



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



## **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

# **FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (ELECTION COMMITMENTS AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2011**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 22 March 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Tuesday, 22 March 2011  
**Page** 2726  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Marino, Nola, MP

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

**Ms MARINO** (Forrest) (7.01 pm)—I rise to speak on the amendment moved to the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Election Commitments and Other Measures) Bill 2011 by the member for Menzies in relation to the youth allowance and workplace participation criteria for independent youth allowance. I would have to ask why this government continues to discriminate against students in my electorate and right around Australia who meet the inner regional classification? That is the one question that no-one is prepared to answer: why is it that this government continues to discriminate against educational opportunities for these great young people and put additional pressure on families.

We have heard that families have to move and I deal with these families on a regular basis. I had a parent ring me just recently to say that his daughter who will not qualify, because of the deal that has been done between the Independents and the government in the latest review, given her position as a 2009-10 student now has to stop her tertiary education because she cannot afford to continue. She was hoping to be one of those who would achieve support through youth allowance. She now has to come back to her hometown and her dreams of an education and a career have been seriously compromised.

This is the reality that this decision has delivered to regional areas. Apparently there are up to 20,000 great young people around this nation who are affected by this decision. The requirement that forces these young people to find 30 hours of work a week over 18 months is sometimes impossible in a regional area. It really reinforces to me the fact that a Labor government does not understand how a regional area works. I have young people who live in places like Donnybrook, Dunsborough, Brunswick, Harvey and Collie. These are not necessarily big community centres, but how do these young people find 30 hours of work a week over 18 months? A lot of employment that is available is seasonal, so it is just not possible for these young people to meet the commitments of having to find 30 hours of work a week and meet the blocks that they are required to do. Plus they then will have two years away from study. Our concern is that their participation rates will fall even further because the longer they stay away from tertiary education the less likely they are to continue with their higher education.

So this is where these young people find themselves. I have had mothers in supermarkets say to me, 'We now have to try to find a second extra job ourselves'. These are husbands or wives who have to fund their child's university education. This is Australia. This is what we have done. This is what the Labor government has done for these great young people and these families. We are seeing a loss, a drain, of these young people and families from our communities. The students already face significant problems in accessing youth allowance and in accessing an education. All they are asking for is a fair go—access to youth allowance—and they will go on and do the best they can and come back and work within the regional areas quite frequently and bring great skills and knowledge back to our communities.

They have no choice but to relocate to study. That is the way it is in a regional area. You cannot just go up the road to the university, there is not one there. You have no choice but to relocate and yet you are being denied the opportunity to access youth allowance to do so for at least two years. The universities are even saying now that they are not going to hold their places. Where does this leave those young people?

The 2009-10 cohort are in no-man's-land. They were not picked up by the previous criteria and they are certainly not now under the current review. They are nowhere. What plans do they make? What plans do their families make? They cannot plan. This is where this has left them. It is the most appalling discrimination. When the families ask me, 'Why has the government done this?' I do not have an answer. Why are your children not eligible but other ones in the same school are? I do not have that answer, only the government has that answer. Only the Prime Minister has that answer because she made this decision. We do know already that 55 per cent of metropolitan students go on to tertiary education compared to only 33 per cent of students from regional areas. The disadvantage is quite serious already but this is enhancing that disadvantage and I do not understand why the government has made this decision.

We have repeatedly, as have the parents and the students, made the government aware of just what this is doing to the students. The government have had opportunity after opportunity, through motions and through bills and even through their own decisions, to change this. Why not introduce a bill or a motion yourselves? Why not fix it? Why not give yourselves the opportunity to fix it? The opportunity is there every day in this parliament to fix this anomaly that you have created. Please take that opportunity. Do not continue to discriminate against these students and do not continue to put their lives, their careers, their families and their educational opportunity on hold or at risk or make it nonexistent. You can fix this.

I have here one of the latest emails I have received. It says:

I am a 2009 school leaver classified ... as an Inner Rural student, meaning that I have to work an average of 30 hours per week over ... 18 months ... At the time of my graduation, the new changes were still unconfirmed, and so I chose to take a gap year in the hope that I would still be able to qualify somehow.

How does that make us feel? I know how it makes me feel and I hope that is how it makes some on the other side feel. The email continues:

I live at best, two hours by car (and longer if taking public transport) away from my university ...

There is no public transport in the majority of regional areas. It is not there, and certainly not to a university that is in Perth. She actually lives over two hours away from a university, and that is not even taking into account the cost of travelling, such as petrol—or, if she were able to access public transport, by train or bus. She says:

... my only real option is to move up to the city, where I'd need to find and pay for accommodation.

Under the old Youth Allowance laws, I would have had to earn ... 75 per cent of the minimum wage. When the changes were announced, we'd originally hoped that at the very least, I could qualify by working 40 hours a week for ... 12 months therefore averaging the same amount of hours ...

But that is not possible under what the government has done. She continues:

My university will not let me defer for any time period longer than a year, and under the new laws I would have to relinquish my place were I to pursue Youth Allowance.

How do you think this makes this young lady feel? How do you think it makes her parents feel?

One of the most tragic real-life stories I have heard—it is not a story; it is the reality—comes from the parent who says to me, 'We have to choose which one of our children we can afford to send to university.' How do you choose and what happens to the family dynamic? What happens to those who you cannot afford to send? When I go into schools, what is even worse is that great young people in regional areas like mine say to me when I meet them: 'I have actually changed my year 11 and 12 focus. I am not going to pursue the courses that will take me to university because my family cannot afford to send me.' So they are consciously making the decision. Some of the drop-out rates will not be showing because these young people are making very practical decisions that have been forced on them by the decisions that this government has made. They will not show up in some of the figures and statistics, but these kids will be victims of this. That is what is ahead of us here. These young people have to take the decision now of not doing year 11 and 12 as they should be doing. They are taking a vocational or other type of course or they are going to make another decision to do some form of training if they can secure it. These are conscious decisions that are being made by young people in inner regional areas.

I have another email here. It says:

Thankyou for your continuing efforts to get our kids the same financial opportunities as all other regional kids when they choose to attend university education.

I also find the changes very frustrating, restrictive and unfair with regards to the 18 month criteria. My son and many others from his school finishing in 2009 have chosen to begin their university studies this year because their course does not allow them to defer longer than 12 months or they want to begin following a 12 month enforced break.

My son has very little chance of qualifying for youth allowance now because he has not fulfilled the criteria of the 18 months. He will be using his savings to fund his university course and all living expenses incurred as a result of having to relocate to Perth.

I cannot understand why the 18 month timeframe, other than a means by which many more students will be eliminated from receiving any financial assistance.

This mother says at the bottom of the email:

What else can concerned parents do to make Labor and the independents see what they are doing?

I have asked that question over and over. My colleagues and I have tried over and over to get this changed, to give these great young people equity of opportunity. They are asking simply for a fair go.

As I said here previously, there were many phone calls to my office when the Prime Minister made her statement in Washington—when she said that perhaps the ultimate importance is the right to education, that she was passionate about education, that education is the key to all our opportunities and that education is the one thing that no-one can ever take away from us. That is true, Prime Minister, but you have to be able to access the education in the first place. Prime Minister, the changes that you have made have disaffected great young people. They have taken away the opportunity for education from those young people who have no choice but to not pursue their preferred courses and their preferred career. They have no choice because they cannot afford to go to university. They cannot afford to go without the support of the independent youth allowance.

So many people have said to me, ‘If the Prime Minister believes this, why did she make those changes?’ I do not have the answer either. The comment made in the US was really a slap in the face. People said to me, ‘If the Prime Minister is really genuine about that, why isn’t she making the changes that she has been given the opportunity to make?’ My other request is: why can’t the Prime Minister and this government make those changes voluntarily? Why does it have to take the will of the people, the will of the two houses here? Both houses voted for the changes to youth allowance because they wanted fairness and equity for the great young people in this nation—the great young people from the areas defined as inner regional. The government has resisted this opportunity over and over. But why? Why would you resist the chance to give an opportunity to a young person in a regional area to pursue higher education?

Education should be a priority. It is a priority for me and I was hoping that it was a priority for members of both houses. Both houses voted for this and I have presented petitions. The will of the people, through the voices in both chambers, is for this government to fix this, but the government continues to resist it. I support the amendment. This offers the government yet another opportunity to fix a problem that they have created.

It is a problem that has been visited upon these great young people and their families in rural and regional areas. As I said earlier, all they are asking for is simply a fair go. They want a fair go because they will make the most of the opportunity. They come from a regional area. They will go; they will study; they will learn; they will commit themselves. Hopefully, part of the development of regional areas will come from these great young people who bring their skills back to us. That is the key to regional development in so many senses. It is not necessarily well understood by some, because if it was, the government would not have made these changes. These young people will bring so much back to the regional areas and I support the amendments as moved by the shadow minister.