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An advertisement for Fido's Talk & Text service. It features a yellow box with the text "Talk & Text" in black. To the right, it says "From \$15 per month" with a large "15" and a dollar sign. Further right is a small image of a dog's face. On the far right is the Fido logo, which includes a house icon and the word "fido".

No pensions for old cons

Tories' move to take prisoners off old-age dole just common sense

By GREG WESTON, QMI AGENCY

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In a chance encounter with Human Resources Minister Diane Finley on the way to work Tuesday, we were moved to dispense with the usual morning pleasantries in favour of an enthusiastic: "Good work, minister."

After the initial shock of a Conservative minister getting praise from a journalist, Finley gave a knowing smile: "Oh, the pensions for prisoners thing — thanks."

The minister's well-earned kudos, of course, are for her move this week to end old-age security payments to hundreds of prison inmates doing time past the age of 64.

The issue was first raised in the Sun several months ago by columnist Peter Worthington, who noted that notorious serial killer Clifford Olson was collecting full old age benefits in the slammer.

The idea that taxpayers have been shelling out \$1,200 a month to a vile psychopath who tortured and killed 11 kids, naturally caused a national furor (which we were only too happy to promote in this space).

This week Finley introduced legislation that would preclude all seniors in a federal pen — including Olson — from getting either the basic old age security, or the guaranteed income supplement aimed at the poorest of the poor.

The latest statistics show the change would currently affect about 350 federal prisoners.

Get with the program

The proposed legislation would also extend the pension ban to felons in provincial jails wherever provinces decide to get with the program which, presumably, most will want to do.

Notably, the legislation is careful not to leave the aged spouses of convicts without support.

The only serious criticism of nixing prisoner pensions was that it could leave hundreds of spouses — mainly elderly women — completely destitute and too old to fend for themselves.

Instead, most of the verbiage in Finley's surprisingly complicated legislative bill is specifically to limit the measures to prisoners without further punishing their families.

The most amazing part of this story is not that pensions for prisoners are finally ending, but that they were paid in the first place and no one in government seemed to notice.

This is not small change. In the past decade alone, Canadian taxpayers have been stiffed close to \$50 million in old age security cheques for some of the worst of the worst behind bars.

This isn't just about denying public support to convicted criminals who don't deserve it. They also don't need it.

The old age security system — and the extra income supplement — exist precisely to ensure that all of our senior citizens have at least a bare minimum of subsistence-level support.

But prison inmates already get all their food, shelter, clothing and other necessities of life provided by the state at a cost to taxpayers of up to \$150,000 a year.

The legislation properly allows old-age security to kick back in when a prisoner is released, and will need the same help as every other senior citizen.

The Conservatives, of course, were quick to turn the whole thing into part of their "tough-on-crime" agenda, putting victims ahead of criminals and all that.

While it may be all those things, mostly this is just common sense.

Worthington wrote that even sicko serial killer Olson found it amusingly odd that he would be getting a public pension in solitary confinement.

This time, at least, taxpayers get the last laugh.

greg.weston@sunmedia.ca

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