

Veterans Affairs

● (2120)

Mr. Alex Patterson (Fraser Valley East): Mr. Speaker, while I intend to be relatively brief tonight I must begin by saying it is a privilege to have the opportunity of speaking on behalf of veterans in this, my first intervention in debate in the thirtieth Parliament of Canada.

I am sure everyone appreciates what has been done for veterans in Canada. We have heard many references to the Veterans Charter—how changes have been made through the years in order to bring the charter more up to date. I do not think anyone in this chamber would take the position that nothing has been done for the veterans.

I feel there has consistently been a measure of co-operation and non-partisanship when dealing with veterans affairs. I had the opportunity and the privilege of serving on the Veterans Affairs Committee a few years ago, and I certainly found this to be true at that time. Nevertheless, I believe there are still in our midst veterans who are suffering certain injustices. I realize that a discussion of these matters would be outside the ambit of the present debate but I look forward to dealing with them on a future occasion.

I think we owe a debt of thanks to my hon. friend from Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall) and to the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles). We know that, thanks to their efforts, we have this opportunity of making our views on this matter known to the government. Had it not been for the continued prodding of these two hon. gentlemen, along with others, I do not think the VLA would have survived the date of March 31, 1974.

May I hasten to say that I believe the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald) has the interests of Canadian veterans at heart, and if he had his way I am sure he would take the same stand as that taken by the two hon. gentlemen I have mentioned, along with other members on this side of the House. Unfortunately for him, for us, and possibly for the veterans of Canada, the minister has about 28 individuals in the cabinet to contend with, and I fear there are many occasions on which he has not been able to convince them that certain steps should be taken to meet the needs of veterans at the present time.

Why the government feels as it does is difficult to say. A great deal of money can obviously be found for things that are of less consequence than the measure before us, and it would seem to me that the idea of restricting expenditure is now being applied in an area to which in no circumstances should it be applied.

I remember the debate which took place in this House on March 28, 1974, when the minister introduced the bill to extend the VLA to March 31, 1975. My hon. friend from Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe said then, as reported at page 950 of *Hansard*:

If the government were really sincere it would extend the deadline, increase the loan ceiling, and many more veterans would be served.

Later he stated:

There is no earthly reason for phasing out this act until every last veteran has been served.

That is our position today, too. The program should continue until all who wish to do so have been given every

[Mr. Douglas (Bruce).]

possible opportunity to participate. My hon. friend went on to remark that unfortunately the minister was not with the right government. Well, Mr. Speaker, we know that those were the days of minority government when the cabinet was a little more responsive to the desires of the minister than it probably is at the present time. Now with the threat of parliamentary defeat removed it seems the government is prepared to dig in its heels and adopt the adamant position the minister has indicated, though such a position was possibly taken without his full agreement.

My hon. friend from Lambton-Kent (Mr. Holmes) made a request, and I should like to support that request. He asked that before the close of this debate the minister should take the floor and state that, in response to the pleas which have been made, he is prepared to go ahead and review the situation. A number of matters have been brought to his attention with regard to the act, and I shall not enlarge upon them. I shall simply mention the suggestions which have been made in order to reinforce the argument in favour of the motion before us.

We have been seeking (1) an indefinite extension of the legislation, (2) an increase in the ceiling on loans, (3) a decrease in the size requirement applicable to lots purchased under the act and (4) the elimination of the certificate of entitlement to qualify for benefits. These are improvements for which some of us on this side have been pressing. Again, recognizing the minister's position and his heroic service to the nation in addition to his understanding of veterans' problems, I would like to feel that these are proposals which he himself would wish to see carried out on behalf of those who served their country in time of need.

I believe it is reasonable to seek the indefinite extension of the act. Some have argued that the original intention was not to provide housing for veterans, and perhaps that is true. However, I ask the question: was the original intent of old age pension legislation that of providing income security? I do not think it was. The original intention was that the pension should be an additional benefit to supplement whatever income senior citizens had been able to provide for themselves for their retirement. However, it has now evolved over the years into an income security scheme that is the sole income for many individuals in our society.

● (2130)

So we ask the question: why cannot the Veterans' Land Act not become the major source of housing for veterans, rather than trying to devise a whole new program of housing for veterans, which I venture to say we will not see anyway? Why not use the mechanism that is already available? It would seem to me that this would be the sensible way to proceed, but unfortunately the government sometimes does not seem to operate in a sensible manner.

So we ask tonight: do we follow the example in the story that I remember reading when I was a boy at school—which is a few years ago now—of the dog that was crossing a little narrow bridge over a stream? This dog had a big bone in its mouth. He looked down and saw the reflection and it looked better than reality, so he dropped