

3 February 2010

Veterans are our Pride and our Responsibility

They are our young, the future of our country and they lay their life on the line to make sure future generations have a better way of life; they are the men and women of our armed forces. And when they retire, or distressingly are discharged due to injury, they are our veterans.

I had the opportunity to attend a forum last Thursday, January 28th, on Parliament Hill that addressed the needs of veterans with a focus on the new generation of veterans who have been discharged due to mental or physical injuries. Jamie Sargent, an ex-air force member and a member of the Seeley's Bay Legion, attended the sessions with me.

We heard from advocates for veterans who were disabled and the veterans themselves. Most dramatically, we heard from Retired General and Senator Romeo Dallaire.



Senator Romeo Dallaire, Marjory Loveys and Jamie Sargent

Although I learned that help for young disabled veterans is much better than it was ten years ago, the day packed an emotional wallop; one could not help but come away feeling a sense of injustice, that more needs to be done when these brave men and women return from their duties with their bodies broken.

I was struck by the injustice of giving young, severely physically handicapped veterans a modest lump sum - and no on-going payments - for a serious life-long disability.

The 'New Veterans Charter' passed in 2006 received only 20 days of debate before it was passed by Parliament. In theory it provides the flexibility for Veterans Affairs to do more for disabled veterans, but in practice veterans told us that they are being stonewalled and their needs unmet. They reported that they are made to feel like liabilities, and that the main objective of Veterans Affairs seems to be controlling costs. Veterans' advocates are speaking out to have this legislation revoked or revised. How can elected officials allow this to continue?

The veterans made sensible suggestions, such as Veterans Affairs giving priority to hiring veterans (as is done in the US) and having a Veterans Ombudsman report to Parliament.

We heard from a retired forces medic that the Department of Veterans

Affairs and the Department of National Defense do not talk to each other about the causes of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and ways to work together to reduce the number of cases. Suicides among returning veterans are of increasing concern, yet in Canada these are not documented.

Dr. Zul Merali, president and CEO of the Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research reported that PTSD can be seen in MRI scans of the brain, clearly indicating that PTSD is a physical injury. He said that while new research on PTSD treatments is promising, little research money is available in Canada.

The forum was also an opportunity to hear from clinicians who are developing positive and innovative ways to helping disabled veterans to heal. They deserve recognition and support. Veterans need venues and personnel that understand their traumas both physical and mental.

Senator Romeo Dallaire, himself a sufferer of PTSD, stated the PTSD is a brain injury and those with PTSD should receive the same support as those with other physical injuries that are clearly visible. He stressed the need for on-going support because it is unknown when an occurrence can flair-up. He is dealing, once again, with extreme trauma triggered by witnessing the devastation caused by the earthquake in Haiti.

The session was open and honest. There were no partisan or political overtones; there was genuine concern about how Canadian veterans are treated. The participants raised questions and sought answers.

Ironically, in the almost empty Parliament buildings, this was democracy at its best.

-30-

Marjory Loveys, Federal Liberal candidate for Leeds Grenville