

Adjournment Debate

aware that in the last five to six years pensions have increased dramatically. I guess it is the old story—what have you done for me lately? Notwithstanding the fact that the minister and, indeed, the cabinet, have been discussing the matter of the increase in pensions, it still remains a fact that now in Canada we are in a time of restraint. Can I agree with you any more when I say that “No, it should certainly not be put upon the backs of the veterans. Neither should it be put on the backs of the other workers in the country; it should not be put on the backs solely of the people who are in the professions; nor on the backs of big business. Surely a restraint program is one which encompasses all Canadians. As such we should be willing to bear not only what we can—and this is not to say over the years, and in time of need, the veterans did not indeed give more, which was above and beyond the call of duty. I simply say that perhaps with patience, with a little time, this particular matter will clear itself up.

● (1817)

I am sure hon. members are aware that the minister has said he would be willing to have this discussed in the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, a committee on which the three of us have served for a number of years. With us it has never been a question of whether we will bring this about by raising each other's political hackles. We have always tried to work for what was best for our Canadian veterans. It is in this spirit that I tell the House that the minister is considering, inasmuch as he can, an increase in pensions for veterans. Rest assured that I sympathize with what the hon. member suggested today. Given a little more time I hope this problem can be cleared up.

VETERANS AFFAIRS—SUGGESTED RECONSIDERATION BY
CABINET OF INCREASE IN BASIC DISABILITY PENSION

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to join my colleague, the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall), in making this appeal to the government once again. We make it as strongly as we can.

I have to say to my friend, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Parent), that the answer he has just given to my hon. friend's question was completely unsatisfactory. If we were asking for something new or proposing a brand new idea there might be some point to the suggestion that we be patient and wait for some of the problems to be sorted out. But what we are dealing with is an issue that has been around for longer than the parliamentary secretary has been alive.

For 60 years we have been working on the proposition that disabled veterans should receive pensions to repay what they lost in terms of wages that they might earn. They are not handouts, not allowances to enable them to buy goods, but pensions to replace the earning power lost because of disability. The scheme was started that way at a low level at the end of World War I. It slipped behind until at the end of World War II the rate of the disability pension was far too low.

[Mr. Parent.]

In 1973, after a tripartite committee made recommendations in 1972, the government accepted the principle that the basic disability pension should be equivalent to the take-home average pay of five designated categories of public servants. Four years have gone by and the 100 per cent disability pensioners, are more than \$500 behind.

It does not wish to say that this is something for which we should wait. The parliamentary secretary says the minister was willing that it be discussed in committee, and that it be discussed in the late show this afternoon, but when I pressed the point that he should take it back to cabinet he says he has to wait until the dust clears. To say these things this long after World War I and World War II just is not good enough.

When the parliamentary secretary answered the previous question he did not do what he did the other day and give us figures as to the rate of the 100 per cent disability pension. Maybe he thought I would have an answer to that and would remind him what members of parliament were getting when the veterans' pension was a lot lower than it is now. What we get now makes what they now receive look pretty sorry.

When word gets around as to what the present level of 100 per cent disability pension is I think it should be pointed out—and it is in the same book of statistics that my friend referred to a moment ago—that in the case of World War I veterans only 7.87 per cent are getting the 100 per cent pension. In the case of World War II veterans only 3.72 per cent receive the 100 per cent pension. In the case of veterans of both wars, more than 60 per cent get pensions of 20 per cent or less. We are not talking about a few privileged persons who are drawing a lot of money from the federal treasury. We are talking about scaled down benefits which, at least in terms of value, should have kept up with the level in the Public Service that was agreed to. That is why we say that the answer that we should wait, that there is a period of restraint, is not good enough. If we had raised this issue just last month or last year maybe that would be an appropriate answer, but this issue has been around for all these years.

In the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs in 1972 and 1973 when we fought for this we made the point that unless the government not only put the pension at that time at a level equal to the wages of the five categories of public servants but agreed to keep it at that level, in no time at all the veterans would be behind. Here we are today, already behind.

● (1822)

One answer I have heard in recent times is that that 7.2 per cent increase that will take place in January will narrow the gap a bit. Instead of being \$530 odd behind, the 100 per cent pension will be only \$390 behind, or something like that. I have no reason to doubt that statistic. However, when the Public Service salaries go up in 1978, as they will, instead of the gap being \$537 it will probably be \$600. To us this is an act of bad faith.

I am prepared to agree with my friend across the way, and my friend to my right will agree with me that in general terms our veterans legislation is good. It is not as wonderful in