

The Address—Mr. Cyr

● (1600)

I thank the minister for the answer he gave me the other day, namely, that the report of the special committee that studied the basic rate will be referred to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs as soon as it is established. I hope this is something that will be dealt with before anything happens to this parliament. This is a piece of unfinished business that must not again go unfinished. The basic rate must be put on a basis consistent with what the plan was when the Pension Act was first set up many decades ago. It was set up on a basis that would be fair to the veterans of this country.

But, Mr. Speaker, I make a special plea to the new Minister of Veterans Affairs to take it as his responsibility in this parliament to see that something gets done by way of substantially improving the War Veterans Allowance Act. Most of the improvements we made in the last parliament with respect to veterans were improvements in the Pension Act and in one or two other pieces of legislation related thereto.

It is also true that we made some increases in the allowances paid under the War Veterans Allowance Act, but the basic approach of that act, that piece of welfare legislation, is that it has a means test which gives the veteran very little advantage over the civilian. This still stands. In fact, during the past four years the slight advantage that was there for the veteran has been narrowed. That is wrong. I do not think the people of Canada like it. If we were still a little closer to the time of the last war, I think there would be very strong opposition to it. I call upon this minister to ensure that improvements are made in the War Veterans Allowance Act, particularly in terms of raising the ceiling on the means test in that act.

I see that Your Honour is about to rise. I shall sit down without having to be told to do so. I simply want to thank the House for listening to me this afternoon. I thank the government for having so many ministers here. I plead with all of them to appreciate the seriousness of the whole pension situation, and to give their active attention to all aspects of the pension problem. I plead with the government, with other Liberal members and with all opposition members not to allow anything to happen to this parliament until we have solved many of the pension problems our people now face. In particular, let nothing happen to this parliament until we have achieved a substantial increase in the old age security pension and a lowering of the eligible age under both the Old Age Security Act and the Canada Pension Plan.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Cyr (Gaspé): Mr. Speaker, on the opening of this twenty-ninth Parliament, I think it is proper to offer to you, in my own name and for those Gaspé people you were visiting during your holidays of 1969, our congratulations on the occasion of your re-election as Speaker of the House. The task of the Speaker is not an easy one. However, your talents, experience and knowledge of parliamentary procedure narrowed the choice of a Speaker and I understand why you were unanimously elected. I ask you to believe that we are very proud that you are still with us.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

On the subject of the House Speaker, may I be permitted to remind you of 1926, when the Right Hon. Arthur Meighen, then Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative party, was heading the government. He then proposed to have a Liberal as Speaker. He was Sir Rodolphe Lemieux, the member for Gaspé. I wish to underline this fact since it was the first time since Confederation.

On the other hand, for the second time in the history of the House, we have elected a member of the opposition as Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Committees of the Whole. The first one was Mr. Georges H. Boivin who was the member for Shefford, in 1918. The election of the hon. member for Halifax-East Hants (Mr. McCleave) is a very happy choice.

I also wish to congratulate the mover and seconder of the Address in reply to the Speech from the Throne (Mr. Blais and Mr. Blaker). They certainly showed a remarkable ability in doing the task that the right hon. Prime Minister assigned to them.

In the speech which the Governor General pronounced on January 4, there is one excerpt which the Gaspé people will certainly appreciate. I quote:

—the Government will meet with the provincial governments in the five regions of the country, to examine the impact of freight rates on economic development and consumer prices. The railways have agreed to participate in these meetings.

I am grateful to the government for its concern, shared by the provinces, about the impact that freight rates can have on the economic development of some areas removed from the large centres of production and consumption.

In the past, the government has recognized that the very expensive services offered by the transportation industry constitute a real obstacle to the development of several parts of the country. Indeed, studies show that high transportation rates are a real problem because they do not allow for the shipment of goods from producer to consumer at a reasonable price. In order to correct this situation, subsidies are already paid to this industry for some classes of goods and in some areas of the country. As an example, I shall only mention the special subsidies paid for the movement of goods in the Atlantic area, which benefit the Gaspé peninsula.

● (1610)

An area like the Gaspé peninsula should be serviced by several means of transportation. We should therefore not limit ourselves to railroads: highways, air lines and boat services may also be used. By accepting those operations and in agreement with the provinces, we must find better solutions to that communications problem. Indeed, it must be recognized that without government assistance, transportation in the Gaspé peninsula is not very profitable.

In our area, there is not enough goods being moved at present, to provide services at a reasonable cost, the largest item being imported consumer goods.

Rates are one factor that affects transportation. They determine exactly what "economic" distance separates the producing area of a given item from its destination and provide for greater advantages for those areas that export the same items.