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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

BILLS

**Social Services and Other Legislation
Amendment (Seniors Health Card
and Other Measures) Bill 2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 17 July 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (19:28): Deputy Speaker Goodenough, you have just missed out on quite an extraordinary debate. We had the member for Hughes taking us back 400 years, I think, to Georgian England. We are talking about the Seniors Health card here, and he mentioned Georgian England and the window tax. He gave us a very interesting history of Georgian England and the window tax and the implications in terms of health. And I do agree with him: the health implications of that ludicrous window tax were dreadful. He then segued into the fact that the carbon price was similar to the windows tax in that the carbon price was responsible for causing disease and ill health—carbon price equals disease and ill health. It was quite an extraordinary speech, Deputy Speaker. I am sorry you missed out on it.

What will cause disease and ill health in Australia is the fact that this government, through this cruel, callous budget, wants to introduce a \$7 GP co-payment. That will cause disease and ill health, because every time a family goes to the doctor they are going to be slugged \$7. Every time they get a blood test or pathology work done they are going to get slugged an extra \$7. What will also create ill health in Australia is the fact that scripts are going to go up. That will also be a disincentive for them to get their scripts filled. So we are talking about a window tax, a carbon price and disease and ill health. What will cause disease and ill health is your budget. What will cause disease and ill health is the GP co-payment, the GP tax. What will cause disease and ill health is the additional cost of getting a prescription filled. And that is just the beginning.

As my colleagues before me have pointed out, this bill is an example of the government's twisted priorities—their twisted speeches beforehand about windows taxes and carbon pricing equalling disease and ill health, and now we have twisted priorities with this bill.

This bill will index the income thresholds for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, currently set at \$50,000 for singles and \$80,000 for couples combined, or \$100,000 for couples combined, couples separated by illness or respite care, or when one partner is in prison. In government, Labor never indexed the threshold, because the current levels are still higher than they would have been if they were linked to the

Age Pension cut-offs, which are currently \$47,881.60 for singles and \$73,247.20 for couples combined.

This measure, which was a coalition election commitment, is one of three measures contained in the budget that impact on the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. The first of these measures includes untaxed superannuation in the eligibility assessment, and if passed this measure will significantly reduce the number of people who receive the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. The second budget measure abolished the Seniors Supplement—and I will have more on this later—which is an annual payment to people who receive the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. This is the reason Labor cannot support this bill. While it will over time result in more people accessing the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, the context in which it comes is a budget that is bad for pensioners, bad for retirees, bad for the sick and bad for the elderly.

At the same time, the government has introduced measures in the budget to cut pensions—to cut the Age Pension through reducing the indexation to CPI only. This means that every year, twice a year, when the pension is indexed it will increase by less. Those opposite seem to think this is not a cut. But let me tell you that the pensioners I have spoken to would beg to differ. And then there are the cuts to the Disability Support Pension, to the Carer Payment, to the Seniors Supplement, to the Schoolkids Bonus, to the Income Support Bonus, and to the low income superannuation contribution.

Last week, I held two community forums, one in Woden and one in Griffith. They were designed to get across the issues that were concerning Canberrans. Front and centre, the issue that is concerning Canberrans is the budget and the job cuts that this government is wanting to introduce to the public service, not just in Canberra, but throughout the nation. Unsurprisingly, given they were held during the day most of the people who attended these forums were pensioners and retirees. Their message was clear and unanimous: Canberrans hate this unfair budget. They see it as an absolute stinker.

One of the issues that came up, particularly in the Griffith forum, was the concern about what is actually going on with the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. There was a lot of discussion and the people

were very confused about what is going on. They are getting mixed messages about what is going on and they have no understanding of what the implications are. These are Canberrans who have retired and who had former wonderful careers as altruistic servants of democracy, as great public servants. They had great careers and are now retired and are actively involved in the community. They are highly intelligent people and they do not have a clue what is going on with the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. They were asking me all sorts of questions about what was going on, so they are very confused about it.

The group that is not confused about it, because they have a very crystal clear idea about the impact the budget is going to have on them, is the Vietnam Veterans Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Association of Australia. In their latest journal they have two references listed on the page titled 'Inside'—they are 'Bad news' and 'Good news'. I am just going to focus on the bad news, because there is plenty of it, and there is a lot that they are not happy about. First up, there is 'A slap in the face for veterans – pensions under attack'. The article reads:

The government has announced that if re-elected at the next federal election it will downgrade the indexation on Veterans' Affairs pensions. The prospect is alarming. Just what is indexation ...

Then they go onto the story 'Service pension concession under attack':

There was agreement between the states and the federal governments to share the cost of service pensioners' travel, electricity, phone and council rates concession. The government has withdrawn its share. Will the states make up the shortfall?

Then there was 'Backdating of pension claims scrapped':

The long-standing practice of backdating veterans' disability pension claims three months in acknowledgement of the unique nature of military service will be scrapped.

This is shameful:

The \$211 income support payment to children of a dead or injured parent with overseas service will be axed. Why would the government want to claw back this pittance from the most deserving of all.

Those quotes are from *The Vietnam Veterans Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Journal*.

Then they go on about DVA offices and how they are being closed in some regional areas, and veterans are

being sent to Centrelink. They ask, 'Is this the thin end of the wedge?' Then they go on to the Seniors Supplement and how it is scrapped:

That payment has been scrapped. Gold Card holders not receiving an income support payment were eligible for the Seniors Supplement of \$876.20 for singles and \$666.40 for each member of a couple. That payment has simply been scrapped.

Then there is more on income being counted for military superannuation:

It has been counted for when people are applying for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. This may disqualify some military superannuants who are now eligible (no more to say).

The article then goes on to a whole range of other issues.

The seniors and retirees who attended my community forum were very frank, vocal, and also confused about what was going on with the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, but they are very clear on what the budget means for them. It means cuts. It means a lowering of their standard of living and it means a huge hit to Canberra and their hip pockets. We also have it straight from the Vietnam veterans, given the Vietnam Veterans Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Association's views on the budget.

There has been a lot of meandering around issues tonight. There has been a lot of discussion on the window tax in Georgian England. The global financial crisis was brought up beforehand, as was the carbon tax.

An opposition member interjecting—and the weather in Darwin!

Ms BRODTMANN: Oh, the weather in Darwin. Terrific. This is all very relevant to the bill we have before us on the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. There is one thing that disturbed me as I watched the members in this chamber while preparing for the debate tonight. I know that my colleagues and those opposite, particularly my class of 2010, would know that what I am saying now is a bit out of the ordinary for me. I was absolutely astounded at the way in which the member for Bass treated the member for Shortland. This is a man who has had ADF officer training. This is a man who was very much playing the ball and not the woman—

Honourable members interjecting—

Ms BRODTMANN: I beg your pardon, he was very much playing the woman rather than playing the ball.

An honourable member interjecting—

Ms BRODTMANN: I do take that back—I got it the wrong way around. Despite his fine training as an officer he was very much playing the woman and not the ball.

Government members interjecting—

Ms BRODTMANN: I am not wrapping this up. Do we want to go back to the nature of public discourse that happened in the 43rd Parliament? No, we do not.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Goodenough): Please be relevant to the question.

Ms BRODTMANN: I think that it was completely inappropriate what the member for Bass was saying about the member for Shortland—

Mr Andrews: Mr Deputy Speaker, on a point of order: there has been a wide-ranging debate—

Ms BRODTMANN: It was out of order.

Mr Andrews: I am on my feet, you can sit down. I have the call.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Canberra will take her seat.

Mr Andrews: Mr Deputy Speaker, to use the words of the honourable member opposite, there has been very much meandering around the issue in this debate, but there is some obligation to actually refer remarks to the substance of this bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Canberra has the call.

Ms BRODTMANN: The entirety of my speech has been addressing the bill, unlike members opposite throughout the course of the debate tonight. But I do want to take issue with the comments by the member for Bass because I think the way he was speaking about the member for Shortland was completely inappropriate. He was playing the woman, not the ball. It was completely inappropriate. Unfortunately, it was not called at the time. I think we need to have on the record that it was completely inappropriate.

Mr Nikolic: Mr Deputy Speaker, on a point of order: I refer to 66(a).

Ms BRODTMANN: No.

Mr Nikolic: You have made accusations. I would love to respond to them.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Canberra has the call. Please be relevant to the bill.

Ms BRODTMANN: I am; I am about to conclude. Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to impart those words because I was very concerned about what was actually happening in the chamber at the time.

Ultimately, it comes down to the fact that this government is all about looking after higher income earners while cutting support to vulnerable Australians, including pensioners, the sick and the elderly. To those opposite I say: you have got your priorities so very wrong.