

Private Members' Business

However no question may be put on this item which, in any event, is not a selected item.

• (1600)

Once we get to the end of the debate, I will have another pronouncement to make.

I will call upon the hon. member for Regina—Lumsden on debate.

I am sorry. After listening to all the arguments, I guess it would be nice if I did put the question.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina—Lumsden) moved that Bill C-252, an act to amend the Department of Veterans Affairs Act, be read the second time and referred to Legislative Committee G.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity you are providing me to make my speech on this bill and I will wait with great trepidation as to what you are going to decide on it.

I am proud to be able to rise today and speak in support of this bill, an act to amend the Department of Veterans Affairs Act. This bill, if it became law, would define those who served in Canada's World War II merchant fleet as war veterans. These former merchant mariners would thereby become eligible for all of the benefits that have always been extended to all other war veterans.

Anybody who would deny that these merchant mariners are not war veterans is totally wrong. I am afraid I cannot use the language that I am thinking of. They are war veterans, period. The bill would also, finally and forever, extend to our wartime merchant mariners the status of war veterans, recognition which they purchased at a terrible price.

Following World War II, the Government of Canada extended 18 benefits to veterans of our Armed Forces. Of those 18, only four were granted unconditionally to the merchant seamen. A further seven were extended only under certain conditions. For example, in the Veterans Land Act, a merchant seaman could qualify for it only if he was disabled. How the hell is he going to farm if he is disabled? What outrageous stupidity we have perpetrated on these veterans.

Twelve thousand merchant seamen served their country in World War II. About 3,500 are still living, while

1,259 of them died in combat. This was one of the highest casualty rates of any allied service during the war. Canadian seamen served with distinction on all oceans of the world during World War II. Nearly 200 were imprisoned, some of them for many years. The loss of seamen's lives during the battle of the Atlantic was the highest proportion of any other allied force.

Those Canadians who served in dangerous waters during the last great war seek today what they have sought since the end of the war: equal recognition, entitlement and the benefits now received by their fellow veterans.

We are approaching Remembrance Day and, my God, it is high time, 45 years past time, that we remember our merchant seamen.

Last year for the first time the Royal Canadian Legion agreed that World War II merchant seamen should be given full war veterans status, as have several other veterans organizations. That is why I have moved this legislation before the House, because it is high time to extend those benefits.

It is time Parliament acted on this, past time, and if it would become law it would give veteran status to those merchant seamen who served in our merchant navy.

I want to remind the House that this question has been studied for almost a half a century, 45 years. We have had all kinds of reasons and foot dragging, procrastination and outright refusals over that 45 years. One put forward in the early years of the merchant seamen's fight was that they got paid more. The fact of the matter is in all but one or two categories in the merchant navy, they got paid less than members of the Canadian Armed Forces, and particularly the Royal Canadian Navy.

During the war they were not only paid less but they faced risks that were just as great, if not greater, than those in the other Armed Forces. To say that they were civilians and they could move or work for one company or another, from one ship to another, was totally false. That was another excuse that was put up for years after the war.

Members of the merchant service during the war could not leave that service. They were compelled to remain in that service. They were bound by military discipline and military orders for the duration of the war. We have still