



Opinion

Credibility and integrity of the prime minister in question with veterans' community

Not only has the veterans affairs portfolio been deprioritized, but the prime minister has also betrayed a formal commitment he made to Canada's veterans and their families during the 2015 election campaign.

BY BRIAN FORBES

Given recent tumultuous events with respect to the resignation of two prominent federal cabinet ministers surrounding the conduct of the government in relation to the SNC-Lavalin matter and the significant political concerns emanating from the Vice-Admiral Mark Norman debacle, it is readily apparent that the integrity and credibility of the prime minister and his government have been placed in serious question.

From the perspective of the veterans' community, there remains a substantial parallel concern. Not only has the veterans affairs portfolio been negligently deprioritized in this process, but the prime minister has also betrayed a formal commitment he specifically made to Canada's veterans and their families during the 2015 election campaign.

In the context of the *Equitas* class action lawsuit, the prime minister made a promise to Canada's veterans that, should his party be successful, it would not be necessary for the disabled veterans to continue such a lawsuit as his government

would re-establish the life-long pensions as an option to the lump sum disability award. It was clearly understood that this commitment would specifically address the basic discrimination that existed between the Pension Act and the New Veterans Charter/Veterans Well-Being Act disability benefits where disparity has been from the outset at the fundamental core of the class action claim.

It remains our position that there is much to do in improving veterans' legislation so as to address the financial and wellness requirements of Canada's disabled veterans and their families. This is particularly so with respect to the pension-for-life provisions originally announced in December 2017 and emanating from Bill C-74, Part IV.

It is self-evident that only a circumscribed number of seriously disabled veterans and their survivors may benefit from the new legislation when compared to the level of entitlement available under the present New Veterans Charter/Veterans Well-being Act—some seriously disabled veterans are actually worse off. However, the greater majority of disabled veterans will not be materially impacted by the legislation in that the new benefits under these legislative and regulatory amendments will have limited applicability.

This fails to satisfy the prime minister's 2015 election commitment to address the inequities and injustices in the New Veterans Charter and continues to ignore the "elephant in the room" which has overshadowed this entire discussion.

As stated in our many submissions to Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and Parliament, the government has not met veterans' expectations with regard to this fundamental mandated commitment to "re-establish lifelong pensions" under the charter so as

to ensure that a comparable level of financial security is provided to all disabled veterans and their families over their life course. This financial disparity between the Pension Act and New Veterans Charter compensation has been fully validated by the recent Parliamentary Budget Office's report issued on Feb. 21, 2019, which clearly underlines this longstanding discrimination.

The National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada's legislative program for 2018, unanimously approved by all of our member-organizations at our annual general meeting in Toronto on Nov. 23, 2018, states our fundamental position in the following core recommendations:

- That VAC, working together with the relevant ministerial advisory groups and other veteran stakeholders, should think "outside the box" by jointly striving over time to create a comprehensive program model that would essentially treat all veterans with parallel disabilities in the same manner as to the application of benefits and wellness policies—thereby resulting in the elimination of artificial cut-off dates that arbitrarily distinguish veterans based on whether they were injured before or after 2006.

- That VAC needs to fully implement the Ministerial Policy Advisory Group recommendations presented to the minister and the Veterans Summit in October 2016, with particular emphasis on utilizing a combination of the best provisions from the Pension Act and the best provisions from the New Veterans Charter/Veterans Well-being Act, producing a form of lifetime pension in a much more realistic manner in order to secure the financial security for those veterans who need this form of monetary support through their lifetime.

It remained our hope through this period and more particularly the 2019 federal budget that

VAC would be prepared to consider changes to the legislation so as to make the pension for life provisions more inclusive prior to its formal implementation on April 1, 2019, and certainly prior to the October election pursuant to the specific recommendations and proposals contained in our 2018 legislative platform.

Given the reality of a federal election in the fall, a genuine opportunity still exists for a commitment to meaningful improvement to the legislation so as to eliminate the blatant discrimination suffered by disabled veterans since the enactment of the New Veterans Charter in 2006. The alienation of the veterans' community in an election year does not make for good politics, particularly given the perceived large swing vote of veterans to the Liberal Party in 2015, largely based on the prime minister's campaign promises.

It will be of significant interest to the veterans' community as to the positions to be adopted by the government and the opposition parties to remedy this longstanding injustice and inequity impacting Canada's disabled veterans and their families.

If the "one veteran-one standard" philosophy advocated by VAC has any meaning, this glaring disparity between the Pension Act and the New Veterans Charter/Veterans Well-being Act benefits for disabled veterans requires that the government seize the moment and satisfy the financial needs of Canadian veterans and their dependants. The new legislation has missed an opportunity to recognize that the longstanding social covenant between the Canadian people and the veterans' community demands nothing less.

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