



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FAMILIES, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (2006 BUDGET MEASURES) BILL 2006

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 11 October 2006

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Cobb, John, MP

Source House
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Responder
Question No.

Mr JOHN COBB (Parkes—Minister for Community Services) (12.49 pm)—The Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (2006 Budget Measures) Bill 2006 gives effect to a number of the 2006 budget initiatives which will boost support for rural age pensioners and victims of domestic violence. The initiatives will also improve the integrity of the social security and family assistance systems.

The government has responded to community concerns over the equity of treatment of older Australians living in rural areas and city areas whose properties have increased substantially in value but remain exempt from the assets test. Currently, people of age pension age may be precluded from all or a part of their pension because only their home and adjacent land of up to two hectares is exempt from the assets test, even though they might have a very good reason for not being able to better use the excess land to deliver an income.

The measures will increase pension payments or allow, for the first time, pensions to be paid to rural people who have at least 20 years attachment to their land, improving their living standards while allowing them to stay in their long-term family homes. It will also help retired farmers who are no longer able to work their properties to stay on their land while encouraging the land to be worked to its potential by those who are capable.

I should say, while on that point, that I think all members of the House have shown their total support for this provision of the bill. I know that in all areas of rural Australia it will certainly help an awful lot of farmers and retiring farmers. The bill will also provide Centrelink with the tools to detect and investigate serious and complex cases of fraud. Over recent years, Centrelink's investigative capacity has been developing so as to be able to detect, investigate and prosecute more serious fraud committed against social security law.

To put this capability to its best use in protecting the integrity of the payment system, this bill introduces provisions for the entry and search of premises and for copying and seizing material relevant to pursuing those investigations. These provisions will mirror provisions already available to other Commonwealth agencies such as the Health Insurance Commission, the Australian Taxation Office, the Child Support Agency and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in their similar activities. We do realise there are those who have concerns about this, but it does mirror provisions already available to other agencies and it has been referred to the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs.

The bill also establishes a further ground on which to qualify for crisis payment. People who remain in their own homes after being subject to domestic violence may now be eligible for support in the form of a one-off payment of around \$230. This bill recognises that some people who have been subject to domestic or family violence may choose to remain in their own homes. This is, I believe, commonsense, and the crisis payment will help fund the boost of securing the person's home and making other practical arrangements.

Lastly, the bill will make additional amendments to relevant provisions dealing with information management, as part of the government's ongoing program to improve the accuracy of payments and to reduce debts. Real estate assets have been identified as a particular area in which valuations held in the system may no longer be accurate, often because of rising property values. To reduce the possibility of incorrect payments, the law will be amended to enable Centrelink to check land title records held by state and territory governments.

Furthermore, the amendments will allow the Department of Health and Ageing to give Centrelink information about people permanently entering residential aged care so the data can be checked against information on people receiving carer payment. This will identify cases where caring responsibilities have ceased and reduce the likelihood of people receiving incorrect payments. The Privacy Commissioner has been consulted to ensure safeguards are in place to protect personal information through these new processes.

We do thank very much those members who have provided so much help and advice in pursuing this alteration to the legislation, in particular the member for Lindsay, the member for Cowper, the member for Riverina, the member for Greenway and many others on both sides of the House for showing their support for the bill.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.