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SUBMISSION FROM THE OLDER WOMEN'S NETWORK MELBOURNE

The Older Women's Network Melbourne congratulates the Parliament of Australia and its House of Representatives Committee on Ageing on setting up the inquiry into issues related to the ageing of the Australian population over the next 40 years. Below is a submission to the inquiry from OWN Melbourne.

Some of the most common problems associated with Ageing

Health eyes, hearing, teeth, brittle bones, arthritis, circulation, respiration, strokes, heart.

Activities taking part in activities, shortage of suitable activities, noise, transport, cost.

Access to services: lack of personal service at banks, supermarkets and telephone enquiries - endless standing in queues or hanging on and trying to deal with recorded messages which often lead nowhere

Maintenance of property and equipment: seeming shortage of reliable, trustworthy trades people affordable price; almost impossible to have electrical equipment repaired.

Insecurity: fear of what will happen to them if they reach a stage where they cannot manage on their own in their own home.

Loneliness: May miss the companionship of the workplace especially if retrenched before usual retirement age. Offspring may live far away and/or may have problems of their own with bringing up children, unemployment etc.

Retirement accommodation: scarcity of suitable partially-assisted accommodation at a price they can afford.

The biggest problem for most people is insufficient money to maintain a standard of living adequate to maintain good health, reasonable comfort and dignity-especially for single people, most of whom are women. Therefore it is suggested that, if government wishes, as the Prime Minister claims, to encourage older folk to stay in their own homes for as long as possible, it should give thought to re-organising its welfare spending.

All tax concessions to business, private schools, private hospital insurance, superannuation etc. should be shown in the national accounts under the heading of Welfare Spending, for that is what they are and they go mostly to the wealthy. Compared to this expenditure, the amount spent on the aged poor is minimal.

Council rates, water rates, insurance, motor registration, RACY, medical expenses, gas and electricity, transport costs and the price of essential foods such as fish, fruit and vegetables (partly because of drought) have all risen steeply over the last year- . far

above what was forecast by the government as a result of the GST Free dental services were abolished sometime ago. The age pension has risen \$1.0 per week since last August. Our members report that this rise is way behind the extra costs.

Longterm Strategies

Basically, we believe that the Federal Government should stop pandering to the lowest common denominator group in society who want government subsidies to help them make money for themselves and their shareholders but who want to avoid paying taxes to provide infrastructure and running costs of public utilities. Despite the myth that subsidies given to business filter down to benefit everyone, this is not true. Most of these companies (including privatised public utilities) improve their profits by sacking workers and the benefits disappear on the way down- like the great Murray River, as the people of Adelaide know.

The main reason for lack of financial security in old age is lack of steady employment during working life. This applies especially to women; most of whom have been disadvantaged in the earning stakes by childbirth and child care. Paying bonuses to encourage women to produce more children will only exacerbate this situation, add to the number of unemployed young people and increase the number of aged women needing financial help in a few years time. Better to provide 6 months maternity leave at average weekly earnings rate. It should not be left to employers to subsidise the production of children; that would be a disincentive to employ women.

It seems to us that the Federal Government should:

- Offer incentives to business to spread the work around: eg higher tax rates on higher incomes, as used to be the case;
- Stop promising cuts in income tax (which always benefit the rich more poor) and target its welfare spending on areas of real need
- Revise its notion that the aged area burden on the young and admit that all of us go through stages in our lives when we need support from others and that when we have income of our own we should all be prepared to help care for those who are going through a needy stage.
- Revise its notion of what constitutes a healthy, thriving society, ie. a society in which the government has a very low level of debt and private industry is booming because people are spending freely:
- Realise that, while low interest rates encourage people to borrow, they do not help the aged, most of whom paid very high interest rates when they were paying off their homes but now find any income from savings slashed to less than half what they expected.
- Stop encouraging the "mums and dads" to go into debt by investing in the share market (which most don't understand) and buying lots of things: which they don't need and which will mostly have worn out or broken by the time they retire have no money to replace them. Look what happened to Telstra shares c Daimaru shopping centre; not to mention Enron, One-Tel, HIH and eyed BHP
- Stop subsidising particular sections of industry by such means as building grants to first-home-builders. The last effort pushed up the cost of housing and encouraged many young folk to undertake mortgages way beyond: their with dire consequences for those subsequently retrenched by profit-hung enterprises and even by government employers, not to mention ageing parents who often feel obliged to help out.
- Stop subsidising private hospital insurance and private school education and invest the money in public health and education systems. Several of our members who have subscribed to private health insurance for many years are no longer able to afford it-

especially the gap between the amount paid out by the insurer and the cost of operation and hospitalisation - can be thousands of dollars. All concessions made through the tax system benefit the rich more than the poor and are no help at all to the unemployed and age pensioners.

- Withdraw tax concessions to superannuation; introduce a compulsory retirement levy percentage of income and an unmeanstested age pension equivalent to 30 per cent of average male earnings, as per model proposal enclosed.* Employers should not be expected to provide superannuation. This is arm on employment and works against small employers.
- Re-institute the practice of raising money for infrastructure of essential services by issuing government bonds to the public. These would provide a safe source of investment for retirement funds and could raise enough money to "buy back the farm" so that our essential services could be owned by Australia and not by some unknown foreign investor.

When Government sells essential services to private industry one cannot expect those industries to put the needs of the users or the general community first. Private industry is not designed to benefit all members of the community. It is designed to benefit the minority who are its shareholders. And, if they make exorbitant profits, it is obvious that the losers are the majority of the community. Those who lose most are the thousands of workers who are retrenched long before their use-by date and who will become "the aged" all too quickly.

Instead of standing ready to spend billions of dollars on supporting ill-thought-out wars against "terrorists", the Government: should raise money to buy back our essential industries before they become totally owned by overseas organisations which could, for all we know, be owned by terrorists.

It was reported in The Age this week that not one of the "illegal" immigrants who had been investigated by Australian Government authorities had been found to be a security risk to Australia. The terrorists who wrought such destruction in the United States did not arrive in leaky boats but slipped easily through the system of the most powerful country in the world. Yet we in Australia are prepared to sell off our airports to private industry. How do we know who will own them?

How to keep older folk in their own homes

If the Federal Government is serious about trying to encourage older folk to remain in their own homes, it should note that the main cause of giving up the family home apart from ill health-is that old people - particularly those on their own - cannot manage maintenance.

The sale of public utilities has had a very deleterious effect on those struggling to keep a house or flat going. Where once the gas company would send someone out to inspect faulty appliance, the privately-owned company tells you the minimum charge for an inspection is \$90, which you must pay when the man arrives at your door. If you cannot afford to have your wall-heater fixed, you must go cold. For one of our members the cost was \$485.

If your air-conditioner packs up and you find the company which made it has been taken over by a multinational which doesn't do repairs, you can ring a private consultant who, for an initial cost of \$45 plus \$26 per 15 minutes, will listen to what you have to say-- on

the telephone - and give you an idea of what could be wrong and what it might cost to have it fixed- that is, if you can give him/her the number and model of the appliance (which is probably high up out of your reach and limited eyesight). The same applies to the electric hotwater service.

Some local councils do provide some home help services through the HACC scheme but it appears that they receive inadequate funding from the Federal Government, and some of the folk they send seem to have no qualifications for the jobs they are required to do.

The Federal Government should fund local councils to provide a team of reliable recommended trades people who could provide real service. There could well be a number of qualified trades people, retrenched or retired early, who would be happy to work part-time if they were sponsored by their local council.

Another major issue is transport. For people who are too old to drive or who can no longer afford to run a car, good public transport is essential. However, now that there are no staff on most railway stations, lavatories are looked up, no guards on trains, ticket machines out of order more often than not, many older folk - particularly women - are afraid to travel by tram-especially at night.

It is recommended that the Federal Government should offer inducements to the States to spend less money on freeways and more on safe accessible public transport, including community buses and taxis to link up with trams and trains.

Government should set up a body such as the old Housing Commission to build, after consultation with various older folks organisations, reasonably-priced group housing options for those who want a home of their own but can't manage full maintenance. There are already quite a few of these complexes provided by private industry but the cost is beyond the reach of most of our members.

THE CASE FOR AN UNMEANS-TESTED AGE PENSION - By Mary Owen
For a copy of this report please call 02 6277 4615

WEL Submission to Ageing Agendas – By Mary Owen
For a copy of this report please call 02 6277 4615