

No need for ombudsman, says Guarnieri

By Robert Smol
Special to the Bulletin

In spite of pressure from the Conservative party, as well as from disabled veterans themselves, Al-bina Guarnieri, Minister of Veterans Affairs, continues to insist that Canada's veterans are properly served by her department and do not need an Ombudsman.

"In Veterans Affairs, we always take the advice of the service organizations," she said. "The Royal Canadian Legion is the organization that oversees all these umbrella groups, and they have publicly stated that they don't want an ombudsman because they feel that it is redundant."

However, this senior advisory status assigned by the Minister to the Royal Canadian Legion comes as a surprise to a growing number of young, disabled Canadian Forces veterans, most of whom have no affiliation, let alone any use for the Royal Canadian Legion.

"The Royal Canadian Legion does not oversee other veteran organizations," said retired Captain Sean Bruyey, a veteran of the 1990-91 Gulf War, who suffers from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. "Other veteran organizations would be very upset to hear that the Minister and the Legion consider themselves to

have "dominion" over any of their interests."

And in spite of the fact that 2005 was The Year of the Veteran, the relationship today between young disabled veterans and Veterans Affairs Canada remains one marked by hostility and mistrust.

"These days, we are often made to feel as if we are criminals by asking for better services and support," noted former Intelligence Officer Perry Gray, who is suffering from Post traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of his service as a peacekeeper with the United Nations in Croatia. "You go into the district office in Ottawa, and you go up to the main desk and it is encased in bullet-proof glass," he said.

Also disturbing is the fact that each interview room is equipped with a panic button, with a secondary escape exit for the Veterans Affairs employee," said Bruyey. "I have frequently heard the employees raising their voices at the vets being interviewed because they do not understand the complexity of the system."

Much of the bureaucratic angst faced by today's disabled veteran involves how the Ministry of Veteran's Affairs interprets the veteran's medical condition.

Many Canadians may also be surprised to know that a documented medical disability in the military does not necessarily translate into an equivalent disability pension from Veterans Affairs.

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speak two languages," explained Mike Detheridge, a retired medic from the army who currently assists other veterans. "I have dealt with thousands of people who have simply given up on Veterans Affairs."

Still, Minister Guarnieri, who is currently campaigning for reelection in her home riding of Mississauga East-Cooksville, is adamant that the services her department's Veteran Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), as well as the Royal Canadian Legion, negates the need for any veteran Ombudsman.

"It (VRAB) has more power because it is independent of the government, and it has the power and resources to overturn department decisions," she explained. "In terms of general advocacy, you have the Royal Canadian Legion, which has the daily connection with veterans."

But, modern veterans are quick to point out that neither the Royal Canadian Legion nor the Veterans Review and Appeal Board have either the bureaucratic reach or the independent investigative powers that an ombudsman would have.

"The Legion can never claim to be an ombudsman; it has neither the powers of investigation nor the resources or skills to carry out investigations," commented Bruyey. "Furthermore, the Veterans Review

and Appeal Board are involved in tribunal proceedings, and to claim it acts as an ombudsman would be like saying military court martials act as the ombudsman for the Canadian Forces."

"I had two lawyers of the Bureau of Pension Advocates (part of Veterans Affairs Canada) recommend that I be given an increased pension and retroactive payment, and VRAB and Veterans Affairs did very little," noted Gray. "Neither VRAB nor the Royal Canadian Legion have anything like the power of an ombudsman to ensure that vets are treated fairly and with respect."

The Minister has also said that creating a veterans ombudsman, as suggested by the Conservative government, would only add another layer of bureaucracy to Veterans Affairs.

Modern veterans are quick to point out that any veteran ombudsman will be used by only those veterans who have problems with the regular bureaucracy of veterans affairs, and it will work to make sure all eligible veterans are properly served by Veterans Affairs.

"To imply that an ombudsman is unnecessary because it 'adds another layer of bureaucracy' is akin to claiming the Supreme Court is unnecessary because it makes decisions that merely complicate the Justice System or that lubrication is unnecessary for ballbearings because it makes machinery too messy," added Bruyey. "An ombudsman looks at the big picture and recommends repairs when necessary, while taking care of those individuals who fall through the cracks."

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Programs should change with veteran definition

By Robert Smol

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When the new Veterans Charter was fast-tracked through Parliament last spring, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Albina Guarnieri, stated that the sacrifices made by our veterans are “a debt that we know we can never pay back.”

And to the dismay of many young, disabled veterans fighting the bureaucracy of Veterans Affairs, the Minister’s statement appears to be a promise she intends to keep.

“The new legislation is not going to help the veteran now or in the future,” commented former army medic Mike Detheridge, who now assists other veterans.

“This new Veterans Charter is written in a completely different language that is much more draconian, much more suspect, and much more scrutinizing of the intention of the veteran,” said retired air force Captain Sean Bruyca, a Gulf-War veteran who, after being medically released from the Canadian Forces, had to spend \$30,000 of his own money to get Veterans Affairs to recognize his medical condition.

Unlike legislation passed at the end of World War II, which recognized the government’s unlimited liability to care for the disabled veteran, Canada’s new veterans legislation reads more like an insurance policy for a high risk client.

“Canadians have been duped by this government into thinking that today’s young veteran is being well taken care of,” Bruyca explained. “That is simply not the case.”

Whether it be education or employment assistance, to name only a couple, one would be hard pressed to prove that a disabled veteran from the Canadian Forces today is being well compensated.

For example, unlike our counterparts today in the United States, and unlike our parents and grandparents generation that returned after World War II, today’s Canadian veteran is not entitled to receive a subsidized university

education under the new legislation.

“After World War II, university education was not necessary to have a good job and a good career, but the government and the Canadian people fully supported paying for a university education for all veterans,” said Bruyca. “In today’s job environment, university education is a must for a decent long-term career.”

Minister Guarnieri, though, dismisses concerns that younger Canadian veterans are not entitled to receive a university education.

“To be honest, I think people can upgrade themselves whichever way they want; it is not up to us to tell them what they should do,” she said.

The minister also insists that the new Veterans Charter will herald a big advance in the employment assistance offered to veterans.

“Under the old legislation that I am operating under, in order for you to access any of the programs I have, you had to be disabled, but under the new Veterans Charter, when you come out of the Forces, we help your transition into civilian life,” she explained.

Many veterans, however, question the context within which that transition to civilian life takes place.

“Only one very limited program is accessible without being disabled: a very poorly organized and written job placement program,” Bruyca commented. “The remaining programs of C-45 not only require that the Veteran be disabled, but the disabled veteran must agree to enter a job placement decided by the government, decided by Veterans Affairs, in order to not only get income support, but health care for the veteran as well as the family.”

None of the veterans programs since World War I have ever forced a veteran into the indignity of government-chosen employment with the threat of removing all the benefits should the veteran not



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stay in the job chosen by the government.

Bureaucracy aside, today’s younger veteran suffers from a crisis of perception. Regardless of our involvement in almost all of the major conflicts of the last half-century, many Canadians are simply reluctant to refer to the recently-released Canadian Forces member as a veteran, let alone a war veteran. They may have been sent to the Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan, or the war in the former Yugoslavia, but, in the Canadian public’s mind, their service invariably falls under the more politically palliative term of peacekeeping, with all the perceptions, real or imagined that may be associated with that.

Added to this is the fact that Canadians have, by and large, not woken up to the fact that the face of Canada’s veteran community is rapidly changing.

More and more, today’s living veteran is not the retired elderly man distributing poppies in the shopping mall. Instead, today’s veteran may be the teacher at the local high school, the man behind the store counter, or, as is case here, the reporter writing for the local newspaper.

And, for a while at least, it may be hard for many Canadians, not to mention our politicians, to come to terms with the fact that an individual young enough to have spent their teen years playing computer games and going to Pink Floyd and KISS concerts may, upon completing their military service, have the same service-related problems and needs that their fathers and grandfathers had at the end of World War II.

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