

*Private Members' Business*

failed to repay our debt to these veterans of the war against fascism.

Successive governments, in my opinion, and successive Parliaments have shamefully failed to act in refusing to recognize adequately the contribution of these courageous Canadians and what they did during those terrible years. I find it therefore especially gratifying to see the members of the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs, members of Parliament from all three parties, coming together with such unanimity on the need to act now. After the war, merchant seamen were not provided with the same rehabilitation benefits given other Canadian veterans. That is why I and other members of the committee are calling for it as being urgently required.

It is puzzling. Merchant seamen have been awarded the same medals as those given to Royal Canadian Navy veterans. It seems to me that successive governments and Parliaments have been trying to have it both ways.

The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia recognize their merchant mariners as veterans. Since January 1988 merchant seamen in the United States have been eligible for full benefits of the Veterans Administration.

On this issue, the ball is in the government's court, and Parliament's for that matter. We are all on the hook on this one. During the Battle of the Atlantic, as I mentioned, they suffered the highest casualty rate of any other service. On October 2, 1991, the standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs unanimously passed a report on this issue. The minister, of course, has 150 days in which to respond to the report in question.

I would not want to prejudge his response. However, I have no doubt that while he considers the committee's recommendation he will be asking his officials to consider the cost. I hope that at some point he will present his findings in this regard to cabinet for approval of the action required to implement the recommendations of the committee.

I do not quarrel with the government's responsibility to examine the fiscal implications of any policy initiative. That is why that clause is in my bill, subject to any appropriations by Parliament. In considering costs of acting on the committee's recommendations, the government must not lose sight of the ethical and moral

obligations Canadians have to our World War II merchant mariners who have never received the recognition and reward they earned during their wartime service.

• (1610)

There can be no price tag on doing the right thing because we can never fully repay our merchant seamen as well as all other veterans. We as a people must not let any costs of these benefits cause us to deny them to those who have earned them.

Our committee was unanimous in its support of the merchant mariners' quest for justice. We agreed that our recommendations are long overdue. Even we felt some shame as to them being so overdue.

Another thing happened following the end of the war. A certain Hal Banks was brought into Canada. Merchant mariners who served during the war all of a sudden found themselves without jobs, frozen out, black-balled. They could not work at their trade. Many of them who survived the war and stayed in the fleet found their jobs sold out from under them and U.S. gangsters imported to destroy their union.

The destruction of the merchant fleet, the importation of Hal Banks and his methods, meant that many merchant seamen were deprived of their livelihood after gallantly serving their country at great personal risk, which means that our obligation to them is even greater than to other veterans.

Arguments have been made over the years in favour of extending merchant navy veterans the same vocational training benefits as given to other veterans. It is too late now to do so, but there remains the question of retroactivity for some other benefits. Why not, for example, extend to merchant seamen, merchant navy veterans who are eligible, retroactive disability benefits?

The other benefits that merchant seamen were denied could and should be at least partially restored. For example, the clothing allowance. I got \$100 when I got discharged. For \$100 in 1946 I was able to buy a hat, new suit, shirt, tie, socks, underwear and shoes. I will not say I went to the fancy stores in Calgary, but it sufficed to get me home in civilian clothes.

Why not give them some kind of recompense? Maybe we do not have to call it a clothing allowance, but why not give them a few hundred dollars, allow for a bit of inflation even though we have had lots of it, to use in