



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Regional, Rural and Remote
Education Commissioner Bill 2018**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 25 June 2018

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 25 June 2018 Page 6107 Questioner Speaker McGowan, Cathy, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Ms McGOWAN (Indi) (10:48): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This is the second in a series of private members' bills that I've brought to this House around regional higher education. I'm trying to convince the government, and in particular the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education and Training, that one size does not fit all when we're talking about education. I'm calling on a national, coordinated approach to how we address the significant problems we have in rural and regional Australia with education and training, but today I'm particularly talking about higher education and training. I'll talk about why this is so important in my electorate of Indi and, by default, around regional Australia.

I finish with a call of action to the minister and the Prime Minister and to the people in rural and regional Australia: this bill provides a way forward to ensure that regional Australia has a comprehensive education, training and research strategy underpinned by policy decisions of government. The bill is intended to progress the recommendations and actions outlined in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education authored by Professor John Halsey. The bill establishes a regional, rural and remote education commissioner to establish a national focus on education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities of individuals and businesses in regions right throughout Australia. The commissioner will provide advice to the minister about education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities and about strategies to support the role of educational institutions—childcare providers, schools, universities and vocational education and training providers—in developing regional economies, sustaining economic growth and supporting employment in regional, rural and remote Australia. It will develop a national strategic framework for regional, rural and remote training and education, beginning with a national regional higher education and training strategy. The role of the commissioner is to be ongoing, with a national regional higher education training and research strategy to be completed within six months of commencement and revised every six years.

Colleagues and members of the gallery: why is this important and why do I persist? Because the data is overwhelmingly showing that people in rural and regional Australia are way behind the eight ball with education. The universities tell us it can't wait. My community tells me that this is a priority. Deputy Speaker Mitchell, here are some statistics for my electorate that I'm sure also apply to your electorate: 24 per cent of people living in Indi are aged under 19. But the next cohort, the 14-to 20-year-olds, make up only 4.9 per cent of the population. The greatest export out of my electorate is young people. Then we look at the next statistic: only 6.2 per cent of all the people in Indi have tertiary degrees. You might think that statistic is not relevant, but, when you compare it with the average of 17.8 per cent for Victoria, something is clearly going wrong. If you look at the percentage of Melbourne people, or urban adults, who go to university, it's roughly a third; but it is only 12.7 per cent in inner regions and 12.5 per cent in outer regions. Clearly, something is going on here that needs serious rectification.

But, before I move on to that, I just want to stress this statistic: while I understand that a tertiary degree is not the only form of education that's relevant, can you believe that, in my electorate of almost 100,000 people, 6.2 per cent have a tertiary degree? It's a shocker. I've mentioned it to my colleagues, particularly on the government side. When I've asked what happens in their electorate, they say, 'It's about the same.' This is not just a problem for me and Indi or Victoria; it's a problem right across rural and regional Australia, where one size is not fitting everybody. We have a one-size approach to education, and clearly it's missing the mark.

I make reference to Minister Wyatt at the table. Minister, I've recently been in the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia as part of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. At every single hearing we've gone to, we've been talking about education and making it accessible. This is a problem in regional Victoria, in regional New South Wales and in our more isolated areas, but we specifically know it's a problem with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. One size is not fitting all. I am absolutely sure that the answer is not only to have a solution for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people. We need to have a solution that's place based, that works with all our communities. My effort today with this legislation is to say that a commissioner is a really good place to start, and I ask the help of the minister at the table to bring it to the attention of his colleagues as one important step in moving forward. I've spoken to both the Minister for Regional Development, Territories and Local Government and the Minister for Education and Training about this, because, of course, they've got the Halsey review in front of them, and we're looking for the government response to it. So here's a really important opportunity that government could take to move it forward.

I also acknowledge colleagues in the gallery. This bit of legislation has been well circulated through the university sector to the G8s, to the RUN universities, to La Trobe and to CSU. It's got the widespread support of my community and the education sector, because the education industry understands that, if you don't actually pay attention to rural and regional education, if you just make it compete with the cities, then we lose it. Certainly, in my local papers, there's been enormous publicity recently around the problems that our universities in Albury Wodonga are facing: "'Must try harder": government failing regional universities' and 'Education cuts ring alarm bells in regions'. So we've got a significant problem there that we must address.

For me, not only is the data there and not only are the universities saying we must do more but the call is from my community. As I've said recently in this parliament, I've undertaken the 2018 budget survey, and the overwhelming response to that survey is the importance of education: 10.33 per cent of respondents ranked it as the second most important issue, but 81 per cent of respondents ranked education and training as very important and only 0.21 per cent of the 1,000 people who filled in the survey said it was not important. Just let me give you a couple of quotes. In Benalla: 'Tertiary education for country students, the extra costs associated with having to travel and or move to another facility.' In my electorate of Indi, I've got universities in Wodonga and an outreach in Wangaratta, way up to the north. But for everybody else in the community they've actually got to leave home. Not only is there the dislocation of that going to the university but there are the expenses incurred with it and the enormous difficulty that we face. So I'm hoping that this commissioner will be able to do the on-ground work that's needed to advise the government on how we could actually get a decent strategy happening so that we solve the problems in the location where they are.

I'm talking to the minister for education about his regional hubs. I think he funded eight in the budget, and applications are currently open. But we should be having higher education hubs in almost every single town in the country. Just like we've got high schools in country towns, we need to have university hubs, not just for young people but so all the training can happen. While we've got a fantastic system of telehealth, we don't have a fantastic system of tele-education, and it's one important aspect that this commissioner could work with.

Let me go back to Wangaratta, with one of the quotes I got: 'Because country students are at a distinct disadvantage to city students who can stay living at home. Not all courses are available in the country. Much higher living costs, stresses.' The students need to work as well as study to make the money, and they've got less time to study. The flow-on effects are the high rate of students not continuing their courses, but there's also a particular problem we have of kids taking gap years and then not going on because they need the money.

Just in closing, my call to action, really, to the government is: you've got to pay attention to rural and regional Australia. To my community: we really need to get behind this effort. Maybe, if we can't get the government to have a strategy, my call to action is: let's have an Indi strategy on higher education. Let's make this an election issue. Let's really take it up to the Liberal Party and the National Party at the next election and say: well, what is their approach to rural and regional education right across Australia? It has not been an electorate issue. It really needs to be, and we really need to see my colleagues opposite. I say particularly to the National Party that they need to stand up. They not only need to support a strategy but actually need to come out with policies to say what they're going to do about the enormous inequality that we experience in the regions with education.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Rob Mitchell): Is the motion seconded?

Mr Wilkie: I second the motion for the second reading of the member for Indi's excellent bill and reserve my right to speak.

Debate adjourned.