

*Pension Act and Other Acts*

Veterans Affairs. One could have assumed that that would be so from the advance publicity given to this legislation; even so, it was good to hear the minister say that, as he did, on Friday.

The third assurance which the Minister of Veterans Affairs gave on Friday, which I find extremely welcome, is that the necessary order in council will be obtained so that veterans who are both on the guaranteed income supplement and the war veterans allowance will not receive an increase from one authority, only to have it taken away by another.

I say again, Mr. Speaker, that those are welcome statements; they are an improvement over certain statements which have been made on some occasions when veterans' legislation has been before the House of Commons. That being so, I hope the minister will work hard in the time that remains to him as head of his department in seeing to it that more improvements along those lines are made. However, Sir, I feel that there are some comments and suggestions that I must make under each of these three headings, and I must also make one or two others.

I return to the first assurance, namely, that the increase to be provided, on the basis of the cost of living increase, of 3.6 per cent is not to be a substitute for an increase in basic rates. As I said on Friday, I hope that assurance applies not only to the basic rate of disability pensions provided under the Pension Act, but that it will also apply to the basic rates set out in the War Veterans Allowance Act and in other acts to be amended by this bill. Perhaps we could take it for granted that if there is to be further consideration of the basic rates, that it will be a consideration of all basic rates, including those in every statute with which we are concerned.

The point I wish to emphasize particularly is this: I hope this is not just a swan song assurance given by a minister who is heading for retirement. I hope that what the minister has said is not just an expression of his own view. I have reason to believe that this is his own view, and I commend him for it. Nevertheless, I hope he is speaking with the authority of the government. After this parliament ends and somebody else becomes Minister of Veterans Affairs, if that somebody else is still a member of the present administration, I hope he will be bound by the assurances the minister has given, namely, that these 3.6 per cent increases are not in substitution for increases in basic rates.

I think we understand quite readily the complaints and protests that came almost immediately from the Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans organizations about the 3.6 per cent increase. Many of them felt that this increase was it. They felt it was the increase the minister had been talking about in recent weeks and that with this increase being made, nothing more would be said about an upward adjustment of the basic rates. This is extremely important. I hope that before this debate ends, at the end of the second reading stage, in committee or on third reading, the minister will give us the assurance that his statement about basic rates still being under active consideration is not only his own view, but is a commitment of the present government.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

• (1540)

I now come to the second point that was made by the minister the other day in his brief statement, namely that the 3.6 per cent increases are to apply to all of the pieces of legislation administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the War Veterans Allowance Act, the Civilian War Pensions and Allowances Act, the Children of War Dead (Education Assistance) Act and any other allowances or pensions paid by virtue of the authority set out in the Department of Veterans Affairs Act. I have to make the obvious point that increases in pensions for those who already receive them is very good, but there is still the problem of many veterans who are not receiving pensions at all, particularly pensions under the Pension Act to which they feel they are entitled.

As a member of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, I welcome the job we did in amending the Pension Act last year. I welcome the improvements we made to that act; the clarifying of the benefit of the doubt clause, the establishment of a new procedure and making it possible for any case, no matter how often it has been turned down, to be dealt with all over again. It was inevitable that procedures of this kind would result in a terrific backlog of cases. The members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs have been informed that the backlog is something in the order of 5,000 or 6,000. I again plead, as we have pleaded in the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, that additional medical personnel or whatever personnel are needed be obtained so that this process can be speeded up.

We were very understanding with respect to the report submitted by the Canadian Pension Commission to the effect that it first dealt with the Hong Kong cases and then picked out a few other categories in terms of need. I believe the members of that commission are now giving consideration to the cases of older veterans, veterans of World War I. However, the point is that the promise and the news in the press that there is to be an increase is not of much help to the veteran who does not receive a pension at all, particularly when he feels he should be receiving one under the Pension Act.

I want to again make the point I made the other day. Not only should all pensions that come under the minister's responsibility receive the escalation that is provided, but the minister should pay some attention to the points we have been making to the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Munro) to the effect that the escalation should be on the most generous basis possible. We do not think that an escalation should merely enable one to continue to buy the same quantity of goods and services that he could buy when he was on pension. That is not good enough. People are not only faced with a rising cost of living, but also a rising standard of living. Who helped to make these rising living standards possible if it was not our veterans? This annual escalation is welcome. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs might give a lead to the Department of National Health and Welfare by giving some serious study to an even more generous arrangement for escalating on an annual basis the pensions of our veterans. I suggest that this type of escalation should be related to the growth in the gross national product.