

Speech – Senior Australians Policy Launch

by Toni McLennan

Welcome and thank you for being here today for HEAR OUR VOICE's Senior Australians policy launch.

I would first like to thank senior Australians for the significant contribution and sacrifices you have made for our country - in fighting wars, struggling through depression and recessions, helping to establish our institutions, contributing to our cultural heritage and working hard to build the democracy we have today.

We in HEAR OUR VOICE believe that no Senior Australian should struggle financially in retirement – and I am pleased to announce today that in the Senate, HEAR OUR VOICE will call for a 30 per cent increase in the age pension, bringing the single age pension to \$350 per week and the couples age pension to \$292 per person a week, incrementally over the next three years.

There are pensioners in Australia who live below or close to the poverty line – this situation is unacceptable in a prosperous country and must change now!

While door knocking recently many people invited me into their homes and told me their stories. Stories that saddened me and made me more determined to address this issue.

Stories like a Queanbeyan women who was married happily for many years. After her husband died a few years ago, the only things that brought her joy were visits from her family and friends and knitting. But because she has to pay for private rental out of her meager single pension as well as other living expenses she can't even afford to buy coffee for visitors.

This may sound like a simple story but it is a story of struggle that many seniors live every day.

Many pensioners were angered recently when politicians accepted large salary increases but were not generous to others, in particular not granting an increase for the age pension.

According to an economic analysis by a major newspaper in March this year, the cost of the Iraq war to Australian taxpayers was around \$3 billion and rising.

HEAR OUR VOICE believes this money would have been better spent helping age pensioners.

It seems the major parties simply do not care enough about our senior Australians or else real action would have been taken by now.

Senior Australians have worked hard and paid taxes all their lives and deserve a pension that enables them to live with dignity, not in poverty.

We are a wealthy country with multi billion dollar surpluses – but many senior Australians can't even afford a cup of coffee with friends, a game of bingo or a beer at the bowling club.

Today, HEAR OUR VOICE announces a bold new policy initiative. We propose the creation of a special fund – to be known as the 'Retirement Fund'. The Retirement Fund is a long term financial initiative to pay for the increase in the age pensions, and would be financed and managed in a similar manner to the Future Fund.

We propose that over 10 years \$40 billion is put into the Retirement Fund from budget surpluses and other revenues. Over time earnings from the Retirement Fund will be used to pay for the increase in the age pensions.

This initiative is possible in the current climate of high budget surpluses and is the right thing to do - Australia should care more for its senior citizens and we must do something now to fix the problem.

The Department of Treasury's Intergeneration Report of 2002 found that the Age and Service pension payments would rise from 2.9 per cent of GDP in FY 2001/02 to 4.6 per cent of GDP in FY 2041/42.

The cost of pensions to the economy will increase. HEAR OUR VOICE's Retirement Fund Initiative in the long term will reduce the strain on the budget to pay for age pensions. This is a sound long term economic initiative and one that will improve the lives of many senior Australians.

HEAR OUR VOICE's increase in the pension and long term financial planning through the 'Retirement Fund' will ensure that the living standards of senior Australians is improved now and in to the future.

This is an important initiative that can work if there is the will in parliament to make it a reality and it must become a reality - and I will work in the Senate with any Party caring enough to support us with this challenge.

I ask the Prime Minister and the Treasurer – will you support our 'Retirement Fund' initiative?

HEAR OUR VOICE believes that senior Australians know more about their own circumstances and priorities than others. We recognize they have a life time full of experience and knowledge and as such their voice should be heard.

HEAR OUR VOICE fully supports the National Seniors Election Priorities – and we are adopting their recommendations as part of our Seniors policy.

We endorse and will collaborate with senior Australians to improve access to health services by tabling a bill to ensure that prescribed medications that are not currently subsidized by the PBS scheme will count towards the Medicare safety net thresholds for low income seniors.

Another priority for HEAR OUR VOICE is to ensure that appropriate support is provided for people ageing at home, including financial and respite assistance for carers.

We will also work with seniors groups and the Government to relieve staffing pressures in residential aged care facilities, and we will press the Government to develop and implement a national awareness and education campaign to combat elder abuse.

HEAR OUR VOICE will also pressure federal and state governments for a single interstate scheme for Senior Card holders across Australia.

HEAR OUR VOICE will not rest until the Government responds to these legitimate and reasonable policy priorities.

Senior Australians have worked and contributed longest toward this nation's prosperity and they should not be forgotten or ignored in their time of greatest need.

We believe senior Australians have the right to participate in all aspects of life - socially, economically and politically, and in the Senate HEAR OUR VOICE will do all we can to ensure senior Australians have access to services, financial support and programs that afford them the quality of life they deserve.

I would like to ask all senior Australians this election that if you are sick and tired of the major parties fighting each other rather than doing what is right for you and our country, then please don't just tick a box above the line on the ballot paper this election and hope for the best – look where hoping for the best has got us.

We need different voices in parliament – not more of the same.

I am asking you to please consider voting for HEAR OUR VOICE in the Senate – a new voice, your voice.

Together we can change our world for the better.

Thank you.