

## Poverty shaming pensioners is a low blow

*Kasy Chambers*

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/poverty-shaming-pensioners-is-a-low-blow-20170105-gtmvg8.html>

Mahatma Ghandi famously said that the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.

Australia, while a democratic and economically prosperous nation, still is home to many vulnerable people.



Perhaps the most stinging of David Leyonhjelm's remarks were his thoughts on what it means to 'be poor', and his view is not a positive one.

This week, the Turnbull Government has restricted access to the aged pension for 300,000 older Australians as part of a tightening of the assets test.

According to AAP, about 330,000 Australians have had their pension decreased and about 90,000 have lost it entirely.

In examining these cuts, I asked a friend from a small, poor South American country if he, currently unemployed, had access to any benefit from his government.

His answer was: "No, only the elderly receive a government benefit in this country."

So, simplistically speaking, even a country with an extremely low GDP sees value in the preservation of its older citizens as a priority.

Now, in Australia, some of the cuts may make good sense. We certainly would not argue in favour of middle class welfare at the expense of the poor, and would hope that those with the possibility of providing for themselves could be encouraged to do so.

Social services organisations have questioned the government however at length over this move in order to make sure those who genuinely need the pension are not forced to live in abject poverty during their retirement. The reason for this is because the recent history of the current government's welfare strategies has been extremely chequered.

This week, Liberal Democrat crossbencher David Leyonhjelm said these new changes don't go far enough in an elitist tirade about "aspirational retirees".

Leyonhjelm has a history of controversial remarks, and this week, he told the ABC that "taking the pension shouldn't be something you aspire to, it should be something you try to avoid because it signifies you're in a low-income group – in other words, you're poor, or close to poor".

Leyonhjelm is arguing that the pension should not be an "entitlement" but rather seen as a punitive "welfare" payment, because people should "plan for their retirement".

His advice is that the pension should not be seen as something deserved, but in fact something to be ashamed of.

He also emphasised that a pension payment is not a benefit that is designed to be passed down to pensioners' children but that people should rather focus on downsizing and selling of their assets to enhance their financial stability.

At 68, my friend Bruce would dearly love to retire, but due to the constantly-changing industry that he works in, throughout his career his financial situation has had its ups and downs.

In the '80s and '90s his small businesses flourished and he was inundated with work. But the recession and other factors have made the last decade one of the most difficult of his long career.

The economy now is such that any superannuation he has been able to accrue will only give him a few more years where he and his wife can enjoy their retirement before going on the pension.

Perhaps the most stinging of Leyonhjelm's remarks were his fairly vocally stated thoughts on what it means to "be poor", and his view is not a positive one.

Leyonhjelm's words to the ABC were clear: Australians should "reinforce the notion" that "when you retire you will only receive the pension if you're poor and it's nothing to be proud of".

We are inclined to disagree with this statement.

Each year, Anglicare Australia recognises long-serving volunteers in a National Awards ceremony.

The 2016 winner and the two recipients of the highly commended honours were three elderly women who had worked as volunteers for many years, serving Anglicare members in places around Australia.

One is a volunteer grief counsellor; another cooks delicious food every week for young homeless men; and another is a refugee who after many years in Australia is now helping other refugees to integrate into the community.

These women, by Leyonhjelm's standards would be (or one day will be) considered "poor pensioners", and yet their contribution simply cannot be measured.

Instead of lining their pockets to save for their retirement, these generous women have chosen to serve in a volunteer capacity, and this has extraordinary value.

As a nation – rather than penalising or shaming our elderly citizens – we should be celebrating their particular contributions, regardless of their economic status, and regardless of whether at some point in their lives they will need to rely on a government payment.

Those pensioners who have spent their entire lives working and paying taxes, often in thankless jobs deserve our compassion and our thanks.

They do not deserve to be subject to an assets test that fails to recognise their holistic contribution; and they certainly do not deserve to be "poverty shamed"; because in fact, they are far richer than we will ever be able to accurately measure.

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