

pension commission's reviews of these applications is not due to the move to Prince Edward Island.

There are many other concerns, one of which is with respect to the Veterans Land Act. We feel that some changes will have to be made in this act with regard to spouses.

There are also very serious problems now faced by ex-prisoners of war. When our committee meets in the near future we will be asking for a review of the prisoner of war compensation with a view to increasing the basic rates. We know today that any former prisoner of war who suffered prolonged incarceration is undergoing serious health problems.

I understand there have been some delays with regard to purchasing land in Prince Edward Island. There are also delays in construction. I hope that these delays will not affect veterans and veterans' organizations across Canada.

Unfortunately, the acting minister is not in the House. I think it is unfortunate that he was not informed that this motion would be dealt with today. I do not even see his parliamentary secretary in the chamber and I do not know who will be answering on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I hope that the government will have the minister here, or at least his parliamentary secretary, to answer some of our concerns about the move to Prince Edward Island.

Mr. Tom McMillan (Hillsborough): Mr. Speaker, I had not originally intended to speak on this motion, but I was so moved by the eloquence of my colleagues, and by the importance of the subject, that I felt compelled to do so very briefly, with your indulgence, sir, especially in view of the fact that my riding includes Charlottetown, the community to which the Department of Veterans Affairs is to be relocated from the city of Ottawa.

I have a great deal of sympathy with many of the causes which the hon. member for Leeds-Grenville (Mr. Cossitt) pursues. But in this case I feel obligated to disagree with the sentiment behind his particular motion because, with all due respect to him, I believe it is a poorly disguised effort to oppose the principle of the relocation of the department from Ottawa to my riding and to my province. It is a sentiment with which I could not disagree more heartily.

Various people who oppose the relocation of the department to Charlottetown do so for a number of reasons. I think some of those reasons are not at all well founded. I would like to address that aspect in my remarks.

Before doing so, however, I want to stress the good, strong, and positive reasons why that department and, in fact, other departments should be relocated from Ottawa to other centres, including my region of the country. The first reason that comes to mind, and not necessarily the most important one, is the benefits to be derived from spreading the government, as an industry, as much as possible, across the country. We quite frequently think of government as being necessarily located in Ottawa-Hull or the national capital region, so-called, or, for that matter, central Canada. Yet there is nothing etched in stone which requires the federal government, that is, major

departments and agencies thereof, to be located in all cases either in Ottawa or the national capital region.

Government, as an industry, produces many benefits apart from services. It produces jobs and creates wealth. It causes dollars to ripple through the economy. There is no single reason why those benefits should be concentrated exclusively in central Canada. In terms of national unity, it serves the country as a whole to have other parts of Canada, not just central Canada, receive the benefits from government as an industry.

● (1730)

Second, I think it is an advantage to have government located as close as possible to the people it serves. We should remind ourselves that not all Canadians are located in Ontario and Quebec. Canadians in western Canada and in the Atlantic provinces are as loyal to this country as those located in central Canada and are, therefore, as deserving of having services provided as conveniently as possible in the area in which they reside.

I recoil every time I see this government move to withdraw parts of major agencies like Canadian National from regions such as mine and I am horrified at the implications for national unity. It means that more and more of the federal government's presence in Canada is removed from regions like Atlantic Canada. Just as I oppose the withdrawal of Canadian National and other Crown agencies from the Atlantic provinces and from parts of the west, so also do I oppose any steps taken to prevent relocations of the kind we are speaking about now.

Decentralization as a principle of government is good when it can be accommodated without any loss of benefits to the people the departments are intended to serve.

There is no evidence the move of the Department of Veterans Affairs from Ottawa to Charlottetown is causing a single veteran in this country to be deprived of services provided by that department.

The fact is that complicated and sophisticated systems of communication are now so advanced that public servants can process applications and adjudicate them in ways that are not affected at all by geography. Whether a department is located in Charlottetown, the Yukon, Ottawa or in Timbuktu has no bearing on the level of services or the speed with which the services can be provided.

The third reason I am not very enthusiastic about this motion is that the federal government, as an institution, must be as visible as possible to all Canadians. That conforms to my remarks of a few moments ago about agencies such as Canadian National withdrawing from regions such as my own. Every time a CN office closes in the Atlantic region, every time Air Canada withdraws a service from my region, every time the federal government consolidates its operations in key centres and major metropolitan areas at the expense of small communities like Charlottetown, people in those communities become more estranged from the federal government.