

Veterans' Pensions

These measures are long overdue and will affect a relatively small number of people but will make an enormous difference to those who should have been assisted before.

The actual disability pension for veterans, even at 100 per cent, is a pitifully small amount, an amount no one in this House would dream of living or subsisting on. The Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald) announced an increase in the basic rate of pension for disabled veterans in May of this year, an increase for which the Conservative party had fought long and hard. We did everything we could in committee to have an amending formula included which would have kept this basic pension adjusted to increases in the pay scales of the five selected categories of public service workers, but to no avail.

I am disappointed that no mention has been made of this in the new bill. Personally, I can see very little advantage these days in a meagre one-shot increase with no built-in protection against inflation. Inflation is a fact of life today and any fixed income simply has to be indexed in some way if a person receiving it is to survive. We may honour the dead, but it seems to me we are treating the veteran rather shabbily.

I should like to interject here that while pensions and pension legislation is one thing, the processing of pension applications is another. This government and the Minister of Veterans Affairs initiated a move of the pension commission as well as the department to Prince Edward Island. A strong commitment was given at that time to the effect that the veteran would not suffer or be hurt by the move. The *Legion* magazine, in its May, 1980, issue, documents a longer processing time with a reduced number of applications. This is a situation that the department should not allow to continue. The application would not have been made if the need was not there. That need continues month by month as people wait for the processing of those applications.

Speaking further to disability pensions, I believe, as has already been established, that there are special circumstances for the Hong Kong prisoners of war. At the first meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, the minister indicated that, as far as the government was concerned, a prisoner of war was a prisoner of war, that the government would not differentiate, and it has not in this bill.

I believe that the treatment undergone by the Dieppe prisoners of war was so dreadful and so extended as to make them a separate class of prisoner of war. No one who has any idea of what those prisoners went through and how, as a result of that experience, their lives have been affected since, could fail to agree that the present 20 per cent pension is sufficient compensation. It is well documented that the mortality rate among Dieppe prisoners of war is substantially higher than the death rate of other POW groups. There are more Dieppe prisoners of war on pension and those pensioners receive on average a higher pension than others simply because their disabilities are greater. It is well documented too that, as a group, Dieppe prisoners of war suffer a more accelerated general deterioration in health and premature aging than do other prisoners of

war. Veterans' organizations across the country are prepared to recognize this fact.

A large number of these Dieppe prisoners, most of whom are now in their mid-fifties, are partially or completely out of the labour market by reason of health or nervous conditions, heart and lung diseases or other disability causing premature death in this group, not to mention the whole range of physical and psychological disadvantages stemming from their four years of maltreatment, degradation and deprivation. The government should be giving these Dieppe prisoners of war compensation of at least 50 per cent, and this bill should be amended accordingly before long. If we do not honour the living, let us at least make their probably shortened lives somewhat easier and more enjoyable.

"Giving" is a misleading word to use. The government is not "giving" pensions to former prisoners of war and other veterans; this money has been earned by those who fought in two world wars. I recognize the words used by a colleague just a moment ago, who said they have given the people of this country the opportunity to enjoy today the privileges and freedoms that are so dear to us. Let us recognize the fact in this House that these people have a right to enjoy a respectable lifestyle. It is the duty of the government to protect and ensure this right. All Canadians owe these pensions to them. It is not a matter of giving—it is a matter of owing to those who fought for our country and who have well and truly earned our respect and recognition.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I should like to say a few words chiefly in reply to the hon. member for Victoria (Mr. McKinnon), who spoke about those over age 65 and about pension increases. I can assure him that they will lose nothing.

The hon. member had another question about the wives of VLA recipients. I am glad to be able to tell the House that this legislation will be forthcoming before too long. We have had a problem dealing with it and getting it in a shape satisfactory to all concerned. I expect to bring it forward before the House recesses, however, depending, of course, on when that is.

I should like to make a correction to my speech, if I may, Mr. Speaker. Apparently there was an error in the text I was reading from. I said that on October 1, 1980, 15,000 widows and 600 children will become eligible under the Pension Act. I should have said 1,500 widows. I wanted to mention that so that it can be corrected in *Hansard*.

Mr. Knowles: That is too bad. I wish your error had been correct!

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. Members: Question.

Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and the House went into committee thereon, Mr. Francis in the chair.

● (1700)

The Chairman: Shall clause 2 carry?