



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**SOCIAL SECURITY AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (INCOME
SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS) BILL 2009 [NO. 2]**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 25 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Speaker	Truss, Warren, MP	Question No.	

Mr TRUSS (Wide Bay—Leader of the Nationals) (6.22 pm)—I am happy to second the amendment. The amendment proposed by the shadow minister brings sense and balance to this debate, and I would like to compliment the shadow minister for the patience that he has shown in dealing with this issue when the government is not prepared to take what are perfectly reasonable steps to help to resolve this issue. We all want a fair go for students, but what we object to very strongly on this side of the House is the retrospective nature of this legislation. Many students around this country, 25,000 or more, took the advice of their student counsellors, of Centrelink, of their teachers to undertake a gap year so that they could become eligible for an independent youth allowance so they could commence university studies. This is particularly important for people who live outside the capital cities, who have the extra costs associated with having to make a new home in the city, find some accommodation, travel to and from their place of residence, to make a new life a long way away from their friends and family supports. Those are the sorts of people in particular who have needed some income to enable them to undertake their tertiary education.

The minister has said on a number of occasions, sometimes with seeming feeling, that she is concerned about the lower proportion of regional students who actually go to university. In fact, the further you get away from a regional town, the further you get away from the city, the lower the proportion of people who achieve tertiary education becomes. That is simply not acceptable. The minister is the Minister for Social Inclusion. If she believes in social inclusion then the fact that a significant proportion of our society is disadvantaged in obtaining tertiary education is clearly a matter that ought to be a priority item for her on her agenda. So here she is coming into the House demanding that legislation be passed that will make it more difficult for regional students, and particularly poor regional students, to be able to obtain a tertiary education.

What this legislation boils down to is that it really shows up the lack of sincerity in Labor's so-called Education Revolution. It all boils down to this: is the Rudd Labor government prepared to arrogantly stand by its retrospective rule changes on youth allowance and consign tens of thousands of students to the education scrapheap? Is the government prepared to say for those students, a very large number of them from regional areas, that education is critically important but just not for them? Or will the government live up to the promise of its so far overblown rhetoric on education and accept some very reasonable and responsible amendments proposed by the coalition and fix the problem? It is the government's call. This is the government's problem to fix and not to pathetically try to fob it off on the coalition because it cannot make compromises to assist 25,000 very deserving students.

Deep within the amendment and this legislation is a question of entitlement the government has endeavoured to fix. The coalition has never argued against the general proposition of ensuring the proper use of taxpayers' money when it comes to entitlement to the youth allowance. We acknowledge that there does need to be reform. What we are upset about is the unleashing of a sledgehammer to crack a walnut. Instead of nuancing this legislation, the Rudd government has reverted to its usual partisan political agenda that defaults to an attack on the regions, in this case regional students. The government has also used the basest form of politics to claim it will be our fault that students will not be entitled to Commonwealth scholarships, even though it was the government that earlier this year abolished these scholarships. They acted unilaterally to abolish the scholarships. They acted to remove the rural and regional scholarships that were so important to people in regional areas. The government was warned early in the piece that this would end up in tears but they did not listen.

Last night the coalition again stood its ground in the Senate and defeated the government's youth allowance legislation with its retrospective penalty on gap year students. I congratulate all of the coalition senators and Senator Fielding for doing so. Labor trained all their guns on them and they did not blink. In particular can I acknowledge the work of the Deputy Leader of the Nationals in the Senate, Fiona Nash, because of her work as chairman of the committee that has been looking at this legislation. They put a lot of time and effort into trying to find a reasonable solution and the best way forward to give regional students a chance of getting equal educational outcomes with those who live in the cities. They are working on longer term strategies as well as the

importance of making sure that there is appropriate support available for students next year and that the grossest parts of this legislation can in fact be effectively reformed.

This is an issue that has prompted a massive response of anger and frustration and concern from young Australians. Many of my colleagues, particularly those who represent regional electorates, have had thousands of people complain about what the government is doing in relation to independent youth allowance. There have been rallies, there have been meetings, there have been calls all around the country to try and get this situation fixed, but the minister has not been willing to listen—hard-hearted and not willing to listen to the people who are going to miss out on an education as a result of the deliberate actions of this government. So naturally members of parliament have been annoyed and they have responded. Students have long prepared for the rite of passage known as the gap year and it has become very important to many young people. Firstly, it gives them on many occasions an opportunity to grow up a little as they prepare to move away from home for the first time and have to live in the cities to undertake a university education. Some may get a breadth of experience which helps them choose the kind of tertiary education they may want.

The rules that are being imposed under the new arrangements for independent youth allowance are very difficult to fulfil if you live in a country community. It might be alright in the minister's city where there are plenty of jobs—where there are opportunities to work 30 hours a week, regularly, as is required by the new arrangements—but, when you get into a country town, those jobs are not there. The people who qualified for the independent youth allowance often did so by doing seasonal work—by working at fruit picking, contract harvesting or in a mine for a brief period. They worked to collect enough money to qualify. They cannot do it by regular 30 hour a week jobs, because they are simply not there.

Frankly, nothing that the Minister for Social Inclusion is doing in relation to industrial relations reform and the state of the national economy is going to make more jobs available for the young people who need them. The Senate had no choice but to vote down the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009 [No. 2]. The bill meant students would have to have worked a 30 hour week over 18 months in a two-year period to qualify for independent youth allowance. That is a prospect that is simply impossible in many regional areas. Jobs just do not grow on trees—something we are increasingly discovering under this job-destroying government.

The coalition is not going to support legislation that retrospectively disadvantages 25,000 students who want to start university at the beginning of next year. The ball is in the government's court. Whether the scholarships go ahead in 2010 is completely in the hands of the government and the Australian Labor Party. You can fix it tonight. You could have fixed it before now, when you redrafted this legislation to bring it into the parliament. You could so easily have fixed it, but you were not prepared to do it. The government can split the bill and receive our support for the positive proposals that it puts before the chamber, or it can take this matter to an election and see what the people think about it.

The minister in her speech quoted a number of people who are allegedly supporting her proposals. They are the usual people you would expect to be supporting anything that the Labor Party proposes. I thought I would read to you an email that one of my colleagues received just a few days ago about this particular issue. He said:

I know that rural students will never recover from bad policy that limits their tertiary options. The current government policy is bad policy and I am delighted to see that you and your party continue to argue against it. Although I have never applied for or obtained Centrelink assistance for my tertiary studies (preferring to work my behind off in part-time employment) I know of many students who are here at James Cook University, and from Childers, who would not be studying Pharmacy, Science, Journalism and even Medicine if not for the assistance that is provided through the youth allowance. I am delighted to see the National Party going in to bat for the bush on this very important issue.

He goes on in that vein. This is a practical example of a real student, not a union member or an academic. This is somebody who is working his way, hard, through university to obtain a qualification. Minister, I suggest you listen to the students. You should listen to the young people. You should listen to those who are affected by your legislation—and soften your heart. Remember the country students, the people who will miss out on the opportunity to break clear of the educational disadvantage that besets many in their community, and help them build a better career for themselves and their families. Minister, do the right thing. Do the right thing for Australian students and provide an education support system that will deliver an education for so many people who need it and want it.