

*National Defence Act Amendment*

What possible excuse is there for harking back to the day—and I mean no pun here—when, for example, the hon. member for Calgary North (Mr. Harkness) was minister of national defence, as has been done more than once in this house and elsewhere? Is it intended to prove that he was not a good minister? What is the point of that? Having used his name as an example, and it is only one example, I owe it to him to acknowledge to the house that from my personal knowledge, regardless of whatever has been said or implied in this house, the hon. member for Calgary North when he was minister in fact enjoyed the general respect of the officers and men of the armed forces for the job he was doing, and nothing can take that away from him. I venture to say again that, whatever is said or implied here, the same respect is generally shared today by the present minister.

If I can continue in somewhat the same vein for a moment, let me ask who would presume amongst us to question subtly the motives of that other westerner, the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert)? Of course there is no need for me to labour on his behalf since he has earned his place in this house and in this debate many times over by his unique experience in the service of Canada both in peace and in war. Therefore it pains me to hear us resorting to excesses in debate both here and elsewhere, and I implore hon. members both inside and outside the house to use the restraint which a matter of this importance deserves. I know this is not going to be easy, and little wonder, because a matter such as the unification of the forces which deals with long established and honourable institutions and is surrounded with such indefinite but nevertheless very real factors such as tradition, esprit de corps, morale and so forth, tends to make ordinary human emotions explode. When one adds to this the undoubted fact that into this emotionally charged field one is thrusting servicemen and ex-servicemen who, God bless them, are not used to losing and who do not intend to start now, then one has the makings of a real knock-down and drag-out battle.

Is this really what will serve our nation best? I suggest that there comes a time, and that time is now close at hand, when we must decide whether in the excitement of the immediate battle and in the excesses of the moment we are not endangering the very thing which in the long run we all wish to preserve. I am sure hon. members will agree

that this is now a very real dilemma. I venture to say that every hon. member here and every person who has taken sides outside the house wishes to see the armed forces of Canada continue strong, useful and, most important, in good heart. What each one of us has to decide for himself is whether by prolonging this debate we are helping to achieve these things, and I for one do not think we are. It does not take much imagination to see what the inevitable results of delay and uncertainty could be, and I say it is a tribute to the qualities of Canadian servicemen that, after all that has happened, morale, enlistments and re-enlistments are as high as they are, and from what I have been able to find out from my own sources they are not at all bad. As I see it, this debate is in danger of becoming a "yes it is, no it isn't" type of debate, if indeed it has not done so already.

Are we now engaged in a time-consuming exercise in futility which could drag on for weeks and weeks, and if so will not the innocent victims of parliament be the armed services? The uncertainty under which they labour has been with us, one way or another, for long enough. Thousands upon thousands of pages of written words are a matter of record, and hundreds of thousands of spoken words have been devoted to the subject.

● (4:20 p.m.)

To be realistic, there may still be some legitimate questions to be answered and this is to be expected when there is almost no precedent for what we are undertaking. Firm answers, in my opinion, too often represent immovable positions, and in stepping into almost the unknown as we are doing this would be dangerous indeed. However, to be realistic also, it can hardly be argued there is much hope now of changing anyone's point of view on this matter. We obviously differ amongst ourselves on the wisdom of the government's action in bringing this matter before parliament, but it can hardly be denied with any justice that it is their right to do so and to do so in the manner in which it has been done. The government has the responsibility and they have followed the procedure entrenched in 400 years of parliamentary practice, which is a pretty good tradition in itself if I may say so.

The government has put its life on the line to back up its judgment and its responsibility. This is not a threat, it is a fact of parliamentary life. This fact sometimes needs explaining, if not inside the house then outside it. I certainly have no quarrel, and I emphasize