

I do not want to become too partisan, but it is obvious from comments of members opposite that we should have some partisan approach. My reading of the situation, from a vantage point outside parliament in March of this year, was similar to that of Geoffrey Stevens in his article of March 13. We all know that Mr. Stevens is not the greatest friend of the Liberal party, or has not been in the past. Hon. members might like to read that article. The Conservative party at that time was desperately looking for any excuse to provoke an election at any cost. I quote from the article:

The Conservatives found a way to twist the VLA deadline into an insidiously worded non-confidence motion while protesting that defeating the government was the farthest thing from their minds.

The New Democrats found a way to use the non-confidence motion to bring another, and dubious, concession out of the government while protesting that politics was the farthest thing from their innocent minds. I quote:

The veterans of Canada will know, said NDP leader David Lewis... that the Conservative party is ready to play politics with their welfare.

That is what we have before us today, genuine sincerity on behalf of some hon. members, and an exercise to save face for the actions of last March by others, playing the veterans of our nation off for political gain. I certainly cannot condone that. Those who protest do so full well in the knowledge that this minister, who is perhaps one of the most distinguished ever to grace this portfolio—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Collenette:—and his sincerity cannot be questioned, would not dare to jeopardize the rights of veterans. Not being privy to cabinet decision making, I fully share the faith of my colleague, the hon. member for Mercier (Mr. Boulanger), who stated last evening he was sure the minister would introduce legislation to answer the needs of those few veterans who have not been assisted under the Veterans' Land Act. Perhaps this can be done by a mortgage financing program under the Department of Urban Affairs, or by a program for rural retirement settlement under the Department of Agriculture.

There is no question of the government reneging on the commitment made by former Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden in 1917, which the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe quoted yesterday, and which can be found at page 1069 of yesterday's *Hansard*.

I recently had occasion to be guest speaker at the semi-annual meeting of the Toronto and district Royal Canadian Legion at No. 10 branch which is in my constituency and, I might add, as a non-veteran. I might say at this point that that portion of my constituency, which is known as the borough of East York, was settled primarily by veterans and their families after both world wars. I can safely say that the constituency of York East probably has one of the largest concentrations of veterans in the country. By coincidence, I might state that I am very happy that the mayor of East York, His Worship Willis Blair, is here today to hear my remarks.

At that meeting I spoke on benefits in general that had been available to veterans under programs established by the Department of Veterans Affairs. A significant portion of my speech dealt with the question of the Veterans' Land Act. I would like to read from that. I quote:

Veterans Affairs

The Veterans' Land Act was designed to assist veterans to pick up the threads of civilian life following discharge from active wartime service by settling on the land as full or part-time farmers, or in association with their occupation of commercial fishing. It was realized that not all veterans would be interested in or find that the provisions of the act best suited their post-war needs and plans. As a result, two other post-war rehabilitation programs were developed, university training and re-establishment credits, with benefits under all three measures being alternative to each other.

Having regard for the purpose of the legislation, the lengthy period which had already elapsed since the end of world war II, and for the fact the university training program had been completed in the mid-fifties, in 1959 parliament approved amendments which established September 30, 1962, as the terminal date for veterans to use re-establishment credit benefits or to become qualified under the Veterans' Land Act. In 1962, this deadline was extended to October 31, 1968.

For the same reasons, in 1965 parliament enacted further amendments which established terminal dates for phasing out VLA lending operations in an orderly and reasonable manner. These legislative changes specified March 31, 1974, as the final date for qualified veterans to apply for settlement under the act and March 31, 1977, as the deadline for veterans with subsisting VLA contracts to apply for additional loans. Last spring, the March 31, 1974 deadline was extended one year.

We all know the reason for that. The opposition, for their own political gain, forced the government to extend this an additional year.

As I have noted, the Veterans' Land Act was designed as a land settlement program to assist veterans following discharge from active wartime service as distinct from being an urban housing measure for use following retirement from post-war occupations or careers. In the circumstances, and bearing in mind that the other two alternative programs were concluded quite some time ago, it is difficult to believe that veterans genuinely interested in VLA assistance have not had an adequate opportunity to do so in the period of almost 30 years which has elapsed since the end of World War II.

At the luncheon break I discussed this matter and the impending probability that the VLA would be terminated in March of next year, and there were no objections from any of the members with whom I spoke. In fact an office holder of the Legion said that it was quite understandable that the government should want to phase out this program at this time, and that he knew most veterans were more than satisfied with the efforts of successive Canadian governments over the years to ameliorate their lives.

Indeed, the only time when this topic arose in the general election campaign was at all-candidates meetings via planted questions by my Tory opponent. That is how the people in York East felt about it once it was properly explained. I think the minister has done a very good job of explaining it.

What then is the nature of the problem today? The nature of the problem is that in spite of understanding the nature of veterans benefits legislation and recognizing its merits, and also recognizing the wisdom of endeavouring at one point in our history to close the books on the benefits to world war II veterans, we have arrived at a stage today where, perhaps in isolated instances, there may be hardships to veterans.

Is it not understandable that a law which was properly conceived, debated and enacted, containing a deadline which was properly advertised and under which every veteran was given a proper opportunity to qualify, may yet, despite every precaution, cause some veterans to regret today the fact they did not apply for certificates of qualification? There are others, of course, who did apply who find themselves in a position where they cannot make