

Pension Act and Other Acts

This is why the veterans have come to us and said: Can you not look after those people who do not measure up and who cannot bring their standard of living up to that of labour. They admit that some of their number have done so well that they have not even applied for their pensions. Some have done very well indeed. In every walk of life there are giants, mentally and physically, who can survive even the rigours of a Japanese prisoner of war camp. But the representatives of the group are realistic enough to know that one must not take account only of the very few who do not need help from a grateful Canadian people. So they have come to us and said: Will you not give us the benefit of the doubt in certain cases. We have done so on many occasions with respect to other veterans, as I mentioned yesterday.

The Hong Kong veterans asked to be given the benefit of the doubt with respect to complaints of premature aging, cardiac conditions and arthritis. They say they can bring forward medical evidence to support their claims. I do not think there is need to labour the point. Everyone in this chamber would agree that it is not good for a man who has a weak heart to spend three and a half years in a prison camp. This is a classic example of a case where the benefit of the doubt rule might well be applied. These people have made an heroic attempt for 27 years to put themselves on the road back. They come forward now and ask for a little more help. I think we should give them the benefit of the doubt as requested.

I shall resume my seat, now, and end my participation in the debate. Let us keep an open mind toward these people and give them all the help we can.

Mr. Arnold Peters (Timiskaming): Mr. Speaker, granting these increases in the form of an escalator clause based on the current increase in the cost of living rather than at a low fixed rate as previously contained in some of our legislation is to be commended. We agree we should be making provision for special difficulties encountered by veterans who were prisoners of war and who may now be suffering from arthritis or heart disease related to privations which they then endured. The inevitable end for some of them is near so we are not being overly generous.

• (1700)

As we approach an election I keep thinking of the argument that has been used, not only by this government but by previous governments, that if we are to provide pensions and allowances they must remain at a very low level since the country would not agree to pay the kind of pension that was originally envisaged to put the war veteran pensioners on a par with a sweeper in the civil service. As many hon. members have indicated, this level has now risen to a reasonably respectable one, and since it is now higher than a mere subsistence level we have to find another way of justifying the low pensions that we pay. Hon. members will recall that the Woods Commission reported that those with multiple disabilities should receive an amount that was three and a half times what was originally suggested as the basic pension rate. Only recently members of the government said that this was too high, having figured it out in dollars and cents, and that it could not be justified.

Although the increase was not nearly as generous as Commissioner Woods would have liked, the legislation has now been in effect for about a year and to my knowledge there has been no complaint that the veterans are receiving undue consideration from the Parliament of Canada. Neither have I heard anyone say that the amounts we are paying are overly generous in terms of the compensation that a country as rich in resources and wealth as Canada could afford to pay those who made the kind of sacrifice they did. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I am quite pleased that we were able to increase the cost of living escalator clause relating to both pensions and allowances to bring it in line with the cost of living increase. It had always seemed to me that we adopted an unrealistic escalator, but we have now corrected this situation.

I am reminded of labour organizations that argue against the implementation of wage controls. They say, and rightly so, that wage controls are fair for some, but for those in the lower categories they are very unfair. If you freeze the pension of a person on low income so it becomes stabilized at a level considerably below the standard of living achieved by the average person in this nation, then you put these people at a considerable disadvantage, which I do not think is in the interests of Canadians.

Finally, may I say that I hope the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Laing) will stay in the department for a considerable length of time. I would appreciate it if he would change his mind and run again, though I do not know how that would sit with some of my colleagues from the minister's province. Nevertheless, he is the first minister of the department who, on his own initiative said he would do this, he would do that, he would do the other, and I think the veterans of this country will be very pleased that the order in council will be implemented and that those changes that the bill neglected to make will in fact be made. I am sure the veterans of this country will congratulate him on the forward step that he has taken, and some of them will remember Art Laing long after he has left this place.

Motion agreed to and bill read the third time and passed.

PROCEEDINGS ON ADJOURNMENT MOTION

SUBJECT MATTER OF QUESTIONS TO BE DEBATED

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger): Order. It being after five o'clock it is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 40, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. Macquarrie), public works; the hon. member for Regina East (Mr. Burton), supply and services; the hon. member for Yorkton-Melville (Mr. Nystrom), agriculture.

Mr. Jerome: Mr. Speaker, in arranging the schedule of business for private member's hour this afternoon, it had been hoped that the hon. member for Vancouver-Kings-