



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**BILLS**

**Higher Education and Research  
Reform Amendment Bill 2014**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 2 September 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Tuesday, 2 September 2014  
**Page** 9376  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Snowdon, Warren, MP

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

**Mr SNOWDON** (Lingiari) (13:20): I listened attentively to the member for Pearce and his erudite denunciation of mathematical researchers at the Australian National University. A compelling case was built around the incomes of lawyers. Apparently they earn a bloody lot of money—heaps of it. You would expect, therefore, they would also pay a higher rate of tax. If they are earning \$1 million more, as has been argued by the member opposite, then he would understand that it is quite likely that as a group they would each pay over their working life probably \$300,000 to \$400,000 more tax. I suspect that that is what we would all want out of people who earn higher incomes. If you are fortunate enough to earn a high income in this country, you should pay higher taxes, as part of the progressive taxation system that we have here.

Let there be no doubt about what this Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014 is about. It will saddle current and future generations with an unfair and inequitable higher education system, one where your background, family circumstances and where you live will be the key determinant of accessing higher education. If a young person or indeed an older person living in regional Australia—I say that as someone who lives in a relatively small but fairly isolated community—wants to study for a degree, they have limited choices. They could choose to attend Charles Darwin University's campus in Central Australia and access a very limited number of courses. They could choose to do their courses by long distance education or, as most do, choose to relocate to other places.

This bill is saying to the people who live in regional Australia, such as those in my community, 'The possibilities for you are going to diminish because of the affordability of access.' Let us not be too cute about it. I have a good income. My wife and I have four children. They have all left Alice Springs to go to university and we understand that we have an obligation to assist them in that process. But, sadly, not all people are on my income. When the member for Pearce talked about tradespeople bearing the burden of the current generation and future generations of people in the higher education system, I think he should have given some thought to the aspirations of those tradespeople's children. Because, when I speak to people in the community, those very same tradespeople feel compelled to tell me that the aspirations for their kids are that they attend higher education institutions and, if they are fortunate enough, access a degree. So quality, affordable education where individual family and community aspirations can be met without crippling debt is what Australians want.

We heard the shadow minister talk about Joseph Stiglitz and the downsides of adopting the US model. We know that, in the context of Australia, if the model which is being proposed in this legislation were to pass, then we would end up with a US model of education and we would see massive disincentives for people who live in rural, regional and remote Australia. I say that also in the context of another group of people who this piece of legislation has clearly overlooked. I want to refer to the Charles Darwin University, which has its headquarters in Darwin. Like all other institutions in this country, higher education institutions will suffer severe cuts as a result of these measures. It estimates it will lose \$50.4 million as a direct result of these cuts. What these cuts do not do, though, is understand the profile of the student population at Charles Darwin University where 75 per cent of its student body are mature age students—that is, people of a mature age, 25 or older in this case. That means of course that many of them will have already had a job—they may even be a tradesperson—and they are seeking to improve themselves by going to university. A very high proportion will have a family and will already have debt as a result of a mortgage.

What this piece of legislation is telling those very people is that you will need another mortgage to pay for your education. It is a massive disincentive for those people and I can tell you that, almost as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, many of those people who would have been looking at making a choice about going or not going to university as a mature age student will defer that decision. Many may take the decision to go to university and cop the debt, but many may also decide they will not proceed at all. Let us be very clear. If you are on a reasonable income, say, on 70 or 80 grand a year, you are a mature age student with two or three kids and you live in a place such as Darwin where the median house price is around \$500,000 and you have to pay the mortgage for that housing loan, where are you going to get the rest of the money to pay the mortgage for this degree?

The government are compounding a debt situation with an even higher debt situation. It is a massive disincentive. They know it but are not prepared to admit it. The member for Pearce spoke about all sorts of mathematicians. He pinpointed a couple of Labor mathematicians at the ANU and gave them a bit of a going over. But let me say to him that, if you are an aspirant to be a mathematician and you are the son or daughter of a working family, which want you to go to university, they do not want you to be burdened with the costs that this bill will burden them with. That is very clear. Working Australians understand what this means for them, their children and future generations.

I thought that the Leader of the Opposition made it very clear in his contribution to all of us as to why we cannot comprehend or indeed countenance these proposals. 'Education is the foundation on which we will build a better Australia,' he said. And he is right. The opportunity of education is an Australian birthright that belongs to us all. And he is right. This opportunity will be removed for many as a direct result of this legislation. I say to the government: there are many ways in which you can make changes, but these changes will impact adversely and, in many respects, more adversely on people who live in rural and regional Australia than on people living in urban communities like Sydney or Melbourne, as most members opposite do.

Any member in this chamber—and there are a lot of them in the opposition—who have a reasonable university in their electorate or who live in a country town or a country area will know what I am talking about because they have had representations from their regional universities about the impact of these cuts upon them and the potential for those students. We know that to be the case. And this bloke up here is trying to tell me they all want it. Well, I beg to differ.

Opposition members interjecting—

**Mr SNOWDON:** I would have a Bex and a good lie down, if I were you, because very clearly there are issues which confront us. I am conscious that in about 10 seconds I am going to be told to sit down, so I look forward to continuing my contribution after question time later this afternoon.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott): Order! The debate is interrupted. In accordance with standing order 43, the debate may be resumed at a later hour. The honourable member will have leave to continue his remarks when the debate is resumed.