

To: The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs Committee
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

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From: P.A. Robb (Miss)

SUBMISSION
on
Senate Community Affairs Committee
Inquiry into the Cost of Living Pressures on Older Australians

(a) It has been well-known for many years that the single, living-alone, aged pensioner has been battling to survive on a pittance well below the poverty line. A study commissioned by the Commonwealth Government in 1998 revealed the pension is inadequate and is likely to increase the risk of deprivation and disadvantage.

The study found a 70-year-old woman who owned her own home needed \$289 a week to live at a modest but adequate standard, or \$215 a week to live on a low-cost budget. An aged couple who owned their own home would need \$388 a week for the modest standard of living or \$296 a week for the low-cost standard.

The age pension in 1998 was \$177.30 a week for a single and \$295.90 for a couple.

This means that the single pensioner was receiving \$103 per week too little for a modest standard of living and \$38 per week too little for a low-cost budget. At the same time, couples were (and still are) looked after at a fairly reasonable level.

According to the Report, a striking feature of all the budgets was the low relative estimated costs of the second adult. For most household types, couples were estimated to need between 30 and 40 per cent more than a single woman to reach the same standard of living.

According to the 1996 census, almost 700,000 men and women over 70, including more than 480,000 widows, live on their own. Around 40 per cent of women age pensioners have been receiving the pension for 15 years, with many running down their additional savings (if they had any to start with). While the pension fell far short of providing enough money to buy basics for single older people, it virtually covered the budget costs for couples on a low cost budget.

You will note that the vast majority of these pensioners are female, which makes one wonder if this is a question of sex and age discrimination. It is no secret that elderly women are ignored by their neighbours, marginalised by society, and considered "easy" game for rip-offs by tradesmen and the like. Do politicians have the same mind set?

I further note that the single pension was \$177 per week in 1998, and since then has only increased by a measley \$85 to \$262 per week, an average increase of just over \$9, or 5%, per year.

Speaking of pensions generally, many people seem to think we are all in the same boat. This is incorrect. At the top of the heap are the non-means tested War widows, and way down at the bottom are the single, living-alone aged pensioners. It appears that some women are more equal than others! No doubt in the event of war, War widows can now be relied on to vote for conscription.

There are two categories of aged single pensioners living alone who are particularly hard hit: the home owner and the pensioner in **private** rental.

(i) As food, petrol and other prices have risen astronomically in recent times, it goes without saying that pensioners in general are worse off than even before. Food prices alone are now 28% higher than last year, but pensions have not increased much at all. Worse, all pensioners are now forced to pay 10% tax (G.S.T.) of almost their entire small income. On \$262 per week, it is obvious that every cent is spent in the battle for survival, and there can be no savings.

(ii) Utility prices keep rising, with gas and electricity now subject to the 10% G.S.T. charge. As pointed out above, couples can share all household running costs (utilities, rates, replacement of household items such as fridges, T.V.'s, car and car costs, house repairs and so on, while the single pensioner has exactly the same costs which she has to fund from a very inadequate income. It is a shame that many singles must cut down on heating in winter, and cooling in summer, and even ration the

number of showers they have in order to save on hot water costs. I know several in Maryborough who are pushed into this kind of economies.

Please remember that women generally, particularly unmarried women, in my day were forced into low-paying jobs at 60% of the male rate of pay. I am "lucky" to own my own, very old house (which I had to work and pay for myself), but banks until recent times would not allow a single woman to borrow for a house. Married women were forced out of the work force when two million men from the armed services were demobilised after World War 11, and jobs had to be found for them.

Those who are in private rentals are in a dire position indeed. With rent assistance, the single pension is \$307 per week. Yet nowhere can one rent under \$150 per week (it is usually much higher), which would leave a pittance of \$157 per week for everything else.

(iii) The cost of dental care is completely out of reach for elderly pensioners, whether couples or singles. I myself do carry "Extra Benefits" from Credit Union - about \$21 per month - but this only covers about half of dental costs, and there is a limit on how much one can use in a year. I have found it useful for scaling and cleaning about once a year or every two years, because the waiting lists at the public Dental Clinic in Maryborough are more than four years, even for this most necessary procedure.

But I now really now need a bridge (about \$6,000) and a crown (about \$500). My "Extra Benefits" will nowhere near cover these costs, I cannot save the money, and the Dental Clinic will not carry out such dental work. A partial plate could be used instead of a bridge. Again, I cannot afford it privately, and the Clinic will only give full plates on an emergency basis. So a partial plate would mean another wait of at least four years, while in the meantime I am unable to chew on one side!

The entire dental scheme is a sheer disgrace. I see people of all ages walking around with no teeth, missing teeth, rotten, broken and black teeth and foul breath.

(b) As follows:

- Speaking for myself, all I can afford is to keep my house running. When shopping, I must look for the "specials", home and cheaper brands, discontinued lines and items past their use-by date. I eat

very little meat, and now fruit and vegetables are becoming too dear.

- Clothes are pretty much off the agenda. Except for underwear, anything "new" is from the opportunity shops.
- Luckily, if one is stocked up with Manchester, which I am, it will last a lifetime. But some seniors do need to replace blankets, sheets and towels now and again.
- House maintenance is a real worry. A few years ago my hot water system broke down and for about 18 months I was forced to use a camping shower (a sort of large hot water bottle affair) which I had to heat in the sun, or fill with hot water boiled up in kettles or saucepans on the stove. It was certainly third-world living. I could only afford to replace it when my step-mother died and left me \$3,000. This money was used to buy a washing machine (I was using a local Laundromat), and to carry out some badly needed house repairs.
- Most of my furniture is second hand. Right now I need a new mattress (old three-quarter size bed), as my present one is very old and became stained when a wound from my recent mastectomy broke down and leaked like a sieve on to everything.
- The \$500 the Government just handed out is almost an insult. Couples received \$1,000, yet the costs for singles are just the same. I had been keeping a plumber on hold for a year to replace my water service, as the rusted-out galvanised pipes were near to bursting. The work was done last week - \$880 (\$500 from the handout, \$110 from Home Assist, and I had to scrape up the other \$270). If I had a partner, the \$1,000 would have covered this cost, with money left over.
- When it comes to this kind of vital work, I know of many singles who take out equity on their homes (a mortgage). This is a pity because the amount is never under \$10,000 and the oldies will never be able to repay it. Others, in desperation, opt for a nursing home. Yet the Government has said it would prefer to keep the elderly in their own homes!
- Also couples are allowed an income of \$116 a week before their pension is affected, while a single pensioner starts losing pension when her income is over \$66 a week. Yet her household expenses are just the same. Why the discrimination?
- When it comes to aged pensioners who are also disabled, the couples will very often designate one of them as a carer, who receives an allowance of \$45 per week. The vast majority of carers are spouses. But the single pensioner can be just as disabled, yet

has to battle along alone with no "allowances", and probably pay a fee to Blue Nurses. Carers, by the way are also often assisted by Blue Nurses.

- It's high time this \$45 per week allowance was also paid to disabled singles in need, to allow them to hire an outside person to help. Why is it that singles get the usual "nothing" every time the Government gives a handout? So that's \$1,500 for many couples and a pittance of \$500 for the invisible singles.
- Obviously holidays are out of the question. To get a break, I do take a day bus trip once in awhile. Also not to be even considered are theatres, concerts and the like. All there is, is the usual Pensioner concerts consisting of line dancing, mouth organ artists, etc. and sing-alongs (with songs from about 1900 - "Daisy, Daisy", "By the Light of the Silvery Moon, etc.), if you like that sort of thing!
- A car (any car) is pretty much a luxury. I drive a 1969 Toyota Corona which I don't think will last much longer. The RACQ has told me not to have any more upholstery or panel work on it, but to just drive it until it "dies." I couldn't afford it anyhow. How I am to replace this car is beyond my comprehension. In this town with poor public transport, and my mobility problems, I will be up the proverbial creek, as the days of \$50 the bomb are long gone.
- Neither can I afford cosmetics, hair-do's, perfume and the like.
- I do not drink, smoke, gamble, or do drugs. I do not own any credit cards. My one "indulgence" is that I am a servant to four cats, all dumpees. I do the right thing by them, so there is a financial cost. However, they are "family", my company and my *raison d'etre*.
- The costs for these cats are partly paid for out of my small U.S.A. Social Security payment. Again, I feel ripped off. The U.S.A. Government takes 30% Alien Tax and Centrelink takes 40% of the **gross**, (who else loses 70% out of a foreign pension?), thus leaving me with a meagre \$30 per week. I also receive about \$12 per week Swiss Government pension and \$30 per week British Government pension.
- I can't afford a computer (I use an Internet shop in town), a mobile phone, fancy cameras, glossy magazines, DVD's, screen doors, air conditioning and so on.

As will be seen, my ability to participate in the community is almost nil.

(c) Social isolation is also a fact of life for most single, aged pensioners, unless they have supportive families. I have no family whatsoever except for the cats. I cannot afford nor am I physically able to invite people around for dinners and the like, and I certainly cannot afford fancy restaurants or even not-so-fancy restaurants. The \$6 pub counter meal is about the best I can muster.

There are hundreds of thousands of us in the same boat, I am sure. Yet I did work all my working life and paid taxes - 22 years in Australia, and 21 years abroad. I am an Australian, born and bred, by the way.

(d) As follows:

- Government concessions in no way meet the costs involved. There is a Rail voucher system in Queensland (4 trips a year), but I don't think many single pensioners in my situation use it. There are other costs involved besides the rail journey: food, buses, etc. during the trip which are out of the question for us lot.
- The other concessions are mostly all inadequate (telephone, car registration, electricity, rates). There is no concession for gas. The only exceptions are the free ambulance for pensioners, although I myself have never used it, and the free hospitals, but the waiting times for elective surgery are far too long.
- Private health cover is out of the question. I was quoted \$175 per month, which includes the 40% rebate.

(e) As follows:

- As mentioned above, the G.S.T. has been a horrific slug. Fancy expecting a pensioner on \$13,000 a year to pay tax!
- The Home Assist program in Queensland does help with house repairs (some labour costs only), but it is not nearly enough. Last year, there was a limit of \$400 per person. My house will never be painted, have screen doors, or any renovations. Heaven only knows what will happen if the roof give out or the white ants get in.

It is obvious that life for the single pensioner trying to survive on the basic pension (or just a little over that) is a nightmare. These pensioners should not be confused with the \$1 a week "pensioner" who is rather well off and just wants the concessions and one-off payments. It is a national disgrace.

May I suggest the Government introduces voluntary euthanasia for those of us who want "out" of the daily battle to survive, and at least we can exit quickly and with dignity. It would also save the Government a lot of money, both in pension payments and health costs.