

Oral Questions

claims policy, then it might be possible or necessary to refer such questions to the royal commission.

The fact is that there is a proposal to have policy changes evolve by a joint working group of chiefs. Meanwhile, we would expect the specific claims commission chaired by a prominent Canadian aboriginal to provide advice to government, not being constrained or restrained by specific criteria, on which we would base decisions with respect to specific claims.

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VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Stan Darling (Parry Sound—Muskoka): Madam Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Veterans Affairs. There has been an opposition charge in the House of Commons that the Department of Veterans Affairs for several years has allowed millions of dollars of its budget to go unspent.

The view has been expressed that the demands of merchant mariners could easily be financed out of this surplus. The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs of which I am a member has recently tabled its report supporting many of these demands.

Further, it cannot be denied that the merchant seamen made tremendous sacrifices during Canada's war effort which deserves both our recognition and gratitude.

Will the minister comment on the possibility of financing these demands out of the unspent portions of the departmental budget?

Hon. Gerald S. Merrithew (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Madam Speaker, the hon. member has been around here a long time and really understands that budget-making is a very imprecise science. When we try to make up those budgets a month or months ahead of time we have to estimate the level of demand for those services and the programs that we provide for our veterans.

I must tell him of course that we try to build in amounts and dollars for unforeseen circumstances and increased demand for services. In this case, sometimes there are moneys left over which have been budgeted for specific purposes.

Every department has, in some of its programs, lapsed funds. I might say that does not give us the right to spend those dollars in the way that the minister would like to spend them or indeed the government might spend them. There must be a legislative base for that and, in this case of course, there is no legislative base for providing those programs, at this time at least, that the merchant mariners want.

However, I can assure the hon. member that the government is taking it very, very seriously. We very much appreciate what they have done for their country and we will help them in the future, I hope.

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RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Mrs. Shirley Maheu (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville): Madam Speaker, my question is for the Minister of National Health and Welfare.

Accusations of racial bias are still commonplace at the Health Protection Branch of Health and Welfare. While the minister of multiculturalism is talking about racial harmony, serious problems are occurring inside another department.

Will the minister of health commit today to a serious investigation of these allegations? Will he promise to severely discipline any senior officials who have been found to systematically discriminate? I am not talking about harassment in response to Tuesday's question, I am talking about discrimination.

Hon. Pierre H. Cadieux (Minister of State (Fitness and Amateur Sport) and Minister of State (Youth) and Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Madam Speaker, as the hon. member knows, the government does not condone discrimination and there are ways and means within that particular department, Health and Welfare, to deal with those issues. I understand that is what is being done.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Shirley Maheu (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville): Madam Speaker, I have a supplementary for the same minister. About 10 per cent of the scientific staff at the Health Protection Branch are visible minorities, but fewer than 1 per cent are in management positions. Would the minister not agree that the best way to fight