

*Veterans Affairs*

Senate report rely quite heavily, in their arguments, on the report of the Committee set up to survey the organization and work of the Canadian Pension Commission, which in abbreviated forum is called the Woods Committee.

● (1650)

In defence of the Government the previous speaker suggested that the Minister of Veterans Affairs have always listened to the needs of veterans. I think he is absolutely right, and surprisingly frank and straightforward when he says that. He is absolutely correct when he says that they have listened. In this particular case they have been listening since 1968 and have probably listened since 1965. When they saw the size of the problem at that time they implemented the usual Liberal strategy of referring it to a commission rather than dealing with it.

They did that in 1965 and the Woods Committee digested the reference for a period of three years until 1968, some 15 years ago, when the Woods Committee report was issued.

The Government then listened from 1968 to 1981, when even senators became impatient, which is somewhat remarkable and perhaps even encouraging. They decided to study the Woods report and issued their report entitled "They Served, We Care" in 1981, I believe. The Government has been listening, reading and considering the Senate report since it was issued in October, 1981, I believe.

The Senate report covered a number of areas in addition to the specific area that was referred to in the motion of the Hon. Member for Red Deer. The primary issue referred to in the motion deals with how a divorced spouse may be treated under the existing pension legislation. It is rather a serious question and I find it difficult to understand why the Government is being so slow and hesitant to improve the conditions of those individuals.

I am sure that other Members have letters, as I do, from women in Canada who are badly treated under the existing provisions of this particular piece of legislation. I know that the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), who has been very actively involved in the development of veterans legislation, receives numerous letters from veterans across Canada. He brought one such letter to my attention in reference to this particular motion. It is from a woman who resides in Eastman, Quebec, and is in a very unfortunate predicament. She was married to two veterans. Her first husband is now deceased and she is divorced from her second husband. In addition to that, she is a battered wife and was defrauded of her life savings by her second husband from whom she was divorced in 1981.

This woman is a former public health nurse, is now terminally ill and is on welfare because she does not qualify for assistance under her late husband's entitlement, nor does she qualify for any benefits from her divorced husband. That is simply because divorce is not recognized by the War Veterans Allowance Program or the Canadian Pension Commission.

This is what the Minister said in a letter dated March 7, 1983, in response to a letter from the office of the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North Centre:

I agree that this woman's situation is indeed a tragic one and I sincerely regret that under the veterans' legislation there is no provision to assist her financially.

The Pension Act provides for the payment of pension to a divorced widow if she was awarded alimony or maintenance. In cases where the divorced widow was not awarded alimony or maintenance, the Commission may, in its discretion, award a pension to her if she is in a dependent condition and if, in the opinion of the Commission, she would have been entitled to an award of alimony or maintenance had she made application under due process of law. Dependent condition is defined, in the Pension Act, as being without sufficient income or assets, other than the premises in which the person resides, to maintain himself or herself.

I saw this letter last week and have gone over it numerous times since then. I have come to the conclusion that only a Philadelphia lawyer could possibly understand what the Minister means. I have still not figured out what the bureaucratic language would mean to a person who was trying to find out what his or her entitlement would be under that piece of legislation.

The Minister goes on to say:

With regard to War Veterans Allowance, the legislation defines "widow" as a surviving spouse of a deceased veteran who has not remarried, and a surviving spouse of a deceased veteran who has remarried and whose spouse of that marriage dies within five years of the marriage. As this woman's situation does not correspond to this definition, she cannot qualify for War Veterans Allowance as the widow of her husband. In addition, as she is no longer the spouse of this particular person, since this marriage terminated in divorce, she does not qualify for any portion of the benefits that may be awarded to him under our legislation.

The Minister then goes on to say that again they are considering the matter as they have since 1965 at least and actively since 1968 and again since 1981. The Minister goes on to say:

I am pleased to tell you that a thorough review of the War Veterans Allowance and Civilian War Allowance Acts has been in progress for several months. I can assure you that your suggestion with regard to remarried widows will be carefully considered in this review.

The woman since then wrote back to the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North Centre and said how encouraged she was by the last paragraph in the Minister's response. I am afraid that I will have to write her and tell her that, based on the information recently received from the Royal Canadian Legion, any hope for any positive result arising from that review will not take place for at least a further two-year period. At the end of that time, of course, we will have no idea whether the review will ultimately result in the Government's finally doing something to implement the recommendations in the Woods report of 1968 or the Senate report of 1981.

In addition to the recommendations made in the Senate report with respect to widowed spouses, they also made a number of recommendations about matters of continuing concern to the Canadian Legion. According to my discussion with representatives of the Canadian Legion, they are very supportive of a committee being established such as was recommended in the Senate report. That particular recommendation reads: