

Statements by Ministers

Every month for the past 10 years, the Veterans Affairs head office has been forwarding standard pension payment information to our 31 district offices across Canada. The information is used by these offices to answer any questions disability pensioners may have about their cheques. It is a simple but very valuable service for pensioners. I was informed on January 9 that two of the 31 parcels forwarded from Charlottetown, and containing the data on the December cheque release, had been delivered in damaged condition. Worse, some of the contents were missing.

An investigation conducted by Veterans Affairs and Canada Post found no indication whatsoever of any wrongdoing. Quite the opposite, Mr. Speaker. The investigation found every reason to believe that the microfiche should have been packaged in a stronger container to ensure safe transmission by first-class mail. The result was that the two boxes had broken open while in transit with some of their contents falling out in the process. Even so, we took the added precaution of informing the RCMP. The RCMP advised my officials that they found no evidence to suspect that the loss of the microfiche was in any way intentional.

• (1110)

I would like to set out very briefly just what readable information is on these cards, and that is as follows: the pensioner's name, the name of the spouse and any dependent children, the service number, the amount of the cheque and the mailing address. In addition, and for a maximum of 10 per cent of the pensioners, the Social Insurance Number is given because that number corresponds to the pensioner's service number. However, the majority of the entries on the microfiche are coded and therefore of no value to an unauthorized person. A complete set would provide information on approximately 144,000 pensioners, and slightly less than a complete set is not accounted for.

While I am personally convinced that the information on these cards cannot be used to anyone's detriment, I fully acknowledge the seriousness of this matter. Indeed, I feel very badly that it has happened. It is one thing to make a mistake; it is even worse to know that the mistake could and perhaps even should have been foreseen and thereby prevented. Put simply, this material should not have been distributed in the way it was.

I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that this material will not be distributed that way in the future. This method of distribution has been stopped and more secure methods will be found to permit us to continue this very important service for pensioners. In the meantime, steps have been taken to make sure that pensioners are not inconvenienced in any way. The two methods we will be using will be Telex and computer link-up.

I have prepared a very detailed information package concerning this matter and it will be distributed to every Member, every Senator and the news media immediately after I conclude this statement.

As a final point, and although I am satisfied that the information appearing on these cards cannot be used for improper purposes, I was furious when I learned about the incident. There is, however, a positive side to all of this. For 10 years, personal information on pensioners has been distributed to Veterans Affairs district offices in this manner. No one had any reason to believe that it was not secure because nothing like this, to the very best of our knowledge, had ever occurred before. We are now fully aware of the risks the department was unknowingly taking and this gives us the opportunity to safeguard our veterans' interests by tightening security and making as certain as humanly possible that this never happens again. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, I can assure you and all Hon. Members that we will make absolutely certain that veterans will continue to receive the good service they have come to expect and fully deserve.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gaston Isabelle (Hull—Aylmer): Mr. Speaker, as the Official Opposition critic for Veterans Affairs, I first want to thank the Minister for having informed me of this incident which, fortunately, will have no serious consequences.

I think the Minister acted responsibly by making his statement before the House, not outside the House or to the press. I think he deserves to be congratulated and that his colleagues would do well to follow his example. Statements on incidents involving departments, whether they involve the Department of Veterans Affairs or any other department, should be made here in the House.

Nevertheless, one wonders what is going on, because Revenue Canada lost some microfiche not long ago. In addition, the Auditor General has criticized the Department of Veterans Affairs about overpayments, and today, we are told some microfiche were lost.

I realize it is not necessarily a matter of incompetence, but there was certainly negligence, because generally speaking a Minister is responsible for what goes on in his department. That is why Ministers must always be vigilant and monitor what is going on in their departments. They have that responsibility and cannot leave it to someone else.

In this particular incident, while part of the responsibility lies with the Department of Veterans Affairs, I realize that Canada Post has a far greater responsibility than the Department.

At Canada Post, mail delivery has been chaotic in recent years. For instance, a letter sent from Ottawa to Hull has to be routed via Montreal. This is absolutely crazy. We know what happened to mail sent from the main post office on Prince Edward Island. We know how the mail got lost. Fortunately, as I said, there was no confidential information. Everything was coded. Be that as it may, I do want to congratulate the Minister again for having selected other means to route the microfiche or the necessary information to regional offices in Canada, for the simple reason that we can no longer rely on