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Senior Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
Inquiry into the proposed Appropriation (Loose-fill Asbestos Insulation Eradication)
Bill 2014-2015

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this submission is to:

- (a) point out the difficulties the implementation of the proposed Bill will create for senior citizens who face the prospect of the demolition of their homes in which they have lived for many years and their removal from their community of which they have become a part, and
- (b) suggest steps be taken to avoid these difficulties.

It does not dispute that many are prepared to accept the government's offer and does not propose that the modifications proposed delay work on their behalf.

BACKGROUND

My wife, [redacted] and I are the owners of a Mr Fluffy home. We have lived in it for 46 years. [redacted] is 70 years old and I am 72. Our home is a major part of our past- we have raised our two boys here and now delight in having the grand children visit.

Our home was also to be a major part of our future, even though we acknowledge that we may not be able to live here for more than another 10 years or so. A more detailed description of our situation was outlined in the ABC's Canberra 7.30 Report last Friday night, the 21st of November. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-21/the-calverts---a-canberra-asbestos-story/5910772>) It emphasises our attachment to our garden, which is irreplaceable.

During our some 50 years in Canberra we have participated in many community activities and continue to do so.

Earlier this year our house was tested for asbestos in the living areas and ceiling space. No asbestos was found and the tester went on to observe the soundness and good condition of the house.

When we were told of the Government's Eradication Program we were overwhelmed with feelings of disbelief, anger, betrayal, hopelessness and, above all, grief. We questioned whether we wished to continue to live in Canberra given the way we were being treated by the Government. I wished I did not have to wake up in the mornings, and still do!

THE ERADICATION PROGRAM

We all accept that the Mr Fluffy issue has created an enormous problem for the ACT Government and that there has been a genuine and concerted effort to solve it. But it must be said that the results are disappointing. The proposed program is not sensitive to the situation of a great many Canberrans, the cost of the program is incompatible with the budgetary situation facing the Government and its proposed timetable exacerbates its shortcomings.

But in this submission I wish to concentrate on those people, like us, who have lived in their homes for tens of years and who are getting on in years.

In "Background" above I have described our reaction to the announcement of the program. We have spoken to many people in a similar situation to us and I think I can safely say that most have reacted in a broadly similar way. The shock and depression we are all suffering is clearly evident as is the feeling of the hopelessness of trying to persuade the Government to a different course. The grief is comparable to that of losing a parent.

There is also the prospect of losing the small local communities of which we are all a part. These communities are an essential part of our wellbeing and, for older people, are more difficult to replace. The chat over the back fence, the help in times of illness, the odd jobs done while others holiday are all tremendously important and are not easily replaced.

And from our searching of the real estate market in recent weeks it would appear that it will be difficult for displaced owners to afford to relocate in their own suburbs because of the imbalance of Mr Fluffy homes and homes coming on to the market for sale in these suburbs. Many of those with limited resources will be forced to live in accommodation not of their choice or to move to distant suburbs.

A major concern of many of us is the conditions the Government proposes to impose within Mr Fluffy houses that will continue to be lived in. Lights, exhaust fans, ducted heating and ventilation systems it seems will be put out of action. Some of these are completely safe. It does not make sense unless safety is not the only objective of the authorities!

And I can find no indication that the Government is prepared to advise on small modifications which, at little expense, could render a home safe for accommodation at least in the medium term.

RECOMMENDATION

It is suggested that the Committee make it a condition of passing this bill that:

(a) owners of Mr Fluffy homes over the age of 60 be permitted to continue to live in their homes for the rest of their lives or until they wish to leave, unless the home deteriorates to the extent that it becomes unsafe,

(b) such owners be permitted to join the Eradication Program ie have their home valued and a pay out made when the home is surrendered.

(c) unnecessarily harsh restrictions not be placed on the running of their homes

(d) those remaining in their homes be permitted to make small changes to improve the safety of their homes

(e) the ACT Government continue to ensure that trades people are available to service such homes

(f) the cost of any monitoring required to be undertaken by the owner be allowed to be offset against rates