



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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HIGHER EDUCATION [GENERAL PROVISIONS] BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (6.36 p.m.): It is hard to know where to start after that comment with which I entirely agree. I rise to support the bill. Education is a large and growing industry in Queensland. It allows us to develop links with the rest of the world across natural and cultural barriers and it is bringing tens of millions of dollars into the state each year. In a state that has traditionally been characterised economically as a quarry and a farm, our burgeoning export education industry very much exemplifies the Smart State. This bill, which establishes new national standards of accreditation, will ensure the integrity of our education export market.

I do not want to go into all the detail of the bill. I think that other members have done that very adequately. I would say, however, that the export of education, as I said, is a key part of the Smart State. If that is going to continue to occur we need to establish good standards in terms of the quality of education that we are providing, and that is what this bill does.

I also want to express my strong view, however, that Queensland universities need to be very cautious not to treat overseas students as a cash cow. While the market is lucrative, it is extremely important that students are also provided with good social and educational support such as having interpreters available. It is important that academic and other staff are sensitive to cultural differences and that we do more than bring people in, sell them an education and hope for the best. We really need to continue to provide excellent social and academic support to these overseas students. If they have a fruitful stay they are going to come back here and in the long term we will have good links with overseas countries.

I understand that we are short of time, but it would be hard for me to speak on an education bill without mentioning the absolutely destructive approach to higher education that has been pursued by the Howard government over a number of years now. John Howard is the most vociferously ideological Prime Minister we have seen in Australia in my lifetime. For seven years he has pursued an agenda of cutting university funding and opening up universities to the rigours of the market. The approach has become more desperate in recent years as health and education spending has tragically had to be cut to pay for the shockingly misguided Iraq war.

Members should not get me wrong. I am by no means hostile to the market, but it alone is not going to provide a poor kid from Ipswich with an education. The reforms that are currently being undertaken by Education Minister Brendan Nelson are based on the false premise that we have to choose between excellence and equity in education and that the market will deliver excellence. The Nelson reforms fail to address the serious shortage of university places that we have in Queensland compared to those available in other states. The bottom line is that there are more places in Victoria, for instance, per capita than there are in Queensland. In practice, that means that a kid in Victoria, who has achieved a lower educational standard, can get into a course in Victoria when a kid in Queensland cannot. It is easier to get into university elsewhere than it is in Queensland. That is an absolute disgrace.

The Nelson reforms do not just not fix that situation; in the short term they will make it worse by cutting enrolments in Queensland as they deal with the high rate of overenrolment in Queensland universities that we have currently. The reforms will greatly increase the proportion of fee-paying Australian students. They will bring it up to a level of 50 per cent in Australian universities—again, pushing out poor kids. They will also cut avenues for poorer kids to get an education by putting a five-year limit on the time in which they can spend doing their degree. That will make it harder for people who have to stop studying in order to get a job or who for various family and economic reasons study over many years.

These changes are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the Nelson reforms. But we really need to understand that they absolutely turn their back on the generation of people who have gone through Australian universities because we have fundamentally valued equity in education. They are very much turning the clock back to a situation where people need to be rich and need to be privileged to walk through the door of an Australian university. There is no doubt that federally the Labor Party will resist those changes. We will remain committed to the principles of equity. I very much hope that we as a party and we as a nation are able to sustain that fight.