

Veterans Affairs

Hon. Members will recall that a similar amendment was made in Bill C-28, passed in February, 1985. I said then that it bordered on the inhumane to reduce a widow's income within a month of the veteran's death, and I feel exactly the same about the benefits paid under the POW Act. This amendment will keep these benefits in pay for a full year following the POW's death and thereby give the widow an opportunity to adjust to her changed circumstances.

I am sure that all Hon. Members will enthusiastically support another measure which will introduce further compassion into our legislation. The House will recall the plight of those Canadians who were held prisoner in North Africa during the war. These veterans had been unable to receive prisoner of war compensation because there was doubt as to whether they had been detained in enemy territory. Eventually, and happily, this matter was resolved, but not before these veterans had been denied compensation for many years because they did not meet the strict criteria.

Now we want the Canadian Pension Commission to have the discretion to grant POW compensation in specially meritorious cases such as the ones which came forward from veterans held prisoner in North Africa.

This flexibility already exists in the case of disability pensions and has enabled such deserving people as the veterans exposed to nuclear radiation in the 1950s to make application for pension.

I have confined my remarks to the more important amendments contained in this legislation. All amendments, however, are designed to improve the existing legislation for veterans and their dependants.

Veterans and their families are very special Canadians, and I am confident that all Members fully appreciate the fairness of this legislation, just as I very sincerely appreciate the support the Bill has received from all sides of the House.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Len Hopkins (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke): Mr. Speaker, first of all I want to say that the Liberal Party agrees with this Bill. I compliment the Minister on bringing it forward. It is in keeping with the historical and traditional policies of Parliament that we look after our veterans and their survivors because we owe it to them.

The Bill today is a very humane act. It recognizes or reminds us once again of the realities of war. It also reminds us of the consequences of war. In many ways, as the Minister has said, it is a housekeeping Bill, but it is a very necessary Bill and the amendments are very important to the people who will benefit from them.

As the Minister stated, there has been legislation which intended to do many of these things but because of technicalities did not work in the way Parliament intended it to work. This Bill will repair those things.

The Minister also mentioned that it will repeal the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act. What it really does is transfer the responsibilities or the purpose of the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act to the Pension Act, so that the amendments to the Pension Act, when passed, will apply to both veterans who were not prisoners of war and those who were prisoners of war. Hence, prisoner of war benefits will become part of the Pension Act. It makes the legislation more simple. It creates less red tape for veterans, their survivors, and their dependants who qualify for the benefits mentioned herein.

Today we hear many people talk about the cost of social benefits in Canada, but I want to point out that in the Bill the Minister brought in today all the benefits that benefit people in a very sincere and humane manner will cost less than \$3 million. If we say it slowly, it sounds like a lot of money. However, if we consider the number of people who will benefit from it, it is not a lot of money. In fact, if we want to use a comparison, let us say that this Bill will cost Canadians slightly more than a present day, modern, heavy-armoured, battle-line tank. I think that is a good comparison to make since today we are talking about veterans' benefits.

It will reinstate payment of prisoner of war survivor benefits where the deceased veteran was not in receipt of a disability pension. This technicality arose in 1986. If a prisoner of war was being compensated for the fact that he had been a prisoner of war, he and his survivors did not qualify for other benefits. In order for his survivor and dependants to qualify, he had to be on disability pension as well, or singularly on disability, whatever the case may be.

As a result, compensation for being a prisoner of war is valid now for continuation of a pension. The disability and compensation factors will both be tied into the Canadian Pension Commission after the legislation is passed. The particular amendment will enable the Canadian Pension Commission to return to its traditional procedures. In other words, it will deal with both compensation and disability at the same time.

Another important facet is the fact that the Bill re-authorizes the combining of the rate of disability pensions with the rate of prisoner of war compensation payable to a deceased veteran in determining a survivor benefit and will cap it at one full survivor's pension instead of two. It will also entitle the survivor to a full widow's pension, which is an extremely important point.

• (1620)

A very important amendment in this Bill on which I want to compliment the Minister authorizes payment of the married rate for one full year following the death of a spouse or veteran. This brings the Prisoner of War Act directly into line with the Canadian Pension Act. The authorization of these payments for one year following the death of a veteran when his spouse and dependants will be receiving a full income from the veterans pension is important because that time is very