

Adjournment Debate

● (2200)

**PROCEEDINGS ON ADJOURNMENT
MOTION**

[English]

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 40 deemed to have been moved.

**PENSION ACT—INQUIRY RESPECTING DELEGATION OF
AUTHORITY UNDER SECTION 33**

Mr. Dan McKenzie (Winnipeg-Assiniboine): Mr. Speaker, on November 18, as reported at page 4805 of *Hansard* of that day, I asked the Acting Minister of Veterans Affairs the following question:

In recent months Canadian Pension Commission claims for awards under Section 33 of the Pension Act, that is for funeral and burial grants, have had to wait many months for adjudication because of staffing problems. Would the minister consider implementing the proposal of the Woods Committee which would delegate authority to the senior pension medical examiner in the district offices to adjudicate matters of a routine nature under section 33 of the Pension Act? This action on the part of the government would go a long way in assisting widows of veterans during a time of great emotional and financial strain.

The minister promised to look into the matter, but to date I have not heard anything further. I hope to have an answer tonight from the parliamentary secretary.

I should like to point out also that the Department of Veterans Affairs has a long backlog of cases in all facets of its operations. The measure which I am suggesting tonight, which was also suggested by the Woods committee, that there be district offices in the provinces, would help alleviate at least one bottleneck in the department.

On the same day, on November 18, as reported at page 4806 of *Hansard*, I asked the following supplementary question:

At the present time the grant under section 33 of the Pension Act for funeral and burial expenses is not to exceed \$550 for the funeral director, plus the cost of the grave, the opening, closing and a marker. For the Department of National Defence this amount is \$850. Would the minister increase the amount allowed for a funeral and burial as provided by the veterans' burial regulations and Section 33 of the Pension Act to correspond to the amount provided by the Department of National Defence? I am sure this small increase for a decreasing number of widows will not be inflationary.

I understand that the maximum burial grant now is \$625. This is still too low, in view of the fact that grants from the Department of National Defence are \$850, and of course, the devastating effects of the Liberal budget and the National Energy Program are causing serious consequences for low income and middle-income widows in the country.

Also, questions have been asked recently about the length of time veterans have to wait for their pension applications to be processed. The problem is that many of them are dying before their applications are processed. On January 30 of this year a question was asked in the House, pointing out the length of time it takes to get a hearing before the Pension Commission or the War Veterans Allowance Board. The government member who asked this question pointed out that:

As a Member of Parliament one hesitates to recommend to a veteran that he go through the appeal procedure, since it takes so long.

That is quite a devastating statement coming from a member of the government party. The minister answered as follows:

I can assure the hon. member that the backlog will most likely be eliminated within six or eight months.

We have been listening to that for years. For years we have been told that the backlog will be cleared up and that it will only take another six or eight months.

In today's question period I asked the Acting Minister of Veterans Affairs a question with regard to veterans' widows. I said that because of the phased in lowering of the 48 per cent disability entitlement in Bill C-40, approximately 1,500 widows became eligible for pensions in 1980. I said that as of December, 1980, the Department of Veterans Affairs had heard from fewer than one third of these widows inquiring about their eligibility.

● (2205)

If only one-third have been heard from, I suggest to the parliamentary secretary tonight that as the proportionate pension was to be phased in over six and a half years, the phasing in period should be reduced to, say, five years. That would allow more widows to become eligible for pensions in a shorter period of time. I would like the parliamentary secretary to look into this so that we can reduce the length of the phasing in period because of the small number applying.

I also asked the minister to make sure his department is advertising and contacting widows to notify them that they can apply for this pension increase.

I am also very concerned because the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs has not been called to deal with these particular questions. Problems are mounting, and I hope I can get some commitment from the parliamentary secretary tonight that she will raise this matter with the minister, so that the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs can be called as soon as possible.

Mrs. Ursula Appolloni (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Defence): Mr. Speaker, before I begin I should point out that the hon. member opposite has asked not one but four questions. I have only three minutes in which to reply, so I will deal only with the first one, if I may.

I think the hon. member for Winnipeg-Assiniboine (Mr. McKenzie) should be thanked for the opportunity he has given the House to clarify the subject matter he raised on November 18.

The Pension Act provides that the matter of approving burial grants by the Canadian Pension Commission is not routine but is dependent upon the size of a pensioner's estate, and an individual decision must be made based on each case. To enable a decision to be made, the commission is required by law to determine the size of the estate and whether it is sufficient to pay for the expenses of the last illness and burial. It often takes considerable time to obtain this information