

Which federal party will stand up for veterans in this election campaign?

As we enter the federal election campaign this fall, it will be of vital interest to the veterans' community as to the positions to be adopted by the government and the opposition parties to remedy the longstanding injustice and inequity impacting Canada's disabled veterans and their families.

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 formally implemented on April 1 of this year.

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 inadequacies and deficiencies 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 the 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.

In addition, given tumultuous events this year surrounding the conduct of the government in relation to the SNC-Lavalin affair resulting in the resignation of two prominent federal Cabinet ministers and the damning report of the federal Ethics Commissioner, together with the Vice-Admiral 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, which disparity has been from the outset at the fundamental core of the class action claim.

As further evidence of the Prime Minister's position on veterans' concerns, we would once again refer to the shocking and revealing exchange between young Canadian amputee veteran Brock Blaszczyk and the Prime Minister at a town hall meeting in Edmonton on January 31, 2018:

Brock Blaszczyk: I served in the Canadian Armed Forces for seven years, I deployed in Afghanistan back in 2009, until April 3, where I was obviously severely wounded by a roadside bomb or improvised explosive. As you can see, I've lost my left leg, I have 58% soft tissue loss and 88% nerve damage on my right leg. Back on August 24, 2015, you made the promise, and I'll quote it here: "No veteran will be forced to fight their own government for the support and compensation they have earned." Yet you are still currently in a legal battle with veterans regarding equal support and compensation to their peers. As you can tell, you know, we have two standard of veterans who fought in the same war, the ones prior to 2006 and the ones after 2006. There are two standards, one on the old Pension Act and one under this new lump-sum or soon to be lifetime pension option... Because honestly, Mr. Prime Minister, I was prepared to be injured in the line of duty when I joined the military – nobody forced me to join the military. I was prepared to be killed in action. What I wasn't prepared for, Mr. Prime Minister, is Canada turning its back on me. So which veteran was it that you were talking about?

PM: ...On a couple of elements you brought up: first of all, why are we still fighting against certain veterans' groups in court? Because they're asking for more than we are able to give right now...

It is fair to say that the Prime Minister's response produced serious outrage in the veterans' community, which was taken aback by his disdainful response to a severely disabled amputee veteran with respect to the government's financial willingness and capacity to meet the reasonable expectations of disabled veterans in Canada.

In this regard, it is essential to recognize that VAC has been substantially impacted by government budgetary constraints in implementing the Pension for Life and related benefits – producing half-measures and inadequate benefit components to overall veterans' legislation.

Notwithstanding the Prime Minister's protestations as to the ability of his government to finance appropriate veterans' benefits and programs, one has to ask the fundamental question: What has happened to the millions of dollars saved by Veterans Affairs Canada with the passing of tens of thousands of traditional veterans and early peacekeepers over recent years?

In this context, in relation to the basic issue as to the "affordability" of veterans' programs, the government has failed to acknowledge the impact on the overall VAC budget of the fact that the greater majority of traditional disabled veterans have passed on over the past several years, resulting in significant savings in VAC's budgetary funding requirements. With the continuing loss of this significant cohort of the veteran population, VAC is no longer required to pay pensions, allowances, health care benefits, treatment benefits, long-term care benefits, VIP et al for all of these disabled veterans.

In all fairness, it must be stated that, under the Harper government's regime, the veterans' community was shoddily treated vis-à-vis budgetary expenditures for veterans' benefits and programs – numerous VAC district offices were closed, front line staffing to assist veterans was dramatically reduced, and budgetary constraints led to a lack of appropriate action to enact necessary reforms to veterans' programs and entitlements. What remains to be seen is whether the new Conservative leader, Mr. Scheer, will now stand up and be counted during the upcoming election campaign to reverse these years of neglect and injustice initially perpetrated by his predecessor.

The National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada's legislative program for 2019, unanimously approved by all of our member-organizations at our annual general meeting in Toronto, 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 2019 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 NCVA's legislative platform.

Given the onset of the federal election campaign this 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.

Before casting their votes, veterans will be closely monitoring all federal parties as to which election platform makes a substantial commitment to addressing the shortfalls and inequities which continue to exist in veterans' legislation. In this regard, it must be remembered that there are almost 700,000 veterans in Canada today and, when family, friends and supporters are considered, this number of potential voters is not without significance, particularly in an election year which will, in all probability, result in a minority government.

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 in power after October 21, 2019 seize the moment and satisfy the financial needs of Canadian veterans and their dependants, and recognize that the longstanding social covenant between the Canadian people and the veterans' community demands nothing less.

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