

Veterans Affairs Committee Report

pressure. There are 148 recommendations, as I said before, and 10 veterans' groups and the Legion itself cannot agree even among themselves on all the recommendations which should receive top priority.

To be fair to these organizations, I think there is general agreement in four areas: the pension appeal board, multiple disabilities, the basic rate, and Hong Kong veterans. In my address I have not catalogued the 148 recommendations, but can the country, and hopefully the opposition and the veterans, see the magnitude of the task facing the government? I urge the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Dubé) to play it cool. I ask him not to seek political advantage. I ask him not to give in to the pressures which are being brought to bear upon him. I ask him not to be rushed into hasty action.

Mr. Nesbitt: Such as in four years.

Mr. Cullen: My friend will have an opportunity to speak later. I did not know he would want to butt in at this time. I am trying to speak on behalf of the veterans of this country. A report that the Legion calls "meticulous in detail" has earned the right to careful appraisal.

I salute the veterans groups, and I salute some members of the opposition as well as some members of my own party who keep the pressure on because it must be done. The Woods report cannot be permitted to gather dust. I venture to say that there is not one copy of this splendid report in the hands of the Department of Veterans Affairs that is gathering dust. I will bet that they are dogeared, read and re-read, considered and re-considered.

I do not have the foggiest notion right now what recommendations will be accepted. I do not intend either to speak on all of them, but I do feel that many recommendations should be automatic, and I cite the following examples. First of all I wish to mention routine decisions. Why should hearings and a mountain of paper work be required to decide that a pension should continue to be paid while a child of a pensioner continues to attend school?

The second point concerns hearings. If a veteran is to receive a hearing, then let us not make it a hearing in name only. It is ludicrous and unfair to place a pension claim before a tribunal without the veteran or his representative being present, and to call that a hearing.

I should also like to say a word on multiple disabilities. Very early in the fall, as an extremely green backbencher—having tangled for a few minutes with the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis) this afternoon I realize that perhaps I am greener than I thought—and without knowing all of the recommendations of the Woods committee report, I asked the following question of the Minister of Veterans Affairs:

Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Minister of Veterans Affairs. While awaiting the completion of the Woods committee report, would the hon. gentleman consider allowing an interim increase, possibly beyond 100 per cent, to triple and quadruple amputees?

I can appreciate the fact that the minister may not wish to deal in a piecemeal way with the recommendations of the Woods Committee report and that he will probably bring in his report in the form of a white paper. However, of all the recommendations, this is surely one in connection with which the minister might wish to give serious consideration to amending the legislation straight away. When one considers the situation of a man who has lost one leg and receives a 70 per cent disability pension and of another man who has lost two legs who receives a 100 per cent pension, one realizes that the loss of one leg is considered to be a 70 per cent disability but the loss of a second leg is only an additional 30 per cent disability. I think this is ridiculous and very unfair to the triple and quadruple amputees.

The fourth point concerns representation. One point to which I should probably have referred earlier in the course of my remarks, and to which I meant to refer earlier, is the question of representation and hearings before the pension commission. At the present time there is an agency charged with the responsibility of defending a veterans case for a pension. This is very commendable, the right kind of thinking and a great approach. The Legion itself calls it a "lofty ideal". But it is a role which has been restricted by the legislation which requires this agency to present both sides of the argument when submitting a case to the pension commission. The Woods committee suggested, and I concur, that a strong lawyer client relationship should exist between the veterans' bureau and the applicant. The committee recommends that the bureau operate as a separate and independent agency charged only with the task of representing the applicant. Who can disagree with that logic?