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Libs deny rural damage from VSU
Samantha Maiden, 10 August 2005

The Australian

REGIONAL campuses and sporting clubs will not be disadvantaged by the introduction of voluntary student unionism, according to a Senate report.

As Education Minister Brendan Nelson held talks with Nationals MPs yesterday over a push to offer regional campuses extra funding in exchange for their political support for the VSU legislation, Liberal MPs have challenged the view that rural students will be worse off under the changes.

Former deputy prime minister John Anderson also backed proposals raised at the talks to offer regional campuses financial consultants to streamline student services.

"I think it's worth exploring," he told the HES.

"I don't want to judge these universities. But some of them might be able to find better ways to use the resources that governments provide them.

"Where does student money go? I just think a bit more transparency is required."

A government-dominated inquiry into proposed reforms to ban the compulsory collection of student fees is today expected to challenge the "patronising" attitude of university chiefs, who believe that students are not capable of deciding which services they wish to fund.

Supporters of VSU reforms are expected to seize on a minority report prepared by Opposition senators, which is expected to argue that students lack the judgment to "understand their needs at the time of enrolment" and should be forced to join a student union.

The Nationals are pushing for a compensation package to boost funding to regional universities if VSU is introduced.

A compensation package would cover services the student fees fund at present, including buses, child care, counselling services and sporting clubs.

More than a dozen regional universities, including Southern Cross, Ballarat, La Trobe, James Cook, Newcastle and Sunshine Coast, could secure extra funding if the Nationals succeed in securing compensation.

However, metropolitan universities with regional campuses, including the University of South Australia and Monash University, could be included in any compromise deal.

Liberal senators also rejected university chiefs' attitude that the "university knew best what was in the interests of students".

The report is expected to highlight the evidence of Swinburne University of Technology vice-chancellor Ian Young, who suggested in his evidence that students lacked the maturity to make decisions.

"This is a rather condescending comment, I am afraid, but when you have a group of 18 to 22-year-olds the reality is their focus is very short term," he told the inquiry.
The issue of student unionism also flared in the Coalition partyroom, with six MPs raising concerns about the debate, prompting Dr Nelson to strongly defend the legislation at the meeting of all Liberal and National party MPs and senators.

The Labor Party has signalled it will amend the Government's VSU legislation to give universities the power to collect fees for services such as childcare and welfare. The strategy is designed to increase the pressure on Coalition senators to take a stand over the issue.

"Regional campuses where facilities and services help sustain local community life will be the hardest hit," Opposition education spokeswoman Jenny Macklin said. "It is a measure of just how out of touch the Education Minister is that he says university students can afford user-pays campus services."

University of Tasmania vice-chancellor Daryl Le Grew yesterday urged Coalition senators to "stand up for regional Australia" on the issue of VSU and cross the floor if necessary.

"This argument is not simply about voluntary unionism. It's about providing a quality educational and social environment in which Australian students can flourish," he said. "I urge the Coalition senators to consider the many vital services to students provided by student and amenities fees and the dramatic impact the loss of those funds would have on regional universities and their constituents."

Professor Le Grew said he agreed with Nationals senator Ron Boswell's comments that smaller regional universities would need help dealing with the effects of VSU.

"But we need more than a 'bit of a leg-up': we need a government prepared to support a service-based university."

Sporting senator onside for fees

Michael McKenna, 10 August 2005

The Australian

HIS rural constituents' patchy telephone calls might explain Barnaby Joyce's poor reception to the full sale of Telstra - but it seems past sporting glories may be behind his push to temper Coalition plans to abolish compulsory student unionism.

It emerged yesterday that his alma mater, the University of New England, was among the first to issue congratulations and then lobby for Senator Joyce's new-found influence after his unexpected election last year.

Steve Griffith, head of the university's sports union, was on the phone "almost immediately" to ask for Senator Joyce's support in opposing the Howard Government's legislative push to abolish compulsory student union fees.

Mr Griffith was confident of a good hearing.

During his student days, Senator Joyce had played in a championship rugby union side - on grounds and using facilities paid for with the compulsory fees.

His rugby days, Senator Joyce has often recalled, honed the aggression that pushed him through two unsuccessful election bids and now marks the early days of his political career.

"You could say I'm one of the people behind the Nationals' push," Mr Griffith said from Armidale in northern NSW.

"I knew he had had a very positive sporting experience at UNE - universities aren't all about books."

Mr Griffith, with other sports representatives from universities around the nation, will meet Senator Joyce in Canberra today to ram home the message.
And it is very simple: union services covering sport, health and welfare, among other things, will be hurt without guaranteed funding from student fees.

The move towards voluntary student unionism has further heated federal Coalition relations, at a time when the terms of the planned Telstra sale are causing friction as the Nationals dig in for a stand on both issues.

While the dispute on the Telstra sale is hardly surprising, the Nationals' stand on union fees has raised eyebrows, since the majority of the dissidents, mostly from Queensland, did not study at tertiary level.

Veteran Affairs Minister De-Anne Kelly has a Bachelor of Engineering, joining Senator Joyce as one of only two Queensland Nationals MPs in federal parliament with tertiary qualifications.

Nationals whip Paul Neville studied public administration but did not complete his degree. Nationals Senate leader Ron Boswell, Warren Truss, Bruce Scott and Kay Hull have no tertiary education.

But for Senator Joyce, who claims to have delivered the Senate majority for the Coalition, and for other Nationals, the issue is about looking after the services provided by the university unions in rural communities.

"We want to achieve something that's worthwhile for the people of regional Australia, and take the ideology away from this and just think about the actual effect of it," he said.

Mr Griffith told The Australian the abolition of compulsory student unionism would "decimate" the university and the neighbouring town of Armidale.

"Just with the sporting side, we receive about $950,000 of our $2million operational income from the fees," he said. "We just wouldn't be able to maintain our facilities, which rank among the best in regional Australia."

Mr Neville said towns like Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Emerald and Mackay would suffer under the changes.

Convert Nelson treads a fine line

Samantha Maiden, 10 August 2005

The Australian

DIVISIONS over voluntary student unionism in Coalition ranks represent a special challenge to one self-declared former ALP voter turned Liberal MP.

Education Minister Brendan Nelson - who proudly declared at a rally in 1993, "I've never voted Liberal in my life" - must salve the suspicions of Liberal Party hardheads that he's a carpetbagger.

Dr Nelson, who later recanted his declaration of Labor Party loyalty by admitting he lied, must also grapple with the demands of Nationals MPs to protect regional campuses.

Hardheads on the Liberal Party's backbench committee on education have already dragged him towards a tougher position on voluntary student unionism in the legislation.

The introduction of million-dollar fines for universities that attempt to circumvent the rules by charging a compulsory student fee was a creation of the committee.

That means Dr Nelson cannot embrace a VSU-lite approach to allow the collection of a student services fee that prohibits any expenditure on political activities.

While this might seem a practical outcome, embraced by universities and promoted by Liberal senator Alan Eggleston as a solution, the Nationals concede it is unlikely to secure support.

The experience of such a VSU-lite approach in Victoria was that student unions found ways of channelling profits from cafeterias and computer rooms into political campaigns.
Liberal Party MPs instead want the full-blooded version of VSU introduced - the sort that brought student unions to their knees.

Any doubt over the undergraduate enmities stoked by the current debate was put to rest in the partyroom yesterday as Liberal MP Sophie Panopoulos and Special Minister of State Eric Abetz heckled their colleague Liberal MP Greg Hunt as he attempted to raise concerns about the policy.

"You've always been opposed to VSU. We always knew," Panopoulos interjected.

For outsiders, it's difficult to grasp the passions unleashed over the $160-million-a-year in compulsory fees charged by student unions.

This delicate political balancing act is already opening up a country-city divide between Liberal and Nationals MPs over the question of extra funding for rural students.

But for political graduates of the rough-house world of student politics, including Treasurer Peter Costello and Health Minister Tony Abbott, it represents a victory for freedom of choice and a crushing defeat for their left-wing campus opponents.