

Veterans' Pensions

welcome the opportunity that the House has today to put it through all stages and see that it is written into law very shortly.

What we like about the bill, as I say, is the ending of that 50-year reign of the 48 per cent rule. What it provided has been that where a veteran was on a disability pension of 48 per cent or more, the widow has been entitled to a full widow's pension under the Pension Act. But if the veteran's disability pension was below 48 per cent, there has been no pension whatsoever for the widow.

I suppose there are some readers of *Hansard* who will wonder how we arrived at the odd figure of 48 per cent. The reason we arrived at it is that the original stipulation was that it be 50 per cent; but then we have another rule which says that all pensions be paid in even figures of 35 per cent, 40 per cent, 45 per cent and 50 per cent. A pension of 47 per cent is paid at 45 and a pension of 48 per cent is paid at 50, and that is how 48 per cent got into the language of this legislation.

To many of us it has seemed grossly unfair that one widow whose husband had been at 50 per cent gets the full widow's pension, whereas a widow next door whose husband had been at 45 per cent does not get it. The minister used to give us a rationale as to why it should stay that way. I am glad for his sake that he does not have to give that defence any more. I am glad for his sake that he can now speak with pride of the fact that he is bringing in this legislation to do this for the widows of veterans.

I think one of the reasons we have reached this point is that with the passage of time the veterans themselves are becoming older and more of them see the prospect of their days coming to an end and their leaving widows. Since most veterans who are on disability pensions are on pensions below the 48 per cent level, they have become much more concerned in the last decade or so than they used to be about this provision. It has moved up just about to the top of the legislative changes for which the Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans organizations have been asking. When we are handing around credits today, I think we should give a good deal of credit to the various veterans' organizations who have pressed for these provisions.

What is happening is that a 50-year regime is being corrected and from here on pensions will be paid to widows of veterans where the veteran's disability pension was below 48 per cent, but of course not below 5 per cent. We still have a cutoff at the 5 per cent figure.

I might as well come right away to the feature in this bill which I do not like. I was not surprised that the hon. member for Victoria did not point it out because it is the same provision which was in his bill of last December 6, Bill C-28. That is the provision under which this glorious new regime will be staged in over a period of six and a half years.

As the minister said in his speech, if this bill becomes law, come October 1 about 15,000 widows will qualify for pensions under it. But it is going to take another six and a half years for the other 11,000 widows to qualify because, in effect, the

threshold point is being brought down this fall from 48 per cent to 38 per cent; but then you have to wait until next spring for it to be brought down a little bit further, and so on down the line, and it will take until April 1, 1987, before all the widows of veterans whose pensions were below 48 per cent will get the benefit of this legislation.

I hope the hon. member for Victoria will not mind—he said some things about me, so I will say something nice about him—if I say that when he brought in his bill last December, he said to me that he was sorry about that provision and that he dared to hope it would not take long before it could be changed. I say the same thing now to my friend, the minister across the way. I know that he is a fighter for veterans in the cabinet. He has to fight all the time. I am sure he did not accept this without a struggle, and I hope he will carry on that struggle.

This House has been used to my asking questions about veterans affairs at least every week, and I suppose that many members think that when this bill is passed, there will be no more questions. Oh, oh, let us see! The next chance I will get, I guess, will be on Thursday to ask the minister when he will bring in an amendment to cut out this six and a half year stage. I am glad to see him nodding his head, and I think he is really on my side. To ask those widows who, according to the terms of the bill are being declared to be eligible, to wait in some cases six months, a year and a half, two and a half years or six and a half years, should not be done. This Parliament cannot do that without bowing its head in shame.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles: I can tell the minister that I have already drafted an amendment which I shall move when we get to Committee of the Whole, which will read as follows:

That Bill C-40 be amended on page 11 by deleting therefrom lines 14 to 31 inclusive.

An hon. Member: It is out of order.

Mr. Knowles: It is not out of order, do not tell me that. In the House of Commons we might not be able to move certain things, but we can vote against things, and we have the right to vote against those lines being included. If we strike out those lines, then a previous provision in the bill would bring it all into effect on October 1 of this year.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles: Like the hon. member for Victoria, I regret that it has not been made retroactive to April 1, the same date he had in Bill C-28; but if we cannot get that, at least this right that we are now establishing after 50 years should not be held off for a six and a half year period, or for one and a half, two and a half or three and a half years, as the case may be. As I say, I know how things happen around here. I know that if we were to deny this bill because we do not like something in it, we would be irresponsible. This is what the cabinet has