

Government Orders

The government likes to say that it wants to co-operate with its employees, it wants to co-operate with its partners in these pension funds. It has failed to listen to the testimony that was put before the committee. It failed to respond to the concerns of the pensioners and future pensioners and to members of the opposition. Very legitimate points that were raised in committee were not responded to and were not addressed.

There were numerous amendments put before this House in a last minute effort to try to get the government to live up to its word on this bill and on what it was supposed to do. Those amendments were unanimously turned down by the government.

Finally, the bill shows a complete lack of fairness. It is almost as if the government has trouble passing up any opportunity to profit from human misfortune. That is most evident in the comments I will make shortly on how divorced and separated wives of Public Service pensioners, armed forces or RCMP personnel are treated.

I want to talk about some of the specifics of the bill. The government has done, as we say and as we admit, a couple of minor improvements in the pension arrangements. For instance, the improvement in the supplementary death benefit is certainly a step forward. For a number of years now there has been a tremendous surplus in that supplementary death benefit account as people's salaries have improved and as their contributions have grown. The supplementary death benefit payment has remained at a paltry \$500 for many, many years.

The fact that the government has finally chosen to give people the supplementary death benefit that they are paying for and that they have generated a surplus to pay for is not particularly credit-worthy except to say that it is a tad overdue.

The major claim the government has made to giving us a fairer pension plan is that it will now allow pension splitting. In other words, it will allow in its own plans a tiny portion of what is allowed under the Canada Pension Plan or what is required under private sector pension plans. Behind this small provision in the bill lie thousands of lives of misery, thousands of years of poverty, mostly for women and their children. The government has failed miserably to resolve that situation.

This bill continues to leave in the hands of not even parliamentarians but Treasury Board officials the discretion to deem somebody to be dead just so they do not have to pay them a pension. This means that somebody who is married to an armed forces officer or an RCMP officer—I refer to those services because that is where the situation arises most often—for the entire period of time that the pensioner was accumulating the pension, may be left without any pension. The government, despite knowing for a decade that this is a serious failure of this pension plan, has entirely failed to correct that problem.

• (1600)

There are women who have participated throughout a marriage in the accumulation of a pension benefit being denied that pension benefit. This bill makes it worse for the spouse of a member of these plans because it now reduces from three years to one year the period in which a second spouse or common law spouse can be recognized for pension purposes.

Someone who marries a pensioner later in life who had no part in the accumulation of the pension plan may benefit, where a long-time spouse is denied the pension, even when there is a separation agreement or a support order entitling that person to half the pension when the pensioner dies.

Treasury Board has the right to totally ignore the wishes of the pensioner and the needs of a lifetime spouse and to deny any pension whatsoever to that person.

Where is the family compact when we are talking about women who followed their husbands around the world in military service, who gave up any opportunity to develop their own careers, who in essence became part of the military in supporting the career of a military member, who never were able because of that to develop their own pension plans and who could be left in poverty by a government that would bring forward a bill like this and leave that unjust and unfair situation in place?

The government will say it is allowing court orders to say that a spouse can get a capital value. That is a help. It makes it easier for a couple separating to divide an asset without putting both of them into poverty. However, there is no guarantee that the spouse will have an asset that will anywhere produce the pension that the spouse has earned by being married.