

Veterans Affairs

(a) the Government appoint a Committee composed of officials from both the Government and veterans' associations to review and update those recommendations of the Woods Committee which have not been implemented and to identify, study and make recommendations about the anomalies which still exist in the treatment of veterans and their survivors.

The Hon. Member who stood up to defend and support the Government by making arguments against that kind of committee being established is misreading the situation, in my opinion. The reason the Canadian Legion and I myself have come to the conclusion that such a committee should be established is, quite frankly, that the Government has given no indication that it intends to act on those recommendations. If veterans' associations were involved in recommending active implementation of his recommendations, then perhaps finally there will be some justice brought to this particular situation. After at least 15 years of study, consideration, thought, letter-writing and everything else, but never any concrete action, I think it is time there was some action.

● (1700)

Mr. W. Kenneth Robinson (Etobicoke-Lakeshore): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to have the opportunity of speaking in a debate in the House of Commons that is concerned about veterans and their dependants. I can speak with a certain degree of integrity, I hope, because I served in the forces at the tail end of World War II. Although I was not in the war very long, I was in it long enough to get my wings. I have served in the militia for over 30 years since that time. I have expressed my concern for veterans, their loved ones and their needs over many years.

The Royal Canadian Legion has done and still does a great deal for veterans and so do other veterans' organizations. As a matter of fact, I have four branches of the Legion in my constituency, Branch No. 1, Branch No. 101, Branch No. 210 and Branch No. 217, to which I belong. I have belonged to Branch 217 for 35 years since coming out of the service and I have been concerned about veterans' problems for many years during that period of time.

In the eyes of other countries, Canada is in the forefront. We have a most enviable record in the ongoing development of veterans' programs and benefits. It is our duty as Parliamentarians to uphold that reputation. I believe the Government has done this over the years, regardless which Government may have been in power at the time. Our Governments have always been concerned about veterans.

I am informed that the average age of veterans today is nudging 63 years. Our present challenge is to nurture programs that reflect the needs of an aging veterans' population. I suggest that instead of looking forward, we are, in effect, looking backward in this motion. All of the considerations have already been given and the facts are known.

I share the expressed opinion of other Members in their assessment of the Senate report entitled "They Served, We Care". Obviously the Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science did not restrict itself to narrow issues. It ranged over a great swath of questions. Many witnesses were called. The Committee clearly felt that it had performed a creditable

task. The Committee ensured widespread circulation of a specially produced publication.

In arguing against the establishment of a special committee, I suggest that we have only to look at the publication itself "They Served, We Care". This committee has covered everything as far as I can see. There is no necessity at this time to recreate the wheel by setting up another committee.

Here are the recommendations of a committee that went to so much time and trouble. This committee found apparent inequities in the treatment of two groups, divorced spouses and prisoners of war. This committee, instead of stating its opinion, recommended that someone else look at the issues. The facts are known, Mr. Speaker. Like them or not, the decisions have been made and it is time to stop the merry-go-round. I will get back to these particular issues in my remarks, but first I want to take a look at some of the other recommendations in the report.

One recommendation had been acted upon before the report's ink was dry showing that Parliament's concerns are invariably answered in the normal course of events. Another recommendation called for an end to delays in processing applications. This has always been a concern of the Veterans Affairs Committee, on which I have been serving for many years. We have considered time and time again the length of time required in order to process a pension application. Here is another recommendation that has been made redundant. The facts are self-evident. At the end of December, 1981, it took 334 days to process a disability pension application at the first level. Twelve months later the processing time had been slashed to an average of 99.1 days. Last month it had dipped to less than 80 days, and we hope that time will be reduced even further in the future.

The Commission has to draw information from outside sources. Of necessity, this takes between 60 and 90 days. Therefore, there is no longer any backlog with regard to pension applications at the first level. I am sure that all Members applaud this dramatic improvement. When I remember the clamour that used to come from the Conservative benches about the size of the backlog, I can only take their present silence on the subject as an indication of admiration for the job that has been done and for the reduction in the length of time in processing these cases.

Some of the other recommendations deal with the War Veterans Allowance Act. Members will know that officials of the Department of Veterans Affairs are undertaking a comprehensive study of this legislation, including the matters raised in the Senate report.

What I am pointing out is that veterans have many advocates and their views are heard. Just last week the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), the dean of critics on veterans' issues, congratulated the Minister on his achievements since he took over the portfolio. There is progress all the time.

What about recommendation No. 7 which is the basis of this debate? I will not talk about the implementation or non-