

them with a motion and that we would dispose of that motion. If it is to be otherwise, I would like to be informed.

Mr. Lewis: Madam Speaker, the House will know that the government has been making every effort to move this bill forward in order to deal with this serious situation. The minister was recognized immediately before Question Period. As the Minister of Veterans Affairs, he wished to bring to the attention of the House the difficulties that we have with the safety and service to veterans.

• (1520)

I appreciate that my hon. friend technically may be correct, as he often is. In this case there was an effort by the minister to see if the House would agree, under the circumstances, to sit through lunch.

There are often cases in this place where there can be agreement because of the tone and the seriousness of the subject that is being debated. One might ask—and I would ask at this time—if there might not be a disposition in the House to recognize the minister in view of the very important part that he will play in this debate and so that members opposite will know what is the position of the Minister of Veterans Affairs. Members opposite may wish to respond and at the end of his remarks, question him in that 10-minute question period.

I would ask if there might not be unanimous consent for the minister to deliver his remarks.

Mr. Gauthier: Madam Speaker, I rose on the point of order because I thought it was a good point of order to be taken up.

I do agree with the minister that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has a contribution to make to this debate. We would like to hear him. We are not obstructing his right to speak in the House. I just do not want it to be a precedent. I would like to see the House strictly adhere to rules so that we do have order in this place.

In this case we have no objection to the minister speaking at this time.

Ms. Mitchell: Madam Speaker, this party would agree to the hon. minister speaking at this time.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Champagne): It is with pleasure that the Chair does recognize the hon. Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Government Orders

Hon. Gerald S. Merrithew (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Madam Speaker, I wish to extend to both opposition parties my appreciation. I feel very strongly about what we are doing here today.

I do think I can make a contribution because it is my employees who are affected in this and, of course, what kind of impact this legislation will have on the people we serve, the veterans of Canada.

I thank very much the opposition parties for their co-operation in this regard.

I know full well that no one likes to go on strike. Such action is taken only as a last resort. I also know that no government likes to end a legal strike with back to work legislation. It, too, is a last resort and one that can only be employed when national interests, above those of the right of the employees concerned to withdraw their services, must prevail.

That, indeed, is the situation that has been reached in the Department of Veterans Affairs. The health and safety of our veteran clients is now threatened.

Before going further I should like to set the stage by saying a word or two about the department of which I have the honour to be minister because I believe this will give a contextual framework for what I have to say later.

I know from the letters I receive and from the discussions I have with members of all parties in the House that no department of the government has more dedicated employees than has Veterans Affairs Canada.

It is a department pointed to with pride by the Public Service of Canada for the quality of service it gives to those who serve Canada so valiantly in wartime. The department is a family and normally a very happy family dedicated to this purpose and the values of the department are clear to all.

Second only to the veterans we serve we place the highest importance on seeing our employees treated fairly. I think members of this House will understand, given what I have just said, my great regret that our members of the Hospital Services Group felt compelled to go on strike. I also regret that we, as a government, now feel compelled, with the co-operation of this House, to order them to go back to work. This will require putting in place a process that would, within a reasonable period of time, see an independent third party, first to assist and then to resolve if necessary, the