

It's the simple questions that count

Amanda O'Brien and Janine MacDonald | *January 21, 2008*

IT took a simple question from 80-year-old Chum Taylor to stop the Government in its tracks when Kevin Rudd and his ministers met in Perth yesterday for the first of a series of community cabinet meetings planned to keep them in touch with voters.

"I'd like to ask the cabinet if any of your members here could live on \$530.90 a fortnight?" the pensioner asked the Prime Minister.

"If you can, put your hand up because that's what the age pensioners are trying to do."

Not a hand moved as he looked up at the conga line of ministers spread out before him.

Mr Taylor's question earned thunderous applause from the 450 people who attended the meeting yesterday.

The community cabinets will be gradually rolled out in every state to meet an election commitment made by Mr Rudd last year.

They include a forum where members of the public can question ministers followed by private one-to-one meetings for a select few.

Mr Taylor asked Mr Rudd if he would commit to reviewing the aged pension in the near future.

Mr Rudd congratulated Mr Taylor for asking a "very, very important question" but failed to answer it. "As I travelled around during the election campaign, and you probably saw me tripping through one shopping centre after another, there was never a shopping centre that I went to where this question was not raised with me," he said.

"We're conscious very much of the pressures that are faced.

"We've had a debate among ourselves about how, for example, the index is calculated for adjusting the age pension."

Mr Rudd admitted the traditional basket of goods used by government did not reflect what an aged pensioner would buy but then handed over to Community Services Minister Jenny Macklin to answer the specifics.

Instead, Ms Macklin said the Government would be increasing the utilities allowance for pensioners, extending transport concessions so they could be used across state

boundaries and providing more internet support for pensioners to keep in touch with family and friends. There was no mention of a review.

Mr Taylor's question was one of 15 served up to the Government in the 80-minute session covering issues such as human rights abuses in China, funding for state schools, over-taxing, the housing crisis, the plight of the Stolen Generation and Japanese whaling.

Mr Rudd and his ministers spent the session soothing and agreeing with questioners but providing no new commitments.

When the main audience dispersed, 110 of them stayed behind to meet directly with ministers for 10-minute sessions - an initiative already adopted by some state governments.

The media were excluded from the private sessions, but most of those emerging from their one-on-one chats seemed happy with the experience, although the majority represented lobby groups rather than people in the street.

One of the few exceptions was Janet McLean, the mother of a four-year-old autistic boy, Joshua, who met jointly with Mr Rudd and Ms Macklin.

She emerged to say they had been very receptive to her plea for greater recognition of the plight of autistic children.

Another was grain farmer Julie Newman, who drove 420km to meet Agriculture Minister Tony Burke to plead for better protection for traditional farmers from genetically modified crops.

She said the minister appeared to listen, but it was hard to know if anything would come of it.



A band of 30 protesters stood outside the cabinet meeting under a large banner decrying the destruction of Aboriginal rock art in the Burrup by mining giant Woodside, but they were forced to stand well out of sight to the side of the building.

Aboriginal elder Neville Collard presented Mr Rudd with a traditional limestone axe, bound with kangaroo droppings, after giving the traditional Noongar welcome. Mr Rudd said he was contemplating the purposes to which it would be put.