

Veterans' Pensions

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Allan B. McKinnon (Victoria): Mr. Speaker, the main reason I am speaking to this bill is that my colleague and friend, the hon. member for Winnipeg-Assiniboine (Mr. McKenzie), is not able to be here because of illness. I am sure we all wish him a speedy recovery from an operation that he has had.

I would like to welcome the minister back to the House. I hope he does not find today's exertions too much, and I also hope his health will continue to improve and that he will be with us throughout the life of this Parliament.

First of all, when one looks at this bill, it does puzzle us as to what took it so long to arrive here. This is a bill where many of the features have been in effect for 15, 20 or even 50 years. They were unjust when they were drafted and when the bill was passed and they have remained unjust ever since. Some of them are relatively minor. However, I agree with the minister that the bill has two major issues that it approaches and there are several minor corrections made to cure these almost tedious discriminatory effects that have been occurring over the years. That is the part that I cannot understand. I will speak about the minor points first and get to the major ones later.

The first one I note with pleasure. World War I veterans are no longer discriminated against for war veterans allowance. They were required to spend one year or 365 days overseas during World War I before they became eligible for WVA, if I may use the abbreviation, whereas World War II veterans were only required to spend one day overseas. That situation simply baffled me. Ever since World War II, which is 35 years ago, we have had two classes of veterans, namely the World War II veteran who had to spend only one day overseas, the other being the World War I veteran who had to spend one year overseas. This was a ridiculous requirement which should have been amended 35 years ago.

The second one is a minor amendment that provides fair treatment for orphans. There is another amendment with regard to a widow who loses her pension if she remarries. If she should lose the second husband, she can again draw the pension she received following the death of her first husband. That is a progressive move.

● (1550)

There is another amendment here which I welcome; I had not seen it previously. If a mistake is made by the Department of Veterans Affairs which adversely affects a veteran's pension, it can now be corrected within the department rather than requiring governor in council approval.

There is one glaring omission here; I do not think it is the fault of the minister. It is a difficulty I had hoped he might mention in his speech. Maybe he will do that when called upon to answer questions in the committee stage. I refer to the total absence of any mention in his remarks of the Veterans Land Act. There is mention of it in the bill. It has nothing to do with the part of it that I am worried about, namely, the right of spouses under the Veterans Land Act.

A lot of publicity was given to a case about a year ago concerning a woman who shared a business with her husband.

The business had a Veterans Land Act loan put on it which immediately made it the sole property of the veteran. The wife no longer had any right whatsoever. If the marriage breaks up, the wife has no right to the home the two of them share. That case may have received more publicity than most, but it is not an isolated one. This is happening all the time.

There is a great difficulty when trying to change this by phasing in a bill to change the terms of 40,000 mortgages in effect under the VLA. I would appreciate it if the minister could tell us if they are still working on that. They were working on it. I had received assurance that an amendment would be ready this spring, difficult though it was. That is what kept us from putting an amendment into the Veterans Land Act when our Bill C-28 was introduced.

Bill C-28 has become fairly well known due to the fact that it has been mentioned almost every Thursday afternoon since this Parliament began sitting. The Conservative government introduced that bill to rectify the anomalies and inequities that we saw in the veterans' legislation at that time. This is what caused me to make my opening remark as to why it took so long for this bill to be prepared.

The first half of Bill C-40 is almost a reprint of our bill C-28. It has exactly the same effect. That bill was there to act as a pattern, and I believe in some ways it did, although there are more changes than I expected in the new bill. We wonder why it did not come in a bit sooner. Why was it necessary for the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) to get up in the House of Commons during question period to ask if we could please get this veterans' bill? He asked for that bill sight unseen. Nobody on this side of the House saw Bill C-40 which the minister has just introduced until today.

The Leader of the Opposition offered to free up a day of the House of Commons in order that this bill could be brought in. We guaranteed to put it through all stages today. That was quite an offer to make. When I read a couple of clauses in this bill, I had some second thoughts about the wisdom of offering to pass the bill through all stages without having seen it.

I will get to the two major issues right away. I wish to point out that the history of this bill is that it was brought into the House today because the Leader of the Opposition made an issue of it on Monday. I might quote some of the minister's statements; *Hansard* is full of them. The minister said he was soon going to discuss the matter with cabinet; he was soon going to talk to his colleagues about it. This might be the first bill we have ever dealt with that has never been to cabinet, as far as one can tell from reading the minister's comments over the last few weeks.

There are two main issues here. The first is the 48 per cent rule, the main reason for the bill in the first place. As the minister pointed out in his remarks, over the years if a pensioner was getting a 48 per cent pension, his widow—generally they were widows, but it could work the other way around—would get \$550 odd dollars a month for the rest of her life. However, if the pensioner was getting 47 per cent, she did not receive anything. This is so obviously unfair that it has been the subject of debate and questioning in this House as