

*The Budget*

will ensure that service continues to be provided to the veteran in need.

Of course normal day to day, week to week house cleaning will go on. The lawns will be mowed, the snow will be shovelled, the ice will be cleared from the steps, the laundry will be done. The Veterans Independence Program will continue to go from strength to strength.

As Doug Fisher pointed out, we have extended the program. He stated:

DVA has chosen to cut payments from the VIP program only for—annual house cleaning. Better than narrowing eligibility or capping client numbers.

That is exactly right.

This government's record on behalf of veterans can be found both in our increasing budgets and in the praise I receive across the country from veterans who think DVA, as they call it, is giving them their best ever service.

Veterans in other countries—I have talked to a lot of them, and I suggest the Opposition should talk to the others—are always saying that Canada has the best veterans' programs in the world. That is the way it is now, and that it is the way we are going to keep it.

It was repeated by Doug Fisher that we provide the best programs, the most enlightened legislation, the best benefit programs for veterans in the whole wide world, and we are going to improve on that as well.

• (1720)

**Mr. Len Hopkins (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke):** Madam Speaker, let us leave no doubt about the minister's final statements. The veterans' programs in Canada are the best in the world, but the veterans' programs in Canada have always been the best in the world. The hon. member mentioned only now and in the future. I want to point out to him that it was Liberal governments in the history of this country that brought in the best veterans' legislation in the world for all Canadians, and to a large extent the veterans are benefiting from those to this day.

I want to ask the minister a very serious question. I know he has a very humanitarian feeling toward these things. I have discussed them with him many times. Is there any movement on the part of the government to extend the Veterans Independence Program to the spouses of veterans? As the minister knows, that is a big question in the minds of veterans. They worry about

what is going to happen to their partners after they leave.

Is there any movement on that? Does the minister see any future move on the part of the government to extend that program to spouses of veterans?

**Mr. Merrithew:** Madam Speaker, I do want to comment and I will respond to the hon. member's question. Before I do, I just want to say that my predecessor, the Hon. George Hees, introduced many, many new programs that were not there when the Liberals were in power prior to 1984. I just want to mention that for the record.

This government improved disability pensions. We significantly increased prisoner of war allowances. We expanded the Veterans Independence Program to make Canada Service Only vets eligible. We reinstated pensions for remarried spouses. We negotiated with the provinces for additional beds all across Canada, and health care benefits have increased 136 per cent since we came to power in 1984.

I know the hon. member is also very interested, coming from a military riding, with regard to the VIP going to spouses. That has been a concern of the Legion and other veterans' groups such as the National Council. It is a matter that I feel very strongly about. It is under consideration by the department now. Hopefully, we will have some news about that particular program in the future.

**Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina—Lumsden):** Madam Speaker, at the beginning of his speech the minister was complaining about certain remarks. As far as I know, no member in this House, on any side, made the kinds of remarks he attributed to certain people, either inside or outside this House.

The second point I want to make to the hon. minister is that in my experience here for nearly 22 years, and from my reading of the activities of Parliament, the only department in the entire ministry of any government since the First World War that is non-political and non-partisan is the Department of Veterans Affairs. That is the only one. Every time an improvement has been made, opposition parties of all political stripes have applauded the government of the day. There is no argument about that.

In the case of the incomes test for veterans' board and lodging, for a single veteran the incomes test is \$9,840 a year. That is \$2,000 below the income which the government accepts as the poverty line. In the case of a married