HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

1998 BUDGET MEASURES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS) BILL 1998

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 25 November 1998

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr HARDGRAVE (Moreton) (11.13 am)—Firstly, I would like to associate myself entirely with the comments of the honourable member for Bradfield. I think his reflection upon the role of self-funded retirees in this nation was a very worthy one, and that is why I want to be associated with them. The measures contained in this bill are not just about rewarding the efforts of self-funded retirees; they are also about sending a signal to others who may aspire to follow in the footsteps of self-funded retirees.

There are many people in our communities who, when they look at things such as the forced acquisition of retirement incomes under superannuation compulsory savings measures—which were set up under the previous government and continue under this government—say, 'What is the point? We are not very confident that the value of our efforts with regard to saving for our retirement will be valued by government and government measures.' In fact, it was not until the advent of this government that we finally saw some administration in place that wanted to send good, strong signals to self-funded retirees and those who aspire to be self-funded retirees.

This bill confirms the government's word as written. This is a government that puts forward a proposition and fulfils on it. We work very hard on the negotiation process in the other place, in particular, to make sure our word becomes law. But there is the effort of those opposite, day in and day out, and their constant negativity, their constant effort to tell us everything that they oppose rather than to state in any constructive way what they stand for. It is this government which is proactive, which is producing some strong results for this country, and which promises to do so much more, if given the chance to pass this bill.

I welcome the support from the Australian Labor Party for this government measure. This is a government which has listened to older Australians, which helps older Australians, and which is giving them what they want. The member for Lilley, in his own words, is now back from the paddock. I am not sure exactly what grass was in that paddock. I suspect there were some varieties of clover there, because I think he is not listening to his constituents—and has not been listening—as well as he should. It is unfortunate that the member for Lilley is part of an opposition which is so vigorously opposing the government's private health insurance rebate measure.

If you want to talk in the context of this bill about providing something that self-funded retirees want to see, it is private health insurance rebates extended to 30 per cent. I suspect they would love to see rebates go to 100 per cent, but 30 per cent is a measure that is supported strongly by them.

So I would recommend to the honourable member for Lilley that time in the paddock has not been spent as productively as it could have been. He came to this place with a 'party first' approach. He was tossed out after one term by somebody who had a 'community first' approach—the former member for Lilley, Mrs Elizabeth Grace. I would welcome the return of Mrs Grace, because she was a strong advocate for the people first, not the party first.

I find it always disturbing when the Australian Labor Party continue to try and unravel history. But the member for Lilley in his contribution today has yet again shown that rewriting history—in fact, drawing a line pre 2 March 1996—is his style. He wants to hide the fact that he was part of an administration and part of the Labor Party machine that produced the administration which did so little for self-funded retirees in this country.

Having dealt with the member for Lilley, let us get onto the positive notion of this proposal. A seniors health card given out a lot more universally than it has been is something that self-funded retirees in particular want. Self-funded retirees copped it pretty bad under Labor. It you talk to self-funded retirees on a pretty constant basis, as I do, they know all too well that this government has at least delivered on what it said it would do.

The tool for changing the particular arrangements that have been the case with regard to the health card is simply the changes to the taxable income ratio. In fact, the income test levels will increase from $21,320 to $40,000 for a single income person, and from $35,620 to $67,000 for a couple. In addition, we are streamlining the system that the Australian Labor Party left behind. They left a cumbersome and intrusive system. Even the
member for Lilley confessed that in his contribution. The system was all over the place. It borrowed from many parts. There was a very small take-up of this health card of some 15 per cent. The paperwork was confusing. It was intrusive; it was cumbersome. It was the sort of thing that people gave up on rather than try to negotiate. So this government is doing something about tidying that up.

This is all about implementing a number of the 1998 budget initiatives. Now, in the Family and Community Services portfolio—it was previously Social Security—220,000 self-funded retirees are going to benefit as a result of this bill. We will be exempting people living in commercial boarding and lodging accommodation from the application of the sharers rule for their rent assistance payment. We will be extending the eligibility for health care cards to children in foster care. We will be aligning eligibility requirements for parenting payment for all foster-carers. Essentially this is good news. It will mean that cardholders will be eligible for pharmaceuticals at the concessional rate of $3.20, with any prescriptions above 52 a year being free of charge.

This is the good news signal to self-funded retirees in particular that their effort is to be rewarded. It is the good news signal to those who aspire to apply effort to their conduct as citizens in this nation that their effort will be rewarded. We have had a problem in this country where those who have sacrificed, those who have put something away for tomorrow, have been discriminated against just by the way the legislation works. Self-funded retirees are completely generous in their nature. They do not begrudge—and nor does anybody, I think, on either side—for a moment the older pension recipients. People who need benefit should get benefit, and this government is right behind that proposal and in fact is improving the range of benefits available to people. But it seems to me that it is not true at all levels of government. The member for Lilley might be well placed through his machine contacts in the Australian Labor Party (Queensland Division) to try and influence the Brisbane City Council. They can smile and laugh but this is real life. I have constituents in my electorate who reflect upon the fact that the Brisbane City Council gives a rates rebate to pension recipients but not to self-funded retirees.

What they are saying to self-funded retirees is the same thing the Keating government—and the Hawke government before that—was saying to self-funded retirees, and that is, ‘We are not going to encourage you to be a self-funded retiree.’ This measure is unpicking a lot of that as far as federal government matters are concerned but the Brisbane City Council would be very wise to look at extending their rate rebate to self-funded retirees as a show of support. You could literally end up in a situation where somebody could go off to work for 40 years and live next to a bloke whom he goes off to work with for 40 years. Both earn the same amount of money. One bloke blows the money on a weekly or monthly basis and rightly receives a pension because he has no means to support himself but the bloke next door has put the money aside and saved for his retirement—

Mr Billson—Frugal.

Mr HARDGRAVE—And has been frugal, as the member for Dunkley suggests, but nevertheless, I think, also responsible, which may be another good word. He has done something to take the pressure off those who have not been able to look after themselves. That particular self-funded retiree, living in exactly the same street next door to somebody who is not a self-funded retiree, will not get an incentive measure like a rate rebate from the Brisbane City Council. They will, though, from 1 January get a seniors health card, which is what this bill before us is all about today.

The other thing that both those little anecdotal examples are looking for is the private health insurance incentive rebate that we are offering from 1 January provided the Australian Labor Party passes the measure in the Senate. In closing, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is worth reminding the member for Lilley that there are 33,394 constituents of his that he is ignoring by being part of an opposition that is prepared to say no to the government’s private health initiative. That is 39 per cent of his electorate. I know he is pretty good on numbers but there are 33,394 people in his electorate who is not a self-funded retiree, will not get an incentive measure like a rate rebate from the Brisbane City Council. They will, though, from 1 January get a seniors health card, which is what this bill before us is all about today.
Mr Billson—Obviously they were in a different paddock.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Obviously they were in a different paddock. The member for Dunkley is right that the member for Lilley was in one paddock and 33,394 were clearly in another.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hollis)—I thought the member for Dunkley was going to take a point of order about relevance to bring you back to the bill.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I welcome your intervention, but reflecting upon the member for Lilley's speech you may find that he ranged so far and wide that the question of relevance went off the map about half an hour ago.

Mr Billson—He grazed.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Grazed, I think, is an excellent interjection in fact.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER—That was why I was so generous.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Mr Deputy Speaker, you were known for your generosity until this particular moment. Nevertheless, I welcome the support of those opposite for this fine initiative from the government to provide a seniors health card to a greater range of people, 220,000 extra people, including a lot in my electorate of Moreton.

In closing, I would just simply ask that those opposite reconsider their quite stupid, naive and ignorant stand on the matter of the private health initiative.