

Civilian War Pensions and Allowances Act

Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Hees) at the ceremonial before the Memorial at Vimy Ridge. It identified for all of us and for generations to come the reality that Vimy Ridge was a landmark in Canadian history which took place in a foreign land.

It was the first time that the fledgling nation of Canada had elements of its forces come together in a great battle in defence of a free world. It was part of a European tradition in one form or another which perhaps went back hundreds of years. Certainly it was something new and different for the land across the sea, the land we so affectionately call Canada, the nation about which we feel so deeply.

Therefore, I think it is appropriate to have a Private Member's Bill dealing with the subject of war allowances before us today. Both the people who fought for us back in the First World War, in that fight for freedom, and those who fought for us in the Second World War, in a repeat of that fight for freedom, are owed a great deal by those of us of later generations who have had the opportunity to benefit from the kind of world for which they fought and which they protected.

The group in the First World War which Canada commemorated at the seventieth anniversary of Vimy Ridge had not only a role to play in protecting our freedoms and making the world a better place for us, but they had a role to play in nation building, because it was an inspiration to what was then a very fledgling nation.

With some consciousness of some of the difficulties in Canada today, perhaps one becomes a little homesick for something inspirational which might happen to all of us—if that could be, what a lift it would be and what a difference it would make.

Perhaps I would be remiss as a member on the government side of the House if I did not take this opportunity to draw attention to some of the achievements of the Government and past Progressive Conservative Governments in their treatment of Canadian veterans. I do that partly because the achievements of the Government over the last 2.5 years have been so many and have happened so rapidly that there is not really a comprehension throughout the land of the difference we have wrought. The situation today is not the same as it was in September, 1984.

Those of us who have memories going back to September, 1984, say: "Thank God, thank heavens it is not the same situation as in September, 1984". It is a better situation. There are more people working in every province of the country. There are fewer people unemployed than there were in September, 1984.

I should like to refer to the activity level of the current Minister of Veterans Affairs. Certainly in the eight years that I have been here—and there are Members who have been here longer—we have not had a Minister of Veterans Affairs who has helped make all of us more conscious of the reality of our veterans—what they fought for, what they stood for, and what they accomplished on our behalf—than the current Minister.

He has visited many points in the world. On each and every occasion, whether commemorating one event or another, he has been accompanied by veterans.

On our television screens last evening which showed the commemoration of Vimy Ridge, the veterans who were with him were about 90 years of age. Their war, their triumph, was a long time ago. I think the children of today and some of us who are not quite children any more need to be reminded of such things. Certainly the Minister of Veterans Affairs is both a symbol and an activist in helping us look at and remember that reality.

Let us look back at the Throne Speech of the Government and its promise of or commitment to a veterans' independence program. The phasing in timetable was laid down years and years ago. I remind Hon. Members that most progress in veterans' pensions has been made by Conservative Governments. I do not think it is a public image which we enjoy throughout the land, although veterans and military people know about it. Some parts of that program were eliminated in terms of First World War veterans and, overnight, a piece of existing public policy became available to 6,000 Canadians who, the day before, were not eligible for it. That is an achievement. It is not one you see on the front page of newspapers, but it is one that you do see in the minds and the hearts of the 6,000 veterans who, all of a sudden, were eligible to participate in a program. I think that for their spouses and their relatives it was also an important event.

• (1520)

That change in public policy announced in the Throne Speech by our Government means that 75 per cent of all First World War veterans with overseas service are now able to apply. The remaining 25 per cent are either self-sufficient or are not in need of financial assistance. I think we can stand in this Chamber and say that 100 per cent of our veterans from the First World War are getting in Canada today, either through their own efforts or through the assistance of Government through our programs, the kind of help and assistance that they need. I think it is consistent with our reputation around the world. We are a nation that cares about our veterans. I see you are looking at me, Mr. Speaker. Does this indicate that the day has come to a close?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): Yes.

Mr. Hawkes: I thank you for your generosity. I think you did give me a few extra seconds, Sir. There is much more that can be said, but if we can all leave this Chamber and remind our children and grandchildren over the weekend about our veterans and the contribution they have made, they will never forget.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): Order, please. The hour provided for the consideration of Private Members' Business has now expired. Pursuant to Standing Order 42(1), the order shall be dropped from the Order Paper.