



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

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WIDOW'S ALLOWANCE

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (1.26 a.m.): Today, I draw the attention of the House to a situation that fails the equity test, and that is the Commonwealth Government's widow's allowance. The allowance recognises the difficulties faced by women who lose a partner and who have little or no recent work force experience. I am told that prior to July 1987, widows received a widows B pension, which gave them the same amount of money as those people who are in receipt of the aged pension. Those widows also received a concession card which gave them a discount on their rates, electricity, car registration and train and bus fares. However, since July 1987 the allowance paid to widows has fallen to the same rate as that received by the unemployed, \$162.85 per week. That is \$17.85 less than a pensioner receives. The widows do not get the \$2.70 pharmaceutical allowance. So, effectively, they are cash in hand \$20.55 cents worse off. In addition, widows have lost the concessions that they used to receive for electricity and car registration, although a health care card entitles them to free glasses, dental work and a cut on prescriptions.

Widows should be treated no differently from any other person on a pension, and they deserve respect. They must be valued and respected for the contribution that they have made to the community as mothers and as wives or partners to men who have contributed to the building of this great nation. As decision makers, we should be moving as one to eliminate confusion, inequity, uncertainty and concern about concessions and support policies that allow widows to receive at least the same income and benefits as a person on a pension. Widows have a right to live in the homes they have shared with their partners and families with some sort of dignity and quality of life. Being entitled to the same income and benefits as a pensioner will not take them from living below the poverty line to being well off. However, it would bring some equity into the income of dependants.

In Queensland, the Labor Government is now looking at what can be done to assist these women. The vast majority of them are fit and well. Many of them would like to work, but they lack the skills or they are disadvantaged by age. As a Government, we cannot increase the allowance that is paid by the Federal Government, but we can make available those concessions that are accessible to holders of a Seniors Card. The Seniors Card was an important initiative of the former Labor Government in Queensland. It provides Queensland residents aged 65 and over who are not in full-time employment with a range of services.

A Labor Government, compassionate about those in need, must look closely at the plight of widows. We must put people first. Widows deserve no less consideration than others who are dependent on the Government for their survival. We must be understanding. We must be considerate and implement initiatives to offset the pain and heartache caused by the Howard Government's stingy anti-family policies that take from the poor and give to the rich. Those decent Australian women should not be burdened with the worry of finding money to pay full rates and other costs like car registration and electricity. One in five Queenslanders now live below the poverty line. I ask: what percentage of those people are widows who are struggling to stay in their family homes, meet mortgage payments or pay rent, and pay rates, medical, power and telephone bills, as well as maintain a healthy diet?

Members in this place must support me in my efforts to gain improvements for this small but disadvantaged group of people. Widows are not asking for a special deal; they are asking only for a fair go and equal access to the concessions provided to other persons who are dependent on pensions. They deserve to be treated better than they are at present. Only as a united force can we ensure that these changes are implemented.