

Government Orders

and many others were willing to put their lives on the line. Many paid the supreme sacrifice. Many were wounded and the result is that we are free today.

Mr. Speaker, as we approach this November 11 when members of Parliament will attend Remembrance Day services across the country, let us make certain that we have indeed kept the faith with those who served Canada in her hour of need.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina—Lumsden): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to take part in this debate. This bill amends several pieces of legislation that we support.

We in the New Democratic Party find much to support in the bill. For example, we are pleased to note the bill would require government to use proceeds from the estates of veterans who die without heirs to be placed in a trust fund and used for the benefit of other veterans, rather than going into general revenue of the government, which has been the practice for years, and which I submit is long overdue to be corrected.

We are glad to see the extension of the attendance allowance to class 2 widows. We are glad to see that a means test for disabled children of deceased veterans is removed. Of course, we have always opposed means testing for social programs.

In the main, this is a progressive piece of legislation. It extends some benefits to veterans and their dependants and puts into statute law some of the more generous practices of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Specifically, there is now legal provision for clothing allowances for veterans whose disability cause wear and tear on their clothing. Again, Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the minister on a positive move.

However, this government has not shown itself either willing or able to listen to the electorate, nor even to take constructive criticism. It was with some delight and surprise I was able to note that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has listened to veterans organizations like the Royal Canadian Legion, Army, Navy, and Air Force Vets, and I am a member of both, and the National Council of Veterans Organizations, and drafted amendments to C-87 to meet the concerns of those groups.

Again I congratulate the minister. He has shown some sensitivity that we all appreciate.

Part of Bill C-87 is concerned with the operations of the Veterans Appeal Board. One of the provisions lengthens the terms of members from five and three to seven and five years. We also see this as a positive measure to allow members of the board to become more expert in their work before they must leave the board.

I would like to take this opportunity again to congratulate the government on the quality of appointments it has made to the Veterans Appeal Board. It is fair to say that many of the present government's appointments to boards and commissions have been something less than judicious and appropriate. Thankfully, appointments to the Veterans Appeal Board, not only from this government but previous governments, have remained to bob the pork barrel.

In fact, I would like publicly and in the House to congratulate the Veterans Appeal Board for the fine work it has done over the years. I humbly submit that I would like to see this government, or the next government—which could be my party—take appropriate measures to ensure that appointments to the Veterans Appeal Board will remain relatively non-partisan.

While I am on the subject of the Veterans Appeal Board, I would like to suggest to the minister that he might want to consider introducing legislation in the near future that would allow the board to hold hearings from time to time across the country. We could run into a situation where a veteran who has an appeal is not satisfied with the pensions advocate who appeared on his behalf when he made application and he wants to appear himself or have a lawyer represent him. This means that one or both of them have to go to Charlottetown.

In those instances I would think that once or twice a year the board should meet in different places in Canada to make sure that the veteran is satisfied with the representation that he can.

It is with mixed feelings I say that the minister's department is responsible for meeting the needs of fewer and fewer war veterans. I cannot say how glad I am that this has been the case, but more needs to be done.