

Pensions

all these years the Canadian people and their parliament do not forget.

The bill provides that the changes will take effect on the first day of the month after royal assent is given. So if the House should see fit to pass the legislation in all its stages this afternoon, it could receive royal assent in time to enable the pensions to be increased on July 1, the birthday of our country.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Norfolk-Haldimand): Mr. Speaker, needless to say it gives me great pleasure to speak on behalf of my party in support of the speedy passage of Bill C-202. It is good to see the minister back in his old, familiar position in the House. As he intimated in his remarks, he was formerly minister of veterans affairs and it is only too bad that the present minister, himself a veteran of very much suffering, could not be here this afternoon to see the bill passed through all stages, which I certainly hope will be the case.

● (1550)

I must also say that we should pay tribute to the hon. member for Edmonton West, and our House leader who has agreed to speedy passage of this bill, as well as to the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe who is the official opposition critic but unfortunately is not here today; thus, it is my good fortune to be able to speak to this bill on his behalf. While paying tributes I think I should also mention the chairman of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, the hon. member for Labelle, who has contributed to the fair-mindedness and fair play that have always been shown in the veterans affairs committee.

We want speedy passage of the bill, too, for the very reason that the minister mentioned, namely, that unless the bill receives royal assent this month the veterans will be deprived of their pensions for the months of July. Clause 3 provides:

This act shall come into force on the first day of the month immediately following the month in which this act receives royal assent.

So it is imperative that royal assent be given with all possible speed. The other reason for passing the bill is that it has taken 50 years—ever since 1918 when we first began to have veterans in our society—to do something really meaningful for the men who served their country so well in its time of need. The year 1968 was a landmark in that the Woods committee report was brought forward. The year 1972 brought the compilation of the joint study group on which this legislation is based. I suppose that this afternoon in 1973 will be a third landmark if we pass this bill to give the veterans their long awaited just desserts.

Perhaps we should not saddle the minister with blame for the delay in introducing the bill, for week after week we in this party, as well as the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre, have questioned the minister regarding when we would have this legislation. This is another reason we welcome it greatly this afternoon.

The bill itself gives us almost everything that the joint study group asked for, as the minister mentioned. As a

[Mr. Dubé.]

matter of fact, the basic disability pension is \$175 more than the joint study group asked for in their report. The percentages by which married people will receive additional benefit, those with one child and so on, are identical to the percentages recommended by the joint study group report. However, what the bill does not contain is so vital and so important that we must mention it, and that is the escalation principle which was recommended in the joint study group report.

In order to be assured that the basic pension will not again fall so far behind the standard of living of unskilled workers in the public service in the selected group of categories, the final report of the joint study group, in paragraph (i) of its recommendations, recommended:

Pension should be adjusted annually on a fixed date in accordance with changes in the average wage rates for the public service group selected and taking into account income tax deductions in effect on that fixed date—

I am a bit worried at this omission because at all stages of the study in committee of this matter everybody was so happy to think that at long last the government had accepted this new principle for establishing a basic rate rather than the old cost of living principle. Anyone studying increases in wages and salaries knows very well that the standard of living increases faster than does the cost of living. My hurried and rather cursory examination of the bill indicates there is no provision at all for any escalation. Granted that the \$175 more than the study group asked for does represent an increase that will be satisfactory perhaps for one year or even two years, but beyond that are we going to allow pensions again to lag behind? This is what worries me. However, I notice that the veterans' organizations accept this bill. I suppose they feel that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, or that a crumb is better than no bread at all.

As has been said in the House, we should give the bill speedy passage, and we are now in committee of the whole in order to do this. The only other thing that annoys me and other members on this side of the House is that the two big carrots that are held out in the bill prevent us from moving amendments and trying to put in it an escalator clause which is sorely needed. If we did not do what we are doing this afternoon, we would be denying the veterans a pension increase for July and also, in effect, denying them a \$175 greater basic pension than was recommended by the joint study group.

For these two reasons it looks as though we are being blackmailed a little into passing a bill which should have another very important clause in it. I hope the Minister of Veterans Affairs will keep this in mind and that after one year or two years have passed will introduce further legislation that includes this very important principle.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Chairman, I intend to be brief but I am afraid that I will not be able to finish before four o'clock. Since I understand there are one or two other members who wish to speak, I wonder whether we could have it understood now that we will not see the clock for private members' hour until we have concluded this order of business?

Mr. McKinley: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, I do not know whether there is any agreement, but it was