

DATE: November 8, 2011	STATION: News 88.9
PROGRAM: Todd Veinotte – Afternoon News	LOCATION: Saint John, NB

VETERANS AFFAIRS PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS

Rick Mantle (NEWS 88.9): Good afternoon and welcome to the Afternoon News. Rick Mantle filling in for Todd Veinotte on this beautiful Tuesday.

Well, veterans right across this country are protesting against planned budget cuts and benefits. The National Council of Veteran Associations, representing 58 member organizations, has recently written to the Prime Minister to express its concerns about those reductions. Joining me on the phone is Brian Forbes, he is the Secretary General of the National Council of Veteran Associations. Good afternoon Brian, how are you?

Brian Forbes: I'm good Rick, it's good to be with you.

Rick: Good, good to have you with us. So, tell us about some of these cuts that are taking place.

Brian: Well Rick, we are very concerned as to the cuts that are occurring within Veterans Affairs and there's even more to this story than first reported. As you may have heard, the announcement had been that there would be a \$226 million cut to the budget, which initially was supposed to deal with the reduction in the population of, let's say, World War II and Korean veterans, but over the last couple of weeks, we have learned that there are also two other cuts that are being looked at very seriously, which are extremely concerning, one relates to what they call a 'strategic operational review,' which apparently will reduce staffing by hundreds of people within the Veterans Affairs administration and, secondly, the so-called 'debt reduction plan' that the Federal Government is operating right now will lead to another 5% to 10% cut, which could affect operations and, quite frankly, in our mind, could affect the service delivery to veterans very seriously.

Rick: Now, what's the Government's reasoning behind all of this?

Brian: Well, I think their initial thought with the demographic change, as you know unfortunately our World War II and Korean veterans are passing on, that they might be able to justify a reduction, but what they are missing of course, Rick, is that with the influx of the Afghan veterans and the casualties who have suffered in that conflict, we have now reached a point in the analysis where there is actually more modern day veterans approaching Veterans Affairs than traditional ones. The rationale of the Department is that they can administratively do this on a smaller budget and we feel that that is just not right.

Rick: So basically, they are saying “Look, there is less veterans and we’re going to cut back,” and what you’re saying is “that’s just not the case at all, I mean, there are many veterans.” Especially as you say with the ones coming from home places like Afghanistan.

Brian: Yes, and I think something that should be considered in all of this is that many of our allies, the Americans, the British, the Australians, for example, they have made declarations that all countries are fighting the deficit problem, an international problem, that they, particularly the Americans, just recently last month President Obama declared that there would be no cuts in the veterans budget for the United States... The British, the Australians have done the same because they obviously see this as something that is sacrosanct and you shouldn’t be dealing with cutting budgets to those veterans who have fought for their countries and have come back disabled. This, to us, is just absolutely unacceptable and we’d like to think Canada should be able to follow the lead of Allied countries.

Rick: Do we have any idea how many veterans there are currently in the country?

Brian: Well, the number that is used often is there are 700,000 veterans in total, with the definition of veteran being anyone who has been in the military over the last 50 years, but the figures we like to deal with relate to 150,000 traditional and Korean veterans who are sort of part of the World War II grouping and then the balance would be more of the modern day veterans who are now coming back having fought in Afghanistan and other military missions over the last 10 to 20 years.

Rick: Yeah and I mean something like a veteran isn’t going to disappear, there are always going to be veterans in this country.

Brian: Well, the thing we like to emphasize too is that if the Government is going to start talking about cutting back budgets and possibly freezing budgets for the future, what is really a concern and really the stark reality here Rick, is that there are things that still have to be done for veterans and they are going to require further money from the Federal Government. As you probably know, the new Veterans Charter was created about six years ago and there are many gaps and problems with this Charter that are going to need correcting and it’s been our position that, quite clearly, if there is going to be a budget freeze or budget cut back, the Government will not be able to fulfill its commitment to the modern day veteran who was looking for improvements in the new Veterans Charter. You know, this has become a very controversial subject with the modern day veteran and if the Government is going to, effectively, look at budget freezes or reductions, they won’t have the funds necessary to effectively make the New Veterans Charter what it should be. The veterans community feels that the Charter, of course, is a living document. That was the commitment that was given initially by the Government and I think the word I’ve used lately is, there is an awful lot of inertia around this living document.

Rick: I know you have written a letter to the Prime Minister, have you heard back from anyone yet on this?

Brian: Well, we have heard back, a very polite letter from the Prime Minister saying that he, of course, is seriously considering the matter and is now in consultation with the Minister of Veterans Affairs, we've had a number of meetings with the Minister, Mr. Blaney, who, as you know is a new Minister.

Rick: What does he have to say?

Brian: Well, he is mindful of the fact that, quite frankly, if there is going to be any kind of tampering with the budget, that he is going to be extremely restricted as to what he can do and we're hoping that he is able to take that argument to the hierarchy of the Government. Just to explain that, many of these reductions are now being negotiated with, what we call, the central agencies in Ottawa. For example, the Treasury Board and the Department of Finance. What's happening there is that each department of Government is coming in to justify that they don't need a cut or they can't afford a cut, so we are trying to give this Minister as much ammunition as possible so that he can go to the table and say, look, Veterans Affairs should be exempt from this particular valuation and we take the view that this is really quite unacceptable that the country is really attempting to fight its deficit problem on the backs of the veteran community.

Rick: Right. I would think that most Canadians are unhappy about this, I mean with Remembrance Day coming up right around the corner and to know that the veterans are basically having some of their services cut, really is unacceptable.

Brian: Well, I think you are noting that right across the country there has been an awful lot of criticism. We have actually put together a number of letters to the Members of Parliament, we are finding they are quite receptive. There has been an awful lot of criticism in the media and quite frankly I would suggest to you that most Canadians would feel that veterans should not be part of the fiscal reduction plan. Veterans are... there is a social or moral contract between the Canadian people and their veterans and they should not be part of some kind of financial evaluation.

Rick: Now, Brian can you tell us exactly... I mean, I know they are talking about cutting cash... what kind of programs would get cut from this if there is a reduction?

Brian: Well I think what we're seeing, or what we're being told at least, is that they are going to cut back on staffing by hundreds of people, all through the VAC administration and what that means is the quality of service delivery. Now Veterans Affairs has two statutes to administer now, Rick. They have to deal with the traditional veterans under the old Pension Act and they have to deal with the new veterans under the New Veterans Charter. What we're predicting is that if they cut back staffing, we're going to see delays, we are going to see problems with veterans getting service and, quite honestly, there appears to be even a suggestion that some programs are going to be looked at to see if they should be reduced. Now the Minister has sworn up and down

that he will not do that, he will not cut the benefits, but really our concern, having worked in this area for over 30 years, is that a lot depends on how the policies are administered, how generously they are administered or how restrictively they are administered and if you are trying to save a dollar and public servants are given a strict message from the hierarchy that they are trying to save a dollar, then it affects the entire attitude toward the policy that is being administered for a veteran. I think we're suggesting that it's one thing to assure us that veterans' benefits won't be touched but what about all these programs that have yet to be put in place to remedy the new Veterans Charter and there are still a number of things that the traditional veteran is concerned about... We have concerns about long-term care problems, we have concerns about our widows, the VIP Program for widows, there is an awful lot of inequities in those programs that require further funding. It's really becoming more than just what they are going to do with the current programs but how they are going to be straight jacketed as far as what they can do in the future if they continue this thinking.

Rick: How do we compare to other countries when it comes to our veterans?

Brian: Well, I think up to a certain point we have a reasonable program but I think what is missing at this stage is that the inertia that I talked about earlier between the veteran community that we represent and the government department known as Veterans Affairs Canada, where if we can identify problems there has generally been a fairly good response but I have to tell you that after working in this area for most of my life, the last couple of years, the response levels have been somewhat negative. I often think the departmental people are somewhat apathetic to our cause but there seems to be a lack of political will right now to actually respond to the concerns. Without getting into the details, as you are aware, there was a major study done on the new Veterans Charter which called for a number of refinements and improvements to the charter and those have only just been addressed in very small fashion. There has been very little done about it and we are very disappointed about that. I think in other countries, particularly the American response to their veterans, has been much more generous over the last couple of years. I think our government is hiding behind this budgetary constraints economic austerity policy that they are trying to give priority to and unfortunately our veterans are suffering as a result.

Rick: So, I assume you are going to continue to protest this?

Brian: Absolutely! We will continue to meet with the Prime Minister, meet with the Minister of Veterans Affairs. We are encouraging all of our member organizations to write to their local MP and effectively write letters to the editor, make these politicians aware that we are not prepared to accept this. We would even encourage your listeners to do the same if they feel strongly enough about it, I think writing to their local MP would probably be fairly effective.

Rick: You know, you mentioned... and I will ask you this very quickly... that in recent years, the last... whether it's been a year, two years... that you found them very unresponsive to you, do you think there is a reason why that is?

Brian: Well, I think to be fair to them, I think they feel that they are living in this world that suggests that they have to reduce the debt, they have to reduce the deficit of the country and they are taking the position that they cannot afford to be as generous as they traditionally have been but, quite frankly, I just don't think that has any application to the veterans' community. You know, the veteran has paid his debt to the country, he has gone to war, he has gone into conflicts and come back disabled and broken and I think we owe them a debt that we have yet to pay.

Rick: No question!

Brian: And what it comes down to, they are losing sight of the fact that this debt reduction plan that they are quite, sort of, keen on is going to encompass veterans. Other countries have seen the light, as I said earlier Rick, other countries have said "look, not veterans, you don't touch veterans! You can talk about all sort of programs but don't fool around with the veteran benefits and services." I think that's the message we want to get through to them now.

Rick: Have we heard any kind of a figure thrown out there that they may be cutting back with?

Brian: Well if you look at the numbers that I started with when I was describing it to you, the \$226 million, which they argue is just a reduction in benefits because of the loss of the veteran population from World War II and Korea...

Rick: ... but you say it's more than that.

Brian: It's more than that... The operational review, they feel, I've seen figures of 300 – 500 employees will be eliminated from Veterans Affairs administration across the country. Now they argue it will be by attrition and by administrative efficiencies will be built in but that language, as you know, is sort of buzz words when the Government is trying to cut back on things they make it appear they are going to be more efficient. That has yet to be proven. The major one though, the debt reduction plan, if you take the 5% to 10% which I'm sure you've heard is what they are using for all departments, you think 5% or 10% of this budget, you are talking a lot of cash. In fact, it becomes almost nonsensical because they... someone said to me the other day, 90% of the Veterans Affairs budget goes to benefits... Well, if you are cutting 5 – 10% somewhere and it's not benefits, you will have no staff left at all, which makes no sense.

Rick: Alright, listen Brian, it's been good talking to you and I'm glad you brought us up to date on all of this this afternoon.

Brian: Well, I appreciate that and I appreciate your interest in the subject Rick.

Rick: Ok, Brian, Take care.

That, of course, was Brian Forbes, the Secretary General of the National Council of Veteran Associations talking about the cut backs at Veterans Affairs.