

Pensions

Pension Act and the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act. We advocated those changes and said the phasing-in period as prescribed by Bill C-40 was inappropriate for widows and dependants of veterans who were in receipt of pensions of less than 48 per cent. It was recommended that we shorten or eliminate that phasing-in period. This party took the same position with regard to widows and dependants of prisoners of war.

May I say, Mr. Speaker, that at the time Bill C-40 was being debated I had the privilege of making this comment in the House:

Let us hope that many of them will live long enough that they will see the day when they, too, will receive the benefit of this golden anniversary year legislation.

In view of that, it gives me a great deal of pleasure to be able to say I commend the minister for the introduction of Bill C-82. With the elimination of the phasing-in period, currently a five and half year wait for some, an additional 23,500 widows and dependants of war disability pensioners will become eligible for monthly benefits as of July 1, 1981. When one considers the advancing age of the veteran population and the inflationary times we live in, the immediate availability of a pension income of this nature is a welcome necessity. Clearly the minister has not only been listening to the veterans' community, but he has been taking action following those recommendations received from the Legion and other veterans' organizations, and from members on this side of the House. For this he deserves the thanks of all of us.

As I mentioned Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Speaker, we remain hopeful that Bill C-79 and Bill C-82 will be the forerunner of still further improved veterans' legislation. Canadian veterans should not be subject to the inexcusably long periods of application reform and delays, and I gathered from the minister's comments today that some action will be taken on these. I would like to say as well that pensions should be indexed in some meaningful way so that they will not continue to be eroded by inflation.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, in my last speech I recommended amending legislation with regard to prisoner of war compensation. The hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) referred to this last Wednesday as a grave injustice to prisoners of war under the Compensation for Former Prisoners of War Act. I can only concur with his assessment. At present, compensation occurs in theory, not in practice. This should be corrected, and soon.

I do not feel, Mr. Speaker, that we in this House should prolong the debate. We are pleased the amendments have been brought forward today. We recognize that veterans and their widows and dependants have called for this action and we want to expedite the bill's passage so that they will receive the benefits of this legislation as early as possible. I would like at this time to confirm it is the Progressive Conservative Party's position that this bill should proceed through all stages today.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I suspect I will make what for me will be the understatement of the year when I say I am pleased this bill is now before us. I congratulate the minister on getting the support of cabinet and for being in the position where he can present this bill before we adjourn for the summer recess, if indeed we are going to adjourn.

As the hon. member for St. Catharines (Mr. Reid) has pointed out, it was just a year ago yesterday that the late hon. Daniel MacDonald presented Bill C-40 for second reading. I am glad the present Acting Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. Lamontagne) referred to that. It was the last thing our friend Daniel MacDonald was able to do for veterans. It was an historic piece of legislation.

● (1230)

However, despite the fact that that legislation improved something which had been around for 50 years, it did leave a serious, most unfortunate gap in that it provided that many widows, more than 20,000, who were given entitlement to pension on that day had to wait for another one to six and one-half years.

As the House is aware, there has not been a week since then, when the House has been in session, that I have not found a way to get in a question as to when we were going to correct that wrong. The minister is quite right in saying that when it looked as though it was difficult to get the money for such a change, I offered various compromises. I suggested on the floor of the House, and I suggested to the minister privately, that if it was not possible to go all the way, that at least the phasing-in period could be shortened, or maybe the proportionate pension could be paid right away to the widows of veterans of World War I, or maybe an age factor could be introduced. These were just alternatives if we could not abolish the phasing-in period altogether. I am more than delighted that the minister has not brought in a half-way measure. He has gone all the way and is wiping out, as of ten days ago, all of the phasing-in period.

The minister has indicated a bit of the history of this legislation. Perhaps I might just include a repetition of some of that. Starting about 50 or 51 years ago, the Parliament of Canada did provide for pensions for widows of disabled veterans; a continuing such a pension for the widow, as of right, provided the veteran's disability rate was 48 per cent or more. That, in itself, was good for 50 years ago. However, throughout those 50 years, those interested in veterans and in their survivors have contended that that 48 per cent cut-off was unfair.

That is what we corrected a year ago. We wiped out the 48 per cent cut-off. We said by Bill C-40 that all widows of veterans who were disabled were to be entitled to a pension, either the full widow's pension or a proportionate pension. The difficulty a year ago yesterday was that there were still clauses in the bill which provided that 20,000 of them had to wait one year, two years, three years, four, five or six years. These were older women. As the minister said today, the average age is 72.