



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**LEGISLATION AMENDMENT**  
**(2005 MEASURES NO. 1) BILL 2005**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 9 March 2005**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

<b>Date</b> Wednesday, 9 March 2005	<b>Source</b> House
<b>Page</b> 30	<b>Proof</b> No
<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> O'CONNOR, Brendan, MP	<b>Question No.</b>

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR** (Gorton) (11.09 am)—It reminds me of the old Redgum song. Of course, the Redgum singer and former candidate for Mayo, in a song, once said: 'Daddy bought me a Mercedes Benz and he bought me a law degree.' When I first heard that, about 20 years ago, I always thought it was a little bit of hyperbole to underline the inequities in the education system. However, after hearing the contributions by the member for Rankin and the shadow minister for education this morning, I think those words are becoming truer by the day. I think that is the fundamental problem with the government's policies: the way in which it wants to privatise the education system and make it more difficult for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds to have a chance.

I am very mindful and conscious of the importance of good education policy. I will just turn to the personal for a moment. I am very well aware that it is unlikely that I would be standing here in this place if it were not for the opportunities afforded to me—and others, but certainly to me—at the time when I was finishing high school by the policies that were enacted in the early seventies and maintained for some of that period and through the eighties. Whilst there have been changes, of course, since the introduction of those policies by the Labor governments of the early seventies, that opening of access to people from low socioeconomic backgrounds improved my chance. There is no doubt of that.

Happily, I was lucky enough to be raised in a family which appreciated learning. They explained to me that, if you entered a room, you did not have to be wealthy and it did not matter who was in the room: if you had knowledge, you could always hold your head up; you could always be anyone's equal. My parents predominantly worked in factories. Therefore, they were not perhaps in a position to avail themselves of the education that they would have liked, but I, along with my siblings, was fortunate to be able to access higher education.

Therefore it is very worrying indeed to see the continued trend away from that capacity for families who do not have the financial wherewithal to buy degrees for their children—to see them say to their kids that it really is going to be a tough ask to get into postsecondary education—as we see the government reduce the overall funding per capita for university places and, at the same time, expect huge fees for many to enter our institutions.

I understand that the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (2005 Measures No. 1) Bill 2005 is the fourth effort by the minister to fix up the errors of his ways and the deficiencies of previous acts, and indeed the opposition support the substantive provisions of this bill. However, we make the point, as the shadow minister for education and Deputy Leader of the Opposition did earlier, that we are not happy with the direction which this government is taking in higher education. We are not happy that there is an increasing proportion of Australian undergraduate students who are able to pay full fees and gain entry ahead of better-qualified students. We are certainly not happy to see an overall decline in the number of full places and we are not happy that HECS fees continue to rise. All of these matters remove higher education as an option for many young Australians.

The problems in my electorate worry me. Gorton is a new seat that takes in parts of many seats in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Gorton has many people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and there are fewer opportunities in the electorate. It is a fantastic, culturally rich and ethnically diverse area of Melbourne but it has not been provided with equal access to education services. Victoria University is in my electorate. It is one of only five universities that undertake both higher education and technical and further education, but the university is not looked upon favourably by this government. The university struggles for sufficient funds, which compounds the problems of an area where people are not as well off as others in our society.

Let me compare Gorton with Bennelong. A 10-year-old in Bennelong would be three times more likely to be online than a 10-year-old in Gorton. A citizen of Bennelong is four times more likely to be a postgraduate than a citizen in Gorton. Although these inequities may have always existed, they are now being widened deliberately by this government. It is incumbent upon the government to assist those who do not have the same opportunity as others.

I am very disappointed that the government has not turned its mind to these concerns. The Minister for Education, Science and Training likes to get up in question time and spout as many numbers as he possibly can, and he counts as many matchsticks as he can see on the floor. Whatever his tricks, he depicts an opposition that does not concern itself with people from the lower socioeconomic areas of our society. He likes to make out that he is the champion of people who want to get into TAFE or into the trades. He also likes to make out that he is a champion of those people who cannot get into university. His argument goes that they should not contribute to an education system that would improve the capacity for people to enter these institutions. That is a false argument. Working-class families would love to see a system that would provide their children and their friends' children with opportunities to enter higher education institutions.

The minister has now returned to the chamber. He misleads the community, deliberately in my view, when he suggests that this is all about taking money from those people who would not get into university and that therefore it is a bad thing. Most people would rather see a system that allows people to enter our higher education system based on merit, not on money. That is effectively what most people in our community would like to see. Intrinsically a system based on merit would be better for all in this country. The minister plays the politics of envy. My own experience, from talking to the people in my electorate, is that they would like a system that enables people to enter university based on their capacity rather than on their bank balance.

Last week the electorate of Gorton was fortunate to have a rare visit from the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education. He arrived last week to consult with the community on the proposed Australian technical colleges. One is proposed for Sunshine, a suburb I share with the member for Maribyrnong. I was not notified of his attendance in my electorate, but when I discovered that he was coming along I attended the seminar. The minister gave very little detail. I do not necessarily agree with how the government is going about setting up these ATCs, and I am not sure that it was not just a quick-fix, drawn up during the election campaign to try to establish some credentials in the area of TAFE and to attempt to illustrate that the government was responding to skills shortages in our community.

If there is taxpayers' money to be spent in my electorate that may allow up to 300 places for young people at a technical college then I would like to see it spent properly, and I would hope that those trade qualifications could indeed be used. But, from listening to what the minister said last week in relation to the proposal for an Australian technical college to be located in Sunshine, very little information was provided. It was as if the government really did not have any idea about ATCs. The minister put the argument at that meeting: 'Look, we have a very open mind about what they should be about. You tell us what you think they should be about, and we will think about it.' When he was asked specific questions about the ATC—about funding, when the college might open, where the college might be located, whether it would be an establishment with bricks and mortar or, indeed, what partners would be involved—he could not answer any of them adequately. This underlined the view around the place that this was a quick-fix notion thought up on the run during an election campaign to placate people who had a view that the government was deficient in dealing with the skills shortage in our society.

I am concerned. I think I treated the minister with the respect he deserved. I spoke with him. I was not there to confront the minister but more to find out what was being determined. But I will be watching very closely to see whether, in fact, this proposed ATC will assist young people in my electorate. There are thousands of young people deprived of opportunities not only in higher education but in TAFE, and I would like to see the opportunity for more young people in my electorate to be given access to those forms of education and training. But I am very unsatisfied by the answers I have received to date.

The government has to come to grips with what its proposal is in relation to ATCs. I looked at the brochure that was provided—the propaganda piece that was put out. It was a nice, shiny brochure. It seemed to spend more time talking about Australian workplace agreements than what opportunities there could be for young people in my electorate. I did ask why there was an expressed reference to AWAs when we know that the Workplace Relations Act provides the capacity for any employee under the federal system to be placed under certified agreements, whether they be collective or individual. But there was only an expressed reference to AWAs which, again, highlights the fact that, when it comes to public policy in this place, the government is so fixated on its industrial relations agenda that it ties everything to IR. In other words, an ATC will be established in Sunshine provided that employees at the college will be under AWAs, notwithstanding the fact that the government's own act allows for employees to choose, along with their employer, what industrial instrument will govern their employment arrangements.

We have seen this before in other education bills brought to this place by the minister, where he has tied the IR agenda of the government to funding of universities. In this case it is tied to funding of a proposed ATC. It worries

me that this government is so ideologically predisposed to dismantling collectivism and the opportunity for employees to bargain collectively that it expressly refers only to Australian workplace agreements in a proposal about ATCs. It is a very worrying trend that this government is so fixated on smashing the right of employees, whether they be teachers or other occupational groups, to collectively bargain that it focuses its energy on that, instead of focusing on the actual education and training of students.

If taxpayers' money is being spent to fix up some of the deficiencies in my electorate, if it is going to assist young people in my electorate, I will certainly work with the government on that, whether or not I agree fundamentally with the way in which it is being done. But I have to know whether or not the government is fair dinkum about caring for those kids because, if you look at the electorate of Gorton and other similar electorates, I do not think we get our fair share at all.

We have realised in this place since the election that this government focuses on marginal seats to the point of obsession—we also saw that in its last term and in its term before that. You may say, 'That is nothing new in politics.' I accept that it is not new in politics, but it now seems to have reached the level where if you are not in a marginal seat you can forget it. That would not bother me so much if I were the member for Bennelong or the member for Bradfield—Bradfield being the seat occupied by the minister for education. But I am the member for Gorton, and my seat may not be marginal but it is marginalised. If you look at almost any indicators, you will see that my constituents in Gorton are worse off than many other urban electorates in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and the like. If you look at the sociodemographic indicators, you will see that my constituents are not as well off as many others, either on the North Shore of Sydney or in the leafier suburbs of Melbourne. That is just a reality.

Surely one of the government's objectives is to rectify inequities. But what I see instead is a government pandering to the marginal seats and not to the marginalised in relation to providing services, whether they be educational, health or other services required by the community. What I see is a government compounding the inequities by allocating money on an entirely improper basis. It would seem that this government is allocating money purely for electoral purposes. I hope the government takes heed of the amendment moved by the opposition. I hope the minister, who is in the chamber now, takes heed of some of the comments I have made. I hope the government realises that one of its main purposes is to remove inequities and assist people who need assistance, not to pander to those people who are doing okay. I hope the minister and indeed the government take heed of that.