



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SOCIAL SECURITY AMENDMENT  
(INCOME SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL  
STUDENTS) BILL 2010 [2011]**

**Consideration of Senate Message**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 21 February 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 21 February 2011  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Truss, Warren, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr TRUSS** (Wide Bay—Leader of the Nationals) (1.00 pm)—The Attorney-General has just given us a long, complicated lawyer’s speech, and I am sure the lawyers in the House are very impressed. I invite the Attorney-General to come to my electorate and give that speech to the students who have not been able to get a university education this year. We are dealing with a serious issue, an issue that surely all members of parliament with goodwill would want to resolve. In this country, students who live outside capital cities have far less opportunity to get a university degree than those who live in cities.

The government often want to herald their social justice qualifications—they have a Minister for Social Inclusion and they say they care about a fair go for everyone—yet they have allowed to be entrenched in this place a system of student support that guarantees that people living in regional areas will not have the same opportunity to get a university degree as those who live in cities. Surely, this is an issue that the government would want to address. They have had three years in office, they have created the problem and they have not been willing to address it. They have not been willing to make the key decisions which would ensure that all Australians got a fair opportunity to have a tertiary education.

When you do not get that tertiary education, that is not the end of your disadvantage; it gives you a disadvantage when it comes to seeking employment in almost whatever career you want to enter. If you have not had the opportunity to get to university because the costs of getting there are too great, then you are disadvantaged throughout your life. If that is not the case, why do we have universities at all? Why does anybody have a university degree? Surely the reason is that the government and indeed our whole society believe that that kind of education is important—to give people a fair go and to make them as productive as they possibly can be in our community.

So we have an issue here. It is not an issue about the so-called rights of the government and it is not an issue about the Constitution; it is about whether or not people in regional areas are entitled to access the independent youth allowance so they can get a tertiary education. The government are hiding behind legal technicalities because they are not prepared to deal with the issue. If they were prepared to give students a fair go, they could find ways within the Constitution and within the bounds of their own arguments which would deliver the result that the coalition is seeking through this legislation.

What is their last minute offer to the Independents and others who are critical in this issue? ‘We will have another committee of inquiry.’ Another review—as if we had not had reviews. There have been at least two Senate inquiries that have gone on for months. Thousands of submissions have come in. Most of us as local members of parliament have received scores of letters on the issue. We know what the facts are, we know how it has to be solved and we could do it now; instead the government is going to have yet another committee, another review, and a decision perhaps in time for students in 2012. What about the students of 2011? They have a classic gap year. They are the ones who are left out altogether. There is no funding for them to get the education they need to assure their future careers.

If the government are really committed to fixing this problem, they should not give us a stack of legal arguments and they should not give us a lawyer’s address that might impress the High Court; they should give us some answers and some reasons why we should believe the government are going to address this issue. Do not just fall over and believe that the government some time, way in the future, might actually be intent on taking action.

It was not very long ago that the Leader of the House was accusing us of stunts and opportunism—which might be credible if it came from somebody else—but he can solve this issue immediately. He can solve it by picking up Senator Nash’s bill from the Senate and making sure we get the message from the Governor-General so that it can be dealt with promptly and immediately, so that income support can flow to students now, not some time beyond 2012 if it ever gets to that stage.

It was not very long ago also that we had the Leader of the House boasting about how well the House is now functioning in the national interest, about how the parliament has adopted important reforms and about how he is

cooperatively negotiating legislation. Here is a chance for him to actually prove it, to deliver results, instead of a long line of gobbledygook and legal arguments about why it should not be done. Indeed, there is only one thing that is more complicated than the government's gobbledygook and that is students trying to access the youth allowance. The gobbledygook that the government is putting up will not cut the mustard when you talk to people who are trying to get access to university.

So what is going on? The government is trying to prevent debate on this bill. We are not even allowed to talk about it. The principles of this bill have already been agreed to through a motion supported by the House, so it is not as though the government does not know what the members of parliament think about this issue. We want it fixed and we have said so in a resolution of the House. It has now been debated at length in the Senate, it has been considered in great detail and obviously it is a matter of significant national interest.

Unfortunately, it did not get the support of the government in the Senate. Quite surprisingly, it did not get the support of the Greens. The Greens, who walk around regional Australia and try to suggest that they are the new-found friends of people who live in country areas, would not support a bill that would enable regional students to go to university. Now they want to do some kind of a deal to put in place another committee. Frankly, that will not wash with the students who want to be at university now; they do not want to wait for some endless committee process.

This bill addresses the government's decision early last year to alter the eligibility criteria for the independent youth allowance. These changes mean that students from inner regional areas have to work more hours over a longer period before being considered independent. Effectively, we have students in those inner regional areas who have to take a two-year gap after leaving school instead of taking one year, and they have to work full time on a continuous basis. They have to find a job that simply does not exist in those sorts of towns. People are not prepared to put on someone they know is only a short-term employee who is about to go off to university. The government does not seem to recognise how blatantly unfair and discriminatory these requirements are or that these requirements will result in many people, who would undoubtedly be able to make fine professionals, not being able to get the qualifications that they need.

Let me ask the obvious question: why should someone who lives in Gloucester, in the electorate of the member for Lyne, have a greater opportunity to attend university than someone who lives in Port Macquarie, Taree or Wauchope? That is what the current laws provide. Yet it seems that some people think that should be entrenched for another year. I think that is unfair. Why should somebody in Gunnedah or Tenterfield in New England have a greater opportunity than a student in Attunga or Armidale? It does not make sense to me.

But let me give you a classic case, and this may be the illustrative example of Labor's incompetence in this area. Have many people heard of the town of Kaimkillenbun, which is in the electorate of the honourable member for Maranoa? It is a little town of about 100 people on the black soil plains of the Darling Downs. If you live on one side of the street in Kaimkillenbun you can access independent youth allowance but if you live on the other side of the street in Kaimkillenbun you cannot. It is a town of 100 people. What is wrong with the people on the other side of the road? Why can't they get the same benefits, the same university education, as somebody who is in a house on the other side of the road? It simply makes no sense. A town of 100 people is divided by this government's legislation—and it is not prepared to fix it.

We have also been told that this particular piece of legislation is inappropriate because it would blow the budget. It is a bit odd for the government to say that the very day after they did a deal with the Greens to give them \$360 million and find another \$50 million for the member for Denison. They could find all that over the weekend—to try to get in place their new tax to pay for the floods—but the \$90 million that is required to fix this problem in relation to the independent youth allowance cannot be found. Apparently that is too much trouble.

In fact, they do not have to go looking around for it, because at election time this was part of our fully costed budget commitments. We identified where the money was going to come from—from the Education Investment Fund. It is one of the few funds that the coalition left to the incoming Labor government that has not been totally squandered. There is still around \$2 billion of uncommitted funds in the Education Investment Fund. That is about seven times the amount necessary to fund the bill over the forward estimates. Treasury costed this policy before the election and they found no fault with it. The money is there. The money is available. It is a simple matter of the government putting in place the mechanisms so that it can be transferred for this purpose and used to make sure that people in inner regional areas are able to get a tertiary education.

The Education Investment Fund has already been raided by the government. So it is not as though we would be the first people wanting to spend some of it. But we were going to spend it on an educational function, trying to get regional students a tertiary education. Labor raided it for \$2½ billion last year to fund a clean energy initiative. They took \$2½ billion out of the education fund so that they could fund a clean energy initiative—one of those I think they have axed now. But that is the way the government operate. Presumably, it is now heading across to their flood funding or some other purpose. In other words, it is all right to use the education fund to finance a failing carbon capture and storage project but it is not all right to use it to support tertiary education for regional students. I think that is hypocrisy.

The bill that Senator Nash presented to the Senate, which is now before the House—and which we are being told we cannot even talk about today—is fully costed. It redresses a clear case of discrimination against 20,000 regional students. It is a bill about social inclusion. It is a bill about social justice. It should be voted on. It should be debated in this House. A government review that will report back in some months time, without any real promise that we will get a decent outcome anyhow, is not a substitute, and it is particularly not a substitute for the students of 2011—the class of 2011 that will not now exist; the class of 2011 that are in the gap year, when there is no assistance for students in this situation.

I agree that in the longer term—and this was very much clearly a part of the coalition's election platform—there ought to be a better way to fund students. There ought to be a better way to provide living support on a permanent basis so that those people who have to travel to get their university degree get the financial assistance that they need. That should be an objective that we all work towards. Some of this work was done by the Senate committees, and they have got some ideas that certainly could be progressed in this regard. The proposal that the coalition has on the table was always intended as an interim measure, until that more fundamental reform could take place. This bill provides an opportunity to put that in place. We can deal with it. It should be debated in the chamber.

If the government believe there are technical deficiencies in what we are doing, let them get on the front foot and come into the House with a way in which they believe this matter can be dealt with correctly and immediately, rather than trying to fob off Independents and others with yet another committee of inquiry. This is an important issue about social justice for regional students. The parliament has the opportunity today to redress this problem and give to people who are being denied an education this year the opportunity to set about getting the qualifications they need for the future. The parliament can fix the problem today and it should do so.