THE SENATE

BILLS

Social Services Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) Bill 2015

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 4 May 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator SIMMS (South Australia) (11:20): I rise to speak on the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) Bill 2015. Further to the comments made by my colleague Senator Siewert, I seek to look at the implications of what is being proposed here for students. In particular, I look at schedule 3 of this bill, which amends the determination of the full-time study requirement for a student to be eligible for Commonwealth income support through youth allowance and Austudy. The legislation would change this structure so that full-time enrolment loads can only be from one course of education. I acknowledge that that does not include combined degrees—there are some exemptions there—but, as has been noted by the National Union of Students, this does significantly restrict choices available to students. It does not recognise the reality of the experience for many students who are engaged at university who may be juggling a range of different employment obligations due to the inadequacy of this government's youth allowance arrangements. Therefore, this will impact on a potentially small but significant cohort of students. It is really important that we consider the implications of this.

We know that the Liberals have form in this regard when it comes to ignoring the plight of students and making life more difficult for people at university. We know they have form in this regard. To see that we need only look at last night's budget flop. To much fanfare, the Liberals have been out saying that they are abandoning their push for deregulation. But let us be clear: that is nothing more than a smoke-and-mirrors ploy to try to cover over what they really have in store. From 2017 to 2018, there will be a 20 per cent cut to the university sector. That is in the forward estimates. That is $200 billion being ripped away from universities.

How do the Liberals propose to make up the difference? They have an options paper, a discussions paper, out there where they are going to talk about all these ideas. Everything is on the table, of course. They want to talk about these flagship degrees where universities can charge sky-high fees. But we know that they want to increase the fees for students as well. Of course that is part of the mix, because that is the only solution that they know. It is interesting that, after Prime Minister Turnbull plunged the knife into the back of Tony Abbott, he is now wielding a razor at students and universities. They head into this election campaign with a sword of Damocles hanging above them as the Liberals try to string them out and pretend that they have some alternative to increasing fees. But that is all they have on the table, and the reality is that that is going to impact on students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from low-income families.

In addition to the changes being proposed in this legislation, which target some of the most vulnerable members of our community, we saw in the higher education announcements in last night's budget $150 million being ripped away from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. That is $150 million being torn away from a program that aims to ensure that that Australians from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have the ability to study at university have the opportunity to do so. We know that costs to attend university have continued to rise. They are going to continue to rise even further if the Liberals get back into government. Now the government are attacking those who need assistance the most by gutting more than $150 million from this critical program—a program that would help students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds get into university and support them in their study at university.

Of course, we know that the Liberals do not like that. They want to shut the door on those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds going to university. They want universities to be the domain of the rich, as we see in the United States, and that is what their deregulation agenda is all about. That is what their approach to higher education has been about—universities for the elites but shutting out everyday Australians.

Isn't it interesting that we see bills like the one before us today—the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) Bill—really targeting those most vulnerable members of our community. They tend to do so on the basis of trying to save taxpayer dollars—that is the guise under which these changes are all so often proposed. Yet when, as my colleague Senator Siewert has said, it comes to finding money for the big end of town the Liberals can always find it. We have even seen in this federal budget $160 million being squirreled
away in a special contingency fund so that they can hold their costly and divisive plebiscite, a plebiscite that so many in the Liberal and National parties will ignore the outcome of.

So, we are seeing $160 million being squirreled away to ask a question that we already know the answer to. Here is a newsflash for the Turnbull government: Australians support marriage equality. They want to see the government deliver on marriage equality, and we do not need a costly and divisive plebiscite to get us there. We do not need a taxpayer-funded hate campaign to be levelled at the gay and lesbian community. All we need is a free vote in the parliament, and Mr Turnbull has the power to deliver that. Mr Turnbull has the power to do that, but for some reason he will not do it because he is wedded to the conservative Abbott era. He is wedded to the toxic policies of Tony Abbott. Of course, we saw the fingerprints of Mr Abbott all over last night's budget, not only with respect to higher education but with respect to a range of other measures as well.

But let's go back to consider the implications of what the Liberals are proposing for higher education in this budget. Of course, we have in the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) Bill before us today measures that are going to make things more difficult for students. But let's consider the measures in this bill in a broader context: let's look at the experience of students across the board. The reality is that the Liberals are also now going to reduce the HECS repayment threshold, so that if you are earning $45,000 a year you are going to have to start paying back your HECS. They are doing that at a time when the cost of living is increasing and when the ability to get ahead is becoming more and more difficult for Australians—particularly for graduates. We know that there is record unemployment for young Australians and those who are leaving university.

What is the Liberal's solution? It is to hike up fees and it is to start reducing the threshold so that people start paying back their fees earlier. So we are going to see students being burdened with more and more debt and we are going to see less flexibility as a result of this Social Services Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) Bill, and that is a bad thing for the university sector in this country and it is a bad thing for students.

I know that when last night's budget was announced, a shiver would have run down the spine of every vice-chancellor in this country. They know what is coming: the Liberal Party razor gang have got them in their sights! They are going to slash 20 per cent off university funding and they are going to start that from 2017. And, of course, the Liberals are using their smoke-and-mirrors campaign to disguise that fact. They are trying to pretend that that is not happening, but hidden away in this budget is the ugly reality. The ugly reality is that the Liberals need to make up a 20 per cent funding cut—they need to make up $2 billion for the university sector and the only solution they know is to hike up fees. The only solution they know is deregulation, and that is what they have got on the agenda. That is what they are taking to the Australian people for this federal election.

The bill before us today does have an adverse impact on students. The proposal in schedule 3 would adversely impact on those who are studying full time and doing a diverse range of courses. It is an unfair policy and it compounds the stress that students are already under as a result of the toxic policies of the Labor and Liberal parties.