I'm listening to the Conservatives blame the Liberals, and the Liberals blame the Conservatives—it's just a lot.

I also know—and I want to thank the analyst so much for his tremendous work—that we've just finished a monumental study on veterans who are women. The report is sitting there. Sadly, in the last couple of weeks, I've been getting messages from veterans who are women and who are very concerned that this won't get done, the piece of documentation they wanted to finally be represented in Parliament—because it has never been done before—so it will be there to give a baseline for the women who served our country and continue to serve our country. I'm just really sad to see this continue on.

I will say that I am also frustrated, because we know.... I keep hearing that there is this great veterans survey and “the veterans

said”, but we still have nothing in the process that clearly states that it was veterans. There is no way of knowing that. Now, I trust veterans. I believe that if they knew there was a survey, they would totally participate, but when I hear that it's going to people's VAC accounts.... I have to tell you that I talk to veterans multiple times a week who are calling into those systems or using those systems and they are traumatized and they don't go on them anymore, so I don't think that it is a really strong statement. The thing that's frustrating is that there's nothing here to quantify. If we want to make sure that this monument gets done.... It needs to get done. There's a long history there that we need to acknowledge. We also have to acknowledge that it needs to be done well and that communication with veterans continues to be a concern.

I find it very interesting to listen to the Conservatives talk about it like they did it well. I remember when they were serving, and there's nothing great to say about the Liberals either. Everybody can shake or nod their heads, but the reality is that veterans are struggling across this country in profound ways, and here we are debating this.

I guess I have a couple of questions.

The first one is for Mr. Richards. I'm hearing from the Liberals now that many motions like this are being made in multiple committees. I'm assuming that there's a strategy there that is more political than based on veterans, if I hear that it's happening in other places. I'm wondering, with the Liberals, if we can at least keep (v) and (vi), because we need to figure out what happened. Let's talk about that. I'd like to offer that up.

If I could, I'd ask the clerk about a timeline. What I'm hearing is that this is happening in other committees, asking for a huge amount of information. Does that mean that, if we pass this, we'll just be waiting for months and months to get that information to our committee so we can do the work? That really concerns me.

If we could get some answers, I think that would help me make a decision.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Excuse me, Mr. Richards, but I already have Mr. Desilets, who would like to intervene.

[*Translation*]

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Desilets. If he wants you to respond, he can let me know.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously, I'm against the amendment moved by the Liberals. It takes away from the essence of the motion. We're looking for information to confirm or explain what happened in this sad situation involving the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister's Office refused to award the contract to the Daoust team, which was the winning team chosen by the jury. I must reiterate that the jury was made up of professional and competent people. The Prime Minister's Office can't act as a jury or art expert.

I'm opposed to the removal of these documents. However, I'm obviously eager to wrap this up. The Conservative motion was moved on December 20, 2023. In a democracy, it makes sense for the Liberals to do this. I understand that. At other times, the Conservatives will do the same. However, the Bloc Québécois rarely acts this way. I don't know why.

In my opinion, the Liberals are holding the veterans hostage in two ways. First, they're making the veterans bear the burden of responsibility for changing the winning firm. The Liberals are relying on a survey that has been repeatedly described as lacking in credibility. The Liberals are all bright enough to know this.

The Liberals are holding the veterans hostage by blaming them for wanting this monument and saying that the government must go ahead with it. It's undemocratic. The government set up criteria and didn't stick to them.

The second way of holding the veterans hostage is quite funny. The Liberals say that they can't wait for us to move on so that we can hear from the veterans. However, by filibustering, they're holding the veterans hostage. I can't wait for the motion to get passed so that we can move on and hear from the veterans.

If the Liberals want to play this game, we'll play it. However, this doesn't amount to listening to the veterans. The veterans should be at the next meeting, and this motion should have been passed a long time ago.

Mr. Chair, thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Richards, you now have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Chair.

Ms. Blaney asked a question and indicated that it was to me specifically. It was related to motions in other committees or something, and I'll just say that I'm not aware of what these motions are. I don't know what's happening in these other committees she's referring to. What I can tell her is that this motion was something I brought forward about four months ago, to begin with, simply to try to get to the bottom of this, to find out for veterans what exactly happened with this interference. It was motivated purely, 100%, by the desire to make sure we got to the bottom of this on behalf of veterans and their families, and nothing more. There's no political nature to this. This is about veterans.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Ms. Blaney, I spoke to the clerk, and he said he's not able to answer your question because it's the offices that have to work on that, so we can't give you a timeline for how long it's going to take to get those documents.

Are there any other interventions?

Mr. Sarai, go ahead.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I think it would be helpful if the clerk could find out, in regard to Ms. Blaney's question, what the typical timelines have been on these productions of documents. Has it been weeks, months, etc.? I think that would help Ms. Blaney.

I thank her for her intervention in respect of items (v) and (vi). I think adding them back in would not be acceptable to us, but we could add any communication between the office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the office of Heritage Canada, if that would be important to her. I think that's probably one of the few things that have not been done for the two ministers before. If that's something that might help Ms. Blaney understand or see the process that's been used, I think we'd be pretty comfortable with that. I wanted to add that, in case that was something she would be interested in.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to remind the committee that the motion states that, within 21 days of the adoption of the motion, they must submit the documents.

Does anyone else want to comment on the amendment moved by Randeep Sarai?

Since no one seems to want to speak, we'll now vote on the amendment.

(Amendment negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: Mr. Casey, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Casey: I wish to propose another amendment to add after paragraph (b).

Mr. Chair, I think you recognized me. When Conservative members had the floor, we afforded them the courtesy of silence while they had the floor. I'd appreciate if I had the same.

The amendment that I'd like to propose is to add, after paragraph (b)(vii), the following: "(c) that the committee invite the Hon. Erin O'Toole, former minister of Veterans Affairs, to respond to questions about the selection of the Richmond Landing site in 2014 for the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, and specifically why Veterans were not properly consulted."

Mr. Chair, I understand that in my absence the committee has adopted one amendment, at least, to Mr. Richards' motion, which is to expand the time period for the production of documents back to 2014, which I think was an excellent thing to do if we are to, as Mr. Richards says, get to the bottom of this.

Given that we're reaching back to 2014, the person calling the shots at that time was the then minister of veterans affairs. In the interest of transparency and in the interest of being comprehensive, I do believe that Mr. O'Toole would have relevant testimony to bring to the issue and he should be included in the witness list.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1140)

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

We have an amendment on the table.

Mr. Blake Richards: Can we just get the amendment read back, Chair?

The Chair: Mr. Casey, could you please read it again for us?

Thank you.

Mr. Sean Casey: It's that we add after paragraph (b)(vii) the following: "(c) that the committee invite the Hon. Erin O'Toole, former minister of Veterans Affairs, to respond to questions about the selection of the Richmond Landing site in 2014 for the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, and specifically why Veterans were not properly consulted."

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Is there debate or interventions?

Mr. Sarai, go ahead, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I just want to say that I think what Mr. Casey is proposing in the amendment is very important. This process started long before this government came in. I think it's very important to find out the process, and lack of it, that was done before. That will probably give a perspective on why the minister had to make the decision that he made later on.

I think it's imperative that we listen to and hear Mr. O'Toole, who was the minister with this file, about how they debated this or talked about this, how they came up with that decision, why that decision was the way it was, what the veterans' opinion of that decision was and why, subsequently, that location and the whole decision had to be changed.

The unfortunate part is that the previous government neglected to have a monument for these veterans. The location was not the one they wanted either.

We've been trying to move ahead and we've been trying to listen to veterans. Although I can agree with Ms. Blaney that the process was not perfect and the survey was not absolutely perfect, the data that's been given by Veterans Affairs, its bureaucrats and civil servants has been pretty comprehensive in showing that an overwhelming majority of those respondents were veterans or members of veterans' families.

I think we trust Canadians, when they do a survey, to give fairly accurate information. We're a country that usually honours people's opinions, and when they say who they are, we respect it, unless challenged otherwise. I think out of everything we've heard here today, nobody has challenged the validity and said, "Oh, I know 12 people, five people, or x number of people who misstated that they were veterans." I think when they said they're veterans, they're vet-

erans, and we have to honour that and respect that. I highly doubt that any Canadian would mis-characterize themselves in a survey and say they're a veteran.

At the same time, I think it's very important to see the process, or lack of it, in the previous government. That's why we ask that Mr. O'Toole come before this committee and answer questions in that regard.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

On my list, I have Mr. Richards and Ms. Hepfner.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, I would just say this, Chair. The period of time that we're concerned with here, as a committee, is obviously from November 8, 2021, through to the time the decision was changed, when there was interference by the Prime Minister's Office. I assume Mr. O'Toole would have nothing in terms of information that could contribute to this for that period of time.

Having said that, unlike when we tried to invite the previous minister of veterans affairs and the previous minister of Canadian heritage, who actually had responsibility for these files during that period of time, and they refused to come to this committee, Conservatives are transparent, so I have no issue at all. If Mr. O'Toole would like to come and try to contribute, let's have him come, but it would sure be wonderful if the ministers who were actually responsible during this period of time also had the same accountability and showed up as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Now let's go to Ms. Hepfner.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to point out that the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan will recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who served in Afghanistan, and the support provided to them at home by their families, peers and communities. I find it odd that we're hearing more about artists than veterans in connection with this monument. After all, it's a monument to veterans.

I think that we're hearing opposition members talk about the arts community for a reason. The reason is that most veterans finally feel satisfied with the government's choice. We know that the veterans weren't happy when the Conservative government decided to place the monument under a bridge. They expressed their dissatisfaction with this decision. This wasn't surprising. The veterans weren't even consulted on the choice of location for the monument. As a result, when we came to power in 2015, we revisited that decision and consulted with veterans. Our government will always listen to and support veterans.

As the Minister of Veterans Affairs has said a number of times, Veterans Affairs Canada received feedback from over 12,000 Canadians regarding the monument concept. Veterans, their families and other stakeholders who participated in this mission were the main contributors. The Stimson team's concept best reflects the feedback from veterans and their families, along with the feedback from other mission participants. When it comes to honouring the sacrifices of our veterans, we must listen to what they have to say.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you for your comments.

[*English*]

Mr. Miao, you have the floor.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We appreciate and respect the work of the jury members who evaluated the final design concepts; however, it is clear that the team Stimson design was the one that veterans of the missions and their families felt best represented the bravery, sacrifices and loss of those who served in Afghanistan. The results of the consultation, which are also public, are clear. It's important that we listen to our veterans.

All the documents we've received show the reason the government chose to go with the team Stimson design. The reason is clear. In fact, the minister told us about that in previous meetings a few times and talked about it for almost an hour.

I'll repeat the reason. Veterans Affairs Canada heard from more than 12,000 Canadians about the monument designs. The majority of those who responded were veterans, their families and others who served on the missions, and team Stimson's design best reflected their input. We choose to honour that choice. When it comes to honouring the sacrifice of our veterans, we must listen to them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Miao.

We have Ms. Hepfner.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to point out again that it comes as no surprise that the Conservative Party is asking us to ignore the voices of veterans on this issue. That's exactly what the Conservative Party did when it was in power. In 2014, it announced the location of this monument with a press release, without even taking the time to consult with veterans. Not surprisingly, the veterans weren't happy. The Conservatives chose a location often blocked by snow in the winter and subject to flooding in the spring.

We overturned that decision, listened to what the veterans had to say and chose a suitable location. We'll continue to listen to veterans.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner.

[*English*]

We have Mr. Casey and Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We've heard today that this is all about veterans. There is what I would call "Trudeau derangement syndrome", where individuals who have another agenda, an agenda that isn't aligned with veterans and that is purely political, seek to smear the Prime Minister without foundation and without reason. I think that's what we're dealing with.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, I'll refer to some of the evidence from the meeting on October 19, 2023. It supports the position that I just described. It concerns a discussion between Mr. Desilets and the Minister of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Desilets accused the minister of dodging questions put to her. Mr. Desilets said:

I'll come back to the issue of veterans. As you know, for the past four years, I've been working very hard for veterans. But this issue isn't about veterans...

It's quite clear, and it helps explain the current situation. This isn't about veterans. It's about politics. This explains the lack of acceptance. That's why we'll be voting against the amendment regarding the documents relating to discussions between the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council. That's really why we're here.

I find it absurd that the opposition members refused to provide the documents that would have helped us obtain the jury's correspondence. Now they want something specific concerning the jury.

I would like to give my opposition colleagues the benefit of the doubt. However, it seems that they want only the documents that align with the narrative that they're trying to build. They don't want to hear from veterans or any opinions that support the final choice, meaning the Stimson team concept. Yet this is a monument to veterans.

The National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan will recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who served in Afghanistan, and the support provided to them at home by Canadians. The monument will also reflect Canada's deep gratitude for the sacrifices made by the people who served in Afghanistan, including those who lost their lives or who were physically or psychologically injured.

The monument will provide a public space to serve as a perpetual reminder of Canadians' selfless service to our country. It will give future generations the opportunity to learn more about this particular period in the history of our armed forces.

As we know, the jury's decision wasn't unanimous, contrary to what my colleague told the House. The jury did an incredible job selecting the five concepts that made the final list. We all agree on that. As project leader, Veterans Affairs Canada's role was to listen to veterans. Even though Mr. Desilets said otherwise, this is really about veterans. We must listen to them.

Veterans Affairs Canada received feedback from over 12,000 Canadians on the concepts considered for this monument. Veterans, their families and other people who participated in the mission were the main contributors.

The Stimson team's concept best reflects the feedback provided by veterans, their families and other mission participants during public consultations. The veterans' choice must be taken into account.

• (1155)

[English]

Mr. Chair, I'll close with this. What we have here is a political smear campaign that has far exceeded the partisan attacks and the partisan manoeuvres we have seen in this place in other committees.

In order to get to other committee business, in order to be able to do the things that are important to people, and in order to be able to do the things that are for veterans.... For example, in other committees we have seen similar motions seeking the production of documents from the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office, but the following committees have actually adopted motions without the inclusion of PMO and PCO. The ethics committee had several motions about Chinese interference that included the PMO, from which the committee agreed to remove the PMO. There were also the foreign affairs committee, the public accounts committee, the citizenship and immigration committee, and the health committee.

There is a way to resolution of this impasse, and I would encourage everyone, in the interest of veterans—which seems to be a bit of a novel concept—to put some water in their wine and to try to get through this impasse in a reasonable fashion.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

On my list I have Mr. Sarai and Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Sarai, go ahead, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Chair.

I thank my colleague Mr. Casey for shedding light on this.

Look, when we do a process and we don't consult veterans and we don't consult the stakeholders in it, the product you get might be artistically great, but it won't be something that people want. The previous government and the previous minister for veterans decided to put a monument under a bridge and tuck it away where only cyclists could possibly drive by and wave to it. The opposite was done when, as an article said, "The victims of communism get a huge, glorious spot on Wellington Street—for the whole world to see—and those who served or died in Afghanistan get a spot below

the Portage Bridge for cyclists to wave at." Veterans were in an uproar. They said they didn't get it; they didn't get it at all.

But this was done, and if you look at who was conversed with, at who knew, they said it was virtually no one.

We checked with several veterans' groups and none said they were consulted about this spot as an appropriate location to honour the 158 Canadian Forces members killed and the 40,000 who served during the 12-year mission.

The Royal Canadian Legion said it didn't know a thing about it, except that Dow's Lake was once a candidate.

Bruce Moncur, president of the year-old Afghanistan Veterans Association of Canada, said his group was not contacted. He's not entirely sold on the site, because it appears to be tucked away.

"I believe accessibility is everything," he said this week. "If it is too far off the beaten track, pretty soon you can see the dandelions creeping in and skateboarders doing tricks off it, and the jogger running by and not looking at it twice. It might be like the war itself, another forgotten war."

These were the comments that the Veterans Affairs office and the public heard after the previous decision was made. The main problem they had was that they were not consulted. They were not consulted on the final product, on the commemoration of the sacrifices or on the location.

That's why, in May 2021, the Government of Canada posted a survey. They asked veterans, families of those who participated in the mission, Canadian Armed Forces members, other stakeholders and the Canadian public to share their thoughts on the design concepts proposed by the following five finalists: team Daoust, team Hapa Collaborative, team Lashley MacDonald, team PFS Studio and team Stimson.

In terms of results, 12,048 valid surveys were analyzed, 10,829 in English and 1,219 in French. In cases where multiple surveys were submitted from the same IP address and were deemed to be overly similar, all but one survey was removed. We can say that it was a fairly free vote and no manipulation occurred in that regard.

The questions were pretty thorough. The first question was on "monument theme". Each respondent could select more than one answer. As a result, percentages may have added up to more than 100%, but you got to see how people felt about each. The monument had several related themes. You were asked which designs you thought most effectively expressed those themes. You were able to select the theme appropriate for you.

On the theme "To express Canada's deep gratitude for the sacrifices made by Canadians who served in Afghanistan, including those Canadian Armed Forces members and civilians who lost their lives or were injured", there were 11,807 respondents. Team Daoust got 26.5%. The people surveyed thought that reflected it well. Team Hapa Collaborative got 13%. Team Lashley MacDonald got 20.5%. Team PFS Studio got 16.8%. Team Stimson got 63.9%, or 64%, more than double that for the closest, team Daoust at 26.5%. It was two and a half times the response.

• (1200)

The next question that was asked with respect to the teams was, “To recognize the strong support offered by families, friends and communities at home during the mission.” Again, of the 11,299 people who responded, 27% thought team Daoust had the best in that regard, 15.5% thought it was team Hapa Collaborative, 17% thought it was team Lashley MacDonald and 14% thought it was team PFS Studio. Team Stimson got 52%, which was double the amount of the closest one to reflect on that.

When we go to “To acknowledge the efforts of Canadians in standing together with the Afghan people to help rebuild their country and encourage understanding of the significance and scope of Canada’s mission in Afghanistan”, again, of 11,500 people—these are pretty comprehensive surveys, I might add, with a very strong response—31% were for team Daoust, 13% were for Hapa Collaborative, and team Stimson was at 56%, which, again, virtually doubled the second-highest amount.

The second thing, besides commemoration, is how many people will see it and what the visitor experience is. There were questions with respect to which design “effectively performs the following Visitor Experience functions”. Again, over 11,500 responded. Team Daoust got a good response of 37%. Others were 19%, 19.5% and 22%, but team Stimson got 54% of the response in favour of it giving the best visitor experience when one came to see it.

The other question was about encouraging visitors to learn more about the mission. For museums and commemoration, an important thing to do is raise the inquisitiveness of a visitor to learn about what has happened and what is being commemorated. Again, out of the 11,334, team Daoust got 22.8%. I won't go into the other ones, but they range between 12% and 18%. Team Stimson got 65%. There were 65% who thought it gave more of a visitor experience.

There's the setting, which provides for gatherings and ceremonies. That's a very important part. Team Daoust got a good response of 40%. Others were 12%, 27% and 13%, but again, team Stimson stood out with 51.9%.

These effectively show that the effect of the design by team Stimson on the visitors, location and commemoration had an overwhelming impact. It wasn't even close when we look at the others.

The other questions were on impressions of the proposed monument design. Was one more cold, more peaceful or more solemn? Again, team Stimson's design showed a very high result in that regard.

When we look at the French results—I assume that a particularly high majority would have come from Quebec to reflect those—the results were not any different from those that came from anglophone Canadians and other parts of Canada. I think this clearly reflects that these were neutral designs. They were great designs. However, some attested to people's feelings, affections and responses more. That was always the team Stimson design.

Even finding out how many of these were from the national capital region—because sometimes people from my neck of the woods will say it's a little biased—I think only 2,700 responses came from this region. That's obviously still a high veteran population. The

Ontario and Quebec population also would have had a strong government, bureaucratic and military presence. That was about 25%.

British Columbia received 1,084 responses. That's 13.64%. I think that is quite reflective of our population with respect to the rest of the Canada, so it seems like the diversity and the demographics of Canada were respected well. Alberta had 1,200, which was 15%. In fact, I'd say that's a bit overly representative. When you go across the spectrum, including Atlantic Canada, I think it was fairly [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], so all provinces, all jurisdictions and all demographics were respected.

• (1205)

Lastly, I would like to say that, when it came to the category of... There's a lot of debate and there are a lot of questions that this committee has looked at in terms of how many were veterans and whatnot. When people were asked whether they participated in Canada's government mission in Afghanistan, as a Canadian Armed Forces member, police officer, public servant or civilian, 28% or 3,000 of the respondents stated they did. When they were asked whether they were a “family member of an individual who participated in Canada's whole-of-government mission”, which included CAF members, police officers, public servants or civilians, there was another 12.5%, or 1,300 members. The third-highest category was for veterans of Canada's military—again, people who have served: 26%, or 2,800, stated they were. Asked if they were current members of the Canadian Armed Forces, 2,500 or 23% were serving Canadian Armed Forces members. About 300 were current or former Canadian police officers, whom we respect like veterans. The general public was about a third, 3,876.

I think this gives you the perspective that this was not a small consultation. It was not a small poll. This was a very comprehensive study.

I think we should move on with the wishes of the veterans and get to the real work, which is building this monument.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

I remind the committee that we are still discussing the amendment by Mr. Casey.

On my list, I have Mr. Desilets, Mr. Ruff and Ms. Hepfner.

I want to welcome MP Alex Ruff to the committee. We also have Jacques Mazide, who is here to help our clerk.

Welcome to both of you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

• (1210)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll try to be brief. I want to avoid playing into the Liberals' hands and obviously helping them ensure that the committee meeting ends without us finally passing or voting down the motion.

I'm speaking to the Liberals.

I'm really very empathetic to your situation. You're working quite hard to filibuster. It can't be easy. I say this because I know some of you. I know that this approach doesn't reflect your values. I'm sure that you aren't really like that. You held a wonderful caucus where you were briefed on the monument situation. In addition, many Liberal members didn't support the government's position. They were uncomfortable with the government's choice.

You spoke about veterans. Some of them are here. Take the time to ask them after the meeting if they agree with how the government chose who should build this monument. You're pinning everything on them. However, take the time to go and see them later.

Mr. Casey, I said that the issue wasn't about veterans. I told you three, four or five times. Thank you for repeating my comments. The only problem is that you failed to put them in context.

You're using the veterans again. In a way, this isn't any of the veterans' business. If you really wanted to make it their business, my goodness, you would have actually put it in your selection criteria. That wasn't done. The government did nothing but conduct a survey. It was a bogus survey, Mr. Sarai, and you know it. The largest survey company in Canada criticized it from top to bottom.

Please, stop using the veterans.

Look around at your colleagues. You'll see how little pride some of them take in the fact that this government makes decisions in this manner. It's absurd.

You spoke about political smear campaigns. All that we and the Conservatives—even though I rarely agree with them—want is transparency on this issue.

Once again, you have taken two hours to avoid letting us address the real issues. All that we need to do, if you have nothing to hide, is simply pass this motion. Let's pass this motion. It's quite simple.

Mr. Casey, I agree that the jury's decision wasn't unanimous. As you know, I have gone back on this position. You can use it as often as you like. The jury had to reach a decision by a majority vote. The jury chose the Daoust team by a majority vote. That's all.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

MP Ruff, the floor is yours.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'm finding this very frustrating. I am one of the veterans in this room. I spent over a year of my life in Afghanistan and left six of my soldiers there, whom this monument is going to commemorate. There were 158 Canadian Armed Forces members who did not come home.

I can't speak for all Afghanistan veterans, but I do know what they want. They want a monument. They want transparency. They want a decision, and they want this to get passed so that we can move on. Right now they don't have a place to commemorate at the national level.

The Liberals have talked about consultation. Ms. Blaney brought up the challenges with the consultation and the data and My VAC. I just spent 20 minutes trying to log in to My VAC Account. I can't get in. I'm a fairly educated person with a background in IT, and I can't even log in to My VAC Account right now without making a phone call and talking to somebody on the other end, and who knows how long that wait is going to be?

I'll tell you what veterans don't want. They don't want political interference in anything. When they were in uniform, they served whatever government was in power. I served proudly. The Liberal government was in power when I first joined the forces in 1993. I served the Conservative government when they were in power for over a decade, and I served under this current Liberal government. There are no issues there. Veterans will serve whatever government is in power. That's their job.

They don't want obstruction. They don't want political interference. They want transparency. One thing that they absolute detest is wasting time. I suggest that you read the body language of the veterans who are in the room, who are finding this very frustrating, in particular because this is an amendment that has been moved that we are debating now, and the Conservatives have already indicated that they are going to vote for it, so why are we talking about it?

It's going to pass. Let's just get to the vote.

Thanks, Chair.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now I have Ms. Hepfner.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Mr. Ruff, thank you for your service, and thank you for your words today.

I think it is important to talk about how this decision was made by veterans. More than 10,000 people responded to that survey. I'm reading from a story from CTV last year when that decision was made:

They overwhelmingly preferred a design put forward by Team Stimson: a circular space inspired by an Indigenous medicine wheel, sectioned into four parts, with an inner sanctuary featuring four bronze flak jackets hanging from crosses.

Artist Adrian Stimson, a member of Siksika First Nation in Alberta, is perhaps uniquely qualified to create such a monument.

A former member of the Armed Forces, Stimson joined the Canadian Forces Artists Program as a civilian in 2010 and spent time in Afghanistan, observing how the troops lived and interacted with their surroundings.

"While I was there, I became interested in the physical materiality of the bases, the industrial nature of embedding troops into the theatre of war.... Mimicking this, the monument is a place to be discovered and to be revealed. The monument enlivens as you approach on a meandering pathway, revealing itself slowly, with purpose."

Three quadrants of the monument will include the names of the 158 Canadian military members who were killed in the conflict. The fourth...is meant to honour Canada's relationship with the Afghan people.

I think it's important that we recognize that it wasn't political interference; it was the government listening to veterans themselves. I think we should keep that in mind. The veterans do want us to move on to other issues. They want us to build this monument and move on to talking about many of the other issues that Mr. Ruff brought up, which are important as well.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now I turn to Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm really struggling with this, because there's a lot we need to get done in this committee, and here we are having this repeat and repeat. My curiosity here is.... One of the things that I've talked a lot about is having VAC have a more veteran-centric communication strategy and also, I would say, a greater level of trauma-informed training, because what we hear again and again from veterans, of course, sadly, is that they're often retraumatized. It's called "sanctuary trauma".

Here we are.... I'm getting frustrated. I would like to see Wednesday happen. We've already turned away all of those people. They came, and one of them is a veteran who has shared with me her frustration about having that happen. I think we just need to do Wednesday. I want to be clear about that, because I just feel that I don't want to be talking to the same veteran again about why she was turned away from having her voice heard.

I want to get answers, too, but what I can't handle here is that there continues to be this discussion, oddly enough, that veterans were consulted, and I don't believe that's the case. I asked questions when the ministers were here, and I don't believe it. I hear that the Liberals believe it. I just want to get this done.

I've talked to Afghanistan veterans, who just want a place to be remembered. There was a fear that their service would not be recognized. We've not only lost them in Afghanistan; we've lost them in our own country, when they took their own lives. I don't care, really, which monument is put up. Personally, I don't care. It's not my job to make that decision. That is really up to veterans, and I agree with that, but we need a better process.

I hope we can get this done, and I hope we can get it done quickly. I hope we can focus on serving veterans, and the way we have been put in this position to serve them is to be here and to do our work.

I'm skimming through this study on the women veterans again. This is amazing, what's in here, and there's so much more that we

need to do. I really want to get to the study around the Persian Gulf veterans. I know that the Persian Gulf veterans are going through some significant challenges right now. We need to acknowledge them and give them support through this committee with the work we do. I don't want to turn away veterans who are trying to come.

I hope that we can just vote on this. Can we call the vote so that we can at least get this part done?

Then, if they're going to continue to filibuster, I think that collectively we need to start thinking about how we can get information that may not be able to come through the committee.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

I have Mr. May, who would like to intervene, but thank you for raising the issue for this Wednesday, because we are in a position, as you say, where we have already invited those witnesses. At the end of this meeting, I'd like to know clearly what the committee wants to do. If not, I'm going to instruct the clerk to cancel those witnesses, because I don't want them to come back again and not be able to talk.

I'll come back to you. Now, I'd like to hear from Mr. May.

First, on a point of order, we have Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Chair.

I think your question is an important one, but the more important question before we get to that question is this: Do the Liberals plan to filibuster through the rest of this meeting, or will they let this come to a vote today? I think it's important that we have that happen. Everybody else on this committee has expressed that they want to see that happen.

Can the Liberals give us an indication? Are they going to allow a vote, or are they not?

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I don't think that's a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: I heard you.

Mr. May, you have the floor.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I apologize for my absence today. I am a bit under the weather, but I do want to jump in.

I agree with MP Blaney that we need to get to the women's study. We need to get to the pressing issues that are in front of this committee now and that have been for quite some time.

I will remind this committee that I warned this committee many months ago that this discussion, the motion that was originally brought forward by MP Desilets, was going to result in mission creep. That's exactly what's happened. We're seeing an attempt by the opposition, specifically the Conservatives now, to make this into something it is not.

I also want to thank MP Ruff for his service, and I agree with him that, quite frankly, this is exactly what frustrates veterans. The veterans I've spoken to at length don't want us to be sniping back and forth in attempts to embarrass the government. They want us to deal with the issues of the day. They want us to deal in very speedy fashion with the motions that are in front of us.

I think it's important to remind the committee and those who are watching what, in fact, the committee has agreed to study and to get to. It's not just the women's study. So far, I have gone through a first pass of it. It is excellent, and I thank the analysts for the work they've done on this. I look forward to getting back to that and getting that tabled in the House of Commons as quickly as possible.

However, there's more than just that study. We have a motion that was tabled by my colleague MP Sarai on the effects on Canadian veterans of exposure to burn pits. I'll read it, because it's been a while since we discussed it, just to remind everybody what that is.

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee undertake a study on the effects of exposure to burn pits on Canadian Veterans, including but not limited to, during the mission in Afghanistan, as well as the potential long-term effects on the health and well-being of Veterans. That the Committee hold a minimum of 4 meetings to hear from witnesses; that the Committee report its findings and recommendations to the House; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109—

• (1225)

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. May. There's a point of order.

Mr. Ruff, go ahead, please.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Chair.

I am just trying to understand the relevance. We're talking about the amendment about calling the honourable Erin O'Toole to be part of this motion. Mr. May is speaking about a different study that's been proposed. Can we have a ruling on relevance there, Chair?

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. May, we have an amendment on the floor, so can you talk about this amendment tabled by Mr. Casey, please?

Mr. Bryan May: I think it is relevant, Mr. Chair. I apologize to the members who don't necessarily want me to remind folks of what in fact we should be working on and talking about. I recognize that we have an amendment on the floor that we need to discuss. However, as this is my time, I think it's important. I would like to get back to finishing my discussion on this.

It's important to remind veterans and the committee about what it is we should be working on in terms of the time we have. The time we have is limited. We're here twice a week. During the sitting weeks, we have a very short calendar to get some of this stuff done.

Another such study that we should be in the middle of right now is the one MP Wilson Miao tabled. I will remind this committee of that study, as well:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a comprehensive study reviewing (a) the definition of "War", "Wartime Service", and "Special Duty Service"; and (b) the difference, the process of determining, and criteria for Veteran's benefits in respect of "Wartime Service" and "Special Duty Service"; that the committee hold a minimum of 4 meetings on this study; and that the committee report its comprehensive findings and recommendations to the House, the Department of National Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I can tell you that I had a conversation, Mr. Chair, about that study this past week with some local veterans in my riding who have been asking for recognition of special service for an incredibly long time.

These are the ways we can move forward. These are just two of the studies. I haven't even discussed the motion I tabled not that long ago, back in November, that we study the experience of indigenous and Black veterans. These are compelling studies that should draw our attention. Instead, the Conservatives want to play games. They want to stymie not just the committee but also the work being done at the PMO. They want to call for a deep-sea fishing exercise to try to waste the time of this committee and the PMO.

Mr. Chair, I think it is incredibly important that we consider adjourning this debate. I will let others make that decision. However, in the half-hour we have left here, we should be getting to the business of what this committee will be doing when we come back. We haven't even discussed that. What is next on the docket? Hopefully, we'll have witnesses on Wednesday. I think it's—

• (1230)

The Chair: Mr. May, wait one minute, please. I have a point of order.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I note that the Liberal member talks about wanting to try to end the debate. There is an easy way for us to get to some of the other topics. We could simply have a vote on this motion, which everybody else—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Chair, that's not a point of order. A point of order is not a way to interrupt someone's intervention.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Please don't interrupt the one who has the mike. It's not a point of order.

Mr. May, please go on.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was coming to an end. I did want to conclude by simply saying that the fear I had when we started this process many months ago has in fact materialized. This committee has become stymied on this issue.

I would very much like to see us get to the motions that are in front of this committee and do the work that veterans want us to do. The veterans I speak to want the monument built, period. They want to get to the point where they can stand in front of that monument and honour the fallen soldiers they served beside. I've read only two of them, but if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Chair—you can check with the analyst—I believe there are six motions that are in front of us, including motions that the Conservatives themselves have tabled and apparently have just decided are not as important as this.

I just want to identify these motions that are in front of us, and I want to identify the fact that the opposition has decided that what we're debating today is more important to them. I can tell you that, for the veterans I've spoken to, this is not the case. This debate in the last hour and a half has not been important to veterans, but the motions that we have all agreed upon are. The sooner we can get back to those motions, the sooner we can move forward with recommendations to the government and actually effect change that will support veterans in this country.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

Mr. Richards, please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Chair.

I want us to deal with this. I know that all the other members—other than the Liberal members—want to deal with this. I've asked for some indication of whether they would allow this to get to a vote today.

I think it's clear to everybody who's watching this what's going on here. There are attempts to delay and deny, just like veterans see every day with their ability to get benefits. Let's get to a vote on this.

Chair, I'll just ask for unanimous consent that we continue the meeting until 2 p.m., or until we have a vote on this motion.

The Chair: First of all, I want to make sure that we have the technical staff to be able to go to two o'clock. Yes, we do.

We're going to go to a vote on that. I'd like to know if I have unanimous consent to go until two o'clock.

Some hon. members: No.

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, I'm just wondering, then, if the Liberals could give us an indication as to why they're not willing to go until 2 p.m. Is it simply that they want to continue this cover-up and they don't want to have a vote on this?

We just heard from a Liberal member that they want to get to other matters that the committee wants to deal with. I certainly want to see that happen as well. I think all of us want to see that happen. I know the veterans in the room and those watching online all want to see that as well. By going until 2 p.m., we can get this motion dealt with and we can deal with those things, which is what we should all want to do.

Could the Liberals give us an indication as to why they're refusing to give veterans their due?

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Casey, you have the floor.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe that, in his presentation, Mr. May suggested an adjournment of debate. I'm not sure whether that was a motion to adjourn debate, or whether he was putting it out there for discussion. If it is a motion to adjourn debate, we have to proceed directly to a vote.

The Chair: I know, but I didn't hear clearly from Mr. May that he wanted to adjourn debate on the amendment.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay, thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to come back to a couple of things that have been mentioned in the course of the debate.

First of all, Mr. Ruff, allow me to add my thanks to you for your service.

One of the things Mr. Ruff said is that he knows what veterans want, and so do we. It was reflected in the survey, and it has guided the decisions that have been made in connection with this matter. It has been referenced on numerous occasions by the minister that this was the paramount consideration, because this is, or should be, about veterans.

Ms. Blaney talked about Veterans Affairs having a more veteran-centric communications strategy. I would suggest that this is being respected in the manner in which the survey was utilized in the decision-making process.

I would also like to say that I agree entirely with what she said when she indicated in her intervention that she'd like to get on with witnesses on Wednesday. That's the reason I sought unanimous consent at the outset of the meeting, so we're certainly on the same page in that regard.

Mr. Chair, the minister has come before this committee three times since October, and every time, regardless of the topic that she was here to discuss—and it wasn't exclusively the Afghanistan monument—including estimates, the conversation quickly turned to the Afghanistan monument, and on each of the three occasions when she came before this committee, she clearly indicated that Veterans Affairs chose to listen to veterans, and that it was Veterans Affairs Canada that made the decision.

As for the conspiracy theories about alleged political interference by the Prime Minister, there is absolutely nothing to substantiate that. There is nothing to justify going way beyond what every other standing committee has done with respect to any probe they might be involved in to take the extraordinary measures that are being proposed by the motion.

Mr. Chair, teams of professional artists, landscape architects, architects and other urban design professionals were invited to submit their credentials and examples of their prior work on similar projects as part of the request for qualifications that closed on February 27, 2020. Five teams were shortlisted by a jury of experts in the fields of art and urban design, as well as representatives from key stakeholder groups, to develop design concepts for this monument. The design concepts were evaluated by the same jury made up of experts in the fields of visual art and urban design and representatives from key stakeholder groups, including a veteran of Canada's mission in Afghanistan, a representative of the families of the fallen, a non-veteran representative of the mission in Afghanistan, and a military historian.

Those individuals included Dr. Stephen Borys, director and CEO of the Winnipeg Art Gallery; Virginia Burt, landscape architect and principal at Virginia Burt Designs; Master Warrant Officer Steve Chagnon, veteran of Canada's mission in Afghanistan; Reine Samson Dawe, representing the families of the fallen and 2019 national memorial silver cross mother; Arif Lalani, Canada's ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan during the height of Canada's military and civilian mission; Talbot Sweetapple, architect and partner at MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects; and Dr. Lee Windsor, deputy director of the Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, named for Brigadier Milton Gregg, VC.

• (1240)

The national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan will recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who served in Afghanistan and the support provided to them at home, and will be a permanent place for Canadians to reflect on their service. The monument will ensure that future generations have the opportunity to learn more about the mission and Canada's efforts in helping to rebuild Afghanistan.

We all appreciate and respect the work done by jury members in evaluating the design concepts, their professionalism and their personal experience.

The process to reach this stage of the project was lengthy and included jury deliberations on several design concepts, as well as public opinion research that generated over 10,000 responses, including from the Canadian Forces and mission veterans and their families. All of those things factored into the decision ultimately arrived at by Veterans Affairs Canada.

The team Stimson design was the one that veterans of the mission and their families felt best represented the bravery, sacrifices and losses of those who served there. The results of the consultation, which are public, are clear.

Mr. Chair, it is our responsibility, as it was the minister's responsibility, to listen to veterans. That is at the heart of where we should be focused.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

We have Mr. Sarai, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I think we've studied this topic, the design selection process. We've had the minister here. We've had the Minister of Canadian Heritage here. We've had department officials here. I just want to remind members that we've had veterans who have come before us.

I've never heard any veteran, either coming to my office or calling, or in this committee—in this study or others—say that the selection that the government has finally made with regard to the team Stimson design has been incorrect. We've heard of process problems that have been there, especially from the artistic community, but we have not heard from others in regard to that, from the actual people we're trying to see—people who have served. I have not heard anything of significance from that, or any uproar. I spent three days at a veterans summit, which my colleague Mr. Desilets

also attended, the national stakeholder summit in Montreal. Again, people wanted the monument to move forward, but I did not hear any objection to the design selected.

I think the amendment my colleague has proposed is very valid, and we should move forward with that.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: As I understand it, the Liberals do not intend to vote on the motion today.

Mr. Chair, you will tell me how to proceed, but as vice-chair, I think we can plan our work. I'm saddened by this situation. I think the next meeting should be on the issue at hand, until it is resolved. That's just a suggestion. If the Liberals decide to filibuster, that's their prerogative. In a democracy, that's inappropriate, but it happens.

I would just like to come back to one point. Mr. Sarai, you didn't hear what the veterans had to say. It's not their style to raise their hand and say that they are not in favour of a monument.

Mr. Casey, you are such a smart man, yet you're going back to the survey again. The government itself recognized that the survey had no value. You continue to say that it has value, that 10,000 people participated in the survey. If you don't believe the people at Leger, who completely demolished it, that's not a problem for me.

I am going to talk to you about a Veterans Affairs Canada document from Amanda Kelly, a manager we all know, who, in an email dated November 17, 2021, raised a point about the survey.

Look me in the eye, Mr. Casey.

She pointed out that the survey did not ask respondents to rank their choice and that, depending on the respondents' interpretation of the question, they may or may not have chosen more than one model. There is no way of knowing which one they preferred or to what extent they preferred one over the other.

After all, it is someone from the department, a manager in an important position, who is telling us that in black and white. This email is part of the documents that were sent in. So you see the relevance of asking for documents to be able to see things clearly, as the process is really not clear. So there is someone at Veterans Affairs Canada who is going against the survey you are defending so staunchly.

At a previous meeting, I asked the minister if she could show me that at least one female veteran had responded to the survey. You remember as well as I do, since you listen to the minister a lot, that she said she was unable to do so. In fact, there was nothing that distinguished gender from the other data or values.

Earlier, you alluded to the fact that people from the national capital had been approached. Statistically, that doesn't make sense, either. They don't account for 25% of the population.

You talked about francophones. Although they represent 22% of the population, they accounted for 12% of the survey respondents. I would rather call it a pseudo-survey. You can't even call it a survey.

You don't believe what I'm saying. What the opposition is asking for in terms of documents is not relevant. You want to drag out the work, you don't want to hear from veterans in the short term. That's your choice.

Once again, someone from the department, someone in a senior position, is telling us that this makes no sense, but go ahead, continue to defend your survey.

That's all, Mr. Chair.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Ms. Hepfner, you have the floor.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I feel like this is a conversation we should be having at my previous committee, the heritage committee, because it feels like a debate about artist communities and artists, rather than about veterans.

The Chair: We have a point of order from Mr. Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Mr. Chair, the gallery is full of Afghan vets, and not once have my Liberal colleagues here acknowledged them in the room or apologized for filibustering and delaying this for two hours—

The Chair: Mr. Tolmie, I listened to you, but your point of order is not a point of order.

We are talking about the motion, so let's keep talking about the motion tabled by Mr. Casey, please.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Mr. Chair, I would like to move that we adjourn the debate on this motion, so that we can get back to talking about the things that veterans really want us to talk about.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Hepfner has moved to adjourn debate on this motion. We'll go to a vote then.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

• (1250)

The Chair: We will continue the debate.

Mrs. Wagantall, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): I would move a motion that we vote on the amendment before us on the floor.

We've heard from these members multiple times, reading what's already in the record. Out of respect for the veterans who are in this room and who are watching, who are calling for action, I think they agree and we should vote on the amendment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I have a point of order.

I think as long as there's a speaking list, you can't move to put it to a vote.

The Chair: Exactly. If we have more members who would like to talk about the motion, we're going to discuss it.

Are there any other interventions on the motion by Mr. Casey regarding Erin O'Toole? No.

Are there any objections to adopting the amendment tabled by Sean Casey to invite Erin O'Toole?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Casey.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to make a few comments on the motion as amended.

I find it absurd that the opposition members opposed a request for production of documents that would have given us access to jury correspondence, and now they want something specific about the jury.

I want to give them the benefit of the doubt, but it seems that my opposition colleagues only want to have the documents that they think will support the narrative they're trying to fabricate. They don't want to hear about the veterans or even about the opinions that were in favour of the final choice—Team Stimson's design concept. And yet this is a monument that honours veterans.

The National Memorial to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan will recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who fought in Afghanistan, as well as the support provided to them by Canadians at home. The monument will also reflect Canada's deep gratitude for the sacrifices made by those who fought in Afghanistan, including those who lost their lives or were injured physically or psychologically.

The monument will serve as a public space to perpetually remember Canadians' selfless service to our country and will give future generations an opportunity to learn more about this particular moment of our military's history.

We know that the jury's decision was not unanimous, contrary to what my colleague said in the House. The jury did an incredible job in selecting the five design concepts on the final list. We all agree on that.

The role of Veterans Affairs Canada, as project leader, is to listen to veterans, and that is what was done. Veterans Affairs Canada received feedback from over 10,000 Canadians on the design concepts considered for this monument. The veterans, their families and others who took part in this mission were mainly the ones who shared their feedback.

Team Stimson's design concept best reflects the feedback received from veterans, their families, and other participants in that mission during our public consultation. Listening to veterans and honouring their choice is essential.

• (1255)

[*English*]

As a final comment before I cede the floor, Mr. Chair, I spent 17 years of my professional life practising law, primarily in the area of civil litigation. It is inevitable that this particular dispute is headed to the courts, and perhaps that's rightly where it should be. This exercise, in an attempt to go on a fishing expedition to try to pin it on the Prime Minister, is a further example of the Trudeau derangement syndrome. To the extent that this is to be prosecuted—the weaknesses in the procedure and the allegations of a failure to follow the rules—these are truly legal matters that are rightly dealt with in a court of law.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Committee members, it's approaching one o'clock, and once again I'd like to know the status of the witnesses who are to come on Wednesday, as they are making arrangements to be here. If I don't have unanimous consent, we will tell them that they cannot appear on Wednesday. That's the situation there.

Mr. Blake Richards: Can we try one more time for unanimous consent to carry on until two o'clock so we can get this dealt with, so that Wednesday won't be an issue?

An hon. member: We have already done that.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm asking for us to try one more time for unanimous consent. Maybe the Liberals have had time to reflect.

The Chair: Mr. Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, as I said earlier, I suggest that, unfortunately, the witnesses' appearance be postponed.

You will take the blame for that, esteemed colleagues.

I will repeat the same proposal as many times as I have to. We have to deal with this. A minimum level of transparency would be required. The motion that has been moved is not the end of the world. If the Liberals really want us to take care of veterans, to listen to what they have to say and to do the studies we have on the agenda, they should compromise a little.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Quickly, we have Bryan May on Zoom.

Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm not speaking for all the folks on my side—they can speak for themselves—but I certainly want to get back to the study at hand and have witnesses appear. I think it's clear what the priority is from the opposition. If they want to continue to disrupt these meet-

ings and the work of this committee, that's up to them, but I do not agree that we should cancel the witnesses on Wednesday. I think they should be here. We need to continue to do the work that folks sent us here to do and not engage in this deep-sea fishing exercise any further.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'd like to know if I have unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting.

Mr. Blake Richards: I would like to ask for unanimous consent that we continue the meeting until two o'clock so we can get the matter at hand dealt with.

The Chair: Once again, I'd like to ask members of the committee if they agree with the motion provided by Mr. Richards to go until two o'clock.

An hon. member: No.

The Chair: There is no unanimous consent.

Now I'm back to you guys. Do I have unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting?

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I move a motion to adjourn. It's one o'clock.

The Chair: We have a motion to adjourn. We're going to take the vote.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I want to ask that we suspend the meeting.

The Chair: Do you want to suspend for a few minutes or come back to this on Wednesday?

Mr. Luc Desilets: I want to suspend and come back to this on Wednesday.

The Chair: After consulting with the clerk, I can confirm that it is possible to do this.

So I have to call the vote to suspend this meeting and come back on Wednesday to continue the discussion.

Before we vote, do I have unanimous consent to suspend this meeting and resume it on Wednesday at the scheduled time?

Everyone agrees.

[*The meeting was suspended at 1:03 p.m., Monday, March 18*]

[*The meeting resumed at 5:15 p.m., Wednesday, March 20*]

• (6515)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Good morning, everyone. I'm very pleased to see you.

When we left off on Monday, we had suspended the meeting. That said, I would like to take a few seconds to remind the committee members that we have to finish our study on women veterans. It will take us at least three meetings to complete this important study. Since six motions have been adopted and more than 25 motions have been proposed, we should consider establishing a work plan.

I would also like to take this opportunity to say that we had to cancel our invitation to the witnesses to appear today. I do not know if they are listening to us, but we hope that we will soon be able to hear their testimony on the transition from military life to civilian life.

Mr. Richards, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, when the meeting was suspended, we were in the middle of debate on the motion. Would we not be returning to that debate?

The Chair: As I said on Monday, the meeting was suspended, so now we are back to discussing the motion.

[*Translation*]

I remind you that the motion was amended. At the request of the committee members, we will continue the discussion on the motion.

I am now ready to hear the committee members speak to the motion.

[*English*]

Mr. Casey, please go ahead.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome back, everyone.

Over the suspension, we had time to have a look at this and to hear some of the conversations taking place with the veterans at the back of the room. Partly as a result of those discussions, I wish to propose an amendment.

The amendment is as follows:

That the committee invite the National Capital Commission (NCC) in regards to their role in the construction of the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan to assure the committee that the project will respect established deadlines and that Afghanistan war veterans who wish to see the monument built quickly will not experience additional delays.

That's the amendment I propose. The amendment would immediately follow the last paragraph asking to invite Erin O'Toole. That amendment was, of course, passed by the committee.

If the chair finds the amendment to be in order, I'm prepared to speak about it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The amendment that was proposed was written in English only. That said, since the members were wearing their headsets, they understood what we were going to debate.

Ms. Hepfner—

[*English*]

Mr. Bryan May: I believe he still has the floor.

The Chair: Oh, Mr. Casey still has the floor to explain why he tabled this amendment.

Please go ahead.

• (6520)

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan will recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who served in Afghanistan and the support provided to them at home. The monument will be built in Ottawa, located on the east side of Booth Street, north of the National Holocaust Monument and across the street from the Canadian War Museum.

The National Capital Commission's role in the national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan is similar to that of the design and construction of other monuments. The National Capital Commission participates in the site selection, offering sites for a decision by the sponsoring department, and answers as the technical support during the design process. The National Capital Commission will then manage the construction of the monument and its maintenance in the long term.

The National Capital Commission's role in the design competition of this monument was to act as the technical authority and joint contracting authority. In this role, the National Capital Commission managed the technical review of the applicants, ensuring that the designs put forward for consideration met the technical requirements of the site and federal land use, design and transaction approval.

It will be interesting to hear from them about the previous site selection chosen by the Conservative government and also on the process to build the monument.

Mr. Chair, we heard from veterans at the conclusion of the last meeting—

The Chair: Excuse me.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets has a point of order.

Mr. Luc Desilets: My question is for the clerk. We don't have the text of the amendment, either in French, obviously, or in English. This is another improvised amendment that was proposed at the last minute. I understand that the member is trying to save time, but at the very least, out of respect for all the committee members, it should be translated.

Can we debate an amendment if it's not put forward in either official language without a written version?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Malachie Azémar): The analyst is in the process of translating the amendment, and we will distribute it as soon as we have it.

Mr. Luc Desilets: So there is no problem for my anglophone colleagues who do not have a copy in English. It's not a problem for anyone.

Is that correct?

The Chair: The analyst is in the process of doing the translation. If the committee wishes, I can suspend the meeting until the document is ready.

Mr. Luc Desilets: In that case, we will listen to the committee members debate in the meantime.

If you are telling me that it is in order, I will let you continue.

The Chair: Yes, it is in order.

You will be receiving this amendment in both official languages in your inboxes very soon.

[*English*]

Mr. Randeep Sarai: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, we can suspend for a few minutes if they need time for this, if that's okay.

Some hon. members: No.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You'd be too happy.

The Chair: My understanding is that the committee members do not want to suspend the debate.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, Mr. Casey began his remarks by saying that the Liberals had taken the time to analyze the situation in recent days and that they wanted to propose an amendment.

If you've taken the time to look at it, analyze it—

The Chair: Mr. Desilets, that is not a point of order. I understand your comment—

Mr. Luc Desilets: It's simply a matter of respect, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I understand, thank you.

We'll go back to Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Desilets is right, and I want to apologize. I could have been more prepared to propose my amendment. I hope there will be no problem and that Mr. Desilets will receive this amendment in the language of Molière very soon. So he will have an opportunity to present his arguments against or, I hope, for the amendment I want to propose.

I completely agree with my colleague Mr. Sarai. It would be fair and equitable to suspend the meeting if Mr. Desilets needs it to better understand and analyze what has been proposed. That's not a problem. If not, I will continue.

Do I have to start over?

• (6525)

The Chair: The floor is yours. You may reread the amendment or continue to explain why you want to move it.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I want to come back to something I mentioned at the last meeting, but also something that arose at the conclusion of that meeting.

There were several discussions with the veterans who were here at the meeting. They were of the mistaken impression that proceedings before this committee would cause a delay in the construction of the monument.

I just want to state on the record that this is absolutely not the case. The National Capital Commission, in their testimony before us, will assure us of that and that they are intimately involved in the processes that govern the timelines around the construction of the monument and around the content of the documents. The timing of construction and the execution of legal documents do not require the involvement, the approval, or any action of this committee.

What we are seeing here is purely an exercise in politics—quite frankly, in theatre. It has nothing to do with the contractual legal obligations between Team Stimson, the Government of Canada or the National Capital Commission. All of the aspects of the relationship that governs the construction or the documents are in a legal and not a political sphere.

We have read in the media that Team Daoust hopes to be able to resolve their dissatisfaction with the process outside the court process. The court process remains available to them.

If there were to be a court process, there would be something called discovery of documents and something called discovery of witnesses. There is a duty, under any civil proceeding, to produce all documents relevant to any issue in the action. There is a duty, in any civil proceeding, for anyone who has any testimony that is relevant to any matter to be compellable at an examination for discovery. It's an entirely different process. If there were to be a legal action launched, an interim or interlocutory measure available to the parties would be to seek an injunction.

None of those things has happened. All of those things have the potential of delaying this, but this hearing doesn't. The National Capital Commission will be able to provide testimony to that effect.

My grave concern, from the conclusion of the last meeting, is that this idea had been planted in the heads of our veterans—and they deserve better. The fact that they deserve better is the very reason the Stimson design was chosen. We listened to veterans. We haven't misinformed them and we haven't mislead them. The testimony of the National Capital Commission will ensure that our interest in putting veterans first will be borne out through the testimony before this committee.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

The Chair: Let's go to Ms. Hepfner.

You have the floor.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to reiterate what my colleague Mr. Casey was saying.

Thank you, Mr. Casey, for those excellent remarks.

Just to underline it for any veterans who have been following this committee, this monument is being built. Whatever is happening here at committee is political; it's not holding up the construction of that monument.

I think it absolutely makes sense to bring the National Capital Commission here to hear from them for all the reasons my colleague Mr. Casey outlined. Therefore, I will happily support this amendment.

• (6530)

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

Now I have Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

This is an interesting amendment, and I just got it in my email, so thank you for that.

Of course, I have concerns about there being extra committee meetings on this issue, because we have the women's report, which I brought with me. I'm getting through it. I think the analyst has done an incredible job. I'm really enjoying it. We also have a study, which we have now twice told one of the witnesses, who is a veteran, that we were cancelling. That does concern me. I met with her earlier this week to talk to her about a few issues. That definitely came up as a concern, and she expressed her frustration, so I'm really listening to her.

I don't have a subamendment in my brain, but I'm wondering if we could talk about perhaps having the committee send a letter to get confirmation. Then we wouldn't take up time with testimony. It would allow the committee to make sure the needs of the veteran and the concerns you have brought forward are addressed. I'm just wondering, if I proposed that, whether Mr. Casey would be interested in entertaining it.

The Chair: Before I go to Mr. Casey, I have Mr. May, unless Mr. May would like Mr. Casey to respond to Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Bryan May: Yes. Go ahead.

The Chair: Please go ahead, Mr. Casey, and after that, it's Mr. May.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have two responses to Ms. Blaney's question.

Number one, she wouldn't need my consent to make a subamendment, but if she was inclined to make a subamendment along the lines that she just described, she would get it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Bryan May, go ahead.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to lend my support for this amendment, because it is very important that we clear the record. During the last couple of meetings, during which we have had numerous conversations in this place, a number of times folks have suggested that the monument itself is being delayed as a result of what's happening here. There are delays happening but not with the monument. The delays that are occurring are of course with the women's study we have in

front of us. I agree with my honourable colleague that the analysts have done an incredible job with that. There are also six or seven others. I have spent a lot of time going through those and reminding members here and folks watching at home that we have agreed to a number of other studies that are critically important to the veterans I speak to. When I speak to folks about this issue, their only issue is that the monument needs to be built as quickly as possible.

Hearing from the National Capital Commission is really important. Whether that's through a letter or witness testimony, I think it's important not just to set the record straight here for us but also to reassure the veterans who are watching this very closely that the work to build something like this does take time and that it is not being delayed as a result of what I've dubbed a deep-sea fishing exercise.

I think we need to see that record corrected, and I wholeheartedly support this amendment.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Ms. Blaney and after that Mrs. Wagantall.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I would like to move a subamendment to delete the first part—"the committee invite"—and to instead have "the committee write a letter to", and then leave everything else as it is. I think I have it right. That is what I propose.

The Chair: Thank you.

Right now the clerk is looking at it. I'm pretty sure the analysts will help them to translate it, and we will send it, as with the previous one, to all members of the committee.

Ms. Blaney, could you please repeat the subamendment?

• (6535)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: What I am saying is that we would delete "the committee invite" from what Mr. Casey proposed, and then add in that space "the committee write a letter to". Then everything else would stay the same with regard to their role and so on.

Is that helpful?

The Chair: Thank you for that.

First I have Mrs. Wagantall. I saw three of you; I don't know which one was first. I also have Mr. Casey, Mr. Sarai and Ms. Hepfner.

Mrs. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to understand the dynamics of this motion and amendment. Mr. Casey is saying that the NCC, the government and the creator of the monument they recommended and chose are going ahead with the building of the monument the government chose over top of their procurement group, which was given that responsibility. I want to understand that, first.

Am I understanding correctly that it's irrelevant, really, what would come out of this committee? The study was about the procedure, not about the monument itself. We've heard from our veterans as well the frustration over the fact that, once again, the government is doing things outside of their own rules. When you serve in the military, transparency, following orders and doing things appropriately are really important. That side of it is still an issue.

On top of that, we are all here very engaged with the veterans who were here this last week.

Mr. Casey, who specifically did you speak to and get this perspective from out of those who were here as guests last week? Who spoke with you or who did you speak with following the meeting?

The Chair: I have Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: First of all, my understanding of Ms. Blaney's suggestion was that there would be a letter in addition to a witness, but the subamendment appears to choose a letter over a witness. I prefer the "and" to the "or".

My indication that she would have my agreement was based on my misunderstanding that there would be a letter and a witness, but what I'm hearing is that she wants a letter instead of a witness. I think it would be of significantly more value to the committee to have someone from the NCC here to answer our questions as opposed to a letter that may not answer all of our questions. While I'm happy to see a letter, I'm not happy to see a letter replace a witness.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Casey, but I think that bells are ringing so we have a vote in 30 minutes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, can we have unanimous consent to sit through the bells?

The Chair: Yes, that's what I'm going to ask members of the committee.

In 29 minutes, we're going to have a vote. Members of the committee, do I have unanimous consent to continue before the vote?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: I don't have unanimous consent.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The meeting is suspended.

• (1735) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1830)

• (6630)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*English*]

First of all, I'd like to welcome Tim Louis. He's replacing Wilson Miao.

We have a subamendment on the floor. On the list, I have Mr. Casey, Mr. Sarai and Ms. Hepfner.

Members of the committee, let me say something. As chair of the committee, I'm a little concerned because we have been discussing this motion for a few meetings. I don't want to cut off debate at all.

That's not my hope, but I'd like to tell you that we have 16 meetings left until June. I remind you that we have a lot of things to do. The clerk always tells me that we need an agenda to continue our studies, so please do whatever you want, but have that in mind so we can continue our work plan.

Mr. Casey, you have the floor.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Chair, I found your remarks very compelling, and I will close my comments at this point. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now I have Mr. Sarai and then Ms. Hepfner.

Go ahead, Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Mr. Chair, I want to know what time we're going until.

The Chair: When we have a meeting of two hours, we have two hours. This meeting started on Monday, so we basically have two hours. However, I consulted the clerk, and if the committee agrees, we can go until 7:50. Someone can say they have other engagements, so we'll have to vote if we continue, because it's now later than 6:30.

Mr. Sarai, you have the floor.

• (6635)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I have the floor, but there's a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Richards has a point of order.

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, my understanding is a little different from what you just indicated. I understood that, for tonight's meeting, there was an understanding well ahead of time that there were quite likely going to be some interruptions with votes. My understanding is that it's been agreed by the whips that we would have two hours of meeting time at minimum available to us. We've used 24 minutes at this point, so if I look at the math, I think that takes us later than what you've indicated. I also understand that there are resources available for one committee to do two further hours, so I think we could go longer than that.

I have a desire; I would like to see this resolved. I think many of the members around the table would like this resolved. I believe we should use all the resources available to this committee to ensure that we get a resolution to this. As you just said, Chair, very wisely, we need to get to some of the other things we're dealing with, so let's do that. Let's get this motion dealt with. Let's use all the resources available to us this evening and use the time we have until 8:30.

The Chair: Before I go back to Mr. Sarai, let me say that we started the meeting at 5:15, so the clerk has already made the calculations, taking note of the vote. We said that we could go until 7:15. If the committee would like to go further, we're going to have to—

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, my understanding is different from that. My understanding is that we were told we were allowed two hours of actual meeting time, not two hours from the start of the meeting, which means we have an hour and 36 minutes remaining. Plus, we have the availability of resources beyond that.

I believe we have until 8:30. Correct me if I'm wrong. I know we have one of the witnesses in the room.

The Chair: Yes, but what I'm saying is that we're not going back to Monday to make the calculation. Today we started at 5:15. Taking care of the two votes, we can—for this meeting, for those two hours—go until 7:50. However, if committee members want it to go further, we're going to make sure we have enough resources to go further than 7:50.

On the list now, just to remind you, is Mr. Sarai, Ms. Hepfner, Mrs. Wagantall, Ms. Blaney and Mr. Desilets.

[Translation]

Mr. Sarai, go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I want to be clear. I think my colleague might have misled us. I don't believe the whips have any agreement in regard to extending this beyond 6:30. I don't know of any other whip's office that has had that agreement, but I can certainly tell you that our whip's office has not agreed to that.

I've heard from other members—I won't say who—who have other things to do. I don't see that we have agreement on extending this time past 6:30.

The Chair: Wait just a second, please.

Mr. Sarai, it's now after 6:30, but I'd like to know if members of the committee would like to go past 6:30. We need to vote in order to go to 7:50, or maybe longer, if we have resources available until 8:30.

You have to be clear on what your intervention is, please.

• (6640)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I was asking for clarity.

Do you need unanimous consent to go further?

The Chair: No, I don't need unanimous consent. We just have to vote if we want to continue until 7:50 or not.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I will ask you to put it to a vote.

The Chair: First, let's ask members, before we take the vote. Do we have unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting?

Mr. Blake Richards: No, of course not.

The Chair: Then we're going to have to vote on that. To be clear, it's to adjourn the meeting.

[Translation]

So it is defeated.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: Mr. Sarai, you were the last speaker. You can continue.

[English]

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Chair.

Are we on Ms. Blaney's subamendment or the amendment Mr. Casey had?

The Chair: We have the subamendment from Ms. Blaney on the floor to discuss.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: As my colleague Mr. Casey spoke to.... I was at a three-day forum of veterans run by Veterans Affairs Canada and a two-day forum on women veterans in Canada, which was in Montreal. I had the opportunity to speak to dozens of veterans and listen to their testimony and their panels.

The one thing that consistently came up is that they want it done. They want to know what the progress is. They don't like watching this. They do not want to know the debate on the location or the design anymore. They just want it done.

In the dozens of conversations that I had, not once did I have somebody oppose the selected design or say otherwise. There were very loud, vocal proponents who said that the time has been enough and that we need a monument.

I think what Mr. Casey is saying is a reflection of the testimony. People want to know what the progress is. They want to know if the location is firm, what the National Capital Commission is doing, what Veterans Affairs is doing, how the procurement process is going, what the timelines are and what the architectural consultants and other consultants are stating.

I think it's important that we call them before us and bring them forward on this. I think it would be good to get their written submission as well. I think Mr. Casey is saying that we need the National Capital Commission and other officials from VAC or otherwise to come here and give an update so that all the veterans who watch us, pay attention to this and read journals and any other blogs or news sources get an update as to what is happening with this.

We've all heard in testimony from the department and the minister that there is process by which the design panellists who weren't successful can adjudicate the decision. They can appeal the decision. I think some of that time period has passed, so my assumption is that they've accepted it, but I'm sure there are other judicial means by which they could do it. That's something the department would have to deal with. I think compensation is something that VAC officials have said they're prepared to offer because they felt that our veteran population is important and the choice they want should be reflected.

As we've stated earlier, that was in the survey with over 11,000 people, the majority of whom are veterans, serving members or family members of veterans. It's fairly broad. No survey of any type that we've ever seen—and we all come from different political parties—or any polls or data we have is ever perfect. They all have margins of error. However, I think when you have a majority where two-thirds or more are indicating an appreciation that one commemorates and reflects this better than the others, that gives you insight as to what people want.

I think it's time that we carry on. If there is a conclusion to this chapter, I think it would be to get an update on when this monument is being built, when it's starting, when shovels are in the ground, when veterans can pay homage to it and when the Canadian public, our students and visitors alike, can see the sacrifices that our veterans have made for not only our country, but the freedom of others who are oceans away.

Thank you.

• (6645)

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

Now let's go to Lisa Hefpner, please.

Ms. Lisa Hefpner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On the subamendment, I want to say that I appreciate the reasons why Ms. Blaney brought it forward. I think that we need to move on from this study and get to some more substantive work. However, like my colleague Mr. Casey said, I don't know that a letter is going to be sufficient. I think we really need to hear from witnesses from the National Capital Commission and ask them questions to make sure the dialogue is fulsome and that we get all the answers we're looking for.

I will not be supporting the subamendment.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now let's go to Mrs. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

I know we're debating the subamendment; however, I just want to mention that I had asked a question on the change by Mr. Casey to the motion. I asked him specifically, because we're discussing something on the basis of an inference that feedback came to Mr. Casey directly from veterans. We had those conversations with them as well, so I'm just asking if he would please share with this room who the people were he spoke with so we have clarity on who he received this information from.

It sounds a lot like an unscientific poll determined that veterans made a certain decision, and I would like to know who those people were, please, so we have clarity, transparency and the following of rules, as our veterans love to see us operating in this place in the same way we expect them to when they serve us overseas and here at home in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Wagantall, for your intervention.

I invite Ms. Blaney to take the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I call the vote.

The Chair: Well, I still have people on the list, so—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: They can talk, but I'm ready to vote.

The Chair: Great. Thanks.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets wants to speak.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

• (6650)

Mr. Luc Desilets: No, I'll pass.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there any further discussion on the subamendment proposed by Ms. Blaney?

Seeing none, we'll go to a vote.

Is there unanimous consent to adopt it? I heard a no earlier. It's better to go to a vote, then, because of Ms. Hefpner's comments.

Let's vote on Ms. Blaney's subamendment.

(Subamendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: We are back to the amendment moved by Mr. Casey, as amended by Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Casey, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What we have before us now is a subamendment requesting a letter from the National Capital Commission, but no witness. My concern, as I expressed earlier, is that if the letter raises questions, we will be no further ahead, and I think we're putting ourselves at a disadvantage. I think the letter is of some value but certainly not the value of having someone here to take our questions. I think it's unfortunate. I hope that the answers we want from the National Capital Commission can form the basis of questions in the request we make.

If the letter sent to the National Capital Commission sets forth the concerns that have been raised here in committee with respect to their role and with respect to the questions that are evident in the representations from Mrs. Wagantall and from Ms. Blaney—the perception that this committee has some authority to delay the proceedings, the question of what's out there in the veterans community and the demand for people to be named.... There certainly wasn't such a demand when we were talking about the counselling of Veterans Affairs employees towards some veterans, that's for sure.

Those would be my concerns over the amended motion. It's watered down, and I think the only way to save it is by a pretty detailed request to the National Capital Commission. What needs to be in the letter is what we need to know. I'm very concerned that the letter is going to raise more questions than answers.

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

Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my colleague Mr. Casey for highlighting some of the concerns.

I think with this amendment, the problem we're going to have is that we'll only get a written submission. We won't be able to ask questions. It may be a simply one-pager that might not outline much more than that they are proceeding with things. We need to know how far they are and if there is a holdup.

Sometimes some of these projects are, material-wise, unique. I think I was reading on the Stimson design that it has “elements of healing” and it’s “the concept of the Medicine Wheel”. Its “design takes the form of a circular, sacred space of safety, a ‘home base’ of reflection, memory, and contemplation.” He has four portals. It’s designed with corten steel walls that surround and protect those places. These are things that veterans, others and people like us would want to know.

Are they being formulated? Are they being worked on as we speak? Is the artist already commissioned and doing their artistic work? A lot of what would be put in place is structural in nature.

I think it is imperative that we have them here. When we have a letter only, it might fall short of what we require. Others will think of that and ask how long it’s going to take. There’s also a doubt raised, as my colleague said, as to whether or not they are moving forward with this and whether or not this study is delaying it. I think we would like to have clarity. My understanding is that it’s not being delayed by this study; it’s moving forward.

If anything, I think what we needed with this study was to figure out the process. The process has been given pretty clearly by the department. Yes, it did deviate, but that deviation was stated and a decision was made. I think everybody is aware of that. There’s no secret about it; there’s no deception on this. I think it’s very clear. The reasons for it are also very clear and I think that’s been stated.

I think an update showing how far the procurement process is.... We’ve seen with the House of Commons construction that certain trades are probably in high use, like stonemasonry and others. That trade would be a tough one to procure at this time. I believe there are only a handful of stonemasons in the country, and basically they’re all working on this. I don’t know if this particular design is using anything along those lines.

There’s also a lot of bronze work, with four bronze flak jackets. Usually the artist has to do the moulds first and test the moulds. Then, subsequently, they will be made into bronze.

I think we should have them. I think it would be very important to get an update. I would probably have gone further and maybe asked that the architects, the visual artist and the coordinators—MBTW Group, Adrian Stimson and LeuWebb Projects—all come and appear. They’ll have the real update based on what they’ve been consulted on and what they’ve been doing.

That would be my opinion. I think this is going to end up falling short.

• (6655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

Now let’s go to Ms. Hefner.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank my colleagues for raising concerns.

I have similar concerns. If we’re sending a letter asking the National Capital Commission for details, I think it has to be a very detailed letter. Perhaps this committee could collaborate on what exactly we’re asking for. However, I think—

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): It’s going to take all 16 weeks.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: I’m sorry. I’m being interrupted by the other side.

Do you want to take the floor, Terry?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Okay, please.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Are you done?

The Chair: Ms. Hefner, you have the floor. Please continue.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you.

I think it’s very important how we word this letter and the details we ask for from the National Capital Commission. I think we should consult as a committee on what exactly is in that letter. I would prefer, like my colleagues, to have a witness we can question back and forth to make sure that all of our questions are answered.

Those are my remarks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Chair, I have a few suggestions on what might be included in the letter.

First of all, let’s have a clear statement of the purpose of the monument. As the committee is well aware, it is to recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who served in Afghanistan and the support provided to them at home.

Let’s get some details on the location, how the location was chosen and the National Capital Commission’s jurisdiction over that location across the street from the war museum, near the National Holocaust Monument.

Let’s get some description by the commission of their role. My understanding is that their role is to design and construct monuments. Their experience in the design and construction of other monuments will be brought to bear in connection with this particular one, with perhaps some indication, from similar projects, of lessons learned, their role in the coordination of government departments and the technical support they provide during the design process. Let’s get some sense of what they envision in terms of their management of the construction of the monument.

Let’s ask for the timeline for construction. It’s my understanding that it is to be ready for public viewing in 2027, but a clearer timeline for this committee would be of some assistance. It’s also my understanding that the National Capital Commission is charged with the maintenance of the site in the long term, so let’s ask for some particulars around that.

The National Capital Commission had a role in the design competition. It is the design competition that is the subject of this motion, so let's get a description of their role in the design competition, specifically because their role was a technical one and they are a joint contracting authority. Let's ask for a bit more information on what is involved in being the technical authority and joint contracting authority. "Joint contracting authority" clearly implies some level of collaboration or co-operation, or a joint effort with other parties. It would be good to know who has which roles.

Let's ask how exactly they managed the technical review of the applicants. We know there were five applications. We know the jury arrived at a decision. Then, after broad consultation with the veterans community, there was a decision taken not to accept the jury's recommendation. Let's ask about the role, from a technical perspective, of the National Capital Commission in all of that, if any. If none, let's see exactly what their role was in the technical review of the applicants. We know the review to seek feedback on, if you will, an emotional or a symbolic level was undertaken by government. Clearly, the technical elements of the decision are where you might expect the National Capital Commission to be involved.

Then, let's ask about the various approval processes. There would be technical requirements at the site. There would be technical requirements associated with the use of federal lands, the design and the transaction. They clearly had a detailed role. I think all of those things are pertinent to the committee's examination. As much as there is some controversy and disagreement around the selection of the company or proponent to design the monument, there was also some controversy around the site selection. The National Capital Commission was by necessity intimately involved in the site selection. That is, in fact, their role as the authority for federal lands in the national capital region, so let's get a synopsis from them around the site selection and the process to build the monument.

• (6700)

I'm just trying to paint a picture of the level of detail I think we should be able to expect from someone if they were sitting here and subject to questions from all of us. I hope that sort of information at that level of detail is something we could reasonably expect in a letter coming from them.

I offer those suggestions on the mandate that we put forward to the National Capital Commission for the letter we're seeking.

Thank you.

• (6705)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Let me be clear. The subamendment presented by Ms. Blaney said to have "the committee write a letter". The clerk or the analyst, if the motion passes, can propose a letter, but it's the committee that has the final word on that letter. The decision on all of the things you would like to put in that letter belongs to the committee.

Let's move on to Ms. Hepfner.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Based on your previous comments, Chair, I would like to know the process for how we are writing the letter. I thought Mr. Casey had some excellent suggestions—

An hon. member: He just told us.

The Chair: Please don't—

Mr. Bryan May: It's interesting that you're only interrupting her.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Exactly.

The Chair: Come on, guys.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Members of the committee, please stop interrupting your colleagues. Ms. Hepfner has the floor. We can listen, and after that, it will be your turn.

You also have to think about our interpreters. There will be a cacophony. They won't be able to translate anything.

Please do not interrupt each other.

Ms. Hepfner.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you for that, Chair.

I was also concerned about how this letter was being put together. I liked a lot of what Mr. Casey was saying, and I was hoping that the analyst or someone else was collecting that information so we could talk about it more as we come to a decision.

It's a committee letter, as you said, but how do we come to an agreement on how that letter is worded? When is that going to happen? What's that process?

Can we include that very fulsome list of suggestions Mr. Casey just went over? I think they are excellent, and I hope we have them documented somewhere.

The Chair: I can explain the process.

First of all, you can add anything you want to in that letter as a member of the committee, to be accepted by the committee.

As to the process right now, is we just voted on the subamendment by Ms. Blaney, so now we are back to the amendment by Mr. Casey, as duly amended. We are discussing that. We have to vote on it.

If that amendment and the motion passes, we will have to discuss the letter. We can say when and how we will prepare that letter, but we'll have to think about a work plan, as I said at the beginning.

[*Translation*]

I'm open to hearing other arguments on the amendment as amended.

Mr. Sarai, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I would like to propose a subamendment to this amendment. If the response from the National Capital Commission requires the committee to get further information, members of the NCC responsible for the monument should be asked to come before this committee.

The subamendment would read, "If the response is not satisfactory to the members of the committee then the NCC officials responsible be asked to appear before the Committee for no more than 1 meeting."

• (6710)

The Chair: Okay.

I'll suspend for a few seconds to consult with the clerk on that amendment. It won't be long.

• (1910)

(Pause)

• (1910)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

After consultation, I confirm that Mr. Sarai's subamendment is in order.

Mr. Sarai, please explain the purpose of this subamendment.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

[*English*]

I think the goal from Mr. Casey originally was to make sure that they appear, but in light of the committee's vote, and I guess Ms. Blaney's concern for time allocated toward a meeting, I think it would be imperative that, if we're not satisfied with the letter, we have the ability to call those officials. The officials can come in and give an update.

Some who have a construction background would like to have a fulsome update, and others just want to know that it's being built. I think most veterans probably want to know that it's being built, not that there's a shovel in the ground and a 12-month wait for the steel or some other item or material required to build the monument. In some cases, further studies sometimes come with these kinds of construction projects, including geotechnical or environmental assessments, or in some cases archeological checks to make sure that no pre-existing habitat or artifacts might be there.

I think it's important to have that update. It's important to have the ability to get that information when and if it's necessary. We've all been through many committees before where we make a request of a department, the National Capital Commission or another governmental agency and we don't get a clear answer. We get a diplomatic or bureaucratic answer when our expectation was something else.

To ensure we don't, we like having officials come before us live to answer questions. Just as many opposition members wish to have a minister, departmental officials or past ministers appear before committee, others like to have officials who are responsible for the projects at hand. We should have them before us.

Again, I want to reiterate that more than 12,000 Canadians who were surveyed want this—

• (6715)

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Sarai. We have a point of order.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm wondering if Mr. Sarai would apply that principle to the two former ministers who have already—

Mr. Bryan May: That's not a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Richards, that is not a point of order.

Mr. Sean Casey, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Sean Casey: It's on the same point of order, Mr. Chair.

I would point out that Mr. Richards wanting to interrupt someone does not constitute a point of order. I don't think you'll find it anywhere in the Standing Orders. This happens repeatedly. It's entirely unfair and disrespectful to his colleagues here on the committee.

The Chair: Mr. Casey, I understand that, but—

Mr. Blake Richards: I just wanted to know—

The Chair: Excuse me.

As soon as a member says they have a point of order, I have to listen to the first few seconds to make sure it is a point of order. That's why he had the floor.

Members, once again, please try not to interrupt. Try not to bully colleagues here. It's really important. We are not in camera. We have a lot of veterans and other people watching us.

Please, let's continue.

Mr. Sarai, you have the floor.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What you were just delving into is very important. I think a colleague should not interrupt other colleagues. It's becoming a pattern. In fact, you as chair have been interrupted. Just moments ago, you were interrupted.

We've had witnesses who have flown from far and wide to give their very deep and emotional stories of how they were treated and what they went through. They have been interrupted by the members who just interrupted here, and they made a point of that. They've complained and written about it. It was deeply upsetting for them, despite our having done training to understand them.

I think people on committees owe respect to each other. We all have our allotted times based on the parties' standings. Everybody gets their turn, and everybody's hands are taken. If anything, Mr. Chair, your liberty is very generous and your impartiality is without question. If anything, we might sometimes complain that you are too generous with your allotments. I think respect from colleagues across the aisle is very important.

Going back to the subamendment, I think when we call witnesses or ask them to write in, we always have to have the opportunity and liberty, if we have further questions, to ask them. It's no different from when we have witnesses who have 10 minutes or five minutes to speak and then have a round of questions. Sometimes they still feel they were not able to give all of their information. Usually you as chair have been very liberal in always reminding them that they're more than welcome to give written submissions.

Sometimes witnesses have given a page or two, and sometimes they've given dozens and maybe even up to 100 pages. That's the beauty of our Parliament: We afford everyone the opportunity to contribute. Our Westminster model of Parliament thrives on the examination of one another and getting answers. We have a responsibility to taxpayers and Canadian citizens to do the most responsible thing at all given times.

We have to have that onus in the event that we're not satisfied with it. We're here for our constituents and, in this particular case, veterans and constituents, to commemorate them. The last thing I would want to tell them is that we got a letter but weren't able to ask anything because we never tried.

That is an important thing. I'm not saying that it's going to take extra time. If it's voted for—and I urge my colleagues to vote for it—it will only be done if inevitably the response we get from the National Capital Commission is unsatisfactory. At that point in time, we would decide as a committee if we feel like we need to call them.

I think it's a reasonable amendment, so I urge my colleagues to vote for it.

• (6720)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

I have now Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleague for this subamendment.

It will probably come as no great surprise to you, Mr. Chair, that I found his reasoning to be very compelling, and I'll be supporting the subamendment, due primarily to the fact that it gives us an option or an insurance policy.

The level of detail that I think the committee deserves from the National Capital Commission doesn't lend itself well to a letter, so I think it's entirely possible that, after receiving the letter, there will be some additional questions. Maybe I'm wrong.

Ms. Blaney was absolutely within her rights to move the subamendment she did to substitute the letter. I expect the motivation behind the subamendment was one of efficiency, which is also admirable. However, with something that has taken on the character that this discussion has, it strikes me that, if we're going there, we should leave no stone unturned, and this will ensure that this happens. It gives us an option that we don't have to use if the letter is as comprehensive as we require. I'll be supporting it.

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

We're still discussing. Are there any other interventions on that?

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: We wouldn't support adding any additional witnesses until the ministers who have actual knowledge of the time period we're talking about but refuse to come to this committee choose to come.

We won't be supporting bringing any additional witnesses in.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, is he asking for a sub-subamendment to add that as a condition? I just want to know.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm just indicating that we won't be supporting it.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Seeing no further debate, we will go to a vote on Mr. Sarai's subamendment.

(Subamendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (6725)

The Chair: We will now continue the debate on Mr. Casey's amendment, as amended by Mr. Sarai's and Ms. Blaney's subamendments.

Mr. May, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think we've landed in the right spot with this in making sure that these witnesses will be heard. If the letter proves to be insufficient, we'll have the opportunity now to call them forward. However, it does pain me to suggest that we extend this even further. The women's study is in front of us. I don't know why it is not the priority of the opposition at this point to get to that, but it's clearly not, and I think it's important that I reiterate it. The work of this committee is to get these studies to the House and get the recommendations to the government in a timely fashion, and that is being threatened right now.

It's important that with the subamendment that was just passed... As many of you know—all of you have been in committees for a while now—questions come up even after interventions from witnesses, and I suspect there will be questions from the letter we'll receive, hopefully in a timely fashion, from those who are tasked with building this monument for our veterans. I suspect we'll have that opportunity, but I would strongly encourage this committee to move off this issue and move towards the women's study report we have in front of us. That's what veterans are asking us to do. That's what veterans are waiting for. We also have many other studies in front of us, including some that I've gone into great detail in the past to remind this committee about. We need to get to those studies.

Mr. Chair, as you rightly pointed out at the beginning of this meeting, we have a very limited number of meetings left. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you said 16, which may sound like a lot, for those at home, but when you consider the runway we have in front of us and consider the slate of agreed-upon motions that are in front of us, it's not. I can tell you that we will not get done what we should have been able to get done because of the mission creep on this study.

We all know that governing and the work we do up here are about making choices. We know that the opposition is making a very clear choice here to push for this study, push for, again, an opportunity in their minds to embarrass the government and stall this committee. I was very pleased to hear Mr. Casey's intervention today suggesting that despite our inability in this committee to get things done, the national capital region is not in any way hampered by that. I hope that is comfort to veterans who are watching this. I think we need to continue to encourage the national capital region to do the work they are entrusted to do and make sure they have the resources necessary to do that work and continue that work.

We know that much has gone into the design and planning, and we started from a really rough spot. We know the previous government's choice to put this monument under a bridge was not well thought out. I've talked to veterans who had written letters to the previous government asking the government to please reconsider this, and I think it's imperative that we recognize that there's a lot of trust we need to build back on this project. There's a lot of concern out there that this project is sliding again. I am looking forward to that letter from the National Capital Commission and to being able to show veterans that this work is moving forward in a timely fashion.

• (6730)

That said, I had hoped that over the two-week break the opposition on this committee would have reflected on some of the interventions that I and my colleagues made in previous meetings when discussing this and would have recognized the importance of this committee and the importance that veterans place on this committee. Often in committee, we question whether anybody is paying attention. I've been the chair of a committee and I've talked to people about—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bryan May: I'm sorry you guys thought that was funny, but I assure you that it's not to veterans; I assure you they are paying attention. As the chair of this committee for a couple of years, I learned very quickly how much of an audience there actually is for this committee, how important this committee is and how diligently members watch these proceedings.

The opposition clearly sees that as a joke. They're laughing and chatting over me right now, but it's not a joke. It's incredibly important to keep that in mind as we're doing this work in public, which is not the convention. The convention typically is to do this work in camera so that we can have challenging conversations—and tough conversations, sometimes—to get to the right spot and do what's best for the subject matter of the day.

By us doing this in public, I hope that people start to recognize this and start to encourage their members of Parliament to move on, to get to a point where we can really focus on the strong issues of the day that veterans face and that we rededicate ourselves to getting back on track to start producing some tangible recommendations to the government.

I'll tell you that this particular issue we've studied at length. The minister has been here a couple of times on this issue. I think extending this, making it into a much bigger thing, is something I

warned about right from the very beginning, and I will continue to say how unfortunate that is, given how much is in front of us and how much we still have yet to do.

None of us are here forever and we have a limited time to the work the people of our particular constituencies send us here to do. I'll be honest with you: I will not look back on these last couple of months fondly as a part of my career that.... It won't make into my memoirs. Let's just put it that way.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bryan May: That was funny. I'll give you that, Mr. Tolmie.

I'll give Fraser a minute to recover from that one.

It's true, and I hope none of us think that way. I hope none of us look at this as something that we should be proud of. I think we have to get back on track. I think it is an unfortunate reality that the opposition wants to make this into something it's not. We need to refocus.

I gave Mr. Tolmie some time to recover, but I am still getting heckled a bit.

I think it's important that—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: That was beautiful. I was complimenting you.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you. I appreciate that. That's how it was intended.

• (6735)

I think it's incredibly imperative that we move off of this and that, regardless of what occurs with these motions and amendments, we do not prioritize it. This should not be the priority of our government; this should not be the priority of the opposition.

I know how this started. I was here. We said that this was potentially a slippery slope, but I think it's incredibly important that folks.... We have a little time left today, and we're going to be off for two more weeks. I really call on all members to reflect on and speak to veterans and ask them what the priority is for them, because that's what we've been doing on this side of the House. I'll tell you that it's not this.

I will conclude by thanking veterans, again, for their patience on this issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bryan May.

On the list I have Mr. Casey and Ms. Blaney, and to close, maybe we will have Ms. Hefner.

Mr. Casey, the floor is yours.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank Ms. Blaney for her support of Mr. Sarai's subamendment. I think we've essentially almost come back to where we started with having a letter—and a witness, potentially, if the letter doesn't provide a satisfactory result.

There are a couple of major benefits from this approach, and that's why I am speaking in favour of the adoption of the subamended amendment.

One is that it puts a whole lot less pressure on the letter because we have a fallback. While I went through at some length what we would want to see in a letter that might be put forward to supplant a witness, I don't think we need to be as prescriptive because we have the built-in safety valve of inviting the author of the letter to come here.

I would also like to address one of Mr. Richards' comments. He stated, in his rationale for opposing this amendment, that the Conservatives won't be agreeing to any further witnesses until we have heard from the ministers directly involved. I think that perhaps presents an excellent opportunity for the committee to break through this impasse. If the primary preoccupation of the Conservatives is to bring the relevant ministers before the committee, I don't think there is any disagreement on that. The disagreement is on the fishing expedition that follows.

In terms of the viva voce testimony of the relevant ministers, if that is the focus, I think there is a path to resolution here, and I'd be most interested in exploring that. I'm not sure that an in-session public meeting is the place to explore that, unless others feel differently. However, I would be quite happy to hear from my Conservative friends as to whether a piecemeal approach, one where we go forward with what we can agree upon and agree to park what we can't agree upon and argue about it later, if necessary.... That's basically the approach we took with this amendment, and we could it take with the overall motion.

I offer that as an olive branch.

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

Ms. Blaney, it's your turn now.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair, for your patience through all of this.

There were a lot of votes. My knee hurts. I was getting a bit sore walking back and forth to vote, but there you are; that's pretty fun.

I'm taking this as an opportunity to read the report about women veterans again. I was recently recognized by women in the defence world because of this work, but it's not public yet and that worries me greatly.

I am finding it hard to listen to the back-and-forth between the Conservatives and the Liberals about who did worse in the role they played with veterans. I don't know if that's why we're here. I just want to be clear that I need to get this report done. We have a commitment to women to get this done. This matters more to me than anything else I've ever done in this committee. It means that much to me.

If we cannot get this resolved, I'm going to encourage people to use other ways to get the answers they need, and I will be looking

toward supporting an adjournment. If all this is going to be is a back-and-forth about the monument and we're not going to get where we need to get, I cannot sacrifice the work we did for women veterans because of that. I just want to be really clear with the committee that this is the direction I'm starting to go in, and I'm hoping we can get somewhere.

I will repeat this again: We heard in testimony on this monument that, even though we keep hearing the Liberals say it was veterans who responded, we have no clear way of knowing what happened, and that does bother me. I trust veterans. I believe that if veterans know they're being asked a question, they are going to step up and are going to answer. There's a confusing lack of communication for me, because I have also heard very clearly, as I think everyone on this committee has, that veterans often feel they are not connected to these systems.

When we were talking about the services to support veterans with rehabilitation being moved to the private sector, we heard very clearly that a lot of them had no idea this process was going to happen. We heard the ministry say that, yes, she sent out information. One of the things I proposed is that a letter should be sent, or something more physical.

We are not doing our job in this country for veterans with regard to connecting with them, so I don't buy what I'm hearing from the Liberal side. I don't even know that big drama was hidden behind this. I don't know what's behind it, but at this point, I'm having to make a difficult decision. I'm going to choose the women. I'm going to choose them every single time.

I just want the committee to know that I hope we can get this figured out. If we cannot get this figured out, I'm willing to adjourn to get this work done. I also want the committee to know I'm willing to come back, but I am going to prioritize the women.

I think this is an impossible decision and it's not right that I have to make it, but as I said earlier, I will choose the women every single time. They've been made invisible and I will not continue to support that.

• (6740)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

We all know how important that study is for all members here. We were so happy to do that study, and there was collegiality among us when we did it. As you know, we have a lot of recommendations, and we hope that those recommendations can be implemented for women.

I said it was going to take three meetings, but the analyst told me that we will have more than four meetings to finish the study on women.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hepfner, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you, Chair.

I want to say how much I appreciate the intervention from Ms. Blaney. I wasn't here for the testimony on either of those studies, but I would really like to get to the women's study as well.

I really appreciated the comments from my colleague Mr. May. I think it's clear from the interventions we heard today and from the behaviour of the Conservatives that they don't want to accomplish anything at this committee. They're just trying to obstruct us.

I think Mr. May also made a very good point about the nature of this debate, so I would like to move that we continue this discussion in camera.

● (6745)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Committee members, I'll have to deal right away with the request that we go in camera. So I will ask the clerk to please put this motion to a vote.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I have a question. Do we go in camera right now?

The Chair: No, we're going to vote to go in camera or not.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: My understanding is that in the past, on this committee, we couldn't make that kind of switch because it takes work to do that. We could not move from public to in camera, or the other way.

The Chair: I understand, but as I was told, we have that motion on the table and we can't discuss it. We have to go right away to a vote.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'm discussing procedure at this committee. We were told in the past, when we wanted to do that, that it was not an option.

The Chair: As I said, there is a mandatory motion, so we have to go right now to a vote. We will come back if it's possible.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. That's fine.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The request to go in camera was denied. We will now resume the meeting.

[*English*]

Mr. Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't think Ms. Blaney has to choose between veterans and the current situation. In my opinion, veterans would agree that we should get to the bottom of this. They have really been used throughout this whole process, which is completely biased.

I was pleased to hear what Mr. Sarai had to say. This is the first time that a Liberal around this table has admitted that there were shortcomings in this process. If I understand you correctly, the pro-

cess was not followed, and the shortcomings were considerable. You said yourself that you need a clear process. I don't know if it was you, Mr. Sarai, who said that or someone else. The process was clear, but it was not followed. That's the problem.

I would like to say—and I look at Ms. Blaney as I do so—that I make this a question of honour and value. Respect for the democratic process in which we operate is also at issue here. You all have a game to play, obviously, but I can't believe that you are in favour of this whole situation—that is to say what is being said at the Prime Minister's Office, that it won't be this monument, but another one.

I was very pleased earlier to hear you talk about engineering, architecture and project management. Needless to say, these topics do not concern us and they do not concern you. There are people who take care of all that.

Moreover, there are probably people around you who have made representations to the National Capital Commission. I have done that myself. So you know full well that we won't get anything out of it. The commission's power is minimal. It only covers the implementation.

● (6750)

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Desilets.

I will give the floor back to you, but as it is 7:50 p.m., I have to ask the members of the committee if there is unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting. As I mentioned at the beginning of the meeting, resources are available to us until 8:30 p.m.

There doesn't seem to be unanimous consent. So we will continue.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Bryan May: Are we not going to vote?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: The agreement is that we will continue the discussion until 8:30 p.m.

Is that correct?

The Chair: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'm done with my comments, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Next on the list is Blake Richards.

[*English*]

Mr. Richards, the floor is yours.

Mr. Blake Richards: I can see that we are in a situation where there is a bit of an impasse. It comes down to this. We're firmly of the belief that the government needs to be accountable for whatever happened in the period of time between November 8, 2021, and—I forget the exact date—June 2023 when the monument was announced with the changes that were insisted upon by the Prime Minister's Office. Obviously, that delayed this monument from being built, beyond all the delays that were already there prior to that.

I understand. I can see there's no doubt that the Liberal Party wants to avoid documents from the Prime Minister's Office being released. We won't accept that. That's not acceptable. The Prime Minister's Office should be accountable and transparent. We believe that firmly. There's no way we'll back down from that.

It seems as though we have a pretty clear indication that the Liberals will go to quite great lengths to avoid that happening. That's clear. We're seeing a filibuster. We're seeing amendments and we're seeing things to try to muddy the waters. We're seeing arguments that try to distract from the issue at hand.

I certainly agree with what I heard from Ms. Blaney, which is that there are things that need to be dealt with. I had really hoped, as I think many of us had hoped, that perhaps dedicating a couple of meetings would at the very least break down the resolve of the Liberal members or maybe they would decide that enough was enough. They could just let us have the documents that are needed to find out what transpired here.

It doesn't seem as though that's the case. This has dragged on for months now. We're certainly not prepared to back down, but I do understand the sentiment. We had a groundbreaking study that involved a lot of this committee's time. It would be a shame to see that not resolved in a report. I share that concern with Ms. Blaney.

I also share the concern about the witnesses who have been postponed twice now. I've heard from one or two of them. They're wanting to know some sense of when this will happen. We can't give them that because we don't know how long the Liberals want to continue to filibuster this situation. Maybe there's a way we can make sure those things that need to be dealt with, which Ms. Blaney has indicated, get dealt with, yet still return to this.

After consulting with our clerks to get some sense of what was possible to make this happen, I would like to move that the debate

on this motion be adjourned until we have completed the review of the report on the women's study and have had the one meeting with the witnesses who had to be postponed, and that the committee agree to then immediately return to debate on this motion.

• (6755)

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

Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: In all of my time at this committee, that is the most sensible and best intervention I have ever heard from Mr. Richards. I am fully in support.

The Chair: I have that motion on the table.

Members of the committee, do I have unanimous consent on the motion of Mr. Richards?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Great.

Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May: I'd ask to adjourn the meeting today.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: We're just warming up.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bryan May: I need more material for my memoirs.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Your memoirs—I love that.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Can I get in a B role there?

Mr. Blake Richards: I have to point out that that was my first intervention of the evening and it was pretty successful.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: It seems we have unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you to our interpreters, technicians, clerk and analyst.

The meeting is adjourned.

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