

Pension Act and Other Acts

Assistance) Act and the Department of Veterans Affairs Act, to provide for the annual adjustment of pensions and allowances payable thereunder, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Mr. F. J. Bigg (Pembina): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to speak on this bill. I am not always complimentary toward the government, but in this case it must be handed a bouquet.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bigg: After long delays, a non-partisan approach in the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs and many years of co-operative planning, speaking and working, we seem to be making a major breakthrough in veterans affairs. I think everyone in Canada, particularly the veterans, knows that the veterans affairs committee is non-partisan.

There have been remarkable contributions from all sides of the House. A good example was the very gracious way in which the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) gave our party full credit for giving him the well earned priority of being the first to speak on this bill. He is a senior member of this House and for many years has been a champion of veterans affairs. This kind of co-operation is very satisfying.

I am by no means a senior member of this House, but in the 14 years I have been here I have taken a very keen interest in veterans affairs. The government is to be commended for its recent changes, particularly with regard to the Hong Kong veterans and Bill C-208 which is another great step forward. I agree that our veterans should not have to come cap in hand and beg the Canadian public, through this institution, for the basic income they so richly deserve. I am not going to waste too much time talking about that.

The bill is quite straightforward. It provides for a yearly reassessment of the problem of keeping up with the ever-spiralling cost of living. I am in complete agreement with this principle. As the minister pointed out at page 2233 of *Hansard* for May 12, in the past there never has been any clear principle enunciated on which to base our pension rates.

In spite of the bouquets I have just handed out, there is still one large hurdle to overcome. This or another parliament in the near future must decide on what kind of yardstick or benchmark the people of Canada wish to base the basic pension. I hope I am not straying too far from the bill. The basis of this bill is to give our pensioners the right deal and this is what prompts me to make these few remarks.

I understand, from representations made by veterans groups and departmental spokesmen, that in the past we have tried to base the general pension on the same level as the wage of an unskilled worker in the federal public service. I have no quarrel with that, because the public purse is not bottomless. However, that should not be the lowest benchmark. From looking at the present pay scales in the public service it is obvious that the basic pension rate has not been maintained at that level. I do not think it is a princely sum. It certainly should not be less than the

[Mr. Speaker.]

average rate of pay for an unskilled worker in the public service. I do not know why that principle was not included in this bill.

I do not think it is too difficult to establish a rate. There has been unanimous approval by the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, at least in the meetings which I have attended over the years. I have heard no objection from the press or the veterans organizations. I understand they would be very happy with this basic rate. It seems fair and equitable and would not put an undue strain on the Canadian public. After all, this is one of the richest nations on earth, per capita. Our potential is such that we can well afford to give this basic rate to our veterans who risked life and limb for Canada.

I am pleased to note that section 70 of the Pension Act, the benefit of the doubt rule, is being put into effect. I wish to refer to one outstanding case. This is not criticism; it is commendation for the way in which the pension commission, the pension advocates in particular, have done their job. I will not mention her name, but the woman involved is very grateful. She has been awarded a widow's pension which has been backdated three years. The pension commission, the doctors and everyone else involved reached the conclusion that her husband's death came about partly as a result of his war service but he had not applied for a pension soon enough.

• (2020)

Earlier attempts had been unsuccessful, but the case was reopened under section 70 and the widow was awarded a pension backdated three years. This, of course, will last her to the end of her days. I am personally familiar with this case. The award will relieve her of the necessity of living with her in-laws; it will enable her to pay hospital bills, and so on, which had accumulated over the years.

This is an example of what can be done by everyone getting together and giving a worthy Canadian citizen her rights in acknowledgement of many years during which she and her husband suffered in the interests of their country. This is section 70 brought up to date and working well. I wish to commend the pension commission, the authorities in the department and everybody involved for demonstrating that the will of parliament can still make itself felt and that even after many years we can show a sense of fairness to those who have served Canada so well.

I have already given credit for the changing of the position of the Hong Kong prisoners of war. I am one who has always felt that the laws of Canada should work equally for each and every one of us. I am therefore impressed by the logic of the argument that those who served in other theatres of war besides the Far East and who perhaps suffered equally or, in some cases, even more, should have their cases treated in the same way. Thus, when prisoners of war in other theatres come forward I know that our committee on veterans affairs will look very favourably on their presentation. They should certainly have the same opportunity to present their case, and I hope they will get exactly the same type of hearing.

One should remember, of course, that simply to award a blanket pension to Hong Kong veterans will not dispose of all their problems. The basic pension may not be adequate