

*Soldier Settlers*

times. On many occasions the Legion and the veterans' organizations in this country have recommended the very procedure which is recommended in this resolution tonight. I do not think there is a returned man in this country who would feel that a precedent had been established. In addition to that, the only men who could claim that a precedent had been established would be these men under the Veterans Land Act. These men were given 33 per cent off the price of their farms when they purchased them after the second world war. A large amount was also spent in helping them to buy machinery. Today the men under the Veterans Land Act are paying  $3\frac{1}{2}$  per cent on the money they borrowed, whereas up until 1944 the men under the Soldier Settlement Act paid over 5 per cent, and if money was overdue they paid 7 per cent. In my mind, therefore, there is no argument at all about a precedent being established.

I am not going to labour this point any further. Like the hon. member for Battle River I hope this will be the last year that it will be necessary for this resolution to be brought before this house. It is a very small matter indeed. It will mean very little to the people of Canada, but it will mean a great deal to these few men who still remain. I believe it is only a matter of justice that this should be done.

**Mr. P. E. Wright (Melfort):** I should like to add my words, Mr. Speaker, to those of the hon. member for Battle River (Mr. Fair) and the hon. member for Royal (Mr. Brooks) in support of this resolution which the hon. member for Battle River has presented to this house so often over the years. It has been my privilege to support him in presenting this resolution during the years that I have been here. As a soldier settler myself, and one who knows something of the trials and tribulations of the 25,000 veterans who took up land under the soldier settlement board in 1919, I can assure you, sir, and this house that the few remaining men who still have debts under this act would be almost invariably those who have had trials and difficulties over and above the ordinary disadvantages that have accrued to farming over this number of years.

Originally we had 25,000 veterans who owed some \$109 million. The average original debt was about \$4,380. By 1951 that debt had been reduced, as had the number of men who still owed money, and there were 1,272 settlers owing some \$1,428,000. At that time the veterans affairs committee recommended that that debt should be cancelled. On page 547 of *Hansard* for 1951, you

[Mr. Brooks.]

will find the recommendation the committee made to this house. It reads:

Your committee recommends that all indebtedness of soldier settlers under the provisions of the Soldier Settlement Act, 1918, be remitted, and that they may be granted clear title to their holdings.

At that time we had real hopes that the government would accept that recommendation. Unfortunately they had decided previously to take a different course of action. They decided to set up a fund, and individual applications were to be made for refund of debt. In 1949 there were 692 of these applications and a reduction of \$269,311 was made. In 1950 there were 226 reductions—I should not say applications because there were a greater number of applications, but that number of applications were given favourable consideration. In 1950 some \$106,386 was written off individual debts. During the last two years still further reductions have been made, to the point where today there are only 548 settlers owing about \$573,000.

I should like to know just what it has cost the government to screen all those individual applications. It seems to me that it must have cost them almost as much as the total debt that is still owing on these lands. I am sure that if the hon. gentleman who replies on behalf of the government would give us the figures, they would show that the amount of money these 548 settlers who still owe the government have paid over the past 34 years is probably three or four times the amount of their original debt. They have been paying for about 34 years on these debts when they were able to do so, yet the average debt is over \$1,000 today. Surely after 34 years some consideration should be given to these veterans who gave their best in the first world war. Many of these men were wounded, and many of them are unable to carry on as you or I have been able to do over the years.

**Mr. Blackmore:** Will the hon. member permit a question?

**Mr. Wright:** Yes.

**Mr. Blackmore:** Does he happen to have at hand the average interest rate over the years?

**Mr. Wright:** I know that during the first years the interest rate was 5 per cent, and if there were any overdue balances the interest was 7 per cent on those. This interest adds up rather quickly. I know that at various times the government came to the assistance of these settlers. At one time there was a reduction of some 30 per cent in the indebtedness on stock and equipment. Another time fifty-fifty payments were arranged with regard to back payments, so that if you paid fifty cents on the dollar you