

Prisoners of War

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): Canada's legislation for pension benefits and other services for our veteran population ranks among the best in the world.

It gives me a great deal of personal satisfaction to speak on a bill to amend the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act. The bill will affect compensation paid to about 200 veterans who were prisoners of war during the first world war and about 100 "evaders"—persons who were in enemy or enemy-occupied territory and evaded capture. These evaders were, in general, members of the RCAF who were shot down during the second world war and avoided capture after reaching the ground. Also affected by the bill are a number of veterans who had become prisoners of war and who escaped from their captors.

This measure, the provisions of which are retroactive to April 1, 1976, will amend the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act to provide compensation for former prisoners of war of the first world war and evaders and escapees under the same basic terms and conditions as for second world war prisoners of war of another power. Under the present legislation, Mr. Speaker, only the time actually spent as a prisoner of war may be counted toward computation of POW compensation. Some prisoners escaped and were recaptured, as I said before; others managed to evade capture and eventually reached allied lines or were able to return to the United Kingdom.

● (1732)

It is estimated, however, that there may be as many as 75 cases where an escapee's rate of compensation would be increased if the time between escape and recapture, or escape and eventual reporting to his own or allied force, could be counted as prisoner of war time. There are now about 200 surviving members of the armed forces who evaded capture by the enemy, and it is estimated half of this number evaded the enemy for three months or more.

Members will recall that in 1971 the Pension Act was amended to provide special benefits to the equivalent of a minimum 50 per cent pension to former prisoners of war of the Japanese because of the long-term after effects they suffered as a result of their imprisonment.

Four years later the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act was passed. This act provides benefits on a sliding scale to former prisoners of war of other powers during the second world war and other later conflicts. It also upgraded the benefits for those who were POWs of the Japanese.

There can be no doubt that conditions in German prisoner of war camps 60 years ago were very primitive indeed—conditions and experiences that do not relate to any other civilized kind of incarceration. This group of about 200 first world war prisoners of war, whose average age is about 82, probably suffered from malnutrition and deprivation to an extent at least equivalent to their second world war counterparts.

I am sure, Mr. Speaker, that the measures proposed in this bill will be welcomed by every member of the House as further

[Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan).]

evidence of Canada's awareness of the special contribution made by our veterans to our country.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): Mr. Speaker, I would also like to pay special tribute to all those who have been involved in the studies which led to this bill: the veterans' organizations, the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, other members of this House and officials of the Canadian Pension Commission.

Mr. Jack Marshall (Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe): Mr. Speaker, today, as a result of the introduction of these amendments to the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act, we are taking another small step in achieving the recognition due and commitment to another small segment of our veterans population. In this case we are recognizing, albeit it some 60 years late, the effects of incarceration on first world war prisoners, as well as escapees and evaders during the second world war, because of the suffering and dangers to which they were exposed. As a result of avoiding capture they experienced effects in some cases equal to the danger to their lives, which they offered Canada at the call of our government, a call to their patriotism as the youth of our country.

While I feel it is my duty, and I do so without reservation, to commend the minister for listening to the plea of veterans organizations, the veterans themselves who were caught in this situation, and most members of the House of Commons who made a plea to bring in this bill which will overcome another part of the faith that we want to restore in the veterans of Canada as to what Canada's commitment is to them. I hope that even with the introduction of this bill, which will correct another glaring inequity in the veterans charter, hon. members will remember we should not feel too smug about what we have accomplished, if indeed it is an accomplishment. Perhaps it should be better described as giving ourselves relief from guilt complex; it is a relief to our conscience because we waited so long to recognize that incarceration in POW camps in the first world war also had serious effects on the lives of those who served and denied them the advantage of opportunity back in that great country of Canada at the same level as those who returned unharmed.

I welcome the fact, too, that those within the department of the minister have had the compassion to make the effective date of compensation retroactive to the original date of bill C-292, April 1976, which is only fair and decent. In some cases this will amount to some financial relief to those veterans who, on a small pension, are faced with the effects of a strangling inflation which is so difficult to cope with these days.

In the case of veterans who fall in the 10 per cent to 20 per cent category, this amendment should mean that they will receive, because of the retroactivity, between \$1,300 and \$2,600. Perhaps this will take away some of the sting of bitterness which they feel towards politicians as a whole, and as they wonder why all of a sudden we can find the insignifi-