



Speech by

## John-Paul Langbroek

**MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE**

Hansard Wednesday, 8 June 2005

---

### **VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM**

**Mr LANGBROEK** (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (3.16 pm): I move—

That the amendment to the motion be amended by deleting all words after “union membership”.

I am pleased to rise, as I have before in this House, to speak on the issue of voluntary student unionism. In doing so, I unequivocally oppose this motion and support the federal government in its endeavours to modernise the life of a student by taking them away from the Dark Ages of compulsory student unionism and allowing students to choose what services they wish to purchase or do not wish to purchase. This is a disgraceful situation in that students attend a university to receive an education and choose their course based on academic pursuits only and no other set of criteria. Yet when they arrive they are faced with a bill of up to \$300 per semester for services that they may or may not wish to participate in.

If I was to join any club in the broader world, the ultimate say in the club is membership fees. If the members do not feel that the club is going in the right direction, then they will simply not renew their membership when the time comes. I am sure that there are many members opposite who—

**Mr Lawlor** interjected.

**Mr LANGBROEK:** I am in the club with you, member for Southport, so any one you are in I am happy to be in.

**Mr Lawlor** interjected.

**Mr LANGBROEK:** Renewal is due on 30 June. I am sure that there are many members opposite who have had members of their political party not renew their membership because they have been disappointed with the decisions that are being made by the organisation. This is the foundation of the decision-making process for those organisations—that they do the right thing by members and that those in control of the purse strings represent members in their decisions, otherwise they will not have members there the next year.

Student unions are special in this regard, and this is the whole point to the debate. No matter what they do, no matter how they spend the money—the hard-earned money of members—they will always have that steady flow of money coming in because the members cannot leave the membership unless they leave their degree. Just last night I was discussing this issue with a young man attending Griffith University on the Gold Coast. He pays \$130 in student fees each semester. He says that the only service he uses is the odd subsidised beer at the student bar. Why? Because like many other students he attends uni to gain his degree and his education. He works four days a week. Because he is working through his degree and working hard to make money and do his degree at the same time, he does not use any of the other miscellaneous services that are on offer. He informs me that the price of a pot of beer at the uni bar is about 20c lower than that which he can get elsewhere, so he assumes that that is the subsidy he gets on beer. This means that to get his money's worth each semester he would need to drink 650 pots of beer or, as he has classes on three days a week, over a dozen pots of beer each day he is at uni.

Based on the scenarios that I have outlined, two arguments are used to legitimise compulsory student union fees. The first is that, even though there is a steady stream of money, the students have the ability to vote out an executive that is not doing its job and vote in a new executive. To coincide with that,

there is no intention that every student will receive his or her money's worth of fees back in services. All of those students who are apparently travelling better than the others have to contribute to those who need the services provided by the guild.

If members are thinking that those two arguments sound a lot like an explanation for imposing a tax, they are dead right. Moreover, advocates of compulsory student unionism are comfortable with likening the fees to a tax. They say that, just like paying a tax, students pay to attend university and in return receive some services and voting rights as well as contribute to the greater good of the less fortunate at university. I do not accept that there should be a tax on university students. I do not accept that student unions, with a high proportion of professional students with little real world experience among their number, should be given the ability to impose such a tax.

I will entertain the argument for a second that it is legitimate to impose a tax of this sort. This explanation solely justifies the imposition of student union fees. But tax as we know it in society is means tested. There are thresholds and levels of tax. Whether it is a flat tax rate or a sliding or ascending tax scale, there is an element of a means test. The whole idea of paying tax is that one pays as much as one can reasonably afford to pay. So the higher a person's income, the more tax that person pays.

There are times when we all disagree on the intricacies of taxation policy. I note the comments of the member for Yeerongpilly, who quoted the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Tasmania. However, the fact that tax is means tested is a given. I ask members to imagine a system where the lowest income earners pay the same amount of tax as do the highest income earners. I ask members to imagine if everyone had to pay \$25,000 tax each year. Imagine the government introducing that! The Australian Labor Party would be the first group to say, 'This is about the rich getting richer and it is unfair on the lowest income earners.' They would be right. It would be particularly unfair on low-income earners. In fact, it would cripple low-income families as that amount could be three-quarters of their income, whereas it may be only five per cent of a wealthier person's income.

I refer to the way in which student unions tax students, to use their own words. In some instances there is a blanket \$130 fee or, if you will, a blanket \$130 tax. Placing a blanket amount on everyone, regardless and absent from their ability to actually pay the fee, is unfair on whom? It is unfair on the less wealthy students because, to use the vernacular of the members opposite, that figure represents a higher proportion of their income than it represents to better-off students.

I cite the typical example of a student on youth allowance and rent assistance having to buy books, appliances and food and pay bond and rent at the start of a new semester then being slugged with a fee for the student union. I ask members to contrast that scenario with the student living at home with their parents. That student has their fees and books paid for. The students whom members opposite claim they are protecting—the less fortunate students struggling to make ends meet—are the ones most disadvantaged under this student funded gravy train for professional students, sometimes known as student politicians. If students are unable to pay their fees, they are slugged an extra \$70 to \$100 for not paying on time. Therefore, less fortunate students may end up paying more to fund these unions.

I now turn my attention to the services that these student unions provide. We have heard the very biased critique of the Labor Party. It stated that these services provide for any number of good things that will be cut when this legislation comes into effect. That is all well and good. For those students who use those services, I am sure they are great. But I want to add to the list of things that student guilds pay for. They pay for magazines that are filled with propaganda, mainly for the Labor Party or the Greens, that will hopefully indoctrinate students into thinking or doing certain things. But here are the killers. Student fees pay for the full amount of air fares for student politicians to attend various important and not-so-important engagements interstate.

**Mr LEE:** I rise to a point of order. I believe the member may be inadvertently misleading the House.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr English): There is no point of order.

**Mr LANGBROEK:** I can guarantee members that not all students know that that is one of the things their taxes are used to pay for. I ask members to remember that students' union fees are used to support students less fortunate than themselves. My assistant electorate officer, Tim Rawlings, is going to a national mooting competition in Perth in a month's time. He has had to use \$250 in prize money from winning the university mooting competition as well as hundreds of dollars of his own money to pay for his trip. Although the student guild made some contribution, it amounted to less than 10 per cent of the cost of the trip. This is for a national law students' competition, which I regard as more worthy of funding than some student representative policy love-in that is fully funded through students' money.

Could it be—and I hate to propagate vicious accusations—that it is not only the less fortunate students that the Labor Party seeks to protect but also the lifestyles of professional students, union representatives or passengers on the student funded gravy train to opportunity and political aspiration? Other things that the fees pay for are buses for some students to attend rallies against federal government policy and posters for whatever the Che Guevara T-shirt-wearing set believes is the latest injustice against their number.

In the words of the Hon. Brendan Nelson, why is it that a single mother training to be a nurse should pay for the canoeing or mountaineering club when all she wants is a degree? Any student who wants to be part of a sporting or social club should have the right to do so. The voluntary student union legislation will allow those students to pay for those services if they make that choice. This legislation affects all students everywhere. Some regional students who do not even attend universities to use any services on campus still have to pay compulsory fees.

The arguments against VSU are specious at best. The federal government is fixing something that has been a terrible thorn in the side of students wanting to go to university to get a degree. I commend the federal government and education minister Nelson on a magnificent initiative.