

Veterans' Pensions

Hon. Bud Cullen (Sarnia): Mr. Speaker, it is always a pleasure to participate in a debate on a measure involving veterans, and particularly to follow the three members who have had so much to do with helping veterans in Canada. I refer to the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald), the former minister, and the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), who has served long and conscientiously on the veterans affairs committee. We were able some time ago to make a series of recommendations with regard to helping veterans who were war prisoners and those who made it back without having to suffer ignominy.

I want to say I was very pleased this government saw fit not to do what was being suggested by all too many people, namely, the burying of the Department of Veterans Affairs in some other department. I am pleased and proud this government and our Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) saw fit once again to bring back the Department of Veterans Affairs, dedicated solely to the welfare of veterans. Although this was put together under the former government, and under the hon. member who spoke previously, the hon. member for Victoria (Mr. McKinnon), I am satisfied that had that government been in power a little longer the department would in fact have been divided and there would in effect have been a minister of veterans affairs to look after that particular interest. Heaven knows, as the former minister of national defence he had plenty to do in that portfolio.

I was pleased to hear the former minister commend the staff of the Department of Veterans Affairs, because that is a group of professionals who bring to their jobs a kind of missionary zeal in respect of the necessity to do something. It is too easy to forget these veterans. At age 53 I was not old enough to serve during the Second World War and I feel I have no vested interest in the pensions paid to veterans. However, I feel that I certainly have a responsibility to those who made it possible for me to complete my education, go on to law school and eventually become a member of Parliament. Had they not performed that service, giving of their time, their effort and often their lives, with many of them being wounded during the war, it would not have been possible for people like myself, growing up as the generation immediately following them, to have enjoyed the great life we have enjoyed, and the opportunity to recognize this responsibility. I guess as a teenager growing up during the Second World War it is fair to say our heroes were those who served in the services. We had our athletic heroes, sure, but the ones we really looked up to, and continue to look up to, are those who gave of their time and a good part of their lives in the service of this country.

I want to commend the minister and the former government, for that matter, for making the 48 per cent rule as dead as a dodo; that was an unfair rule. If I may say so, citing a personal experience, my father who served in both world wars, in the Royal Naval Air Service in the First World War and as a squadron leader in the Second World War, suffering primarily as a result of his service in the First World War, was a 48 per cent disability pensioner for something like ten years.

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About one year before his death, because his health, believe it or not, improved in so far as his pensionable disability was concerned, he was dropped to 40 per cent and my mother was not entitled to receive a widow's pension. Fortunately, we have changed the legislation so that if that individual, who is now on 48 per cent disability for something like three years, eventually gets better he can in effect plan his estate knowing that his widow will in fact receive a pension. To that extent I was very pleased to see the changes which got rid of that antiquated 48 per cent rule.

I want to pay tribute to the evaders and former prisoners of war who today continue to act on behalf of their colleagues to do what is possible to see to it that POWs get the kind of pensions and assistance which they require. The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre has already commented upon the fact that we helped the Hong Kong veterans first, because theirs was a textbook case and one that required immediate attention. Gradually, stage by stage, clause by clause, session by session, Parliament by Parliament, we improved the pensions to these particular individuals who served and suffered as prisoners of war or evaders and were able to help people in that particular category. I believe that the present premier of Prince Edward Island is one who evaded escape as the result of being shot down during the Second World War. These people, not being content to act only on behalf of their colleagues and themselves—of course, they have a vested interest since they were POWs—did everything they could to bring to the attention of young people the sacrifices made by veterans during the Second World War.

Mr. John Miller wrote a book about the veterans of Dieppe called "The Forgotten Heroes". Those who have done any research on the matter at all will recall a book entitled "The Shame and the Glory". Books such as these highlight what was faced by these young men. There is a tendency today, and I particularly find it around the schools, to think of veterans as they look today, not as the young men of 18 years, 22 years and 23 years who served during the Second World War. We have an obligation and a responsibility through providing these books and talking to young people to point out to them the sacrifices which were made.

The legislation which we have before us today is first-class. Like the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre I, too, have one little gripe. It is not so much with the legislation; it is a problem on which I have been harping for as long as I have been here as a member of Parliament. I refer to the fact that we must continually be pressing the Canadian Pension Commission, the War Veterans Allowance Board and pension advocates. We must do everything we can to expedite applications for pensions. It still takes too long to process these matters.

We tried to expedite these matters when we brought in the legislation with regard to the "benefit-of-the-doubt" rule because it was slowing up some of the applications. We brought in a veterans review board so that there would be a body independent of the Department of Veterans Affairs