

Prisoners of War

There are many items which should be dealt with when the estimates appear before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I hope the suggestions I have outlined will be taken into consideration. My party appreciates the compassion of the Minister of Veterans Affairs, as well as his department. The department is continuing to study the cases of veterans and their war service. Even though we perhaps feel embarrassed, have a good Pension Act and a good veterans' charter, we should not rest. Agreement was reached to put this bill through all stages today. That is indicative of how the House of Commons feels toward the veterans of our country.

Veterans made this country great. That is a fact which seems to be forgotten too often. We must remember the dedication, the service and the sacrifice made by the youth of 1914-17, 1939-45, and at the time of the Korean War. I hope this bill will be put through, and that World War I veterans, escapees and evaders will receive the benefits they are entitled to as quickly as possible.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, my colleagues and I very warmly welcome the introduction of Bill C-27. We have indicated our approval by pointing out that we are prepared for the bill to be put through all remaining stages this afternoon. If perchance we have not reached that point by six o'clock, I hope Your Honour will not see the clock until all necessary deliberations with respect to this bill have been completed.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): As has been pointed out on quite a few occasions, the number of prisoners of war veterans of World War I who are still with us is not very great. Probably they amount to about 200. That means they are scattered all over Canada.

The day after it reached the media that this legislation would be brought in, one of these veterans, who was a prisoner of war in World War I, came to Parliament Hill. He saw me in the rotunda. I believe he went to see the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall), as well as the hon. Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald). This gentleman happens to be just at the average age which has been mentioned, 82. When I looked at him, I realized he looked as young as I do. He said that of course the extra dollars would be useful to him, and that he was glad to know the money would be forthcoming. But what meant the most to him was the recognition which was being accorded, even though it was more than 60 years after the time he was a prisoner of war in German prison camps during World War I.

I have received two letters from other parts of the country since it became clear that this legislation would be put through. In both cases the same message appeared: they are glad to get the money, but what really helps is the recognition which is now being accorded. Therefore, we are happy to give

[Mr. Marshall.]

our support to this bill and to see to it that it is passed this afternoon.

I hope I can be forgiven for saying that this bill should not have been necessary at all. These provisions should have been contained in Bill C-92 which was brought before the House in March and April of 1976. As the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe pointed out, the recommendations of the Hermann Commission and the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs referred to all Canadian veterans who had been prisoners of war, and not just those who had been prisoners of war during World War II. But when the government brought in the bill, it was narrowed.

● (1752)

Also, the escapers and the evaders were mentioned in the Hermann report and also in the report of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, so they should have been dealt with then. It is unfortunate that some who might have gained by this legislation had they been included in the original bill have passed on, but at any rate it is good we are doing it now.

Like the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe, I welcome the fact that the same effective date which was in bill C-92 of 1976 is being retained in this legislation, which means that a World War I veteran who was a prisoner of war, whenever he applies, can pick up the compensation that is coming to him retroactive to April 1, 1976.

We are glad that all of the other provisions apply. Some of those provisions could be improved for the whole group, and the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe mentioned one or two of them. There is also the question of whether the rates might be increased, and there are questions that can be raised about some categories still not included.

The hon. member for Parkdale (Mr. Haidasz) the other day had a motion in which he expressed the hope that some of those from allied forces who were prisoners of war in World War I or World War II and who are now in Canada might have been included. There is also the case of a group of priests who were the victims of enemy action in the Atlantic during World War II and found themselves spending the rest of the war in a POW camp in Europe and who ministered greatly and effectively to the enlisted personnel who were in that camp. There are those of the prisoners of war associations in this country who feel that they should be considered as well. Unfortunately, they are not covered in this bill, but there is a motion on the order paper for the reference of the annual report of the Department of Veterans Affairs to our committee, so that when we do get that reference before us, we can discuss those matters as well.

So far as this legislation is concerned, even though it is two years late we welcome it and we are very happy to put it through all stages this afternoon.

The hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe pointed out that there are certain facts that should be made known to those who will apply for this compensation. Let it be remembered that if there are such veterans who are receiving the war veterans allowance because their other benefits do not