

*Families, Housing, community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other
Legislation Amendment (Further 2008 Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2008*

Dissenting Report from the Australian Greens

Schedule 1 and Schedule 3

The Australian Greens are in general agreement with the Majority Committee's report on Schedules 1 and 3 of the Bill, but dissent with its comments and recommendations in relation to Schedule 2.

Schedule 2 Partner Service Pension

This amendment has caused a great deal of concern in the community. It has the potential to impact on the wellbeing and financial security of a group of people who have in many cases faced considerable hardship, been out of the workforce for a considerable period, and are unlikely to have superannuation or recent employment skills. We heard evidence during the committee inquiry that some partners have spent a considerable period living with, caring for and supporting a Veteran partner suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other significant physical or mental health issues. Some have suffered from family violence as a result of the trauma their partners have experienced in the service of our country. These women have therefore been forced to leave the family home. The cost to personal well-being of caring for a traumatised loved one – in terms of the time, emotional investment and missed job and career opportunities- can be significant. The Australian Greens believe that the nation has a duty and obligation to care for veterans and their families. We are concerned that these issues have not been adequately addressed in the majority report.

a. Definition of illness separated couple

The Majority Committee report suggests that women who have separated from their Veteran partner due to PTSD or other mental illness may retain their Partner Service Pension if they are assessed by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) as an illness separated couple.

However, as stated by the DVA in its answers to questions on notice, the definition of 'illness separated couple' requires some evidence of a continuing marriage-like relationship.

"In addition to living apart due to illness, the veteran and spouse must remain members of a couple – that means, remain legally married and continue to have a married relationship.¹"

However, partners who have separated from the veteran due to fear of violence or actual violence resulting from the veteran's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or other mental illness are not in a position to maintain this relationship. These women are the ones most likely to lose their eligibility for PSP, particularly as the veteran can decline to be considered a member of an illness separated couple. We therefore believe that the criteria of an illness separated couple needs be reviewed to ensure that it does not exclude partners who are separated due to PTSD (or other service-related mental illness) and/or family violence and have separate financial arrangements.

Recommendation 1

That the Government amend the criteria for an illness separated couple to accommodate the needs of those partners who are separated due to PTSD, mental illness and/or family violence and, who, out of concern for their safety, are not in a position to provide the care to the veteran that they would otherwise have provided.

b. Transition period

These proposed measures will come into place on January 1 2009. Many of the separated recipients have already been apart from their veteran husband for more than 12 months and will therefore lose their eligibility immediately. In the intervening period, people must await the review of their case by DVA and must then seek some other form of income either through employment or income support from Centrelink. Those moving on to a Centrelink payment will receive less than the current rate of PSP and so will have to adjust to a lower income. We are concerned to ensure that there is an adequate period to allow people to make the necessary financial adjustments such as renegotiating mortgage payments and rents.

¹ Department of Veteran's Affairs, answers to questions on notice.

Recommendation 2

That transition arrangements be put in place that provide affected PSP recipients with adequate time to reorganise their finances and apply for employment or income support from Centrelink.

Senator Rachel Siewert
Australian Greens