• (1140)

I do not think it is enough to go about saying that people are worse off in the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia or Africa, because we are not able to change the pension plans in those countries. However, we can do something here and we have a responsibility and an obligation to get on with it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Debate.

Mr. Bloomfield: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Chair is sorry but the time for questions and comments has expired.

Hon. W. Bennett Campbell (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate in the House today. To begin with, I believe that one should first examine the point which has been raised by the Hon. Member opposite with respect to her contention that the Government has delayed the introduction of legislation to fulfil its promise to alleviate the difficulties experienced by Canada's single elderly pensioners.

I hear the word "delay" being used quite often. I think we should begin by examining the accomplishments of the Government with respect to pension reform and I think one could then conclude that it is simply not the case that there has been a delay. Contrary to what has been indicated, when examining the events of the past couple of years it becomes very clear that not only has action been taken but it has been consistent with the fulfilment of the Government's 1980 promise of pension reform.

In order to look at the history of the pension reform process, one must go back to the early part of 1981 when, shortly after the election, the National Pension Conference was convened. That conference brought together all of the players in the pension system including business, labour, government and women's groups. These players came together for the first time to look at the real problems of our pension system and to begin moving toward a national consensus on reform.

The Government followed up on the momentum established by this conference with the 1982 publication of the green paper entitled *Better Pensions for Canadians*. It should be noted that the proposals contained in that paper included the Government's position *vis-à-vis* income for the single elderly pensioner. I quote from the statement of that position:

—the situation of these single pensioners will be improved as soon as resources permit.

That same paper included a proposal to establish a parliamentary committee to undertake widespread public consultation on the issues surrounding pension reform. As the Hon. Member opposite knows, having served on that committee, that special committee on pension reform was formed on March 1, 1983. In other words, the promise to establish the committee was made in December, 1982 and fulfilled in March, 1983.

As Hon. Members know, the committee members undertook an amazing responsibility. They undertook a study of all of the proposals contained in the Government's paper on pension reform. These not only included suggestions for changes to the public pension system of Old Age Security and Canada Pension but also included suggestions for changes to the private pension sector and changes to reflect inflation protection, the special situation of women and pensions and the financial issues associated with those proposals.

The committee heard hundreds of witnesses and scrutinized briefs from all sectors of Canadian society. All areas of vital concern to Canadians were covered thoroughly in its final report. Recommendations concerning each issue were submitted to the Government of Canada in December, 1983, and I might note that under its terms of reference the committee had an assigned reporting date of December 31, 1983. There was certainly no delay on the part of the parliamentary committee.

The Government gave its response to the parliamentary task force only two months later. This response was contained in the Budget Speech of February 15, 1984, made by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Lalonde). In other words, within two months the Government announced its intentions to introduce legislation to improve the financial situation of single low-income pensioners. This announcement did not contain generalized promises. It contained specific proposals to increase the guaranteed income supplement for single pensioners by $25 a month in July of 1984 and another $25 a month in December of 1984.

The same Budget also specified that the guaranteed income supplement program would be further amended to guarantee recipients of partial Old Age Security pensions the same minimum income guaranteed under the GIS program for other Canadians. I might point out to Hon. Members that the parliamentary task force had recommended further study of ways to assist these partial pensioners. The Government chose, however, not to study this issue further but instead to announce its intentions to introduce this proposal at the same time as it introduced the two-stage $50 increase in the supplement for single pensioners.

Let us examine in more detail the $50 increase in the guaranteed income supplement single rate. This increase will benefit current low-income single pensioners, widowed pensioners receiving the spouse's allowance and one-pensioner couples, about 750,000 pensioners in all. As well, some 25,000 persons whose incomes were just slightly too high to qualify for the supplement will now be entitled to receive part of the increase.

This proposed increase is by no means the first step taken to ensure income adequacy for low-income Old Age Security pensioners. In 1979, the guaranteed income supplement was increased by $20 per pensioner household. In 1980, a further increase of $35 was provided to each pensioner household. However, even though single pensioners received the full benefit of the $20 and $35 increases, for those pensioners it was not enough. Single GIS recipients, three-quarters of whom are women, were still not guaranteed an income sufficient to meet their basic needs.