

Plight of the elderly needs to be addressed

As WA booms, a new report has focused attention once more on the plight of the elderly, who are falling behind the rest of the community as money pours into government coffers. The Melbourne Institute's Household, Income and Labour Dynamics survey shows that elderly couples saw their disposable incomes grow by the slowest amount of any household type over the four years from 2001.

The survey also revealed that single elderly people faced the highest risk of falling below the poverty line. And the head of one of WA's biggest aged-care groups says pensioners here are worse off than those in other States because of the rapid rise in prices in a booming economy.

The release of the latest research comes as pressure mounts on the Federal Government to increase the age pension, which senior ministers have admitted they would not be able to live on.

The Opposition has seized the chance to embarrass the Government into taking action by pledging to introduce a Bill to increase the single age pension by \$30 a week to \$303.

While the move has all the hallmarks of a political stunt — Liberal leader Brendan Nelson and shadow treasurer Malcolm Turnbull rejected a call for an increase in the pension earlier this year from their party's own spokeswoman on ageing — something has to give.

The Government says any changes will have to wait until next February when a special review of all pensions will be completed. But pensioners want action now, not a review, and the Government's admissions as to the inadequacy of the single age pension do not help its cause.

The debate on caring for the elderly has been fuelled by revelations that the staff shortage gripping aged care in WA is set to worsen because of a lack of government funding, which industry leaders say is putting residents at risk of injury. And with up to 60 per cent of nursing homes operating at a loss, the shortage of beds will continue, with waiting lists likely to grow.

The issue is increasing in urgency as our population grows and ages. The Government needs to ensure that taxpayers will not be abandoned once they leave the workforce. But the stakes are high — just raising the single age pension by \$30 a week alone would cost from \$1.3 to \$1.4 billion a year.

Pensioners undoubtedly need an increase and governments need to come up with creative ways to meet the challenge of providing for an ageing population with rising expectations. But the days of retiring with the hope that one's needs will be met by the pension are gone. While there will always be a need for a safety net for those most in need, we all have a responsibility to manage our finances to provide for our future as best we can.

WA deserves better from

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