

Extract from Legislative Council Hansard - Tuesday 30 August

COMPULSORY GENERAL STUDENT SERVICES AND AMENITIES FEE - RETENTION

Mr PARKINSON (Wellington - Deputy Leader of the Government in the Council) - I rise to speak on this important motion. Mr President, it is worth noting at the outset that the Liberal Party Opposition in this State has been a vocal advocate in support of the abolition of compulsory student union fees and, presumably, therefore a vocal advocate of the consequences that would follow. This House would be aware that the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 was introduced in the Federal Parliament earlier this year and was referred to the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee - that is the Federal committee - for comment. The report from that committee is currently being debated in the Federal Parliament. It is also worth noting, Mr President, that a number of Commonwealth government members have publicly voiced their concerns about the amendment.

I cannot let the opportunity pass to say something about the newly elected Senator Barnaby Joyce and his threat to block the abolition of compulsory student union fees. When the Commonwealth Government's own speak against their legislation then we do need to step back and consider what the amendments will mean for our students. The Government supports the retention of compulsory general student services and amenities fees. The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 will prevent universities from requiring a student to become a member of a student body or pay a charge for services or amenities unless the student wishes to pay. If a university were to ignore this requirement under the bill, that university would be penalised \$100 per student.

Mr President, the bill will put at risk a range of student services. At the University of Tasmania the services currently supported, at least in part, by student services fees include student accommodation, food services, sporting facilities, student lounges, concerts, international student services, student employment, campus radio, welfare services, sporting clubs, interest clubs and societies, bookshops and retail outlets, legal services and academic advice and advocacy. These services, Mr President, are integral support systems for our tertiary students.

The impact of the bill will therefore be significant in regional centres in particular, where university facilities and activities make a critical contribution to their communities. Currently, the services amenities charge at the University of Tasmania, as the honourable member has indicated, is less than \$300 per annum. It is worth noting at this point as well, Mr President, the compromise position that has been put up by the Federal Labor Opposition which, in order to bring about some sanity in this debate and to bring about a reasonable solution, is supporting a proposition that membership of the student union bodies themselves would be voluntary but that the payment of the amenities fee itself would remain compulsory.

Mr Harriss - It didn't bring too much sanity and unity to the party itself, though. Macklin got her fingers smacked over that.

Mr PARKINSON - That would solve the problem, obviously, because what this is all about is the payment of the fee that supports all these services which are of benefit to the entire student body.

I would like to read into *Hansard* in part a letter that I had published in the *Mercury* on 14 May 2005 where I saw fit to congratulate one of the university students who had a letter printed on 5 May 2005 in the *Mercury* and the letter, after congratulating the student, proceeds:

'If only long-time advocate of "voluntary fees", Senator Eric Abetz, and his Liberal Party mates could understand what their policy means for the majority of students.

I am sure they would think again.

There is no room in this debate for extreme views. As those charged with the administration of universities know, the student body needs a diverse range of services which are in the main provided (or heavily subsidised) by student union fees.

Services such as counselling, accommodation, refectory (meals), child care, bookshops, uni bar and debating (and a range of other clubs and societies) all contribute to university life and personal development.

Unless all students contribute, many of these services will either not exist or will be priced above the means of the average student.

Not everybody drives a car, but we all pay the taxes that build the roads. So too for all the other services we may or may not use. Student unionism is all about clubs, societies and welfare activities, all for the mutual benefit of students in general, and ultimately for society as a whole.

Hopefully there will be enough fair-minded Liberals who will cross the Senate floor on this issue.'

I support the motion.