

HOUSING AUTHORITY — TENANTS — RENT ASSESSMENT

Statement

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [6.20 pm]: I rise to raise a matter that arises out of a question asked in question time earlier today. Hon Samantha Rowe asked the Minister for Housing a question about which payments from the federal government, in the form of allowances, would be included by the Department of Housing in assessing the income of applicants and determining public housing rents—changes which took effect from 28 March 2016. The question asked was: what are those changes? The part of the answer that is relevant was —

I have asked the Housing Authority to re-examine commonwealth payments that have not previously been included as assessable income and confirm whether they should continue to be excluded. Pending this review, and as an interim measure, the Housing Authority has temporarily removed a small number of payments from the rent increase that occurred on 28 March 2016. I will inform Parliament of these changes in due course.

The question was asked because the single biggest agency that our constituents come to our electorate office about is the Department of Housing. Constituents are asking us what the changes will mean for them, but we cannot tell them. We know that there is a review and an interim change but we cannot get the minister to provide Parliament with the relevant information. The original list is available; it comprises many pages of allowances and it was published on the Department of Housing website when the announcement was first made. That list of allowances was subsequently withdrawn by the Department of Housing. Today, if we go to the Department of Housing website, we will find a much shorter list of allowances titled “Newly Assessable Government Payments List: Effective from Monday 28 March 2016”. It does not include veterans’ allowances. If we go to the same website today and look at the policy manual, we will find a section on page 9, which states —

Income Counted When Assessing Eligibility

Definition of income that is counted — Any benefit or allowance that is counted by the Centrelink or Department of Veterans’ Affairs in assessing a benefit.

Then on 29 March, the day after changes to the allowances were due to come into effect, an article in *The West Australian* referred to the Minister for Veterans, Joe Francis, indicating that he had spoken to the Minister for Housing, Mr Holt, and I quote —

He said Mr Holt undertook to review the decision and the Housing Authority would not dip into veterans’ support payments until after the review.

If that is the case, there is conflicting information on the website. One minister is saying that the other minister has given him a guarantee that those changes will not apply to veterans while the review is being carried out, and the Minister for Housing today has confirmed that interim changes have been made to those allowances that will be included as part of assessable income, but he is not prepared to tell Parliament what they are. The minister’s first obligation when it comes to the release of information is to Parliament; not to his government, not to his party; it is to Parliament. We are asking for this information because there is conflicting information in both the public domain from another minister and from our constituents. The minister should tell me what I tell my constituent, who is a veteran and lives in a Homeswest house in Parkwood. The minister should tell me what I tell him about whether these apply to him. The minister’s first obligation is to Parliament, to provide the information that is sought.

The policy, I think, is fundamentally flawed, but that is irrelevant. What I think about the policy is irrelevant. When Hon Samantha Rowe or I come and ask for information that we need to give to our constituents because the information in the public domain is disconnected and contradictory, it is the minister’s obligation to give that information. If the minister cannot give that information for some sound reason, he needs to tell Parliament what that reason is and not simply say to us that he will make the announcement in due course. I do not know whether it is planned that on Anzac Day the minister will announce he has relieved veterans’ allowance recipients of these. Is that what it is about? I do not know. The minister needs to give Parliament an adequate answer. The Minister for Veterans has said publicly that veterans would not be affected. Are they in or out? Is it temporary or is it ongoing? Are other allowances excluded at least temporarily? Are they in or out? I cannot advise my constituents and nobody else can advise their constituents because the information available on the public record via the Department of Housing website is contradictory. One minister is saying another minister has given him a commitment that, at least temporarily, veterans’ allowances have been excluded. Why can the minister not even confirm that publicly in this house?

The issue is the minister is treating the house with disdain, if not contempt. I ask the minister to stand tonight and advise us exactly what allowances are temporarily in or out. If he cannot do that today, he should do it at the next

opportunity, which is tomorrow. The answer the minister gave to Parliament this afternoon was disgraceful. The policy is flawed but, frankly, whether the minister agrees with me on that is irrelevant. The minister owes Parliament an answer. We come to this place to get information to assist our constituents. It is our basic job. The minister is saying that he cannot give us the information and he will not give us a decent reason why. I have heard a lot of disgraceful answers, but that is one of the most disgraceful answers I have heard.

Statement

HON COL HOLT (South West — Minister for Housing) [6.26 pm]: I will take the opportunity to respond to that. The question asked today was about an attachment with a long tabulated list of various allowances and supplements. The question was targeted around that table. It was about whether we could consult the table and indicate, from memory, whether these allowances are in or out or have been assessed. The complete table had maybe over 150 allowances. What I want to say —

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, members!

Hon COL HOLT: I want to say that I understand my obligations and I want to get it right. When the question came today, I had been pursuing this with the Department of Housing about reviewing all the allowances to make sure that it meets that commitment, as I have outlined previously. When that list is finalised, and I expect it to be very soon, I will provide it, as I indicated in my answer.

Hon Sue Ellery: You said you've made an interim change. What's the interim change?

Hon COL HOLT: The question was around what the interim changes are. One of them is that I have said that veterans' payments, of which there is a wide variety, need to be reassessed and in the meantime taken off the list of changes.

Hon Sue Ellery: Why didn't you say that three hours ago?

Hon COL HOLT: Because there was a whole list. Does the member want to do a to-and-fro now, or let me make a member's statement in response?

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon COL HOLT: The question was around a whole table of allowances, as attached to the question. Some I could have confirmed, but others I could not confirm. I received that question at 11.30 today. I have made some changes. I will confirm them with Parliament as soon as I can.

House adjourned at 6.29 pm
