

Veterans' Benefits

of those Canadians either killed in the defence of Hong Kong or the victims of years of captivity.

Mr. Benjamin: Look at the number of years it took to do something about it.

Mr. Campbell: These were Canadian ceremonies, our way of recognizing that our present freedom and prosperity were secured through the sacrifice of those who believed this country was worth fighting for.

The department's mandate includes the objective of perpetuating recognition of wartime sacrifice and achievements and their contribution to Canada. Let us note the words "contribution to Canada". Similarly, the department provides a wide-ranging program of benefits in recognition of wartime service. The objective is, and I quote:

To manage special programs for veterans and other specified persons which will compensate for death or disabilities incurred in the service of Canada.

The words "service of Canada" are the key to the benefits Canadian veterans can receive. With the best will in the world I cannot accept that the veterans of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion were serving Canada in the full meaning of the department's mandate.

Mr. Benjamin: Change the mandate.

Mr. Campbell: The hon. member for Broadview-Greenwood has detailed the reasons why these men went to fight in Spain, and from the standpoint of history these reasons seem valid and noble. However, at the time these Canadians deliberately chose to ignore the laws of their own country and to join in the conflict raging in Spain. This was an individual decision for which we are now being asked to give a collective reward. Whether the Foreign Enlistment Act was worthy legislation is certainly something which can be disputed over 40 years later, but at the time it was the law of the land. Canada chose to be neutral when Spain erupted into war.

Mr. Benjamin: It is time to admit a mistake.

Mr. Campbell: Over 1,200 Canadians chose to ignore that neutral stance and to take sides against the nationalist forces. Nobody forced them to go. Canada was not at war, but they let their conscience be their guide. Surely such an individual conviction does not entitle them to join the ranks of those Canadians who went to war because their own nation asked them to serve. The strength of the conviction which propelled these brave individuals to fight against tyranny and oppression as it existed in Spain was not shared by the Government of Canada, nor by most other nations of the world. Although we can only see the world order from an historical perspective, I do not believe it would be wrong to say that the Mac-Paps were very alone in their struggle. Canada did, however, offer some measure of welcome when the survivors returned in 1939, and the Department of External Affairs did assist in the return of the battalion to Canada.

As I said earlier, our government has given the requests of the veterans of the Mackenzie-Papineau brigade every con-

sideration. Representations were first made back in 1975. Only last May 22 members of the Mac-Paps met with Dan MacDonald and received an understanding hearing when they voiced their objectives.

Dan MacDonald was aware that the survivors of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion had seen the horror of battle and shared a common experience with our soldiers who fought Hitler and Mussolini a few years later. During the meeting they asked that the Foreign Enlistment Act be amended. This is understandable because they were still living under the threat of prosecution. While there has never been any intention in recent years of prosecuting them, this symbolic cloud was there, and the minister appreciated this concern.

● (1730)

As a result, the minister of justice was able to give an assurance that the government would not undertake any prosecutions of members of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion under the Foreign Enlistment Act. A symbolic gesture it may have been, but it was the government's way of putting on record its view that these men were not criminals and should not have to live in the shadow of the act any longer. Also at this meeting the veterans of the Spanish civil war asked for recognition under the veterans' charter. This request was not shrugged aside. It was given a long, serious study. The study reaffirmed the government's conclusion that it could not, in all conscience, give these veterans the recognition they felt they deserved. This decision was not taken out of a spirit of meanness. In financial terms, the cost to Canadian taxpayers would be insignificant. The decision was taken simply on the grounds that these men did not qualify under the provisions and the spirit of the veterans' charter.

This is not to say that their cause was unworthy or that they were not brave and stubborn soldiers. They fought in the company of a man called Norman Bethune whose concern for humanity went beyond geographical boundaries. Certainly the exploits of the International Brigade will live on in literature long after all the members of that gallant group have passed away.

History has proven them right. They were among the first to take on fascism. As has been said, some of them enlisted in the Canadian forces in 1939 and continued their struggle against Hitler and all the evil he represented. Naturally these particular men are entitled to all benefits available to any Canadian veteran. With that said, the House must deny the Canadian survivors of the Spanish civil war the benefits earned by servicemen and women who fought in the uniform of Canada.

I should like to repeat the government's reasons. These men went to Spain in defiance of the laws of Canada at that time. They fought on behalf of their own conscience, not on behalf of the people and the Government of Canada. The fact that they are now regarded as having been on the right side at the right time is not the point. If Canadians were asked whether they now agree or disagree with the action taken by the members of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion, I am certain that few would disagree.