

SENIORS — COST-OF-LIVING INCREASES — CONCESSION FUNDING

Motion

MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition) [4.31 pm]: I move —

That the house condemns the state Liberal–National government and the federal Liberal government for making the lives of seniors and pensioners increasingly difficult through increased cost of living and the withdrawal of concessions.

The way that both state and federal Liberal governments are treating seniors in our community has become a subject of great debate in Western Australia and Australia more generally in recent weeks. We have heard some unfortunate commentary by some government ministers who imply that seniors are somehow living it up, are on easy street and are being treated overgenerously by the government. We heard the Minister for Transport make some insensitive remarks. The Minister for Seniors and Volunteering made some fairly insensitive remarks about seniors in our community. This has upset seniors across Western Australia. Last Friday I attended a rally at Perth Town Hall, which was organised by 6PR and Channel Seven and the Council on the Ageing. This was a significant event; the many hundreds of people present at this rally last Friday are concerned about the attacks on their living standards by both state and federal governments. They raised a range of concerns about what is happening nationally and what is consequently happening at a state level that is impacting on their quality of life and their capacity to afford to live. It was an important event and I thought it was well handled by the people who ran it, but what was absolutely plain was that the anger amongst the seniors who were present was absolutely white hot. These people are very concerned about what is happening to their standard of living and their incomes.

Some seniors are self-funded retirees, some are pensioners and some are a mix of both; some might work a little bit, so although they are seniors, they are employed. A range of them receive benefits from governments to provide a certain standard and quality of life, and for a long period it has been the case in this country that a range of benefits have been provided to seniors across the community. Those benefits are now under attack. The government calls them concessions. Indeed, it has put out a document in which they are called state government concessions and which lists the concessions for seniors and other people in the community, and the government has said that it will review these concessions. I find the definition of “concession” interesting and somewhat ill-defined at times. I often hear people say that they receive a benefit that other people do not receive. Perhaps that is the definition that the government might use, and I see the minister nodding. That is the definition of “concession”. If a person receives, in effect, \$12 000 or thereabouts of benefit to send their child to a state school, is that a concession, because not everyone in the community receives that? If a person goes to a public hospital regularly because they have a debilitating medical condition, is that a concession, because not everyone in the community receives that? If a person lives in an environment in which they regularly call the police, are they receiving a concession, because not everyone receives that? State governments do a range of things for which they do not impose a user-pays arrangement on the people who receive the benefit; in fact, state governments do not apply a fee that fully recoups the cost of most things they do. That is what state governments do. That is part of the Australian way; state governments provide services to the community, and people may well access them depending on their individual needs. That is what state governments do and have always done.

I find it difficult to nail down what a concession is. That is the first point I make. However, having said that, the government has constantly said that the concessions are too generous—we heard the minister say today that they are too generous—so it will crack down on them and review concessions for seniors across the community. That is code for withdrawing concessions for seniors. The reason the government is going through this concession-withdrawal activity is that it has mishandled the finances over the past five years in government. With an increase in revenue of more than 52 per cent over the past five and a half years, the government has consistently driven down the surplus and consistently driven up debt to a record level, from \$3 billion when it arrived in office to \$30 billion by 2017, and therefore it now has to look at ways to pay for it. Because we have had small surpluses over the past few years, the government now has a debt problem. With the prospect of a significantly reduced iron ore price—I saw figures today suggesting that it would be \$105, although the figure in the budget is \$122—a very significant financial problem is approaching.

The point I am making is that this is of the government’s own doing. It has been warned year in, year out to rein in the Premier and get the finances under control, and it has consistently not done that, and now it has come out with a review of concessions, even though I find it interesting how it defines “concession”. The first activity in this regard will come into effect very shortly. A few weeks ago, the Treasurer said that there would not be a cut to seniors’ concessions, even though he knew what the commonwealth had done. We found out on Tuesday that the Premier had cut the cost-of-living assistance provided to seniors across Western Australia, and that has been done because of the big increases in the cost of power and water. Now the government has halved that assistance, on top of what it did with the private vehicle allowance in the state budget. Seniors notice these

things. If people do not have a large income and they do not have the prospect of a significant improvement in their income depending upon how much they work, they watch every cent that comes in and they watch what happens with their budget. We found at the seniors rally that seniors are concerned, but they are even more concerned because a few weeks ago the government said that it would not touch the rebate in the coming financial year, and we have now learnt that \$21 million has been cut in seniors' concessions through the cost-of-living rebate. What I find disturbing is that the Premier did not even fight it. As I said the other week, I have the letter sent by the New South Wales Premier to the Prime Minister. He went to town on the Prime Minister. I belatedly learnt last Friday from the Minister for Seniors and Volunteering—the perpetually besieged and fairly beaten down and unhappy character he now is compared with what he was —

Mr P. Abetz: He is doing an excellent job.

Mr M. McGOWAN: If the role of Minister for Seniors and Volunteering is to reduce government support for seniors, yes, the member is right.

At the seniors rally, the minister said that the Premier had written to the Prime Minister. On the matter of seniors' concession cuts, the Premier said on 17 June in this place —

The federal government has made its decision; it is not going to change its mind. It is not going to. Accept the reality, it is not going to.

That is how the Premier stands up to the commonwealth these days. That is how the Premier stands up to the commonwealth in 2014. From 2007 to 2012, it was a very different story when the Premier stood up to the commonwealth. These days, when Tony says something, the Premier says that that is just the reality. When Kevin Rudd or Julia Gillard were Prime Minister, he was out there screaming and yelling, which a Premier should do. Now that the Liberals are in government nationally—everyone can see it; he cannot defend this—the Premier just gives in all the time. It is a sea change in attitude by the Premier of Western Australia. He accepts it now, whereas a few years ago he would never have taken this lying down. We learnt the other day—because I shamed him into it—that he had sent a letter. Bravo! The Premier did not stand up on the cost-of-living rebate, except that now, belatedly, he has sent a letter. The concessions review is underway and quite obviously seniors will cop it again. The eligibility for the Seniors Card, which was a very good initiative by Kay Hallahan in the late 1980s, is under threat. The most recent budget has resulted in a massive increase in cost-of-living pressures through the price of electricity and water, motor vehicle registration fees and tip fees—you name it; it is across the board—of around \$350 per household. The government should not think seniors do not notice because, as I keep saying, many, if not most, have fixed and often small incomes and it is difficult for them to cope; whether they are self-funded retirees or pensioners, their income is generally not large, so they are finding it difficult. On top of that, seniors are attacked by the commonwealth government, lifting the retirement age to 70. Admittedly, that affects people born in the 1960s and beyond, but there have also been changes to the pension. It was formerly indexed according to average weekly male earnings, but it will now be indexed according to the consumer price index. That is a very significant change to the take-home income of the average pensioner. The commonwealth government has also attacked the Seniors Supplement; it was \$876 a year for singles and \$1 320 a year for couples, but it will be abolished as of 1 July. Those are three major changes put in place by the commonwealth government that will impact on seniors in Australia.

Earlier today we also raised another doozy, this time about security. I find it extraordinary that the government has put in place rules like this. In case members could not understand the Minister for Seniors and Volunteering during question time—I know his language is ordinarily very clear, but today he was perhaps a little excited and did not explain it properly—let me explain something. The seniors safety and security rebate, brought in by this government in 2009 or 2010, is a \$200 grant that can be applied for to assist in the purchase of security equipment, such as security doors, window bars, deadbolts and the like. It is basically a subsidy put in place by the government, designed to assist and encourage people to take care of their own security. There has been a large take-up amongst seniors, because seniors are vulnerable in their own homes—everyone, I suppose, is vulnerable in their own home, but some are more vulnerable than others—to burglaries. There has been an increase in the burglary rate and a reduction in the clear-up rate of burglaries. A rebate of \$200 might offset one-fifth of the cost of putting in place a security screen door, treatments on the window to prevent people smashing them, or an alarm system. But it is encouraged, because it helps seniors with the cost and makes them aware that it is available; an economist could explain it, but I think it probably encourages demand.

That grant has been heavily taken up by seniors over the last few years. Since the election, however, despite having promised an enhanced scheme before the election, the government has instead put in place new rules for eligibility. I have here a copy of the eligibility rules and the application form for the \$200 seniors and safety and security rebate. It informs the applicant that a maximum rebate of \$200 is available, subject to certain conditions. The conditions are enumerated in the form of a series of questions. The first question asks whether the applicant has previously received a home security rebate, yes or no. If the answer is no—in big, bold letters—the applicant

cannot claim a rebate. The second question asked is whether the applicant has been burgled on or after 1 January 2014, yes or no. If the answer is no, the applicant cannot claim a further rebate.

These forms can be downloaded or sent from the department; the government has actually gone to the trouble of printing up application forms for a rebate for which the only people who are eligible are those who have received a rebate previously, which means that they already have security devices, and those who have been burgled within the last six months. An applicant who has not been burgled within the last six months, or who was burgled on 31 December last year, will not be eligible. What sort of scheme is that? That is just trickiness on paper; it is not worth it. Do members know what the take-up of the rebate has been over the last six months, since February? The take-up has been four people. Over the same period last year, the number of applicants was 2 709. In other words, this is a mean, tricky and frankly silly scheme, but I suppose it is indicative of all those other changes. I have a copy of the promise the Liberal Party made before the last election; it was going to enhance this scheme and add more money. An additional \$15 million was to be allocated to it, but that is not in the budget. This is just another indicator of what seniors and pensioners across the community have suffered as a consequence of the government's seniors policy.

The government should not think that older Western Australians do not notice this; they do. They have noticed what the state government has done and what has happened nationally, and they are not happy. This is all being brought on by the state and commonwealth governments. The commonwealth government has its own reasons, but at the state government level, two things have happened. Firstly, the government's mismanagement of its finances has brought on these cuts; and secondly, the government has broken election promises with impunity. I note that the Premier did not attend the seniors rally, even though he was invited. If he had attended that rally on Friday morning he would have felt the wrath of the 500 or 600 seniors who were there—bearing in mind that hundreds could not get in—at all these changes to their standard of living. These people are so important to our community, which is why the opposition is taking up their case here today.

MS M.M. QUIRK (Girrawheen) [4.47 pm]: I concur with what the Leader of the Opposition said about the Council On The Ageing rally on Friday, and I congratulate both COTA and 6PR for organising it. I think the Leader of the Opposition said that people were “red hot”; in fact, I would use the word “livid”. They were absolutely livid because they are sick of being treated as if they are stupid and of being treated, to use the vernacular, like mushrooms. That group was very well-informed; they were able to say why the government's priorities were wrong and to point to a range of areas of excessive expenditure, such as Elizabeth Quay, the Florence Hummerston kiosk debacle and many other areas of excessive expenditure that they recognise as being not the right priorities for this government. They also pointed to the government's lack of economic management and expressed how terribly disappointed they were. Many of them said that they had voted for the government at the last election.

The state government seeks to lay the blame at the feet of the federal government for this mismanagement, but what I found amazing was that there was not one federal Liberal member present at the rally, and I think that is absolutely disgraceful. The federal Labor member for Perth, Hon Alannah MacTiernan, was present, but the best that the federal Liberal Party could do was to have Senator Chris Back, who I am sure is a very nice, well-meaning fellow, connected by phone link-up. No federal Liberal member was prepared to face their constituents to explain why seniors and pensioners are being duded.

The government claims that these cuts are modest, and I think that claim reveals the disconnect between the government and the community. The cuts have to be seen within the context of the high costs we suffer in Western Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has revealed that our cost of living is lower than only that of Darwin; it is higher than all the other states. We know that since 2008, electricity prices have increased by 80 per cent, water by 90 per cent, and water, sewerage and drainage by 62 per cent, and the overall cost of living has increased by 48 per cent. Of course, I also mention the emergency services levy, which I calculate to have increased by over 60 per cent. It is all very well to say that these pensioners get a concession, but they still have to pay—it might be 25 per cent or half of these escalated costs. In the total environment, the halving of the cost-of-living allowance does make a difference. Either the minister or the Premier said in the media that the cut is equivalent to about \$5 a week, which is not much. That is almost equivalent to the co-payment that now must be made when these seniors attend a doctor. It is not an insignificant amount. It might be enough to deter a senior or pensioner from going to the doctor. The government really needs to amend the narrative to understand that people are doing it hard with escalating taxes and charges and that the very rationale for the cost-of-living allowance and the cost-of-living rebate was these escalating costs. As I said, we must look at other imposts on pensioners in the context of the federal budget, including the \$7 co-payment for visiting a doctor and the \$5 increase in pharmaceutical benefits scheme scripts. Health expenditure is one of the largest drivers of cost to seniors and pensioners, and now they will also have to meet this impost.

The Leader of the Opposition mentioned some of the new changes under the federal budget, a few of which I will quickly refer to. The federal government is altering the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card income test for eligibility by including previously exempt income for new applicants for the card. Income from untaxed superannuation accounts-based pension funds that was previously exempt will now be included in the deeming system to determine eligibility. This will affect applicants from 1 January 2015. The bottom line is that fewer people will be entitled to the Commonwealth Seniors Card. The seniors supplement, as we have heard from the Leader of the Opposition, will be abolished from 1 July, saving the commonwealth \$1.1 billion. This provided \$876 a year for singles and \$1 320 for couples. We also heard that the aged pension will be index linked to the consumer price index and not to average male earnings, and asset and income test thresholds will be frozen for three years from 1 July 2017. Deeming thresholds for the income tests will be reset to \$30 000 for single pensioners when it was formerly \$46 000, and \$50 000 for couples when it was formerly \$77 400. Of course, the pension age is not an immediate problem but it will rise from 67 to 70 years from 2023 to 2035 at the rate of six months every two years. Although that is some way off, the culture of this society must change in terms of accepting and employing older Western Australians because otherwise this simply will not work. It is just a sleight-of-hand on a bit of paper. Unless we have that major cultural change, this will not work. The dependent spouse tax offset available to people with dependent spouses over 60 years or older will be discontinued, and the mature-age worker tax offset will be abolished and replaced by Restart, which is a \$10 000 bonus for businesses. Of course, I have already mentioned the co-payment for doctors. Pensioners must increasingly struggle with the rising cost of living so that millionaires can be paid \$50 000 to have a baby. It is just simply wrong.

The other issue that is concerning and a bit of a sleeper but not directly related to the concession cuts is the change to the probity requirements for financial advisers by the federal government. The checks and balances on financial advisers have been very much diluted and watered down. People who have retirement incomes want to make balanced decisions about how to best eke out that retirement income and superannuation, so it is absolutely essential that they have independent and robust advice. This potentially will mean that secret commissions and so on will be much harder to police. It is worth raising in the context of seniors' incomes that changes to the probity requirements for financial advisers have been watered down.

In terms of the cut that was announced yesterday, we were told that this had to be done because the money simply was not in the state budget, but as organisations such as the Council on the Ageing and Western Australian Council of Social Service said yesterday, it is a very blunt instrument. On Friday, at the forum the minister said the government was looking at this and would not make any ad hoc decisions, but suddenly on Monday, the government was wondering where it could get \$20 million from, and suddenly the cost-of-living allowance was halved. There is a level of arbitrariness in that. It is a blunt instrument and it does not sit well with the rhetoric we have heard in the past few weeks that a considered decision would be made and all of the concessions would be reviewed. Instead, we were told yesterday about an ad hoc decision, and that the sword of Damocles will hang over everyone's head until some future time when the government decides what other concessions need to be attacked. I am quite concerned about that and I am not alone. WACOSS said that with an ageing population, we must reconsider the sustainability of the level of concessions.

The minister has come along to a number of forums with a chart that said Western Australia has the most concessions of all states, and, yes, I would say that if I were in his position, but let us face it, some of them are things such as concessions for entry into the Zoo and exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. They are not about subsistence. The halving of the cost-of-living allowance is about subsistence and being able to survive on an income. It is not about occasional treats that are nice to give to seniors or pensioners, but about day-to-day living. It is disappointing that the government is comparing apples with pears and not apples with apples.

I now refer to the government's report titled "An Age-friendly WA: The Seniors Strategic Planning Framework 2012-2017". I must be a bit guarded because the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry to review this document and how close Western Australia comes to being a senior-age-friendly state. However, I will read a couple of the remarks in that report made by the previous minister —

Western Australia has a long history of recognising and valuing the contribution of our seniors. We were the first state to recognise seniors through the introduction of the WA Seniors Card.

As the Leader of the Opposition said, that occurred under a Labor government —

Now, with the introduction of the Cost of Living Rebate, free off-peak public transport and the Safety and Security Rebate scheme, to name just a few of the many concessions on offer, the WA Seniors Card is one of the highest value cards across Australia.

We have already heard how a couple of those schemes have now very much been undermined. It goes on to say —

... the new Cost of Living Assistance payment which provides a rebate on the energy supply charge for around one-third of all Western Australian households, including Seniors Card holders.

As I said, yes, that is very welcome, but it is from a very high base, with power having gone up by over 80 per cent in the last five years. Yes, we do accept that there is a demographic challenge. As of June 2011, just over 400 000 people aged 60 years and over were living in Western Australia, which was close to 18 per cent of the population, but by 2021 it is projected that this will have increased by 50 per cent to just under 600 000 people, representing 21 per cent of the population. Western Australia's ageing population, and the growing ageing population, reflects the combined impact of the ageing of the baby boomer generation, longer life expectancies and decreasing fertility rates. These are all things that need to have serious public policy consideration and not just knee-jerk decisions to plug a hole in the budget. Members should not be misled—I have said this elsewhere: the reason that the Premier is not robustly lobbying Canberra is that it suits the general agenda to cut seniors' rebates and concessions in this state in any event, although it is inconsistent with what is in the seniors' framework, which states —

All seniors should be treated with respect and have their contribution recognised

Clearly, what has happened in the last few weeks shows a complete lack of respect.

I wanted to mention a couple of other things. Many people are concerned that this attack on seniors is preventing such things as seniors being able to contribute as much as they would like as volunteers. Many of our volunteers are seniors, so if there are cost impediments to them continuing their volunteering work, obviously that is a problem, and it is not without some cost to the community. I think the estimate is that volunteers in Western Australia effectively inject \$9 billion worth of labour into the economy. So, it is short-sighted in some ways to restrict seniors' ability to do things such as volunteering.

There is an article in *The Perth Voice*, which I am just trying to find, about a volunteer who takes a lady to hospital a few times a week. She has kidney cancer and can no longer drive. He is saying that he may well have problems doing it because of increased parking costs for seniors at the train stations and the exorbitant costs of parking at hospitals and so on. That might be an isolated case, but I have certainly heard that in recent weeks, and it was mentioned at the forum that restricting the ability of seniors to volunteer is going to be a real problem.

To conclude, I have to say that the way in which both the state and federal governments have behaved on this issue shows a complete lack of respect for people who have worked all their lives, contributed greatly to our society and raised children so that they could likewise contribute to society and be taxpayers. Seniors really resent the fact that they are regarded as being of no consequence and are only considered prior to election time. They are very, very angry. They are particularly angry at the lack of advocacy by the Premier to the federal government in what is very high handed treatment of them at both a state and federal level.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah) [5.04 pm]: It would be negligent of me to not speak on this matter tonight, given that my electorate has one of the greatest proportion of seniors residing in it in comparison with other electorates in the state of Western Australia. I said in my budget speech earlier that the budget handed down by the Barnett government was bad news for a whole range of people. As we have seen since the state budget delivery and since the delivery of the Abbott government's budget, seniors have now been attacked in a pincer-like movement by both the federal and state governments at a time when we would expect the Premier of Western Australia and, indeed, the Minister for Seniors and Volunteering to stand up against their federal colleagues, as they have always said they would do. They always say that they stand up for Western Australia. They have been pitiful and whimpering, and have simply knelt down and accepted what has been given to the people of Western Australia, in particular seniors in Western Australia.

The member for Girrawheen and the Leader of the Opposition have highlighted to the house this afternoon a number of examples of the slashing of schemes, programs and supports for seniors in Western Australia. Both members did that very, very clearly and very well, and I am not going to repeat them. What have we heard from the minister and what have we heard from the Premier, particularly since the Abbott government announced in its budget that there would be a slashing of commonwealth subsidised programs and/or subsidies? One of the first things we heard even earlier in June after both budgets had been handed down was that there would be no changes to the Seniors Card and to concessions made available. The minister said that as early as 5 June when he and his colleague the member for Kingsley were at a seniors' forum. The minister has a track record of using the old "moving forward" line. A common line of his is, "We are moving forward." Whether it is local government reform, seniors or volunteering, it is always, "We're moving forward." Although he can be described as a jovial character, it is not going to cut anymore, because the minister knows—he saw it even as late as the rally on Friday—that seniors are not buying his argument at all, and there is good reason why. The minister's stock standard response now is to thrust in front of them a chart that compares concessions of other states with those of Western Australia, and then give the whiny sort of response that seniors get so much support from this government.

The reality is that many seniors' households in Western Australia, and, in fact, many households in general in Western Australia, continue to feel the impacts of not just this particular budgetary measure, but a range of budgetary measures that this government has imposed on households since it was elected in 2008. The government has effectively been drunk with power, and what it has done in its inebriated approach to the running of the Treasury is to promise everything to everyone, say it is fully funded and fully costed, and then, with what I consider to be a blatant lie, turn around and say, "Oh, we didn't say that, or if we said that, we actually meant something else", or, as the Premier is now famous for, just re-create history. They are making it up as they go along. Sometimes the political environment allows people to do that for a little while, but the chickens are coming home to roost for the government and, indeed, for the minister and the Premier, because the people are not buying that anymore. It does not matter whether the member is a government backbencher who stands up and says "I care about my seniors" or "I care about my young people" or "I care about families in my electorate"; the evidence is now stacked against government members. The evidence is now piled up in front of everyone to see every time someone goes to get their power, water and gas bill, and every time they receive their vehicle registration bill. Every time they go down to pay a utility bill, they are reminded that it is costing them more all the time. Now there is a great uncertainty about the future for seniors, about whether they will continue to get rate discounts, and the only flimsy response or evidence that the minister gives in any of his responses is to thrust in front of them—or in front of himself, as though it is a shield—his now battered chart saying, "Aren't we wonderful, because you get the best concessions of any place in the country!"

The fact of the matter is that Western Australia is an expensive place to live. If someone is on a low or fixed income, it is increasingly difficult to make ends meet. That is the reality. Unless some members sitting on the government side of the house, particularly the backbenchers, work this out quickly, they will be destined to become one-termers. That is the reality of some of the guys and girls over there. They will be one-termers. Government backbenchers will not see it coming, as some members from our side did not see it coming, quite frankly, until it is too late. All the seeds of doubt about government backbenchers are planted by the men, women and their families in Western Australia, both regionally and in the metropolitan area. The seeds of doubt are there. They should not think that they can win votes by writing out Christmas cards and birthday cards saying, "Aren't I lovely because I've written to all of my over-70s or all of my over-60s." The backbenchers of the Liberal Party should not think that that will save them at the next election because it will not. What people will look at—they always look at this—is whether their lives have been enhanced by the government of the day or whether their standards have declined. Many, many people on fixed and low incomes, people who cannot find a place to live, people who cannot find a place to rent, and people who wake up every morning not overly certain about their employment and whether they have a job are only thinking about, as they rightfully do, their survival and their capacity to keep paying the bills that come in each week and whether their children and grandchildren have the capacity and opportunity to succeed into the future.

Therefore, Liberal Party backbenchers should not think that they might be all right, or that their box of 150 birthday cards this month will save them because I will tell them now—it will not save them. The sooner they wake up to this, the better. The problem is that too many members opposite have been following the Premier around like a little lamb. We still get this pathetic experience in this place during question time and at other times when they, like lambs, are licking and lapping at the Premier's lap whenever they get the opportunity. We see them telling him what a great man he is; what a great fellow he is. All they are doing is probably boosting his ego, but they are not telling him the real problems. They are not outlining to him the hurt that this government's budget measures have imposed on the people of Western Australia since it was elected in 2008. The impacts are felt in the retirement villages, in the rental homes by people who have children, or in the mortgage belts where people are paying off a mortgage of their home, but also trying to etch out a decent living and a decent life in the suburbs. This is where the votes came from just on a year and a half ago. I will tell members opposite now, these people will desert them. They will desert government members because the government has not delivered. The government has, in fact, lied to the people about a whole range of projects that government members said they were going to build that were fully funded and fully costed. Government members have systematically ruled them out and then, in this place, rather than apologise and say, "Look, we're sorry; we can't deliver that now", they have made excuses. People are not buying it. There is no greater example of what people feel right now than exemplified in an email sent to me by a fellow at 1.21 pm; namely, a senior who lives in Mandurah, Mr David Tupper, from Meadow Springs. He wrote to both me as his local member and also to Kim Hames, the member for Dawesville, asking the following —

Good afternoon Gentlemen,

I refer to yesterday's announcement by the Premier on the halving of WA Seniors Rebates ...

He then attaches a link to the announcement and states —

Can you please explain the **ACTUAL GOVERNMENT PROCESS** on how this decision was arrived at, or was it, as I suspect, another example of the Premier's seemingly total and arrogant disregard for

the ‘democratic process’ that should be followed to arrive at this outcome, given that the effect of this announcement will directly affect over 300,000 already financially struggling pensioners?

He then refers to a second link, and states —

The 2nd link below is a public disgrace:

By the way, it refers to WA having the worst fine defaulters in the country. He continues —

if only 1 tenth of the outstanding fines were recovered, that money would cover the cost of halving the Seniors Rebates mentioned above.

...

I look forward to your replies.

I would like the minister responsible for seniors in his response tonight to answer Mr Tupper. I will send the email to the minister asking him to answer his question, because what we know about process is that there is no process. The minister’s Premier made that decision, and I reckon that Mr Tupper is spot-on with his analysis. But it is not just Mr Tupper who thinks that the minister’s government and Premier have a total and arrogant disregard for the democratic process. There are now thousands and thousands of Western Australians who have arrived at that assumption and analysis. If I had been the minister, I would not have been part of that process whereby I could not explain myself in question time yesterday. We know that the minister has appeared, along with other members of the public and elected members at the rally last Friday. I give him credit for turning up. He was the only Liberal who went. It is a pity that the Premier did not have enough guts to turn up, but that is an example of his approach to this matter. But I reckon the minister knew that on the following Monday, there was to be an announcement about the halving of the cost-of-living rebate for seniors. I reckon he knew, and I would like him to tell us today whether he knew. I reckon he knew. Of course, it put him in a difficult position if he did know. He would have said some reassuring words, I am sure—or tried to—last Friday, but he knew that he would be part of a conspiracy against seniors on the Monday at the cabinet meeting; that is, the minister and his Premier would be part of a conscious decision at the cabinet meeting to halve a rebate offered to up to 300 000 seniors in our community. I think the minister was a part of that. If I am wrong, if he had absolutely no idea of what was to happen on the following Monday, that probably also condemns him because it reaffirms how this government is being run—that is, it is being run by one person and whatever decision he makes stands. The 16 or 17 other members might as well not turn up to any cabinet meetings on Mondays because they will be overridden by the emperor.

I appreciate David Tupper writing to me. He wrote to me only a few hours ago, and I have had a chance to raise his concerns in Parliament today. On the minister’s behalf, I will be seeking an answer to the question Mr Tupper asked. The problem is that the minister, the Premier and his supportive backbench have not been asking the hard questions; members of the backbench, in particular, should be condemned for that. They are not reporting back to the Premier on the issues that affect them in their electorates. I think they are too scared to confront him. I do not know about the government party room but we have some really good debates in our party room. A few members in our party room do not care who they have a go at if they want to get a point across. I applaud them for it. I will not name names; we only need to look at the first letter of the alphabet to guess one of them.

The fact is that when a government introduces measures such as these, it is the responsibility of the backbenchers to support those people who put them there; in this case, the seniors, a sizeable portion of the population. We have to represent our electors. Many members told us in their inaugural speeches that they would do this. As Whip, I have to sit through some awful things in this place. I have sat through some awful inaugural speeches. The theme from many of the new members this time around was all about how they praised the Premier. They said what a magnificent man he is and how wonderful it is that he has this great leadership. Now none of them is prepared to front up to him and say that they reckon he is on the wrong track and he has got it wrong. None of them has come out publicly and said that they support these changes—the axing of rebates and the threat to other concessions that seniors receive. We have not heard some of the boisterous new members get up in this place and start bellyaching about how they stand up for all their seniors. We have not heard a whimper. They are following this minister, who is attached, almost permanently, to the Premier, down the garden path. When the Premier leaves in two years, he will not have to worry about seniors’ concessions. Good gracious! He is on the old parliamentary scheme. His snout will permanently be in the trough. He will not be moving from the trough. He will not have to worry about whether he can find the money to pay his gas or electricity bill.

[Member’s time extended.]

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The Premier will be okay. The silly blighters opposite—if they are here, if they have not been swept out by some of the angry seniors such as Mr Tupper—will be clamouring around, and they will not be in the position that the Premier will be in. He has no obligation to anyone now. If members do not see

that, I am afraid that the crash is coming for them. I will not give them too much notice of that because I want to see them fail. They are doing everything to fail. They are ticking all the boxes, and it is working. That suits me. Worst of all, it affects real people. It affects Mr Tupper and his wife. It affects the men and women who have made contributions to this community—the people who built our communities, who built our nation, who taught our kids in their professions and helped the sick. They are the people who have worked in public services and small businesses and who have made contributions in a variety of ways. They are all saying, “Why are you coming after us?” Members opposite should do what Premiers in some of the other states have already done. I think South Australia has already done it. Is that right, member for Girrawheen?

Ms M.M. Quirk: I am not sure. Queensland certainly has.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: They guaranteed that they will protect seniors from the changes that have been imposed by the Abbott government. The problem with the Liberals is they reckon that they will just do this now as they are a long way from the election. Since Abbott is a long way from the election, the Liberals can be a bit mean towards the seniors, savage them and then wheel out a little packet of dollars later.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P. Abetz): Member, may I just remind you about the word “relevance”.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: With the greatest of respect, Mr Acting Speaker, this is a motion from the opposition. Indeed, I am sure that the opposition, having put the motion forward, would support me and say that I am being very relevant. I am talking about the impact of a raft of changes that your government, Mr Acting Speaker—the government that you were elected to support—has imposed on seniors. I could talk about the good folk of Southern River. I know that there are a number of retirement villages in Southern River. I have a couple of good friends who live in Southern River. They do not say very nice things about you.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member, you are not allowed to address the Chair.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: No, I am talking about the member. I would never reflect negatively on the Chair. It is a very nice chair. It is a very important chair. However, there are some very good people in many of the electorates in the suburban metropolitan area who are hurting.

I know that the member for Albany wishes to speak next. What the minister has done is wrong. Along with a number of other measures that this government has imposed on families and seniors, in particular, with the increases to utilities that I and others outlined before, they are hurting. The minister’s frivolous comments, as he waves his little chart around as a means of validating what he is doing, is not cutting it anymore. The problem is that people have long memories and they will condemn him for it.

MR P.B. WATSON (Albany) [5.28 pm]: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. I hope you will be as kind to me as you were last night.

It is not very often that I get up after the member for Mandurah and agree with him. I think he hit the nail right on the head.

Mr D.J. Kelly: You can’t talk about caucus!

Mr P.B. WATSON: No, I cannot talk about caucus. Who would be a senior in WA at the moment?

Mr M.H. Taylor: You.

Mr P.B. WATSON: That is very funny. If the member has a mum and dad or an aunt and uncle who are seniors and who are really struggling at the moment, they would be really embarrassed to have him as a member of the family.

Our seniors are the ones who have paid our taxes. They want to set themselves up for retirement. Some look after themselves better than others. Some are disabled. Some have not had the same opportunities in life that others have had. Some have not taken the opportunities that have been presented to them. Now they are in their senior years, and they should not be struggling. Admittedly, as I said, some people have not looked after themselves. The government is just ignoring them. The Minister for Seniors and Volunteering is sitting on the other side of the chamber. Everyone thinks he is a good guy, except probably the local government people and the seniors. The minister cannot keep pretending he is the good guy and run around doing the Premier’s dirty work.

I sat here the same as the member for Mandurah and listened to the maiden speeches in not only this Parliament, but also the Parliament before and the Parliament before that. All these new members say that they have certain values and they will stick by them and do certain things. However, some of the most vulnerable people in my electorate are being hit with cost-of-living increases, yet we can afford to build a \$2 billion stadium, by the time it is finished, and Elizabeth Quay. Younger people and families from Albany will come up to Perth for the football, but not the seniors. None of my seniors will come up to Elizabeth Quay. Seniors are the backbone of

our community. I do not think that those on the other side realise that seniors have children and grandkids; the government is hitting the wrong base. A lot of these members here came in on a wave and they do not seem to realise that they can go out on a wave. Some of the members who have been here for a few years probably won their seats by 14 or 15 per cent. I remember that when I came in, I knocked off a minister with a swing of nearly 15 per cent. Members should not think that anyone over there is safe, because if the government does not look after the people—it is not doing so at the moment—it will lose seats. Obviously, no-one is strong enough to stand up to the Premier. As the member for Mandurah said, the Premier will probably get a more than \$2 million payout under the old superannuation scheme. He will not be worrying about it; he will be off and he will say, “Okay, boys, you live with it.” There are some good people on the opposite side of the chamber, but there will not be many after the next election. A lot of members enjoy their job and probably think it is the best job around, but if they do not look after the weakest people in their community, the resentment will build and they will not see it coming when it hits them.

I want some of the guys and ladies on the other side of the house to have a bit of ticker and stand up to the Premier. We on this side of the house are always being accused of having to do what we are told. If members opposite come to one of our caucus meetings, they will see what it is like. We each have a mind of our own in our caucus. Even though we get attacked, I would like to think that people on the other side of the house would stand up to the Premier and say, “Fair enough, political issues are involved and there are different sides, but when we are hitting the most vulnerable people in our community, it will affect us.”

I want to grab something off my iPad here, if I can figure out how to work it; I do not have my granddaughter with me!

A phone call was made to my office today by a constituent who is a low-income earner with osteoporosis in her spine. As a result, she will be forced to give up work in August when she turns 60. She phoned my office to ask what Seniors Card concessions the state and federal government is planning to cut. This lady was distressed because she had budgeted on getting the most out of these concessions to help her pay her bills and help with her cost of living. As a low-income earner, she is already cutting back what she can in electricity and gas. She saves whatever cash she can for when she retires. In summer she takes cold showers to save money and this is uncomfortable given she has osteoporosis, but she has become used to it and saved money. That is only one person. I have been in this job for 14 years and I have never seen so many people come into my office who are on the hardship utility grant scheme and who cannot pay their bills and want to know how they will survive. They are really proud people who have worked hard all their lives. Some of them are veterans of the Vietnam War, the Second World War and the Korean War. These people have done the hard yards, defended their country and taught our kids, yet the government is pulling out the carpet from underneath them. As I said, they do not use the HUG scheme for only one lot of bills but for all their bills. Then they have to get a financial planner. It is the embarrassment. These people, who have tremendous pride in themselves, have to go cap in hand to a government agency and say that they cannot pay their bills. They have worked hard all their lives and thought they had put enough money aside, but then they realise that they cannot survive. I know families in which both the husband and wife are working, but they cannot afford to survive. It is terrible. I have never seen anything like it and I do not want to see anything like it again.

Let us look at the increase in the cost of living since 2008. The Premier, the Liberal Party and the National Party are all involved. The government has increased household bills by a whopping \$2 479 since coming to office in 2008. That equates to an almost 50 per cent increase in household bills and charges under the WA Liberal–National government. During the election campaign Premier Barnett promised to hold electricity prices on or about the rate of inflation. However, the recent state budget confirms that electricity prices are set to rise by 4.5 per cent when the inflation rate is expected to be just 2.75 per cent. On top of higher power prices, the budget also outlined an extra \$324 in household charges, with water bills up another six per cent, public transport fees up another four per cent and car registration fees up three per cent. The landfill levy, which applies to every WA household, will also double despite the government committing only 25 per cent of the extra revenue to initiatives designed to reduce or re-use waste. All these increases are on top of the 48 per cent increase in fees and charges that the Barnett government has imposed since it was elected. Since 2008, the cost of car regos has gone up by 62 per cent; water, 90 per cent; and electricity, 77 per cent. These things are necessary for people in a household and that allow people to survive.

The Liberal government promised \$15 million over four years towards the seniors safety and security rebate. However, only \$3 million has been provided for the next three years. Obviously, it is safer in the community—not! When I go out to see people in my community, it is very hard to get past the front gate because they all have dogs, especially in areas such as Lockyer and Spencer Park. They are not nice dogs. Being an ex-postie, I know what bad dogs are like. By crikey, when I see dogs such as that, I leave a note in the letterbox that reads, “Sorry, I could not get past your dog.” These people have them for security. A lot of seniors in Albany use a website that is updated with suspicious events. People report things, such as, “Someone’s over the back fences in Humphrey

Street. Everybody, look out and put your outside lights on”, or “Someone in Spencer Park has someone in their backyard”. The police cannot keep up with the calls they get. The police do a great job, but they have only one patrol car in Albany at night. It is very hard for them to get to all the affected areas.

The seniors safety and security rebate scheme provided a one-off \$200 rebate for home security devices, such as alarms, security doors and window screens, deadlocks and sensor lights. A lot of people in Department of Housing houses used that rebate because those areas are where there is the most concern for my seniors. In January this year the Premier dramatically changed the scheme and tightened the eligibility criteria. Now only seniors who previously received the security rebate and have been burgled in 2014 are eligible, leaving thousands of WA seniors unable to afford to properly secure their homes. The member for Girrawheen said that only four people have been eligible so far. This was a great scheme when it came in. A lot of my seniors live on their own as they have lost their partner. It is terrifying for them at night when they do not have the security that most of us take for granted. A lot of Homeswest homes are getting very old now. They were built a long time ago and the security in those areas is very poor. When people go home at night, especially if they are seniors, they should be able to lock their front door and feel very secure. However, more and more people are coming to my office on a regular basis saying that they do not feel safe in their house at night and they ask me how they can get extra security. The Department of Housing says it has no funding. Seniors previously had the opportunity to get that concession, but not anymore. Why can they no longer get that concession, when the stadium and Elizabeth Quay are being built, Packer is making billions and billions of dollars and Gina Rinehart is going to get someone to look after her thing for a billion dollars a year? Everybody looks after those things, but they do not look after the people who probably helped Lang Hancock get his money in the first place—that is, the little shareholders and the people who have worked hard all their lives. I do not know how these guys opposite sleep at night. Why do they not get up and have a go at the Premier? He has only one agenda. All he wants are monuments after he has left so that he can say, “I’m Colin Barnett and I built the stadium and I built Elizabeth Quay.” He would not want to walk down the street in Albany at the moment, because I have never seen so much distaste—I would not say hatred—for a political party. Federally, I am in a very safe Liberal seat. Three ladies who have always voted Liberal came into my office the other day—I think I mentioned this last night—and they said that there was no way that they would ever vote Liberal again. I have heard that plenty of times before from people, but you never know. If enough people say it, it could roll along. They probably voted for me, because the Libs love me in Albany.

There are other funding cuts to the discount on local government rates, the discount on the emergency services levy, the discount on motor vehicle registration, the discount on water rates and the free bus and train travel. The federal government has not helped either. Pensions will be indexed to the consumer price index instead of the average male wage. I remember when the Labor Party was in government and the Premier said, “We’ll do this and we’ll do that. When a Liberal government comes in, we’ll get everything done.” Why is he not standing up for the pensioners with this lot? The Premier just rolls over, Tony Abbott tickles him on the tummy and off he goes.

The eligibility age for the age pension will be increased to 70 years by 2035. It is all right for people who have a job such as the Premier’s; he gets picked up in the morning and driven home at night. What will happen to a brickie or to those people who work on a mining site, in an underground coalmine or in the outback if they have to work until the age of 70? I had to laugh at the Treasurer when he said that they could just change their job when they are 60 or 65 years of age, after all those years of doing something that they love, because they will have to work until they are 70.

The deeming thresholds will be lowered to \$30 000 for singles and \$50 000 for couples. The seniors supplement, which is worth up to \$876.20 a year, will be abolished, as will the education entry payment, which is worth \$208 a year. The government wants seniors to keep working, but it is taking away the education entry payment, which is worth \$208 a year. I heard the Premier say on radio this morning that it is only a couple of hundred dollars a year, but to a pensioner that is a helluva lot of money. It is all right for the Premier. He is on the super pension; he does not have a worry in the world, and all credit to him. I would like to see him bring it in for everyone. He does not have to worry about it, and I think that is his problem. He was born to rule. Obviously, sitting on the Liberal Party side of the chamber, he does not worry about other people: “Everything will be all right.” I would like him to talk to some of the seniors in Lockyer or Spencer Park to see how hard they are battling and to see that they cannot pay their bills from one week to another and they turn off their lights at night. They cannot even watch Collingwood win on a Friday night because they cannot have the power on!

Mr J.E. McGrath: That’s a rarity!

Mr P.B. WATSON: I know. At least they have a chance if it is in black and white!

The Minister for Seniors and Volunteering should know better, but he does not have the ticker to stand up to the Premier. The member for South Perth should know better, but he does not have the ticker to stand up to the Premier. People in the electorate of the member for Bunbury who are in his age group are really struggling. What

is he doing about it? What is the member for Belmont doing about the people who are struggling in her electorate? The same thing applies to the member for Forrestfield. Stand up to the Premier. Some of these people voted members in and they are the same people who will vote them out. As I have said before, seniors have kids and grandkids —

Mr G.M. Castrilli: Don't worry about what I'm doing in my electorate. I'm working pretty hard for mine, as I presume you are for yours. So don't presume to know what I'm doing in my electorate.

Mr P.B. WATSON: All I am asking is: does the member for Bunbury have the ticker to stand up to the Premier and say, "My pensioners are struggling"? He will be gone at the next election, because he spat the dummy when he did not get a minister's job, so he is not worrying about the people in his electorate who are really struggling.

Mr G.M. Castrilli interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Members!

Mr P.B. WATSON: Do not give me that rubbish that you are looking after your electorate because you are not! I will get all the pensioners in Bunbury to stand outside your door and ask, "What are you doing for me? What are you doing about my power bill? What are you doing about my water bill?" You do not care about the most vulnerable people in your community. Do not tell me what I am doing in my electorate. I am standing up here defending my electorate. What are you doing? Are you going to get up and talk on this motion? No, you are gutless; that is why.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P. Abetz): Member for Albany, please direct your comments through the Chair.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Certainly, Mr Acting Speaker. I love looking at you in the chair; you look very regal.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Very handsome, am I?

Mr P.B. WATSON: I did not say that!

The recent federal government has revealed that Tony Abbott intends to increase the price of medication under the pharmaceutical benefits scheme to \$6.90 for concessional patients and \$42.70 for general patients. Why are members not standing up against the federal guys? They just roll over. I am glad that the member for South Perth has acknowledged me, because he is not a bad guy. As I said last night, I think he should have been a Labor member as he was born in Beaconsfield.

Mr J.E. McGrath: Hammy Hill.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Hammy Hill—same thing! I think we have lost him. I had a crack at the member for Bunbury; he stuck up his head so I had to have a crack at him. He is a good man, but I would like to see him get a bit more ticker. It is like *Dad's Army*, but it is Col's army, with everyone saying that he is the best Premier we have ever had. I remember him sitting in the bar just before he was going to retire and he was going to go down to his farm. We were quite good mates then; we both barracked for Claremont! He is the most horrible man I have seen in Parliament. He does not listen, he makes up things in this chamber and he does not care what he says.

Mr M.P. Murray interjected.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I cannot say that he lies; he tells mistruths all the time. All those members at the back just sit there and listen to him. They have looked after the member for Vasse three times. Do members know why he got into trouble so many times? It is because they keep letting him get away with it. They do not bring him to account. They will support him, but they will not support our pensioners. I think it is an absolute disgrace. I know that the member for Gosnells wants to speak next. Members opposite can sit in this place and smile like Cheshire cats, but they should come down to my electorate—I will bring them down in a bus—so they can see my pensioners in Spencer Park and Lockyer who are struggling. When people drive through the streets at night, there are no lights on because all the pensioners have gone to bed early as they cannot afford to pay their power bills.

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Gosnells) [5.47 pm]: I support the motion that this house condemns the state and federal Liberal–National governments for making the lives of seniors and pensioners increasingly difficult through increased costs of living and the withdrawal of concessions. I believe that the increases in the cost of living that our seniors are facing are causing severe restraint in their ability to engage in community activities, and I am very worried about that. We know there is a linkage between poverty—a lack of money to enable people to participate fully in our community—and isolation. We are creating a situation in which our seniors are becoming increasingly isolated. That is what I am really fearful of. We know—other members have spoken about this—that a lack of money in their budget means that their day-to-day decision-making about home heating or cooling, the quality of nutrition that they might enjoy, housing matters or security rebates suffers. However, the other issue about the ability of people to participate in local community events is a very underrated

one. If our seniors feel that the only way they can manage their budgets is to stay at home and watch television and hear and dwell on stories about the extent of crime in the community, which certainly exists, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and they become more and more homebound and more and more withdrawn, and that is a very serious downward spiral for anyone to fall into. I fear that our seniors are particularly vulnerable to that, and people's health, including their mental health, suffers as a result of that downward spiral, isolation and lack of any connection with what is going on in our community. They are no longer able to go out and get the sort of medical treatment that they need; they do not even have the social networks for people to tell them, "Oh, you're not looking so well; you're looking a bit off-colour. Perhaps you should go and see your GP." They are missing out on those sorts of opportunities. As part of an antidote to that, I am very pleased that we have in the Gosnells community things like the Gosnells Men's Shed, which is an excellent initiative. I certainly hope that more of our seniors—particularly the men, obviously, in the case of the Men's Shed—get along to community gatherings like that because it enables people to talk about the problems affecting their day-to-day lives.

I have noticed quite a change at the Men's Shed; there was a time, prior to the last federal election, when I would go there and feel somewhat on the outer as a Labor member. People then were not particularly supportive of Julia Gillard when she was Prime Minister, and there was a degree of antipathy towards her and her partner, even though he, of course, held the position of national Men's Shed president, I believe. That, I thought, was all very unfortunate, because they were beneficiaries of the good work of the Men's Shed community. Nevertheless, there was a negative feeling towards the then Prime Minister. I have seen that change. Why has it changed? It is because day after day people are seeing reports about increasing cost-of-living pressures because of changes in both state and federal Liberal government policies. They had some idea that an Abbott federal government or a Barnett state government would look after them, but their hopes have been dashed. They feel that they are suffering more and more from all sorts of utility price rises and they can see that they are missing out. Seniors are aware of the incredible wealth in the state, but they feel that they are missing out. They also have a sense that their generation did it much tougher than current generations. That also is an unfortunate thing, and something that we have to guard against—the idea of what has been described as intergenerational warfare. Certainly, there is a sense of intergenerational injustice, and that is a very unfortunate situation. We are all products of the eras in which we live, and we have different circumstances to face. I do not think that is a reason to blame or be jealous of those who have either gone before us or come after us; we have to deal with our lot in life as it is.

But it is true that our seniors are under a lot of pressure from these cruel increases in the cost of living and the withdrawal of concessions. These things are making life so much tougher. When I hear stories about how difficult it is now for people to access things such as the security rebate scheme, it brings home to me just how difficult it has become for seniors to access the kinds of support they were once able to access freely. There is now talk of increasing the eligible age for the Seniors Card from 60 to 65. I will note in passing that it was my own branch of the Australian Labor Party that initiated the Seniors Card policy. Our branch historian has kept the paperwork from when Stephen Smith was state secretary of the Labor Party; this was in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Letters were sent to him as the state secretary, suggesting that at the next state executive meeting we should put forward this idea of a Seniors Card. It was a very exciting idea, and one that had not been contemplated before. A former member of the other place, Kay Hallahan, was instrumental in guiding the concept of the Seniors Card through the Labor Party, this chamber and the other place. It is something that my branch is certainly very proud of having helped create, and we as Western Australians should also be very proud of our role in leading the way on the creation of the Seniors Card.

However, I heard a discussion on the radio this morning about how the eligible age would be increased on the Seniors Card and also about the possibility of it being means tested. Those sorts of things are very worrying for those people who feel that they need and benefit from a Seniors Card. Perhaps there are some cases in which people have private means that would enable them to get by quite happily without needing access to the Seniors Card, but to just put it out there that it is going to be so much harder for people to access that service in the future is really unfair.

I have already talked about the Gosnells community Men's Shed, and its role in helping to bring people together as part of the antidote to the problem of poverty and isolation. It brings people together, but when I hear the conversations going on at the Men's Shed, I become increasingly aware of the sorts of difficulties that people are facing. I recently spoke to some seniors from my electorate and they told me that now, would you believe, they have to re-use teabags. They are not doing it because they like weak tea; they are doing it as an economy measure. I am not sure how much is saved by making a teabag last for three or four cups of tea, but it is certainly an indication of just how desperate some people are getting. It sounds impossible, but some people are facing such a level of difficulty that they have to re-use their teabags.

Seniors are facing increasing energy costs, increases in rates bills and all sorts of other housing cost pressures, and they really do feel that they are under a lot of extra pressure and that their only response is to stay at home and fall into the trap of isolation—living an isolated existence that is not healthy for anybody, but especially not

Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Margaret Quirk; Mr David Templeman; Mr Peter Watson; Mr Chris Tallentire

for seniors if they have perhaps already lost a partner or the network of peers or friends that they enjoyed during their working lives. These people are particularly vulnerable to the declining size of their network, so it is always good to hear when people are actively involved in sporting groups, such as bowling clubs. That is the way to tackle this issue, but even there, if cost-of-living pressures increase, there is the real issue of whether they can pay to join the local bowls club, or if they may have to consider whether they can afford to have a beer after a game of bowls, which is an essential part of the whole social interaction. These are very difficult times for many of the seniors in my electorate; I acknowledge that. They are deserving of much, much better. I am also concerned that this isolation will lead them to being vulnerable to misinformation. If they watch some of the more salacious reporting on some of the commercial TV networks, they can easily get the wrong idea, and they are becoming disenfranchised to the point at which they lose their ability to make strong contributions to our community. The passing on of the wisdom of the elders is their role in society, and that is what we should seek to foster. However, the cost-of-living pressures that are driving their poverty are preventing them from doing that.

This motion, put forward by the Leader of the Opposition, is one that I fully support. The difficulties that people are facing are really quite frightening, and that is totally unfair and it is often coupled with other aspects of modern living that lead to people being a long way from family, if relatives have moved interstate or their children no longer live in Australia. That exacerbates the sense of isolation that so many seniors feel. We are putting them in such difficult financial circumstances that they cannot even afford to enjoy hobbies and pastimes.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm