

National Defence Act Amendment

I think there is a point in favour of having this indefinite period available to offer servicemen because it does give them the feeling of security and continuity that they would like to have so far as their chosen career is concerned.

Mr. Harkness: Mr. Chairman, I do not think that the example the minister has given about short service commissions is a good one so far as the enlistment of men is concerned. The very term "short service commission" denotes that the commission is granted for a short period only.

Originally when short service commissions were granted the presumption was that these men would be released in most cases at the end of the term which was ordinarily five years with a short service commission. It has always been understood—this has been the regular custom particularly in the case of N.C.O.s—that when the period arrived to re-engage and these men wished to re-engage, then they would be re-engaged. I do not think there has been any uncertainty, let us say, in the minds of the enlisted men, particularly the N.C.O.s who were chiefly the ones re-engaged, about their ability to re-engage. Therefore I cannot see any advantage in this method. In view of its very obvious potential dangers, I still hope that the minister might be prepared to strike out this provision and revert to the former situation.

Mr. Hellyer: Mr. Chairman, I am not as concerned about the potential dangers as my hon. friend. I also feel that, the staff having recommended that we have the legal authority to implement this policy if it is deemed to be in the interests of the service to do so, I should therefore seek parliamentary authority to so implement it. I have often been accused of not taking advice. I must admit that in this case, as in many other cases, I got conflicting advice. But the consensus of the military staff, those who are responsible for the organization of the forces at the present time, is that they would like to have this authority so that the policy can be implemented if it is considered by them and by the department to be in the best interests of the forces.

Mr. Groos: Mr. Chairman, if I may add a few words in this connection may I say that I understand the dangers the hon. member for Calgary North has outlined. However, certainly so far as the naval service is concerned the engagement period has been changed many times over the years. In my early days

a total engagement period of 21 years—I believe it is now 20 years—was required to qualify for a pension. The period of 21 years was divided into two sections, the first of 12 years and the second of nine. I believe the division then became seven-seven-seven. Then it was five-five-five-five, and I believe that now there is a three-years initial engagement period.

This further change is being sought now and personally I do not object to this departure. As I think all of us in this house agree, those of us at least who have been in the services at any time, morale is all-important. Morale varies in the services very much with the pressures of civilian life that are brought to bear upon servicemen. Regardless of the period for which a person is serving, I think he regards himself as being chained to the service for the rest of that period, and automatically bad morale sets in. The advantage of this clause is that it will make the defence department much more responsive to the changes in civilian life that occur from time to time, and I think that this is a good move.

Mr. Churchill: Mr. Chairman, now that we are discussing these matters of great importance I hope the committee will realize that some of the matters that the pundits have told us have been repeated over and over again have really not been dealt with effectively in this house because we have not had the time to do so. This is one such instance. Here is a specific change in the act for which the minister has given no satisfactory explanation.

The minister has told us that if advantage is taken of the indefinite enlistment arrangement or if circumstances arise where a large number of men are going to give six months' notice and this would disrupt the service, the Department of National Defence would then take appropriate action. I think that is a very bad legacy to leave to the minister's successor. As of Tuesday night the minister will have the bill approved by the guillotine and the juggernaut, with the assistance of his friends to the left of me, and he will then be free to go to some other position leaving the mess to be cleaned up by somebody else. I think the minister should put the matter into better shape. Why saddle another minister of national defence with a bad policy?

The minister has said that he sometimes accepts advice. I wish he would give us instances which show he does. He has had advice, as the hon. member for Calgary North pointed out, from three men of experience and