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UNDER WRAPS

Minister stays mum on Harmer pension report

by **KIRSTY MCGOLDRICK**

PENSIONER groups have vowed to continue working together after being left waiting for details of how the Federal Government will deliver on its promises for pension reform.

The Harmer Review was completed in February, however Community Services Minister Jenny Macklin has refused to release details.

Rumours of a \$35 per week increase for single pensioners have been circulating to mixed responses from key groups.

A Fair Go for Pensioners delegation which met with Ms Macklin on March 16 was told no decisions would be made pending the outcome of the Henry Tax Review this month.

However Queensland Australian Pensioners and Superannuants League policy co-ordinator Ray Ferguson said coalition groups would continue to work together, with representatives from each state meeting to discuss ongoing efforts for reform.

He said the group would meet after the May budget to discuss a co-ordinated response.

Mr Ferguson said while a \$35 per week increase would be welcome, it was time for a serious commitment to improve the lives of all pensioners.

"We hold the government accountable to its assurances given in the lead-up to the Harmer Review, and also remind them of their response when in opposition, when they initiated the Senate Inquiry into the Cost of Living and Impact on Older Australians, and the recommendations that flowed on from that," he said.

"In addition to improving the lifestyle of single pensioners, the whole purpose of the Harmer Review was to consider the overall position of the basic pension rate."

Fair Go for Pensioners Coalition spokeswoman Patricia Reeve said while the delegation was disappointed the Harmer report had not been released, it made sense it should be

considered in light of the Henry review.

"For a lot of people their retirement income is a mix of superannuation and pension, and the majority of people in the future will have a mix of the two," she said.

"For us the most important thing we want to get out of the budget is not only a pension increase, but some future direction and perhaps even a staged introduction of reforms.

"Our claim is for an increase from 25 per cent to 35 per cent of male average weekly earnings, and we believe the \$30 being put forward by some people is completely inadequate."

NSW Alliance of Retired Trade Unionists president Morrie Mifsud said delegates had made it clear to Ms Macklin that the Fair Go for Pensioners coalition would not "conveniently disappear", and expressed disappointment at the government's failure to release the Harmer report.

"We will continue to act vigorously in support of

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Minister holds on to pension review

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our legitimate and greatly overdue justice for pensioners," he said.

Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association policy co-ordinator Charmaine Crowe said her association and pensioners who had attended a recent public meeting in Sydney were also calling for the Harmer report to be made public.

She said after a nine-month review process, the rumoured \$35 a week increase for single pensioners would be inadequate.

"CPSA will be calling for an extra \$80 a week for single pensioners with no other income to supplement their pension, and an extra \$50 a week for couples in this position," she said.



PATRICIA REEVE

"This targeted increase will ensure that age, disability support pensioners and carers will be covered for less than what is spent each year on rebates for private health insurance."

Pensioners and Superannuants League Western Australia president Mike O'Brien called for an independent commission to be established to

review the social welfare system.

He said his organisation would continue to push for the reintroduction of land tax to cover the cost of pension increases.

■ Meanwhile, from March 20, indexation has delivered an increase of \$7.70 a fortnight to the maximum single pension and \$6.40 in the maximum partnered rate for each member of a pensioner couple.

Deeming rates have been further reduced to reflect lower returns available from financial investments.

The upper deeming rate has decreased from 4 per cent to 3 per cent for the balance of financial investments over \$41,000 for single pensioners from March 20.