

Old Age Security Act

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Good; I hear they are applauding even now. Maybe they would like this parliament to carry on a little longer so they could go to the government and say it should do something in this pension field; that is one way this parliament might be made to last.

I wish to support, without reservation, the request of the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary. His motion asks that the government give consideration to the introduction of an appropriate amendment. The hon. member for Thunder Bay says such an amendment will be forthcoming. I hope there will be no loss of time in this being done, and that when it is done there will be sufficient retroactivity in the regulations so that my hon. friend's constituency will be covered so far as his pension is concerned.

The hon. member for Thunder Bay sought to explain the situation and was afraid that at times he was confusing it. It can be confused, but I think it is relatively simple. At least, I shall try to make it that way. The point at issue with respect to the constituent of the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary comes up only in the case of a person who does not have the last ten years, before age 65, of residence in Canada and has to make up for any shortage of years in that last ten-year period by three times as many years during the period from age 18 to age 55. It just so happens that the act and the regulations, in providing for that shortfall of years between 55 and 65 to be made up by three times the number of years between 18 and 55, require as the legislation now reads, that any of those years between 18 and 55, if used for that make-up purpose, must be years of actual presence in Canada.

● (1740)

It seems to me, in view of the fact that in interpreting other parts of the legislation it has been possible to define residence in Canada in such a way that absence for certain specified purposes did not destroy that residence in Canada, it is grossly unfair that in this one instance it should be ruled that a man who was overseas as a veteran serving in the armed forces cannot count those years for the purpose of making up the shortage between the age of 55 and the age of 65.

The request is obviously one that should be met as quickly as possible. I understand that there are not a great many cases affected, but the law is wrong when it does an obvious injustice even to one person. I think it is particularly wrong when it does an injustice like this to a Canadian veteran, and I hope this matter will be resolved very quickly and that the next time the hon. member for Thunder Bay tells the story of old age pensions since 1908, there will be a few more chapters that will make the story even better.

Mr. Barnett J. Danson (York North): Mr. Speaker, these debates are never a waste of time and never without merit because there is no time when we really do not learn something. Today I learned something that I did not realize before. I knew that 1959 was a great vintage year for Bordeaux, and that 1965 was a great year for Burgundy; but I did not realize how great a year 1908 was for Winnipeg North Centre and for the House of Commons as a whole. That was indeed a vintage year because it started us along the right path toward pensions in this country.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

I think this is a particularly important afternoon because it is rare that in the House of Commons we come to grips with problems of individual Canadians. I believe we are fortunate as a nation to be so small in the sense that this place is not too big to bring forward the problems of an individual who has suffered injustice. For that we are grateful to the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary (Mr. Whittaker). I am also grateful to my colleague, the hon. member for Thunder Bay (Mr. Penner), who stated the case so well and in such detail that he left me with little more to say. However, it matters not if one talks out such a motion; the fact that it has been brought to the floor of the House and that the government is responding, as the minister has indicated, is the important thing, and it will be done with dispatch.

I think it is important that we do not get out of whack with regard to injustices in our society in individual cases. However, it does not mean that our society is wrong. I was sorry to hear the suggestion of the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary that this government does not care about veterans. I happen to be a veteran and I came out of the forces after five years of war. I do not know of another nation that has treated its veterans better than ours. As a result, the original legislation and legislation that has been passed recently by this government would indicate that there is no inequity or insensitivity toward veterans nor so far as pensions generally are concerned.

It was this government that brought the veterans legislation up to date and is continuing to do so. That is not insensitivity. It is this government that provided the old age security plan which is second to none anywhere in the world. I do not mean by that that it is enough. I agree with the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) that we must do more, and we shall do more, and no one will ever be satisfied in that respect.

In effect, it must be recognized that the government has given to senior citizens a guaranteed income and has given pensions to burnt out veterans—although I do not like the expression and the gratuitous way in which the pension is handled in some respects—and we have escalator clauses built in to protect them at least partially against the ravages of inflation. In none of these instances am I totally satisfied, but it is unfair to take a situation which is really not a normal one and accuse the government of insensitivity. The fact is that this government has not been insensitive, nor have Canadians been insensitive. Had we been insensitive, we would not have been in power as long as we have, certainly not with the support of hon. members opposite who, I am sure, share our concern and our interest in this respect.

There are fine differences between the terms "presence" and "residence" and these can be wildly misconstrued, as my colleague the hon. member for Thunder Bay has said. It is a little frustrating for those of us who are non-lawyers and think in ordinary terms. As for the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary, I do not know whether he is a lawyer, an apple-picker or a peach-picker, but I am sure that even if he were a lawyer he would be frustrated by it also, although he might understand it a little better.

We must have reasonable regulations, and I think our regulations are reasonable. As a matter of fact, the amendment that is causing difficulty here was brought in, not by