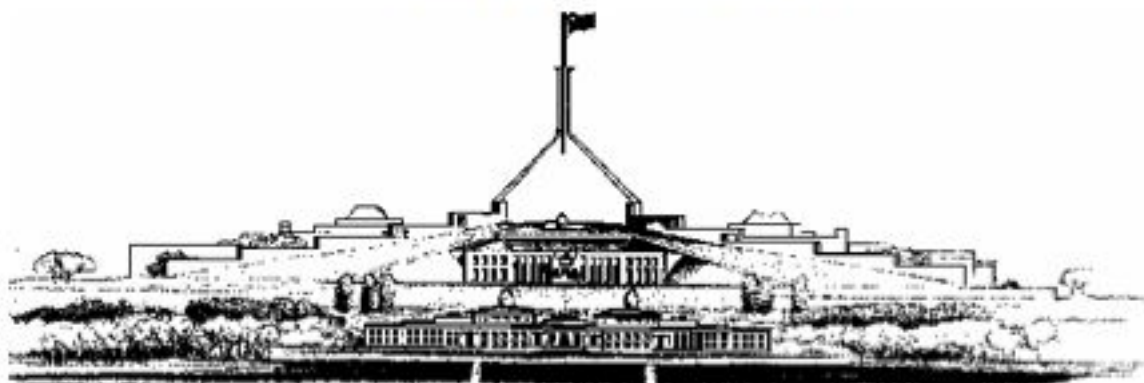




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Education Services in Isolated Regions

SPEECH

Monday, 23 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 23 February 2009 Page 1534 Questioner Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (7.42 pm)—I will certainly an important issue for a lot of families in rural take up the member for Parkes' last point, if I may, and remote Australia. So I thank him for that. and thank him for moving this motion, because it is

When I had the privilege of being able to go to university in the early seventies—I know I look a lot younger than that!—I had a lot of advantages, in the sense that, firstly, I lived in a city, so I had direct access to tertiary education. Secondly, there were ample scholarships available—the Commonwealth scholarship, which was very broad in its application, and also teaching scholarships and others. And, thirdly, we did not pay fees. So I was paying for books—and other curriculum activities, of the swigging kind! But I do not want to demean what is really an important issue.

Then I moved to regional Australia, where I am very proud to be and which I am very proud to represent. Clearly an issue which has arisen over time is that there is a discriminatory factor based on geography. We try to deal with a lot of discrimination in our country by means-testing things. Okay—so be it; we think that is a fair thing to do. But I would like to have a look at the situation in regional and rural Australia for a lot of people.

Take the families that have reasonable incomes—not massive but reasonable incomes. Their children must leave home to access higher education. The differential—the discrimination based on geography—is that they have to move to do this. We can measure that differential cost by looking at accommodation receipts, or travel receipts and so forth. The difference is that those families are up for \$10,000 at least—\$10,000 to \$15,000, and rising—for one of their children to access tertiary education. As my colleague the member for Parkes said, he has three children, so I can fully appreciate the cost. I have two. And you might say, 'This is just self-interest talking.' But, you see, the difference is that I do not mind doing my bit; it is when, above and beyond that, it is going to cost \$10,000, \$15,000, \$20,000, or \$25,000 because of where I live. That is what we are raising in terms of inequity—an enforced cost based on geography.

Some people have dubbed this middle-class welfare. We will have that argument; no doubt about it. The point is: I do not mind if it is purely means-tested and that is it, but in actual fact it is a discriminatory factor because of geography. They have to go away to do their courses, and they contribute to the economy of this country. That is holding a number of students back. They cannot do it, they are not able to do it, and so they have this gap year—which has become the trend now. People say that, for sociological reasons, that is a good thing.

We all know what is driving a lot of this. It is purely and simply that mum and dad cannot afford it, or the children take the attitude that 'I'm not going to impose on them.' Let's face it: when most of our children go to university, and up to the age of 25, many are dependent on us. This is demeaning, in a sense. They have to work. Most of them have part-time or almost full-time jobs. I think we have got to take into account that discriminatory factor based on geography. We can do it through a tax rebate. For instance, you have to prove your accommodation expenses, and you get a tax rebate for those whom you depend on—because if they do not depend on us they are either on allowances or they are virtually in full-time work. So I reckon it is an issue that is well worth taking up on the grounds of equity. I am not pleading poverty but I honestly believe it is discriminatory and it stops a lot of our kids—particularly in rural and regional Australia, where the tertiary retention rates are too low, and it affects the economic future of this country as well as the social wellbeing and the development of social capital in our area. So I thank the member for Parkes.

I recommend the report *Time running out: shaping regional Australia's future* for commentary on this issue. It is a very good report from an inquiry in the year 2000, and a number of my colleagues in the House at present participated in it: the member for Lyons, the member for Barker and me, and the former member for Parkes. I think this is something we can take up, we can measure it, we can support it, and it will have positive benefits socially, economically and educationally.