



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT
AMENDMENT (ABOLITION
OF COMPULSORY UP-FRONT
STUDENT UNION FEES) BILL 2005**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 6 December 2005

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Ciobo, Steven, MP

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Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (6.51 pm)—What an opportunity to follow such an extraordinary speech! It was 20 minutes of absolute rhetoric, with, I think, one point, or maybe two points, of any substance in the entire 20 minutes. In the four or five years that I have been in this chamber, there has been no better example of someone filling their 20 minutes for the sake of filling their 20 minutes. The award must certainly go the member for Oxley for his latest contribution.

I would like to pick up on some of the points made by the member for Oxley to highlight how absolutely shallow the Australian Labor Party's position is when it comes to voluntary student unionism. I would like to signify how intellectually corrupt his speech was and how there is a complete absence of any rigour whatsoever when it comes to the Australian Labor Party's position on student unionism, voluntary student unionism, a student amenities fee or whatever other cap we wish to put on this debate this evening.

I heard the member for Oxley make some absolutely outrageous claims. In summing up he made comments to the effect of saying, 'This government'—that is, the Howard government—'is all about punitive retribution, like all its legislation.' For the member opposite to sit in this chamber and deliver with a serious face a comment like that simply highlights and underscores the complete vacuum of intellect in that last speech. Does the member for Oxley seriously contend that this government is only focused on punitive retribution and that every piece of legislation this government has passed in some way is about punitive retribution? I think not. It just demonstrates how light on that last contribution was.

I also heard the member for Oxley, like a number of other members opposite, make claims about how the days of compulsory student unionism are finished and how the focus should be on a student amenities fee. The member for Oxley and other members opposite have gone to great lengths to describe the kinds of services they seek to continue by compulsorily forcing students to pay funds. They have described them as being 'essential services' and 'vital services'. The member for Oxley even referred to them as 'a lifeline'. The kinds of services that Labor members say must be absolutely guaranteed by forcing students to pay were outlined in some detail by the member for Oxley. He mentioned, for example, child care; counselling; sporting and recreational facilities; employment services; interest-free loans; subsidised care; leadership courses; diaries and magazines; accommodation referrals; and entertainment. The member for Oxley said, 'What would life be like on campus without entertainment?' Shuttle buses have been mentioned. These are the kinds of services that various members opposite have described as 'essential services', 'vital services' and 'a lifeline'.

I make two points in this regard. The first is that if these services are so essential and vital—if they are a lifeline—for students, why wouldn't they pay to use them? If all of a sudden a student is liberated from paying hundreds of dollars every year in compulsorily acquired funds, why would they not choose to spend money on the kinds of services they need? That is the first point. The second point—the member for Oxley's speech was again completely devoid of any intellectual rigour on this—is that most reasonable people would take the position that, unlike the rest of the community, those who have the opportunity to go to university are privileged. The member for Oxley said it. I have had that privilege and I know a number of others who have enjoyed the privilege of going to university. It is a privilege. The reason why it is a privilege is that only about 30 per cent of Australians have the opportunity to go to university. If you go to university and successfully graduate, chances are you will not be unemployed. If you do become unemployed you will be unemployed for less time. Those with university degrees have higher average levels of income and have a higher standard of health. These are what the averages tell us about those privileged Australians—that 30 per cent—who have the opportunity to go to university.

The flaw in the logic that the member for Oxley and many others opposite have made is to say that it is no different for students who go to university than it is for students who go, for example, to school. But there is a very big difference. The very big difference goes with the catchment of those who attend these services. All students are required to go to primary and secondary school. Every young Australian, with perhaps a few very minor exemptions, goes to school. That is the reason governments collect taxes. It is the reason parents will put their hands in their pockets and put money on the table for particular services in some schools. Everyone eats

at that table. It is very different from university. The privileged are the ones who get to go to university. To in some way suggest that there is an equal footing or a comparison to be made between taxes that are raised to pay for social infrastructure in the community—something that every single person is able to enjoy—versus compulsorily acquired funds at university for something which many people do not have the opportunity to enjoy is, quite frankly, absurd. For those who have the chance to go to university, the notion that they should be forced to pay for services that are already covered by taxpayer funds is simply unsustainable.

The Labor Party claim that they are the champions of workers—of, for example, those who are in trades. We have heard members opposite say that they are the real representatives of those Australians engaged in vocational trades. I need them to explain to the chamber why it is that special legislation should exist that says, ‘This applies to university students who desire to use shuttle buses, subsidised care or interest-free loans but does not apply more generally in the community.’ Why is it that there is a special category for university students that does not apply for people who work hard, people in apprenticeships who get low pay and some people in vocational trades who may not make a lot of money yet pay the taxes that pays for 75 per cent of a university degree that an undergraduate student obtains while the undergraduate student only pays for 25 per cent? Explain that, please, members opposite.

I see the Chief Opposition Whip sitting there. I would dearly love him to contribute to this debate and explain why a university student is entitled to an interest-free loan but a single mother who might work many hours a week to support a family has to pay taxes that pay for 75 per cent of the cost of the degree of a university student. When the Australian Labor Party can stand up with any intellectual rigour and honesty and explain why a special circumstance should apply to the privileged 30 per cent of Australians who go to university, that will be the day I will support the legislation the Australian Labor Party put forward. But they cannot do it, because for the Australian Labor Party this debate is all about protecting unionism. Like so much of their myopic focus, this debate is all about protecting that base, the hatchery of the Australian Labor Party. The entire frontbench of the Australian Labor Party is made up of union hacks who have earned their stripes. I have not done the research, but I am sure probably 90 per cent of them were in the union all through their time at university. That is why the Australian Labor Party have a quaint fondness for making sure they prop up a system they know is intellectually flawed.

There is a very big difference between compulsory unionism and student amenities. The problem is that so many do not see it. The reality is that money that is easy to come across is money that is easy to spend. When you force students to pay for services, irrespective of whether they use them, irrespective of the percentage of the services that are utilised, it is very easy to continue to waste that money, because it is easy come, easy go. To give you an example, Madam Deputy Speaker Bishop, in Victoria the model that operates is the kind of model for student unionism that the Australian Labor Party is advocating today. Yet a press release was put out today by Michael Josem, President of the Monash University Student Union Caulfield, highlighting how even though what I would term VSU lite exists in Victoria—that is, the kind of model the Australian Labor Party has put forward, which apparently exists only to fund student amenities—compulsorily acquired student union funds have been used to pay for fines of students who were protesting and were charged with obstructing police.

So students, many of whom struggle to pay several hundred dollars a year in these compulsory fees, are having their money paid towards the fines of student protesters. The interesting thing about this is that the money that was spent by the interim student representative council of Melbourne university, who approved \$500 to pay these fines, was not even spent on fines for students from Melbourne university. They used that \$500 to pay for the fines of students in Perth. This is the kind of outrageous and flagrant abuse we see by student unions, even under the model the Australian Labor Party says safeguards students’ money. It does not safeguard students’ money.

We saw another matter a couple of weeks ago where the so-called protected money, which is only to be used on student amenities, was actually used to fund people in Iraq who are firing bullets at Australian troops. That is an absolute disgrace. And the Australian Labor Party champion this as an example of the preferred model that should apply in Australian universities today. It is an absolute joke. This once again highlights and underscores how flawed the Australian Labor Party are in their thinking when it comes to voluntary student unionism.

The inescapable conclusion is that voluntary student unionism comes down to simply being a matter of choice. If services are so important—if they are essential, if they are vital—students will pay to use them. It is nothing like local government; it is nothing like state government; it is nothing like federal government; it is nothing like taxes. The reason it is not like taxes, local government, state government or federal government is that governments collect fees to pay out to the community at large. That is what government does. But those privileged elites—

and I count myself among them—who have the opportunity to go to university are not in a situation where they deserve special protection. My real concern lies with low-class and middle-class Australians—

Mr Tanner interjecting—

Mr CIOBO—To use the PC term, so I do not upset the member for Melbourne, my concern is for socioeconomically disadvantaged Australians. Let me put my focus back onto those people. They are the people who do not enjoy interest-free loans, shuttle buses, counselling, subsidised child care, sporting and recreational facilities or special leadership courses, because they do not often have the opportunity to go to university. If they do, that is fantastic. But let them also make the decision as to which of these services they would choose to utilise. I guarantee one thing: the several hundred dollars a year they save by not having to scrimp and save to pay for compulsory student unionism will be much better spent by that student than by some unrepresentative student council that would rather spend thousands of dollars to support people shooting bullets at Australians in Iraq or, alternatively, to pay for fines of students 3,000 kilometres away in another state. These are outrageous examples of the ways in which easy money is easily spent by student unions.

The debate tonight is fairly fundamental. It is important to Liberals and Nationals because it rests on and revolves around one key principle that we believe in: people in the modern Australian democracy know where they want to spend their money. We believe that students know if they get value for the dollar that they invest. We on this side of the chamber believe that privileged Australians who have the opportunity to go to university are able to determine how best to utilise services and whether they want to pay for those services. More importantly, we on this side of the chamber believe that the market will supply services if there is demand for services. If there is not demand for services then we already collect taxes to pay for the kinds of services that they may seek to use, such as legal aid, assistance when it comes to putting together their tax and subsidised child care.

These services exist in the community. No, they are not quarantined to one small, isolated campus. They are not there purely at the beck and call of the university students that happen to be on campus on that particular day. They are there for the community at large. We fundamentally believe that university students are part of the community at large, the same world that everyone else exists in. It is the Australian Labor Party that would seek to corral them, to put them to one side and say, ‘This group of Australians deserves special protection, and we will force everyone to pay for those unique and particular services because we think they are not capable of determining what they should pay, for which services they should pay, and the manner in which they should pay for them.’

Let us please attribute intellect and intelligence to Australians and say, ‘They can determine how they want to spend their money.’ Let us get back to the fundamental notion that says that people have the right to choose whether to be part of a student union. People have the right to choose whether to contribute funds towards particular groups. If community groups can raise money, by holding sausage sizzles and lamington drives, for equipment for the weekend rugby club or for the weekend cricket club then I think it is high time that university students also did the same thing. If it is good enough for apprentices, if it is good enough for the low-paid and if it is good enough for middle-class Australia then it is good enough for university students. I totally commend the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005. I put it to the House that this bill thoroughly warrants support.