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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1155)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** We will now begin the public portion of the meeting. Welcome.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on March 9 and December 5, 2023, the committee is resuming its study on the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans and wartime service.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. I would like to begin by welcoming the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence. Also, from the Department of National Defence, we have General Jennie Carignan, chief of the defence staff, Canadian Armed Forces, and we wish her all the best in this new role. We also have Major-General Erick Simoneau, deputy commander of military personnel command, who is no stranger to the committee and whom we salute.

[*English*]

Minister, you have five minutes for your opening statement. Then we'll ask you some questions.

The floor is yours.

**Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of National Defence):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would also extend my sincere gratitude to the members of this committee for the kind invitation to appear before you today. I look forward to the opportunity.

I would like to begin my remarks by stating quite unequivocally that Canada is immensely grateful for the services of all members of the Canadian Armed Forces, and we particularly want to acknowledge our veterans. This includes the more than 4,000 Canadians who served in the Persian Gulf region in 1990 and 1991. As part of a coalition of countries, those service members helped to remove the invading forces of Iraq from neighbouring Kuwait. Following the war, they served on peacekeeping missions and helped enforce embargoes in the region. In the face of danger, they each showed courage in defending our most cherished values of peace, freedom and democracy.

I recently had the privilege and opportunity to meet with two members of the Persian Gulf War veterans association, Sammy Sampson and Michael McGlennon. I know that this committee has

also heard from them. I want to take the opportunity as well to thank them for their service and their advocacy.

I also know that the committee heard from the Minister of Veterans Affairs earlier this week. In relation to the study of the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans, I am here today to provide a brief overview of how military service is currently classified. I will also highlight some of the services that the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces offer to current military members. However, I'd like to make one thing very clear: We all have an obligation to those who served our country.

I work very closely with the Minister of Veterans Affairs, who is also the Associate Minister of National Defence. I have heard from many of our veterans how difficult it can be sometimes to get pushed from pillar to post between the Minister of Defence and Minister of Veterans Affairs. Let me state very clearly that I believe it is a shared obligation and responsibility to support all members of the Canadian Armed Forces and their veterans. It is the government's responsibility and not any one individual ministry's.

I'd also like to draw the committee's attention to key definitions that are relevant to today's meeting. The Pension Act defines service during World War I and World War II as "service in a theatre of actual war", because there was a declaration. Similarly, the Pension Act provides a specific definition for service in the Korean War. The Veterans Well-being Act defines "special duty service". Under sections 69 and 70 of the Veterans Well-being Act, it is my responsibility as the Minister of National Defence, in consultation with the Minister of Veterans Affairs, to designate military service as either "special duty area" or "special duty service". To determine which classification to use, we conduct a high-level assessment of the hardship and risk factors in that operation before members are deployed. While an initial assessment is made by professionals, the hardship and risk levels can be adjusted as each mission evolves.

The classification of military service ensures that members and veterans receive the benefits they are entitled to from National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada. It also means that as hardship and risk levels are adjusted, members' compensation and benefits can be adjusted as well.

**The Chair:** Minister, can you please slow down for our interpreters?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I apologize, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** No problem.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** In one respect, I want to be very respectful of the five minutes you gave me, but at the same time, I will try to be kind to your translators.

**The Chair:** Thank you. You still have two minutes.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thank you.

However, applying these classifications to different deployments should not indicate that we value the efforts of our members and veterans more or less, depending on where and when they serve. Our appreciation must always be for everyone who wears the uniform, and it must be unyielding.

Additionally, reclassifying those who served in the Persian Gulf on special duty service to mirror the definitions for service during the first and second world wars or in the Korean War would not necessarily change the benefits they are eligible to receive. This is because these veterans are already eligible for some of the highest levels of benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada for injuries arising from their service.

When it comes to offering support for our armed forces, National Defence is responsible for currently serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces. This is a responsibility that I want to assure you we take very seriously. National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces offer a comprehensive framework of benefits and services, including those related to mental health, illness and injury, and transitioning out of service.

For example, the CAF runs 31 primary care clinics, offering specialized in-house mental health services, social workers, mental health nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, addictions counsellors and mental health chaplains who are on site to provide the care and support our members need. When a service member is ill or injured, the Canadian Armed Forces transition group provides support for recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration within the forces wherever that is possible. We have also developed a five-step process to assist military members to transition to civilian life, whether they are medically or non-medically released.

• (1200)

The Government of Canada wishes to express—and I personally want to express—its sincere gratitude to all Canadian Forces members who served in the Persian Gulf War. Their efforts, and the dangers they faced while deployed, cannot go unnoticed or be allowed to be forgotten. It's vital that we recognize their dedication, service and sacrifice. That's why we will continue to work with other departments, like Veterans Affairs Canada, to recognize the enormous sacrifices made by those in uniform.

I am personally looking forward to the recommendations of this committee. I very much value the work of the committee in hearing from witnesses and coming forward with recommendations. I want to assure every member of this committee that your recommendations will be given every due consideration.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister. We hope so, too.

Now, let's start the first round of questions. I'll remind colleagues to stay with six minutes each. Try to direct your questions through the chair in order to help our interpreters.

I'll start with Mr. Richards for six minutes.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Minister, in your opening statement, as it is on many of the government websites and in other places, you referred to it as “the Gulf War”.

Do you personally believe it was a war?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Again, I think, in common language usage, it was a “shooting war”. There was danger, and Canada participated quite fulsomely in that effort. I recall very well that, at the time, this is how we spoke about it.

Also—as I'm sure you're already aware, Blake—there are certain legal definitions for what constitutes a war under the two relevant pieces of legislation this committee is examining today in relation to that particular conflict.

• (1205)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I understand. I don't want to get too much into that right now, in the interest of time.

It sounds to me as though, in your personal opinion, at least, you would call it a war. I get the differences in legislation, but you would agree that it was a war.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I'm also mindful of the colloquial representation of that conflict as a war, because we've also referred to the “Afghanistan war”, for example.

However, it certainly is relevant to this conversation. There are legal definitions that need to be considered.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I understand.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that you recently had a chance to meet with some of the Persian Gulf veterans. I know they've been trying to get a meeting for a while, so I appreciate that they were finally able to get one.

Can you share with us the outcome of that meeting and what you had to say to those veterans when you met with them? Was it the same as what we heard in your opening statement today, or was there something different?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Actually, it was a very good conversation, Blake. I was very grateful that we had the opportunity to sit down together. It was important for me to have the opportunity to hear about their experience of service. They also, I think, were very effective advocates for others who have served in that conflict, as well, regarding some of the challenges those veterans faced. That was very important for me to listen to and hear.

Also, I took every opportunity to acknowledge and recognize their service and our obligations to them. We talked, as well, quite extensively about what they perceive to be disparities or inequities in the services they—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm quite familiar with what they've been saying. We've heard from them a number of times. I've talked to them myself.

I'm more interested in what you had to say, because the Minister of Veterans Affairs came to this committee on Monday and told us that, in her opinion, it was clearly your responsibility to make this decision—or not make this decision. She was very clear about that. What you said to us this morning is that you think it's a shared responsibility. You think it's some entity called “the government”, rather than putting the responsibility on somebody within that government to make a decision.

What did you tell the Persian Gulf veterans? Was it that, or was it something else?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** No. Perhaps I was not as clear as I'd hoped to be.

I tried to assure them—because they've had the experience of going to various ministries, trying to get answers and support—that I very much recognize and acknowledge my responsibility and authorities within the current legislation. I wanted to assure them that I wouldn't be sending them around...and that they were talking to us and we were listening to them. I wanted to assure them, as this committee does, I think, that all parties are represented here. I wanted them to be assured that we are listening.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay.

You mentioned that you're anxiously awaiting the results of this study, and I appreciate that.

I guess the question I would ask is this: Should this committee make the recommendation that this service be designated a “wartime service”? Will you commit to us that you will make a recommendation to the cabinet that this in fact occurred?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I'm very much looking forward to the work of this committee. Frankly, I think your recommendations will be useful to us.

However, I also want to look at the nature of your deliberations. For example, regarding the 2006 legislation we're talking about, I went back and looked through Hansard and saw what debate and discussions took place, in both the House of Commons and the Senate, because it's very informative to understand the nature of the testimony that's been received here and the discussions that have taken place.

As I've tried to assure this committee, I will give all due consideration to the recommendations, but I'm not able to commit to an outcome before you've even made the recommendations.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I know that many veterans will be disappointed if this committee makes that recommendation. You've indicated, as has your associate minister, that this is a responsibility that you could make a decision on. I know they'll be disappointed if they don't see that outcome if this committee recommends it, so I certainly hope that you will give it more than just due consideration.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** To be clear, my understanding of the legislation is that I do have the authority, and I'm quite prepared to exercise it, in designating a conflict under the two categories available in the

legislation, but I would not be in a position to retroactively declare a war. That would be an executive decision.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Do I have one minute?

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm going to give that minute to Mr. Dowdall.

**The Chair:** Mr. Dowdall, go ahead, please.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you for being here, Mr. Minister.

I think this is probably quite easy to do, so I'm not actually going to talk about the Persian Gulf veterans because I really think the onus is on you. Everyone here agrees, so we're studying that and I think it should be done.

Just quickly, Base Borden is in my riding. You said earlier that you're grateful for all the veterans and that there's an obligation because they served.

A report that came out—a second report within three months—from the budget officer basically says that the numbers have been fudged for us to meet our NATO obligations.

What message is that sending to people in the military and to their families when we're not even being realistic to the individuals?

• (1210)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** First of all, Terry, I think you have grossly misrepresented what the Parliamentary Budget Officer actually said. He had his own calculation of GDP and he used terminology—

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** No, Minister. Once again, you guys are changing numbers in your favour. That's not really what's going on here, Mr. Minister, if you read the report.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** If you'd like an answer, I'd be happy to provide you with one.

Canada has committed to reach 2% of GDP. It's a NATO spending target. NATO determines GDP for all 32 members of NATO using the OECD calculation of anticipated GDP. That's the commitment that we've made—

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** Are you saying the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report is wrong?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** That's not correct, but that's the commitment we've made.

**The Chair:** The time is up. I'm sorry, guys.

[Translation]

I now give the floor to Mr. Sarai for six minutes.

[English]

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

Thank you, Minister Blair, General Carignan and General Simoneau, for attending this meeting. It's always a pleasure to have such distinguished guests as you attending this committee.

Minister Blair, you mentioned in your opening remarks that this is not a finger-pointing exercise.

To set the record straight for the committee and to set the scene for today's committee meeting, can you clarify exactly what your role is in relation to the designation of classification of services for veterans?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Basically, the legislation provides that the Minister of National Defence can either declare a conflict as a special duty area—it's a specific geographic area outside of Canada where members are exposed to conditions of elevated risk—or declare it a special duty operation. These are missions and operations involving elevated risk that may take place inside or outside of Canada.

I have a list of the number of times that previous defence ministers have made that designation. Some of them have been in Canada. Most of them have been expeditionary and external to Canada.

That's my authority: It's to declare particular engagements and missions, or areas, according to the expert advice that I would receive from the Canadian Armed Forces.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you.

General Simoneau, could you please explain the legal difference between the Pension Act and the Veterans Well-being Act, as well as the tangible changes that this has had to benefits and the evolution of benefit delivery over the years?

**Major-General Erick Simoneau (Deputy Commander, Military Personnel Command, Department of National Defence):** The legal framework associated with the Pension Act covers World Wars I and II, and the Korean War, Mr. Chair.

The Veterans Well-being Act covers everything thereafter, granting authorities to the Minister of National Defence to declare special duty service—either the area or the operation.

The main difference between the two legislative frameworks is the actualization of the compensation and benefits that can be provided to both service members and veterans. For example, moving from the Pension Act towards the Veterans Well-being Act, benefits have been actualized to factor in a caregiver providing care to our veterans, as well as mental health.

If you would recall, Mr. Chair, after the two World Wars, a lot of the veterans were diagnosed with shell shock. It was in the very early days of mental health, so we were not attuned to all the complexities of mental health. Proper legislation was required in order to expand and actualize the services offered to both service members and veterans.

That's the essence of the difference between the two frameworks, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** My understanding is it's not a superior versus a subsuperior format; they're just two different types of programs. One is more exclusively monetary versus the new, modernized one, which is more holistic and has more aspects covered. It's a different framework.

**MGen Erick Simoneau:** Absolutely, Mr. Chair. I agree with this statement.

The new framework allows...and is flexible. I'm sure you recall our Veterans Affairs' colleagues from an earlier appearance. They

stated, for example, that under the current framework, the benefits and compensation have been adjusted 19 times since 2006 to ensure that we adjust those benefits to the needs of our populations—both servicemen and women and veterans.

• (1215)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** For this one, I'll go to Minister Blair.

We have heard about two aspects. One is the compensation between the Pension Act and the Veterans Well-being Act, and the other is commemoration. I think a lot of the Persian Gulf War veterans feel they are not commemorated in the same light as other war veterans.

Is there something that can be done in that respect? One part is semantics of what framework of compensation or pensions they have and the other part is the commemoration. Is there a special designation that can be considered subsequent to this report?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I'm very interested in working with Veterans Affairs and in consultation with the veterans. I believe very sincerely that they are deserving of our highest respect and commemoration and acknowledgement of their service.

I'm not aware of any particular legislative instrument. I'm bound by and my authorities come from Canadian legislation. The Veterans Well-being Act primarily talks about these issues and my authorities to designate. I don't think it is really relevant to that designation. However, I'm quite prepared to explore ways in which we can acknowledge their service in a way that is meaningful to them and meaningful to all Canadians. I think it's important that we do so.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you, Minister.

Really quickly, General Carignan, we know how important the transition from military to civilian life is for our members and their families. In fact, the committee has undertaken a study on that very subject.

Can you tell us more about the work and services the Canadian Forces transition team does and offers to support members transitioning to civilian life?

**General Jennie Carignan (Chief of the Defence Staff, Canadian Armed Forces, Department of National Defence):** Mr. Chair, good morning.

Thank you for the question.

Our transition group was established and founded to support members on active duty who are transitioning toward civilian life, so it provides services that allow them to understand the benefits postretirement and accompanies them on a personal basis as well. We need to understand that for service members who have been serving for many years, there's a level of identity that is very strong in terms of belonging to the CAF, and on a personal basis as well. That needs to be done properly as members transition toward civilian life.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, General Carignan.

I now give the floor to Luc Desilets, the committee's second vice-chair, for the next six minutes.

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

Good afternoon to my colleagues and thank you to our guests.

General Carignan, your appointment is extraordinary and exceptional. I congratulate you on that, but I especially congratulate the people who chose you and I commend them.

Minister, do you feel that the Gulf War was indeed a war?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I would use the term colloquially. I appreciate—and I'm sure the committee would recognize this—that within the legal definition, there is no “for example”. There is no defined service in Veterans Affairs legislation, and certainly not in the Veterans Well-being Act, that enables me to declare it a war as such. However, at the same time, it was an armed conflict in which people put their lives at risk.

Colloquially and in my view, it meets a war.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** In your opinion, was Canada at war, yes or no?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** No. Well, we were not at war within the legal definition of war. Normally, we would define the war as a declared war, as we did in the First World War and Second World War. Under the old Pension Act, we included the Korean War as a war, but there is no legislative way to do that retroactively.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** In your opinion, were our Canadian soldiers deployed in a war zone?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Well, I think a war was being fought there, but at the same time, under existing Canadian law, it was not defined as a war per se. It was actually a UN deployment where we sent our people.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'm trying to understand the prevailing logic here and in the various departments.

The Canadian military was operating and fighting in a war zone that was the Persian Gulf. Okay. You say that Canada was not at war in this conflict. I accept that.

In that case, however, can you explain to me why the Canadian government would have felt the need to create an emergency war cabinet for that conflict? Indeed, a war cabinet was created on an emergency basis.

• (1220)

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Again, sir, I can think of a number of different conflicts in which Canadian Armed Forces members have served over the past several decades that were not declared wars by the Government of Canada—there's actually a legal process for the declaration of war—but which we were sending members of the Canadian Armed Forces into, conflicts where their lives were at risk. Certainly, there were the conflicts in Afghanistan and in Kosovo where a number of our people were exposed to battle conditions.

I think it's important that we acknowledge, recognize and commemorate that, and that we provide those veterans with all of the support that they need and deserve with regard to those conflicts. However, the actual legal ability to retroactively declare those conflicts, in the legal context, as war is somewhat constrained.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** In my opinion, the commemorations of people who took part in the Gulf War are quite minimal. On Remembrance Day, will they be named and thanked for their service?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I was speaking at a Remembrance Day ceremony in my community, sir. I am more than happy to acknowledge and recognize the service of every member of the Canadian Armed Forces who has served in conflict and even those who supported them in serving in that conflict because I think they're deserving of our recognition and respect.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Do you think the government will do that here in Ottawa on Remembrance Day?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I will try to make the point and share with them.

Unfortunately, I will be in Toronto that day because I have.... In Toronto, there's a cenotaph that I always attend, and it's my obligation to be there. However, passing that on.... I think it's important to acknowledge all of the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces who have served in conflict; it's important to thank them for their service and to commemorate their service.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I really like what you're saying and I hope it comes to fruition. Clearly, these veterans—and there are a few of them behind you—are not being properly recognized. What we are hearing and what is being communicated is that there are two types of war. When you've been on the front lines, it's not easy to hear that. When you have suffered major injuries and set aside your family, it's not easy to hear that.

The committee held nine meetings on this topic for a total of more than 14 hours of testimony. The committee tried to invite all types of veterans. The veterans we heard from at committee were unanimous. Witnesses who participated in the Gulf War or who are familiar with it were unanimous about the fact that there was inequity between the two systems.

Do you agree that there is inequity between the two systems, especially when it comes to finances?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I've inquired very specifically about that because I want to make sure that we support all our veterans, of every conflict, appropriately.

There are some differences between the Pension Act and the Veterans Well-being Act. However, I have inquired, and I'm sure Major-General Simoneau could provide you with more information. I'm assured that they're not the same but that there is parity between the systems. In many respects, the legislation passed in 2006 provides additional supports.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Minister, in the discussions that have taken place in committee, the blame for this legislation has been placed on the Department of National Defence. Do you think it is possible to amend this legislation?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Yes, of course. That's the nature of legislation.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Are you prepared to do that?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** The law is supposed to be a living tree, and that's one of the reasons that the work of this committee and the work of Parliament are very important. All legislation can be made better.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Are you prepared to do that?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Well, I'm very much looking forward, as I've said, to the outcome of the work of this committee. I think this committee would also recognize.... The moral imperative, I think, is clear. I've also listened to the veterans, and I find their testimony and advocacy very compelling. However, at the same time, changing the legislation needs to be done in a thoughtful and well-informed—

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You have to look at the financial aspects.

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** —way.

There are some funding implications, but I think they're the least important of these considerations, because the Veterans Well-being Act already provides a lot of support to those veterans. I think in many respects, they are all receiving acknowledgement of their service.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Minister.

• (1225)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Now, I'd like to invite Ms. Blaney for six minutes, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you so much, Chair, and as always, everything is through the chair.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses today and thank them all so much for their service. They've all provided services in different ways. Thank you for being here to talk about this really important issue that matters to so many.

As I've sat through the testimony in this process, I've been reflective of one of the challenges, which is that the reality these veterans experience and live with every day does not seem to be reflected in the commemoration and resources that they receive. When we come down to that, I think that is just the honest truth. We know there's something there that's broken, and we all need to work together to fix it.

I think in true military fashion, the veterans, the Persian Gulf War veterans, are here not only to talk about their own experience, but they also want to see a process that includes all modern-day veterans. That is important as well. When we're looking at this, legislation is the key, and it is a process of reviewing what peace, conflict and war are. Legislatively, those are different things that we can make really clear, but unfortunately, the experience doesn't seem to fit the categorization.

My first question is for you, Minister. You said you've met with the veterans. I'm wondering if you could talk about whether there were any particular discussions around legislation. Are you prepared to explore that with your own cabinet moving forward?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thank you very much, Rachel.

I think there are two really important issues. I think my first obligation is to make sure that all of our veterans, regardless of what conflict they served in, receive all the supports they require and deserve and have earned from us. I had some inquiries of them of what they perceived to be the disparities between what was available to veterans who were covered because their conflict was covered under the Veterans Well-being Act versus those who were covered under the Pension Act.

Notwithstanding that those three conflicts were characterized quite differently from the subsequent conflicts, I think our first obligation is to make sure that we provide the supports that are necessary. I had a lot of conversations about what they perceived to be the differences in eligibility and supports that were available to them. We really need to make sure that there is parity, that we treat everybody the way they need and deserve to be treated.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Sir, I don't want to interrupt. I try to be careful because the interpreters have a hard time when we're both speaking at the same time.

If I could bring you back to that idea of legislation, that would be helpful.



**Hon. Bill Blair:** As we look at the Veterans Well-being Act, if there are deficiencies—nobody has ever passed legislation that was perfect—I think it would be entirely appropriate that we should go back and look and see if we can make it better.

I look forward to your recommendations on that, because I'm in complete agreement that we should make sure that we provide our veterans with all the supports that they require and that they've earned from us.

Also, there's this other really important issue you raise about commemoration, acknowledgement and respect for their service. That's in many respects a more complicated question. We can deal with the compensation and the supports for our veterans, and I think we're in complete agreement that it should be as good as we can possibly do. On respect and commemoration, I'm also in complete agreement that we should show complete respect for their service and that we should properly commemorate it and honour it. Legislatively, retroactively declaring certain conflicts in a certain way, or all conflicts perhaps more generally, is something that we need to think about. These were not wars. Canada did not...Parliament did not declare a war against...

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much.

I understand that. However, I would say, Minister, that conflicts across the world are changing very quickly and rapidly and have been for many years. Therefore, especially looking at the framework of how the world is working, and our relationship with NATO, declaring a war is going to happen a lot less.

We need to figure that out. That's probably the crux of the issue here. When we ask people to serve, when we ask them to go and experience a war zone and thus to see what Canadians at home will not have to see and experience in the same way, we need to recognize that when they come home and to make sure that they get their supports.

Commemoration is really important. If you ask average school-age children right now, they would know World War I, World War II, and maybe the Korean War, but I don't think they would know the other ones in the same way. That means, as a country, we have not done our due diligence to make sure people understand that in our country there are people walking around doing that.

I don't have a lot of time. You said you cannot go back retroactively. In your role with this issue, and in the reality of all modern veterans, what can you do?

● (1230)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I have the authority, and I'm quite prepared to exercise it, to declare a conflict either as a special duty operation or special duty area. We all have a responsibility to elevate Canadians' understanding, appreciation and respect for the service of all of our armed forces members.

I don't disagree with you. The nature of conflict continues to evolve and we need to recognize the impact that conflict can have on all members of the Canadian Armed Forces, and, subsequently, on our veterans. We need to continue to explore ways in which we can honour their service and find ways...

I've listened very carefully to veterans. They make very strong points. Their advocacy is quite compelling. I'm quite willing to work with them, and with all of you to find ways in which we can honour and respect them.

Some of it may require legislative change, and that's the responsibility of Parliament. I'm trying to operate within the authorities currently bestowed upon me by existing Canadian legislation, but there are some limits to my ability to do what you would like me to do.

I would therefore ask this committee to consider what legislative tools might be required to actually accomplish that.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister, and Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Tolmie, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC):** Thank you, Minister, for joining us today, and thank you, Major General, for being here.

This committee met with the Minister of Veterans Affairs four days ago, who is also the Associate Minister of National Defence. In her own words and her opinion, she felt that the Gulf War was a war. I've clearly heard today, in your testimony, that in your opinion the Gulf War was a war.

Is that correct?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Yes, sir. However, again, in our common usage of the term, there's also a legal definition of the term, the threshold of which was not—

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** I understand that, Minister.

According to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, she said that her definition of war was different from the legal legislation. I asked the minister what legal legislation she was referring to. She said she didn't know, but that she would forward it.

The minister was referring to the Emergencies Act, something that your government is very familiar with.

There are two points there, but I'll read one of them:

*war emergency* means war or other armed conflict, real or imminent, involving Canada or any of its allies...

Minister, in your opinion, was Kuwait an ally of Canada?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** It was a UN mission. We served the people of Kuwait and protected them. Our members went there and helped the people of Kuwait. However, at that time, I would not, in my understanding of that conflict, have necessarily defined Kuwait as any ally. We used the term, I think, advisedly and carefully.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Thank you. I understand your point there.

Were the United States, Britain, France, and Saudi Arabia our allies during that coalition operation?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** The United States and Britain are allies.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Thank you.

They were involved in the conflict, and they recognized the Gulf War as a war.

Minister, when I look at this definition, and I think about the Korean War, I ask myself, and I'm going to ask you, was Canada at threat during the Korean War?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Again, under the Pension Act passed by Parliament, they included the Korean conflict as a war. That was done through Canadian legislation and it was designated as a war for the purposes of that act in a similar way in which the First and Second World Wars were designated.

• (1235)

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Well, Minister, I don't think that we declare war or we go into a conflict based on the Pension Act. I think we go based on the Emergencies Act and we decide as a nation, and the Pension Act reflects that. I don't understand why the associate minister for national defence and you are referring to the Pension Act when we should be looking at the Emergencies Act and deciding whether this is a Gulf War or not.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Yes, and, respectfully, I was speaking in the context of the support that we provide to the veterans and the subject of this committee's debate. The discussion on how a nation declares war...it is actually an executive decision for a decision to enter into a war, but it also requires going to Parliament, and that has not happened since the Second World War.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Well, I understand that there was a paradigm shift right after the Cold War and that Canadian forces were in Europe and prepared for a different kind of war, and we've gone from that nuclear posturing to limited conflicts. I'm very familiar with that, but there seems to be a problem with authority here. There seems to be a problem with interpretation when it comes to implementing the Emergencies Act and recognizing that this was a Gulf War.

The associate minister agrees that this was a war, in her terminology. You agree that it's a war in this terminology. You've said to my colleague Mr. Desilets that you have the authority to make this change. Why don't we go out, make an announcement, call this a war and let's get it done—done and dusted? This committee can go on and do some good work dealing with other challenges that Veterans Affairs is dealing with.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Sir, I would point out that when Canada entered into the Afghan conflict, where 500 and, I believe, 28 Canadian Armed Forces members...or 158 Canadian Armed Forces members lost their lives, the government of the day did not declare a war in that circumstance, but our people were fighting in battle. They were dying and being injured in battle—

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Minister, excuse me—

**Hon. Bill Blair:** —but we did not declare a war in those circumstances.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Chair, through you, the veterans just want recognition at Remembrance Day. We can do it. We've got the time. It's only 10 days away.

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds if you'd like to reply, Minister.

Okay.

Let's move to MP Sean Casey for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to our witnesses.

I want to come back to the issue raised by Mr. Dowdall, someone for whom I have tremendous respect. He indicated—and I think the use of the word “fudged” was unfortunate—that the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report that was issued in the last couple of days did indicate some concern with the GDP numbers that were used as the base for the calculation to get to the percentage.

I don't think you had a full opportunity to explain or to address Mr. Dowdall's concern, but I do think it's of interest to the committee and to the public, so if you could, Minister, talk about the concern raised by the PBO in connection with the 2% of GDP NATO spending target and the allegation that somehow the numbers were fudged by the department, please.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thanks very much, Mr. Casey. I think it's an important opportunity to clarify that, and I'm happy to be able to do so.

In 2014 at the Wales NATO summit, the Government of Canada committed to reach two per cent. It was a difficult challenge at that time because we were spending less than one per cent of our GDP on defence. Since then, we've more than doubled it. We've reiterated our commitment to meet the two per cent ratio, and at the NATO summit in Washington most recently in July, the Prime Minister outlined a plan to reach that target by 2032. It is going to require a significant increase in defence spending, which is absolutely required.

The target that we have agreed to meet is NATO's target. It's a NATO spending metric, and they've said that in establishing their two per cent metric, they would apply exactly the same calculation of national GDPs to all 32 members of NATO. It's based on the OECD projections to report on defence spending across the entire alliance. That's the target that Canada has committed to, reaching two per cent of what NATO defines as our GDP projection based on the OECD report.

Now, the PBO has used different projections for Canada's future GDP. Quite frankly, I'm encouraged by his optimism, and I think the projections reflect some great work that has been done to position Canada for future growth and increases in productivity and in our GDP.

I was also encouraged when he said that such expenditures are possible without unduly impacting the government's deficit-to-GDP ratio. That's all good news, but the only point I would make to the Parliamentary Budget Officer—whose work I'm always grateful for because it's always useful to help us get an understanding of this—is that the target that Canada has committed to is two per cent of the GDP as set by the OECD numbers that NATO has relied upon right across the alliance. I'm encouraged by the Parliamentary Budget Officer's more ambitious projections about our future. I also think that might give us an opportunity to make even more investments in national defence. Those investments are needed to meet the challenges of the current threat environment, the new technologies, climate change and all of those things that require much greater demands upon the Canadian Armed Forces. We must do more. We must invest more in defence and in their capabilities.

Certainly we are committed to meeting it, and I've been able to go to NATO and articulate, I think, a very clear and verifiable plan to our NATO allies on how we're going to get to the NATO spending metric of two per cent, but we also recognize that there's a lot of work to get that done, and Canadians are just going to have to put their heads down and get this done.

If there are future opportunities as a result of more growth in Canada, then we will, I think, benefit from being able to do even more.

• (1240)

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you, Minister.

There has been some discussion at this committee about prayers at Remembrance Day services and other commemoration events. I know that this is something that resides within DND, as opposed to Veterans Affairs, in the office of the military chaplains.

Can you provide us with some clarity around the directive and how it will impact Remembrance Day ceremonies this year?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I appreciate the opportunity to clarify this as well, because I've heard it suggested that I somehow made that order. That doesn't really show much understanding of how my job works. I don't issue orders to the Canadian Armed Forces. I work very closely with the CDS and her team, but this was a decision made by the chaplain general.

I've asked how this came about and what the intent was. I've been assured that the directive that was issued by the chaplain general last year in no way bans prayer. I will tell you that I've attended an awful lot of Remembrance Day ceremonies. I used to host one myself at my police headquarters for over a decade. Prayer is an important part of that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Perhaps I can come back to it another time.

**The Chair:** The time is up.

[Translation]

I now invite Luc Desilets to ask his questions for two and a half minutes.

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

Minister, I sense the sincerity in your remarks and I also sense a certain openness, which I greatly appreciate. If you were a sovereigntist, I might vote for you.

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** We could be friends.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Let's move on to more serious issues.

You say that we can't act retroactively. However, I understand that there is one piece of legislation that should be modified, amended, changed, whatever, but that all legislation can be amended by other legislation.

Am I wrong?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Parliament has the ability to pass legislation. I think there are lots of examples, even during our most recent Parliament, where there's been an effort to amend existing legislation to make real improvements and to respond to changing times.

I think that's possible. I believe very strongly that it's possible.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** In order to take this first step or try to amend the legislation, whose court is the ball in: that of the Department of Veterans Affairs or that of the Department of National Defence?

• (1245)

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I'm more than happy to exercise my responsibility here. At the same time, I have legislation before the House right now. I've been having a lot of trouble getting it through second reading. I wanted to get it to committee, because I really value the work that the committee can do on the thing. I think the report by this committee and the important work that this committee has been doing on this issue can inform Parliament. I've seen lots of examples of that as well, where committees have come forward and said, "This is what we think is right". Then it's up to me to take the responsibility—

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Do you have discussions with Ms. Petitpas Taylor about recognizing the Gulf War?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** We've had a number of conversations about it. It was an important conversation I had with the veterans.

We talk about commemoration a lot. She leads that for our government, but I also have a role in commemoration and honouring the work of veterans.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'll ask you a specific question. As minister, how do you explain to a veteran who is before you that the monetary value of losing a leg is not the same from one plan to the next? What are the justifications for that? How do you explain it?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Well, as you put it, it would be a very difficult thing to explain. I asked him questions about that, because the issue was raised with me as well.

I think the way the previous act was legislated was that it was so much money for a leg, a limb, a hand or whatever. I think the new act is a little bit more thoughtful and nuanced about what the impact of losing that leg is and whether or not it precludes a person from engaging in their employment after their service.

It also talks about the supports that are necessary. It's not just a straight cash payment for the loss of a limb; it talks about the supports that individual will need to live a productive, healthy and happy life with the loss of that limb.

I might suggest, as it's been explained to me, that it's slightly more nuanced than simply paying so much for a lost limb, and more about providing—

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Blair.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you very much.

You got the red card, so you have to....

**Hon. Bill Blair:** If we were playing soccer, I would be off the field, sir.

**The Chair:** Yes, but we have more questions to ask you, so you can't leave.

I'd like to invite Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

I was hoping you were going to say, "She has five minutes, just because I like her so much", but it didn't work out for me.

Minister, I just want to say, first of all, that I really hope there will be some work done to harmonize the benefits. I do feel like this is part of it. Commemoration is a more significant part in my mind, but I think harmonizing the benefits makes sense.

I want to go back to something in my riding. I know, as you're smiling at me, that you already know what I'm going to ask about.

In Comox Valley, of course, the amazing 19 Wing Comox Valley Air Force Museum is working very hard fundraising a tremendous amount of money to build a pavilion to store the De Havilland Vampire Mark III jet.

This is so important to our area. We already have a beautiful space where many military planes are shown. It allows the community to engage and to learn about what those planes did and what it means for the tradition of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

We know that the Vampire first flew in service in September 1943 and was retired from the air force in 1966. It became the first jet to operate from an aircraft carrier and to fly the Atlantic crossing from the United Kingdom to Goose Bay. It has been declared a Canadian heritage artifact and now lives at 19 Wing Comox.

Sadly, it can't be viewed by the public, and yet it's such an important part of remembrance. Because the cockpit is made of wood, which I think all of us who've ever been on a plane think is quite tremendously amazing, it cannot sit outside, especially in our very rainy environment, because, of course, it will not stand up to that. A glass display case has been designed to house the Vampire, and I'm pleased to report that, before he passed, local Comox World War II ace James "Stocky" Edwards approved the building design and really wanted to see that aircraft made available.

The supporters of this have raised a significant amount of money and would love to see the federal government contribute a small amount to have their name attached to acknowledging this piece of our history. I'm just wondering if you will continue to work with me to find these little bits of resources.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Please be assured. Absolutely. I'm grateful that you brought this to my attention. I had a whole team of people working on it just last night after you and I spoke about it. I'll do everything I can to find a way to help you on this one, because I think it's the right thing to do. I like to help people who are helping themselves, and your community has stepped up on this. It's an important commemoration. All commemorations, as we've talked a lot about, are important.

We'll work with you on this one, Rachel, and we'll get it done. Thank you for your advocacy on this.

• (1250)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, sir.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Now, for five minutes, we have the vice-chair of the committee Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I have two things.

First of all, I was very interested while listening to your response to previous questions about defence spending. I was struck by it. I would absolutely disagree with your characterization of a so-called plan to meet those targets years well after the current Prime Minister would be the Prime Minister of the country. It is not really a commitment to meet the targets.

Secondly, I hear you talking about the difference in the projections. Essentially, what you're telling us is that the only reason you believe you can meet these targets well into the future is because your government has driven the economy into the toilet. That's what you essentially said. Maybe the PBO is factoring in a future Pierre Poilievre government, and that's why the projections are so much more optimistic.

**An hon. member:** Wow.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** We'll have to agree to disagree about your thoughts on that, for sure.

Let me turn to something else you were asked about previously: the prayer ban.

You indicated that you don't believe it is a prayer ban. However, the directive the chaplain general put out is clearly that. Canadians see it as that.

If you believe it's not a prayer ban, why was there a need, last year, before Remembrance Day, to announce a temporary reprieve, in order to enable prayer at Remembrance Day ceremonies?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thanks very much.

In response to your first thing, I think we all recall—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Minister, what I'm asking you about is this. I only have so much time—

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I'll be very quick.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** —so I'd like your response to this question, please.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Let me respond to everything you said.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'd like a response to this question.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I promise you will get one.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. Your question was a minute and 25 seconds, so I think you have to let the Minister reply to that.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** He needs to answer the question I asked.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** You kept interrupting.

**The Chair:** We're losing time.

Okay. Thank you, guys.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** What I'd like to—

**The Chair:** Excuse me.

Minister, you have the floor for one minute and 25 seconds. Please go ahead.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't want to waste a lot of time talking about the Conservatives' dismal record on defence spending. For two years, they took defence spending below 1% of GDP. In the last nine years, they voted against almost every single investment in national defence.

The projections we provided are part of a clear plan and a budget we brought forward in April 2024. I think it's a clear articulation. Our budget for the coming year—while we're still the govern-

ment—is going to increase defence spending by 27%. That's real action and investment. It's absolutely required, and—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Are you going to get to the question?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** —I'm very hopeful that we'll get some support from the Conservatives in passing that legislation and authorizing that money.

However, if I may, I'll go back to the other very important question about the chaplain general's directive. He issued a directive at that time. It was very clear, in my reading of it, that it was his intention not to exclude anyone, but rather to enable everyone attending a commemorative event to feel included. The Canadian Armed Forces is diverse. Canada is a diverse country with many different faith traditions. Our intent was to make sure.... Excuse me, the chaplain general's intent was to make sure that everyone could feel included and participate in reflection or prayer, no matter their belief.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** The Freudian slip of “our intent” was very interesting.

He did not respond to the idea of why there was a need for a reprieve, but maybe I'll ask him a different way, then.

When Colonel Lisa Pacarynuk, the director of chaplaincy services, appeared on an Ottawa radio program, she was asked about people's concern about not being able to say prayers of any faith during Remembrance Day.... She said, “In certain settings,” of course, “in faith-based settings and church settings, they...of course will speak about their own faith and the role that God or their heavenly being has in that setting”. This is the key part: “But in a public setting,” from that perspective, “where there are people who do not believe in God or...who bring [other] perspectives, they will not use that [God] language.” She was very clear that you're not to reference any kind of God or higher being, and not to pray from any kind of faith perspective. That was clear on the radio program, and it was clear in the fact that there was a need to announce a reprieve.

How can you say there's no prayer ban?

Let me ask you this, as well: How many chaplains have faced disciplinary measures or had their chaplaincy revoked, as a result of this directive?

● (1255)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** First of all, I'm not aware that any chaplain would be disciplined for this or have their chaplaincy revoked.

With regard to one of the things that you comment on, I think it does reveal the reason for the reprieve. There was so much misinformation that was put out by various individuals about the chaplains—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** The misinformation including—

**The Chair:** Please, Mr. Richards, please stop interrupting the minister.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** —because he has very clearly indicated that's the case?

You can't talk about this situation—

**The Chair:** No, guys, no.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** —without pointing out that his own official indicated that it's a ban.

**The Chair:** You see the clock. It's one o'clock.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Listen to me, Chair.

**The Chair:** No, listen.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** His own official indicated that it's a ban, so is he saying his own official is guilty of—

**The Chair:** Mr. Richards, come on.

We need more discipline, guys.

Minister, you have the floor.

Listen, Mr. Richards. You asked a question, so why don't you stop to listen for the answer? My goodness.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You don't have that right, Chair.

**The Chair:** I don't think it's helping veterans—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** His own official—

**The Chair:** I don't think your behaviour helps veterans.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Let's let him answer the question, then, but he needs to answer the question.

**The Chair:** Minister, please go ahead. You have the floor.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, the reprieve was announced by the chaplain general simply because his directive was so badly misinterpreted and misrepresented. As I think he made very clear in his directive and in subsequent communications, it was about making all commemorative events more inclusive to enable every Canadian to participate in a reflection or prayer, no matter their beliefs. It was a respect for the diversity of our country—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It's inclusion by exclusion. Your own official has said that he is not to be included.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** —and for all people to participate in these reflections.

**The Chair:** Come on, guys.

Minister, I'm sorry.

With all those interruptions, Mr. May, you only have four minutes left for your intervention.

Please, go ahead.

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

Thank you all for being with us today.

I certainly am looking forward to having an early Remembrance Day ceremony that's held in one of the rural communities in my riding, this Sunday. I'm looking forward to Father Frank Squires

bringing the benediction. I can assure all in this room that I will certainly not chastise him for doing so.

To kind of bring us back, if we can, I, too, met with Persian Gulf veterans, actually, this morning.

It struck me that one of the representatives from that group said to me that that he wants to be an advocate. He wants to be a recruiting tool. With all this around the Persian Gulf not being considered a war, it's challenging for him. It got me thinking about recruitment and retention. We know the importance of service and how important recognizing and commemorating service is. We also know that potential young people are actually looking to DND and CAF as an employment opportunity.

I am wondering if you or potentially the general can share, in the limited we have left, the larger plan on recruitment and retention, focusing on that commemoration piece as a potential recruiting tool.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thank you very much for the question.

People are our most important asset. There's not much point in buying boats and submarines and planes if you don't have sailors and airmen to service them and to serve on them. Our new chief of defence has been working really hard with her team on a new re-constitution for the Canadian Armed Forces, and I'd like to give her an opportunity to explain a little bit of the plan.

• (1300)

**Gen Jennie Carignan:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You're absolutely right. The work of commemoration helps educate Canadians of all ages about the contributions of the CAF and the veterans to the overall security of Canada, so they go hand in hand. We have an extensive program in place where active members are deployed to various speaking engagements during Veterans' Week to make sure that the work of commemoration is being accomplished and shared. This is extremely important and, of course, part of helping the CAF to become better known.

In terms of recruiting, we are acting in many different ways, because it's not just one thing that's going to make us successful. For example, we will be addressing short-term issues, the ones that we can change at the moment—right now—and in the next few months to ensure that we streamline and modernize our recruiting process. We're also addressing the long-term issues that require more time for implementation; here I'm thinking about the digitalization of our processes and modernizing the whole business process of recruiting.

We are already making changes, for example, in the medical standards, modernizing them to make sure they are fit for 2024. We are also looking at how we do security screenings, and we are, of course, working at onboarding permanent residents who are showing up strong at our doors and want to contribute to security. I will tell you, for example, that within one month, we onboarded over 188 permanent residents, which is a significant increase, and we're already starting to see changes in terms of increased capacity for onboarding new members of the CAF.

**Mr. Bryan May:** That's excellent. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. We're going to stop right here.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their testimony today.

We had with us the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence, and from the Department of National Defence, we had General Jennie Carignan, chief of the defence staff, Canadian Armed Forces, and Major General Erick Simoneau, deputy commander, military personnel command.

Once again, thank you to our interpreters. Thank you to the staff.

This meeting is adjourned.

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