

National Defence Act Amendment

Mr. Herridge: I wish to make a few comments with respect to what I consider to be a certain amount of discrimination against the women who serve in our armed forces. My comments are based on conversations I have had with women serving in the navy, army and air force, as well as a number of other persons who are interested in this question either because of their interest in the armed forces or their interest in the question of non-discrimination because of colour, creed or sex. What I have to say, Mr. Chairman, is related directly to the principle and purpose of this bill because it is related to the efficient development of integration and to the maintenance of morale in the armed forces.

I know the minister has spoken on this question several times during the debate. I know the associate minister is also interested in doing all he can to maintain the morale of the armed forces. In that connection and in support of the argument I wish to make very briefly later, Mr. Chairman, I should like to quote from a statement made by the Prime Minister in this house on February 3 when he announced the appointment of the royal commission on the status of women:

• (5:30 p.m.)

The government has decided to establish a royal commission on the status of women.

The Chairman will be Mrs. John Bird of Ottawa. Other members of the commission will be announced when their appointments have been completed.

The royal commission will be asked to inquire into and report on the status of women in Canada and to recommend that steps might be taken by the federal government to ensure their equality with men in all aspects of Canadian society. Its findings will, of course, have to take into account the division of legislative powers between the federal and provincial governments under the constitution.

The commissioners will be free to look into such matters as they feel are relevant and in particular the following areas:

—Laws and practices under federal jurisdiction concerning the political rights of women;

—The present and potential role of women in the Canadian labour force, including the special problems of married women in employment and measures that might be taken under federal jurisdiction to help in meeting them;—

That includes the Department of National Defence.

—Measures that might be taken under federal jurisdiction to permit the better use of the skills and education of women, including the special re-training requirements of married women who wish to re-enter professional or skilled employment;—

[Mr. Bigg.]

That too applies to the Department of National Defence.

—Federal labour laws and regulations in their application to women;

—Laws, practices and policies concerning the employment and promotion of women in the federal civil service, by federal crown corporations and by federal agencies;—

That provision relates directly to the Department of National Defence.

—Federal taxation pertaining to women;

—Marriage and divorce;

—The position of women under the criminal law;

—Immigration and citizenship laws, policies and practices with respect to women.

That, Mr. Chairman, is the policy announced by the Prime Minister to which the Minister of Manpower and Immigration has given his endorsement on many occasions in this house, as well as in speeches across the country. He is particularly concerned with the question of discrimination on any ground whatever in this country, and I support both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Manpower and Immigration in their approach to this very important matter. I am bringing these matters to the attention of the committee, Mr. Chairman, because they have been brought to my attention.

The committee may be interested to know that a number of women serving in the armed forces have informed me that they consider there is a measure of discrimination in the fact that women are not permitted to be trained for combat service in peace keeping operations. I was rather surprised to find that that was the case. I did make inquiries of certain sections of our armed forces, but I found no direct representations have been made to the navy, army or air force women's sections in this regard.

However, it has been suggested that the government should consider the policy adopted by the state of Israel and other countries whereby women have proven to be an effective arm of the combat forces of the country in question. I might say that in this respect there is a precedent in Canadian history. Anyone who knows the history of this country is aware that in the early days men and women fought together to defend this country from the invader and the enemy.

I am pleased to see that the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of National Health and Welfare is showing some interest in this question. I mention it here because it has been brought to my attention, and I always try to represent the views of persons in my