



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (AUSTRALIANS WORKING TOGETHER AND OTHER 2001 BUDGET MEASURES) BILL 2002

In Committee

SPEECH

Thursday, 12 December 2002

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner
Speaker Cherry, Sen John

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Senator CHERRY (Queensland) (6.45 pm)—The Democrats oppose schedule 4 in the following terms:

(9) Schedule 4, page 40 (line 2) to page 42 (line 28), **TO BE OPPOSED**.

Schedule 4 goes to the closure of mature age allowance and partner allowance. Partner allowance recipients—that is, married women—may have not worked for many years, if at all, and are unable to compete in the labour market. We do not believe that there is assistance to enable older Australians to compete effectively in the labour market. In 1997 the government abolished pretty much all of the programs which existed to assist older workers, and the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Australians Working Together and other 2001 Budget Measures) Bill (No. 2) 2002 provides no incentives or subsidies to employers to take on older workers.

Older workers face serious prejudice because of age and may have workers compensation issues. Frequently, employers simply will not touch them. It has been recognised for many years that the mature age allowance and the partner allowance exist because the labour force, unfortunately, simply does not have room for a lot of mature age workers. I would like to see a lot more employers around Australia change their attitudes towards employing mature age workers, but it is simply not happening fast enough. This came out in the Productivity Commission review of the Job Network, which showed that the Job Network itself was letting down this group of people. It has come out in various surveys. The ABS survey showed that mature age employees are being discriminated against in the labour force.

I cannot see the point of requiring people to chase jobs that they are just not going to get. In my view, most mature age people who can get employment will seek employment and take it on. But, when you are talking about a group with low skills or those who may have been left behind by the economy, you sometimes have to acknowledge—and it is acknowledged in the policy paper released today by the Minister for Family and Community Services—that the social security safety net does need to pick up people who would otherwise be left behind. That is why the Democrats believe that mature age allowance and partner allowance have served a valuable purpose in our social security system. We find it quite offensive to impose activity testing on this group. People with Disabilities New South Wales wrote to me of their concern about these provisions and the extension of activity testing to their members and a large number of other people. They commented:

PWD is concerned that the AWT bill expands participation requirements and the breach and penalty system currently applied to unemployed income support recipients, to sole parents, parenting payment recipients and older employed people. We believe this will have a significant negative impact on people in receipt of these payments. ... The introduction of participation requirements to these payments will create serious difficulties for this group as many, because of their disability may not be able to meet participation requirements, or will have extreme difficulty in meeting the requirements.

I believe that a lot of the people PWD talked about are in this category, and I do not think that has been adequately taken into account by the government in developing this schedule of proposals.