

Veterans Appeal Board

our existing resources without diminishing existing appeal rights for veterans in any way whatsoever.

This merger is necessary because the Pension Review Board is under considerable strain as its annual case load has increased by nearly 100 per cent from 1,335 to 2,654 applications in just three years. Hon. Members will appreciate that as veterans grow older their disabilities tend to become more serious. That is why more and more pension claims are coming forward each year.

By way of contrast, the War Veterans Allowance Board carries a lighter work-load as veterans grow older. This is because war veterans allowance is an income-tested program. Once veterans reach age 65 they become eligible for Old Age Security benefits and so are much less dependent on Veterans Affairs for income support. The result is that the number of appeals coming before the War Veterans Allowance Board has dropped by 73 per cent in the last three years.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, at present the War Veterans Allowance Board has more person-year resources than the Pension Review Board. A combined Veterans Appeal Board will permit us to concentrate our resources on the area where they are most needed—pension appeals. Hon. Members should also be assured that no Public Service layoffs will result from the merger. Any public servants not required at the new board will be transferred to other areas of Veterans Affairs.

I am also glad to report that this legislation meets with the approval of the major veterans' organizations. Indeed, the National Council of Veteran Associations recommended the merger some time ago and the Royal Canadian Legion has publicly endorsed the proposal. Both associations were consulted prior to the development of Bill C-66.

In short, Mr. Speaker, we are asking the House to approve a measure which will streamline our pension process to enable us to provide better, more efficient service for now and in the future.

I again wish to thank all Hon. Members for their very kind co-operation in permitting the passage of this legislation through all stages today. Such co-operation is a superb example of the very high esteem in which Canada's veterans are regarded by their elected representatives.

I thank the Members of the House for their co-operation very, very much indeed.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gaston Isabelle (Hull—Aylmer): Mr. Speaker, I should like to thank my colleagues—at least the Liberals, of course—for having so generously agreed to debate Bill C-66 which, for all practical purposes, establishes the Veterans Appeal Board.

Mr. Speaker, as the Official Opposition critic I am very pleased to make a few comments on this subject. First I want to thank the Minister for giving me the documents required to

study this piece of legislation to set up the administrative mechanism which I am sure will contribute to meet the needs of veterans in an effective manner.

I can say that we support this essentially administrative measure, and we are impatiently waiting for the new omnibus bill which we have been promised for next fall and which will update the 27 laws dealing with veterans affairs.

Mr. Speaker, I think this approach reflects the sound management of veterans affairs since there will be a merger—the purpose of this Bill—of the War Veterans Allowance Board and the Pension Review Board. As we all know, veterans do grow old like everybody else, and since War Veterans Allowance Board benefits are simply an income supplement of sorts for those who needed them, for those who at age 65 are more or less transferred to the income supplement section of the Department of National Health and Welfare, naturally the work of this War Veterans Allowance Board loses some of its importance. The WVAB also had more staff than the Pension Review Board which has an ever increasing workload, and at the same time it had much fewer employees than the War Veterans Allowance Board.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is sound management. I think the Minister . . . I don't know whether this is one of the results of the Marin Commission, but I do think that improving management is a step in the right direction. There is also the considerable savings involved in a merger of these two boards, probably as much as \$400,000, and I hope that amount will be given to our veterans instead of being paid back to the Treasury Board or put in the revolving fund to be spent on other employees or other purposes. I am sure veterans will continue to get the same service, perhaps more efficiently.

I also noted that as far as staff was concerned, Pension Review Board Canada and War Veterans Allowance Board Canada had a staff of fifty-eight employees. I have been given the assurance there will be no jobs lost and that employees who can no longer be employed within the former boards will be transferred to other jobs in the Department. So I think this is a very wise decision, an administrative decision that is both economical and efficient, and I am sure that the veterans who acted on the Minister's suggestion to submit their claims to the Review Board if they thought there was a worsening of their case or that they could in some way benefit from certain pensions through the Department of Veterans Affairs will agree.

I am sure that this merger, the regrouping of these two entities will generate greater efficiency, as I believe is the purpose, in addition to saving the Department considerable sums of money. And here again, I would ask the Minister whether the money thus saved could be spent on other programs, on veterans who need it and who have given so much of their lives to their country. I hope they will finally get some tangible reward that will make their lives more comfortable, especially if we can finally provide them with some pleasant moments every year.