

War Veterans Allowance Act

We on this side of the House welcome this legislation. It is long overdue. It rectifies a number of serious inequities in the War Veterans Allowance Program. It neglects a number of other equally serious problems which we would have expected to see dealt with in a piece of legislation touted by the Minister as a major overhaul of the program.

This Bill does nothing for the veterans receiving disability pensions or for their widows. It completely disregards the serious problems which I have identified today and which other members of my Party have brought to the attention of the Minister in committee. The Minister's announcement made no reference to these disability pensioners. He did not even clarify their status with respect to the Aging Veterans Program. His silence on the subject of the long delays which these veterans are encountering in the pension appeal process is quite deafening. However, we are not prepared to delay passage of the Bill despite our reservations about its shortcomings.

We would have had a dozen amendments had there been time available. However, we are worried. We can see the calendar as well as the clock. This Bill must get through before the end of June. There are few days left. For that reason, I do not intend to present any amendments to the Committee of the Whole stage.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Mr. Speaker, I agree with the Minister and the Hon. Member for Victoria (Mr. McKinnon) about the need to get this legislation through even though, as the Member for Victoria said, it is not good enough and does not go far enough. In light of the calendar, it is better to have this amount of the loaf than nothing.

I will touch on only two or three items. Before doing that, I draw to the attention of the House, and I know this will be greeted with agreement and approval, the contribution made since 1942, when our veterans were the Armed Forces, both in Canada and overseas being fought for, stood up for and advocated by the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) who is in the Chamber today. He has spent many years working on behalf of the veterans of this country.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

● (1610)

Mr. Benjamin: Mr. Speaker, I would like to touch upon two or three points regarding the matter of war veterans allowances for those veterans who do not reside in Canada. I have never been able to understand the departmental reasoning behind requiring such veterans to return to Canada for one year in order to remain eligible to receive benefits. We received one answer to that question as recently as June 6.

My colleague, the Hon. Member for Beaches (Mr. Young), raised a question regarding veterans being denied the benefits received by every other eligible veterans simply because they cannot return to Canada and live in Canada for one year. Believe it or not, Mr. Speaker, the executive director to the executive assistant of the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Campbell) as quoted by the Hon. Member for Beaches, said

that the only reason these veterans must return to Canada for one year is so that the Department of Veterans Affairs can get to know them. I would presume that the Department of Veterans Affairs got to know these veterans before it gave them a war veterans allowance.

Once a veteran qualifies for war veterans allowance, the country in which he lives is of no significance. Canada has reciprocal agreements with many other countries for old age pensions, guaranteed income supplements and Canada pensions among others. The place of a veteran's residence should have absolutely nothing to do with his ability to receive the war veterans allowance. I would be quite happy to stay here another 10 minutes so that the Minister could quickly draft an amendment to add to the Bill so that we may discuss it when we go into Committee of the Whole in a few minutes' time. Such an amendment would put an end to that kind of nonsense.

A problem that I have run into ever since I came to Parliament in 1968 and a problem that all other Members face is the length of time it takes for the Government to make decisions. It does not matter whether or not the decisions to be made deal with disability pensions, war veterans allowance or widows' pensions. It takes a great deal of time. I once dealt with a case that took four years to resolve. The Government finally agreed with the case as it was presented in the first place and the veteran received \$28,000 in back benefits. However, it took four years for that to happen.

The Hon. Member for Kootenay West (Mr. Kristiansen) wrote to the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Campbell) on May 28, 1984. I must say in passing that I sincerely regret the Minister's inability, for whatever reason, to pilot his Bill through the House because it is so darn seldom that this ever happens and it takes so darn long to have a veterans' Bill put before the House.

My colleague, the Hon. Member for Kootenay West, wrote to the Minister on behalf of a veteran, Mr. Joseph Wrangler, who has been pursuing his settlement since 1952. That is more than 30 years. This veteran recently received a letter from the Bureau of Pensions Advocates in Vancouver, which was dated February 13, 1984. However, he received that letter on May 15, 1984. One immediately wonders about the efficiency of Canada Post, but it turns out that the delay was not the fault of Canada Post.

When the representative of the Vancouver office was questioned about why the letter took three months to reach Mr. Wrangler, his reply was that inexperienced staff were causing a backlog. The submission to Ottawa and the letter advising of it did not get mailed from the Vancouver office until a full two months after it was written. That is surely no way to serve veterans, whether their cases are justified and legitimate or not.

The Hon. Member for Victoria brought up the question of the means test and the matter of interest income. If a veteran is entitled to a disability pension or a war veterans allowance or if his spouse or orphaned dependants are entitled to such benefits, those benefits should be exempt from any kind of