



Speech by

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EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (6.09 p.m.): This bill amends the University of Queensland Act to extend the term of the university senate, effectively its board, for another year. The amendment is necessary because, in its recent review of higher education, federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson blackmailed the universities into governance changes on the basis that, if they did not apply the federal government's ideological-driven governance protocols, the feds would starve them of funds. Those heavy-handed changes have not yet been made law, so this amendment is necessary to extend the current term of the senate for another year until the changes go through. Without this amendment, the university would have had to go to the trouble and expense of a full senate election for a group of senators who would probably have served less than a year.

The Nelson changes will require UQ to reduce the number of its senators from 35 to 32 and they will specifically forbid the appointment of state members of parliament to the senate, along with staff and students representing legitimate unions or associations. The changes are designed to make universities run like big companies, which would be all very well if the purpose of universities was to make money. Call me old fashioned, but I am still of the view that the primary role of the university is to provide education.

The cut from 35 to 32 senators will completely destroy the culture of governance which, since 1907, has served the University of Queensland so well. As Queensland's pre-eminent and for many years only tertiary institution, UQ has a key role in research, as well as in educating the state's political, business and community leaders. It has traditionally drawn the members of its governing body from across the state sectors, including industry, agriculture, mining, the law and, by longstanding convention, including a government and a non-government member of the state parliament.

While on the face of it 35 members may seem unwieldy, UQ is well governed because there is a culture of collegiality in which members apply their vast experience through a range of senate committees. The members of the UQ senate include some outstanding figures. The Chancellor is the former Deputy Premier Sir Llew Edwards, the Deputy Chancellor is Robert Wensley QC, there is Supreme Court Justice Margaret White, former head of MIM Nick Stump, leading company director Norbury Rogers, Aboriginal leader Lilla Watson and Brisbane's best recognised spiritual leader Archbishop John Bathurst as well as me and, until recently, former Liberal minister Dr David Watson.

The beauty of a big senate is that these people, many of whom charge a fortune for their time elsewhere, give their services to the university at no cost at all. The Howard government's changes will force the university to say to many of these people, 'Thanks, but we won't be needing you anymore.'

While the Howard government thinks that it is cleverly trying to depoliticise UQ by cutting out state MPs, it is actually severing one of the universities best and most lucrative links to government. Since the 1980s, under both Labor and conservative governments, there has always been a member of the state cabinet who is a former UQ senator and the Beattie government has contributed hundreds of millions of dollars more than any government before it to the university.

The changes seriously disfranchise the university's 35,000 students who, despite being major stakeholders in the institution, will now have just two of the 22 senators. The culture of the UQ senate has

never been political. When it came to university governance, David Watson and I rarely disagreed on anything. The culture has been cooperative and collegial and, given the university's consistent and rising position as one of Australia's three best, it is a culture that has been successful.

The Howard government is the most partisan Australia has ever seen. Now, in its attempt to shape university governance in its own image, it is selling out one of UQ's most solid foundations. The danger is that what we will now see will not be a more efficient but a more partisan senate.

While the Howard government might want to suggest that it is getting rid of anachronistic governance, we should never forget the debacle it created on the ABC board when the organisation became divided and dysfunctional after the Howard government appointed uber mate Michael Kroger. Then there was the huge split on the National Museum board after Liberal backroom player Tony Staley sacked museum director Dawn Casey, despite the rampant success of the museum. And are not Telstra's services sensational under the chairmanship of Liberal mate Don McGauchie? When it justifies cutting members to the University of Queensland senate, the Howard government will say that it is creating a lean, mean corporate machine. I wonder if that is a bit like the board of HIH which had seven members or Ansett, which I understand had eight.

The Nelson review of higher education had hair all over it—insufficient growth in student places for Queensland, increases in HECS and full-fee paying places for kids who were not smart enough to get in the first time. It is possible that in the midst of those outrages changes to university governance will pass by without a whimper. But as we watch it happen, those who care about Australian education need to understand the long-term effects it will have.

We need to understand that it is another example of the Howard government's misguided attempts to create a nation in its own small and partisan image. We need to understand it is another attempt for it to use its funding power to change state laws, despite decades of cooperative federalism. We need to understand that it is doing it because it is bloody-minded and because it can. I suspect that in the years ahead we will be seeing a lot more of that.