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Chair

Mr. John Cannis

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• (0900)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Angela Crandall): Good morning. I see a quorum.

Today, pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), which states that at the commencement of every session or, if necessary, during the course of a session—and that is the case this morning—the committee has to elect a chairperson.

The chairperson of the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs has to be a member of the governing party.

I'm now ready to take nominations for the position of chair.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): I would like to nominate John Cannis.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Is it appropriate for members of the opposition to nominate a member of the government to be chair?

The Clerk: You can nominate anyone.

Mr. Rick Casson: If we do nominate someone, is it up to them to decline, or do they have to put their name in?

The Clerk: They can always decline.

Mr. Rick Casson: I'd like to nominate Mr. Rota.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Thank you, but I will respectfully decline.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Rick Casson: I kind of thought that might happen.

That's just to show the respect we have for you, Anthony.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor (Carleton—Mississippi Mills, CPC): We just want to check if the fix is in, that's all.

Mr. Rick Casson: Nothing against you, John.

Mr. Anthony Rota: I have my hands full with the veterans affairs subcommittee, and I'm very pleased with that, thank you.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

Seeing none, Mr. Cannis is the chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair (Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I too was going to say Mr. Rota, but he was telling me how busy he is with his subcommittee, so....

Thank you very much, colleagues. I had the opportunity some years ago to serve for a very short period of time on the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs, but as we know, in this environment sometimes we tend to go from one committee to the other.

I had the opportunity most recently to chair the Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment for our country, and certainly I had a great opportunity to work with all members on all sides. There was great cooperation. All I can assure you from my side is that I intend to bring the same type of flexibility and cooperation to this most important committee. Along the way, I'm obviously going to seek the help and support of the clerks and the researchers to get me up to speed as quickly as possible.

I can only say that from my friendship and experience with the former chair, my good friend Pat O'Brien, he did an excellent job on this committee. Hopefully, today I have the opportunity to keep his standard and improve on it, with your help.

With that, we'll move to the next point on our agenda today.

Yes, Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, I wonder if you'd entertain a motion of thanks—with unanimous consent, obviously—for the work of the former chair, and that this be communicated to Mr. O'Brien on behalf of the committee.

Mr. Anthony Rota: I second that.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Yes, absolutely. As I said initially, he should be commended for the dedication and hard work he put into the committee along with all the members. I've heard nothing but praise for this committee.

Any other comments?

Our next order of business, pursuant to Standing Orders 110 and 111, is with respect to the nomination of Monsieur Yves Côté to the position of ombudsman, referred to the committee on May 30, 2005. Monsieur Côté is with us today.

Monsieur Côté, you have 10 minutes for your presentation. Then we'll go to questions from members of the committee.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be a pest here—

• (0905)

The Chair: Not at all.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: —but one of the traditions of the committee, which you may not be aware of, is we were in the habit of having the chair ask everyone to turn off their cellphones to make sure there was no symphony in the middle of testimony.

The Chair: I think out of respect for all members, and our witnesses even more, yes, we all should make sure our cellphones are turned off.

Monsieur Côté.

Mr. Yves Côté (As an Individual): Mr. Chair, before I do anything else, I wonder if I may ask your leave to take my jacket off, perhaps what a number of people have done. Would that be okay with you?

The Chair: As soon as I walked in, the signal was given to me, and I felt very comfortable taking my jacket off, so by all means, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, it is with great pleasure that I appear before you and your colleagues today to present my credentials and answer your questions. In the next few minutes, I would like to introduce myself, explain why I applied for this position and share with you my vision of the role of ombudsman and of the position's importance within an institution made up of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces.

[English]

The Canadian Forces constitute a very important Canadian institution, an institution we have every reason to be very proud of. For the forces to perform in the best way possible and to meet the many challenges they are facing now and will be facing over the coming years, I believe it is essential that there be mechanisms allowing members of the CF and the civilian employees of the department to have an effective voice, to have a voice that will allow them to be heard, and heard in a real and truly effective way, a voice, Mr. Chairman, to ensure that they have their due, that they are treated the right way, that they are treated with fairness, with equity, and of course also with dignity.

I believe that as a voice mechanism, the Office of the Ombudsman has been and must continue to be effective, to make a difference, and to produce results. It is because, Mr. Chairman, I would very much like to carry that voice, to be that voice, to produce those results, that I applied for the job. And believe me, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I would not have applied for this job if I were not convinced that I could do it well and very effectively.

[Translation]

Indeed, becoming ombudsman represents a marked change of direction for me.

[English]

On the one hand, as we all know, the nature of this job is truly unique, and therefore quite completely different from anything I have done up to this point in my professional career. The ombudsman, as we all know, is not part of the civilian or the

military bureaucracy. Indeed, he is and must act in a manner that is totally independent from the chain of command.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, let me state very clearly that in my mind independence is absolutely key to the credibility and therefore to the success of the Office of the Ombudsman. Let me also assure you, in the clearest terms possible, that the independence of the office is something I will do absolutely everything I can to defend and to preserve, should it ever come under attack.

Secondly, I also realize that I would not be going into this job to do what I have been doing for the last 20 or 25 years; that is to say, practise law. Quite clearly, the job of an ombudsman is entirely different from the job of a legal adviser. In a sense, the ombudsman operates at a different level. His job is primarily to promote fairness and due process and in so doing to see to it that the life of the soldier is made better in a real and concrete way.

In the performance of such a job, any ombudsman must always be and remain conscious of the profound power imbalance that exists between a government and its citizens, and also the kind of imbalance, to bring it closer to home, that exists between the military chain of command and the soldier. This imbalance is something I am acutely aware of and will continue to be aware of.

• (0910)

[Translation]

I would now like to briefly describe my background and I intend to do so in four stages.

To begin, my professional background demonstrates that I am very familiar with the institution of the Canadian Forces and that it is important to me. As you learned when you read my resumé, I worked for the Canadian Forces for about six years during my career. I first worked as an officer of the Office of the Judge Advocate General from 1977 to 1981; I came back in 1998, seventeen years later, this time as a civilian and as a legal advisor for the Department and the Canadian Forces. So, Mr. Chairman, it is an organization which I believe in and for which I would like to work once more.

Second, Mr. Chairman, I would like to mention the fact that after leaving the Canadian Forces, I held several positions in government which, I believe, helped me acquire a very solid knowledge and a good understanding of the machinery of government. This knowledge will be of great use to me in my role as ombudsman, since it is much easier, I believe, to have an impact and influence when one is intimately familiar with the inner workings of an organization and of its constituent systems.

Third, Mr. Chairman, I worked for nearly eight years—and I then headed the group responsible for providing experts advice—in areas dealing with the Charter and human rights within the Department of Justice. I greatly appreciated the work, because it relates to—and several years later still relates to, my personal values and principles. This is because our role consisted in making sure that human rights, such as the right to equality, and basic rights, such as freedom of expression, were upheld to the greatest degree possible.

Lastly, Mr. Chairman, I would like to talk about my studies, which included completing a bachelor degree in psychology just a little over ten years ago. In the course of those studies, I have learned a lot about human nature, on human relations, on what motivates people and on communication.

The work I accomplished in the area of human rights and the studies I completed in psychology helped me learn things which have been very useful to me and which, I am convinced, will still be of use to me in my position as ombudsman.

[English]

Before I conclude, I would like to tackle a potential issue head on. I realize that applying for this position may not seem to be part of my career path. However, I would like to assure you that applying for this job was a decision I made on my own and for reasons of my own.

Last year in December, Mr. Marin announced he would be leaving his position. I quickly decided this was something I dearly wanted to do. I applied for this position essentially for two reasons.

First, as I said before, I profoundly believe that the ombudsman and his office can achieve and have achieved so much to bridge the gap between those who have power, on the one hand, and those who have less power or indeed no power. By ensuring that the institution does right by its members, the institution itself becomes all the stronger and more effective.

However, if there is one key message that I would like the members of this committee to bring from this testimony today, it is the following. I would like to be absolutely clear that my highest commitment in this job will always be not to the institution itself but to its members, to the men and women in uniform.

Second, I applied for this job because I believe it is a job I can do well. It is a job where I think I can make a real difference in the lives of people—the members of the CF and their families—who make such huge sacrifices for their country.

• (0915)

[Translation]

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I will just say a few words.

[English]

I would like to say in closing that I hope I will develop with this committee and its members the same kind of open, strong, and dynamic relationship that I believe Mr. Marin enjoyed with you. I would also like you to know that I will always be happy to appear in front of you to share my thoughts on items and questions of common interest, and of course to assist you in any way I can.

[Translation]

Mr. Chairman, I would now be pleased to answer any questions members of the committee may have. Thank you.

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

[English]

Mr. O'Connor.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté, welcome to our committee. I had a quick review of your career, and at least on the surface, given that the ombudsman is supposed to represent the individual against the organization, based on your career you seem to be an odd choice. I'm just going to go through some of the highlights here.

You seem to be essentially an organization man. You've always represented the organization. You were on the commission of inquiry of the Somalia affair. You were the principal Justice Canada lawyer representing Justice Canada on that commission. You were a DND legal adviser from 1998 to 2000, where I guess you advised the chief of staff, the deputy minister, and the minister on all matters related to military law. I imagine in that period you may have even advised them on the Office of the Ombudsman.

In your most recent functions you were basically the legal counsel to the Clerk of the Privy Council—and you can't go any higher in the system than that in an organization. It seems to me that if you stay on this track, you're on the track to become a deputy minister in the government. So this is part of your career pattern.

Again, I only have the outline of your career, and maybe there were many times in your career when you actually represented the individual and fought for the individual. But it seems, through the more prominent parts of your career, you always represented the government, a government department, or the service, etc., essentially against the individual. So I'm just wondering how you will make that switch to defend the individual against the system.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chair, there is a lot in that question. I'm glad it's being asked, because I know there are some people who share the views expressed by the honourable member. Let me address it in the following way.

First of all, I would like to clarify something for the honourable member. The work I did in connection with the Somalia inquiry was not as chief legal adviser of the government before the commission. It was rather the role, as I think my CV shows, of coordination. My role was to see to it that the disputes and difficulties—the rough areas, if you will—that arose between the commission and the government, in particular on the lawyer side, were taken care of and facilitated in the best way possible, and that any possible crisis could be defused.

The honourable member mentioned that, looking at my CV, I appear to be on the track to become a deputy minister. That may or may not be the case, but the point is that I have decided to make that switch. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, for me this is a *changement de cap marqué*. This is a reorientation of some significance. I've done that on my own, as I said, because I really believe it is important for the ombudsman to play a very useful and important role for the members of the Canadian Forces.

In a way, I believe I am well prepared for this because of some of the things you learn to do as a lawyer. They are to adapt, to change, to take a brief one day that goes in one direction and the next day to assume a brief that perhaps goes in a somewhat different direction.

One of the things I would like to share with the members of this committee is the following. It seems to me that most of us in this room, at least those who are over the age of 40 or 45, have had changes in our careers. Some of you perhaps were formerly businessmen and now are full-time MPs. Some others could have been, for example, medical doctors somewhere, and then they decided to pursue a political career, as Mr. Couillard may have done in Quebec, and become very effective ministers.

Perhaps closer to home, in a way, for me as a practising lawyer is that we all know of people who for many years act as prosecutors, for example, or defence counsel and then are appointed to the bench. Someone could ask how that person, after 25 years of prosecuting criminals, could be expected to become fair-minded, and good, and reasonable, and objective, and fair—yet we all know this has happened and will continue to happen.

One of the things I mentioned, Mr. Chairman, is that for eight or nine years I worked in the human rights law section at the Department of Justice. Our work then and there, day in and day out, was to see to the protection of the rights of the individual—to make sure the government did not lose sight of their reality, their interests, and their rights.

I would also like to mention, Mr. Chairman, that if you look at my CV, you will see that when I was at the Department of Justice from 2000 until 2002, I acted as co-champion for visible minorities and for disabled people. That was something I did because I was interested in doing it. By the way, I still do that now. I act as a mentor for disabled public servants who come to me from time to time because they need advice and would like to be helped and guided in their progress.

All of this is to say that I think my past—including, by the way, the 30 months or so that I have done at PCO.... If there is one thing I've learned in the Privy Council Office, it is how government works. It is how decisions are made. It is how the bureaucracy interacts with the political to make things happen, to resolve issues. It seems to me that as an ombudsman, I would find that very useful—to know which strings to pull, at what time, and with what strength.

Finally, what I would say, Mr. Chair, is that I come to this job with the highest level of commitment and with the determination to continue the good work the Office of the Ombudsman has done, so that the life of the ordinary member of the Canadian Forces is improved by my job and by the job of my office.

● (0920)

The Chair: Mr. O'Connor, you have only about a minute left, sir.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor: Okay.

Mr. Côté, the PCO is basically the central management organization of the public service. Normally what they do is deploy people; they bring them into the PCO and they deploy them out into departments. They maintain a network throughout the whole government this way. Do you think you'll have any problems being the ombudsman and perhaps taking on people in the central government, given that you've just come from that organization?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chair, yes, of course, I'll be coming out of PCO, but I will also be arriving in a position that has a very high degree of independence. Indeed, the appointment is made during

good behaviour, which means it is very difficult to displace somebody who is in that job.

But I also come with a past in which I have given legal advice, in my 20 years or so, to clients, sometimes to senior clients, and sometimes to very senior clients, where the advice was, sorry, Deputy, or sorry, Minister, this is not something you can do, because the rule of law, because the Constitution, stands in your way. This is something I've always done, I think very clearly and very forcefully. If there's one thing I've learned, it is the importance, in the public service, of speaking truth to power and giving fearless advice.

So what I will take from PCO, as I've said, is certainly an enhanced understanding of the manner in which the whole of the government, both politically and bureaucratically, operates, but also I'm arriving there with an absolute commitment. As I said in my opening remarks, if I have one commitment, if I have one priority, it will be to stand up for the little guy, if you will, for the people who are less empowered or are disempowered, and make sure their interests are brought forward to the people who can make a difference and fix the problems, fix the predicaments that such people find themselves in. And in so doing, if there is a need for me to become engaged in a confrontation, it is something I will not shy away from.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to Monsieur Bachand, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My colleague Mr. O'Connor raised a certain number of issues, but I would like to come back to the selection process.

Mr. Côté, you saw in the *Gazette* dated February 12, that the position was open, and so that is when you applied for the job?

● (0925)

Mr. Yves Côté: Indeed, that is how it happened, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Claude Bachand: You realize that this committee does not have the power to accept or to reject your candidacy. We are only here to make sure that the process is respected.

In his white paper, Mr. Marin said that the position of ombudsman should not fall under the minister or the department, because he thought it was important for the position to be completely independent. Can you tell me whether it would be possible to get a list of the people who applied for the position of ombudsman? Or should I ask the department for that instead?

I am also interested in who sat on the selection committee. It includes representatives from National Defence, from the Privy Council Office and from the Prime Minister's Office. These are the people who separate the wheat from the chaff and prepare the list of selected candidates. The candidates have to have a certain degree of credibility. Everyone knows that complaints have been filed with the Judicial Council against people who said that you had to be a Liberal or a federalist to be appointed to the bench.

Please understand that we, the members of the Bloc Québécois, are always a little suspicious when we see who sits on the selection committee and the list of selected candidates. The minister then chooses a candidate based on that list.

Do you share Mr. Marin's opinion, as stated in his white paper, that your position should be immune to political manipulation and influence? The position of ombudsman should no longer fall under the control of the minister, of the federal bureaucracy and especially of the Prime Minister, because the Prime Minister's Office is involved in the selection process.

I would like to know what you think about that. Do you understand that we would like to see an independent ombudsman and not someone who is accountable to a department which is involved in the selection committee that drew up the preliminary list of candidates? Do you understand our approach?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I think I understand clearly the points raised by the honourable member. Allow me to respond.

First, I never saw the list of candidates for reasons having to do with protecting the privacy of the individuals in question. I do not know. However, there was obviously more than one candidate. I believe that the selection committee sat an entire day and interviewed between five and seven people. But that is all I know.

The member indicated that he would like the ombudsman to be independent. As far as that is concerned, I can tell you that I will operate based on the following premise: everybody wants the same thing, be it on the political side, on the bureaucratic side, or here, in Parliament. Nothing leads me to believe the contrary: everybody wants an independent ombudsman.

As I was saying earlier, the fact that this is a permanent five-year appointment guarantees a significant degree of independence. I also mentioned in my opening remarks that if anyone tried by whatever means to reduce or weaken the independence of the ombudsman, I would react with force and conviction and, if necessary, I would make the situation extremely public.

You talked about interference or the role the Prime Minister played. That is not quite right. The mandate of the ombudsman requires him to be accountable to the minister. The ombudsman is therefore completely independent of the chain of command and of the senior hierarchical ranks, and once the ombudsman has taken up his mandate, he has no relationship, either directly or indirectly, with the Prime Minister's Office. It is very important to me to point that out.

I am taking up this position with the necessary conviction, commitment, energy and enthusiasm to innovate and continue the work started by Mr. Marin during the seven or eight years he was ombudsman.

• (0930)

Mr. Claude Bachand: In the minister's letter, it already seems that your role has been weakened. In the minister's letter dated June 1, he recommends your candidacy, but it seems that, at the same time, he is withdrawing part of your mandate and giving it to Ms. Finlay, who "shall have the authority to authorize sensitive investigations that are systemic in nature and to submit or publish reports under section 38 of the Ministerial Directives." It therefore

looks like the minister—I do not know why but it seems to be the case in the letter—gave part of your mandate to Ms. Finlay who, in my opinion, will fulfil that part of the mandate somewhat beyond your purview. Is that not already evidence that the minister is doing what he wants to do? Is that not evidence that you are not independent, since you do not even have a say as far as your own mission is concerned? The minister decides everything. Following our first discussion, I would not like you to have a bad impression of me. I have always been very critical. I like to get to the bottom of things.

I would like to rectify what you said. I know that the Prime Minister cannot call you in anymore to tell you what to do, but to my view, the fact that the Prime Minister or his cabinet are part of the selection committee speaks volumes about your degree of independence. I have to candidly admit to you that I do not think you have the necessary independence to do your job well. I am not blaming you, because you are stuck in a system which has already been set up, and it is not up to you to change it, but please understand our criticism as far as your position is concerned.

Mr. Yves Côté: With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I will answer your question in three parts.

First, with respect to Ms. Finlay, according to what I have heard and seen, this is an interim measure that will allow the office's daily business to continue until there is an ombudsman. I have every reason to believe that when I will have been confirmed in my position, that delegation of authority will be withdrawn.

The issue of the Prime Minister's Office and its involvement was raised again. This may be rather obvious but it is perhaps worth pointing out that this is an order in council appointment. As the committee members are no doubt aware, this is a prerogative of the Prime Minister and so, from that point of view, I think it is normal that the Prime Minister's Office be involved.

Third, and even more importantly, the member stated that I do not have the amount of independence required to carry out my duties. Independence is manifested in at least two areas: the structure and one's state of mind. In terms of the structure, the guidelines for the Office of the Ombudsman have been drafted in such a way as to guarantee the independence of the ombudsman in exercising his or her duties. For example, if the minister wants to give guidelines to the ombudsman, he has to do so on paper and he has to make those guidelines public. That is important.

The other part of independence is one's state of mind, in other words how I approach my new position. I told the committee and I will repeat this again, I approach this position proudly, almost ferociously. Independence is key for me. I will do everything I can to ensure that everyone, throughout the system, knows where I stand on that issue and so that that independence is respected.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté. You're showing a lot of flexibility on time, especially in this important meeting.

We'll go to Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to begin by saying that having been through this appointment process—not the appointment of the ombudsman, but other appointments over the years—I've heard similar concerns expressed, and they're legitimate concerns, about people's background in an organization or connections with the government or with the governing party or whatever. Mr. Côté has referred to his independence of mind; I was going to say it really depends on the character of the appointee, because when people take on a new job, they can really run with it.

I remember a great deal of concern being expressed, for instance, about Mr. John Reid when he was appointed as the access to information person. He was a Liberal MP, and he had been associated with the Canadian Nuclear Association, and he had been this and he had been that. But I don't think anybody has given the government and the Prime Minister a harder time than Mr. Reid has when it comes to access to information.

So it's not always an indication of how people are going to behave. I know absolutely nothing about Mr. Côté. I'm just making this theoretical point, that it doesn't always work out that way, and I hope that in your case it doesn't work out that way and that it will really be dependent on your character, what you do with the job. It may well be, I hope, that you observed injustices in the system that you weren't able to do anything about in previous positions that you might be able to do something about in this particular one.

My understanding is, if I remember correctly—though I wish I had the details in front of me—that when the former ombudsman made his final report and when he was in the process of retiring, he made a number of recommendations for strengthening the Office of the Ombudsman. I wonder if you're conversant with those. What are the things he said on his departure that you would want to pick up on and carry forward by way of trying to get the government to strengthen the role of the ombudsman?

● (0935)

Mr. Yves Côté: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, there are two things I'd like to state here. The first is that I'd like to complement, in a way, what the honourable member said about people like Mr. Reid coming from a certain background and then becoming something that perhaps would not have been expected.

A good example of that I think would be when Mr. Iacobucci, as Deputy Minister of Justice at the time, was appointed Chief Justice of the Federal Court and then was elevated to the Supreme Court of Canada. At the moment of the appointment, many people could have said, how can you expect somebody like that to become a fair judge who will hold the government to account and who will find, for example, that the laws passed by the federal government from time to time are contrary to the charter? I think Mr. Justice Iacobucci has proven he was quite able to elevate himself to the challenge.

The second point the honourable member made had to do with the parting recommendations Mr. Marin has made. Of course, I have read the report Mr. Marin prepared and that was discussed with you early in April. I see he has, in a way, made the same recommendations yet again. As somebody from the outside looking in, some of those recommendations, at least on the face of it, quite clearly have merit to them. It perhaps bears mentioning that I left the

National Defence environment about five or six years ago now, so I'm certainly not up to speed as much as I used to be.

What I would really like to say on this point is that because it has been discussed so much, this is an issue that I will of course look into. One of the first things I will be looking into when I get into the job will be to see what it is Mr. Marin found and how many difficulties have been experienced by the investigators in doing the work. Then I will come to my own judgment after I have discussed it with my people, other players, and other stakeholders. To the extent that I reach the same conclusions as Mr. Marin, then I would certainly engage with the minister on those issues and afterwards share my thoughts about that with this committee, if this committee was interested in hearing from me.

But at this point in time, I hope the committee will appreciate and understand that it is difficult for me to pronounce in any kind of informed, let alone final, way, because there is so much that frankly I don't think I know enough about to be able to engage usefully in that debate.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: I wonder if you have a timeline in mind, because Mr. Marin made these recommendations at the end of his term of service. We wouldn't want you to be doing the same thing five years from now, and then we have another new ombudsman who says, "Well, I've got to look at it for myself", and nothing ever happens.

Do you have a framework in mind for when you might be able to come back to this committee and say, for example, "I've been six months in the job, I've looked at Mr. Marin's recommendations, and these are the things I think the committee should press the government to be changing"?

● (0940)

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, this is something that will certainly be a priority. Not having been in the office, I do not know what is ongoing now and what the bigger files are that the office is working on. But again, given the profile this issue has received, I can assure the honourable member and the committee that this is something I will make a priority. But I would find it difficult to commit myself to any kind of timeline, because I do not know enough about what is ongoing right now and what may be ongoing at the office over the next several months.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would certainly encourage the new ombudsman to have a good look at.... I'm not sure of the actual processes, for instance, the grievance process within the Canadian Armed Forces, and whether that is something you're able to comment on or whether you only deal with individual cases. It's through individual cases that you could comment on the inadequacy of the process, but certainly my impression, from a number of cases I've been familiar with, is that the grievance process in the Canadian Armed Forces leaves a lot to be desired. People are left hanging for years. There is no sort of natural justice in it whatsoever. Basically what happens is people get waited out. They finally quit—long before their grievance is ever dealt with. The whole system really stinks. So I would certainly urge you, as one of your first priorities, to have a good look at that.

I've been in situations where I've said to people, maybe you should talk to the ombudsman. But people have a sense of despair: the ombudsman thing is going to take forever, and the grievance process is going to take forever, and there is no immediate way to kind of get some resolution of an issue.

So both in terms of speeding up your own processes but also in terms of having a look at the grievance process.... I would certainly hope that would be one of the things you would keep an eye out for in your new job.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, this is an urging I will take very seriously; the issue that has been raised is a very serious one. We've all read stories about, as the honourable member said, grievances pending and being left hanging for years and years, so quite clearly this is an issue I will be sensitive to and will do something about.

The second point I'd like to make is that the Office of the Ombudsman deals with files and issues and complaints on a pretty expeditious basis. To the extent that there may be some slowness in part of the system, my understanding—at least from what I've read on the site of the ombudsman—is this probably is not as big an issue, if an issue at all, on the ombudsman's side.

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

Mr. Bagnell.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): I hope you know we need submarines in the north.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Larry Bagnell: No, I'm just kidding.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: You need more than that.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor: You need a new MP.

An hon. member: That's a low blow!

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Have you discussed your appointment with the previous ombudsman and solicited his views on the office?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I have had, on my own initiative, a couple of discussions with Mr. Marin. The first one was extremely brief, on the day I was nominated for the position. I just wanted to talk to him and let him know I would like to talk to him again, which we did, maybe a week later. Then we spent about twenty or thirty minutes on the phone. I wanted to get from Mr. Marin his best take on what was going on in his office, what the priorities were, and what the big things were. André was very cooperative and gave me the information I needed, so from that point of view we're off on the right foot.

One point I'd like to add, Mr. Chairman, is that the acting ombudsman, Madam Finlay, phoned me a couple of times to extend to me her best offices to assist me in preparing myself for this. I am of course very grateful for what she did.

That, essentially, is what I would have to say in answer to that question.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: There are certain things I disagreed with in his recommendations. From the little bit you've read and from the reports and talking to him, do you have any different directions from those of the previous ombudsman that you might take in any area?

● (0945)

Mr. Yves Côté: This is hard to say, and maybe I could use that question to talk a little bit about what my priorities would be going into the job. Certainly the first thing would be to engage in some outreach in a real way to get myself known. More importantly, I'd be sitting down with people across the organization, civilian and military, and certainly with non-commissioned members, the more junior people, in environments that would allow them to be open and frank and to say what is on their minds. That's one thing that will be very important for me early on.

The second thing is that I would like to take stock of what the office has been working on, what kinds of major investigations they are carrying on, so I would know what the issues were. I would of course find it important to make sure I was comfortable with the approach that was taken and the manner in which these things were going to be done.

All of this is to say I find it difficult to comment at this point in time on whether I would take the office in a different direction from what Mr. Marin has done.

What I would certainly remark on—and I think it's a very important point—is the fact that the Office of the Ombudsman over the last four or five years has, through its intervention, allowed the resolution of very serious files. I'm thinking, for example, of PTSD and mustard gas, a file that had been ongoing for 40 or 45 years and was going nowhere. Then finally, when the Office of the Ombudsman was seized of it, they were able, through the publication of their report, to make the government solve the issue, and solve it in a way that I think was important.

This is what I would say to the honourable member in answer to his question.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Do you have any philosophy to take the various individual problems you get and try to see if there's a pattern in which a structural change could be made to solve the problem in general, not just the one for the particular individual?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, this is a very important question. Quite clearly, the Office of the Ombudsman may not, should not, and could not limit itself to handling individual complaints. I think one of the roles they have to play, and have to play very vigilantly, is to see the extent to which there are systemic issues, issues that go from one base to the next.

For example, we've heard stories before about certain types of harassment and what not. To the extent it goes beyond the individual, quite clearly the ombudsman has a major role to play to identify those issues, to sensitize the institution and the chain of command to these things, and to make sure appropriate steps are taken.

Incidentally, on this, one of the things I would certainly do in my outreach in the first few months would be to sit down with, for example, the network of social workers who work in the military, those officers who do that kind of job. I'd sit down with them to understand and get from them what they see on those issues that goes beyond the individual and appears to have a systemic side to it.

In the same way, one of the things I'd certainly like to do is to sit down with chaplains, because as we all know, chaplains will hear a lot about the real life of not only the members but also their families and dependants, and get from them a sense of what is ongoing now that deserves and merits to be elevated and be looked into.

Quite clearly, Mr. Chairman, this is an issue that is important. Any office of an ombudsman that only resolved individual complaints, I would submit, would not be doing its job the way it should.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bagnell.

We'll go to Mr. Casson.

Mr. Rick Casson: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté, the previous ombudsman did an analysis and looked back over his time, and he made some recommendations upon leaving. There are three pretty distinct ones that came up, and you've partially addressed some of them. He felt military police complaints could be handled more efficiently through the ombudsman's office, and he felt there could be an avenue for veterans' complaints also through this office. He then got into—I know you've addressed this—the whole grievance situation. There's a lot that could be done through an ombudsman's office to circumvent that happening.

Have you looked at that? Do you have comments on dealing with the military police, the veterans, and the streamlining of the whole process?

And are you aware of how many cases there are in your office right now that are being dealt with on a day-to-day basis? How many outstanding complaints are there that you're going to have to address in the near future?

• (0950)

Mr. Yves Côté: Maybe, Mr. Chair, I could answer the second part of the question first because that answer is going to be the shortest. The answer is that I do not know what the workload or the file load is right now, and that is because, being a nominee only at this point in time, I didn't think it would be fully appropriate for me to get into more detailed or more current information about the manner in which the office has been working. That's the first part.

Secondly, you mentioned the issues of the veterans and the MPCC. I think in a way we've talked a little, and maybe enough, about the grievance board. What I would say on this is yes, I have read the reports Mr. Marin put out, and looking at the way in which the information he has marshalled and published on how this is set out, I certainly get the sense that there are issues there that absolutely need to be looked into and addressed.

With respect to veterans, I find this particularly difficult. For one thing, veterans affairs, as this committee would very well know, fall under the jurisdiction of another minister. I think Mr. Marin acknowledged that himself...to the extent he was given a mandate to look at both sides, the serving members and the veterans. In a way, he might find himself having two ministers he would be accountable to, and that may raise issues.

There are also things I don't fully understand and appreciate, for example, the role the Royal Canadian Legion plays with respect to veterans. All indications I have are that they're pretty effective and do quite a lot to assist veterans. Also, there is an organization in

Veterans Affairs called the Bureau of Pensions Advocates. I think they also do a lot to move things forward and make sure the veterans get the kinds of benefits, assistance, and services they require.

All of this is to say that what I have now is only a partial view and understanding of the overall situation. It's a situation that is extremely complex for all of the reasons I have given, and probably for a number of others. What I would like to say is that I'm not therefore in a position to engage in the discussion of it in a way that could be useful for this committee. That is certainly something I will look into early on in the mandate to get a better grip on it and then move forward with the expression of my views and positions on it.

Mr. Rick Casson: The other issue that was mentioned here you touched on just slightly. I'm not sure if you're in a position, after your comments, to comment much on the details of some of these policies and problems, but it's an issue of a policy on harassment that covers both the military and civilian employees. I think it was an element that led to the establishment of the ombudsman's office, that this needed to be addressed.

I'm not sure the situation has been properly addressed or that the harassment issue has been completely examined or policies put in place to ease that problem. Do you have any ideas, maybe not from what you're looking forward to, but in the experience you've had to date? Do you see anything in what you've been handling in your other duties that you could bring forward into this ombudsman's role to help put in policies and to help alleviate the situation?

Mr. Yves Côté: Yes. Indeed, at the time Mr. Marin was appointed ombudsman—in June 1998, I think—the major television networks in particular were, day in and day out, presenting reports about harassment in the Canadian Forces. Quite clearly, Mr. Marin came in at that point in time, as did a number of other oversight mechanisms, to deal with those issues.

In terms of what has been going on in the Canadian Forces over the last couple of years, I am not in a position, really, to comment. The only thing I could say is that my understanding is that the situation has improved considerably. Whether there are still, to this day, areas where harassment may be prevalent, may be rampant, I certainly do not know. It is very difficult for me to comment any further than that on this issue, except to say that certainly in terms of harassment, this would be something I would take extremely seriously.

Maybe I could mention the fact that we have a daughter who is in the military. She is a young officer in the navy. She went through military college. I talked to her when she went through college, through RMC in Kingston, and I asked her questions about whether there was, especially for a young female francophone, anything having to do with harassment, or adverse treatment, or negative treatment. Certainly, throughout, anything I've heard from her and from her colleagues has been that this issue was not there, or at least she was not aware of it.

So the understanding I have about the fact that perhaps the situation has improved quite considerably would be based in large measure on that, but I would certainly be the first one to note and to say that this is a very tiny slice and may not at all be representative of the bigger picture. But harassment is something that would get me to intervene, and intervene forcefully, if it were brought to my attention that these things were happening.

• (0955)

Mr. Rick Casson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casson.

We'll go to Mr. Desrochers, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Odina Desrochers (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté, how would the transfer of powers between Mr. Marin and yourself take place?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, as I stated, I have spoken to Mr. Marin twice and the second time we spoke, I told him that if I was confirmed in this position perhaps he and I could dine together. He said that he was quite open to that.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Will that be a social or professional meeting?

Mr. Yves Côté: It would probably be both social and professional because, as I told Mr. Marin, I would certainly want to benefit from his experience, knowledge, and all that he learned while he was there. In fact, André told me—and I think I can say this—that if I wanted to speak to him at any time to obtain more information, I could do so.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Would you describe yourself as being a candidate who supports continuity or would you say that there will be a real change when you start your job?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I would describe myself as the candidate I am, as Yves Côté, new ombudsman, who comes with his past, his own experience, and who wishes to carry out his mandate in the most efficient, real and concrete way possible.

That probably means that in some cases, I will be following exactly the same kind of issues that Mr. Marin was interested in. That also means that, given that we are two very different individuals, two very different leaders, in other cases, I will take a different approach. However, the goal, the priority, the commitment, will always be to improve our soldiers' and our corporals' situation, so that they are always treated, to the greatest extent possible, fairly and with dignity.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: When there is a change, there is either continuity, or there is a break. That is why I was asking you where you stand. Mr. Marin has made certain recommendations. If you support continuity, that means that you will endorse some of his recommendations, but if you are saying that, to a certain extent, you will be working in your own way, then there may be a certain contrast between both individuals. How will the soldiers and corporals find their way in all of this?

Mr. Yves Côté: I think that the soldiers and corporals will be able to tell themselves that an ombudsman who did many good things for

them has left, and that there is now a new ombudsman who has made the formal commitment, here and elsewhere, to do the same, that is to take care of their interests in a real, concrete and positive way.

I would also like to point out that to the extent that Mr. Marin may have made recommendations that have not already been implemented, obviously it will be up to me to ensure that those recommendations are not ignored or forgotten.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: How many people make up your staff?

• (1000)

Mr. Yves Côté: I believe I understood Ms. Finlay to say that the budget was approximately \$5 million and that the office has about 48 to 52 employees.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I know that my anglophone colleague put this question but is it your intention to extend your mandate to the veterans? We met them last week and they are asking for an ombudsman. Do you think you will be in a position to extend your responsibilities and to respond to veterans' grievances as well as those of people who work directly for the Canadian Forces?

Mr. Yves Côté: The answer that I gave earlier is more or less the same as the one I will give you now. From many points of view I think that the issue that has been raised is a real and important one, but given that I am still limited in what I know and especially what I understand about the issues, and given that I do not completely understand the role that, for example, the Royal Canadian Legion, the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, and so on, may play, it would be very difficult for me to give you an opinion on that, however preliminary an opinion that would be. I think that the Canadian government has done many good things for the veterans over the past month, with the Veterans' Charter having been passed so quickly. Like the rest of the government, I think that it is important to treat veterans well.

In terms of my own mandate, and in terms of what it means for my office and the recommendations I may make, it is very difficult for me to speak any further to that at this point in time.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Can you tell us if you would support the creation of an ombudsman's position for Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Yves Côté: I support that the veterans be paid all the attention they deserve and that all mechanisms and machinery necessary be put in place in order to achieve that goal.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I would now like to speak about your work as an ombudsman. I share Mr. Blaikie's opinion on this. There is currently an arbitration system and there are grievances. Where do you stand with respect to your responsibility for grievances and your responsibility as an ombudsman? Are you going to intervene quickly or only after the first stage?

Mr. Yves Côté: I think we need to look at the mandate and at the current legislation. The grievance board received a mandate from Parliament approximately five years ago. The guidelines for the Office of the Ombudsman also contain rules and approaches. If I have correctly understood this, the Office of the Ombudsman, or the ombudsman, must give priority to existing mechanisms, except under extraordinary circumstances. However, it is up to the ombudsman to judge whether there are extraordinary or exceptional circumstances. It is up to the ombudsman, when he feels there is urgency and that there are important things that must be done, to take the necessary measures and intervene faster than the rules and existing mechanisms provided for. That is essentially how I would answer that question.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Rick Casson): Larry.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Thank you. I'm happy that you have the intensive experience in government, because I think as you said, then you know how the system works and how you can get things fixed.

I'm wondering, though, about your former position as an officer. Sometimes non-commissioned officers always see officers as an officer, whether they're retired or not, for the rest of their life. As an officer in the forces, do you think young corporals could feel comfortable coming to you as the ombudsman and not suspect that you'll be a conduit back to the senior brass?

Mr. Yves Côté: I was an officer from 1977 to 1981. That goes back about 24 years now. When I left as a young captain, I was still at the lowest rank possible in the office of the Judge Advocate General. So yes, I was an officer, but not a very senior one.

More important, what I would say is this. In many ways, I wouldn't like to be judged by my words. Words in a way are cheap. They can easily be uttered. I would like to be judged on my deeds. When I begin my outreach, my intention is to sit down with the ordinary members of the Canadian Forces, with the privates, the able seamen, and so on. I think when they sit across the table from me they will see that they have in front of them not a former officer of the Canadian Forces, not a former official of the PCO, but a real human being who has in his heart and in his mind the fierce determination to improve their lot.

People could, for their own reasons, feel limited in how they approach somebody like me. I hope that through my doing the job and my meeting and speaking with people they will realize that the anxiety they may have had is ill-placed, that they should feel free to speak to me, and that as human beings we have one thing in common—to see to it that fairness and equity prevail.

•(1005)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Have you met with the minister? Did he provide any thoughts?

Mr. Yves Côté: I met with the minister once. There was a short list that was prepared. Again, I do not know what the names on the list were, but certainly I understand the minister met some of us. I met him in that context. There were a couple of things that were made clear by the minister, and that I think I can report here. He wants this office to continue to deliver results, to be effective, and to make a difference in the lives of soldiers. His message to me was that

if I were appointed, I should keep in mind that this is my mandate. That's what I would say on this.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: One last question. The previous ombudsman made recommendations on the Military Police Complaints Commission. I don't know if you have any thoughts on it yet, but if you do, I hope you will meet with them and talk to them. The previous recommendations were made without anyone talking to the Military Police Complaints Commission. I'm curious whether you have an opinion now. But I hope you will meet with them before you come to a final opinion.

Mr. Yves Côté: If I did not do that, I would not be fulfilling the job in the way I should. I am a person who, before coming to any kind of decision, likes to hear all sides of the story. I like to collect the information that is relevant to the issue and then come to my own conclusion.

It seems to me all the more important for an ombudsman to be doing that—to be open, objective, and fair. This of course does not prevent him from being firm and clear. It is important to be the kind of person who sits down and hears what the other side has to say. You hear it in a way that is frank, open, and sincere. Then you move away, develop your own judgment, and form your own impressions and conclusions. I would certainly sit down with any other overview or oversight mechanism in which I might be interested and over which I should be making recommendations.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Rick Casson): Thank you.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The independence and impartiality of the ombudsman's office must be paramount for it to operate with the confidence of our soldiers. It's been suggested by a distinguished former Somalia inquiry commissioner that the decision to shut down the Somalia inquiry was motivated by politics rather than the need to get at the truth. You played a significant role in that inquiry. What has changed that will give confidence to soldiers, who look to the ombudsman for support, that in the face of a political request an investigation will not be handled like the Somalia inquiry and shut down before the truth comes out?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I have a couple of things in answer to this.

Firstly, I would like again to set the record straight on what my involvement or my role was with respect to the Somalia inquiry.

I was called into it to act as a facilitator, to act as somebody who tried to resolve issues in the best and easiest manner possible, to diffuse issues and to find compromises—if that's the right word—particularly between the lawyers' team on the commission side and the lawyers' team on the government side.

Certainly my role as the middle executive at the time was not such that I made any kind of decision as to what should happen to the commission, whether it should be shut down or not. As members will appreciate, I'm sure, this kind of decision is made at a level much different from the level I was operating in at the time.

That being said, I applied for this job because I believe in it and because I am convinced that I can do it in a way that will be useful, that will be constructive, that will be positive, and I know that going into this job, I'm going to be a different person professionally than I was before, but I will keep the same values and the same principles.

•(1010)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: After the previous ombudsman's term had expired, the acting ombudsman was requested to submit her reports to the Minister of Defence for censoring prior to release.

Will you be following the same practice?

Mr. Yves Côté: The same practice being submitting for censorship?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: If the minister requires that you submit the report to the Minister of Defence prior to laying down the report for the public, will you adhere to that?

Mr. Yves Côté: What I will do, Mr. Chair, is make sure the directives, as they exist now, are fully complied with. As they exist now, what they call for is for the ombudsman to file proposed reports with the minister and give the minister either 28 or 60 days before they are made public. But the directives, at the same time, are very clear that no one is to amend or change a report prepared by the ombudsman, except to make it consistent with the Privacy Act.

So my short answer is that this is what I will do, and this is what I will insist on having done.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Do you then believe that having your report submitted to Parliament, as opposed to the Minister of Defence in advance, would be more apt to preserve the integrity of the Office of the Ombudsman?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chair, it seems to me that this system, or the procedure as it exists now—given what I just said, that no one has the power to amend, in any way, a report prepared by the ombudsman—is probably sufficient to ensure that in the end what Parliament gets, what this committee gets by way of reports from the ombudsman, is the report the ombudsman wanted to file. To me, that is the important thing, the important consideration. And as I said, it seems to me that the procedure as we have it now is sufficient to guarantee that.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Do I have any more time, Mr. Chairman?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Rick Casson): Yes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Already since the previous ombudsman has left—whom I trusted and the soldiers trusted—there have been a number of situations come before me, and I have to have the confidence that I can trust you enough—

Mr. Yves Côté: Me?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: —right—to refer these soldiers to you. There has been this question hanging over the Somalia inquiry, and your ability, willingness, to answer this question will for me provide the answer as to whether or not I can make a reference to you if it becomes necessary.

My question is, what exactly was it that prompted the government to close down the Somalia inquiry? What was the truth that they didn't want the public to know?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, at least from my vantage point, I find this question difficult, if not impossible, to answer. I think we all read the papers at the time, we all were informed by various reports that came out, and some things were said, and so on.

To the extent that the doubt she has, has to do with whether or not she can confidently refer somebody to me, with the hope that I will be looking at the case that somebody files with me with an open mind, with a mind that would be geared towards helping that person resolve a problem, what I would say is that the honourable member should take the chance, if she has a doubt. I think that after that has been done, the member she would have referred to me will come back to her and say, "Well, it may be that some people had doubts about him, but he really meant what he said when he appeared before your committee, and he really looked at my case and listened to me in a manner that was serious, that was open, that was impartial, and that was objective."

I would also say that if at any point in time a member of this committee thought I was not living up to the standards that I've just proclaimed for myself here, please, get me to appear before your committee again and to account for the manner in which I may have misbehaved, according to some, or may not have lived up to the standards I have set for myself.

That would be my answer to that question.

•(1015)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: That's it, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mr. Blaikie, is there something you would like to have an answer to? No? Okay.

Monsieur Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I have a question on Somalia. I see that you were the coordinator for government action in Somalia. At the time did you recommend that the work of the commission investigating the situation in Somalia be brought to a close? You must have made a recommendation to the government.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, given that the position I held at the time was not a senior position, if I were to have made any recommendations at all, I am not sure that the government would have decided to act one way or another because of my recommendation. That decision was made at the highest levels, for reasons that the government had at the time.

Mr. Claude Bachand: However, your CV does specifically state that you were coordinating the government's activities for that commission of inquiry. You did not make a recommendation. The government just went over your head and took the decision to end the commission's work. You did not make a recommendation.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, the role that I had as coordinator was one of facilitation. Some members of the committee may remember the enormous difficulties encountered in the collection and production of documents for the commission of inquiry. We all remember how difficult that was.

One of the areas I looked into was how we could facilitate the identification and production of relevant documents. As I mentioned, we also had to resolve conflicts between teams of lawyers and the prosecutor, on both sides. That was the level I was working at. It was more the level of the mechanics, it was operational. That was the work I was doing.

If I had made any recommendations about the commission's status, I do not think they would have necessarily held much weight.

Mr. Claude Bachand: You do not think they would have had much weight, but did you make a recommendation?

Mr. Yves Côté: Quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, that was in 1997 and I do not remember having mentioned to anyone that the commission's mandate should be extended or not.

Mr. Claude Bachand: When you held that position, you must have had the lawyers' motto, "*Veritas*", written on your sleeve.

Mr. Yves Côté: At that time, the justice department did not have any uniforms. Therefore, I did not have "*Veritas*" written on my sleeve.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Were you not an officer at the time?

Mr. Yves Côté: No, I was no longer an officer. During the events in Somalia, I was a lawyer for the justice department, I was the assistant director of the human rights section. Incidentally, my job as a coordinator for the commission of inquiry was a part-time one. I continued in my position as the section's assistant director.

Mr. Claude Bachand: You do not remember if you made a written or verbal report.

Mr. Yves Côté: If you are talking about a written report, I can almost guarantee that I did not provide a written report recommending that the commission be disbanded. That would not have been part of my mandate.

Mr. Claude Bachand: And you did not provide a verbal report.

Mr. Yves Côté: Honestly, a verbal report...

Mr. Claude Bachand: One can say an awful lot in a lifetime, right?

Mr. Yves Côté: The member is quite right. One can say an awful lot in a lifetime, whether it be over a glass of beer, or in other circumstances. I may have said something to that effect, but I have no recollection of it now.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Very well. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Bagnell.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I just wanted to give you a chance to speak, if there's anything you'd like to say that you didn't get a chance to say in your opening remarks or in relation to some of the questions.

• (1020)

Mr. Yves Côté: At the risk of repeating myself, Mr. Chairman, I would say that I believe I come to this job with a background that

will make it easy—not easy, but easier—for me to get things done. Certainly I come to this job with an absolute commitment to make a difference, to resolve issues, and with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for this new challenge.

[*Translation*]

As I conclude, this morning, I reiterate my determination to insure that, along with my office, I will make a real difference in the lives of our soldiers.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Longfield, given that we have plenty of time, would you—

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): I want to thank you, Mr. Côté, for coming and for fielding the tough questions. It won't be the last time you'll be faced with such.

I was impressed with one thing you said, and I would encourage it. Perhaps you might want to put it on your desk. Unlike someone who had "The buck stops here", the phrase I want you to put on your desk is "Speak truth to power". You indicated that you weren't afraid to do it, and I hope you will continue to keep that as one of your guiding philosophies.

Mr. Yves Côté: Most certainly, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I just want to pick up on that. I want to thank you for appearing before our committee. It's my first chairing of the committee, Mr. Côté, and I must just pick up on that and Ms. Gallant's comments about honesty and trust, which she touched upon and which I think is so important, and one or two things, if I may just summarize, that I heard from Mr. Casson and Mr. Blaikie in terms of process, grievances, and resolution, areas that I think are very important.

I know Mr. Marin had certain standards. Certainly I think that for these people who put their lives at stake for their country, a process that could be expeditious, efficient, truthful, honest, etc., really will go a long way to supporting these people in the other dimension. So I wish you good luck and thank you for appearing before our committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Côté: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much, members of the committee.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will suspend for two minutes, until you leave, sir, and then we'll go into the second phase of our committee, and that is the committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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