

*Government Orders*

report examination results as soon as possible. Similar measures would save a lot of time, since many witnesses have testified that medical visits and examinations account for a large proportion of undue delays, something about which the government has not yet summoned the courage to intervene.

I can understand that the medical profession is subject to quotas, that it is free to decide how to run its business, and that it is a very delicate matter to ask a professional to fit more patients into his or her appointment book. At least, those are the excuses we heard from the Liberal members on the committee. However, the question we must ask ourselves is this: When we decided to send our young people to the front, on the eve of a promising future, to put their lives on the line to defend their country, did we ask them if they had appointments? No. We did not ask their permission. These young people decided to serve in the military because of a sense of duty, a sense of honour, a sense of urgency. They were there when their country needed them; they did not make anyone wait. It is not the physicians we should be concerned about in this case. We should only be concerned with the person who is aging and cannot afford to go through the regular channels. Our society must recognize that, on the basis of the sacrifices they made, we owe our veterans the privilege of coming first in our health care system. I hope that physicians will hear this reasoned and heartfelt appeal.

• (1240)

We also rose in this House at report stage to try and obtain guarantees for veterans, in this respect. We suggested ways of accommodating concerns expressed regarding concentration of powers in the hands of the minister. We suggested a more transparent approach to selecting the members of the new board, one which would require that the provinces and the standing committee be consulted before any member is selected. But this solution was rejected by the Liberal majority, who did not want this greater degree of openness and democracy.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence and Veterans Affairs mixed everything up, claiming that our initiative would weigh down the processing of applications. It would not. We know very well that appointments are for ten year terms. Moreover, the bill includes transitional provisions that should ensure a smooth transition to the new Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

This refusal by the federal government to consult the provinces and the standing committee on appointments to the board shows how little it cares about the provinces and about openness. Under the circumstances, the government can well be accused of wanting to centralize more than ever and of ignoring the provinces. It can well be accused of wanting to put its own

benefit and that of its friends before the public interest by taking advantage of public issues in this way.

Bill C-67 fits in perfectly with such bills as Bill C-65, Bill C-76 or Bill C-43 on lobbyists. This bill reflects the federal government's will to centralize. No wonder it is concerned. Out of concern for efficiency, having failed to remedy the inadequacies of the Canadian Pension Commission, it is now concentrating the whole first level decision making process in the hands of the minister, rebuilding a two tiered board, the membership of which will come from political appointments made without any consultations, and concentrating legal assistance at the level of reviews or appeals before the new Veterans Review and Appeal Board. These services are being transferred to the department so they will be easier to control. Now that is typical of this government.

There is a great deal to criticize in this bill. However, the need for change tends to override any criticism, at least that is the message we get from veterans associations that did not openly oppose the bill. In their representations we read a desire to reduce delays, even if this meant making some concessions in terms of services or opening the door to arbitrary decisions.

That is the main reason why we will support Bill C-67 on third reading. However, as is the case with the veterans associations, our support is mingled with a great deal of concern and dissatisfaction. I feel we could have done far better. I think we could have considered, first and foremost, the interests of those who risked their lives and defended our freedom at the cost of physical and mental suffering. At a time when we are given this opportunity to commemorate our veterans, that we have failed to do so is unfortunate, disturbing and indeed distressing.

Keeping our commitments to them is even more important than expressing our gratitude. We must not forget that the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War will probably be the last time those who experienced these historical events come together to participate in these ceremonies.

There are still about 3,000 World War I veterans, 505,000 veterans of World War II, now averaging 73 years of age, and we also have 20,000 veterans of the Korean War.

• (1245)

I realize that military personnel who participated in UN peacekeeping operations will apply for disability pensions, but not in the same numbers as after the Second World War.

That is why we must deal with the backlog in processing pension applications as soon as possible. With our support on third reading, I would nevertheless urge the government to reaffirm its commitment to our veterans. It must give them the assurance that giving applicants for disability pensions the benefit of the doubt is not just an empty phrase. The new section