

STATES OF JERSEY

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WINTER FUEL PAYMENT (P.89/2007): SECOND AMENDMENT

Lodged au Greffe on 17th July 2007
by Senator B.E. Shenton

STATES GREFFE

WINTER FUEL PAYMENT (P.89/2007): SECOND AMENDMENT

After paragraph (c) insert the following new paragraph and renumber accordingly –

- “(d) to request the Minister for Social Security to prepare a report after 12 months of operation of the winter fuel payment scheme detailing the effectiveness of the scheme in achieving its goals and setting out whether persons outside the means tested income support bands are suffering hardship as a result of the low income bar.”

SENATOR B.E. SHENTON

REPORT

“If I could work my will”, said Scrooge indignantly, “every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!”

The provision of pensions and benefits for the elderly entails a balance being struck between saving for the future and immediate consumption; between compulsion and individual choice; between public and private sectors; and between present and future generations.

How those balances are struck cannot be determined scientifically. It is matter of political judgment. Get it right, and the results may not be evident for decades. Get the balance wrong, and the consequence will be a significant increase in pensioner poverty and social inequality, that may be punished much sooner – at the ballot box.

In the face of this the States have used widespread means-testing to target extra money for those on low incomes. However, means-testing can be ineffective at getting help to those who need it most because of the low take-up level, and demeaning for older people who have to parade their poverty in order to receive a few extra pounds.

Those hardest hit tend to be the over-70s, the vast majority of whom are women who spent years bringing up families, caring or working in badly-paid or part-time jobs. These efforts have been historically undervalued and many do not now have an occupational pension or enough contributions to qualify for a full state pension.

Whilst I would like to get a full Winter Fuel Payment in place for all pensioners I realise that this has little chance of success in the current composition of the States Assembly. I am therefore willing to accept the benefit system as proposed by the Minister for Social Security on the proviso that a full and comprehensive report is submitted to the Assembly shortly after 12 months of implementation analysing whether goals have been achieved and identifying any areas of hardship.

My hope is that as a Government we realize there are injustices in our society, as there are in any society, and that solutions are not easy. It is easy for the “haves” of society to criticise the “have-nots.” And it is easy for the “have-nots” to criticise and blame the system. Everyone, however, shares a responsibility for helping those in need, including the government. And those in need have a responsibility as well to do something about their life situation. But sometimes the government is the only power that the masses of people have to protect them and help them against powers that sometimes exploit.

People that have worked hard and have some savings should not be penalised. My heart goes out to the many thousands just above the income support level that struggle to live in this expensive Island. We should not penalise them because “some millionaire up the road doesn’t need it”. I believe that it is up to the Minister to prove that means-testing is the correct way forward and that the bar has been set at a level that will alleviate cold and suffering amongst our elderly.

Every journey begins with a single step. Let’s hope that this is not only a step forward in achieving our social aims but also a step in a new compassionate direction.

Financial and manpower implications

I am assuming that there will be no financial or manpower implications to this amendment as a competent Minister would undertake a comprehensive review of this new benefit in a timely manner. The Minister and his Department should therefore have already factored this into the original proposition.

“I have so great a contempt and detestation for meanness, that I could sooner make a friend of one who had committed murder, than of a person who could be capable, in any instance, of the former vice. Under meanness, I comprehend dishonesty; under dishonesty, ingratitude; under ingratitude, irreligion; and under this latter, every species of vice and immorality in human nature.”

LAURENCE STERNE
Irish humorous and novelist
(1713 – 1768)