

*Pension Act and Other Acts*

brief presented by the national association wherein they ask for an immediate 10 per cent increase in pension for those who suffered indignity, starvation, humility, inhumanity and mental anguish in the war. They have reason to make this simple request. I might say that all members of the committee, government and opposition alike, were sympathetic to the request by this association. The departmental officials were present, heard the representations and made note of them. I hope they are also sympathetic.

This morning the Hong Kong veterans made similar representations. The committee afforded them the same reception. All members were sympathetic toward them. The brief is in the hands of the government. I trust the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Laing) will take note of their representations which are reasonable, especially in view of the fact that a comparatively small number who suffered at the hands of the Japanese are still alive today. Most members of the committee agreed that the sum of money that would be involved would be in the neighbourhood of approximately half a million dollars. Surely, we cannot afford to do less than that for these men who gave so much. I wish to put on record that the Hong Kong prisoners of war asked that such conditions as arthritis, coronary ailments, mental breakdown and so on be considered automatically a result of service under those terrible conditions they suffered during the war.

Your Honour has allowed me to wander a bit. I appreciate that. I will now return to the substance of the bill before us. We are talking about a 3.6 per cent increase in pensions and allowances and all the benefits in veterans' legislation. Let us take a look at what this means to a 100 per cent pensioner. The basic rate of pension is \$3,504. Based on 3.6 per cent, that works out to \$126 and some odd cents per year. Broken down, this means they will receive \$10.50 a month. This is a good thing and we do not object to it. However, let us not over-praise the government for what it is doing. This is long overdue.

As was pointed out last night, what is really needed is to bring the basic rate into line with the inflation that has taken place over the years and parity with the unskilled labourer in the federal public service. If that had been done, the veteran would be satisfied with the 3.6 per cent increase and would not even have asked for an increase at this time. Had that been done, and the escalation formula attached to the new basic rate in line with the present wages for unskilled labour, I am sure we would have received this bill with far more favour, and so would the veterans organizations. I shall not mention this aspect any further except to say that when we praise the government for the action it has taken we should remember that it is only veterans drawing the 100 per cent pension who will be receiving the \$10 or \$15 a month. And not many of them are getting the 100 per cent pension. Many are getting less. Of course, the percentage of benefit decreases in proportion to the reduction in the amount of pension they are getting. So the crying need is for an increase in the basic rate of pension and if the government is really sincere about helping the veteran, this is the direction in which we should move. As my hon. friend from Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall) has pointed out, the veterans organizations have requested such action time and time again through their representatives. I am afraid

[Mr. Knowles (Norfolk-Haldimand).]

their briefs are gathering dust in the pigeonholes of the department. Let us dust them off; let us do something meaningful for those who did so much when their services were needed.

• (1650)

Everyone in the House agrees that what is being done for the veterans needs to be done and we support the measure wholeheartedly. There is nothing the matter with the bill except that it does not go far enough. We have tried to draw attention to its deficiencies and we have tried to make some impression, not only in the House but in committee on the officials of the department concerned and on the mind of the minister in the hope that heed would be paid to some of our representations. Let us hope this is not the last of the bills to aid our veterans. Let us hope it is only a beginning. It has been suggested that the government only takes action of this kind when it is considering going to the people for a mandate. Why not take action some time when there is not an election in prospect? If we are serious about aiding those who gave so much of themselves for their country when they were needed, then surely we can look after them when they are entering the twilight of their lives and when their own need is greatest.

**Mr. F. J. Bigg (Pembina):** I wish to join other members of the House in welcoming this bill. We have received an assurance from the minister, and I, for one, am very pleased about the attitude he has taken toward this important matter in assuring us that the basic rate will in fact be looked into and that a benchmark commensurate with the rate of pay of labour on Parliament Hill will be put into the statute once and for all. Surely, this is not being over-generous. And if we are looking for a standard which can be rationalized, may I say that I have never met anyone in the years I have been in parliament who ever raised any objection when this particular benchmark was mentioned.

The Hong Kong veterans were before us this morning in the committee. They are very happy, generally speaking, about the recent improvement in their lot, but, as they say themselves, time is running out on them. Some 20 per cent of them are still fully employed, which is a miracle in its way, when one realizes that these men endured three and a half years of the most frightful treatment as prisoners of war in the hands of the Japanese. They have made heroic attempts to remain self-reliant and self-supporting. As one might have expected, they became tremendously close as a group. They have stuck together, and they worry a great deal about those who have not been able to make it. They say, and I will take their figures, that there are 25 per cent of the survivors, some 1,150 in round figures, who are still unable to support themselves completely. Then again, as everybody knows, a strong-willed man is often able to put up with the rigors of life but in these cases it frequently happens that hardships fall upon the family, wives and children who do not enjoy the standard of living which most Canadians can get for themselves today. The best they can look forward to is a standard of living below that of the labouring man on Parliament Hill.