

Veterans Affairs Committee Report

the mistakes made by a previous Minister of Veterans Affairs should be corrected *tout de suite*, and I understand this is his intention. I refer to the fact that Canadian veterans who are receiving the veterans allowance are being penalized in regard to other legislation. They find themselves in no better position than other people who receive supplementary benefits under the Old Age Security Act. I do not think this was the intention of our veterans legislation.

The number of veterans diminishes each year. This is inevitable as we move farther and farther away from the period of active warfare. Eventually we hope the need for veterans legislation will cease. However, the younger members of the house and those who did not participate in either of the two world wars should be made aware of one very simple fact, that veterans legislation should not be considered in the same light as other social legislation.

For example, some of my colleagues have asked how we can justify giving the veterans special preference in terms of providing money to build houses, or in terms of medical treatment and the financing of their medical care. They forget that our veterans sacrificed their health, happiness, home life, education and the chance to be with their families when their families most needed them. They did this not for their own sake but for the sake of the people of Canada and the debt we owe them cannot be measured in dollars and cents. It is an obligation that each and every one of us must accept. It is a moral, spiritual and financial obligation, and we have fallen down in the last five or ten years in the way we have discharged our obligation.

• (12:30 p.m.)

Do hon. members realize that when supplementary benefits under the old age security program are paid to veterans who have passed a needs test, the amount of veterans allowance those veterans receive is reduced by the amount of the supplementary benefit? That is a disgrace. The extra \$30 a month the veteran receives in supplementary benefits is taken off his veterans allowance. The veteran is no better off under these circumstances. It was wrong to lump veterans allowances with other payments made under our social benefit programs. There ought to be no direct relationship between the amount a veteran receives in veterans allowances and any amount he receives under the old age security program. It is wrong of us to subject to a

[Mr. Peters.]

needs test a man who was willing to serve Canada in her hour of need.

I now wish to deal with a number of other matters to which the speaker preceding me alluded. The way we treat our Hong Kong veterans is a disgrace to this country and to any minister prepared to go along with such treatment. Sections 92 and 93 of the Woods report indicate that as of September 1, 1968, 395 Hong Kong veterans were receiving disability pensions of 48 per cent or less. The members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for as long as I have been on it have been recommending that, considering the privation these men underwent, considering the inhuman way they were treated while prisoners of war and the diseases they suffered from as a result of that treatment, diseases like beriberi, malaria, typhoid, as well as other ills arising from malnutrition brought on by the diet of rice and fish which many of them were not accustomed to, they should receive disability pensions of not less than 50 per cent. They are entitled to that. That is the opinion of the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. It is also the opinion of those who compiled the Woods report. They all think that the pensions of these veterans should be set at 50 per cent or more of disability because these men underwent torture and privation in prison camps unlike such camps anywhere else in the civilized world.

I can remember seeing some women who belonged to an organization known, I believe, as the first world war widows of Canada, or something like that. There were two or three of them who were over 80 years old and when they came before the committee we congratulated them warmly for having lived so long. Unfortunately they were not given the pension the committee recommended they should be given. I am saying this because the minister is in a unique position in the government. He can recommend to the government that payments falling outside the scope of existing social legislation be made to veterans. He can recommend that these payments be based on the needs of our veterans who served our country so well, and their dependants. His recommendation could cover those men who participated in the war but who are not, strictly speaking, veterans.

For instance, why have our firefighters not been paid the pension they were promised? They ought to be classed as veterans and be entitled to veterans allowances. What about the miners who went to Gibraltar and the