



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



## **THE SENATE**

# **QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE: TAKE NOTE OF ANSWERS**

## **Age Pension**

## **SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 17 September 2008**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

---

## SPEECH

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Date</b> Wednesday, 17 September<br/>2008</p> <p><b>Page</b> 4975</p> <p><b>Questioner</b></p> <p><b>Speaker</b> Furner, Sen Mark</p> | <p><b>Source</b> Senate</p> <p><b>Proof No</b></p> <p><b>Responder</b></p> <p><b>Question No.</b></p> |
|---|---|

**Senator FURNER** (Queensland) (3.24 pm)—May I firstly congratulate you, Mr Deputy President, on your appointment. This is the first time I have had that opportunity. Mr Deputy President, you have heard the opposition in this chamber today, both in the matters of public interest debate and also in this debate, say that the Rudd government does not care about pensions. What a furphy, because if you examine the facts—and the facts are quite clear—you will find that this government in its first budget increased pensions by \$15.40 per fortnight, effective 20 September, and by \$12.70 per fortnight for partner pensions. That is the commitment that was given in the budget. There is also the bonus increase of \$500 to all eligible pensioners—the increase in utilities allowance of a further \$500. Those are the commitments that were given by the Rudd Labor government in its first budget.

There was also an increase in the seniors concession allowance from \$218 to \$500 a year and a range of other improvements for pensioners. These are commitments that cannot be disputed. The opposition had 12 years in a situation where they had record surpluses in just about every budget they ran. The Treasurer at the time, Peter Costello, brought down a budget in which he predicted he would have a \$10 billion surplus. Then all of a sudden it was another \$15 billion. These are the irresponsible measures of a past, tired government that was not in a position to help our pensioners, and now they have the hide to come into the chamber today claiming that the Rudd Labor government is not prepared to do anything for pensioners. What nonsense!

The previous government also left us with high interest rates—interest rates that had gone up 10 times in a row. The only time the interest rate decreased was recently. On the last 12 occasions that interest rates were considered by the Reserve Bank, only on the last occasion was the rate decreased. The oppositio, when in government, gave us high interest rates, inflation on a runaway path and left the Labor government with a situation of having to bring down its first budget in economic circumstances of high interest rates, the prospect of continuing high interest rates and increased inflation affecting food prices, rent and so on. These are

the very things that affect pensioners and low-income earners the most.

Let us look at new data that is in circulation. This week a new report by the Melbourne Institute shows that elderly Australians were left behind by the Howard government. The data is based on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey, the most comprehensive longitudinal survey of Australian life. The report clearly shows that the Howard government neglected older Australians, with the standard of living growth slower for older Australians between 2001 and 2005. This was on their watch. Over one-third of elderly lone male households, 34 per cent, and elderly lone female households, 35 per cent, were persistently income poor—that is, poor in all five years between 2001 and 2005.

When the previous government had the power to act, they did nothing. Now they are interested in pensioners! They come to the chamber putting up ridiculous proposals for short-term political gain. Unlike the opposition, this government is determined to get this right for the long term. We will soon be completing a comprehensive investigation into the structure and adequacy of the pension.

Interestingly, we have had the new Leader of the Opposition, Mr Turnbull, saying that he supports an immediate increase in the base rate of the pension and the government's investigation of the pensioner system. What do the opposition want? What are they really seeking? On the one hand they are saying that we should increase the base rate and then on the other hand they are saying that we should investigate the pension system. Mr Turnbull must decide which position he is taking. He cannot support both Brendan Nelson's political quick fix that left 2.2 million pensioners out in the cold and the government's commitment to fixing the system for the long term. The opposition have put forward a proposal, off the top of their heads, to introduce a private member's bill to increase the pension by \$30 a week. They sat around in this building for 12 long years— (*Time expired*)