

Veterans Affairs

his point of view, but in fairness I think I have to recognize, first, the seconder of the motion. If I do so, I do not think I can forget the hon. member for Rimouski (Mr. Allard) if he should seek the floor.

Mr. William Knowles (Norfolk-Haldimand): Mr. Speaker, first I want to commend Your Honour for your fairness in the ruling just made. I feel honoured to be able to second this motion, not because I support the principles of the New Democratic Party necessarily but because on this particular occasion I support the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles). As he has already stated, all members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs treat matters such as this in a completely non-partisan way, so it is not strange that I should be seconding this motion. I also seconded the motion because ever since June 12, members from all opposition parties have pursued the same objective, namely, to have these recommendations of the standing committee placed in legislative form and put before this House at least for first reading and printing of the bill so that we can see what action the government intends to take.

I am pleased to participate, also, because I follow in the footsteps of another member of our party, my colleague the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall), who has made a contribution to veterans affairs second to none in this House. In addition, on many occasions he has lent a hand in assisting, in a very personal way, veterans from all across the country. Also, he has spoken many times on veterans affairs matters in this House.

Our main purpose today is to get the cabinet to reach some decision. We want the government to accept the recommendations and present a bill to the House. We feel new legislation is required. We do not believe it is good enough simply to incorporate a recommendation in the Pension Act, because in that way these people would not receive the benefit of the recommendations of the committee; the benefit would be lumped in with the disability pension which they now receive and they would not benefit in the way members of the committee intended. The intent of the report is that ex-prisoners of war receive a benefit in addition to whatever disability payment they may now receive.

I wish to make it quite clear, also, that the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald), who was here for the opening of the debate and has momentarily left the House, is not personally the object of our criticism; he is not in any way under attack. The only possible way we could fault him is for inability to convince his cabinet colleagues to do what the committee asks. We know where the minister stands. He is a veteran who carries the permanent scars of war, a reminder of the hellishness of war, if you like, and the stresses experienced by men who participated in war either in action or as prisoner of war camps.

I think he is symbolic of veterans across this land and of the crying need for the government and every Canadian to do a little bit to make the lot of the veteran more worth while so that he might be given some relief in his time of suffering. We believe the minister not only because of what I have said but also because of his forthright remarks in respect of these recommendations. I shall deal with that matter further in my remarks. What we are concerned

about is lack of positive action by the cabinet. There is a long list of evasive and non-answers by the government House leader and, on occasion, by the minister.

I am sure that in cabinet the minister has the support of the Minister of National Revenue (Mr. Cullen). Surely he supports the minister, because he was a very valued member of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. It was he who was able to bring about consensus in the committee. Members of the opposition perhaps wanted a little more than was granted, but they accepted what he proposed. The chairman of the standing committee, the hon. member for Mercier (Mr. Boulanger), has performed yeoman service in the committee. I know that if he had the opportunity to express his opinion he would support this recommendation. The hon. member for Welland (Mr. Railton) has always been a staunch supporter of the causes of veterans, as well as the hon. member for St. Boniface (Mr. Guay), the government whip. The hon. member for St. Boniface should use his whip on the backs of some of the recalcitrant cabinet ministers so that we might have some action.

This is more than merely an effort to persuade cabinet. I think what we are saying is that the will of parliament should prevail, and not necessarily the will or the power of government. The will of parliament in a democratic way, as represented by all members from all sides of the House, should prevail. If the democratic process is to mean anything at all, the government must listen when members speak with one voice.

I wish to review very briefly some of the background in respect of veterans over the years. On Remembrance Day we repeat over and over again the words "we will remember". I ask whether this pledge has been kept. I ask, also, whether the words "veneration" or "valour" figure very largely in today's vocabulary. When we remember that a quarter of a century has elapsed between today and the last great war, and that more than half a century has elapsed between today and the first great war, one can realize that some people are a little prone to forget what we are talking about when we say "we remember". Some members on the government side also seem to have forgotten this.

● (1600)

How have we dealt with the human cost of war? In the case of men who died, have we given adequate pensions to their widows and children? One of the recommendations we are asking the government to implement indicates that we are not satisfied with the treatment accorded to widows. Have we been fair to the thousands who served and came back alive, to the prisoners of war? Many returned with wounds and disabilities which constitute lifelong handicaps; others accepted risks and bore their share of hardship and deprivation which is inseparable from war. As citizens of the Canadian nation, they gave much. How have they been paid? How did they expect to be paid? Here we have an opportunity to make up for some of the sins of omission of which perhaps we have been guilty. I do not say that the government is totally to blame for that; I think that citizens in all parts of the country are prone to forget the great debt we owe to our veterans.