

these special considerations, applications are handled as far as possible in the order of receipt.

Thus, I can assure hon. members that whenever a justifiably urgent case is brought to the attention of the commission it is given priority attention. In other words, so far as we are aware prompt consideration is being given to all claims where there is real need. Last fall seven more commissioners were appointed and they will soon be able to carry their full share of the load. Support staff has also increased substantially and more will be taken on as fast as they can be trained for these highly specialized jobs.

The cumulative result of these measures is that the output of the commission is rising substantially. This trend, and the fact that the trend of new applications is downward, leads to the conclusion that, hopefully before summer comes, decisions rendered will outnumber applications received. But even when the current backlog has been completely eliminated, much time will still be required to deal with the continuing flow of applications based on service of long ago. As I have already said, this type of application constitutes a large part of those now awaiting decision.

Before leaving veterans affairs subjects I want to say a few words about our treatment services. In 1964 it was announced that the government was prepared to transfer DVA hospitals to suitable public authorities, subject to certain conditions. Stated briefly, those conditions would guarantee adequate accommodation and satisfactory standards of treatment for veterans, and the continued employment of the hospital staffs at rates of pay and other benefits equivalent to those they enjoyed as federal public servants. Since then, several DVA treatment institutions have been turned over to such authorities, notably Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, Ste. Foy Hospital near Quebec City and, last November, Lancaster Hospital near Saint John, New Brunswick. Negotiations for the transfer of other DVA hospitals are in various stages of discussion.

I want to assure hon. members that the policy of this government on that point remains the same. Indeed, it can be no other way if we are to fulfil our obligation of providing satisfactory medical treatment for the veterans for whom we have treatment responsibilities. Very few veterans are now under 50 years of age, and it is increasingly difficult to recruit highly qualified medical and technical staffs for hospitals which are chiefly providing chronic treatment to older people.

I do not want to imply that the standards of medical treatment in our remaining hospitals are not high. We still have many well qualified, dedicated, medical, nursing and technical services employees, but it is becoming more and more difficult to replace those who retire, for younger professionals in the medical sciences prefer to work in hospitals offering wider experience and more constructive challenges.

Our responsibility is to provide quality treatment for veterans, and we intend to do so. It is apparent that in the years to come it will be more effective and economical to buy that treatment than to provide it, and our policy is to continue to work toward that objective.

The Address—Mr. Carter

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Would the minister permit a question? Can he tell us what the backlog of applications is at present? I am referring to the cases before the Canadian Pension Commission.

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): Mr. Speaker, I did not have my earpiece on, but I believe the hon. member asked about the backlog of applications at present. The figure may not be exact, but I believe that at present it amounts to 9,400.

Mr. Marshall: Mr. Speaker, first of all I should like to congratulate the new minister on his appointment. In view of the fact that it will be impossible to get evidence on cases which go back 10 or 15 years, would the minister consider and discuss with the pension commission the relaxation of the benefit of the doubt clause, because it seems to be part of the problem? If we are going to give them the benefit of the doubt, let us give them the real benefit of the doubt. Will the minister take that matter into account?

• (1550)

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): Yes, I will take it seriously into account. If I might be allowed to elaborate for a moment, Mr. Speaker, some of us know of cases of veterans with whom we served. We are aware of something that happened to them, something that is not recorded in their papers. This is why I would be in favour of this suggestion, and I will bring it to the attention of the commission.

Mr. Walter C. Carter (St. John's West): I should like to join other hon. members of the House who have taken part in this debate in extending to His Honour, the Speaker, my sincere congratulations on his re-election to that very important post. I have every confidence, as have my colleagues, that His Honour will discharge the awesome responsibility which has been entrusted to him with dignity and fairness to all members of the House. I would also like to extend to you, Sir, my sincere congratulations on your election to the very important office of Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you, too, will discharge your responsibilities with the same dignity and fairness to all members of the House regardless of political affiliation.

Needless to say, I am honoured to have been re-elected by the voters of St. John's West to represent them once more in this House. To other hon. members who were re-elected, I offer my sincere congratulations. To those who occupy seats in this House for the first time I wish the very best and I hope their tenure of office will be rewarding and fruitful to themselves and to the people they represent.

The Speech from the Throne opening this session of our twenty-ninth parliament contained very few surprises for the average Canadian. However, it does stand out as representing the fastest reversal, the fastest about-turn in government policy since the Prime Minister's recognition of the Queen. But I am afraid, Sir, that it contains about as much sincerity. It seems that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and his ministers have come to realize that people, their needs, desires and expectations must be considered top priority by any legislative body, and the House of Commons is no exception. People are very important,