



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

**HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (STUDENT SERVICES
AND AMENITIES) BILL 2010**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 18 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Thursday, 18 November 2010 Page 24 Questioner Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (11.48 am)—I am very pleased to support the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010. I will discuss the actual bill so that we can put to rest the fear mongering and the absolute exaggeration the member for Flynn and others opposite have been prattling for the last couple of hours.

Mr Ewen Jones—Dawson.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—I support this bill for the third time. The reasons we are here for a third time can be boiled down to about four reasons. First and foremost, the opposition—and they are indeed opposing—are hell-bent on stopping us from fulfilling an election commitment from 2007 and an election commitment reinstated again in 2010. As far as I know, we are the government, and we were in 2007, so we have the mandate to have this legislation passed. I think that has been pretty well established. But the opposition, being an opposition for opposition's sake, have been making up all these scary old so-called clauses that are supposed to be in this bill—all probably written out by the member for Indi, who has a pathological hatred of unionism, particularly student unionism. They get their template answers, pop in here and slip out a few examples from their electorates, like the member for Flynn. You are going to have to do a bit better than that—do your own research, for a start.

Mr Ewen Jones—Dawson.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Secondly, listening to those opposite, both in the past and now, particularly the member for Flynn here as well as the member for Indi and the member for Mackellar, we hear this pathological, ideological hatred of unionism. Because of this pathological hatred, they have associated unionism with anything to do with fees for amenities and services on our university campuses. Do not worry about the truth; if it has the word 'union' in it, it has got to be bad—and of course it has got to be compulsory. This legislation is not about making it compulsory at all. It is about making it optional for universities. So tell the truth, and none of these fibs you have been pumping out with some of your cobbers opposite.

Those opposite also continue their attack on public universities. They are not supporters of public

universities at all. Their record is that money was ripped out of our public universities. The so-called legislation—the Howard legislation, which is still in effect—only took out more services and more money from universities, who had to try to re-divert and redirect their resources to make up for those services that the Howard government wanted to rip out of universities. That is the truth, but of course you do not hear that. It is all 'in the name of free market forces' and 'the students want to get on with the fundamentals of life' and all these types of things. What a load of rubbish. Students have fundamental needs in life, and those needs were provided for by the universities through their services and other facilities. So do not give us all this tripe about you knowing the essentials of what students want today. You do not know at all.

Finally, I believe their view of politics is not to argue the substance of any legislation. That was demonstrated today. If you go through the substance of the legislation, which I will now do, you will see it has nothing to do with the opposition to it. That is purely political. When you ask for substantive argument about why we should not try to reintroduce what we regard as necessary services and amenities to our campuses, the opposition cannot give you an example except to say, 'You're trying to reintroduce compulsory unionism to our campuses.' That is the fundamental argument all the time. Go and read the bill. It says the opposite. But they do not worry about that. On they go.

Those are the four basic reasons why they are opposing this bill and opposed earlier attempts to introduce it. There is nothing of substance in their opposition to it except that they are the opposition—and they are well and truly acting like it today. They stand for 'no', for obstructionism and for little else. But they pride themselves on that.

First and foremost—and on a positive note, because I am a very positive person—I would like to say what this legislation is all about. Fundamentally it is about restoring a balance. Labor is about restoring balance after the destructive years of the Howard era—and the acolytes of Howard are floating around in the chamber today and leading the mob opposite. Fundamentally this is about restoring balance, as we promised we would do and the electorate said: 'Thank you very much. We endorse balance. We endorse you as the government.' This is about restoring the balance

between what was taken away during the Howard era and what existed before that government's miserable changes. It seeks to do this in a contemporary way, which means a way for now that is appropriate and takes into account changing circumstances and the needs of students, their families and their communities. It is not going to be the same as in the past, contrary to all the fears that the member for Flynn raised in reading the template answer that the member for Indi popped out for him to read. It is going to be our way today. That is what the bill seeks to do. This time we are putting some balance back into the tertiary education system and accompanying services, after they were hacked at—I think that is a good description of it—by the previous government in what was, as I noted earlier, a poorly disguised attack on what they perceived as a political threat to their future on campuses around Australia. Hence, like the member for Flynn, attacking the lefties—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas)—I remind the member for Braddon that the previous speaker was the member for Dawson—if he is referring to the previous speaker.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—I humbly apologise to the member for Flynn! Contrary to what some members have said in this House, both when this legislation first came up and, more recently, today—thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am humbled by my mistake—the past legislation stripped nearly \$170 million from university funding. That is \$170 million, member for Dawson—remember that figure, because you did not cite it—that was stripped from university funding, which left universities struggling to cover many vital and valuable services to the students the previous government claimed to represent. How do you make up \$170 million of stripped services? I would like to know how to do that. One way the universities tried to do it—they were forced to by those opposite—was to take away funding from their mainstream programs. They took it from student classes, programs and courses so they could redirect it into what they regarded as fundamental amenities and services.

You do not have to believe me about this. I try to have substance and references for what I say. Just go and read the universities' comments about how they had to redirect their funding to keep some of these services going. For example, dental services at La Trobe University and Southern Cross University were completely closed down. Having the odd molar problem is bad enough at any time, but if you are a rural or regional student at La Trobe University and you need assistance with your oral health—which can affect all of your health, of course—you cannot access basic oral health services on campus, and it is very difficult.

Mr Laming—Cross the road!

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—It is very difficult, as we all know, to access those services outside the campus. 'Cross over the road,' says our friend on the other side—oh yes, any old access to dental services. I am sure if we did a little survey in this chamber at the moment it would tell you how many weeks you have to wait to get dental services. What a load of rubbish! La Trobe University, James Cook University and the University of Technology, Sydney, had to close their legal services. Of course, you can just go over the road! In the case of the University of Technology, Sydney, this affected not only the students but also the local community, to whom they provided the services as well—and no doubt took some fees from those who accessed the service and were able to pay. The emergency loans scheme once offered at the University of Sydney had to close down. I understand that three universities shut down their Centrelink advice services. Nine unis shut down their student legal and taxation advice services. Childcare fees at La Trobe Uni rose by \$800 a year, and direct funding for sporting clubs was cut by something like 40 per cent—and so on.

Members on this side whose electorates include those campuses and those students have cited example after example of amenities and services being cut because of the former Howard government ripping out \$170 million from the system. That is still supported by those post-Howard acolytes sitting on the other side. We all know this. Students are more than people just sitting in class and consuming lectures. Students, particularly those that come from rural areas such as my electorate of Braddon in north-west Tassie, require services to support and complement their studies. Those students are forced to travel, live away from home and go to university campuses throughout this nation and elsewhere. Those services and amenities are very important to those students.

I think it is very important—and again it has not been emphasised by those opposite—that this legislation allows higher education providers to choose to implement a compulsory student services and amenities fee. There is a choice. They can choose. This does not mean it is compulsory. Let us get the facts right. It is not compulsory. It is up to those higher education providers to choose whether to implement this form of amenities fee. Also—unmentioned by those opposite—it is capped at \$250 per student. It is indexed annually. What it is meant to do is clearly and precisely set out. It is not for the old beer fests that were mentioned by the member for Dawson, or for the running of the old lefties clubs or whatever. We know that is specifically prescribed against. So why don't those opposite tell the truth and say what is actually in the bill instead of doing all this fearmongering that the

member for Indi has given you all to trot out in this place?

It is not meant and cannot be used to promote Labor, the Greens, the Liberals, the Nationals or Calathumpians Incorporated, none of that—and you know that to be true. It allows higher education providers to choose to implement such a fee. It does not say that they must do so. So this is not imposed by us from without. It is up to the higher education providers to make the decision and to remember it, taking into account the whole of the demands and expectations of their students on their campus. They make the decision. There is consultation on this decision by universities. You do not hear that from the other side—so please tell the truth and speak about what is actually in the provisions of the bill instead of trotting out this other guff.

I mentioned earlier that, contrary to the claims of those opposite, the changes introduced with voluntary student unionism that the Howard-era and post-Howard acolytes still support did not reduce costs on university campuses. Those changes merely shifted those costs. For example, evidence demonstrates that students have been hit with increased costs for child care, parking, books, computer labs, sport, food and so on. They have also indirectly affected academic achievements, with a number of unis forced to redirect funding, on their own account, out of research and teaching budgets to cross-subsidise and fund services and amenities that would otherwise have been cut.

For the edification of those who may be listening to or may read this debate and those present in the chamber and for posterity, I would like to explain a little more about what the intention of this legislation is and what is not intended. The new fee, if introduced by higher education providers, comes with some room to move. So as not to introduce a financial barrier, eligible students will have the option, if the fee is introduced, of a HECS-style loan under a new component of the Higher Education Loan Program, SA-HELP. The fee will be indexed along with other loan programs. So, importantly, if it is introduced by a higher education provider, it is capped and if somebody finds it financially difficult then they can take a loan to help them pay that fee.

This bill is not about a return to compulsory student unionism. I point out to those opposite that section 19.37(1) of the Higher Education Support Act 2003, which prohibits a provider from requiring a student to be a member of a student organisation, is unchanged in our legislation. We know that there would be scaremongering about support for political activities on campus, but the amendment is very clear on this point. This is very interesting, given that those opposite have carried out scare campaigns

about this legislation, mainly driven by what I regard as ideological motivations. I reiterate that the new provisions prohibit the fee from being spent by a higher education provider on support for a political party or a candidate for election to the Commonwealth, state or territory parliaments or to local government. I have other things that I would like to add about this legislation but let it be known that it is not compulsory unionism. There is choice. There is support for students who may find it financially difficult if that university through consensus accepts this legislation.