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The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
Suite R1 116
Parliament House
CANBERRA A.C.T.2600

REFERENCE: Report on The social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment or establishing a business, following unemployment.

Dear Sir

In respect of the reference, and in regards to the advertisement in the Canberra Times of 24 March 1999, calling for contributions to the above report, attached is my submission for the Standing Committee's consideration.

Further to my submission, I would have no objections to appearing before the Standing Committee to expand upon or clarify any comments contained in the attached submission.

Yours Faithfully

Kevin A.J.Connor

SUBMISSION BY KEVIN CONNOR FOR INCLUSION IN THE REPORT BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS on THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND INDUSTRIAL ISSUES SPECIFIC TO WORKERS OVER 45 YEARS OF AGE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT, OR ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS FOLLOWING UNEMPLOYMENT

1. SCOPE OF MY SUBMISSION:

As a guide, the overall scope of my submission relates to the following points:

- Discrimination against mature-age job seekers.
- Anti-family aspect of the current labour market.
- Lack of government recognition and the special needs of mature-age job seekers.
- Specific [negative] position of mature-age unemployment in the Australian Capital Territory.

In respect of the above points, it is appreciated that there may be an overlap in the comments subscribed to each point. However, the overall intention of this submission is to keep to the point, and whereby possible address the issues as specified.

2. PERSONAL BACKGROUND:

2.1 I became redundant from the Australian Public Service in August 1989. I was 46 years old, married with a family of five children, whose ages [at the time] ranged from 18 years to 7 years. I fully expected to be able to work for at least another fifteen years or more.

2.2 For a while there was no disruption to our standard of living, as I had obtained a 'package'. Bills were paid and other monetary commitments met. Also I was able to obtain regular short-term employment. This situation was maintained until 1991, when casual work became harder to obtain as a consequence of the recession.

2.3 The search for regular work of any kind became imperative, as the redundancy money was now being used as a substitute for income, which is not what I intended to be, nor should it have been. Eventually my redundancy money was exhausted due to my inability as a mature-age person to obtain [paid] employment.

2.4 My wife obtained full time employment as a Child Care Assistant which though helping the family finances, was then, and still is today, a low-income occupation. We are not materialists, but from that point in the early 1990's when my redundancy package was exhausted, and my wife commenced full-time work, our standard of living commenced its decline from which to date it has never recovered.

In effect we became a single-income family with double-income responsibilities.

3. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MATURE-AGE JOB SEEKERS:

3.1 I have over the years, applied for numerous positions ranging from Administrative Officer to Bar Attendant, Chauffeur, and any other position that is worth a try for, all to no avail. There is always plenty of voluntary work, [which though personally rewarding, and benefitting the community, is a financial burden on the volunteer].

3.2 I have come to the conclusion that there is discrimination against mature-age applicants. A case-study as an example:

For several years, I was a Voluntary Guide at the Australian War Memorial here in Canberra. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was academically qualified, having two degrees, one being a post-graduate diploma in history. As well I had Department of Defence background, therefore being thoroughly familiar with the service departments. Also being a World War 11 'blitz baby', I have had first-hand experience in many areas to do with the effects of war, and the service life, pertinent to both the United Kingdom and Australia. On a number of occasions, positions e.g. Information Assistants, became vacant at the AWM that I was well-qualified to apply for. I was even encouraged by older colleagues to have a go. To my utter disappointment [and that of my family], I never even gained an interview. Upon being challenged, both orally and in writing, senior staff at the AWM generated excuses that were blatantly insulting and inconsequential. An ironical instance in regards to the example of my Information Assistant application, was that on one occasion, I was actually asked to familiarise a successful applicant, with the self-same duties, that I had not even gained an interview for. To the immediate chagrin of those concerned, I declined, and told them why. Needless to say, albut with some sadness, I resigned my voluntary appointment at The Australian War Memorial.

3.3 There have been plenty of other situations, though none so disappointing as the above. The interesting thing is that on the occasions that I have challenged an unsuccessful application, there is always an apologetic tone, that in many instances borders upon the patronising. rarely is there sincerity. Yet the paradox of all is that there have been occasions when the position applied for has been re-advertised within a matter of months. Keeping experienced, mature-age men such as myself, who are eager to work, out of the workforce, is I suggest a waste of a valuable resource.

3.4 Discrimination per se is difficult to prove. Because of the low number of vacancies, and the generally high volume of applications, I believe that the sifting process is generally biased against the mature-age applicant. [A recent experience early this year can verify this statement.] My own experience, and those of other individuals in like circumstances to myself, agree with this perception. Effectively the job market for mature-age job seekers becomes a lottery.

3.5 In this paragraph I would like to comment on voluntary work. Like many people I have done 'my bit' for the community, and I am still doing it. It does not become a question of a 'pat-on-the-back', brownie points, etc., but an issue of a fair go. Having been prepared to do voluntary work in the past, I find now that it is continually expected that individuals especially at my age, continue to do so. In the current economic climate with downsizing the order of the day, Human Resource Managers in certain areas, know that they have reserves of volunteers willing to work for nothing. This plays upon the generosity of people, but more to the point, it is denying paid work, to people, [like myself] who are need of some financial remuneration to just maintain our already existing low living standard. It is a myth that voluntary work, is a stepping stone to paid employment. Again I speak from personal experience. Voluntary work for the volunteer, can be quite expensive, an expense, that is not entirely recompensed in getting the satisfaction from the work being done. Moreover management likes to treat volunteers as staff, without necessarily affording them the same protection as paid staff.

4. ANTI-FAMILY ASPECT OF THE CURRENT LABOUR MARKET

4.1 For mature-age job seekers, the hardest thing to cope with, when enemployed, relates to family. The realisation that they are no longer wanted by employers is demoralising for them, and impacts negatively upon their families. It places additional stresses upon the spouse who formerley was the nurturer, and now has to become the breadwinner. With the burden of income-maintenance, shifting from the male to the female partner, an inequality arises, that generates tensions. These tensions invariably lead to breakdowns in marital relationships that further impact upon the offspring of the unions, and eventually become costly to the state.

4.2 From my own observations, the labour market favours young single people, with the balance generally favouring females. But whilst this is acceptable, single people, regardless of age tend to be more favoured than married people with ongoing responsibilities. The very fact that mature-age married men are discriminated against by the labour market generates a social cost to the community. The impact vis a vis married men [and sometimes married women] not being allowed to work is far greater than that of single people who are unable to work.

4.3 I believe that this issue needs to be addressed by government, because there are areas of inequality that are creating financial hardship, and will have long-term negative effects upon society.

5. LACK OF GOVERNMENT RECOGNITION AND THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF MATURE-AGE JOB SEEKERS.

5.1 Mature-age job seekers are penalised across the board. All governments ignore the special needs of older people who want to work, by denying them benefits and other government recognition. Again speaking from my own experience politicians and bureaucrats pay lip-service to the needs of the older person trying to obtain paid employment.

5.2 These comments reflect upon the frustration that is extant when unemployed people are up against an uncaring system. For example:

- A.C.T. Territorial Government charges 17.5% interest p.a. compounded on unpaid rates viz. water and land
- The Commonwealth Government refuses to recognise married spouses with no income and will not issue Health Care Card if partner is working.
- Cessation of Austudy re for same reason as above.
- Minimalist tax concession re spouse rebate

These are major complaints and inequities from governments relating to the older unemployed. In my own situation I have written to the respective authority, and received the same uncaring answer namely: tough.

5.3 I believe that all governments are contributing to the national debt through their refusal to become involved, except for grandstanding around election times, in regard to older people wanting to work. Eventually this indifference will redound upon all politicians.

6. THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY AS A SPECIFIC ISSUE

6.1 The ACT has been, proportionately hard hit in respect of retrenchments, reduced employment, and a lack of viable private business enterprises. As a consequence bankrupts and suicides are becoming the norm rather than the exception. Regardless of what spin local politicians may say, these social disorders, together with a growing crime rate, particularly in regards to property, are increasing. Again, there is the question of uncaring governments. Families are becoming less and less able to be sustained through a normative process, due to the policies of the Federal and Territorial Governments. As a friend recently remarked, "No one knows what goes on behind closed doors." Many people keep their problems private, until at some time or other they snap, and the question is then asked why did they do it?

6.2 Very few people understand the uniqueness of the ACT. Canberra is denigrated or used as a pejorative term by the media when referring to decisions by the Federal Government of the day. Not only is it insulting to those that have either lived here or grown up in the territory, but very incorrect. The situation is not helped by the refusal of our current Prime Minister to reside in Canberra as a recognised part of his employment. Another factor which has an influence is the climatic extremes, particularly the extremities of winter, whereby not to have some form of heating, which if you are unemployed is a luxury, causes poor health.

7. SUMMARY

7.1 I believe that what I have written can be substantiated. Whilst most of the comments pertain to the ACT, which is my home territory, those that pertain to mature-age unemployment and governments non-recognition, can also be applicable in the other states.

7.2 Loss of dignity is a prime downside of mature-age unemployment. In this the so-called year of the older person, due to governmental policies, past and present, the older person is disregarded-an inconsequence that has to be tolerated at the best, and preferably shunted aside. The ageing process is difficult enough for everybody, by exacerbating it through the loss of dignity as a consequence of unemployment, is nothing short of criminality. It is worth reminding, that at some time or another most people do get old.

7.3 Another area of contention is the failure of all governments to allow income splitting, particularly at the low-income levels. With many families being forced to survive on one low income, income splitting would be a fair realignment to avoid the poverty trap.

7.4 For those families who do exist on a single income it is noted that now holiday pay and leave bonus do not go to what they were supposedly intended for i.e. to have a vacation. Now due to the economic climate many low-income earners use their holiday pay and bonus to pay overdue bills. These bills are related to my previous comment [para.5.2 first dot point], re the approved government extortion viz rate payments.

7.5 I have kept my comments to the last, in regards to the establishing of businesses following on from retrenchment. In this regard I did consider it as an option. However aside from the retrenchment package, the only realisable asset was the family home. Equity in the building was high, but there was still a high-risk factor. Both my wife and myself know close friends who went bankrupt and lost everything, including the family home. We have not reached that stage-yet, and hopefully will not do so. The important factor is that in Canberra in particular, the economic climate is not conducive to small business enterprises. Many of those who have tried establishing small businesses in the territory have gone bust, together with dissolution of spousal relationships and everything else that follows on from these circumstances.

7.6 Mature-age job applicants [I believe more so than their younger counterparts], are up against a phenomena referred to as 'Criteria Cloning'. Cloning as is known relates to a process of identical reproduction propagated from the original seed or sperm. Interview panels whilst adjudging applicants against the Selection Criteria, are also consciously aware of the Cloning Process which obviously is not an official part of selection. Cloning militates against applicants who are known to members of the Interview Selection Panel. Members of the panel want an applicant that fits as closely as possible to the persona of the person managing the section/branch where the position is located. I might as well comment and say that the Department of Defence and the Australian War Memorial are known users of this practice as also are other institutions in Canberra such as in the hospitals. After very recently not even making the 'short list' for interview, at a certain A.C.T. hospital, where I am a volunteer, the reason given was 'the very high quality applicants', which raises the question, that are volunteers low quality? The reality of it all, as like the AWM, relates to where all else falls resort to the Cloning Factor. It is impossible to beat.

7.7 Finally, for many job applicants these days, irrespective of age, applying for a vacancy is a form of torture. In this respect mature-age applicants are better off than the younger ones, due to their experience and resilience. Nevertheless it still takes its toll upon individual health, and the physical and social well-being of families. Inability to get work, and a lack of government recognition is detrimental to the nation. It is in the long-term very costly, as I have previously commented. Some age-groups are better

catered for than others, in the same way as that the gender balance is also unequal in specific demographic groups. Regardless, it behoves the government to take stock of the issue. At least in this last respect, credit must be given, where credit is due to the current federal government calling for public comment, on an issue that could probably become more vexatious as time marches on.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 8.1 A government register for aged over-45 job seekers, with preference provisions on a need by need basis.
- 8.2 Full age-retirement benefits for over-55 mature-age unemployed, subject to genuinely seeking work in the previous ten years to no avail.
- 8.3 Income splitting for all low-income earners.
- 8.4 All Governments to recognise the current hardships of mature-age job seekers, and generate strategies to redress the inequalities associated in jobseeking by the mature-age.
- 8.5 Employers to be encouraged to recognise the experience, stability and maturity of older job-seekers and give them a fair go.
- 8.6 Investigation into the insidious practice of cloning during the process of selection for interviews, following job applications. Furthermore preference should be given to volunteers who apply for positions in the same area where they are working as a volunteer.
- 8.7 That the present Federal Government recognise the special employment needs of Canberra. Acknowledges the negative effect [by successive Federal Governments] of downsizing, on the territory's economy and the hardship that those policies have caused, particularly to mature-age job seekers
- 8.9 If possible assist in removing the usurious payments charged by the ACT Territorial Government, [including if applicable other states], for non or part payment of local government rates.
- 8.10 Being the year of the elderly, maintain the dignity of the elderly through being empathic to the needs of the elderly.