

Government Orders

If the veteran errs in the information given to his pension officer who works for the Department of Veterans Affairs, it could be used against the veteran when his case is adjudicated by that department. This is a conflict of interest. It presents an arrangement that precludes any sort of confidentiality between veterans and pension officers.

The veteran also loses solicitor-client privilege at the appeal level. He has access to a bureau lawyer. However the lawyer is no longer an independent solicitor who keeps the veteran's case in confidence. He is now an employee of the Department of Veterans Affairs. His paycheque comes from the Department of Veterans Affairs. I conclude this is a conflict of interest and works against veterans.

How can the veteran be confident that the information he gives the bureau advocate will not be used against him when the advocate works for the department and not for him? The veteran is already angry and frustrated that he has to appeal his case in the first place. Now he has to trust another departmental employee with his case. Therefore under this legislation veterans will lose the right to solicitor-client privilege.

I foresee another difficulty with the Bureau of Pensions Advocates being removed from the first level. Under Bill C-67 the size of the bureaucracy will be increased and the minister will be getting more power to influence the department's internal affairs.

I think every member of the House would agree that bureaucracies in the country are too big as it is. Under these proposals the minister may have undue influence over the whole decision making process, the quality of service or the rate of acceptance.

Departmental employees will be vulnerable to receiving direction that could deter from encouraging veterans to pursue benefits and services to which they are entitled. They will also be under pressure to take part in fiscal restraint. Even an offhanded comment by the minister could affect the way his staff deals with veterans. We only have to look at the way the money markets danced and sang to the finance minister's prebudget comments, to the detriment of Canadians.

Veterans will lose a number of other rights under the legislation. I have offered the government a number of amendments that would have corrected the situation. I was in consultation with many groups of veterans including the Royal Canadian Legion which represents some 250,000 veterans. The member opposite does not have an ear for listening to grassroots consultations.

However it must be stated that it is totally unclear at this point what the regulations will say. We have not even seen the regulations or even know for a fact that they exist. The rights of veterans under Bill C-67 will no longer be law. The government

has said that they will be in regulations. This is extremely important. Regulations can be easily changed behind closed doors, while laws must be changed in full view of the public.

I conclude my remarks by stating that Bill C-67 is a bad piece of legislation for Canada and for Canada's veterans. This is unfortunate because we have lost an opportunity to speed up the process so that veterans get the service and the pensions they deserve. Instead veterans face more delays and a decrease in their rights and services.

• (1305)

Without a commitment on the part of the government to increase first level acceptance rates this cannot be legislated. The majority of veterans will be locked into a lengthy appeal process without an independent advocate or paralegal to guide them through. The veteran is now faced with the prospect of dealing with yet another bureaucrat that works for the department.

I call on all members of the House to vote against Bill C-67. During the Remembrance Day ceremonies in the Netherlands that I took part in "The Last Post" was played at each and every one of the ceremonies. Let everyone in the House vote against the bill which sounds the last post for the rights of Canadian veterans. They fought and some of them died so that we would have the freedom to vote for what is right and for what is just. For once, let us have the courage to vote that way.

Mr. Leonard Hopkins (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada has the best veterans legislation in place of any country in the western world. Only France comes close to it.

Let us not be too negative. As we discuss the bill and talk about these issues in the House of Commons let us remember that the veterans whom we have honoured, and rightly so, over the past number of days were not always against something. They were for something. They went out and fought for freedom. They fought for the world we enjoy today. They fought for this country today. We should not say all the time that they fought against something.

We have legislation before us now that is among the best in the House. We have another example of the new decorum brought to the House by the Reform Party. Its members are trying to shout across the floor and raise a disturbance. They were to come here to bring a new dignity to Parliament.

I would like to add a few words of support for the legislation that the Secretary of State for Veterans has brought forward to improve the veterans pension process. Veterans pensions are awarded for disability or death related to military service. Civilians who served in close support of the Canadian Armed Forces during wartime may also be entitled to pensions. Addi-