

Senate and House of Commons Act

Mr. Randolph Harding (Kootenay West): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with a great deal of interest today to the debate on Bill C-242. I would like to say at the outset that I appreciate the views of those members who have spoken both for and against the bill. I thought I would wait a while before taking part in the debate, but I feel it will last a little longer than this evening and I expect to be absent from Ottawa tomorrow. I wish to express my views on this legislation in the event that there is a vote while I am not here.

I am opposed to the legislation. I fully endorse the views of the leader of our party, the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis). I feel he has fully outlined the position which I can take. However, I would like to give my views on several aspects of the proposed increases and I will take this opportunity to do so. At the same time, I would like to make some general remarks about the role of Members of Parliament under our parliamentary system. I believe that this legislation should not be on any priority list. It certainly is not on mine.

About four months ago we passed legislation raising the basic old age security pension by 42 cents per month, or \$5.04 per year. When I look back at that increase I find it impossible to justify an \$8,000 increase for Members of Parliament. There are many other groups in our society which should have priority over and above Senators and Members of Parliament, when it comes to spending from the public purse. Despite recent improvements in some categories, many of our old age pensioners, veterans and retired workers still live at or near the poverty line.

I would like to very briefly and concisely outline my objections to the legislation with which we are dealing. I feel that the increase is excessive—a 50 per cent increase over the salary that members are now receiving. Second, I take very strong exception to the increase in the non-taxable allowance. The proposal is to increase it from \$6,000 to \$8,000. The third thing I object to is the retroactive provision in the bill. Very few pieces of legislation come before this House which make salaries retroactive for a number of months. This legislation will pay the members back to October, 1970, when this session started.

Another point, Mr. Speaker, is that members have to be credible when putting forth their views. We have massive unemployment in Canada, one of the highest rates of unemployment in the history of our nation. This summer there will be many thousands of students out of work. Guidelines have been laid down by the government and endorsed by the members of this House. For the past two or three years we have heard the message that there must not be more than a 6 per cent increase in wages so far as labour groups are concerned. This year we heard the message that wage increases must be kept to 4 per cent or 4½ per cent. The House of Commons, in one swoop, will raise the wages of its members by approximately 50 per cent.

I realize that the last increase for members was in 1963, eight years ago. Some hon. members have made a pretty good case for an increase being made at this time. There is certainly a case for a number of members to

[Mr. Deachman.]

receive an increase to cover various types of expenditures. I can think of members who come from scattered ridings whose expenditures over the year are far higher than those who live close to Ottawa or in an urban area. Further consideration should be given to members in this category. If they are to do a job for their constituents, they need money to get around the constituency in order to see and hear the problems. This is very difficult if much of their salary is spent for travel or other excessive expenses by those who live in these rural areas.

There are one or two points I would like to leave with the members of this House. I feel this method of raising the salaries of members is something we should not tolerate very much longer. Some members will be outlining what should be done to change the present set-up. We have heard a number of suggestions. I shall make another one. Members of Parliament should receive an adequate salary based on the job they do. I do not think that anyone here or in the constituencies would object to that. However, I firmly believe that it should not be left to periodic voting on an increase, and frequently great embarrassment to members of the various parties who take part in the debates and vote for or against salary increases.

The job of a Member of Parliament should be evaluated. A benchmark should be set, in the same way that benchmarks are set in the civil service. There has never been a proper evaluation of the job and work of a Member of Parliament. This is what a committee should do. An independent committee should evaluate the work done by a Member of Parliament.

An hon. Member: Beaupré did.

• (9:20 p.m.)

Mr. Harding: Beaupré did a partial job. We have recently been tussling with a similar problem in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. There was a tremendous amount of debate when we were trying to find a proper benchmark as far as the Auditor General of Canada was concerned. The committee members finally came up with a solution. There is no reason why a similar evaluation could not be carried out as far as the members of this House and Senators are concerned. It might not be an easy task. We would have to take into consideration every facet of the job a Member of Parliament does and then compare it with closely related jobs in the civil service. If we cannot find such a job in the civil service we should look for one in private industry which parallels the work we do here. Find the job, find what the going rate of pay is and fix it at that level. Then, I believe, as civil servants get increases every two years there could be step by step increases for Members of Parliament and the problem would be dealt with. This is a proposal which I pass on to the government with the recommendation that serious consideration be given to carrying out an evaluation of this type.

There is one further point I wish to make before I sit down. It seems to me that the most important job an MP can do in Ottawa is to police legislation and carry