



Silence on campus

On less pretext, and with less resistance, the Victorian government may achieve what governments in the days of Oz could not: the effective eradication of university student newspapers and organised political activity.

The Tertiary Education (Amendment) Act 1994 was introduced in order to prevent the funding of 'political' activity on Victorian campuses through the use of student union fees. Although the Act has been in force for some time, its impact on students was allayed by the Keating Government's commitment to replace any funding lost under the Act with Federal money. As expected, this scheme ceased following the defeat of Labor in the March federal election.

Commonly referred to as the 'VSU' (voluntary student unionism) legislation, the Act prohibits compulsory membership of student unions and the annual extraction of union fees. Each year, unions levy up-front fees on all enrolling and re-enrolling students, which are then pooled and distributed to fund a range of activities. From a practical point of view, this collection process has not altered: universities may still collect mandatory 'student amenities fees' essentially identical to the previous union fees.

The real change results from the legislation's restriction of the purposes for which these fees can be allocated. Section 12(e)(3) of the Act prohibits the use of fees for any purpose other than for 'providing facilities, services or activities of *direct benefit* to the institution or students at the institution' in regard to a list of innocuous items including food and services, sports facilities, libraries, personal accident insurance and the maintenance of reading rooms. The student amenities fee cannot be used to fund any facility, service or activity

not listed in this section. The list of prohibited recipients includes social clubs, women's departments, student advisory services, education campaigns, political activities (including the administration of student elections) and student newspapers. As a result, campus life is reportedly very quiet. To date, Monash University's *Lot's Wife* and Melbourne's *Farrago* newspapers have ceased operating; closures of others are expected in the

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near future. Most are hoping to survive or resurrect in a reduced format, funded by a combination of corporate sponsorship and advertising. Imposition of a newsstand price is being considered only as a last resort, for economic as well as ideological reasons: distribution and accounting costs are likely to offset increased revenue.

The Kennett government's displeasure with the tone of comment emanating from student newspapers and politicians is on the public record. A leaked Liberal memo, reported by Kate Legge in *The Australian* on 17 May 1996, stated: 'we do not want compulsory student monies flowing out to anti-Kennett and anti-Coalition campaigns and other fringe activities of the hard student Left'. What is surprising is the strength of the reaction, for governments have traditionally tolerated, though at times with gritted teeth, perceived student transgressions of social, moral or political codes. However, the present legislation effects not only the short-

term silencing of a bothersome element, but the permanent dismantling of organised social and political activity on Victorian campuses.

The underlying rationale for this action lies in the argument for VSU - a campaign that has circulated throughout universities over the last decade, but which has not borne fruit until now. VSU is the application of 'freedom of association' industrial relations policies to the university environment. It manifests itself in the primary proposition that students should not be compelled to join the student union (a corollary of this proposition is discussed below). This application is somewhat inappropriate, since student unions are not labour organisations and play only a minor political role. Their essential character is administrative, serving mainly to administer and subsidise student activities. Although they do have a representative aspect (most notably in their opposition to HECS, a party non-specific issue), they are not rallying points for political action: this is largely the domain of clubs. Accordingly, student unions are generally regarded benignly as apolitical benefactors of campus life, and, to the extent that a campus is politically active, VSU has not been supported along party lines.

A corollary of the primary proposition in support of VSU is that a student should not be required to contribute, by way of a compulsory levy, to political causes to which he or she does not subscribe, or which does not benefit the general student body. A politically conservative student, for instance, should not have to help fund the Labor Club. On its face, this argument appears reasonable (though it has implications that politicians could find disturbing). However, given that the proceeds of union funds are distributed indiscriminately to all eligible applicants, clubs



representing all political persuasions are granted funding and all points of view ultimately accorded their share. Only the conscientiously apolitical (if such a term carries any sense) could complain.

Nevertheless, this is the principle the Victorian government has relied on in drafting its legislation. In doing so, it has taken a broad approach to the infinitely elastic word 'political', and has made no attempt to distinguish between political causes and political processes. As a result, the legislation goes much further than refusing finance to particular groups that have troubled the government. It paralyzes student politics by denying funds to conduct annual elections. It forces the closure of student newspapers because they serve as forums for political discussion. It causes the disappearance of a range of advisory services staffed by volunteers because they are not deemed to be of 'direct benefit' to the student body.

In its defence, the government has played the 'minority' card, pointing to the minority readership of student newspapers, and observing that student political candidates campaigning in voluntary elections on a platform of opposition to the VSU legislation have attracted a minority of votes of the overall student population (though they have won the overwhelming support of voting students). This is disingenuous. Student fees have traditionally supported a plethora of clubs and events, none of which (with the possible exception of subsidised food services) could claim to cater directly to a majority of the student population. This remains true of those services still eligible for funding under the Act. However, taken as a whole, student fees support a heterogeneous community that benefits everyone, both economically and culturally. More importantly, principles of community and democracy are of 'direct benefit' to all members of a society, even those who choose not to engage actively.

Student newspapers occupy a spe-

cial place in the university community. As forums for the candid expression of views ('political' or otherwise) as diverse as the student population itself, they comprise an important and time-honoured aspect of university life and can in themselves be educative experiences. They have served as breeding grounds for some of the nation's greatest intellectual talent; and continue to offer unparalleled training to aspiring writer and editors. The government could have no legitimate objection to content appearing in these newspapers critical of its policies, where such content constituted the product of an open forum. For it must be remembered that, in contrast to the general media, the content of student publications largely comprises freelance articles submitted by its readership, not the work of staff journalists. A publication will therefore generally represent the views of the participating collective, unless an editorial committee holds an interventionist line and forces the prevalence of a preferred point of view. However, since committees are elected annually in democratic processes - and given the the perennial nature of the Kennett government's irritation - it is therefore likely that the views expressed in them generally reflect those of the student population.

The effect of the VSU legislation is not merely to silence the views of a critical faction, but to dismantle all structures that facilitate the sharing of information and exchange of opinions. To regard political processes as not directly beneficial to a student community is to regard political activity as an inessential, or even illegitimate, aspect of society - or, of course, to deny that society exists. With the Act, the Kennett government has significantly nullified opportunities for free speech and political association. Democracy's language can find no words to justify such systematic depoliticisation of a community.

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Paper by Holly Raiche

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