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There are two fiscal elephants in the Gillard government's cabinet room. The first and better known elephant is the fact that the government's wafer-thin surplus has been crushed under the weight of a slowdown in revenue forecasts and a speed-up in new spending announcements.

The second elephant is that the cost of so-called "self-funded" retirement is not only the biggest, but fastest-growing area of government outlays.

In fact, over the next three years the cost of the taxpayers' contribution to the retirement incomes of the wealthier half of the population will increase from $30 billion per year to $45 billion per year.

You would think that a $15 billion blowout in the annual cost of any policy would attract the attention of the federal Treasurer and the ire of the opposition, but it seems neither the class warrior Wayne Swan nor the fiscally conservative shadow treasurer Joe Hockey is keen to take on the lobbyists for the most profitable form of middle-class welfare Australia has ever seen.

That $15 billion a year could easily fund the federal government's Gonski education reforms, the national disability insurance scheme (NDIS) and the Denticare proposal with more than enough change left over to pick up the cost of the likely shortfall in mining tax revenue that will accompany collapsing commodity prices.

The Coalition, on the other hand, could redirect the forecast growth in tax concessions for superannuation to fund the cost of scrapping the carbon tax, scrapping the mining tax, increasing the generosity of paid parental leave and posting billions of dollars' worth of cheques to polluters as part of their "direct action" scheme to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

But despite the fact Treasury forecasts suggest that the cost of super tax concessions will grow faster than any other area of government policy, there hasn’t been a peep out of Swan or Hockey.

Using the tax system to boost the retirement savings of those who work is not only expensive, it is incredibly inequitable.

Treasury estimates that 37 per cent of the taxpayers’ contribution to private superannuation accounts goes to the wealthiest 5 per cent of the population.

Needless to say, those who care for children, care for their parents or those on the disability pension receive zero.

While the Gillard government has introduced a range of initiatives to reduce the inequity of the existing arrangements, the fundamental premise on which the scheme is based is flawed.

Put simply, those who earn the highest incomes get the biggest top-ups from the taxpayer, while those who earn the least get literally nothing.

Defenders of the most costly form of middle-class welfare in Australian history often like to pretend that the scheme is worthwhile because it “takes pressure off the age pension budget”.

This argument makes about as much sense as someone saying that eating out each night helps them take pressure off their grocery budget.

There is no such thing as “the age pension budget”.

The only budget that matters is the Commonwealth budget and the cost of taxpayer support for private superannuation dwarfs any small reductions in the cost of providing the age pension.

Increased spending on education, on the other hand, will almost certainly increase the rate of productivity growth and, in turn, economic growth over the coming decades.

As a high-wage, high-income country, the quality of our education system is one of our most significant competitive advantages.

That said, if we fail to invest in this asset, then we will inevitably receive lower returns.

Investment in the NDIS also has the potential to boost both the participation and productivity of those with disabilities and those who care for them.

As with education, there is no doubt that investment in the NDIS will deliver economic growth in the future.

The same simply cannot be said for the generous tax concessions for superannuation.

Given the soon-to-be $45 billion per year size of the superannuation tax concession elephant, it is surprising that it has tip-toed so quietly for so long.

Surely either the spendthrift left or the fiscal conservatives on the right will have to start paying attention to it soon.

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