

Pension Act

amendment I was challenging the independence, the autonomy of that body, I would not have recommended it to my colleagues in the government.

Some hon. Members: Question, question.

Mr. Macdonnell: I have listened with interest to the arguments that have been made on this side and now with even greater interest to the arguments of the minister. I was struck, first of all, with the phrase he used as an excuse for this change, that it would be more flexible in administration. Of course, every acquisition of power makes things more flexible in administration; that is a classic argument which could be used in eroding all the power, such as it is, that is still left in parliament. I do not think that argument carries us very far.

Secondly, we come to another classic red herring, and that is the character of the commissioners; by seeking to maintain a principle apparently we are assailing the characters of the commissioners. That was a red herring which I thought was very unworthy of the minister. Nobody on this side is assailing the character of the commissioners. What we are trying to do is prevent a situation arising where it may become more and more difficult for them to discharge the duties that are left to them. Those were the chief points, it seemed to me, the minister made. So far as I was concerned, they did not even begin to answer the arguments which were made on this side.

Mr. Hahn: I would say section 2 of Bill No. 339, if it is passed, will probably be the most important piece of legislation that this house has had the privilege of passing. I make that claim in this particular respect because I remember for so many years teaching that one of the fundamental principles of every parliament under the British empire is the control of the purse strings. From the time of King John to the time of the Westminster Act of 1911, it was a struggle for the people of Britain to try to get control of those purse strings. If there are 200 members in this house today, every one of them should be getting up here and saying, "No!", in no uncertain terms.

I feel very strongly, despite what the minister has said, Mr. Chairman, that this part of the bill should not be passed under any circumstances. I would go so far as to say that it will be possibly the darkest day of this great Liberal government about which we have heard so much—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Hahn: —if this ever does become law.

Mr. Lapointe: I will take you up on that.

[Mr. Lapointe.]

Mr. Hahn: You will possibly wish you had not taken me up on that. I will say, sir, that there is more at stake in this thing than meets the eye. Nobody is questioning the integrity of the pension commission. Nobody in this house, whether they are on this side of the house or whether they are on that side of the house feels that our pension commission is not one of the best Canada will ever have. What we are questioning is the fact that the power to grant money by order in council should be given to any government, whether it happens to be the Social Credit government we shall have some day or whether it happens to be the present Liberal government.

An hon. Member: You are spoiling your case now.

Mr. Hahn: I am not spoiling my case one little bit. I stand for one principle in this house. The people have sent me here to guard their rights. Whether or not I return here at another time is not an essential matter. I want to know that the man who is sent here to represent us will have control of the purse strings that I expect him to have. I do not except this government or any government to take it upon itself to say, "We are the masters". The power was lost to us for so many centuries until 1911 that I do not think we have the right to turn around and say to this government, "It is yours for the having, gentlemen".

Mr. Harkness: The minister devoted the major portion of his remarks to trying to refute the arguments which had been made on this side of the house as to why this is a bad piece of legislation, and as to why it would impair the independence of the Canadian pension commission. He attempted to make only one argument in favour of this change. He said that it was solely, and these are his words, to adjust the salaries from time to time; that was the only purpose for making this change. The salaries of the pension commission could be changed readily from time to time whenever there was a general change in the civil service.

I cannot see that that argument has any validity whatever. Every year for the last nine years parliament has been in session for about six months in each year. This leaves only a short period of time during which, if an increase or decrease in civil service salaries had been decided upon, the pension commission would have to wait before that increase or decrease could be made applicable to the commission. In other words, the only argument advanced in favour of this change is no argument at all. It is quite apparent that a delay of three or four months or even the full six months,