



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 28 February 2006

RETIREMENT VILLAGES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (7.50 pm): The Retirement Villages Amendment Bill 2006 is an important piece of legislation. This legislation affects, and is designed to protect, some of the most important people in our society: our senior citizens. These people—grandfathers and grandmothers—have made a colossal contribution to our society financially, culturally, spiritually and morally. They have helped our state, indeed our nation, become the envy of the world. Our senior citizens have earned the right to be afforded the extra legislative protection that this amendment bill offers to retirement village residents.

Unequal treatment of pensioners has occurred in this state for a long time under governments of all political colours. In fact, excellent library research by Joanna Fear points out that former Labor member for Port Curtis, William Prest, in 1980 highlighted in this chamber the unequal treatment of pensioners across the local government areas. Mr Prest's speech was a prime mover in the establishment of the pensioner rate rebate scheme.

I have been approached by many senior citizens in retirement villages who have made me aware of the extreme financial pressures under which they and their fellow residents are placed. The simple message that I get from these pensioners is that every cent counts. When people have decided to retire they must watch the pennies. They must make a very good budget and stick to it. The smallest rise in costs has a significant impact on our retirees' budgets and on their lifestyles. Conversely, the smallest of government assistance is a welcome financial blessing.

Our senior citizens need greater protection and greater involvement in their financial matters. As the member for Toowoomba South so elegantly stated, they need and they want greater clarity. They are at greater risk of financial abuse and misuse. I am glad that the Minister for Tourism, Fair Trading and Wine Industry Development has recognised this in her second reading speech in which she stated that residents will have involvement in the village budget setting process, receive greater disclosure of financial information and there will be stricter guidelines for increases to fees and charges. It is to this issue of financial information and increases to fees and charges which affect our retirement village residents that I will mainly address my very brief comments.

One of the largest retirement villages in the Burnett electorate is Carlyle Gardens Retirement Village in Bargara. The present population is 450 residents. There are still 40 units to be built which will accommodate 80 people. A care centre is also to be built by 2010 which will accommodate 60 residents. So by 2010 there should be approximately 590 residents. Before visiting and meeting with the residents' action committee I was ignorant to a lot of the issues pertaining to retirement villages. I did not appreciate just how many retirement village residents are doing it tough and how great financial resources and assistance should be afforded to them. It is through Barry Stick and Sue Barnes, residents of Carlyle Gardens Retirement Village, that I have been educated on some of the issues of concern.

Clauses 51 and 52 of this legislation speak to the issue of financial reporting. Council rates and the state government's pensioner rate rebates are just some of the financial information which will be reported on, according to clause 52. It states—

A scheme operator must ensure a financial statement showing the following particulars about the retirement village's operation is given, on request, to a resident within 5 months after the end of each financial year—

Subclause (f) states—

Interests, mortgages and other charges affecting the retirement village's property as at the end of the financial year.

These clauses ensure that important financial figures such as council rates and state government pensioner rate rebate figures will be available in a timely manner to the residents of Carlyle and, of course, to the thousands of other Queenslanders who have retired.

If the minister would like some honest feedback from my residents, she should be made aware that there are a couple of burning issues that the Burnett retirees are talking about. No. 1 is greater financial protection for residents in their retirement villages, which is addressed in this bill, and No. 2 is rate rebates for residents in retirement villages or, putting it a different way, greater financial assistance for residents in retirement villages.

The RSL Bundaberg subbranch was recently presented with a motion, which I am sure the minister would like to hear. The motion is headed 'Rate rebate for residents in retirement villages'. It states—

That the Queensland branch of the RSL approach the Queensland state government and request a change in government policy that will result in amendment to the guidelines set for the distribution of funds under the state government rate rebate scheme so that veteran pensioners and their widows residing in retirement villages registered pursuant to the Retirement Villages Act 1999 receive the same rebate as Centrelink pensioners.

Of course, I am sure that the minister is aware of the issue regarding leaseholders and also pensioners who have a freehold interest over their retirement assets. I believe that if this government were fair dinkum about helping pensioner property owners to stay in their homes and provide greater financial security it would have significantly increased the pensioner rate subsidy. The library research shows that it has remained unchanged at \$180 for more than a decade—that is, 14 years. I simply remind the House that every cent counts.

The other issue raised so eloquently by different members—by the shadow minister and also the member for Toowoomba South and the member for Cunningham—is what I term the repugnant and concerning feature of this bill. It has been highlighted by the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee in its latest report. It states—

The committee notes that cls. 8, 23, 26 and 44 of the bill are arguably retrospective, in that they alter obligations arising in the future under contracts which are presently in existence.

That is my brief contribution. I reiterate that I will be examining and listening to the minister's comments carefully about the issue of retrospectivity. It is of concern to those on this side of the House. I support the legislation.