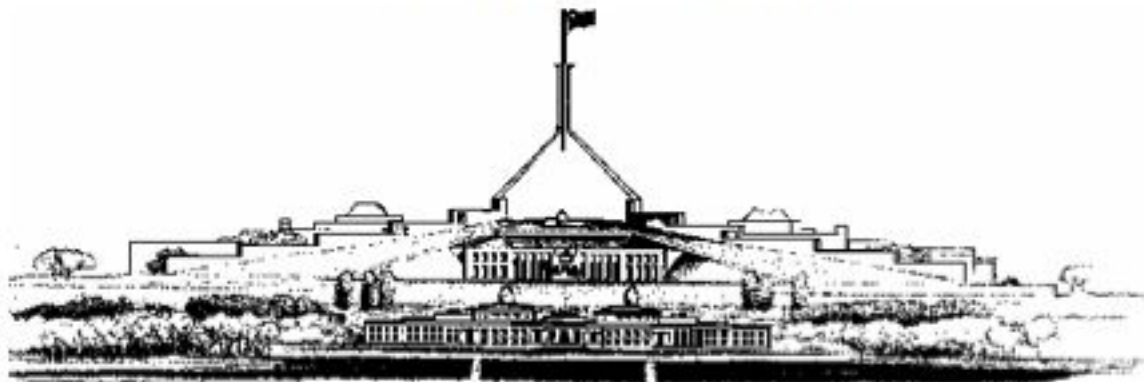




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

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

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 26 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 26 November 2009
Page 50
Questioner
Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP

Source House
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Question No.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (1.26 pm)—I am very pleased to support the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009 for a second time. I think the reasons we are here for a second time can be boiled down to about four reasons. First and foremost: the opposition, if I may call them that, are hell-bent on stopping us from fulfilling an election commitment. I think one of the major reasons they are doing that is that they want to have something to say at the next election, whenever that will be, to say that Labor have not fulfilled their promises, because this is part and parcel of what Labor promised in 2007 in our election campaign and we are trying to fulfil that. But those opposite are setting out to stop us from doing that, to use it for cheap electioneering purposes for the next election, whenever that may be.

Secondly, from listening to many of those opposite—not all, but many of those opposite—I know they have a pathological, ideological hatred of unionism and, from that pathological hatred, they have associated anything to do with fees for amenities and services at our universities with promoting—and I think the member for Mayo used this term—‘Labor Inc.’ in our universities. So universities, to those opposite, are nothing more than seedbeds of socialism, of potential communism and, I suppose, the seedbeds for this conspiracy on climate change which those opposite now believe permeates the decision-makers of the world.

But those opposite have a pathological hatred of anything to do with student services. Take, for instance, the member for Indi. I do not know what happened to the member for Indi at university, but it has caused a pathological hatred of student services and amenities on the university grounds.

Mr Shorten—They wouldn’t vote for her; she kept losing elections.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Well, something happened, indeed! I did notice, though, that a number of those on the other side have been involved in, I suppose you could call it, union politics on student campuses in the past. The former member for Higgins is another. When he got re-elected, a little disappointingly for him but not for me, personally, he only spoke once in this place and that was about this bill and the re-emergence

of ‘Labor Inc.’ on university campuses. But enough of their pathological hatred for anything bordering on unionism.

They also continue their attack on our public universities themselves. They have never been supporters of public universities, even though many of them have benefited from a public education through our universities. Not only have they attacked funding of universities, but they have tied their funding, perversely, to their perverse industrial relations systems in the past. In other words, you do not get funding or you do not get certain programs unless you introduce AWAs and other forced industrial relations systems in the university—again, this pathological interest in trying to dumb down liberal—small ‘l’ liberal, I have to say—institutions in this country.

Finally, I believe their view of politics is not to argue the substance of any legislation such as this. If you go through the substance of this legislation, which I will now attempt to do, you will see it has nothing to do with their 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 services and necessary amenities to our campuses, they cannot give it to you, except to say, ‘You’re trying to introduce compulsory unionism to our campuses.’ And on they go. Those are their four basic reasons for why they are opposing this bill. There is nothing of substance in their opposition, except that they are the opposition and they are well and truly acting like it today.

First and foremost, on a positive note, I would like to say what this legislation is all about. Fundamentally, it is about restoring a balance, as we promised we would do. It is about restoring the balance between what was taken away during the Howard era—and what is now being supported in the post-Howard era in this House by the opposition—and what existed before the Howard era. It seeks to do this in a contemporary way. It is not going to be the same as the past. It is going to be our way today. That is what it seeks to do. This time we are putting some balance back into the tertiary education system and accompanying services, after they were hacked at—and I think that is a pretty correct description—by the previous government in what was, as I have noted before, a poorly disguised attack on what they perceived as a political threat to their future on campuses around Australia.

Contrary to what some members have said in this House, both when this legislation first came up and more recently, the past legislation stripped nearly \$170 million from university funding and 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 did it—had to do it, were forced to do it 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. For example, dental services at La Trobe University and the Southern Cross University were closed down completely. I do not know about you, but having the old molar problems is bad enough at any time. But, if you are a rural and regional student at La Trobe University and you need assistance with your oral health—which can affect all of your health, of course; that is why I have always been struck by why, to this day, it is not part of Medicare, but that is another issue—and you cannot access basic oral health services on campus, it is very difficult. It is very difficult, as we all know, to access those services outside the campus. That is just an example.

The University of Technology, Sydney, La Trobe Uni and James Cook Uni had to close their legal services. In the case of the University of Technology, Sydney, this affected not only the students but also the local community, who had also accessed the service. 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 universities 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 Howard government ripping out \$170 million, which 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 who come from rural areas such as my own electorate of Braddon in north-west Tasmania, 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 mentioned by those opposite—that this

legislation allows higher education providers to choose to implement a compulsory student services and amenities fee. They can choose. It does not mean it is compulsory; it is up to those higher education providers to choose whether to implement this form of amenities fee. It is capped at \$250 per student, it is indexed annually and what it is meant to do is clearly and precisely set out. It is not meant to and cannot be used to promote Labor, Green, Liberal, National or Callithumpian Inc., as the member for Mayo was very quick to point out in his rather scratchy contribution to this legislation. It allows higher education providers to choose to implement such a fee. It does not say they must do so, contrary to the mischievous comments made by members opposite. So this is not imposed by us from without. It is up to the higher education providers to make the decision, taking into account the whole of the demands and expectations of their students on their campus. They make the decision.

I mentioned earlier that, contrary to the claims of those opposite, the changes introduced with voluntary student unionism that 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 this debate and those present in the House I would like to explain a little more about what the intention of this legislation is and what is not intended.

Mr Shorten—Please do.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Thank you, Parliamentary Secretary. I know you will be interested in these details, although you would know them anyway, I am sure. The new fee, if introduced—and I reiterate: if introduced—by higher education providers comes with some room to move. I see my good friend the member for Dunkley at the table is now listening to the actual contents of the bill. 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.

Contrary to comments made by many opposite, particularly by the member for Indi in her contribution to this debate, 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 knew 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 the member for Indi, not surprisingly, carried out a scare campaign 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 local government. It is strictly prohibited. So I do not know where the idea of Labor Inc. being reinforced by this legislation comes from, except in the somewhat warped neurological domain of the member for Mayo and others. This restriction also applies to any person or organisation which receives any of the fee revenue. So we are not harking back to the old days when, as the member for Canning reminded us in his earlier contribution, there was tremendous warfare on the campuses, with support for the PLO, if you remember them. They are ancient days. I could well imagine how some people might have been upset at how student fees were used for contentious political debates; however, we have moved a long way from those heady days of the sixties and seventies. That is strictly prohibited in this legislation—but you would not believe that if you listened to those from the other side.

Mr Billson—Don't tell me you've lost your place!

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—No. I am just trying to—

Mr Billson—You've had a go at just about everybody.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Not quite—I have another one coming up, Member for Dunkley. I note that the very edifying National Territory Education Union has welcomed the bill, again. We expect some mumbling on the other side, because as soon as you mention a student union you immediately get right-wing reactionary comments. But the National Tertiary Education Union, which represents many thousands of students, has welcomed the bill as:

... the first step in the vital process of rebuilding student culture on university campuses, devastated by the effects of the former Coalition Government's Voluntary Student Union (VSU) legislation.

I also note that Carolyn Allport, the NTEU President, said recently:

“The loss of student services in the university sector has been endemic, with essential health, welfare and academic advocacy services being reduced or abandoned in almost every university in the country.”

If we take that at face value, and we do, this is a pretty sad legacy from the former government's legislation. Dr Allport also said:

It is a fact that the introduction of VSU has seen the demise of a number of elected student organisations, with many others only just surviving. As a result, many universities have been forced to redirect funding from their core duties of teaching and research to help support student services, often at a reduced level.

The protocols and guidelines—which we do not hear much about from the other side—that will accompany this legislation as a legislative instrument, which will be presented to the parliament, are an attempt to be more prescriptive about how student services and amenities fees are to be used and also more prescriptive about delivering national access and service benchmarks on services and information that are going to be presented to students.

To sum up, first and foremost this legislation is about delivering on an election commitment to restore balance to our universities by providing a mechanism to allow universities to provide much needed services and amenities to students. There are prescriptive guidelines on how this capped fee—if it is decided by universities that they want to introduce it—will be used. It is not to be used for overt political purposes, as those on the other side would have us believe. I urge them to support this legislation once again and get it through the other place. (*Time expired*)