



Senator
Steve Fielding
Leader of Family First



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Family First Leader

Second Reading Speech

Higher Education Support Amendment (2009 Budget Measures) Bill 2009

7 September 2009

(1:57 PM) —Today we are here debating the level of financial assistance we should provide to Australian kids so that they can go to university. So how do you think a clever nation would deal with helping their kids get to university? Well, a clever nation would make it easier for their kids to get to university, not harder. But the Rudd government is doing the opposite and making it harder for thousands of our kids to get to university. There is nothing clever about that. This is wrong. The Rudd government should not be making it harder for thousands of kids to get to university even though some other kids will get assistance through scholarships. You should not be robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The Rudd government know they got it wrong; that is why at the last minute they have exempted those kids that have taken a gap year already. But exempting this year's gap students does nothing to fix the same problem for all those kids taking a gap year in future years. The Rudd government wants an education revolution but it is in danger of encouraging an education revolt by making it harder for our kids to get to university.

Even though the proposed change in this bill will result in more or some kids getting a scholarship, this will come at a huge cost because it will rip away assistance from other kids, and that is wrong and it is un-Australian. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is not an education revolution. So even though, by exempting this year's gap students, the government have shown that they know they have got the policy wrong, they are now playing wedge politics by only bringing on one of the two bills that affect the level of support our kids get while studying at university.

The Higher Education Support Amendment (2009 Budget Measures) Bill 2009 which is before us now is directly linked to the forthcoming Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009, which deals with, among other things, the controversial and highly unpopular changes to youth allowance. Clearly, these two bills are directly linked and it is ridiculous that we are not debating them together. That is a shame. The Higher Education Support Amendment (2009 Budget Measures) Bill abolishes existing Commonwealth scholarships while the Social and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill provides for their

replacement. I find it absurd that the government will not debate the two bills together. In fact, not only is the Rudd government not willing to have these two bills debated together; the Rudd government does not even have the guts to put all of its changes before the parliament—(*Time expired*)

Debate interrupted.

(5:48 PM) —Before being interrupted by question time earlier this afternoon I was speaking on the Higher Education Support Amendment (2009 Budget Measures) Bill 2009. It is about the level of financial assistance that we provide to our kids that go to uni. The government has realised they got it wrong and has moved to exempt this year's gap-year students from some of the proposed changes. The real issue here is that they also know that many families, especially many rural and regional families, in future years will also be impacted, and they are left hung out to dry.

The government are obviously worried that they will be forced into doing another backflip and therefore the second part of the legislation is still going to be introduced into parliament. But these are linked together and it is important that we make that link of the two. The government had been insisting for months on pressing ahead with their changes to Youth Allowance for gap-year students, and instead they should have been sitting down with kids and parents and experts. Then perhaps they would not be in the mess that they are in at the moment.

Family First has been speaking to students and parents living in rural and regional Australia and hearing firsthand about the massive impact the changes will have on their prospects of going to university. A few weeks ago I arranged for a roundtable discussion between the Deputy Prime Minister and a group of students, parents and experts from rural and regional Victoria. I want to thank the Deputy Prime Minister for making herself available to hear this group and for taking the time to listen to their concerns. The meeting was set up by Family First to find a way to fix up the mess that the government has created and the uncertainty that many gap-year students have this year. Again, it is not just this year's students; I am worried about the future years and our kids. It was clear at this roundtable meeting that the Deputy Prime Minister was left with the need to make some changes. In less than an hour students and parents whose lives were going to be dramatically affected by the proposed changes to Youth Allowance were able to put across to the Deputy Prime Minister that an enormous mistake or mess was going to be created by the changes the Rudd government was planning.

It would make sense for the government to sometimes listen to these people earlier, maybe, and take on board their thoughts and their feedback. The parents and students at this roundtable meeting highlighted how the changes to the youth allowance eligibility criteria would put rural and regional kids two years behind their city counterparts. We are discussing one piece of legislation that is intrinsically linked to another piece of legislation. We should be having the debate on both, rather than just having it on this one. The government is proposing that school leavers be forced into working 30 hours per week for 18 months to prove their independence and to qualify for government assistance. The new 30 hours a week for 18 months rule is blatantly unfair and will see fewer people from country areas heading to universities, instead of promoting university education for more Australians.

Unfortunately for the students who finish their year 12 studies—many of whom are from rural and regional areas—the solution that the government has come up with falls well short of what is fair. The solution that the Rudd government has proposed, exempting current students, is only a temporary reprieve and does not solve the problems that are going to be faced down the track. I let the government know that I will be supporting this particular bill, because there are a number of positive measures contained within it. But it is directly linked to another piece of legislation that is coming up. I say again that it is a shame that we are not debating both pieces of legislation at once.

Family First will not be supporting the changes, in their current form, that the government is planning on making to Youth Allowance. They need to take care of the issue of regional and country students being effectively pushed into being two years behind their city counterparts because of this rule about working 30 hours a week for 18 months—the year and a half. That pushes them into another year of waiting, because each year university places are given out on a one-year basis, not an 18-month basis. That is the concern.

I am happy to sit down with the Deputy Prime Minister and nut out a real solution, not some half-baked idea that will maybe take care of this year's gap students but not those in the following years. Let us hope that the government gets serious about fixing this problem and that we can all make sure that as a clever nation we make it easier for our kids to get to university, not harder.