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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

BILLS

**Higher Education Legislation Amendment
(Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010**

Second Reading

SPEECH

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Page 6556
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Speaker Brandis, Sen George

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Senator BRANDIS (Queensland—Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate) (18:01): On 27 February 2007, when the first semester of that academic year began, it coincided with the first semester in which Australia's university students had been liberated from compulsory student unionism. On that occasion I took the opportunity to describe the fight for voluntary student unionism as:

... one of the great recent battles in the history of freedom in Australia.

For five years now, Australian students have been the beneficiaries of the success of the Liberal side of politics in that battle for freedom. For the last five years, Australia's university students have been able to attend university, have been able to attend their academic studies and have been able to partake in the full range of student activity on campus unburdened by the debt and the cost of compulsory student unionism and also unburdened of the insult of being told that they were obliged to join unions and campus associations against their will.

Those five years of freedom in Australian universities were won during the Howard government and they proved so popular with Australian students that, when he went to the 2007 election, no less than Mr Kevin Rudd, then the Leader of the Opposition, was forced to acknowledge that it was untenable for the Labor Party to reintroduce compulsory unionism on campus. And so the Australian Labor Party, as Senator Adams has pointed out, was actually elected to office four years ago on the strength of a promise not to abolish voluntary student unionism, not to reimpose upon university students the shackle of compulsory student union fees, not to subject them to the insult of being told they would join an organisation whether they wished to or not.

What has happened now? Just as one of the first fruits of the Howard government's control of the Senate after 1 July 2005 was the freeing of Australia's university campuses, so the first dead fruit of the Labor-Greens control of the Senate after 1 July 2011 is to reimpose compulsion on Australia's university students, to force them, against their will, to pay costs for services they do not want to use—because some bureaucrat and some ideologue and some student activists of the Left decides it would be a good idea to make them do so.

This is a great defeat in the history of freedom in Australia just as the Howard government's liberation of university students six years ago was a great victory in the battle for freedom—for intellectual freedom, for freedom of association and for the cultural freedom that says to university students, 'You will decide what you do with your days on campus and nobody will tell you what to do; you will decide for yourself.' But we will not be deterred. There are so many on my side of politics whose formative experience in politics, whose awakening of political consciousness, coincided with experiencing the dead hand of compulsion at universities. So we will not give up.

This is an issue of tremendous importance to my side of politics for two particular reasons—first of all, the reason I have just touched on. As university students we saw for the first time with our own eyes the authoritarian cast of mind. We saw for the first time that habit of mind that says to others, 'Do what we tell you to do; don't do as you would choose to do,' and then seeks to legitimise, even glamorise, that authoritarian cast of mind with pious invocations of the general good. That was a formative experience for generation after generation of Liberals. It was a formative experience for Mr Tony Abbott, once the chairman of the Sydney University Students' Representative Council, and for other great Liberals of my generation, including Michael Kroger, Peter Costello and Senator Eric Abetz. Down the generations, other prominent Liberals who first came to political consciousness on the campuses have joined in that fight, including Mr Tony Smith, the member for Casey, at the University of Melbourne and Ms Sophie Mirabella, my shadow cabinet colleague. When some people who claimed to be supporters of VSU engaged in a little bit of convenient backsliding in the party room in 2005—I well remember it—Senator Mitch Fifield kept the fight going, as did Senator Mason and as did I, and Senator Scott Ryan's contribution should be acknowledged as well. They are but a few.

Senator Hanson-Young interjecting—

Senator BRANDIS: It means so much to us because we have, since we were teenagers, lived with this belief and been shocked by the authoritarian cast of mind we first encountered on the campuses, represented today by people like you, Senator Hanson-Young, who certainly is unblushing in her apology for the authoritarian cast of mind.

There is a deeper reason. Voluntary student unionism for us is emblematic of the difference between the Liberal side of politics, which believes in freedom, choice and the rights of individuals, and the Labor side of politics, which derides the freedom of the individual and believes that the collective will of the temporary majority of the day can be imposed on an unwilling minority. We see that in this chamber all the time now that the Greens have seized the balance of power and are in cahoots with the Australian Labor Party.

Madam Acting Deputy President, you may think that this is all merely rhetoric, you may think that it is all merely high sentiment, but it is more than that. I will acknowledge that these issues, these values, these causes, mean a great deal to people like me, which is why we have fought, including against occasionally unsympathetic colleagues in the coalition, for these values. But it is more than just idealism that inspires us; it is the practical outcomes because, like every choice between 'an authoritarian government knows best' system and a system based on freedom of choice and freedom of the individual, it is the latter which always produces the best outcomes.

If I may, let me instance my own alma mater, the University of Queensland. The University of Queensland has the second largest student union in Australia. From the time voluntary student unionism was introduced five years ago, every year at every annual election for the office bearers and members of the Union Council of the University of Queensland, the forces of freedom have prevailed. At every election since 2007, the principal antagonists in those elections were a team of student activists known by the name 'Fresh' aligned to the Liberal side of politics, of course, and a team—it would be so appropriate if they were called 'Stale'—called 'Pulse' aligned to the Labor side of politics. Unfortunately, the Pulse team has barely been able to raise one because, in each of the last five years, the Fresh team, the Liberal team, the team that was associated with freedom of choice and the rights of the individual student, has been overwhelmingly successful. Furthermore, in each of those years the number of students who participated in the election has grown exponentially from about 2,500 in the last year of compulsory student unionism to 12,500, a fivefold increase in the course of the last six years.

One of the lies we were told by the apologists for compulsory student unionism was if we remove compulsion and introduce freedom people would not be interested, people would go away, the quality of the student experience would degenerate, the students would be the poorer for it and the level of involvement would fall off. On the contrary, at my own campus, at the University of Queensland, which Senator Mason knows very well as a former patron of the University of Queensland Liberal Club, far from the level of involvement and enthusiasm falling away, the level of participation has increased from a derisory 2,500 in 2006 to 12,500 this year, quite an extraordinary number by comparison with the usual turnout of student elections across the country.

As I said, this is the fifth year in a row—five out of five—since freedom was introduced at the University of Queensland Student Union, that the Fresh team were overwhelmingly endorsed by the student body.

Senator Mason: Let freedom reign!

Senator BRANDIS: Thank you, Senator Mason. Let freedom ring! They won 57 per cent of the primary vote. There were other candidates as well but of the two principal teams the Fresh team won 57 per cent of the entire field earlier this year. They won 12 of the 15 positions on the Union Council. They won every position on the union executive. They won every unpaid office bearer position. A more comprehensive slaughter of the forces of compulsion by the forces of freedom could scarcely be imagined. And this is the product of what we were told would be a degeneration into almost non-existence of student activity on campus as a result of voluntary student unionism. As always, in the contest between the authoritarian cast of mind and the belief in freedom, freedom triumphed.

I want to use this opportunity on this very sad day, when the forces of academic freedom and the freedom of students to choose their own university experience are suffering this woeful setback from this shabby alliance between the Labor Party and the disgraceful Greens, to pay tribute to some of the people who at the University of Queensland campus have been instrumental in those achievements. Many of them are friends of mine. They are people like Josh Young, who won the presidency of the UQ Union in 2008; Brandon Carter, in 2009; Michael Zivcic, in 2010; Ben Gorrie, in 2011; the gentleman Colin Finke, who has just been elected president for the ensuing year, 2012; Brodie Thompson, who has just been elected as union secretary; Christian Hayes, who has just been elected as the editor of *Semper Floreat*, the University of Queensland union magazine, and was also, I

am told, the campaign manager for the successful Fresh campaign in recent weeks. They are young people like Kiran Srinivasan; Kieran Shaw, who was elected union vice-president; John Stubbs, who was elected as a union councillor; and Elliott Johnston, who was elected as the Business, Economics and Law faculty representative. The list of the people on the campus of my old university who have accomplished this magnificent victory for the forces of freedom in the last five years could not be complete without mentioning Ben Riley, who was elected a student senator of the University of Queensland and was very active for many years in the University of Queensland Liberal Club and is currently the state president of the Young Liberal Movement, and Laney McLaren, who was a long-time vice-president of the University of Queensland Union. Those people in Brisbane, at the lovely campus of the University of Queensland on the bend of the Brisbane River at St Lucia, follow in the tradition of Michael Kroger, Peter Costello, Tony Abbott, Tony Smith, Sophie Mirabella, Brett Mason, Mitch Fifield, Scott Ryan and all of the others on the Liberal side of politics who have dedicated themselves as students to the cause of freedom.

Senator Mason: And Gary Humphries.

Senator BRANDIS: Thank you, Senator Mason. How could I forget my friend and colleague Senator Gary Humphries, who was president of the ANU Liberal Club in the 1980s! There are many more others and I hope I may be forgiven over any of the oversights which I may have made.

Let me conclude by making this point. Freedom is indivisible. One of the great lessons we have learned since the Enlightenment, one of the great lessons of the West, is that you cannot have the authoritarian cast of mind for some purposes and the Liberal cast of mind for others. If you believe in freedom, you believe in intellectual freedom and you believe in freedom of association and you believe in academic freedom and you believe in civil liberty. You believe in them all because you believe in freedom, choice and the rights of the person as a core value. The person who tells you, 'We will have compulsion in the affairs of university students,' is the same person who, out of the other corner of their mouth, will be saying, 'We will not have academic freedom either.'

If you do not believe in freedom for one purpose, you do not believe in freedom for all purposes. So beware, as I have said throughout the course of these remarks, of the authoritarian cast of mind, incipient in student activists of the Left. The current Prime Minister began her career as an activist of the hard Left on university campuses and only gradually traded away her hard Left dogmatic beliefs for a kind of flimsy pragmatism. But she remained an authoritarian throughout, as is seen even today in her approach to the issue of asylum seekers.

The authoritarian cast of mind is of a piece, just as the liberal cast of mind is of a piece. Either you believe, in the pith and marrow of your bones, that a good society is a society in which everybody is enabled to be free and not imposed upon or bossed around or forced to do what it would choose not freely to do or you believe that human nature is at its best and most noble if people do have free choice. The great pioneers of and the great warriors for voluntary student unionism have carried the torch of freedom on university campuses in this country for 30 years and they have carried that torch of freedom much more loyally than left-wing academics, who mouth pieties about academic freedom but nevertheless impose the cultural values of the Left, have ever done. It is a setback for them and it is a setback for us today but they will live to fight and to prevail again.