



LABOR'S SNEAKY STUDENT TAX

It's true that leopards never change their spots. You don't become an economic conservative simply by saying you are one. Mr Rudd is at the helm of yet another high taxing, high spending Labor government.

And students are next on Labor's hit list. At the same time Labor are bringing back compulsory student unionism.

From 1 July 2009, Labor plans to slug university students with a new tax of up to \$250 per year. It will rise annually with automatic indexation. The Government will establish a new loan scheme to assist some students to defer their fee payments. This is tacit acknowledgment that many students will struggle to afford the fee up-front.

If you are wondering why you didn't hear about this during the election campaign, that's because Labor didn't mention it. In fact, their then education spokesperson, Stephen Smith, expressly ruled out a compulsory amenities fee. Mr Smith was not making mere idle comment. He was announcing Labor's policy.

When considering their vote at the last election, no doubt many university students noted Labor's assurances that they would not seek to return to the days of compulsory amenities fees. Labor have now betrayed the trust those students placed in them with this sneaky return to compulsory student unionism.

The Coalition freed students from the up-front compulsory fee burden in 2005 when it introduced voluntary student unionism (VSU). Our reforms ensured that students could finally enjoy their right to freedom of association and choose for themselves whether they wished to spend their hard-earned money supporting particular services.

Many students were tired of seeing their money wasted on extreme political campaigns. But ultimately this debate is not about whether student unions promote left-wing or right-wing causes. The central issue is that under Labor's plan, many students will be compelled to support student organisations against their will.

Labor claim this new tax on students is needed to sustain services. But it is not the role of student unions or universities to behave like a fourth tier of government. Federal, state and local governments provide a social safety net for the whole community, students included.

The position of the Government, many university vice-chancellors and student unions seems to be

that students are not capable of making their own judgements about whether they wish to voluntarily support student services. Instead, they must be compelled.

This is a particularly condescending view. Students are trusted to choose their own institution, course and subjects. When they do so, they make long-term judgements about issues such as their future career path. Yet their critical faculties supposedly leave them when it comes to deciding whether they will need particular services.

Labor argue that their plan does not amount to compulsory student unionism because the university would collect the fee rather than the union. This is a con and a sham. Students can choose not to be a union member, but will still have to pay an equivalent fee, much of which will be passed to student unions. It's "no fee, no start."

Contrary to the claims of VSU opponents, the argument that fees are needed to fund university sport doesn't withstand scrutiny. Thousands of community sporting clubs exist all over the country, funded by their participants and run by volunteers. They don't need to compel support. Community sporting clubs survive and prosper because they offer something people want at a price they are willing to pay. There is a lesson in that for student unions.

When a student union claims it cannot survive without compulsory fees it is an admission of failure. It is a confession that what they are offering is not attractive enough to elicit voluntary support, therefore that support must be compelled.

Instead student unions need to change their attitudes and begin to offer what students want, not what unions think students should want. The smart student unions will survive, because they will offer students the facilities and services they desire at a price they are willing to pay.

The best way to help struggling students is not to hit them with a new tax to fund services chosen by a university or union. The best way to help students is to allow them to keep more of their own money and let them decide which non-academic services they need.

Today's students are Australia's future. Labor should show more faith in them.

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