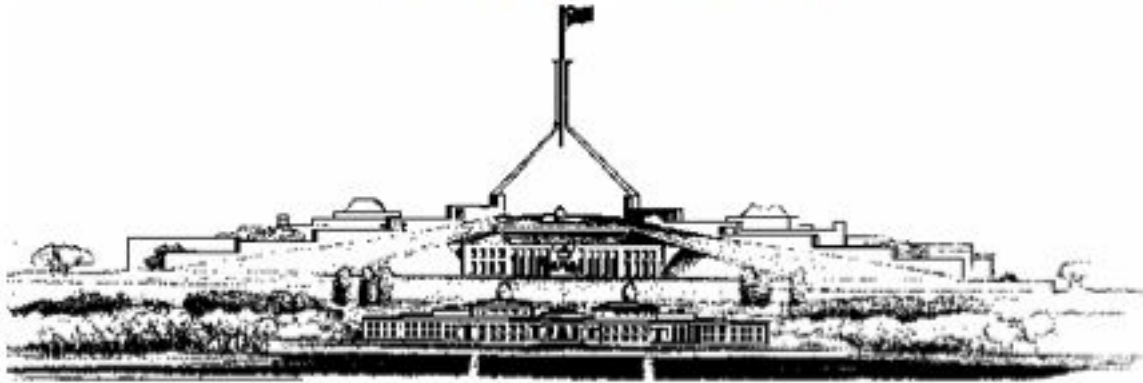




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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

Consideration of Senate Message

SPEECH

Wednesday, 17 March 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 17 March 2010
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Questioner
Speaker Truss, Warren, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr TRUSS (Wide Bay—Leader of the Nationals) (5.25 pm)—The amendments before the parliament are an improvement on the old arrangements that the government was insisting upon. The government has made some concessions, but the government itself acknowledges that those concessions are not substantial. They have removed the retrospectivity that was a part of the old arrangements. It should never have been there. It was obscene that the government sought to take away an access to independent youth allowance from people who had abided by the rules as they were advised by Centrelink and by their school counsellors, and as had been in place for quite some time. They had been working at that for a year or a year and a half, only to be told that the rules were changed. The removal of that retrospectivity is perhaps the most important change in these amendments.

However, they have made a number of concessions also in relation to a continuing access to the independent youth allowance for people who live in very remote, remote and outer regional areas. The government has made much of that but, in fact, the Deputy Prime Minister herself said in question time today that only 1,900 people are actually going to benefit from that change. There are about 30,000, we are told, who were getting the independent youth allowance, and of those around 12,000 to 15,000 were in regional areas. So fewer than 2,000 out of 12,000 to 15,000 are actually going to be eligible for any benefit as a result of the changes to the independent youth allowance, and that is a pretty paltry effort.

The government has chosen as its index for determining remoteness a geographic index which is fatally flawed. Most of those 1,900 people who will be able to access the independent youth allowance will be coming from cities like Townsville, Cairns and Darwin. They are included in the areas that will get access to the youth allowance under the old arrangements, whereas if you live in Mackay, you do not get it. If you live in Dalby or Echuca, you do not get it. The minister is actually saying that it is easier to get a job in Dalby, Echuca, Yarraman and Cherbourg than it is in Townsville, Cairns and Darwin. It is simply a nonsense that the 30-hour rule should apply in one place, but a 15-hour rule applies in the other.

You could live next door to the James Cook University in Townsville—a very fine university—and qualify for the independent youth allowance. But if you live in a town like Dalby or Echuca, hundreds of miles from your capital city, you do not qualify. The government is asking us to believe that this is a good, a reasonable and a fair deal. The reality is that students in regional areas have far less chance of completing a university education than young people who live in the cities. It is a statistical fact that about a third as many people from remote areas have university degrees as those who live in the city. About 30 per cent of rural people complete a university course, compared with the best part of 60 per cent of people who live in the cities.

That is a social injustice that must be addressed. The minister is the Minister for Social Inclusion, and that she can completely ignore this injustice leaves me absolutely in despair. The educational outcomes in regional areas are not equivalent to what occurs in the cities. There is a huge cost imposition on people who have to move from a regional area to live in the capital city.

I recognise that there needed to be some reforms made to the independent youth allowance. I do not disagree with that. But we do need to have a student assistance scheme that enables all young Australians to achieve their education potential, including those from poor families and those who come from regional areas. The government's changes to student assistance will in fact further disadvantage those who live outside the capital cities. They have delivered an outcome with serious anomalies. The government must address those issues if it wants to be fair minded.

For the next student year there will be a new government and a government with a different attitude to the importance of equality in education, and we will address those concerns. We agree to the passage of this bill because the student year has already begun and there are hundreds of thousands of students out there who have been left in limbo because of the unwillingness of this government to address the serious issues much earlier. But even now what has happened is only tokenism. Only 1,900 students will benefit in the longer term and that

still leaves thousands of rural Australians who will in fact not be getting the university education they should have. (*Time expired*)