

*The Budget*

• (1650)

First of all we were invited by the minister to have this meeting to try to thrash out our views. We welcomed that but we did not initiate it. This came from the hon. member's side not our side. His speech is well directed but it ought to be directed to his side of the House.

My second point is we have participated in public debate on the deficit and debt reduction for 18 months now. Personally I have given thousands of speeches on this subject, many of them in public meetings with open question periods. We welcome that and we welcome doing it in this House. I was making the point that as many members know, when one debates these issues so often the partisan aspects get into it and we get away from the real issues.

We know in question period if we raise some hot topic about the jets and the \$140,000 expenditure on that we can get a great hit on the evening news. We can get a great deal of attention by doing that. However if we raise some structural problem with the health care system which can probably save \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion that is not even newsworthy because it is complicated and it cannot be discussed in short exchanges.

I welcome all kinds of opportunities for public debate and debate in this House. However I do think there would be some merit in accepting the minister's invitation to sit down around a table and get into the details of some of these issues. Then those discussions could be carried into the House as well.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Secretary of State (Veterans)):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in my place today and speak in support of the budget brought down on February 22 by my hon. friend and colleague, the Minister of Finance.

We should congratulate the minister on his first budget since this government assumed office. He has steered a wise and careful course. He has set in motion a measure which will lead to major changes in the years to come.

As members are aware the Minister of Finance consulted widely with Canadians before he brought down his budget. It is clear that he was listening. I can tell because I have been listening to my constituents and to the people of Prince Edward Island.

They told me they want action to build the economy and create jobs. They want a social security system that is fair and compassionate, but they also know that Canada needs social security that is affordable. They told me that government has to get its finances in order.

This budget responds to those concerns. It sets the foundation for growth and jobs in the future. At the same time it balances the need for social reform and deficit reduction.

I know many veterans were concerned about the impact this budget might have on them. These men and women have served

our country well. They devoted the best years of their lives to Canada and they have personal memories of the devotion of comrades who made the final sacrifice for Canada and the values we hold dear.

I can tell members there is no group of Canadians more passionately concerned about Canada's future than our veterans. There is no group more outspoken about our need to preserve our quality of life. I know that veterans across Canada welcome the measures to reduce government spending.

We are going to launch a review of the government's operations so we can get things done more efficiently. We are going to look at all our programs and find out where we can reduce overlap and duplication.

In Veterans Affairs Canada we will be looking at our own operations. That is how it should be. We are going to find ways to trim administrative costs just like other departments in government.

However, we are not going to touch veterans pensions or allowances. We want to ensure that veterans who need and are eligible for benefits receive them. Veterans deserve their pensions and allowances and this is the time when many veterans need them most. As they grow older many veterans rely on us to maintain the quality of life they so richly earned.

• (1655)

All members in this House have veterans in their constituencies. I am sure no matter what region of the country they come from hon. members will recognize the fairness of the government policy to provide for veterans. It has often been said that Canada provides veterans with the finest package of veterans benefits in the world. We are second to none.

I would like to take a few minutes to talk about my own region, Atlantic Canada, and what this budget means to my home province of Prince Edward Island.

I am very proud that this budget contains provisions to locate a demonstration project in Prince Edward Island. This joint undertaking by the Department of Human Resources Development, the Government of Prince Edward Island and the Canadian Association of Community Living will look at ways to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Canada cannot ignore the potential of its citizens who have disabilities, not at a time when we need everyone to contribute his or her skills to building Canada's future. The government hopes that what is learned with this project in Prince Edward Island can be applied in other areas for other persons with disabilities.

Another budget measure many of my friends, neighbours and constituents in Prince Edward Island have talked about with me are the changes to the unemployment insurance system. As this House knows these changes are the first step in a bigger strategy