



Speech by

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VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM

Mr REEVES (Mansfield—ALP) (11.59 a.m.): The proposal by the Federal coalition to introduce voluntary student unionism is nothing more than an attempt to silence the voice of those who have been the most vocal opponents of the Government's savage cuts to higher education. In order to justify this draconian legislation, the coalition has used a number of arguments that when examined in detail are found to be not only false and misleading but very dangerous.

The first argument the conservatives use is that universal membership of student organisations is an infringement of one's human rights. To argue this they refer to the UN's declaration on human rights, which states that no person shall be forced to join an organisation. However, time and time again it has been demonstrated that this does not apply to student organisations. For example, in October 1989 the Supreme Court of South Australia decided that universal membership of student organisations was not in breach of any human rights to freedom of association.

As everyone benefits from the many services offered by the student union, everyone is obliged to make a contribution. The idea of voluntary student unionism is akin to voluntary taxation. If the argument the Government uses to justify voluntary student unionism were applied to the wider community, then we would pay tax only if we wanted to, and then only for the services we directly used. In fact, the hypocrisy of the conservatives in their interpretation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is mind boggling, as Article 26 of the declaration states—

"Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."

If the conservatives want to strictly apply the charter, then all higher education should be free and entry based solely on merit. How does Kemp reconcile the rapid growth in massive up-front fees for university courses which has occurred under his Ministry with this article, as the rich now have a greater access to higher education than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. If Kemp were to apply the declaration, then there would be no HECS and no up-front fees. Rather, higher education should be the right of all—not just dumb rich kids. The conservatives also do not seem to realise that membership of student organisations is already voluntary in that any student may opt out of membership of their student organisation by being a conscientious objector.

The second argument that the conservatives use is that a free market approach to the provision of student organisations will better meet student needs. Bunkum! This argument is also highly flawed. Many of the vital services that student organisations provide will not be provided by free enterprise as there is no profit to be made in certain activities. For example, who is going to provide counselling and advice with respect to academic grievances, sexual discrimination, Austudy and taxation? Further, who will provide free legal advice to those students who find themselves in legal difficulties? Admittedly, students could pay for the use of such professionals when the time arises, but the cost would be far beyond what the average student could afford as they comprise one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in Australian society—unless you are a dumb rich kid. Many of the activities student organisations provide are non-exclusionary, such as bands and recreation areas. How are those who do not pay a fee going to be excluded from these activities?

Another argument the Federal coalition uses is that student unions are unaccountable and that they can do whatever they want with students' money. Again, there is no evidence put forward. Student organisations' budgets must undergo a thorough and rigorous review. The Queensland University of Technology Student Guild, for example——

Mr Reynolds: An excellent student guild.

Mr REEVES: It is an excellent student guild that works for all the students. Its budget must be approved by the guild council as well as the university council. On top of this, independent auditors KPMG audit all guild expenditure. I am sure the university would draw attention to any outrageous line item that was being funded by student fees. Further, if students object to the way their fees are being spent, there already exists the same mechanism that exists in the wider society. It is simply called elections. Student organisations are democratic bodies elected by students for students. Hence, at the ballot box students can express their displeasure at their student organisation's behaviour.

Another argument the coalition uses is that student organisations serve the interests of only some students. Again, where is the evidence? This is typical of the coalition. Student organisations in Australia have over the years worked tirelessly to benefit all students by opposing Government policy that has disadvantaged students, no matter which side of politics has presented it. For example, student organisations were at the forefront in opposing the Federal Labor Government's HECS legislation.

Student organisations have also been at the forefront of opposing up-front fees. The fact that HECS is not even higher than it is today and that more students are not paying up-front fees is to the benefit of all students. Hence, all students have benefited from the work done by student organisations, even if they are unaware of it.

Probably the greatest untruth that Dr Kemp has argued is that VSU has improved the services offered by student organisations in Western Australia. I do not know where Dr Kemp gets his information from—it is probably from the Peter Reith school—but let us look at the facts. At the Curtin University Student Guild the introduction of VSU has seen the closure or cessation of the women's department; the disabled students department; the part-time, external and mature aged students department; the guild shop; the campus newsletter; guild films; cultural hall; sports library; tool library; orientation camp; and student loans. There have also been massive reductions in sports and recreation, reduced from \$280,000 to \$30,000; clubs and societies, reduced from \$250,000 to \$25,000; representative staff, reduced from 14 to two; campus life, with a reduction in major clubs from eight to one; and membership income, reduced from \$3m plus to \$100,000.

At Murdoch University the story is the same. With the introduction of VSU there have been cutbacks to postgraduate student advisers, personal advocacy, the research library relating to student welfare, and the list goes on. After looking at all the services that have ceased to exist under VSU in Western Australia, how can Dr Kemp claim that student organisations have prospered under VSU? It is obvious that it has hurt every single student enrolled in Western Australian universities.

Another issue Dr Kemp and his coalition partners have not looked at in their desire to introduce VSU is the massive economic impact it will have on the Australian community, especially in regional areas. The results of a survey by the Australasian Campus Union Managers Association in February 1999 revealed the following implications. There will be over 3,000 job losses. Student organisations also employ a vast number of casual staff throughout the year. It is estimated that another 5,000 jobs would go. Student organisations spend \$163.4m on campus services, \$98.1m on salaries and oncosts, and \$26.8m on running costs of buildings and facilities. The effect on regional districts will be even more devastating. The survey indicated that 1,000 jobs would be lost in regional centres. \$35m in salaries paid to regional workers each year will be lost.

Ninety-eight per cent of expenditure by regional campus student organisations is on the provision of student and university community services. Two per cent of expenditure by regional campus student organisations is on student representation and student politics. Seventy per cent of those surveyed had already contracted out all commercial services. Eighty-two per cent of regional campuses provided facilities that were used by the local students as well as the local community.

The Chairman of the Country Mayors Association, Mr Richard Torbay, said that universities were the major industries in many country towns. He went on to say that many coalition MPs had yet to understand the impact of the plan on regional communities. He said that many were driven by an anti-union ideology.

Voluntary student unionism will mean that the Australian University Games, which is the largest annual multi-sport event in Australia, will not proceed past 1999. It will also mean that the injection of approximately \$4m into the economies of future host cities will not occur. The improvement to and construction of sporting infrastructure will cease. Currently over \$160m worth of sporting infrastructure exists due to universal membership of student organisations. Over \$17m a year is spent by student

organisations on facility maintenance. Who will maintain them after the introduction of voluntary student unionism?

VSU highlights the arrogance of the conservative Federal Government. At no stage has Dr Kemp consulted with any of the peak organisations involved in the tertiary sector. Not once has he consulted any student organisation. The fact is that VSU is about payback—payback for scores not settled from coalition MPs' own student days; payback for the dissent those student organisations have expressed over coalition education policy.

VSU is a policy formed in ignorance and framed by ideology. Its impact will be devastating and complete. Students and young people need look no further than Dr Kemp's Voluntary Student Unionism Bill to see that John Howard and the Federal coalition Government just do not care about them.
