



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

**HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (STUDENT
SERVICES AND AMENITIES, AND
OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2009**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 17 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Speaker Fielding, Sen Steve

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Senator FIELDING (Victoria—Leader of the Family First Party) (8.35 pm)—I rise today to speak to the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009. Among other changes, this bill allows for higher education providers to charge students an annual, capped compulsory fee of \$250. Thirty years ago I was a fresh, young student about to embark on my first university degree. I do not know whether people would agree with fresh and young, but it was certainly my first university degree. University education was then free, but that debate is for another time and place. Education is now an expensive business and these are tough times for Australian families. Attending university is a rite of passage for many of our young Australians. A place in a university of their choice, studying the course of their dreams, is often hard-won, following years of intense study and often sacrifice. That sacrifice also extends to their families who work to support their loved ones in full or part-time study to enable those dreams to be reached. University is a costly experience, particularly for those coming from regional areas who have to pay for things like accommodation, food and living expenses that have probably been provided for them at home.

The Rudd government is proposing to reintroduce a compulsory student amenities fee that must be paid even if the student has no intention of using any of the services being offered. I have to admit that I have an issue with the word ‘compulsory’ and, judging by the number of responses I have had to a blog I wrote about this on my website, so do many of the students this legislation is meant to be helping. Listen to what Helen, a student, has to say:

I do not use the services that this tax would be spent on and I find it extremely unfair that I would be burdened with more expenses in these difficult economic times.

It also worries me that even one cent of this compulsory tax could be sent to student unions.

In the workplace compulsory unionism has been abandoned as it does not represent the whole of the work force.

Why should struggling students be treated any different? I pay the same taxes everybody else does, so why should I also have to pay a tax just because of my status as a student?

If people want to keep using these services they can voluntarily pay for them.

I have no need of these services, so I fail to see why I should pay for something that I don’t need when I can’t afford to be wasting money.

Consider what Kahla has to say:

University is supposed to be for everyone from any socio-economic background.

I fail to understand how forcing students from low socio-economic backgrounds to pay large compulsory fees, which is spent on funding student unionism, political rallies and social events, is going to help those who are at the centre of this issue: THE STUDENTS.

I think that imposing such a tax on every student, no matter their university and its services, is unfair and is an unnecessary extra burden on student finances and their subsequent HECS debts.

For this semester alone I have paid out over \$400 in textbooks along with over \$100 in parking permits and I struggle to afford these in the first place.

As an independent student I also have to pay for rent, food, car payments and bills and any extra pressure, especially in the current global climate, would be an extra stress.

While there is the argument that it can be put on HECS I am aware of just how large my HECS debt currently is and will be by the time I finish. I am not prepared to make it any larger especially as I will be paying back my debt at a time in my life when I will want to buy a house and save for the future.

These are just two examples from many on my website. These are the thoughts of students who are struggling to manage their finances as they study, who are struggling to pay for the necessities of life and who object to having

to pay a compulsory fee for university services that they will never use. Students are often among the lowest income earners in this country. That is why we have government funded schemes, such as Youth Allowance and Austudy, because without this money many students would be unable to afford to study. Many have to work just to support themselves through university.

I know many young people attending university at the moment and I know their priorities are, firstly, the necessities of life—food, rent and bills—and, next, expenses associated with their study: books, stationery, petrol, public transport fares to go to classes and parking. For the government to even suggest that these students could manage adding a compulsory fee to their shrinking budget shows they are out of touch with the young battlers of our nation. For the government to force this compulsory fee on students for services many may not even use is against all reason.

I am opposed to this bill for three reasons. Firstly, it does not make any sense. If university students want to use the many services on offer at their campus, they can pay for them as I would pay for any service I wish to use. But those who do not want to use these services should not be burdened with a compulsory fee that will subsidise other students' use. Secondly, I believe the bill is morally flawed. The bill removes the student's right to choose. I thought we had moved on from the days when students were forced to join unions and pay fees just to get a university education. Now it seems the Rudd government is using the method of force once again. I am also concerned, as are many students who have contacted me, that their hard earned money will go to supporting groups with political agendas within universities across our nation. Only a few years ago we saw a radical socialist group publicly burn the Australian flag using student money to fund their activities. Is it fair that decent Australians should be forced to pay for such disgraceful acts? How absurd is it that students should be forced to dig deep into their pockets to pay a compulsory fee and then have no say on where the money should go?

Thirdly, and finally, I am against this bill because it is a tax on the poor. It is a tax on those people in the community who can least afford it. At the moment important student services are funded by the universities through their federal government funding. If this bill were to be passed, we all know what the next step will be. The government will simply reduce its funding to universities because the costs are now being picked up by the students. This is not something that I can support either.

I believe a compulsory fee will breed inequality in our education system. It will only widen the gap between rich and poor. Putting a further financial burden on those already struggling will push some low-income students out of the tertiary system. This country has worked hard to improve the next generation's chance at a successful future. We have decided that university should be an option for all people, regardless of their family, their financial situation or their socioeconomic background. This ideal is already fading under the pressure of limited university places, low-income support, dwindling housing options, rising living costs and the latest challenge of rising unemployment. What the government is proposing will put university out of reach for some. This bill seems like a backward step from our goal of making university accessible to all Australians. Compulsory university fees also put further pressure on students and their families at a time when we should be aiming to relieve them of this burden. It is for these reasons I have decided to vote against this bill.