



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Age Pension

SPEECH

Wednesday, 24 September 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 24 September 2008</p> <p>Page 71</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Boyce, Sen Sue</p>	<p>Source Senate</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
---	--

Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (4.35 pm)—I would like to support Senator Bernardi's proposal lauding the contribution that has been made to our society by pensioners, particularly age pensioners, and the need to assist all pensioners immediately, in particular single pensioners. I will explain why I think that is the case shortly. I do not think Senator Brown should be surprised at all by the extraordinary behaviour of the Rudd government to stifle debate and to stifle action on the part of this parliament. I think it is just part of the form of this government.

Pensioners should be a treasured and respected part of our community. They are the parents of our generation and grandparents—and often carers, as grandparents—and they have contributed significantly to the great prosperity of this country, as Senator Bernardi pointed out. Now in their later years, they are very much the backbone of our community organisations. They are the majority of our volunteers. They are the people who hold our society together. They contribute billions of dollars worth of unpaid hours to keeping our society functional—or at least they were when they could afford to be.

We introduced a bill into the Senate to give single age pensioners, single service age pensioners and widow B pensioners a \$30 increase in their pensions, and the Senate—which apparently has far more compassion and moral fibre, I suggest, than the House of Reps—passed this bill. It went on to the House for debate. One would have thought that the House would have relished the chance to at least have their say on this suggestion to increase these pensions by \$30 a week, but the government, in their mean-spirited wisdom, completely stifled debate—not just debate on this move but debate on the constitutionality of this and the right of the Senate to propose this. The government stomped on any opportunity for their members to represent their constituents. They would not even talk about it. They used legalese to not talk about something that affects hundreds of thousands of people in Australia every day—now. I have previously characterised the Rudd Labor government as the 'empathise and ignore' government, but I think we can now call them the 'empathise and stifle' government.

There is only one answer in the Rudd government toolbox—that is more reviews and more inquiries.

I think Prime Minister Rudd has reduced the prime ministership of this country to that of public servant in chief. He confuses reports with reforms. He confuses inquiries with real help. The way that our age pensioners are being treated now is testament to what we are not doing as a nation—how we are not treating well and not respecting our most vulnerable. I think every inquiry we have had on this matter has made the point that single female age pensioners are the most vulnerable, especially the ones who live in rented accommodation.

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council recently built on their definition of poverty from 1996. I thought this was worth reading out so that people can contemplate how much of this applies right now to our pensioners. The Catholic Social Justice Council's definition of being poor is:

- To have inadequate access to resources and services.
- To be unable to do certain tasks that are essential for fulfilling one's human potential and carrying out one's social responsibilities.
- To be shunned, denigrated, blamed, patronised and ostracised by others.
- To have little opportunity to participate in decisions affecting one's life.
- To be, and to feel, powerless, excluded, marginalised, ... to live 'in exile' in one's own society.

Now, let us keep those criteria in mind. A few weeks ago, I spoke on the cost-of-living problems being experienced by pensioners and mentioned some of the comments that pensioners had written in letters to my office. Many commented that they could no longer afford the petrol to get to volunteer activities and they could no longer afford to be involved in social activities. One that stayed with me from the almost 800 letters that I received said: 'I can't afford to buy new clothes or shoes that are badly needed. I do not have any superannuation or a car or a house, only a pension. I cannot even afford to die, because I cannot afford a funeral.' Thank goodness there is a little bit

of the Australian sense of humour left in these people, because that is all they have got now.

In terms of the contribution of pensioners, cruelly ignored by the Rudd Labor government, I guess I cannot do much better than pass on the comments of an RSL club secretary who recently rang about the availability of flags for veterans' funerals. He said: 'Most of our servicemen served in World War II. These days, some weeks we have three funerals.' These are the people we are talking about; that was their contribution—

Senator Bernardi—Shame!

Senator BOYCE—and the government's reaction is, as Senator Bernardi points out, a shame. This government will not even talk about it. We have had Senator Feeney discussing hypocrisy and poor choices. I think perhaps, Senator Feeney, what the pensioners of Australia are starting to realise is that the worst choice, the poorest choice, they made was in November last year. And the Labor Party—

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Moore)—Senator Boyce, I remind you that your comments must be through the chair.

Senator BOYCE—I am sorry, Madam Acting Deputy President. The Labor Party, of which Senator Feeney is probably the most recent representative, attempt to suggest that our government did nothing for pensioners. They know that is false, but they continue to try to rewrite history. Let me just remind Senator Feeney and others of what we did do. We introduced the indexation of pensions not just to CPI but also to MTAW, male total average weekly earnings, whichever was higher. This meant that single pensioners were more than \$36 a week—directly into their pockets—better off than they would have been under the system that used just CPI. Under our government, wages went up and the economy was robust, but pensioners also benefited from that prosperity. It was a reasonable recognition of a real contribution. We also introduced utilities allowances, the seniors concessions allowance, bonuses of \$1,000 a year to meet household bills and the Pension Bonus Scheme, in 1998. So to say that we did nothing is an outright lie.

This government needs to find its compassion. It suggests that what we were trying to do was unconstitutional. Stop being hypocritical. You are the government; you can act. Introduce this legislation now. Stop reviewing, and act to assist people who genuinely need assistance. (*Time expired*)