

Adjournment Debate

● (2200)

As indicated, in previous statements which I have made both in the House and to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, VLA was not designed as a program of urban housing nor as part of a retirement program for persons reaching the end of their productive careers. Its basic purpose was to provide loans for the purchase of agricultural land to be used on a full or part time farming basis by veterans who were interested in this form of rehabilitation program on their return to civilian life following wartime active force service.

The point that my friend and I sought to make in the motion that this House passed, on November 9 is that the minister should meet head-on the contention that veterans are now making, since these veterans are older men, that even though they are not now at an age that they can go into farming, even though all they want a smallholding for is a place to have a home and to retire, that that request should be met. A good deal has been said about the number of veterans—whether it is 125,000 or 140,000—who have certificates that would qualify them for a loan under the Veterans Land Act because they got the certificate before October 3, 1968. It is often said about them that they got those qualification certificates just in case they might want to use them, but now that there is a deadline of March 31, 1974, unless they get a loan before then, they are out. Some of these veterans, admittedly, are not wanting to go into small farming but they have other comrades who got assistance for a smallholding which includes a home and a house that they are living in, and in which they are able to retire, and they feel they should have that right as well.

As I say, the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe will develop other aspects of the matter, but the point I should like to impress upon the minister is that it does not satisfy us for him continually to tell us that the act was set up simply for farming purposes. We think that the desire to have a small piece of property on which to retire, the desire to have a piece of this land for which our veterans fought, and the wish to have a home is a legitimate one. We think that the minister should consider seriously what this House unanimously passed on November 9, namely, that thought be given to changing the regulations so that veterans can get loans under the Veterans Land Act even if all they want is enough money for enough land on which to build a place where they can live and enjoy their home and their period of retirement.

As I say, there are various angles in this issue but it seems to me that the time has come for the minister to deal directly with this request: that the Veterans Land Act, or at least its regulations, be transformed to meet the needs of over 100,000 veterans who have certificates, who admittedly want mainly a chance to build a home in which they can retire. I simply say, why not? For my part, and I know I speak for my friend from Newfoundland and I think probably the minister agrees with both of us, this desire ought to be met and I hope that tonight, either in his answer to me or in his answer to the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe, the minister will give us the answer that I believe, he really wants to give us.

Hon. Daniel J. MacDonald (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Mr. Speaker, the motion moved by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) on November 9 last requested that I give urgent consideration

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

to the amendment of the Veterans Land Act regulations to permit veterans to acquire smallholdings, even if the main purpose of the older veterans now applying for VLA loans is to meet their housing requirements. I believe the nature of the amendment contemplated would be cancellation of section 24 of the Veterans Land Act which prescribes that the minimum size of property for VLA smallholding purposes shall be one half acre or, at the discretion of the director, not less than 17,424 square feet. This is not, of course, a new proposal. Although I have not completed the consideration which the House requested I give to the matter, I must say that I am impressed with the substance of the numerous factors which on previous occasions led to the conclusion that a change such as I believe is contemplated by this motion should not be made.

In looking at this matter in the perspective of the purpose of the Veterans Land Act, it must be remembered that it was one of three alternative rehabilitation measures enacted to assist veterans following discharge from wartime active service, and was designed for those interested in settling on the land as full-time farmers or in utilizing agricultural land in conjunction with off-farm employment.

I believe it is evident that the smallholding or part-time farming provisions of the Veterans Land Act were never intended to represent a measure to assist veterans in the acquisition of urban housing. To have done so would have served to duplicate the provisions of the National Housing Act and the various arrangements made under that act in the post-war years to make housing accommodation available to veterans. It was, in fact, to avoid any such duplication and to adhere to the intent and purpose of the Veterans Land Act that minimum acreage requirements for smallholdings were prescribed by regulation in 1946.

Further evidence to this effect is furnished by the approval given by parliament in 1954 to the introduction of part II of the Veterans Land Act—as recommended by the government by the Royal Canadian Legion—under which financial and other assistance was made available to veterans interested in building homes on city-size lots and who were approved for loans under the National Housing Act.

More than 4,500 veterans built their own homes under the provisions of part II. I think it must be acknowledged that these veterans at least would consider complete elimination of a minimum acreage requirement to be a breach of faith. I believe it must also be realized, however, that a substantial number of veterans who used benefits alternative to those of the Veterans Land Act did so because VLA smallholding loans were not available for the purchase of city-size lots in urban areas and particularly those who did not obtain a VLA certificate of qualification for that reason by the deadline of October 31, 1968, would take a similar view if action were to be taken now to eliminate the minimum land requirement.

In considering this matter, I must also keep in mind that section 24 of the Act already provides that the minimum land requirement does not apply to veterans in receipt of a disability pension of 50 per cent or more. As I indicated at the beginning of my remarks, Mr. Speaker, I have not yet completed my consideration of this matter. From my studies to date, however, I would reiterate that I am strongly