

Pension Act

of the bill to amend the Pension Act has at times assumed. When second reading of the bill took place I had the illusion that I had very simply and clearly explained the reason for this amendment. I explained at the time that the only purpose in amending section 2 of the Pension Act, which at the present time fixes the salaries of the members of the pension commission, so that these salaries would be determined by the governor in council was to make the act more flexible in administration.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Lapointe: My hon. friends may laugh but I suggest that if many of them had to wait a couple of years until parliament made up its mind to give them an increase in salary to which they were entitled they possibly would not laugh so much. I explained at the time that it was solely for the purpose of being able to adjust the salaries of the pension commissioners in the same manner as adjustments are made from time to time among senior civil servants who belong to the same class of salaried government employees. I explained that in the past occasions had arisen where general increases had taken place but where members of the pension commission had not obtained the increase immediately and had to wait for a pretty long period of time until the Pension Act was amended so that they could benefit from the general increase given throughout the country.

That is the only purpose. We have heard hon. members opposite say that by introducing such an amendment to the Pension Act the government is challenging the independence of the pension commission. It has also been said that we are taking away from parliament the right to vote moneys and are going to do it by order in council.

I think, Mr. Chairman, that almost every member of the house is very well acquainted with the members of the Canadian pension commission. I would suggest that almost every hon. member has had to deal with the Canadian pension commission and has been able to satisfy himself as to the integrity and independence of every member of the commission. I doubt that any hon. member opposite would think that any member of that commission which adjudicates on the pensions to be given to veterans would be affected by the fact that the government has introduced this amendment to section 2 of the act.

It is all very nice to attack the government by saying that by such an amendment we are challenging the independence of the commission, but how is the commission

created? Subsection 8 of section 3 of the Pension Act is the one which, so to speak, constitutes the commission so far as terms of appointment are concerned, and it reads as follows:

Each commissioner, except an ad hoc commissioner, holds office during good behaviour for a period of ten years from the date of his appointment, or for such lesser period as may be specified by the governor in council in the instrument of his appointment or reappointment, but any commissioner, including an ad hoc commissioner, is removable at any time for cause by the governor in council.

That section has been in the act for I do not know how many years, certainly for many years before I had the privilege of holding the portfolio of Minister of Veterans Affairs. In other words, each one of these commissioners is appointed by order in council. He can be appointed for a year; he can be appointed for two, five or ten years, but not more than ten years. When his term of appointment is up, even if it is an appointment for one year he can be reappointed only by order in council, and should any reason arise, which fortunately has never happened, he can be removed by order in council.

Now, I sincerely ask hon. members in what manner will the present amendment add something that will affect the independence of that commission? Hon. members say we are taking away the responsibility of parliament to control money. They all know that as the matter stands now the salaries of these commissioners are provided by statute, and become a statutory item in the estimates. Parliament, from year to year, does not even consider the statutory item covering the salaries of the commissioners. If these salaries are fixed by order in council, every year the Minister of Veterans Affairs, who is responsible for providing funds to administer the commission, has to come before this house and request approval of the necessary funds to pay the commissioners' salaries. Every year hon. members who are so ardent in their defence of the right of parliament have occasion to either approve, diminish or make any suggestion concerning the salaries of the commissioners they desire, whereas they would not have that opportunity under the present statute.

Now, Mr. Chairman, in my opinion that is the crux of the question. I repeat that I believe every hon. member who has to deal with the Canadian pension commission will admit this body has always been above political considerations. I can assure hon. members in this house that if I had thought for one minute that by bringing forward this