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—
Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

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•(0845)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.)): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the 46th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Today we'll be studying, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the subject matter of clause 1 of Bill C-597, an act to amend the Holidays Act.

We have with us from the Canadian Veterans Advocacy, Michael Blais, president and founder. We have from the Royal Canadian Legion, Bradley White, Dominion secretary, Dominion Command; and William Maxwell, senior program officer, Dominion Command. Joining us from the York Catholic District School Board via teleconference is Sonia Gallo, communications manager.

Before we get going, Sonia, can you hear me all right?

Ms. Sonia Gallo (Communications Manager, York Catholic District School Board): I can hear you, yes, thank you. Good morning.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Frank Valeriote): Good morning, and we can hear you as well.

So without further ado, we'll start the meeting by calling on Mr. Blais.

You have 10 minutes, Mr. Blais.

Mr. Michael Blais (President and Founder, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): Good morning.

My name is Michael Blais and I'm the president and founder of the Canadian Veterans Advocacy.

Thank you for inviting me to Ottawa to speak to Bill C-597 and the sacred obligation that I believe this legislation represents. I welcome the opportunity and encourage you as parliamentarians to demonstrate apolitical respect for those who serve today in the veterans' community by ensuring Remembrance Day is accorded federal equality to other federal holidays.

As you are aware, I testified last week beside Dominion Secretary White before the heritage committee, and I should like to ensure that a copy of this testimony is included as a written submission by the clerk, because I think it is counterproductive to repeat what I have said last week in lieu of the extensive consultation process we have conducted since my appearance before the committee.

I would remind committee that we have had just over a month to formally consult and that Bill C-597 is unique in the sense that, while we have been supporting Wilma McNeill's quest to convince

the Ontario legislature to embrace their sacred obligation to veterans of Ontario in the provision of a statutory holiday for some time now, this bill is different. It seeks only a legal holiday without legislated day-off status. I have endeavoured to speak to as many veterans and serving members as possible since being invited, from a chance encounter with the CDS in the hallway last week prior to testimony, to purposely speaking to non-commissioned officers currently standing sentinel at the National War Memorial.

I have also attempted to expand our consultation to my community in response to a medical emergency in my family in the expansive time I have spent in Niagara hospitals over the past month. The issue is a fine discussion point, and there was ample opportunity to speak to many Canadians of all professions and all areas in lobbies or waiting rooms. Of course, there's our engagement through the CVA social network, which has grown substantially since our last encounter, and our effort to work with the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that updated and accurate information, particularly in this era of change, is provided to veterans who use the Internet as their primary source of news gathering or consultation.

As it stands now, through consultation with serving members, veterans, families, and the civilian population we have engaged we find there is universal support for the legal holiday that Bill C-597 presents. Once the bill is defined, once it has been clarified that no days off would be accorded, support has been universal. It is vital that our discussions today focus on the opportunity Parliament has been provided through this bill to honour and respect national sacrifice in a meaningful and effective manner.

We must understand that Bill C-597 neither imposes or mandates a federal day-off holiday such as the oft-quoted comparative Victoria Day and the insinuation that Remembrance Day would become just another holiday. This argument has no foundation in these discussions. There is no day off. For the schoolchildren, if there was no school, they would simply go to the mall and ignore the reason that Remembrance Day exists. Again, this is not a day-off holiday. These arguments have no bearing with the content of Bill C-597. Accordingly, our collective focus must be on the context of the bill, the acknowledgement that it presents only equality to other federal holidays, and that it does not impose on or mandate provinces to provide a statutory holiday.

Accordingly, I would encourage all parliamentarians to set aside political agendas and embrace the opportunity Bill C-597 provides for them to fulfill their obligation to the spirit of the nation. I would encourage you to work together, united in respect for the national sacrifice of Canada's sons and daughters, and to pass this bill before the next election. I am aware that no private member's bill has passed to fruition, and that the potential delays incurred by this committee's late stage involvement may jeopardize the bill's passing. To that end, again, I would encourage you to move swiftly with unity and with understanding that you are according equality not only to other federal holidays, but acknowledging recognition of the sacrifice of all generations and the valorous service of those who serve today.

I often speak to equality for veterans, whether it may be the equality of the Pension Act for those disabled and wounded who have been subject to the new veterans charter; equality to the anti-poverty provision established in the new veterans charter for Memorial Cross widows currently living in poverty; or in this instance, recognition and equality of Remembrance Day to other federal holidays.

• (0850)

Ultimately this bill is about respect, about ensuring equality and stature for our most important time, the day we reserve to recognize and honour national sacrifice, our wounded and disabled veterans, our serving members' selfless service, and their families' commitment to this nation.

Bill C-597 fulfills this obligation and I would encourage you to embrace this opportunity to apolitically approve legislation at your earliest convenience so that we may resolve this issue under this government, not the next one. The process will undoubtedly, at additional cost, be repeated. We can do this in the now. We can affirmatively demonstrate tangible support and recognition of sacrifice by ensuring that Remembrance Day is not a lesser holiday and that it is legislatively enshrined as a legal holiday.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to this issue. It is always a pleasure for me to be here. I am hopeful that we can explore this issue with constructive, bill-focused dialogue. I welcome your questions and shall endeavour to answer to the best of my ability.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP)): Will it be Mr. White or Mr. Maxwell speaking next?

Mr. Bradley K. White (Dominion Secretary, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): Chairman, it will be me.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. White, you have the floor, please.

Thanks again for coming.

Mr. Bradley K. White: Honourable chairman and members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the invitation to appear before the committee today to speak on Bill C-597. On behalf of our Dominion president, Comrade Tom Eagles, and our 300,000 members, it's a pleasure to be here.

I am Brad White, the Dominion secretary of the Royal Canadian Legion. For the last 17 years I have been involved in every major commemorative activity the Legion has participated in, as well as being the director of the national Remembrance Day ceremony.

Accompanying me today is Mr. William Maxwell. Bill is our senior program officer. He's also the secretary of the Dominion Command poppy and remembrance committee, and very much involved in all of our commemorative activities.

It is the Legion's position that November 11 not be a legal or statutory holiday. Therefore, I will be speaking against the proposed amendments in Bill C-597.

As background information, such positions, and other matters of Legion policy result from resolutions passed at a Dominion Convention following consultation and debate at all three levels of the organization. The procedure for enacting change in the Legion starts at the branch level, where any member can propose a change in policy or administrative procedure that could affect the entire organization.

Following a review and discussion by all members within the branch, the resolution passes to the provincial command level. It is at the provincial command convention that delegates from within that provincial jurisdiction further consider and discuss the proposed resolution.

If the delegates concur, the resolution is submitted to our Dominion Convention for consideration at the national level. This is the third and final level of consultation and debate within the organization. If passed by the Dominion Convention, which is attended by delegates from all of the branches in all provincial commands of the organization, the resolution becomes adopted policy and approved procedure.

As you can see, such matters receive very thorough consideration and undergo debate throughout all levels of our organization.

The holiday status of Remembrance Day has been debated at numerous Dominion Conventions throughout the Legion's history, in fact, 13 times since 1970, and most recently at our 2012 Dominion Convention. It was at the 2012 convention that the Legion's position against Remembrance Day being a statutory holiday was reaffirmed.

We remain concerned that if given the time off as a legal holiday Canadians may not take the time to remember, that it may simply become a mid-week break or just part of another long weekend. The latter situation relates specifically to the discussion at the 1978 Dominion Convention, which focused on how government departments of the day treated November 11 as a floating holiday for the purpose of giving their employees a long weekend. This must not be allowed to happen again.

We have heard an interpretation that making Remembrance Day a legal holiday would not designate it as a statutory holiday. The semantics of such interpretations are subjective. One need only look at the news media reporting on the progress of the bill to see it is a commonplace position that statutory holiday status is exactly what the bill would produce.

This perception is further validated by association, as the bill would serve to designate Remembrance Day as being the same as Canada Day and Victoria Day, both of which are legal holidays in the Holidays Act, with each also being a statutory holiday. If it is not the intent of the bill to make Remembrance Day a statutory holiday, if designating it a legal holiday would not change its current status according to the interpretation provided by the Library of Parliament report to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, why propose the bill in the first place?

Perhaps what is needed is to raise awareness and understanding of Remembrance Day, which could be achieved through education strategies. It is paramount that the significance of Remembrance Day be instilled in our youth and in the general population to show respect for the sacrifices of our fallen. To honour this day, many schools hold assemblies where they organize their own commemorations. Some teachers take their students to participate collectively with their peers in ceremonies at local cenotaphs, thereby strengthening the significance of November 11.

The Legion works very closely with schools throughout the country to provide an educational component to Remembrance Day. In addition to welcoming classes at ceremonies, the Legion's teaching guide is an excellent educational tool, which has been viewed or downloaded from our website more than a million times.

In a letter last fall to Mr. Dan Harris, the Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations expressed strong support for the Legion's position on Remembrance Day.

● (0855)

The association noted that:

In the 1960's, Ontarians did observe Remembrance Day as a school holiday. Children remained at home to play, watch television and enjoy a day of rest.... At that time, veterans' groups, school boards and other organizations such as the OFHSA petitioned to have schools remain open on Remembrance Day....

"...so that suitable Remembrance Day services can be held in schools to provide students with a better understanding of the purpose and tribute paid."

So too are we encouraged to hear of organized commemorations in workplaces on November 11. We need to make honouring and remembering an important part of our regular routine on that specific day and not simply provide a day off from work or school. Take Victoria Day, for example, a legal holiday, and question what observances are held across the country to honour Canada's longest-serving monarch. For most it just provides a long weekend in May. We must not let Remembrance Day suffer that very same fate.

We thank you again for giving the Legion this opportunity to express its views on Bill C-597.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. White, thank you very much.

Mr. Maxwell, do you want to say any words at all sir?

Mr. William Maxwell (Senior Program Officer, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): No, that's fine.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Very good sir, thank you.

We will now turn our attention to the video screen for a few moments, and Sonia Gallo of the York Catholic District School Board.

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Members, good morning. It is a pleasure to be here on behalf of our chair of the board, Elizabeth Crowe, and our director of education, Ms. Patricia Preston, to speak to you this morning about Bill C-597, an act to amend the Holidays Act, Remembrance Day.

At the York Catholic District School Board's regular meeting of the board, held on Tuesday, November 25, the board of trustees passed a motion that a letter be written to members of municipal, provincial, and federal governments to express their strong belief that November 11, Remembrance Day, should not be made a statutory or school holiday. This year, nearly 100 letters were sent. The motion was a result of comments made to trustees by several veterans who visited and presented at various Remembrance Day services across the York Catholic District School Board. The veterans' comments unanimously expressed their desire to keep our schools open on November 11 in order to appropriately honour this important day.

The York Catholic District School Board supports this desire by our veterans and does not endorse Member of Parliament Dan Harris's private bill to make November 11, Remembrance Day, a statutory holiday. Although the bill may have good intentions, we believe that school Remembrance Day ceremonies and activities are an opportunity to teach young students to appreciate the many sacrifices of those who have fought, died, and served for our great nation.

Remembrance Day ceremonies are held at each of our 104 schools with over 55,000 students participating to honour our Canadian Armed Forces and Canada's fine military history. Students gain a better understanding of the meaning of Remembrance Day and are able to fully participate in activities commemorating the sacrifices that Canadians have made in armed conflicts by wearing poppies, offering prayers of thanks, hope and peace, hearing liturgies, hearing war veterans recount, or hearing active duty personnel speak to students, and observing a moment of silence.

This year alone, we had many members of the Canadian Armed Forces visit our schools to speak to our young students. There is no guarantee that students would respectfully observe Remembrance Day if they were not in school, because it would be a statutory holiday. We respectfully ask that you work with all levels of government to discourage the making of Remembrance Day into a statutory holiday so that we can continue to create meaningful learning opportunities for the future generations of Canadians, our students.

Thank you, and I welcome any questions.

● (0900)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Ms. Gallo, thank you very much for that. We greatly appreciate it.

Now we'll turn over to our individual MPs for five minutes of questioning.

I should let everybody know that our regular committee chair, Mr. Royal Galipeau, is unfortunately unable to be with us. He did send thanks to everyone who's appeared before the committee as well as to the members, and hopefully he'll be back very soon.

Also, I would advise the committee that it was previously agreed that this meeting will go to 9:45, so I would ask that members keep their questions and witnesses keep their responses fairly succinct so we can get in as many questions as possible.

Thank you.

Mr. Harris, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to quickly clarify one matter of confusion. Did the veterans affairs committee request that heritage study this bill or did heritage request that veterans affairs study this bill?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I believe the letter came from the chair of the heritage committee for the chair of the veterans committee to look at this bill.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much.

I'm going to start with Ms. Gallo. No offence to the witnesses here, but we have already spoken with you before.

Ms. Gallo, in the Peel board, with the 104 schools that observe ceremonies for Remembrance Day, what does the school board do when Remembrance Day falls on a weekend?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: In schools we normally celebrate with liturgies and by inviting veterans and members of the Canadian Armed Forces either on the Friday or the Monday.

Mr. Dan Harris: Do you think the kids at that point miss out if the ceremony is taking place on the last school day before or after?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: No, we don't believe so because usually they do school assemblies. The kids are very involved in the planning and preparation of the event, so it continues to be a learning opportunity for our students all the way through.

Mr. Dan Harris: Absolutely, and certainly it is legislated in the Ontario school curriculum that Remembrance Day be observed. I think it's important to do that whether it's on the day of or not. Obviously you won't have any statistics to this effect, but do you ever hear about kids going to ceremonies with their parents when it falls on the weekend?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: We certainly do. Our teachers can provide feedback in that regard, but we certainly do hear about children visiting cenotaphs and participating in Remembrance Day ceremonies with their parents, especially when grandparents and great-grandparents have fought and served.

Mr. Dan Harris: Absolutely.

Now, whether Remembrance Day was on a weekend or on a day off, do you not think the responsibility would fall to the parents to make sure their kids go to ceremonies?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Sure. Part of the discussion, in fact, is that it is the role of the parent to also provide learning opportunities for children. But we feel it would become a mall day for most children.

● (0905)

Mr. Dan Harris: That's certainly possible if the malls are open, but do you understand that this bill doesn't actually create a statutory holiday?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Yes. But we're looking at not creating a school holiday on this particular day, at giving students an opportunity to be inside the school to create meaningful learning opportunities on this day, to continue the tradition.

Mr. Dan Harris: Absolutely. It doesn't create a statutory holiday so it wouldn't actually create a day off. It's interesting to look around the country because there are lots of different options. Currently six provinces and three territories have it as a statutory holiday. Ontario and Quebec don't have anything special, with the exception of the Ontario public service being off. But it's really interesting, in Manitoba and Nova Scotia they've done their own things. In Manitoba they've mandated that businesses be closed until 1 p.m. to give them a chance to observe.

Then, Nova Scotia—and one of my Conservative colleagues Scott Armstrong was here for the very first meeting at heritage—brought in their own Remembrance Day Act, which made it a day off for businesses but kept schools open. I thought that was a very novel approach because I find the best argument for not making it a statutory holiday is that kids be in school. But at the same time, even if that were to happen, I don't think we would necessarily lose out. I think there's an opportunity to actually gain something because more veterans and service members would be able to then come into schools and teach kids, and go to cenotaphs and services.

I think there are lots of options there, whether to make it a statutory holiday or not, but that power lies with the provinces. Certainly I think that would be where the push should be happening.

I'm going to go very quickly to Mr. White.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have about three seconds.

Mr. Dan Harris: Okay.

Is the Legion actively trying to discourage the provinces where it is a holiday to remove it as a holiday since that's the Legion's position?

Mr. Bradley K. White: Keeping with the chairman's wishes, no.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Mr. Harris and Mr. White.

We now move on to Mr. Hawn of the Conservatives, please, for five minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank you all for being here. This is an important issue. It goes to the psyche of what it is to be Canadian and what it is to remember.

There is a lot of confusion around it, obviously—legal, statutory, what one province does, what another province does. I'll just tell you what we do in Alberta. In Alberta it is a statutory holiday, but the week before, the schools do full-blown ceremonies and kids attend. On the actual day, even though it's a statutory holiday, I can tell you, speaking only for Edmonton, that the ceremonies are packed. The Butterdome at the U of A is the big one in Edmonton. There are 6,000 or 7,000 people there—kids, parents, veterans, the whole nine yards. As usual in Canada, I think we do things 13 different ways sometimes, or most times.

Comrade White, given that now there are all these different practices across the country, how would this bill change it one way or another?

Mr. Bradley K. White: I'd like to start by saying that, first off, I don't think anybody challenges the idea that we have to respect and celebrate and commemorate our veterans and the sacrifices made on behalf of average, everyday Canadians. That's a given. It's how we do it and what are the best educational opportunities to get that done.

We firmly believe...and there's been a debate through the course of our history, right from 1926 all the way to today at this presentation, on how we do that with Canadians across the country. Some years it's yes; some years it's no. The position of the Legion at 2012 was that we do not want to have Remembrance Day as a national holiday.

What we want to do is work with organizations, with schools. Through the teachers network, in particular, and the teaching guide that we have, we want to provide an educational experience for Canadians to have an understanding of what remembrance is all about. We feel the best way to do it is to have the children in school.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: That's a perfectly legitimate point that I do not disagree with. What could we do in the wording? Right now the wording in the act is "legal holiday". There is a lot of confusion around that. Is it legal? Is it statutory? What does that mean?

Is there language that could be used in the bill, or in the implementation of the bill, that would clarify it one way or another?

Mr. Bradley K. White: As I think we noted in our presentation, even though you may have it as a holiday, it does tend to morph into a statutory holiday, which means that people will get the time off and go away. People expect it. It's kind of a semantical argument, in that way.

We worked with the City of Ottawa here to talk about when the stores could open in Ottawa around the national Remembrance Day ceremony. We had many debates with the city, in particular the large Rideau Centre, because it's a tourism area and there are a lot of people downtown. We were successful in saying that you can't open until after the ceremony is done and the observances have been paid.

Things do tend to take on a life of their own. People interpret it differently, regardless of what the meaning of the words are from the Library of Parliament.

• (0910)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes, and I don't disagree with that. There is no guarantee that anybody will observe anything, whatever we do. The provinces can do whatever they choose to do in this regard.

To Ms. Gallo, we have an organization in Alberta called No Stone Left Alone. I know that the Legion is aware of it. It's a great project. Ultimately they would like to put a poppy on every gravestone of every veteran across the country. They started off in Edmonton, and it's expanding in Alberta. It's done on the Thursday before Remembrance Day, typically, and we get hundreds and hundreds of schoolchildren out. The schools are very cooperative. They really support it. It's a great educational tool. It's a great way for schools to be part of the process of helping children remember.

I agree with Mr. Harris about the parents' role. The parents ultimately should be driving this. How we make that happen is another story.

Things like No Stone Left Alone are creative things that schools can get involved in. Are you folks aware of No Stone Left Alone, or have you looked at anything like that in your school district?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: No, I don't believe we've looked at No Stone Left Alone. We do work with Canadian Heritage. They supply newspaper articles, bookmarks, posters, and a whole bunch of material that we distribute to students in our schools.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay.

Going back to the Legion, there are differences in provinces across the country, and obviously Legions are across the country. How much difficulty...or does it give the local Legions difficulty with obviously the national...?

Dominion Command's position is clear. Does that give you any kind of fit when...? You know, obviously each province does their own thing, and Legions work with them as best they can.

Mr. Bradley K. White: As I said in the presentation, we do have that representation. It comes up all the way from the branch level to become national policy. That's how the policy is formulated at the national level. Regardless of where this goes, the Legion doesn't break the law.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Hawn, thank you very much.

We now move on to Mr. Valeriote, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, everyone, for appearing today.

Ms. Gallo, I am the former chair of the Catholic school board in Guelph, and I share your feeling. I can tell you that most of the people I've talked to in Guelph share your feeling, and the feeling of the Dominion Command, and frankly the feeling of Mr. Blais, that this day should not—sorry, I won't speak for Mr. Blais, but the others—be made a statutory holiday, which would enable or in fact require schools to be closed and businesses to be closed.

In Guelph, we commemorate Remembrance Day in a remarkable way, but as I've said before, there's no amount of commemoration or compensation that could be given to our veterans to acknowledge their sacrifices. Knowing that it is not going to be a statutory holiday if this bill were passed, we should just elevate the day to that of a legal holiday, to give the proper recognition, as Mr. Blais said, to the sacrifice of our veterans and honour our sacred covenant to them.

Making it an equal day—not a statutory day, but as a sign of reverence, a holiday—would your position change if you knew that it would simply be elevated to a holiday without the requirement for schools being closed and businesses being closed?

Did you hear my question, Ms. Gallo.

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Was that for me?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Ms. Gallo, if you knew that it was not going to be a statutory holiday, that schools would remain open and students would have to attend, would your position change?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Likely yes.

We feel that students should be in school on Remembrance Day. Agreed.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Thank you.

Now Mr. White, I have talked to you before at the heritage committee.

From what I'm hearing, you're compelled to follow the resolution that was passed at your convention, and that was that this bill, this movement, can't be supported because it could create a statutory holiday and people want students in schools and businesses open. Is that correct?

• (0915)

Mr. Bradley K. White: That's how we've formulated our policy within the organization, and from that formulation people believe that holidays don't equate to commemoration.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Understood, and I acknowledge that.

I'm not disappointed in your efforts. What's disappointing is that the understanding of legal holiday is contorted into somehow being a statutory holiday. I get that. I can see that misinterpretation. If we amended this bill to say “which will not be equal to a statutory holiday”, or “not require schools and businesses to be closed”, would that possibly change your opinion?

I know you can't speak for the membership because you don't know how they would have voted regardless. You can't predict how they would have voted if they knew it wasn't a statutory holiday. If it were clear that the bill did not create a statutory holiday, might that appease the concerns of those you represent?

Mr. Bradley K. White: If the delegates accept that position, then that would be the position of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Blais, I have never heard it expressed better, frankly, than how you expressed it, and that was that it has to be elevated so that it is considered no lesser a day of reverence than our other national holidays.

Would you and the membership that you represent agree that this should be elevated to a national holiday without the requirement that it be a day in which schools are closed and businesses are closed?

Mr. Michael Blais: I think it's semantics. It's clear. I've read what has been provided. The definition of “legal” is not obscure. It's not unrealistic. It is what it is. What's happening here is fearmongering. We're scared our kids are not going to come, that they are going to go to the mall. We're scared. This is about parents. Laurie Hawn brought it up right.

I have taken my children out of school at Remembrance Day to bring them down to the cenotaph, because that's where the spirit exists. That's where our men and women are assembling. I find it almost disrespectful that we're expecting veterans now to go to the school instead of going to the cenotaph to remember the fallen, their brothers and sisters who have died, who have sacrificed. As a parent, as a Canadian, I think we should have the right.

I'm not talking about “statutory”. I wish it were statutory across the nation, frankly, but that's not my decision. What we're talking about here is simple respect—respect by 308 parliamentarians to even it up, to make sure that Remembrance Day is no lesser a holiday. I would encourage you; there's an opportunity here particularly at your level.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Blais, thank you very much for that.

We now go to the parliamentary secretary, Mr. Lemieux, for five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you, Chair. I want to thank our witnesses for being here.

Certainly I support the good intentions of the bill. I want to clear up some confusion, though. The law does not identify it as a lesser holiday. It was a witness who said that, and somehow it has taken on a life of its own and is being quoted as “Remembrance Day is a lesser holiday”. It is not a lesser holiday. It is simply termed differently from a statutory holiday, but that doesn't make it any less. I think we should be dropping that word “lesser”, because it was brought into the discussion by a witness who came before the heritage committee.

The second thing is that while I support the intention—I think it's a noble intention that we honour those who have fought and given their lives in the defence of Canada and Canada's freedoms—I don't think I'm going to be the first to say that tremendous confusion surrounds this bill. You hear it here today. I've read through all the transcripts and followed Mr. Harris' speech. Even Mr. Harris at the beginning—11 times in his opening speech in the House—called it a “statutory holiday”.

So there is tremendous confusion, and while we're trying to sort out the confusion here amongst MPs, imagine Canadians who are not following the debate closely and not listening to the interpretation and the clarifications. It is confusing what Canadians will think when it's raised to a legal holiday but not a statutory holiday. There's a lot of confusion here.

It has been implied that it is a day off. That's the implication, and I think it's what most Canadians are expecting when they look at this bill. They'd have to follow exactly what's going on to think differently.

I have another concern, and that is about the competing interests on what would be a statutory holiday, if it were a statutory holiday; that is, that the commercial sector would see an opportunity here and that there would be other events organized on this day. I think that Canadians right now honour Remembrance Day. They know that Remembrance Day is special. They honour it by attending a ceremony, the children in schools or others in their own way as Canadians, to pause and reflect on what the meaning of the day is.

Let me ask a question about consultation. Because of the confusion that I see, at least, I think it's really important to consult before a bill like this comes forward, because I think that dissipates confusion and you have the buy-in of stakeholders. You'd also have their input in terms of their saying, "Oh, that's not clear to us" or "This is not clear to us". I'm not convinced that there has been a lot of consultation. I have read in the transcripts, I believe, that there was not official consultation with the provinces. There was perhaps some dialogue, but not consultation with the provinces.

But let me ask about the Legion, Mr. White. Was the Legion formally consulted on this bill and the way it's worded or what is being advanced, before it was tabled?

• (0920)

Mr. Bradley K. White: I think there have been attempts, but I don't think they've been successful, to make that connection to talk about this bill and how it was formulated and what our opinion was on it.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Blais, let me ask you about your organization. Were you consulted in a more formal...? I don't mean just a sort of discussion at the end of an event, but I mean on the intent of the bill. It's not that you would have seen the wording of the bill before parliamentarians, but were you consulted on the intent of the bill and the implied understanding? As I said, right from the very beginning there was confusion over whether it's a statutory holiday or not, and that came right from the proponent of the bill.

Mr. Michael Blais: I can honestly say that I did not hear what he said when he was speaking there and making those references. When it was presented to me, it was clearly defined as a legal holiday. There was no discussion—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Was that after or before?

Mr. Michael Blais: No, this was when—we're talking about consultation—when he spoke to me.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Was it after the bill was tabled or before the bill was tabled?

Mr. Michael Blais: I think we were in the process at that time.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: After the bill was tabled...?

Mr. Michael Blais: We had prior discussions too, but the bill hadn't been brought forward so I didn't know what he was doing. Once the bill was brought forward, I read it. He sent it to me. He explained that it's a legal holiday. There were no vagaries—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Right.

Mr. Michael Blais: —on our consultation. This is important.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: If I may, the word "legal" was added afterwards, so—

Mr. Michael Blais: Okay, but my point is—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, I'm getting to the point here of consultation. This is an important bill that affects all Canadians.

Mr. Michael Blais: Sure. Let me finish.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It affects provinces and it affects schools and school boards—

Mr. Michael Blais: Great.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: —and I'm simply trying to ascertain.... The word "legal" is an amendment—

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Excuse me. May I raise a point of order?

Mr. Dan Harris: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Harris, you'll have your opportunity. First, there's a point of order.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Yes, it's a point of order.

It's what you just said, Mr. Lemieux: that schools will be required to close.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, I didn't say that.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Well, if we could go back on the record, that's exactly—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I said they'd be affected.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: —what you said. That's the point. There's an intention here among some to perpetuate the confusion, when we know for certain that this does not create a statutory holiday. I would ask the member to not complicate it.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: If I may—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Lemieux, one moment, please.

Mr. Valeriote, in my experience, that's not necessarily a point of order; it's more a point of debate. The opposition will have their opportunity to speak once again, but I will allow Mr. Lemieux a few more seconds to wrap up his point.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'll take a few more seconds to adjust that point.

I said "affected", and clearly affected, because we have the school board—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Lemieux—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, I'm continuing to finish off.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I realize that, sir, but you should be addressing the witnesses, not necessarily—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I am. I'm looking right at the witness from the school board—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Very good. Thank you.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux:—and I'm saying "affected", because the school board is here and has written a letter saying that this will affect children in school and it will affect the schools.

I will leave my case there. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Okay.

Ms. Gallo, did you wish to respond in any way to Mr. Lemieux's comments?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: We're good.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Okay, very good. Thank you.

We'll now move on to Mr. Harris again, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much.

I'd like to clear up a couple of things that Mr. Lemieux said. He said that adding the word "legal" was an amendment. No amendments have been made to this bill. The bill is in its original form that was submitted to the House. The current Holidays Act lists Canada Day and Victoria Day as legal holidays, and lists Remembrance Day as a holiday. That is where the interpretation that it could be seen as a lesser holiday than the other holidays... because it is worded differently in the Holidays Act that was passed in 1972.

I certainly agree with the Legion with respect to Victoria Day. Not many people use it to observe or revere our longest-serving monarch, but it also might surprise people to know that several provinces do not celebrate Victoria Day, or they celebrate by a different name and for a different purpose.

Canada Day is the only one that is universally agreed on by all the provinces and territories. Certainly, all the provinces can choose to do their own thing with respect to Remembrance Day because they're the ones that have the power to make statutory holidays.

I was very glad to hear Ms. Gallo, after questions from Mr. Valeriote, say that if it was clear that it didn't create a statutory holiday, their position would likely change because the reality is that this doesn't impact the school boards in forcing anybody to close. That was one of the primary reasons why I did not consult school boards across the country, because statutory holidays are at the provincial level.

There were wide attempts to get in touch with the Legion. My office wrote a letter to every Legion branch in the country. We sent letters to different veterans organizations. We were out on the Internet asking questions and consulting with people all over the place. I even spoke to Canadian Forces members while I was on my honeymoon on a ship in Alaska. I found it very interesting that serving members of the navy were choosing to go on cruises for their vacations. It just shows how much they love the sea.

Certainly, there were many attempts to get in touch with Dominion Command. Mr. White asked me last week if I could forward him some of those communication attempts, and I do have some emails. They're not going to be submitted to committee because they're not in both official languages, but the communications started on September 6, 2013, and they were primarily through Bruce Poulin. I don't have ready records of the phone conversations that took place, but there were several attempts over a six-month period to speak to Dominion Command before the bill was tabled.

Mr. Blais, you've spoken about the equality of other federal holidays. Maybe the word "legal" is one of the big, confusing things that exist here. My proposal in the bill is to add "legal" to Remembrance Day. On the flip side, we could remove the word "legal" from the other two, and then they'd all just be listed as national holidays. Do you think that would help alleviate confusion?

• (0925)

Mr. Michael Blais: I don't know. I think people are deliberately trying to confuse the issue. I read it and there were no problems. Everyone I've spoken to when it was clearly defined that this was not a statutory holiday and that it was about equality, including that young fellow who's manning the war memorial right now, agreed that this was the proper way to go forward, that there must be equality.

This reference to Victoria Day I find disingenuous. Do we not light fireworks across the nation every Victoria Day evening? What are we celebrating? We're celebrating her reign. My regiment celebrates it—Victoria Regina Imperatrix. Why else wear our hat badge?

The spirit of the nation is alive, but it's up to this government to ensure that spirit is fulfilled, as in Victoria Day, as in Canada Day, and as in Remembrance Day. You have the opportunity not only to celebrate on the 11th hour, but to expand that reach. Yes, we lay our poppies on the 11th hour, we pay respects to the dead, but the rest of the day we try to pay respects to the living. You have a wonderful opportunity to make that happen.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Blais, thank you very much.

Now we move on to Mr. Lizon, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses who are here today.

Mr. Chair, I am trying to understand what we are arguing here. For the record, and for the information of witnesses, there are only five statutory holidays that are celebrated by all provinces in Canada.

We are a federation. Therefore, provinces have the power to adopt a national or federal holiday or not. These five holidays are New Year's Day, Good Friday, Canada Day—with the exception of Newfoundland and Labrador, which calls it Memorial Day—Labour Day, and Christmas Day. The others are observed in some provinces but not in others. Therefore, they are not statutory holidays in all the provinces.

November 11 is already a statutory holiday in seven provinces and three territories. The only exceptions are Ontario, Quebec and, if I have the right information, Nova Scotia.

• (0930)

Mr. Dan Harris: Nova Scotia has its own Remembrance Day Act.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Harris, Mr. Lizon has the floor.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: I am just trying to understand how renaming Remembrance Day to a legal holiday would change anything. It is already a statutory holiday in seven provinces and three territories. Therefore, I don't know what we are trying to achieve here and how we are going to achieve it.

I love Remembrance Day. In Ontario, it is not a statutory holiday. It actually is a statutory holiday for federal employees. Therefore, it is elevated already. Federal employees have a day off.

I love going to schools. I wish more schools would take an active part in doing something on that day. Some schools do and some don't. I love going to schools. Usually there is a veteran there and students have a chance to meet and hear the history.

I would like to hear your opinions because I don't understand. What will this change? After what I heard, and after reading the part of the bill about trying to make it a legal holiday, I don't know. Can someone tell me or define what that legal holiday would be? How would it be different from what we have now? Would other provinces jump in and declare a legal holiday? I am confused, to be honest. I am looking for some answers.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Do you have a question for one of the witnesses?

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Whoever would like to comment on it...

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. White, if you would like to clarify Mr. Lizon's confusion, that would be great. Thank you.

Mr. Bradley K. White: I would love to try to clarify the confusion because that is exactly the issue that we are asking about as well.

From coast to coast to coast, Canadians recognize November 11 as Remembrance Day. We all celebrate Remembrance Day. As a parent and as a service member, I took great joy in going to my sons' schools, to their Remembrance assemblies, wearing my uniform and medals, and talking about what Remembrance Day was all about and why.

I am third-generation military. We have a long history in our family about Remembrance Day, and we remember. That is why we celebrate it. That is why we commemorate it, because we remember the sacrifices that were made.

I guess I have the same question that you have. Why are we doing this? We already understand November 11 as being Remembrance Day. Why do we need to designate it as a holiday under the Holidays Act? That is really what the question is.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Ms. Gallo, would you like to make any comments to Mr. Lizon?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: No. We feel that our students have an excellent opportunity to learn and prepare for assemblies for Remembrance Day. We invite veterans to speak to them about what Remembrance Day means to them and why, and our students learn a great deal from the experience.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you very much.

Now we move on to Mr. Opitz, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. I truly appreciate it.

I share everybody's confusion on this, but there's one thing I'm not confused about. I know everybody around this table cares deeply about veterans, they care deeply about remembrance, and if we didn't, we wouldn't be so engaged in this discussion today. So thank you all for your concern for veterans.

I'm going to start with Ms. Gallo. We've gone around talking about legal versus statutory, and so forth, but I'd like to talk about effects. One of the things we do in the military is talk about effects-based things. I'd like your opinion on the effect of keeping kids in school, the effect that a veteran or somebody knowledgeable would bring to the table, and the effect on these kids, not only immediately, right after they get their presentation, but throughout the rest of the school year and as they progress through the grades.

Can you maybe comment on what you may have observed as to the level of understanding and comprehension of students about the actual meaning of Remembrance Day?

• (0935)

Ms. Sonia Gallo: We think the effects are profound and it varies from grade to grade. We teach our youngest students, and as they move up to the older grades, we have our high school students right now creating walls of remembrance where they're asked to research individuals who have made an impact in wars and the like. With those walls of remembrance, they then pay tribute and post information on those walls. We've gained much media attention from that, and those specific learning opportunities do stay with the students.

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's great. What you're saying as well, then, is that it's not just passively sitting back, listening, and absorbing the information, it's also the walls of remembrance. They actively go forth and research the information.

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Absolutely.

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's great. That was part of my job when I worked at Canadian Forces College, to rally, not only other regiments but my fellow staff members, and get them out to the schools. It was always, I thought, very valuable to have current veterans there in concert with previous veterans and the Legion.

I'm going to give a shout-out to the Legion because I've used, year after year, the packages and the materials that are produced by the Legion, and I think they're absolutely outstanding for the children. I always tend to want to look at the effectiveness of this.

Do you have any comment on the Legion packages that come to schools? Do you find them effective?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Absolutely. We use those as additional material to supplement what we're teaching in our curriculum about Remembrance Day.

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's great. What about kids from other cultures? Some kids' parents may have come from places where they fear their militaries. I've run into that at times as I've gone in as a soldier to talk to kids on Remembrance Day, and on other occasions, by the way. Sometimes I found there was a little trepidation on their part when they saw a uniformed individual, especially in a military uniform. Do you have any comment on what kids of immigrant families might find when they participate in this program, when they create the wall of remembrance, and if you've observed it, possibly the impact on their parents?

Ms. Sonia Gallo: We use that as an opportunity. A lot of what happens is in our classrooms, especially with a student in the younger grades who might feel that sense of trepidation. We do a lot of inquiry-based learning, so teachers are trained to take the lead if a student is feeling like that. We address those queries head on with those children, but we use it as an opportunity to relay the information with respect to our nation.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Thank you for all your good work.

Ms. Sonia Gallo: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Mr. Opitz.

I now just have a quick question for anyone who may answer this.

Before it was called Armistice Day. Does anyone know when it was changed to Remembrance Day? The actual wording? I just throw that out there for anyone who does know. It's just something curious, I think. I still speak to some veterans who call it Armistice Day. I leave it with you.

For everyone who's listening, we have one of the smartest people in all of Ottawa right here, our analyst. He is chomping at the bit. He's analyzed the bill. He's followed this debate quite carefully, to the best of his ability.

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré would like to give a clarification on statutory, legal, and everything else. By the way, we refer to him an awful lot in many of our reports. So, sir, you have two minutes for the floor.

• (0940)

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher): I don't feel the pressure at all.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré: First, the federal Parliament does not have the constitutional power to legislate on holidays for all businesses. It has the power to legislate on federal employees and employees in businesses under federal legislation. Even if it wished, it could not impose statutory holidays for businesses, schools, and things like that. It does not have the power. It would make the bill unconstitutional.

It can legislate only on its own employees, and the federal employees already have Remembrance Day as a statutory holiday, as a day off, so that does not change anything here. The provinces would have to adopt a specific bill for their own businesses and schools to implement something that would make it a statutory holiday and define what it means for them. The federal Parliament does not have the power to legislate this.

The problem with the Holidays Act is that there is a distinction between "legal holiday" and "holiday". For 25 years, the courts have been saying that the difference does not have any legal consequences. Because these differences in language are actualized and implemented in other legislation and in all other federal or provincial legislation, it doesn't make a difference.

If you read the Holidays Act, you see the confusion. You could think there might be a difference between "legal holiday" and "holiday". The courts have said there is no difference, really. There are no legal consequences. The confusion would remain if somebody reads the act and thinks there must be a difference because there is "legal holiday" and there is "holiday". In fact, there are no legal consequences to that.

Therefore, the consequence the bill would have is to remove the possibility of confusion in the reading, but this would not have any legal consequences.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Mr. Paré.

Ms. Ablonczy, go ahead, please.

Hon. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Chair, I am happy to advise you that Armistice Day became Remembrance Day in 1931, about the time you and I were born.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Ms. Ablonczy, thank you very much. You are a great addition to our committee, by the way.

To our witnesses and to Ms. Gallo out in video land, on behalf of our esteemed colleague Monsieur Royal Galipeau, who couldn't be with us, we want to thank all of you very much for appearing before the committee to give us your testimony and to take time out of your busy schedules to help us in our deliberations on this bill.

We are going to close down for about one minute to say goodbye to our witnesses, and then we have to come back immediately to discuss what we'll do, moving this bill back to the other committee.

We have one minute to say goodbye to our witnesses, and then I ask everybody to be back in their seats in 60 seconds.

Thank you, all, very much.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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• (0945)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Before we start, I received....

Yes.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: We should probably go in camera.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Is it agreed? I am at the mercy of the committee.

A voice: There is no debate, so do we have a motion?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It was a suggestion. It is not a motion yet. I am looking at my colleagues. Last time Mr. Valeriotte asked to go in camera.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: I don't know why we would.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Very good. We are not in camera.

I noticed that Mr. Valeriote wanted to bend my ear regarding a discussion on the bill.

Be succinct, please.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Succinctly, I would propose that, as a result of this discussion, we report to the heritage committee that the committee could support the bill provided the bill is amended to read, "In no circumstance would the designation as a legal holiday be interpreted as direction to, or import the notion of, the day becoming a statutory holiday."

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Is there any comment on that?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Can I just say why?

I think we all agree that this day should be of the same status as Victoria Day and Canada Day without it being a statutory holiday. I think we all agree that it ought not to be a statutory holiday. If that is a province's or a territory's choice, that's its choice. I think we all agree that there is some confusion, and I believe that the import of that language will take away the confusion and enable us as a committee to give to Remembrance Day, and everything that it represents, the status it deserves.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Lizon.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Chair, I don't know what Frank's suggestion will change, because as I said in my questions or remarks, it is already a statutory holiday, except in three provinces—or four, or whatever. If it were to be a statutory holiday, the federal government or federal Parliament cannot implement it or impose it on the provinces; they have to do it themselves. Other holidays are statutory holidays in some provinces and not in others. Victoria Day is one of them, and there are others.

Therefore, I'm not sure exactly...and on top of that, I have a question. How many Canadians actually know that in our act Remembrance Day is a "holiday" and doesn't have "legal" in front of it? I don't think there is a general knowledge. The general knowledge is that it's an important holiday, a day when we commemorate our fallen and give respect to those brave Canadians who went and fought in two wars and other wars, and that we owe them what we enjoy today—our freedoms we owe to those who have fallen. Therefore, I don't know exactly whether for the general Canadian public this word "legal", or whatever we want to change it to, would have any impact.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Lizon, I think I can fix that up right now.

Mr. Paré, would you like to respond to Mr. Lizon?

I think he will clear it up right now.

● (0950)

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré: This would really just be an opinion; I'm not a federal judge or anything. If you have holiday, legal holiday, and statutory holiday, you might actually create confusion,

because there is no clear, uniform definition of what a statutory holiday is. Each province can decide what it means and define it specifically in its own act, and the federal Parliament could decide to define statutory holiday as a holiday with no day off. It's up to the provinces and the federal Parliament to define what it means by that.

So it could actually create confusion.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Lemieux, please.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Chair.

I think we are fortunate to have Mr. Harris here with us today, so I thank him for being here.

I would like to ask him a question, if I may, through you, Chair.

What Mr. Lizon just pointed out was that Canadians don't really know the legal terminology of the act. Is it a "holiday"? Is it a "legal holiday"? As I mentioned, and as I think Mr. Valeriote said, there is confusion over whether that, therefore, makes it a statutory holiday or not. That's one comment.

The second comment is that the analyst has clarified that legally speaking there is no difference between the act's saying a "holiday" or saying a "legal holiday".

So the question I want to ask to the proponent, to Mr. Harris, is this. Could you refresh our memories on the purpose of the bill, when we've just heard all of this discussion and I think that there is the risk of confusion? It's being clarified around this table, for example, but maybe not in the minds of Canadians who are not following every word that is being spoken here at the table.

If I may, I'd like to ask Mr. Harris that question.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: I think Mr. Lizon's point, that most Canadians don't know that there is a distinction in the Holidays Act, is certainly true. I would say that's true for about 99% of the laws that are passed. What the analyst said was exactly our interpretation in bringing this forward: there is no legal consequence; there is no legal change.

I wish I could talk to the original author of the Holidays Act in 1972, who actually put the distinction in there, to understand why they were listed differently. Most Canadians don't know, but for anybody who looks at our Holidays Act—because it will come up in random searches when people are looking for what the holidays are and when they might be—there can be confusion as to why Remembrance Day is listed as a national holiday and the other two are listed as national legal holidays.

My purpose was to get rid of that confusion in order to make sure that nobody could ever say that one is more important than the other, because if you see the word "legal" in front of it, certainly it looks as if it might be more important.

I certainly wouldn't want anyone to think of Remembrance Day as a lesser holiday. The generations of my family who served in the forces, from my great-grandfather who served in both World Wars, my grandmother and my great-uncle, and a continued level of service in peacetime and in every conflict that Canada has been a part of, right through to two cousins who served in Afghanistan.... Mr. Opitz said it. All of us around the table have a great respect, and we all want to see the tremendous sacrifices that have been made honoured.

That was why I brought it forward, to at least visually level the playing field within the Holidays Act, knowing full well that there was no legal consequence to it and that it wouldn't force schools to close. Now, I personally support its becoming a statutory holiday, but I was very clear from the beginning, including in my speech when I said that this power lies with the provinces and that it's not up to the federal Parliament to try to do it because that would be unconstitutional.

Maybe, there being no legal consequence, if we add the word "legal", all three of them are the same. If we were to remove "legal" from all three of them, then they would all be the same as well. Maybe that's a way to also get away from the confusion.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Ms. Ablonczy, please.

Hon. Diane Ablonczy: I commend my colleague Mr. Harris for wanting to put extra respect and extra significance into Remembrance Day. I think that's what we all want.

My concern is that I don't think that's going to be the net effect of passing this bill. My friend Mr. Valeriote has just said that we want to give it equal status with Canada Day and Victoria Day, but clearly we're not giving it equal status, because those are stat holidays and we can't give this stat holiday status, so it can't be equal in status.

My concern is that we have to legislate for Canadians. I would think that 1% of Canadians, probably not even that many, would know the difference between Remembrance Day as a holiday and Remembrance Day as a legal holiday. I didn't know that difference, and it would make absolutely no difference to me if I had. I celebrate Remembrance Day because from my heart I honour those who have served our country and sacrificed for our country. We're not all fortunate enough to have a smart analyst at our elbow to give us this fine legal distinction, which actually isn't any distinction at all.

If we pass a bill that provides an expectation that somehow we're elevating this day when actually it doesn't elevate this day, I don't think that's good legislating.

• (0955)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Let me just remind the committee once again that it is not up to this committee to amend, pass, or defeat the bill. The only aspect of this, from the letter we received and my consultation with Mr. Galipeau, is that we give reference back to the heritage committee to say that we have looked at this bill and we now throw it back to you. We can add our own comments to the letter we send back to them, but it is not for us to say yea or nay to the bill. There will be no vote or amendments in this committee. We can offer suggestions, if that's what the committee wishes to do, but it's up to the heritage committee to determine the final analysis of this bill, just to let you know.

Mr. Hawn, please.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'll pass, because essentially they do the same thing as far as....

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you.

Mr. Lemieux, please.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Just to follow up on Ms. Ablonczy's comments, I understand the intent to clarify. I think that's a good intent but there can always be unintended consequences. My concern is that the unintended consequence is greater confusion even though the original intent was to clarify, which is kind of what Diane was saying. That's certainly my concern and I think the concern of some colleagues around the table.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Harris, please.

Mr. Dan Harris: Maybe one of the comments this committee could decide to add and send back to the heritage committee would be exactly what the analyst said in his remarks, because I think that was clear, concise, and very exact.

As to—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Hold that thought for a second.

Would it be advisable to add Mr. Paré's comments?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: You'd have to summarize that into something we could digest.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Yes, because they have analysts as well and maybe the heritage committee would want to look at it as well, similar to what Mr. Paré did.

I'll get back to you, Mr. Harris, but I would just ask the committee: would that be advisable to do?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Harris, please continue.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lemieux brought up unintended consequences, and there is always that potential with the bills and laws that we pass. If this bill, after being fully supported by all but two members of Parliament at second reading, ends up dying before Parliament ends, whereas it was fast-tracked through second reading, that could have unintended consequences with respect to what people think about what happened and why, so that's another thing to think about.

Actually during the little break I lost part of my train of thought so if it comes back to me I'll ask to speak again.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Mr. Harris.

To wrap this up, Mr. Chicoine, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would simply like to say a few words about Dan's bill.

I do not know where the confusion that followed came from. It was about the legal status of this holiday. It was probably in the context of the committee's work. According to what I read in the newspapers, when the bill was passed at second reading, the government said it was open to the idea of creating a holiday for Remembrance Day. At that time, I did not notice any confusion.

I went through the Quebec school system and I never heard anything about Remembrance Day, either in primary school or in high school. Things have not changed very much. I am sorry and this may offend you, but in the francophone school network, very little is said about Remembrance Day. I think that the bill could start to change things, especially if the province decides to make Remembrance Day a holiday. I think that there would then be no other choice but to explain to children why November 11 has become a holiday.

I think there is a lot of awareness-raising to be done with the French-speaking community of Quebec as to the nature of Remembrance Day. In my opinion, it would really be a good thing to pass this bill if only for that reason. It would probably be reported in the media. People would talk about it more. If the government decides to make this a statutory holiday, it would be a good thing since for the moment this is not discussed in French-language schools in Quebec. I find this deplorable, but that is the reality. The bill has at least led to discussions on this topic in Quebec. This could give rise to a movement in that regard. That would be a good thing and would contribute to raising the awareness of the francophone population of Quebec regarding Remembrance Day.

• (1000)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Mr. Chicoine.

What we have before us now is that if the committee will agree, we will write a letter from the chair of the committee, Mr. Galipeau, to the heritage committee indicating that we have discussed the bill and brought witnesses before us. That letter will have the testimony of the witnesses attached, including Mr. Paré's analysis of holiday status, legal status, and so forth. It will be submitted to the heritage committee for their final analysis and decision.

Is there any discussion on that?

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I agree. I think that's a great plan.

For my part, I'm actually glad it came to the veterans committee because I think just in the comments we had, the discussion we had, the analyst's notes, it's helped. It has added to the debate in a constructive way, so I'm actually glad it came here.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Very good, thank you.

Any concerns at all? No. Okay, that's what we'll do, then.

We'll move on to future business now. Of course, one of the concerns addressed is that we know usually when there is a new

Minister of Veterans Affairs, or a deputy minister, we have an opportunity to bring him before our committee. I'm just wondering if the parliamentary secretary can give us any update of when we may anticipate a visit.

I know on Saturday the minister and deputy minister are heading overseas for commemorations and won't be back until around probably the 11th or 12th, and then we'll be on our break. Is there any indication of when the minister may be able to be here with the deputy minister?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Yes, thank you, Chair.

As we discussed at the end of our last meeting, this is something that I have been working on with his schedule. He's had a rather demanding schedule with a number of announcements and with, of course, the summit that he had organized and a number of other commitments as well. I don't have a final date today, but I will tell you that it's imminent. It will be very soon. I'm hoping to report back to committee, but yes, I'm working on that. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Valeriote, please.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Lemieux, while I know that the minister's schedule is onerous and that he has other obligations, one of his biggest and most important obligations is that of transparency and reporting to this committee. I would ask that you report on his behalf this coming Thursday on when he will be available and to give us various dates that the committee might choose from so that we can get to this as quickly as possible.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Perhaps I may just clarify, with Mr. Valeriote's comments. The estimates that are before us have to be passed by May 29. If the minister does not show by then, they are deemed passed by the committee and off they go. That would be unfortunate for the committee if we didn't have an opportunity with the minister.

I leave that with you, Mr. Lemieux. If he can appear before that, it would be most helpful.

Would you like to respond to Mr. Valeriote?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'll just say that I take his comments under consideration. The minister wants to come to committee. It's just a question of coordination. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Hawn, please.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Chair, I would like to request that the rest of the meeting go in camera since we're talking about committee business, with the minister's attendance, and so on.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): If the committee elects to go in camera we can do that.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): We'll just wait a minute or two while the powers that be do that, and we'll go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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