



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SOCIAL SECURITY AMENDMENT
(2007 MEASURES NO. 2) BILL 2007

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Wednesday, 19 September 2007

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner	Responder
Speaker Gillard, Julia, MP	Question No.

Ms GILLARD (Lalor) (1.11 pm)—Clearly we still do not have an understanding of this essential point and I am not sure why it is proving so difficult for the Minister for Workforce Participation. I refer the minister to the evidence that the Mental Health Council of Australia submitted to the inquiry into the Social Security Amendment (2007 Measures No. 2) Bill 2007 by the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee. They said that taking the term ‘medical officer’ out of this legislation—and consequently the role of the medical officer out of the assessment—could have ‘damaging unintended consequences for the person with mental illness’. Then there were the words of the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, who were also concerned with the implications of this bill. They said that even under existing arrangements:

... people whose impairments are not visible have been inappropriately assessed by people with poor knowledge or appreciation of the impact of their condition on their capacity to work, the supports they need to work and the range of work that they can realistically undertake.

Given this predicament, disability advocates are concerned about the impact of removing the limited remaining role of medical officers from the process.

As usual we get from the Howard government this degree of arrogance that suggests that they are the only people who are right and it is impossible for anybody else on the planet to be right. When the minister rises to the dispatch box and refutes these suggestions, she might think that it is cheap politics to throw insults at the opposition. But she should understand that she is not insulting us; she is insulting the professionals who run the Mental Health Council of Australia. She is inviting this House to believe that the people who dedicate their lives to trying to improve the condition in our society of people with mental illnesses—psychiatrists, psychologists, academics, family members of people with mental illness and people who have insights that ought to be listened to and thought about such as the dedicated people I enjoyed meeting from the Mental Health Council of Australia—are idiotic and simply do not understand that their views are not worth listening to and that maybe they are trouble makers. She is saying that these are people of no account or no wisdom. We say to the minister that these people are of account and wisdom and she should think about that before she gets up with a glib and insulting response to the Australians who involve themselves in the Mental Health Council of Australia and the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations.

Can I say to the minister that I no longer know what it is that she is arguing, and I suspect that she does not know either. If she is arguing that, despite this legislative change, there has been absolutely no change to the involvement of medical officers in the assessment process, then why make the change? If it makes no difference in substance, if in the big, wide world where reality exists these words in the bill mean nothing, if they mean that nothing will change and that a medical officer will still be able to do everything that a medical officer has done in the past, then why amend the bill?

The minister is shaking her head; she does not get that concept. Why amend the bill if there is not going to be any change? If there is to be no change, you might as well leave the legislation the way it is now—that is, you might as well accept Labor’s amendment. If the purpose of changing these words in the bill is of no account, is of no consequence, then this is a completely redundant piece of legislation-making and you might as well leave it out by accepting Labor’s amendment. Or is the minister arguing—because she does not know; she has argued both positions even though they are completely inconsistent—that there is a change but that it is possible for any errors made as a result of this change to be fixed in the appeals process? If the minister is arguing that, wouldn’t it be better for government policy to try to aim to get these things right the first time, rather than saying, ‘If something goes wrong, when it goes wrong, after it’s gone wrong, we can have an appeal process, and we can do that and this in the course of the appeal process’? Wouldn’t you aim to get it right the first time?

I do not know what the minister at the table is arguing; she does not know. But we do know that people who have dedicated their lives to assisting others, assisting people with mental illnesses and disability, think that this

is a foolish change. We are inviting the minister to think that they are Australians who should be respected and to think about their views. Their views are reflected in Labor's amendment, and, consequently, she should think about accepting it. (*Time expired*)