

HIGHER EDUCATION BILL 2003

Second Reading

Resumed from 24 June 2003.

HON DERRICK TOMLINSON (East Metropolitan) [5.07 pm]: The Opposition will vote in favour of this legislation; however, I make it clear that in my opinion this is totally unnecessary legislation that the universities within a decade will come to regret. This is not the first time in my memory that the House has considered legislation of this kind. In 1991 the Post-secondary Educational Institutions (Title and Degrees) Bill was presented to this House. It was referred, before the second reading debate as I recall, to the Standing Committee on Legislation. The Standing Committee on Legislation took evidence from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Western Australia, Professor Roy Lourens; the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Edith Cowan University, Professor Doug Jecks; and the Vice-Chancellor of Curtin University, whose name eludes me, but it was the person who preceded Dr Lance Twomey in the position.

Hon Graham Giffard: It was not Watts?

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: No, it was the person between Watts and Twomey.

At the time the vice-chancellors were keen to impress upon the committee and, through the committee, the Parliament, the need for legislation that would protect the status and the degrees of their institutions from incursions by lesser bodies that might set themselves up as universities and offer qualifications nominated as degrees, such as bachelors degrees, masters degrees or doctorates. I was not convinced by their arguments. Having been both a member of the faculty of the University of Western Australia and a member of Parliament, I can see the similarity between a member of Parliament and an academic. Each has one thing to sell; that is, his or her reputation. Just as politicians live and die by their reputations and those of the parties they represent, so too do academics live or die on their reputations and those of their institutions. Hence, an academic will expend considerable energy on research, publications and the pursuit of research grants. The quality of the research, the quality of the paper, the standing of the refereed journal in which the paper is published and the standing of the publishing house that accepts a book for publication all contribute to the reputation of that scholar. In addition to those pursuits, a reputable scholar will gather around himself or herself a group of people of similar standing, either as colleagues in the faculty or as doctoral-level research students, thereby building up their reputations and that of the institution.

With that in mind, reputable institutions - that is, reputable universities - seek scholars of standing, because they know that those scholars of standing, through their research output and through their teaching activities in fostering doctoral research, and even post-doctoral research, will contribute to the standing of the institution. I hope honourable members can see the sorts of parallels that I could draw between academics and politicians. The only thing that they have to sell is their reputation.

There is without doubt a hierarchy of universities. There is a hierarchy of universities in this State, nationally and internationally. I will not go into the hierarchy of universities in this State, because to any informed observer it is self-evident which university of Western Australia is the foremost university of the State. However, I can tell members that in Australia, of all the universities that were established, 11 have international standing. The University of Western Australia and Curtin University of Technology are among them. Within the international fellowship of universities, three universities in Australia - perhaps even five - are in the top 100. It does not take much imagination to recognise the link between what I have already said and the extent to which those five universities in Australia, which are in the top 100 universities in the world, will go to attract the foremost scholars, the foremost administrators and the foremost vice-chancellors, and the most attractive and most lucrative research grants from the most reputable of research-granting institutions - private mainly, so they do not rely entirely upon public grants through the Australian Research Council. Their reputation depends upon it. It is through the enterprise of the university that its standing is maintained in academia. It is through the enterprise of the universities that their standing is maintained within the professions that employ their product. Hence, a degree in law, for example, from the law school at Harvard University is a qualification that will give a person entree to the best law firms throughout the world. It is not that the degree is any different; it is the standing and the quality of that university and the quality of its programs and the recognised status of the individuals who are accepted by and graduate from that university. It is the enterprise of the university that does that.

The second point I make is that each of the Australian universities established by statute of their respective States has conferred upon it the authority to make its own decisions about its own qualifications and its own awards. It determines the standards. However, a close examination of the enabling legislation of each of those universities shows that the legislation refers to the standards of international scholarship. For example, the

letters patent of Queen Victoria establishing the University of Sydney makes reference to the university - I will use the word advisedly - emulating the standards of the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London; that is, the three established universities. That was the standard to which the 50 scholars or students who first entered the University of Sydney in the 1850s aspired and was the standard of the enabling legislation of all the universities up until about 1911. Oxford and Cambridge are most often referred to in the British Commonwealth. The aspirations of Harvard, Yale and Johns Hopkins Universities or any of the so-called Ivy League universities of the United States of America are not necessarily to the standing of Oxford and Cambridge but probably to some of the German universities, because the Ivy League universities of the United States emulated and aspired to the standard of scholarship that had come out of the German universities.

It is the recognition and acceptance of standing within international scholarship that maintains the standing of universities and therefore the standing of the awards of universities. Hence, a baccalaureate degree from the University of Western Australia has greater standing than a baccalaureate degree from - I will not mention any names - a university that has a lesser standing. It is a simple fact of life. If a scholar were to try to use his or her degree for the pursuit of employment, as in the case of the Harvard degree, it would get that person a job at any of the top law firms throughout the world. Similarly, a doctoral degree in medical research from, for example, the Australian National University would enable a person to gain a position with any reputable research or teaching facility or hospital in the world because of the standing of that degree. Therefore, it is not necessary for universities to be regulated to protect them from charlatans.

There are charlatans. I know that I could buy a doctoral degree tomorrow through the Internet. I could buy it from the University of West California or from somewhere with a name equally as spurious. For an outlay of something like \$250 I could buy a doctoral degree and pass myself off as Hon Dr Derrick Tomlinson or Dr Hon Derrick Tomlinson, whatever the procedure is. That might persuade some people, but it would not persuade anyone who scrutinised the degree. However, a bachelors or masters degree or a doctorate from the University of Western Australia has international standing and recognition. It is the same for each of the other Western Australian universities and the University of Notre Dame Australia, which has a close affiliation with the University of Notre Dame in the United States of America.

I make the point simply that it is not necessary for the status and standing of universities to be protected by regulation. I will now contemplate the consequences of regulation. We have the historic example of the consequences of regulation in Australia. Until 1948 there were, I think, six universities in Australia, including Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia.

Hon Ed Dermer: Adelaide.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: It was the University of Adelaide, because the universities in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney took the title of their capital, and the universities in Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania took the title of their State. In fact, the University of Western Australia was to be the single university in this State, but that is another issue.

After 1948 the Murray report, commissioned by the Chifley Government for consideration of the needs of university education for postwar reconstruction and development, recommended the growth of Australian universities. That was followed by the Martin report of 1953. The Martin report recommended a two-tiered system of tertiary education - universities and a group that was called institutes of technology. Those institutes of technology were characterised as being equal to but different from universities. They were to be institutions not bedded in the academic tradition of Oxford and Cambridge, but institutes of technology that applied the research to industry, commerce and technology. They were not to be degree-granting institutions; they were to be institutions that awarded the degrees of associateships and diplomas. They were to be equal but different. They were to open up an opportunity for higher or tertiary education for those people who had no aspirations to academic scholarship. They were to be for those people who aspired to applied scholarship for commerce and industry. What happened? The institutes of technology wanted to become degree-granting institutions. Why? If they were degree-granting institutions, they would have a higher standing in the world of academe. An associateship was considered to be inferior to a baccalaureate. Therefore, to raise the standing of the institutions, they wanted to be able to award baccalaureates. The Government of the day responded and set up a committee. I forget the name of the committee; it may have been the Walker or the Wall committee. I used to know these things. That committee had the task of determining, first, whether these institutes of technology should be degree-granting institutions; and, secondly, if they were to be degree-granting institutions, how they were to be accredited. If they were to be accredited degree-granting institutions, how would the accreditation be done, by whom and who would specify and maintain the parameters of a baccalaureate? What is a baccalaureate? Traditionally, according to Oxford and Cambridge, a baccalaureate is an award given to a scholar by his masters - not her masters - because he achieved a standard of scholarship.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to sessional orders.

