

*Veterans Affairs*

receive full and frank discussion. But this has not been the case and I think it illustrates some partisanship of one kind or another.

Government members of parliament and also the minister hint at some new plan which might supersede the legislation being phased out, Mr. Speaker. But it is only a hint. As the right hon. member for Prince Albert pointed out, the minister is strangely silent when this subject is brought forward. There have been some innuendos on his part and on the part of others, but we have had nothing of a concrete nature.

The first part of the motion asks the minister to review the terminal date of the VLA and to report back to the House in 15 days. We still hope that within that 15 days he will come to his senses and heed what has been said in this debate. If he does, he will wipe out the deadline of March 31, 1975, and while he is at it he will repeal section 3 of the Veterans' Land Act which sets up the October 31, 1968, deadline for qualification.

I am going to repeat what others have said, but being repetitive seems to be the only way that we will get the government to appreciate our strong feelings in this matter. I think repetition also serves to emphasize the validity of our arguments. I think we also want to assist the minister in convincing his colleagues in cabinet and those others who sit on the government side that this is a fit and proper course for him to take.

Attention has been drawn by other hon. members to the fact that we are debating this matter on the eve of Remembrance Day. We have just passed through committee, preparatory to third reading in the House, a bill to amend the War Veterans Allowance Act to give generous increases to veterans. That, I suggest, is a symbolic wreath which we may lay on the cenotaphs of remembrance across this land. But just as surely as that is a symbolic tribute to those who died—and war veterans allowance is a tribute to those who are still living—it must also be a black mark on the Department of Veterans Affairs and on the government if they permit the Veterans' Land Act to go by the boards.

● (1800)

I plead with the minister to reconsider the suggestion to refurbish and update the VLA which has meant so much to so many people and, if he will not, I would urge him to introduce a suitable housing program. If he stood in his place now and indicated that he was about to make this announcement, I would sit down, and I am sure that all hon. members would be silent and await with interest what the minister had to say.

No one can deny the benefits of the VLA which has been in effect for approximately 30 years. We listened to a long discourse in this regard by the hon. member for Toronto-Lakeshore (Mr. Robinson). Many full time farmers have been established on the land, and a great number of others have benefited.

I personally have benefited under this legislation so I can speak from experience about the great work that has been done for veterans in this area. These benefits have been provided to full-time farmers as well as to fishermen, those with small holdings and so on. I do not think I need detail that.

At this point I should pay tribute to the efficiency of members of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and particularly those who have worked under the Veterans' Land Act. I pay tribute to them all for the way in which the act has been administered. I would pay tribute as well to the past and present directors, and to those field men who were of such great assistance to the veterans over the years.

Let me follow somewhat along the line taken by the right hon. gentleman for Prince Albert in trying to analyse the thinking of a government which would contemplate doing what it intends to do in phasing out the Veterans' Land Act. Obviously the minister has been advised in this regard by the officials of his own department. I am sure their opinions are based on statistics only. The point was well made yesterday by the hon. member for Malpeque (Mr. MacLean) that more important than statistics are individual persons whose livelihoods will be affected and whose very opportunity for advancement will be curtailed if we neglect the human factor.

The flow of letters across members' desks from people objecting to the phasing out of this act, and asking if we are in a position to do something to persuade the government to do otherwise, indicates to me the personal nature of this thing and how these people feel about it. Let us not be swayed by statistics.

One argument being used by officials to convince the minister is that administration costs are too high. Let me point out that the staff is already in place and experienced. This is a good group of men who know more about settling people on the land than perhaps any other single group in the country. Surely cost is not a factor. Mortgage money comes from a revolving fund constantly being replenished by the repayment of loans by veterans. Surely cost is not a good reason for these people to take this view.

Some suggest that there are not sufficient numbers of veterans interested in this act. For goodness sake, some 150,000 veterans established eligibility, and 100,000 will be affected if the act is cut off. Let me read what was said by the Director General of the Veterans' Land Act when he appeared just last week before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I quote from page 2:28 of the proceedings of that committee on October 22:

Mr. Chairman, we have had approximately 2,000 loan applications for new settlement—

Surely the need is there. The reason for phasing this out cannot be that insufficient numbers of veterans are applying. If there is in fact some element of truth in that suggestion let us consider why there is not a sufficient number of veterans coming forward. To begin with, many veterans were simply unaware of the October, 1968, deadline. They were not members of veterans' groups of any kind, the Legion, the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans, or what have you. They did not read their magazines and did not see the supplements in the newspaper. I suggest they did not realize the finality of the deadline.

Other people felt their way of life was good and sufficient for the rest of their lives, and there was no reason for them to apply. We have had many letters from individuals, all of which would suggest that conditions have changed. Let me read from one of those letters as follows: