

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES,
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 24TH SEPT., 1959

Mr Chairman, I just want to intervene very briefly to say something on behalf of the Government in this matter. The honourable member for Scullin (Mr. Peters) appears to be under the impression that the point that has just been under discussion has never been considered. I can assure him that he is wrong. Very many aspects of this law have engaged very close attention. But I think it is necessary to point out that, when a Government produces a budget, it does not consider social services alone; it considers the whole range of financial and economic activities in the country, and it has to arrive at a balanced conclusion as to the terms of a budget which it thinks will be best for the country. In doing that, it cannot concentrate on one matter to the exclusion of others. It does something useful, as it hopes, in relation to each matter, and on this occasion, we have done something useful, as I believe, and as I think most people believe, in relation to the rate of pension.

In previous years, we have made changes in the means test and we have dealt with other aspects of the social services law. I know, Sir - nobody knows better - that there are great differences of opinion around the chamber on the matter of the means test. The property means test has been very much discussed of late. The honourable member for Port Adelaide (Mr. Thompson) has given notice of an amendment in relation to it. Another amendment is down in the name of the honourable member for Mackellar (Mr. Wentworth). I am very well aware of these differences of opinion. Some of my own friends have very strong views on them.

All I want to say, Sir, is that we gave considerable thought to these matters as part of the general Budget preparation. The Budget has been presented; this is one of the Budget measures, and, naturally the Government stands by it. A vote against it is a vote against the existence of the Government. That is elementary in parliamentary practice.

Mr Curtin: Look at the sour faces on Government supporters now.

I thought that some of the new boys opposite might not know that. That, of course, is an elementary observation, Sir. I apologize for having felt obliged to state it. But I want to say this: Although the Government has not felt able to deal with the means test, or, in particular, the property means test, in the Budget and in this measure, that does not mean that we regard the problem as closed or as finally disposed of. On the contrary, there are still many problems to be worked out, and this, no doubt, is one of the most contentious of them.

I have, some time since, agreed with my colleagues in the Cabinet that it is not always satisfactory to deal with the intricacies of the social services structure at the time when you are considering the broad sweep of Budget preparation, and I therefore propose to have this problem, and those problems allied to it, very carefully examined by the Government well before the preparation of the next Budget. I say that because I know that the problem is difficult, and I believe that it requires concentrated attention and a good deal of close study.

I want to make it quite clear, Sir, that when I say that, I am making no commitment. I do not undertake to say what the result will be.

Mr Reynolds: Two bob each way.

Of course, if I undertook to say what the result would be, it would be mere humbug to engage in the investigation; and I do not propose to engage in humbug at this late stage of my political life.