



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 14 April 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Voluntary Student Unionism

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Education) (9.59 a.m.), by leave: When the Commonwealth first assumed responsibility for the funding of higher education in 1973, it did so on the basis that it would provide money for teaching and research only. The provision of amenities and services were to be funded solely by compulsory direct contributions from students. These contributions were to be paid to student organisations as a legislative condition of Commonwealth grants for universities.

The Commonwealth has now decided unilaterally to renege on this deal. It proposes to legislate to prohibit compulsory student unionism and to exact financial penalties from universities which do not comply. Funds for student services are worth around \$175m nationally a year. The loss of these funds to the system is equivalent to a funding cut of about 3% to universities, which have already sustained a cut of 17% under the Federal coalition Government through direct reductions in funding and the refusal to fund or supplement salary increases. The average university campus in Australia has a daily population of around 20,000 students and staff—akin to the size of a small city. Universities have no capacity to fund these services themselves, and under the Commonwealth proposal they will not be allowed to do so.

Many university students are young adults. They are able to enter into legal contracts and relations; they are frequently tenants in rental properties. They need education and advice services which address the problems common to their age group. They need assistance with their study, with academic appeals and course advice, with part-time employment, accommodation, temporary financial assistance and jobs, to name just a few areas. It is unconscionable to expect young people to live and work for four years of their lives without access to appropriate, reasonably priced, targeted services in these areas.

Good student associations build strong links between students and their institution. These links continue to exist after graduation in the form of the alumni associations, which are a significant source of donations and bequests. The Commonwealth's present proposal will undoubtedly reduce this source of funding by preventing the initial development of these links.

This Government takes very seriously the need to protect the rights of students to organise themselves to provide a reasonable standard of daily university life by the provision of facilities of the kind that can be expected to be available elsewhere in the community. The Government is looking at options, but we will wait for the Commonwealth to proceed with its legislation before we take action. Meanwhile, on behalf of the Government and on behalf of at least some members from the other side of the Chamber as well as members on this side of the Chamber, I call on the Commonwealth Government to desist from its pursuit of this destructive and misguided legislation.
