

Veterans Pensions

increases in pensions and war veterans allowances as well as having the privilege of sponsoring a bill to enact into law the results of the most extensive review of the Pension Act in half a century. The three components have together resulted in a complete package of benefits for those who, when they were needed, placed their lives at the disposal of this country and for whom Canada has a special obligation.

Mr. Jack Marshall (Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe): Mr. Speaker, although I have been waiting with bated breath since nine o'clock this morning for the statement by the minister, I was surprised about five minutes ago when I was handed three pages. While I am heartened by the fact that there are increases, why it took so long to decide on an increase of 10 per cent for disability pensions and 15 per cent for those war veterans receiving allowances, who have not had an increase since 1966, is beyond my powers of imagination.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Marshall: The important thing is, Mr. Speaker, that this poverty line that we keep referring to every day seems to be away up in the clouds as far as this government is concerned.

Mr. McGrath: Too little, too late.

Mr. Marshall: In a speech the minister made in the House in reply to my party's motion on October 27 urging the government to implement the necessary legislation, he said that the wheels of justice are slow. I am heartened, as I am sure all hon. members and the many thousands of Canadian war veterans will be heartened, that the wheels of justice are starting to move again—

Mr. McGrath: They need some oil.

Mr. Marshall:—and that we can see some ray of hope for these deserving Canadians.

It would appear most of the recommendations of the Veterans Affairs Committee are acceptable to the government, the most important being those relating to the Hong Kong veterans and other prisoners of war and their dependants. They include increased payments for those suffering exceptional incapacity, consequential disability, loss of paired organs, the retroactivity clause and the acceptance of an organization arrived at by compromise for the handling of applications and appeals.

As to the Hong Kong veterans and prisoners of war, the white paper produced in August, 1969, over one year ago, indicated recognition by the government at that time of their need, but an amendment was not introduced immediately to grant the benefits which the government said they agreed were deserved. The result is that even though the benefits will be retroactive, many of those veterans who suffered such exceptional hardship will not be able to experience the joy and satisfaction of some justice for their wives and children, if not for themselves, because they have passed on.

[Mr. Dubé.]

On page 37 of the white paper on income security, Mr. Speaker, there is a reference to veterans and the interrelationship of war veterans allowances and workmen's compensation. I find it very distressing that, some 25 years after these men in the prime of their productive life served their country in war, the government is now saying they were not really fighting an enemy, they were not dedicating their lives, they were not being tortured in prisoner of war camps but were "work-connected", to use the phrase in the white paper. I shudder at this phrase indicating that it is considered that veterans pensions should be integrated with the Canada Pension Plan and with workmen's compensation. This bothers me, Mr. Speaker. While I do not want to appear pessimistic, it is becoming, to me at least, more obvious day by day that the Department of Veterans Affairs will be gradually phased out and absorbed by the Department of National Health and Welfare. This is completely unacceptable to my party and, I am sure, to the nearly one million surviving war veterans and their dependants. I can only hope that somewhere in the cold heart of present-day bureaucratic thinking there remains some human consideration for the dedication of Canadian war veterans.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I say in a spirit of comradeship that my party offers our pledge of acceptance of this bill and our complete co-operation in its speedy passage. We are prepared to sit day and night in the parliamentary process to achieve third reading and passage of the bill.

This bill is a very significant step forward in the consideration of the dedication and service of some one million of our citizens, but there is much more work to be done. There are many phases of veterans legislation that must be re-examined and reassessed on a continuing basis. To mention a few, there are the merchant marine, the fire-fighters and the Newfoundland foresters, and we must also examine the Veterans Land Act to try to help those veterans who are still without decent accommodation.

● (2:20 p.m.)

I hope that in the not too distant future we who sit in this House, even if the wheels of justice and of Parliament are slow, will be able one day to stand proudly because of the feeling that we have paid our debt to the war veterans of Canada.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, we in this party understand the pleasure that the minister feels in being able to introduce today a bill with regard to veterans legislation and also in being able to announce increases in the levels of disability pensions and payments under the War Veterans Allowance Act. I might be pardoned for suggesting that the very good bill that is to come as well as these increases are to a large extent a tribute to the good work that was done by the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs which was ably assisted by the representatives of the veterans organizations of Canada. However, Mr. Speaker, even though the