

1917. There was such a terrific explosion that the glass in windows of buildings and residences was not only broken but was flung or thrown in such a vigorous manner as to cause many of the casualties, including some of the fatalities and cases of blindness.

This fund was established, as was said last evening, as a result of the compassion and generosity of governments, including those of Canada, Nova Scotia and other provinces, private persons in all parts of Canada and the United States and, particularly, the New England States. Payments have been made ever since the fund was established during the year after the explosion, and much of the money was expended on the rehabilitation of the very badly damaged area of Halifax. I am informed by the authorities of the Halifax Relief Commission that, effective January 1, 1976, the rates being paid are as follows: the one dependant I mentioned receives \$119.44 per month; the five widows each receive \$199.44; and the nine suffering from general disability receive a monthly payment of from \$40 to \$290, depending upon the degree or percentage of disability assessed in the individual cases. The 11 blind persons receive payments in the range of \$265 to \$422 per month, depending upon their circumstances. The 39 who are partially blind each receive \$99.02 per month.

Honourable senators, I am informed, although I cannot confirm it from my own first-hand knowledge, that these rates are generally below those paid to pensionable persons in similar circumstances in connection with service in the armed forces in time of war. One of the submissions which I propose to make is that this inequality should no longer be permitted to exist.

Consider for a moment how these deaths and injuries came about. When the explosion occurred, Canada and Canadians had then been heavily involved for something over three years in the greatest cataclysm of battle the world had ever known. Halifax was the main Canadian port through which Canadian men and women and munitions and supplies left Canada to become part of this country's great war effort overseas. Munitions of all kinds were stored in the area in great quantities, not only for shipment overseas but for many other uses. From the early days of the war until its end, the citizens of the Halifax-Dartmouth area were continuously exposed, 24 hours a day, to the danger which became a terrible reality on December 6, 1917.

In the morning of that day two ocean-going ships, both connected with the war effort, were moving toward each other in that part of Halifax harbour known as The Narrows. One of the ships was laden with a cargo of dangerous and volatile high explosives. Through an error in navigation, which I believe has never been completely explained, the two ships collided and, despite the gallant efforts of many people to prevent it, the munitions cargo exploded shortly after 9 o'clock in the morning. The force of the blast is generally acknowledged to have been far greater than any other blast resulting from the act of man until the explosion of the atomic bombs near the end of the Second World War.

The great majority of the casualties—last night the figures of 10,000 injured and 1,635 killed were given—occurred in a matter of a few seconds, much more quickly, I believe, than I can say “occurred in a matter of a few

[Senator Smith (Colchester)]

seconds.” I doubt whether so many casualties have ever occurred in such a short time in the bloodiest battles of any war until the atomic bomb explosions to which I have already referred.

Honourable senators, having given a brief and inadequate outline of the facts and surrounding circumstances, I should like to draw your attention to two provisions of the bill now under consideration.

Clause 5(4) provides:

No payment shall be paid out... in excess of the amount of the balance to the credit of the Account.

That is, to the credit of the account established in the accounts of the Canadian government when this fund is transferred to it, which means that it is necessary that the pensions be kept within the amount of the fund and within the individual amounts which can be calculated actuarially to bring about that situation.

Clause 6 of the bill provides that when no further amounts will be required for payment out of the fund, the Government of Canada, in consultation with the Government of Nova Scotia, may transfer any balance remaining in the account to a provincial or municipal body in Nova Scotia for the continued rehabilitation of the area of Halifax that was damaged by the explosion.

There are two points that I wish to emphasize and bring to the attention of the Governments of Canada and Nova Scotia for consideration in the future. I have said that of the 65 people now eligible for benefits, 11 are blind and 39 are partially blind. That means that 50 out of a total of 65 persons are receiving benefits because of injury to their sight, or nearly 78 per cent of the total.

There is in Halifax a school for the blind which is devoted entirely to helping those whose sight is seriously deficient and which never has more money than it requires to carry on this very necessary and beneficial work. If there should, at the last, be a balance remaining in the fund, it would appear to me to be in harmony with the general objects of the fund to provide that any such balance be transferred to the school for the blind, or its successors, to assist in carrying on its work.

My second point is that those casualties were suffered in the course of a war in which Canada and her allies participated, just as casualties were suffered by members of the armed forces. Now, as those casualties, and the dependants of those who were killed, move on into the senior years of their lives, I submit that this fact should be recognized by raising the benefits to the level received by war veterans and their dependants.

Such an increase may, of course, exhaust the fund while there are still persons entitled to receive benefits, and this would require some money from the Consolidated Revenue Fund outside the account itself; but surely, in the ordinary course of events, it would seem likely that any such requirement from the Consolidated Revenue Fund would be relatively insignificant.

● (1430)

Therefore, I respectfully urge the federal government and the Government of Nova Scotia to examine carefully these two suggestions which, I believe, are in harmony with the spirit of the fund, in harmony with the spirit of fairness, and not inconsistent with any generally accepted