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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

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Higher Education

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Bird, Sharon, MP

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Question No.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (4.39 pm)—I want to take the opportunity to talk in this debate because, as members would appreciate, the University of Wollongong sits in my electorate. It is a university that is actively engaged in supporting young people from rural and regional New South Wales and, indeed, from across the country, to attend university. I regularly go over to International House, where many of them stay whilst they are studying, and meet with them and talk about the issues they are facing.

What are we actually dealing with here? Let us look at a little bit of history in this area. Students used to be able to qualify as independent at a much younger age than they currently can. At the moment, they have to be 25. Any parent will tell you that it is a challenge for a young person to have to ask you, up to the age of 25, to support them. They are in the transition to adulthood and they want to be quite independent. How did that become the case? Let us remember how we got to the age of 25 as the age for independence. The previous government consistently raised the age that a young person had to be before they could qualify for the independent rate to start with. These young people then thought: 'I don't want to be a burden on mum and dad. What are my options? What am I going to do? The only loophole is if I go out and get a job, put off my university study, delay my life for a year or two, and try to get a job and earn an income so that I can qualify as independent.' That is how we got to the position that those on the other side are supposedly so concerned about now. They created the situation in the first place.

It was an inequity that had serious educational effects, because we know that when young people delay the opportunity to take up their studies—not from choice but because they feel they have to take up employment—there is a significant risk that they will not actually go back to university. That is why the other bit of history is important in this debate. What is that? During the 12 years of the previous government, the number of regional and rural students participating in tertiary education was going down. For all their fear and concern for these students, what were they doing? Absolutely nothing.

At this point in time we have before us the Bradley review that in effect pinged this problem well and truly. There was also the situation, which the Deputy Prime Minister has talked about, where very well to do

families, often with businesses, said to their own kids: 'This is a nice way we can go. Why don't I put you on in the family business and you can work for a year or two and then you will qualify?' Do not shake your head, because I know people who did it. The reality is that there were people who were not in regional or remote areas who actually took an opportunity to get their children to qualify for this payment when they were earning \$200,000 or \$300,000 a year.

The Bradley review has quite rightly said that we should target these payments to make sure that those who most need them get them. What are we doing? Firstly, we are increasing the parental income level so that more of those young people are not forced to make that decision in the first place. Their family income will allow them to qualify for youth allowance where, under the previous government, it did not. That is what caused them to make those difficult decisions about delaying the commencement of their studies.

Secondly, we are decreasing the age, from 25 to 22, at which young people can qualify on their own independent income allowance. When you put those issues in context and look at the problems we are trying to address, which were created under the previous government, it baffles me that we have yelling and outrage from the other side about what we are trying to do to support these rural and regional students. At the end of the day, where we are now is that there were some legitimate issues, as the Deputy Prime Minister indicated, that some from the other side of the House and some from this side of the House raised around the transitional arrangements through the bill.

We had that conversation. We now have a range of amendments that the Deputy Prime Minister has agreed to—four significant ones. I indicate to the Leader of the Nationals, who was talking about the 30 hours per week requirement, that there is an averaging provision in those amendments to address that issue. There is a review process. There is a task force in place to keep a record of how that is progressing and to raise transitional issues that may come up along the way. There is also the \$20 million Rural Tertiary Hardship Fund. In bringing this bill before the House again, the Deputy Prime Minister has taken into consideration the sensible amendments that needed to be made to make that transition work.

It is absolutely true that this is a matter of public importance. Why is it a matter of public importance? Because these young people start uni on Monday. Let's just have a look at how many we have: 150,000 university students who receive youth allowance, Abstudy or Austudy who are waiting to receive their \$2,254 start-up scholarship. They can get that—if the legislation is passed through this parliament. The parental income test will be raised, so that families with two children studying away from home can earn more than \$140,000 before their allowance is cut completely—if this legislation passes this House. There are students who choose to move to study who may be eligible for an additional relocation scholarship worth \$4,000 in the first year of their study plus a subsequent \$1,000 for each year after that—only if this legislation passes. From 1 July 2012, if this legislation is passed, students will be able to earn up to \$400 a fortnight—that is up from the current \$236 level—without having their payment reduced. Finally—the point that I made before—the age of independence will reduce progressively from 25 to 22 by 2012. That will see an estimated 7,600 new recipients of the independent rate of allowance—if the legislation passes this parliament. There are many, many students looking at commencing their university studies next week. Their families and their university communities are waiting to see the outcome of this legislation. They are anxious about how their financial arrangements are going to be coordinated. That is why this is a matter of public importance today.

I also want to make the point, which the Deputy Prime Minister has already made, that there is almost universal agreement that this needs to be passed. What do I mean by 'universal agreement'? I mean the fact that every state and territory education minister, including the Liberal education minister in Western Australia—an education minister whom I would have thought would have a very good understanding of the issues of rural and regional students—is saying to the opposition: 'You have made your point. Amendments have been put in place. Get on with passing the legislation.' Every university group—and we have seen the 39 vice-chancellors—across the country is saying: 'The reality, for the best interests of the students that we are seeing commence their studies next week, is that this bill, and the amendments that were sensibly put in place, meets all the requirements. Get on with passing it.' On top of that, we see the Australian Greens and Senator Xenophon in the Senate saying: 'We agree that the amendments that are being put in place are sensible and reasonable. Get on with passing the bill.' I could go on and point out that every Independent other than Senator Fielding, I understand, in this parliament has said: 'We had concerns. We went to the government. We have looked at the amendments.

They are sensible. They address the problems. Get on with passing the bill.'

So how did we end up here today? I am sad to say that I believe it is simply and purely because the shadow minister does not know when to stop punching. He does not know when to say: 'This is a good outcome. In the interests of the country rather than my politics, get on with passing the bill.'