

Government Orders

branches and the department, and that ultimate power will lie in the hands of the minister.

Despite all of these criticisms, these worries, there is one glaring reality which will not change, that is the time required to process claims.

I would like to point out to the House how long these lags are. We all know that, from the time we are born, we are all relentlessly getting closer to our deaths, and that, once we reach a respectable age, we all realize how little time we have left. How can we tolerate that the applications submitted by veterans, whose average age is 73, get bogged down in the bureaucracy, that veterans have to wait ages and ages while their health deteriorates and their standard of living suffers?

I would like to give you two examples. In its February 23 issue, *Le Journal de Québec* ran a story on Yvon Bureau, a former member of the Royal 22nd Regiment based in Valcartier. On April 17, 1964, while on a peacekeeping mission in Cyprus, he was injured. After waiting 30 years, the government finally decided that he was entitled to a pension. It took them 30 years. They maintained that his condition was not related to his service, to the accident he had in the line of duty. They even had him consult a psychiatrist. And it was only recently, after the government obtained opinions from many different experts, that his right to a pension was acknowledged. But he is not finished waiting yet, because he was not granted benefits for those 30 years he was waiting. He will have to take his case to all of the avenues of appeal, if not to the Federal Court, in order to obtain full and true justice.

There are many other similar cases. For example, Frances Crummer, a very worthy person who was willing to submit a paper to the standing committee reviewing this bill. Mrs. Crummer, the widow of a veteran, has stopped counting the years she and her late husband had to put up with the pension system and all of the paperwork they have done. She went through three applications, one after the other: the initial application, the application for review and the application for appeal. She went to the hearings of the review board and of the assessment board. After going through nine decisions, two amended decisions, one decision in the form of a letter, eleven appeals and six hearings, Mrs. Crummer still has not given up, but that does not deter her from harshly criticizing this bill.

After seeing such examples, how can we claim that the current bill will prevent similar situations? In one case, the file was studied for 30 years and, in the other, it took 12 decisions for the applicant to gain some ground. In my opinion, the problem is simple: there is either a lack of will to resolve problems or, simply put, people are making sure that they continue to have work by taking their sweet time closing files. If this is the problem, it is not only scandalous, but absurd.

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The review of pensions by two consulting firms and the department in 1992 at a cost of \$670,565 concluded that it could take 18 months for a first level decision and up to 36 months, if there were complications. Given this information, you will understand our desire from the outset to be involved as much as we could in a bill that would identify the system's shortcomings and propose corrective action to remedy them.

This is not to be, however. We note that the shortcomings are not clearly identified, that the proposed merging of agencies in favour of the department and the new board will serve much more to consolidate the minister's authority, that these measures limit services to veterans and, finally, that it is not clear that all these changes will accelerate the process.

Is this not, perhaps, a backhanded manoeuvre by the Minister of Finance and his budget to save a few bucks on the backs of the veterans? Is it not, perhaps, instead a less than subtle way to find positions for the party faithful? I can assure you that these questions are foremost in the minds of anyone who examines the bill for what it is and not for what it claims to be. Naturally, we have received no answer to this sort of question. There is, however, one thing we know for sure and that is that the bill will do nothing to reduce the time required to settle veterans' applications, because it fails to deal with the basic problems.

These problems, as the review clearly indicated, are: duplication and cumbersome operation, the slowness in implementing computerized communications and, most of all, the acknowledgement, in practice, of the veterans' right to priority treatment at the medical specialist's office. Nothing in the bill deals with these problems. Our approach in reviewing Bill C-67 was guided by our desire to help reduce delays and to ease as much as possible the concerns expressed by both veterans' associations and experts.

That is what we tried to do during clause by clause consideration and at the report stage before the House. Our proposals in this regard were rejected, and that is unfortunate. We, however, still feel that special measures should apply to the physicians and medical experts who become involved in the award application assessment process.

For example, whenever the minister exercises his power to order an applicant or pensioner to undergo a medical examination, he should require that the designated medical expert give priority to his request by conducting the examination and reporting results as expeditiously as possible, as is done for any review or appeal application to the veterans board.

When the board seeks the advice of an independent medical expert, it should instruct this medical expert to give the applicant or appellant the required examinations without delay and