

Veterans Affairs

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): Mr. Speaker, there is no particular reference to those who served five years. So far as the European prisoners are concerned, we seem to have uppermost in our minds the Dieppe prisoners who, as we know, were prisoners for approximately three years. In respect of those with longer periods, as yet the legislation is not drawn with anything specific in it about them. What was the other question?

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): Whether there is to be a qualifying three months' period and whether those people with less than three months would not qualify under this compensation legislation.

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): The reason the period is there is that, for instance, many people may have been prisoners for only half an hour. I refer to those people who got away. This is the reason the period was put in the first place.

Mr. Marshall: Mr. Speaker, I shall abide by your request in respect of a short question. I had a short, five-part question but the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) pre-empted two or three parts. Would the minister give us an indication of the status of the drafting of this legislation at the present time, when he expects to introduce it, and whether any consideration is being given to First World War veterans who were prisoners of war?

Also, will he tell us whether any consideration, before the legislation is drafted by his officials, is being given to escapees and others who may have suffered comparable or even worse hardships by avoiding capture? Can we expect, in the future, consideration of pensions for widows of veterans who had disability pensions below 85 per cent, and is consideration being given to retroactivity? Might I say I am very pleased that the rates are to be indexed. I have one final question. Will the schedule and recommendation indicate that the graduating scale will be in accordance with the recommendations of the committee on veterans affairs? That supplements the question of the hon. member for Edmonton West.

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): Mr. Speaker, I should have had someone taking shorthand. The answer to the hon. member's question with reference to First World War veterans is that they are not considered in the legislation. The chief reason, as you know, Mr. Speaker, is that the treaty with regard to the treatment of prisoners in the First World War was pretty well adhered to so far as we know. They were not subjected to malnutrition or other suffering such as World War II veterans were.

● (1530)

So far as benefits for widows are concerned, no, this is not in the legislation. It will be considered at a later date. This matter is always under consideration. As far as retroactivity is concerned, it is not being considered at this time. I have felt a wee bit lucky to get this without going back. How far back would you go—one year, two years, five years, thirty years? The graduating scale as recommended by the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs is to be considered in the bill.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): May I put one question to the minister? In effect, it is supplementary to the one he has just answered. Even if he feels he cannot win a substantial amount of retroactivity, can he tell us what the effective date of the legislation will be? It may take perhaps a few days before the government brings in the bill. Surely veterans who have been waiting for this should get it backdated to January 1, or even as far back as last October—some such date as that. Can the minister give any indication as to what the effective date of the legislation will be, so that it does not get lost in further delays on the floor of parliament?

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): The hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall) asked me a question about the legislation. As hon. members know, I have received permission today to have the legislation drafted. Hon. members can rest assured that this will take place today. As to the effective date of the legislation, I would be inclined to think that when it is passed by the House it will be proclaimed.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I think the minister has misunderstood me. I know the legislation comes into effect on proclamation, but what will be the effective date of the payments?

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): It would be hard for me to say for sure, but I suggest that the effective date for payments will be when the legislation comes into effect.

Mr. MacFarlane: Mr. Speaker, I should like to speak in line with questions on the same subject. The minister mentioned the effective date. Having listened to the discussion in which hon. members have participated, I am sure he is aware that we are very concerned about the fact that so many of those who were prisoners of war seem to be disappearing from our numbers at a very early stage in their lives, in my view. So I have some concern, as hon. members have said, with regard to the effective date. Possibly the minister cannot give us an answer at this time, but perhaps at a later time, if he foresees any long debate on the legislation or any delay, he could make a statement concerning the effective date.

Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan): I will be glad to, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McKinnon: I have a supplementary question to that posed by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre. The minister has given us no word to take to the veterans regarding when their benefit cheques will start to go out. Perhaps the minister could give us a firm assurance with regard to the date on which he will bring the legislation before the House. We had an example today from the House leaders regarding Bill C-71 which was brought in for first reading more than two months ago and has not been spoken of since. It affects the pay of members of parliament. We know he is a well intentioned minister in this regard, but if he cannot give us the effective date on which the payments will be made, surely he can give us a ballpark guess as to when he will bring in the legislation and then we will see to it that it is passed quickly.