

*Prisoners of War*

cant sum of some \$200,000 to \$350,000 to provide a bit of extra comfort for the few who are left, probably by this time numbering below 200.

The first world war veteran is of the average age of some 83 years. According to statistics I gathered, in 1976 there were some 12,404 first world war veterans receiving disability pension. In 1977 this dropped by 1,500 because many of them passed away. This means we are losing some 15 per cent of our first world war veterans each year.

Based on these figures it is natural to assume that the known 200 prisoners of war probably number now somewhere around 150. It is tragic that the 50 or so who have passed away could not have been afforded a little bit of the financial comfort they might have enjoyed had it not been for our procrastination.

One of the small advantages that will result from this bill is that it will bring some of the first world war widows up to the 48 per cent category which will provide them with a widow's pension. Even though there will be few, this is one small advantage of this bill.

This brings up another point and gives us the opportunity of referring to the recommendation of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, a recommendation that was accepted unanimously as a result of the Hermann Report which brought about the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act. Let me quote that recommendation:

That because the difference in widows benefits for those whose husbands were pensioned above and below 48 per cent is too extreme, the widows of those pensioned below 48 per cent should be awarded a pension that is the same percentage of the widows pension as the assessment of her deceased husband's disability, including any additional compensation awarded as a result of this study.

This means that compensation of 10 per cent, 15 per cent or 20 per cent, depending on the period of incarceration, would be added to the amount of pension payable under the Pension Act on account of pensionable disability, to a maximum total of 100 per cent; and that escapees and evaders should also be considered, which they now are.

We really could have commended the minister and his government to a far greater extent, at a time when they could use a little praise, if they had accepted the very important and vital recommendation to amend the Pension Act to award widows' pensions to those who at present cannot qualify because of the fact that their veteran husbands died when in receipt of a disability pension of less than 48 per cent. It is stated in the recommendation, and I think it is worthwhile putting on the record:

Your Committee also recommends to the House that consideration be given to amending the Pension Act to provide that a widow's pension be awarded on a sliding scale as follows:

When at the time of death of the prisoner he was, or would have been, in receipt of a pension assessed at 47 per cent or less, that pension be paid to the widow in double proportion to the assessed degree of the pensioner's disability as it relates to the basic pension granted to widows.

I had hoped that the minister, who agrees with this recommendation, would include this in the bill. At the present time a full widow's pension is paid when the pensioner's death was attributable to, or was incurred during, wartime military ser-

vice, or, in the case of peacetime forces, if it arose out of, or was directly connected with, service, or when the pensioner's disability was assessed at 48 per cent or more at the time of death. Because 100 per cent of the widow's pension is payable when the disability pension was paid at a 50 per cent rate, the effect of this would be that a double proportion would be payable if the disability was assessed at a lesser rate. For example, if the veteran who died was receiving 40 per cent, his widow would receive double that, or 80 per cent. The minister agreed with this. It is unfortunate that he could not convince cabinet.

● (1742)

The inequity with regard to the widows of veterans who died receiving less than 48 per cent condemns anything which is right in society. Either those responsible are not aware of this absolute discrimination, or they do not care. It is a condemnation of any agency commissioned by parliament, whether it is responsible for studying equality or the status of women, human rights and civil liberties, or any other government agency responsible for the welfare of Canadians.

How in the name of all that is humane and decent can the following be rationalized? A married disability pensioner is entitled to \$372.93, at the rate of 48 per cent. Upon his death his widow is deemed to need and receives \$447.53. If that veteran was receiving \$37.28 less, or 1 per cent less, she is deemed to need \$335.65. When he dies, and unless his death is attributable to war service, his widow receives nothing. Thus, she is relegated to the mercy of the welfare system in the province where she lives.

This is particularly unfair in the case of World War I veterans. In a great number of cases, their widows spent most of their years caring for their husbands. It is just not right. Also it is difficult to reconcile this when compared to the fact that the wife of a veteran recipient of war veterans allowance is protected after her husband's death. She receives the married rate of \$502 per month for a year, and then reverts to the single rate of \$300 per month.

I hope the minister can convince cabinet that something must be done. World War I veterans are now 83 years of age, and World War II veterans range between the ages of 60 and 63. After the bill is passed, World War I veterans who were prisoners of war will have to apply. The facts should be pointed out to them in a note, in order for them to take advantage of anything which exists under the act.

In 1973 it was agreed that the basic rate of pension would be equated to the five lowest categories in the public service. We agreed that it should be done on a wage indexing basis, yet it was done on a cost of living indexing basis. That caused veterans to fall behind. This creates concern among veterans and I hope the minister will give it serious consideration.

At the present time a veteran who is receiving a 90 per cent disability pension and is also entitled to the 20 per cent rate increase would lose 10 per cent because his rate would exceed 100 per cent. Something should be included in the act to allow him to receive the full benefit of the 20 per cent.