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Feature: Ministers and Misery

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VVi is for you, all veterans, regardless of whether you belong to a veteran organization or not. VVi is a distribution centre, a conduit for making sure that the information you need as a veteran is there for you in a timely fashion. Our aim is to provide a forum for *all* Canadian veterans, serving members and their families to have access to information pertaining to veteran rights.

VVi is an independent site, not associated with any governmental department, agency or veteran organization. VeteranVoice.info is maintained by independent contributions.



Ministers and Misery

Perry Gray

"The rulers of the state are the only persons who ought to have the privilege of lying, either at home or abroad; they may be allowed to lie for the good of the state." **Plato**

Politicians have short term memories. It often seems that they can not remember much before the previous election, particularly if the memories are negative. This unfortunate trend is obvious in the continuous barrage of criticisms launched against the former Minister of Veterans Affairs. Julian Fantino may be guilty of many things and by extension Prime Minister Harper as well for not improving the relationship between the federal government and the Veterans Community.

It was the representatives of all political parties who supported the last report of the Commons Committee for Veterans Affairs last spring. This was supposed to have been a thorough review of the NVC, but was not. That the opposition

parties later withdrew their support but this does not absolve them of being complicit in failing the Veterans Community...again.

Prime Minister Harper was correct when he stated that it was the responsibility of the previous Liberal government for introducing the NVC in 2005. He is not correct, however, for stating that the Equitas law suit is “ actually a court case against the previous Liberal policy”. All parties represented in Parliament supported the NVC in 2005.

The prime minister could have avoided the SISIP law suit as well as the Equitas law suit, but decided to oppose both. His government only conceded in the former class action when it became apparent that it would lose. He could have repealed the NVC at any time since becoming prime minister in 2006, but has not shown any inclination to do so.

There have been two ruling parties complicit in the ongoing decrease in support for the Veterans Community since 1945. Other political parties have also contributed to a lesser degree.

It was the government of Liberal Prime Minister Louis St Laurent which denied benefits to the Veterans of the Korean War in 1953. This government also reduced the VAC health care faculties from 40 to 18 and limited support to that of chronic care only.

It was the government of Liberal Prime Minister which oversaw the transfer of ownership and operation of its VAC health care facilities to provincial health authorities after 1966. Only one facility, Ste. Anne's Hospital, remained federally owned and operated for Veterans.

It was during the government of Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau that SISIP was approved in the 1970's. The clawback of VAC financial benefits began after the introduction of this long term disability insurance plan.

While the NVC was introduced by the government of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, it is the government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper which has failed to implement about 500 recommendations or repeal the NVC.

Perry Gray is a Regular Force veteran, serving as both Publisher and Chief Editor of VVi. Perry has been with VVi for 12 years.



The Future of VAC Stakeholders Committee

Perry Gray

“Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose” **Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr**

“The more thing change, the more they stay the same.”

You are probably aware of the recent news about the new minister snubbing CVA, which claims that it is being denied a role as a participant of the VAC stakeholders committee. CVA is not the only group which was not invited to continue participating on this committee. The Veterans of Canada and VeteranVoice.info (VVi) were also excluded from the last committee meeting in November 2014 in Quebec City.

The only unofficial reason given was that these organisations do not conform to the format of more traditional groups like the Royal Canadian Legion:

“have bylaws, that have boards of directors, that have votes, that have annual general meetings, not just a Facebook page, so I would like to hear your plan on becoming that, like a, like the Legion (or other associations) where the members have a lot to say on what direction policy should....” (Hill Times 12 January 2015)

This is being disputed by both CVA and VoC, which claim that they do share similarities with the Legion. Both groups were members of the committee since it was established in 2011.

VVi stated openly prior to admission to the stakeholders committee that it was an information portal rather than a traditional organisation. There are more than 110,000 subscribers; however, there are no membership fees or other conditions because we encourage anyone interested in Canadian Veterans to subscribe and use our resources. It is well known to VAC what type of organisation we are because the stakeholders committee was briefed on VVi during its December 2012 meeting. No group has publicly objected to the inclusion of VVi, CVA or VoC at any of the meetings that we attended between 2011 and 2013.

The introduction of these new membership criteria was not discussed by the stakeholders committee and it is clear from previous statements from ministers and VAC that the conditions for participation were more liberal:

New people are being brought to the table through new organizations providing new voices and more diverse input on Veterans issues. He (the minister) emphasized that the proposed Departmental Stakeholder Committee would not replace the need for ongoing communication between Veterans Affairs Canada and Veterans organizations, which could be in the form of bi- and multilateral meetings, telephone discussions and e-mails. The committee would provide a mechanism to share issues and policies and provide a sounding board for the Department, for example as it seeks innovative ways to use technology in reaching Veterans and their organizations.” (VAC October 2011)

What is apparent is that neither the new minister nor his new deputy understand what VAC envisioned when the committee was formed in 2010-2011.

“He (Deputy Minister Walter Natynchyk) said it wasn’t within his purveyance to change the minister’s invitation...” (Hill Times 12 January 2015)

This is incorrect based on my reading of the Terms of Reference of the committee:

2.2 COMMITTEE COMPOSITION

The Committee will be comprised of representatives from national Veterans’ organizations and other Federal Government representatives, such as from the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman. It will also include advisers. In addition, there may be other individuals who will be added to the Committee, upon the recommendation of participants, subject to the approval of the Chair. See Appendix A for list of Veterans’ organizations and other participants.

2.2.1 CHAIR

The Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada will chair the Committee's meetings.

2.2.2 MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

Member organizations are identified in Annex A. Each organization may designate one representative; in addition, each organization may have a second individual attend as an observer. In order to ensure continuity on the Committee, member organizations will endeavour to ensure the participation of their designated representative at Committee meetings; however, it is recognized that there may be exceptional circumstances under which an alternate representative may need to replace the designated representative.

2.2.3 ADVISORS

The Committee may include academics and experts in Veterans issues.

Mr. Natynchyk can invite any number of participants and there are no specific restrictions as suggested by the new minister. There are a number of national organisations, which do not have the same format of the Legion and other traditional groups. In fact, the majority of Veterans are no longer represented by these traditional groups. This means that the minister and his deputy should be inviting representatives, who do not belong to traditional groups so that the majority of the Veterans Community are represented.

The sad reality is that the former minister and his successor prefer to limit the participation of stakeholders rather than finding ways to increase it. This trend contradicts the Terms of Reference:

2.4 CODE OF CONDUCT AND CONFIDENTIALITY GUIDELINES

The work of the Committee will be conducted in such a manner as to foster openness and communication, respect for human dignity and diversity, with fairness and civility.

Once again Canadians are witnessing hypocrisy as the federal government ignores its own policy. Is excluding original members fair? Was the manner in which they were excluded respectful or open? The answer to both questions is no.

*“VAC recognizes the importance of maintaining ongoing and productive relationships with Veterans’ organizations, the Ombudsman, experts and academics, as well as other organizations and institutions that have a **vested interest** in Veterans issues.”* (Terms of Reference 28 October 2011)

The three organisations excluded from the committee do have a “vested interest” as do many other groups, which have never been considered for membership on the committee. Recommendations were made to include aboriginal groups, Gulf War and Afghan War groups (i.e. the young modern Veterans), and spouses and other family members of the Veterans Community (i.e. the primary care givers for many Veterans), **but not one additional group has ever been invited to a meeting.**

It is unclear to this writer how VAC determined that the ten groups represented at the last stakeholders meeting satisfied the new criteria. Some of the groups have been very reluctant to publicly disclose information about their membership and internal administration. VAC should have to be responsible and provide information on how it approved these groups, but not the others.

VAC probably did not do anything more than accept the advice of the Legion, which has also banned CVA, VoC and VVi from its annual consultation meetings as of late 2014. The Legion does invite a larger number of organisations to its meetings, so why were none of these groups invited as alternative participants for the 2014 stakeholder meeting?

The answer, in my opinion, is that VAC wants only a limited number of stakeholders, which are easier to manage. Groups that repeatedly criticise and embarrass the department are not welcome.

VAC has in fact constantly undermined the operations of the committee.

The Committee will meet at least twice per year, face-to-face, in the Fall and Spring. Other meetings may be organized, as required, throughout the year including by way of tele- or video- conferencing.

In 2013 and 2014, there were no spring meetings. There have been no other official meetings held, specifically tele- or video conferences.

It is recognized that Committee participants may need to report and disseminate information to their membership, whether in writing, by e-mail, in person or on the Internet (Web page/Facebook). However, it is essential that comments not be attributed to specific individuals or organizations.

During December 2012 and 2013 meetings, members were not allowed to bring any type of electronic device (cell phone or computers) into the meeting. This made it very difficult for the members to communicate information to anyone outside the meeting. Since there are no detailed minutes recorded by VAC, each member must make their own records of the discussions.

Given the dependence on various recording devices, it was a shock for the members to be told that they had to leave their phones and computers outside the meeting room. Ironic when the meeting was held in a special conference room of the Canadian War Museum, which caters to electronic devices commonly used in presentations, lectures and briefings.

In addition, the chair was not the deputy minister, but rather Lt.-Gen. Walter Semianiw, seconded from DND to a VAC assistant deputy minister position, who chaired these stakeholder meetings. Only one representative instead of two was permitted from each group again a contradiction of the terms of reference. The President of the RCL, Gord Moore, was prepared to quit the meeting until it was agreed that the Legion and CVA could have two members attend. No other group was extended this compromise.

Given the amount of information discussed at these meetings, it is important to have at least two representatives from each organisation. VAC tries to overwhelm the stakeholders with information (as if “bullshit baffles brains”). Excluding the former chairs and certain other participants meant that there were fewer people able to deal with this avalanche of information. It is ridiculous to expect one person to be able to be familiar with all of the VAC policy and federal legislation. This challenge was compounded by the short notice given for meetings and the provision of the agenda.

While limiting participants, VAC imposed no internal restrictions on how many people it included in its entourage. At times, there were more VAC employees than Veterans in attendance.

2.1.1 VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE OPERATIONS

Veterans Affairs Canada will set the agenda for Committee meetings in consultation with member organizations, advisers and participants from other federal government organizations.

Veterans Affairs Canada will be responsible for preparing records of decisions arising from each of the Committee's meetings. Following each meeting, the draft record of decisions will be circulated, via e-mail, to member organizations, advisors and participants from other federal government organizations for their review and comment. The record of decisions will be discussed, further revised if required, and validated at the meeting following that for which the record has been prepared. Once validated, the record will form part of the official documentation of the meeting for which it was prepared.

The Committee will develop a work plan in which it will identify five or six issues to pursue. As issues are addressed, new issues may be added to the work plan. The Committee will identify those issues for which research and evidence are required. VAC will be responsible for obtaining such research and evidence. Committee members will assist VAC in determining how best to obtain research and evidence.

While it was true that VAC set each agenda, it was very reluctant to accept input from the stakeholders. Any record of decisions was rarely discussed in detail and amendments were few. Rather than five or six issues, meetings tended to be a series of VAC presentations based on what the department thought that it was doing. The committee did not have much advanced notice of each agenda and was rarely asked to supplement the VAC portion of each meeting.

Operations were very different from a typical Canadian Parliamentary committee or for that matter how meetings in the private sector are conducted.

"VAC is developing an approach to stakeholder engagement which is more flexible and adaptable, will evolve with time and will help position the Department to respond to Veterans and their evolving needs, as well as those of their families."

This statement is contradicted by the actual events of the meetings of 2013 and 2014. Veterans would not be surprised by the lack of information provided by the participants to their own organisations and VAC's almost complete silence about the meetings. Do not accept my word, try finding anything about the stakeholders committee on the VAC website or for that matter on any website. I used Google to identify any mention of the committee, but there was nothing associated with VAC.

VAC terminated the participation of four chairs of Advisory Groups and the Croatia Board of Inquiry after the February 2012 meeting, then started making excuses for limiting each group to one participant and more recently started reducing the number of groups allowed to attend. The agenda remained limited to VAC items and a complete lack of an official paper trail to show what was discussed (or not). All of which contradicts VAC's claim that it "engages regularly with veterans' organizations and other stakeholders to help ensure that VAC services and benefits meet the needs of veterans and their families... VAC recognizes the value of ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and their input and feedback is used to inform decision making."

It seems clear to me that VAC is happy to have a stakeholders committee reduced to nothing more than a series of presentations about current and planned operations presented to groups, which are unlikely to complain publicly about its operations and intentions.

*"It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to
Cry if I want to, cry if I want to
You would cry too if it happened to you"* (sung by Lesley Gore 1963)

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You Can Help!

All veterans are encouraged to pass information, opinions, links to self-help sites onto VVi. VeteranVoice.info is a distribution centre and we are dependant on others to pass information. This is your site. Tell other veterans about your site.

Email: info@VeteranVoice.info

Facebook Messenger: <https://www.facebook.com/VeteranVoice.info>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/VetVoiceinfo>

 VeteranVoice.info (VVi)	http://VeteranVoice.info
 VVi Bulletin Board	http://VeteranVoice.info/bulletinboard.htm
 VVi Database	http://www.veteranvoice.info/db/all_records.asp
 VVi CSAT Forum	http://csat.top-talk.net/
 VVi on Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/VeteranVoice.info
 VVi on Twitter	https://twitter.com/VetVoiceinfo
 Veteran's Aide Memoire	http://veteranvoice.info/archive/aide_memoire/Vet_Aide_Memoire.pdf
National (US) Gulf War Resources Center, Inc.	http://www.ngwrc.org/
 PPCLI Association Volunteer Patricia Program (VPP)	http://vpp.ppcliassoc.ca



**SISIP
Clawback**

<http://leavenovetbehind.ca/home>



<http://seanbrueya.com>



<https://www.cfpsa.com/Splashpages/SoldierOn/>



**Veterans Affairs Canada
Anciens Combattants Canada**

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/>

**V.E.T.S
Veterans Emergency
Transition Services**

<http://www.vetscanada.org/>



**Veterans Ombudsman
Ombudsman des vétérans**

<http://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/>



Veterans of Canada.ca
A Community for Canadian Heroes

<http://veteransofcanada.ca/>



Wounded Warriors Fund

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