

Soldier Settlers

I think there is more to be taken out of the progressive increase in the number of cases of debts liquidated each year than the mere fact that although these old veterans are getting a little bit older, most of them living in Alberta and Saskatchewan, I am told, have in recent years had rather better than average crops with better than average prices, and they have responded by helping themselves.

I am quite frank to say that on a couple of occasions when the numbers involved were greater; when the stability of Canadian agriculture was infinitely inferior to the position at the present time; when there was a great demand all across the country for handouts of various kinds, I supported this motion as it stood. I also supported it in the veterans' affairs committee, as was mentioned a moment ago, at least to the extent of receiving the recommendation and reporting it to the government—I think I was chairman of the committee at the time—on the ground that it was uneconomic to send good money after bad.

But I would remind the house that members of the government have a responsibility—and surely those in the opposition would not quarrel with this statement—to husband public money even more carefully than they would their own. I accept the figures which were given to us tonight of a reduction of approximately \$400,000 in the amount for last year as against a contribution from the government of less than half that amount. I think perhaps there is a good deal to be said for a good business policy of orderly reduction of debt by assistance.

I reject out of hand the suggestion in the speech of the hon. member for Battle River (Mr. Fair) tonight for the first time, that these people had been badly treated, that they have been subjected to injustice. I think the hon. gentleman was more unfair and a bit more bitter in his presentation tonight than he had ever been before. It surprised me a little, particularly when he is getting so near to the end of the road and when so many pleasant things have been said to him about keeping this matter before the attention of the house. He has been fairly successful. To put it in his own words and in the words of others, this campaign of his has been so successful that I was surprised a little that he should be digging back into the past to claim any credit for his opinion of former officials, rather than to accept the fact that his voice has been listened to, as all voices are listened to, when that which they propose has merit.

The hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Bryce) also had something to say. I know him; I know his sympathetic instincts. I know the

tendency of the Scot to be sentimental. I know as well as any man in this house the difficulty of keeping the sentimental approach away from any matter dealing with veterans, and particularly of veterans who are ageing and under financial or physical stress. In his remarks he indicated that he had accepted the idea that there was something unjust about it. The injustice of what has happened to these people in individual cases is often the result of their differences of opinion with administrators in the field, or it is the result of the prevailing prices which existed at the time of purchase, or it is the result of bad advice which was given and taken by the members of the then department.

Mr. Fair: If I might come to the hon. gentleman's assistance, the injustice I mentioned was the price these people had to pay for land, livestock and equipment, which was two or three times what it should have been at that particular time. That is the injustice.

Mr. Mutch: I was coming to that. I just said that it had sometimes been related to prices, and I was on the point of saying that in certain circumstances it has long been recognized that too high prices were paid on good land and a great deal of inferior land was, in other circumstances, procured for and sold to soldier settlers.

I am not going to dig back into the political history of the early twenties to remind the house of some of the situations which arose then. I am not denying what some of my hon. friends have said tonight, that there were factors which were recognized in the first instance by some of those who, if they did not perpetrate the mistakes, permitted them to happen during their administration, and by those who succeeded them. One must remember when we talk loosely of injustice that 30 per cent of that indebtedness was written off at one crack, and that many others who were industrious and who were good operators were given a further opportunity under the inducement that was mentioned of a fifty-fifty break on their indebtedness if they were able to meet the offer, and thousands of them did meet it.

Therefore I am a little surprised at my hon. friends coming to the house now at the close of the fifth year of a rather unusual experiment in accomplishing the very thing which they desire to happen, and not showing at least the same kind of appreciation in public which the hon. member for Royal (Mr. Brooks) mentioned a moment ago when he spoke about his realization that the urgency had gone out of some of these problems. I did not take it that he meant that all the bad cases had been dealt with; neither did I take