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COTA FORUM
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First of all I would like to thank COTA for holding this forum. It is a great way for older Australians to learn first-hand the policies that are being offered by political parties at the up-coming election.

I congratulate COTA on the pre-election policy document they have prepared and the ongoing policy development that they continue to do.

Of course, the election campaign has not even begun.

I will address the issue raised by COTA first and then move onto some other areas that I think will be of interest.

1. Income and Employment

For those older Australians who have saved for their retirement, recent tragedies such as the collapse of Westpoint, Fincorp, Australian Capital Reserve (ACR) and Bridgecorp have shown how vulnerable seniors are to investment choices and bad financial advice.

These four collapses alone have seen over 20,000 investors standing to lose up to \$1.3 billion in savings. Many of these victims are seniors now in retirement with little opportunity to rebuild their savings.

Labor has publicly stated that it is concerned with the Federal Government and ASIC's role in the lead up to these collapses, and has called for a full and comprehensive inquiry into these collapses including the role ASIC played; unfortunately this has been blocked by the government.

Over the years I have had many representations to me about the indexation method used by ComSuper. Currently it is indexed to the Consumer Price Index or CPI.

In 2001 a Senate Select Committee concluded ***“Commonwealth public sector and defence force superannuates are having their living standards eroded through the use of the CPI alone, rather than the higher of the CPI or a wage-based index”***.

I have made several representations to Labor's Shadow Minister on Superannuation about the need to change the indexation method. We will be making an announcement during the election campaign on this very important issue.

For Pensioners, a Rudd Labor Government will maintain the benchmark of the single adult pension at 25% of male total average weekly earnings and ensure that pension rates are indexed twice per year inline with movements in the Consumer Price Index. I have noted very carefully COTA's call for a review of the adequacy of the aged pension and you can be sure I will continue to talk to my colleagues about this issue.

For our retired military people, Kevin Rudd has announced that we will remedy tax hikes faced by Military Superannuation and Benefits Scheme members, of which there are over 46,000 contributing members, brought about by the government's recent changes to the superannuation laws. These changes have meant that some members of the scheme face an increase in tax burden of up to 413%.

In May, Labor announced that Veterans Disability and War Widow's pension will be indexed to movements in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Male Total Average Weekly Earnings – whichever one is greater.

Currently general rate disability pensioners have their payments indexed only to the CPI and the War Widow's domestic component is not indexed at all. I'm pleased to let you know that the government adopted Labor's policy last week. It's great news for veterans and war widows.

This change will assist over 4800 recipients in the ACT.

Given the skill shortage that we are experiencing here in Canberra and around the country, it is vital that we support older Australians who wish to stay in the workforce. We are committed to promoting equal employment practices in the private and non-government sector in relation to mature age workers.

I agree with COTA's call for improved training opportunities for older workers. I have been calling for this for some time. Some employers have seen the light. I know Westpac have dramatically increased the number of older workers they employ in recent times.

To address the skill shortages we have in this country, we should be helping older workers first, rather than bringing in overseas workers on 457 visas to fill jobs.

2. Health

I would like to commend COTA on their research paper on dental health. I have only just read the report and I will be taking it up with my colleagues.

Last week Kevin Rudd announced Labor's first instalment in its plan to restore the Commonwealth Dental Program that was axed by the Howard Government in 1996. After 11 years of neglect by the federal government, there are currently over 650,000

people on dental waiting lists around the country and many of them are being forced to wait years to have essential procedures.

A Rudd Labor Government will fund up to one million additional dental consultations for Australians needing dental treatment by establishing a Commonwealth Dental Health Program at a cost of \$290 million over three years.

Remember, this is only the first instalment in Labor's dental health policy, with more to come as we get closer to election day.

Kevin Rudd has announced that Labor will invest \$2 billion over four years to implement a National Health Reform Plan, which will do three things:

First, a Rudd Labor Government will immediately invest in improving our health system and our hospitals.

Second, a Rudd Labor Government will provide financial incentive payments to State and Territory governments who deliver better outcomes for patients using their health and hospital system.

Under Labor's Plan, in order to access funds, the States will be required to sign up to achieving specified health outcomes, such as:

- Reducing avoidable hospitalisations and readmissions to hospital;
- Reducing non-urgent accident and emergency presentations;
- Reducing waiting times for those people who require essential hospital services such as elective surgery; and
- Providing more appropriate non-acute care for older Australians.

These payments will serve as an incentive for State and Territory Governments to engage in this National Health Reform Plan.

Third, given the importance of preventative health care in reducing pressure on our hospital system, a Rudd Labor Government will make available dedicated funds for investing in community-level non-hospital health services.

If the states and territories don't lift their game, a Rudd Labor Government will take over responsibility for running all 750 public hospitals, not just one hospital in a marginal Liberal seat in Tasmania.

As part of this \$2 billion investment, Federal Labor has also announced that it will invest \$220 million to establish GP *Super Clinics* in local communities – bolstering frontline health care for older Australians and their families.

Labor's investment will ensure more Australians have access to doctors, nurses, specialists and allied health professionals, such as physiotherapists, podiatrists, dieticians and psychologists, all in one centre, in their local community where they need them.

Labor supports and is committed to retaining the 30%, 35% and 40% rebates for private health insurance to make private insurance more affordable for seniors and families who chose to use the private health system.

3. Aged Care

Labor understands that most people would prefer to remain in their own homes. But a Federal Labor Government will also ensure that aged care beds are available for those who need them - in a timely manner.

There are currently an estimated 2000 older Australians who have been assessed for residential aged care waiting in hospital wards. Some are waiting months for a place in a nursing home.

Labor will provide funding of \$158 million for 2,000 additional Transition Care Places, so that those who were able to return to the community could be given every opportunity to do so.

The Federal Government has a target of 88 aged care beds for every 1000 people over the age of seventy. The most recent figures from December last year, show that here in the ACT, they are only providing 73.4 beds per thousand. They are failing to meet their own target.

To help address the shortage of places, Labor has announced \$300 million in zero real interest loans for aged care providers to deliver residential aged care beds in areas of need more efficiently.

4. Housing Affordability

Older Australians are being hit by the housing affordability crisis and it leaves some serious questions for government policy-makers

For those who own their own homes, does that equity transfer across enough to the older person real estate market? Are ongoing fees in retirement accommodation preventing many people from taking that step into more appropriate accommodation?

Those older Australians reliant on public or private rental housing face different and perhaps more difficult challenges.

A Rudd Labor Government will establish a National Rental Affordability Scheme that will help create 50,000 new affordable rental properties across Australia. It will use tax incentives and financial support to provide rental housing to low and middle income earners at 20 per cent below market rents.

5. Cost of living

I'm very pleased that Kevin Rudd and Labor initiated a Senate Inquiry into the cost of living pressures on older Australians.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that pensioners have been hardest hit by recent cost of living increases. Over the last five years, living costs for pensioners rose by almost 16 per cent, compared to overall consumer price index increases of

14.5 per cent. As cost of living increases, it is those on a fixed income that feel the pinch the most.

The Senate Inquiry received over 200 public submissions and is due to report in March 2008.

Labor's concern for the welfare of older Australians doesn't end with this inquiry, although it is an important step.

A Rudd Labor Government will appoint a Petrol Commissioner with sweeping powers to look behind the scenes to uncover price-fixing and collusion by oil companies and petrol stations.

We will also have the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to conduct an inquiry into the ever increasing costs of groceries, which will report to government within six months.

Interstate recognition of transport concessions is important for seniors, and Labor is committed a co-operative relationship between Commonwealth and State Governments to resolve issues such as transport concessions across state and territory borders.

Ambassador for Ageing

A Rudd Labor Government will establish an Ambassador for Ageing to promote respect for and the value of older Australians.

The Ambassador will promote positive programs and activities that ensure our communities value and respect older people.

Ministerial Council on Ageing

Labor will also establish a Ministerial Council on Ageing reporting to the Council of Australian Governments – as we do in education, health and justice to ensure that policies and programs in State and Territory governments are also focussed on inclusion of older people.

This election is about the future

The next election is about what you want for your future, your children's future, your grand children's future and the future of the nation as a whole.

In addition to the areas I mentioned earlier I want to touch on some of the major issues that are facing Australia in the future and which will be decided on at this upcoming election.

Work Choices

Most of you, throughout your working lives would have enjoyed the protection of the award systems that underpinned the working conditions of all Australians. The Awards ensured that you had a fair days pay for a fair days work.

John Howard has destroyed that fairness with his extreme Work Choices laws. Labor will introduce a new system of industrial relations that brings back the fair go. Workers earning less than one hundred thousand dollars will be fully protected by an awards system.

I know many of you have no intention of returning to the workforce, but you children and your grandchildren are in the workforce. I have had many seniors raise their concerns for their kids and grand kids under Work Choices. They have seen them lose their penalty rates, holiday loadings and have their pay cut. Is that the future that you want for your family?

Climate Change

One of the biggest problems facing Australia in the future is climate change. This is not just an environmental issue – it is a major economic issue. If we don't act now to address climate change, the cost will be much higher down the track.

Labor has a comprehensive plan to address climate change. In short, Rudd Labor Government will:

A Labor Government is fully committed to tackling climate change by:

- Ratifying the Kyoto Protocol
- Setting a target to reduce Australian's greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent from 2000 levels by 2050;
- Offering \$10,000 low interest loans for Australian families to undertake green home improvements;
- Providing \$4000 rebates for rooftop solar power systems and for solar hot water across Australia; and

Labor is ready, willing and able to take on the task of addressing dangerous climate change, protecting our environmental and economic future.

Broadband

The internet is the link to the world for many of us including older Australians. Labor's Broadband policy will deliver speeds up to 40 times faster than what is available now, 12 meg per second, to 98% of the population within five years. In my electorate of Canberra, Communitiess at Work run a great program that teaches computer skills to our seniors to help them make the most of the wonders of the internet. It has produced great results for the seniors involved.

Health

Only Kevin Rudd and Labor have a comprehensive plan for our all of our hospitals. Labor's plan is not about propping up one Liberal MP in a marginal seat half-way across the country.

Information Kits

I have brought with me today some information in carry bags. Included in the bags are two of my information kits, Pensioners and Seniors Kit and my Superannuation Information Kit. They are designed to help you navigate your way around the range of benefits and laws that apply to each of these areas.

Also in the bags is some information about myself and a notebook for each of you to use.

They are free and are available from my office anytime.

Ends.