

VOCATIONAL-BASED TRAINING

Motion

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [10.14 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house condemns the Barnett government for undermining vocational-based training through its changes to state training providers, including harsh rises in course fees.

I am sorry that the students from Eaton Primary School had to leave the gallery, because I was going to specifically address some the issues that they will be facing in a few years' time if they follow the pattern of their predecessors through their primary and high school careers.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Members of the government clearly do not want to hear this argument because it is explicitly embarrassing for them and it is indefensible.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I was just going to say that maybe it is a good thing that those students have left the chamber because they would immediately have seen how an unruly class operates. We do not want them to get that impression.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: They would have immediately seen, Mr President, if I may suggest, that members of the government, who should be standing up for people in the south west region, have signed off on this extremely unfair and punitive measure.

I was saying that if the students of Eaton Primary School follow the pattern of their predecessors through high school, then when they leave year 12, one quarter of those students will opt to go to TAFE. Twenty-five per cent of year 12 students from Eaton Community College are currently going to TAFE to do TAFE studies, and it is those TAFE studies that this government—the Liberal Party and National Party members of this government—have just hit with an amazing price slug, an amazing increase of nearly 400 per cent, in the cost of studying at TAFE. I am sorry those students are not here to hear the argument and to know how they should be holding their local government members to account for having signed off on this extraordinarily unfair measure.

We are used to talking and hearing about broken promises from this government. We will never get used to the wrong priorities. We will never get used to the fact that millions of dollars are being poured into riverside developments in Perth; yet students, like the students of Eaton Community College, are being slugged with these massive price increases. The reason they are being slugged with those price increases—I will go into this more in a moment—is that this government does not know how to rein in its overspending and it does not know how to deal with the crisis of debt it has created. Rather than look literally out of the windows of this building down the terrace and see where some of those excesses are going and try to cut the cost of some of those major spending projects that are just becoming massive black holes, where do they go? They look to TAFE students.

I think it is probably fair to say that so far we have slugged students at every stage of their learning careers. We have cut money from primary schools, high schools and senior high schools, and now we are effectively putting the price of a TAFE course out of the reach of many ordinary families all over this state, with a price increase that in some courses is up to 390 per cent.

Supporters of this government may be inclined to argue that there is some kind of fundamental economic rationality at work here. If we look at some of the stock-standard answers that members in the other place have given to questions on this issue, what is constantly rolled out is: “Was it fair to subsidise students to the tune of 80 or 90 per cent? All we have done is cut it back to 70 per cent.” Is there a kind of dry-side, albeit warped, economic rationalist policy at work here? In fact, there are two cohorts, two areas that will suffer major losses from this change in policy. One is all those students who will now no longer be able to afford to go to TAFE. We are not just talking about school leavers; TAFE is not just a training provider for school leavers. TAFE has also served over many, many years as a career enhancement mechanism. We now live in an economy in which everybody is encouraged to be flexible and to be prepared to undertake further learning and training as they go through their careers. I know that many members of this house have not followed that old-fashioned line of going into a job when they are 18, 19 or 20 years old, and staying there until they retire at the age of 65 or 70; we have all learned to swap jobs, and TAFE has played a major part in building adaptability into the Australian workforce. People who now find themselves redundant or retrenched at the age of 30, 40, 50 or even older, and who in the past have used TAFE to enhance their skills, to acquire skills in other areas, or to update skills that have become outdated, will now no longer be able to afford to do that.

Extract from Hansard

[COUNCIL — Thursday, 11 September 2014]

p6045e-6057a

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

They are the major losers, but the economy also loses, and that is why it is so astonishingly short-sighted to increase the prices of courses at TAFE to such an extent. I mean, who did the modelling for this? The prices have been increased to such an extent that we have lost thousands and thousands of students from the TAFE system just this year, and we are only up to September. I have travelled around the high schools of the south west talking to principals, deputy principals and other school leaders, and many people are only now beginning to get their heads around the fact that, whereas a few years ago a year 10, 11 or 12 student might have come home and said, “I think I’ve got an option here to go to TAFE to study auto mechanics, floristry or aeronautics, and it’s going to cost me maybe \$1 000 a year, maybe less”, they are now coming home and saying, “Mum, dad, the course I want to do is now going to cost me \$9 000 a year.” That means that we are losing massive numbers of people from the TAFE system.

I will just go through the way that this has unfolded since the budget before last, which was August 2013. In August 2013 we were told that the estimated income from TAFE fees for 2013–14, after these price increases, would be \$144 million; in 2014–15, \$173 million; in 2015–16, \$191 million; and in 2016–17, \$208 million. One can see the Treasurer rubbing his hands with glee because he was assured of that additional income. A few short months later—not that any time period seems short under this Liberal–National government; it is dragging on for an eternity—in the midyear economic review in December, those numbers were revised down. Were they just tweaked? Had somebody just done a slightly more refined model of the impact of these cost increases? Oh no; this was no minor tweak. In December we were told that the figure for 2013–14 had been revised from \$144 million down to \$125 million. What had been predicted in 2013–14 as a result of those cost increases was an extra \$18.3 million. Picture it: the Treasurer rubbing his hands with glee. In December 2013, we were instead told that there would be a net loss of \$19 million. That is a shortfall for that year, if we take the increases and then the decreases, of \$115 million over the course of four years. This is not a minor tweak; over those four years, it is \$115 million short of what the government predicted it was going to get.

Who loses here? TAFE students, school leavers and mature-age students. They all lose, because they can no longer afford to do the courses that they want or need to do. The economy also loses, because we are getting fewer and fewer students going through TAFE. It was confirmed only yesterday in the other place that we are 5 200 students short in this year’s enrolment, simply because of those cost increases that people cannot afford to pay.

There is a sense that what we are seeing being played out here is a surreal version of that *Monty Python* scene with the knight having his arms and legs cut off. The government comes along—swipe!—“It’s okay; it’s only a flesh wound. We’ve only put your utility prices up a few hundred dollars a year.” Swipe! The other arm comes off, and the government says, “It’s okay, it’s only a flesh wound.” This has gone on and on, with the government constantly repeating this mantra: “It’s okay; it’s only a flesh wound.” We now have the community lying on the ground, bleeding. They are nearly \$1 700 a year out of pocket from where they would have been if the government had not decided to do things that are completely barmy: increase the cost of running a car, but at the same time increase the cost of using public transport. None of this makes any sense; it does not matter how dry one’s economics are, none of it makes any sense in any framework whatsoever. “It’s only a flesh wound, it’s only a flesh wound”, and now the government comes along and makes the cost of going to TAFE rise by nearly 400 per cent. Suddenly, all we hear from the government is silence. “It’s only a flesh wound” will not run anymore, because people are no longer taking up these training opportunities. The government is now faced with an escalation of the two major problems that our economy faces. Our economy relies on having a skilled workforce in terms of manufacturing, mining and industrial production; and hospitality and community services. Those are the two legs on which our economy walks, and the government has cut them both off at once by guaranteeing that TAFE is no longer a viable option for people wanting to acquire or hone their skills in those areas. This is indeed a very sick prospect, and people are rightly very angry about it.

I will give members a few figures to corroborate what I am saying. In 2013 a diploma of nursing cost a student \$1 862; in 2014, it has gone up to \$9 131. Imagine having to come home and say to one’s family, “I’m sorry guys, but the cost of my course has now gone up by this much.” When I was studying at university there were many, many full-time students. By the time I got to the stage of teaching at university, the full-time student was a rarity. Some students were even in full-time work while undertaking full-time study; this is a major change in the way that our tertiary education and training system operates. One cannot make up this kind of money by taking on more work; one cannot make up a cost increase in course fees of 400 per cent just by doing extra hours down at the bottle shop or extra shift hours as an aged care worker.

Speaking of aged care workers, a certificate III in aged care has gone up from \$621 in 2013 to just over \$1 500 a year in 2014; a diploma of engineering in oil and gas has gone from \$1 200 to \$2 800; and a certificate III in engineering and technical drafting has gone up from \$561 in 2013 to \$1 621 in 2014.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

I know that the government in its response—I am sorry that the minister is not here to personally participate in this debate—but I know —

Hon Alyssa Hayden interjected.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Yes, but the minister who would have responded is very well-versed in all these issues.

I know what the government's response will be; it will say that there are loans systems in place and it will say that there is a fee-capping structure in place. When I move around the high schools in the south west and talk to the school community leaders, I see that it is slowly beginning to dawn on them what it will mean to have to go to a large proportion of their year 12s to talk about increases in fees. A fee-capping arrangement is in place for students who were already enrolled in a course before the middle of August last year, and they can continue to study in 2014 at the old rates. That is not true for 2015. I draw the attention of all honourable members to the Central TAFE website—members can find it by googling it. It clearly reads in the middle of the page —

From 2015, all students will be required to pay fees in accordance with the new fee structure.

What does that mean for a student who is in the middle of their apprenticeship or traineeship now, to know that in 2015 they, too, having started these courses 18 months ago, will be hit with these increased fees? I will tell you what is going to happen, Mr President: the government has said that this is a way of tweaking demand; this is a way of responding to employer demands for more relevance and traction between the training system and the demands of employers. I heartily applaud that. Anybody on this side of the house will sit down any day and talk to employers about what they need from the education and training system to help our economy work better. Remember, this is all about trying to cover up overspending and a failure to control debt, but what this government has tried to do, in the most ham-fisted, deceitful and clumsiest way possible, is engineer the TAFE system so that people are channelled into courses that employers have designated as being areas of high demand. What has the government done? Has it made those courses cheaper to encourage students to take those courses? No. I will tell the house what it has done: it has just made everything else much more expensive. It reminds me of the days when I was teaching music and I had one very talented young man who was a good musician, but also a very, very fine writer; he came to me for cello lessons. He told me that he intended to study agricultural science, and that seemed to me to be quite interesting—I thought maybe I had a Renaissance man on my hands. But, no, he told me it was because his dad studied the job advertisements every Saturday and there were lot and lots of jobs for ag scientists and none for writers or poets or musicians, so the kid was going to go to university and study ag science. During the course of our conversations he somehow changed his mind, and he ended up being quite an eminent writer who is now carving out a good reputation for himself as a playwright.

This is not the way to channel students into certain areas. We cannot say, “You can no longer be a planner because we're putting the planning course fees up to \$7 000, \$8 000 or \$9 000.” The government should make the prices of courses into which it wants to encourage people cheaper; they should not keep everybody else away. I ask members whether this government has a good reputation for predicting future trends in the economy. Does anybody on that side of the house want to stand and defend this government's predictions on the American dollar, the iron ore price or population growth? Hon Sue Ellery is constantly pointing out that school planning is at least five years behind population growth. This government is hopeless at predicting where the economy needs to go, and the people who will pay for that hopelessness are a whole generation of TAFE students who will no longer be able to take up their studies.

Are we talking about an insignificant number of people? I have already said that TAFE enrolments this year are down by more than 5 000. Let me just talk about a few local schools in my electorate, some of which should be of great interest to the people who are propping up the government's crazy policies, like Hon Col Holt, Hon Robyn McSweeney and, I have to say with the greatest of respect, Mr President, you, as a member for South West Region. All the schools in the south west have a very high proportion of students for whom TAFE is a year 12 destination, but I have picked out the five highest ones. Collie Senior High School has a total student population of 478, and 59 per cent of year 12s at Collie Senior High School last year ended up in TAFE. The government will have to go to the parents of that 59 per cent of students and explain to them why it is putting this extra slug on their fees next year. Manjimup Senior High School has a total student population—remembering that this year is a very, very low year because we have half the cohort going through year 12 —

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! Look, besides being disorderly, it is very difficult for Hansard to pick up comments when there is continual banter behind the speaker. Let the speaker have the floor.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I was just reminding honourable members, before they got so excited—I hope they are all going to stand and make a contribution to this debate—that it is a low year enrolment-wise for all these schools because not only do they not have year 7s, but also the half-cohort is going through year 12.

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p6045e-6057a

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

Manjimup Senior High School has a total school population of 515, and 32 per cent of year 12s last year went to TAFE. Harvey Senior High School, as Mr President would know, is struggling at the moment to keep its identity; everyone involved is doing a fantastic job there. There is a new principal there who I think will bring the whole thing together, but against what odds when 54 per cent of last year's year 12s ended up at TAFE? How are they going to pay \$9 000 in a place such as Harvey? Then, worst of all, is Pinjarra Senior High School, where 69 per cent of year 12s now face the prospect of not being able to afford to pursue their careers through TAFE.

The PRESIDENT: Normally, I go from side to side with this, so I will give the call to Hon Alyssa Hayden, but I acknowledge, too, that the Leader of the Opposition gets some priority.

HON ALYSSA HAYDEN (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.35 am]: I would like to put on the record that the government will not be supporting this motion. I would also like to highlight that the minister is truly committed to ensuring that our marginal groups continue to receive vocational training opportunities.

Several members interjected.

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: Can I finish? I sat quietly, Mr President.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Let the member make her comments, and then other members can have an opportunity to reflect or comment on them in the proper way.

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: I want to touch on the marginal groups continuing to receive vocational training opportunities because it was raised in the other place yesterday. I want to put the minister's comments on the record in this place. He stated that he is currently working on identifying exactly how many courses that sit under the general industry qualifications sector should and could be moved across to the priority qualification industry courses. By doing that, we will obviously be able to lift the percentage of subsidies available under these courses. People need to understand that the general industry qualification courses are the basic entry level into that space, and the last thing we want to do is miss the group that needs assistance to get into the tertiary level of education. The minister is currently working on that, and I know he is committed to seeing it happen.

I will explain for the house the foundations of the new system that has been put in place—Future Skills WA. Future Skills WA was introduced in January 2014. Like any responsible minister, this minister needs real, reliable and validated data to assess how the changes are working. I will outline to members how Future Skills WA works, and I think people need to realise that its introduction in January was part of the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform. The whole purpose of Future Skills WA is the identification of demand in the market to ensure that this government directs hard-earned taxpayers' money into the right areas so that we can educate and train our workforce to support the growing demand in Western Australia. The government will achieve that with this great initiative of Future Skills WA, and by talking to industry. The government receives an economic data list, then goes to the industry training councils that represent the marketplace of WA—mining, hospitality, construction and the like—and the courses from which real jobs can be obtained are identified. The most important thing government can do is identify for our younger generation where education is required, to make sure that when they are at the end of their studies, they have a job and a better future to go to. In order to support the market demand and make sure we have the skilled workforce required, it is government's responsibility to educate people and to demonstrate to them which course they should be doing to ensure that they get the skills to support our growing state and our demand in industry and that they all have a job at the end of the day. The list of priority industry qualifications was formed by that process. As I said, WA taxpayers' money is being directed at investing in training and education to ensure that we get the best result for our money.

The opposition would lead people to believe that there is no funding available for people to choose the course they would like to do. Numerous courses are available in the priority industry qualifications list, and I want to identify them so that people do not think we are making it untouchable for the average citizen to go out and become qualified in these areas. The industry courses listed under agriculture, horticulture and conservation are from dairy production through to Indigenous land management, poultry production and pork production; these are all industry needs. The market needs people in these industries and these are the courses that we are promoting through our primary industry qualifications list. Courses under care and community services are early childhood education, aged care and disabilities.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: There are courses under civil construction and engineering; electrical and electronics; food and hospitality; food and meat processing, which goes into boning, food services and rendering; information technology; forestry; local government administration; management and human resources; mining

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

and minerals; property, building and construction; retail; and transport distribution and logistics. These are just the topics; they are not all the courses. There is a list of courses under each of these topics that I am reading out.

People need to realise that the subsidy—the percentage—that government is giving is not the drastic figure just given by the very dramatic and entertaining member across from us in this place.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: For example, we are actually subsidising 87.5 per cent of the course for primary industry qualifications, which goes up to certificate IV. That means that a student needs to pay 12.5 per cent of that course. I am a strong believer in people investing in their own course. They make sure that they complete the course because they have invested their time in it and they do the work that is needed to get out the other end and get a job. There is no harm in asking students to invest in their own career and their future. The government is still, through taxpayers' money, investing 87.5 per cent in priority industry qualifications. The opposition, through Hon Sally Talbot who just spoke, would have us believe that people were trying to get into entry-level tertiary education that is now not available. Ninety-nine per cent of foundation skills courses are still being subsidised by this government with WA taxpayers' money. Those courses are for people of all ages who have not completed high school or who have no literacy or numeracy qualifications. Those people still have that grassroots, ground-level entry into tertiary education. They are the people we need to keep assisting, and we are doing that with WA taxpayers' money funding 99 per cent of those courses to give people a better education.

When opposition members say that we are cutting people out of the chance to get an education, I can say that they are absolutely wrong.

Several members interjected.

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: As I said, I personally believe that it is an individual person's responsibility to invest in their future so that they can do the best they can to get a job that they are suited for and a job that is required. There is no point in educating people and taking them down a path where there is no job at the end of the day. If we have a demand for a skilled workforce, we must make sure that we are filling that demand by encouraging and directing people to take the courses required to fill the spaces needed. Our state is continuing to grow, and if we do not act responsibly and train our up and coming youth and if we do not give the opportunities to people who want to change their career to employment opportunities that are out there, we are not doing our job as a responsible government.

As I said, we still support the ground-level, grassroots entry into tertiary education. The minister is working on ensuring that minority groups are not disadvantaged in any way. As the data comes in —

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN: I will change that, Mr President. I meant marginal groups. Marginal groups come under the headings of Aboriginal, remote and regional living and the like. They are the people we are looking at in the data that is currently coming in. As I said, this is a new initiative and we cannot act on it until we get real validated data coming through. The initiative started only in January and that data is now coming through. The minister is looking at that data, and if there is a need to move some of the courses out of the general qualifications area, we will then put that into the priority industry qualifications area to ensure that the subsidy remains so that the marginal groups are not disadvantaged in any way.

As I said earlier, if people invest in their future, the government will support them. The way in which we support people and direct them into the right areas of demand is the way we will grow this state and be able to support the businesses and industries that need a skilled workforce.

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [10.46 am]: This is a matter that is of really great importance. I am glad that Hon Sally Talbot has moved the motion that she has today, as it is of particular concern in my electorate of South Metropolitan Region. Members would be aware that my electorate has pockets of the highest concentration of youth unemployment in the state, and the government needs to make sure that it is pulling all the levers that it can pull to address those pockets of youth unemployment. I am very concerned that a combination of things are happening—the increase in TAFE fees is one but a very disturbing one—that will lead to more young people being disadvantaged in the labour market, which will have devastating consequences in part of the South Metropolitan Region. I have talked in this place before about two other elements that I believe will lead to really difficult times for young people struggling in the labour market. Those

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

elements come from the federal government and I will touch on them in a minute but I want to start on the things that the state government can do.

We know that the state government made a decision that it would reduce the level of subsidy, thereby increasing the amount of money that TAFE students would be required to pay, and that the reduction would occur over a staggered period. The subsidy reduction started in January 2014 and will reduce again next year and the year after. It means that the fees will increase again next year and the year after. Some of those fee increases are in this order; for example, the government doubled the maximum cost of certificate courses at TAFE and increased the maximum cost of diplomas and advanced diplomas to \$7 500 a year. The cost of a certificate IV in disability was \$631 in 2013. At the beginning of this year it went up to \$2 744, which is a 34 per cent increase; and it will rise again by 2017 to \$4 235, which is an almost 600 per cent increase. In other areas, for example a diploma in accounting, the fee has gone up by 120 per cent to \$1 503; a diploma of education has gone up by 132 per cent to \$1 653; and a diploma of nursing has gone up by 387 per cent to the figure of \$7 268. There are more and I could list all of the fee increases.

The interesting thing about the labour market is that when it is strong, enrolments in further education—technical and further education and universities—decrease. When the market is on a downturn or weak, enrolments in TAFE and universities increase because people are desperately trying to improve their skills to put them in the best possible position in the labour market. It is absolutely astonishing that this year, at a time when our labour market is on a downturn, that TAFE enrolments in Western Australia are down by 5 200. All of the economic and enrolment data tells us that because the resource and construction industries and the construction part of the resource industry are on a downturn, it should be harder for people to get into TAFE and the universities, as there should be more people trying to enrol. That is not the case. What has driven 5 200 people out of the TAFE sector? What has changed? The answer is staring us in the eyes: it is the fee changes. That is the only thing that has happened in Western Australia that would turn those enrolment figures around. The Barnett government needs to be ashamed of that. At a time when enrolments should be increasing, the government has done the opposite to what it should have done by increasing fees and has driven people out of the TAFE sector. It is absolutely astonishing that the parliamentary secretary would have us swallow the proposition that this is because people are making a choice not to invest in their futures. For goodness sake, people are desperate to invest in their futures because hours are being reduced, casual employment is increasing and full-time employment is decreasing. This is a time when people are desperate to invest in their futures. The poppycock that the parliamentary secretary would have us believe is that people are making a choice to not invest in their futures.

Hon Alyssa Hayden: I did not say that at all.

Hon SUE ELLERY: The parliamentary secretary said, “We are asking students to invest in their own careers”. If I have that quote wrong, *Hansard* will point it out in about an hour. That is exactly what the parliamentary secretary said, “asking students to invest in their own careers”. *Hansard* will be the test of whether I have that quote wrong or not. That is what the parliamentary secretary asked people to do. I am telling the parliamentary secretary that people are desperate to invest in their own careers, but the short-sighted, ham-fisted decision by her government to increase TAFE fees because it has mucked up the rest of the budget means that people are not able to invest in their own careers because they do not have the money to pay the increased fees. They will not have the money to pay next year or the year after. Not only are the fees going up this year, but also next year and the year after.

The really disturbing thing about these TAFE changes is that they are not happening in isolation. They are happening at exactly the same time that the federal government has decided in its “wisdom” that the right thing to do for young unemployed people aged between 18 and 29 years is to make them wait six months for Newstart or Youth Allowances from 1 January. During those six months they will still be required to search for jobs, meet with employment services and try to improve their skills. How might they try to improve their skills during that period? They could enrol in a TAFE course. Except, of course, they cannot, because they cannot afford it! Not only do they not have any Newstart or money to support themselves or their families, but the state government has also increased TAFE fees, completely putting it out of the reach of those most desperate to increase their skills. Astonishingly, the federal government’s proposition not only leaves people without Newstart for the six months that they are unemployed—if a person is still unemployed at the end of those six months, they can get Newstart for the next six months, during which time they are required to work for Work for the Dole for 25 hours a week—but also the six months after that if they are still unemployed and have been unable to improve their skills, they will not receive income support. It is six months on, six months off. Tell me how that is going to fix the labour market and get those young people making the contribution that the vast majority of them want to make to our economy. How is that helping them? At the same time, the federal government has decided in its wisdom to take an organisation such as Youth Connections, which this house has discussed on several occasions,

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

and rip funding from it. The most marginalised, disengaged students in high school, who are not engaged in education or the labour market, who go to organisations such as Youth Connections will no longer be able to do so. Was that money removed from Youth Connections because it was not successful? No, it was not. Youth Connections was outstandingly successful and by every measure could demonstrate that it was turning the lives of disengaged young people around.

There are a range of measures that governments can take, but the federal and Western Australian Liberal governments have decided between them to remove every possible support there is for young people who are disengaged from the labour market by making it harder for them to increase their skills or pick up a qualification and therefore putting completely beyond their reach the capacity to re-enter the labour market or take a different course of action on the skills that they bring to the labour market. Federal and state Liberal governments are working together to ensure that their policies set up young people who are struggling to engage in the labour market in Western Australia to stay out of the labour market and effectively become destitute. We are not even going to let them pay their rent or pay for food for six months at a time while they are unemployed. It is an astonishing and appalling combination of policy decisions. People on the government side of the house are contributing to what I think is a really disgraceful and terribly distressing time for young people in the Western Australian labour market.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.56 am]: I will not take too much time. This debate is really interesting, and I think it is about trying to strike a balance between the sustainability of the sector and making it easy for people who cannot afford to enter the higher education system to ensure that they do not miss out. We are trying to balance those who can obviously afford to invest in their education, and always do. The honourable member quoted a figure of 5 200 fewer enrolments, but how many people are enrolled? Does the member have that figure?

Hon Sue Ellery: I don't have that number.

Hon COL HOLT: I assume that there are quite a few more people who are enrolled.

Hon Sue Ellery: Yesterday, in the other place, the minister said that there is a 20 per cent reduction in enrolments in general industry courses at TAFE.

Hon COL HOLT: I am not sure what that means in terms of how many people are enrolled, but, maybe, it is around 40 000 to 50 000.

Hon Alanna Clohesy: It is about five and a half thousand.

Hon COL HOLT: No, I am trying to find out how many people are enrolled. I still want to know how many people are enrolled.

Several members interjected.

Hon COL HOLT: There are 105 000 people still enrolled. Okay, we have had a drop off, but there is a sector of the community that still really does want to invest in their education through the TAFE system. That means that 5 000 people have consciously made the decision that they cannot afford TAFE now, and that is not good enough.

Hon Adele Farina: There will be more next year and more the year after.

Hon COL HOLT: Let us see what happens and adjust it as we go. But there are people who are investing in a TAFE education. This year, I have two sons graduating from year 12, and one of them wants to go to TAFE. I will support him to go to TAFE. He knows what he needs to do to go to TAFE.

Hon Sally Talbot: You are not exactly an average resident of the south west.

Hon COL HOLT: That is the point—is the member not listening to what I have to say? That is exactly what I am trying to say. I am happy to subsidise and contribute to his education. There are many other people who do not have that opportunity—potentially 5 200 people. That is the point I am making. I agree with the member that that is not fair. The member is not listening; I agree with her.

We have to make adjustments as we enter this period of change. We have a new system that is trying to make the sector sustainable. I spend a lot of time in the south west, as does Hon Sally Talbot. I spoke to the people at the South West Institute of Technology, who have had massive changes in what they are trying to achieve. I am pretty encouraged by what they are doing. They are saying, "This is the new world in which we live; what can we do to get great outcomes for students in the south west?"

Hon Adele Farina: That's fine, but it is not helping the ones who can't afford to get there.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

Hon COL HOLT: I have already commented about that, and I agree with the member, but I am trying to say there are some changes happening. If we have overshot the mark, let us look at how we might change things back for disadvantaged people, a lot of whom live in regional and remote Western Australia and come from Aboriginal families.

I have stood here before and talked about Youth Connections as well and I reckon it is the crappiest decision that I have ever heard, so I am backing the member on this; all right. I am just saying that adjustments are needed to make it sustainable, but that we should not leave some people behind, and that is what the argument has been about to date. I know that people are enrolled who can afford it and should continue to subsidise their education payments. The federal government's idea of either learn or earn will put more pressure on our TAFE and university systems and the support for young people trying to get skilled up. I agree with the member. Somehow we have to get that adjustment back to assist the disadvantaged people who decide not to go to TAFE because they cannot afford it. We need to work out what those figures mean. There may be a heap of reasons for their decision not to go to TAFE, but if it is based on cost, we must find a more effective way of subsidising that cost.

The Nationals took a policy idea to the last election that was based around expanding the construction industry levy fund. At the moment, that levy is applied to only domestic construction. We put out the idea that perhaps the levy should be expanded to include the resource sector. In the lead-up to the last election, \$167 billion worth of construction was going on. If we had applied the construction training levy fund to that sector, it would have raised about \$40 million to put into the training sector. When the Nationals put out that policy, the Liberal Party in government said it would not support it, and a spokesman from the opposition said it would not support it either. This is a way of asking those industries that actually benefit the most from our training sector, because they get apprentices and trainees from the building construction, domestic construction and domestic apprenticeship system and put them into the mining sector, to help.

Rather than charge it at 0.2 per cent of the fund, our policy was to cap it like Queensland did. It capped it and raised \$18 million in 2013 to subsidise its training sector. Why can we not do that? We can bring that policy back into this forum and ask this house to expand the construction levy fund beyond and into the resource sector, which is clearly a large beneficiary of the TAFE system —

Hon Ken Travers: Is that another new tax that the Liberal–National government is proposing?

Hon COL HOLT: Would the member like to see the construction and training industries grow?

Hon Ken Travers: Yes, of course I would.

Hon COL HOLT: Well, I am suggesting a way to subsidise the costs.

Hon Ken Travers: Is the member proposing that his government introduce a new tax?

Hon COL HOLT: I am saying that it is a levy on the construction industry and the resource sector.

Hon Ken Travers: So it is a tax.

Hon COL HOLT: Does the member agree with it or not? Does he want to support —

Hon Ken Travers: I support the member's principle of getting more people to work in that area, but I want to know whether the member is proposing another tax from his government rather than expenditure control on our wasteful projects.

Hon COL HOLT: So the member does not support the construction industry levy expansion. I will move on. It is an interesting debate. I am just as concerned as everyone else in this house about how our young people take up the jobs and opportunities provided by the state. Have we overshot the mark in terms of fee increases? The raw figures potentially suggest we have. We must go back and look at them. It is not acceptable if the fee structure takes the most vulnerable people out of the system.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [11.03 am]: I know a lot of members want to engage in this very important debate so I will keep my comments somewhat brief. Thank you, Hon Sally Talbot, for this great motion. It has really highlighted that the Labor Party and the Liberal Party are polar opposites. The Liberal Party's view clearly is that if a person is rich, they can go to university or TAFE in this case and get an education; and, if a person is poor or comes from a disadvantaged background, then bad luck. That is what we heard from the parliamentary secretary; I thought was one of the poorest contributions I have heard in this Parliament.

This situation is totally ridiculous and I want to now focus on what this all means. In my electorate, we have three TAFE providers. The Durack Institute of Technology operates out of Geraldton and it is a magnificent facility. Last week, it hosted a community morning tea at its Zeewijk Training Restaurant, and what a magnificent group of young people were there. Most of these students were able to get in under the old fees. I asked a few of them if they would be able to afford next year's round of fees and a few of them said it would be

Extract from Hansard

[COUNCIL — Thursday, 11 September 2014]

p6045e-6057a

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

a struggle. However, they did a magnificent job of providing us with a beautiful morning tea, which was a real testament to the Durack TAFE and what it is doing up there. The institute also has the Evolution Training Salon, a National Association of Testing Authorities accredited laboratory, the Master Class training vessel that operates out of there, and of course, as everyone knows, the Batavia Coast Maritime Institute at Separation Point, which opened in 2006 and is a world-class best practice aquaculture marine research and training facility. All those facilities are in Geraldton but its enrolments are down because of the increases in fees. Enrolments are down in a lot of the disadvantaged areas of Geraldton because people cannot afford the fees, which goes along with the Liberal mantra, “If you can afford it, good on you—if you can’t, bad luck, go and do something else.” What happens to these kids who are not engaged in further education? Their lives are the worse for it. In 20 years’ time we will face a skill shortage in areas such as nursing, aged care, disability services and engineering as a result of the stupid decision made by this state government purely because it cannot balance its books.

I was pleased to hear the comments from Hon Col Holt in some level of agreement that the government needs to work harder to provide the opportunity to the 5 200-plus kids, because it is fair to suggest that every year there are more and more people enrolling in TAFE, so the 5 200 fewer does not take into account the natural increase in population and people who normally come. I hope that Hon Col Holt can work with members of his own government to change this totally ridiculous broken promise and wrong priority of the Barnett–Redman Liberal–National government.

The Durack Institute in Geraldton also runs the Aboriginal learning centre at Wiluna. Who in their right mind would up the fees by up to 400 per cent in a facility like that in that location? The managing director of the C.Y. O’Connor Institute, John Scott—a great man—does a lot of good work in the wheatbelt and has campuses at Northam, Narrogin, Moora and Merredin. Those people are tearing out their hair looking for ways to engage people and they are trying to work on people from migrant backgrounds to fill their classrooms because many of the locals are backing out due to the fee increase. When I looked at its website to do a bit of research for this speech, it mentioned that there will be some changes to tuition fees in 2014, and to find out more “click here”. So naturally I did and it told me about the annual upper limits of the courses. It did not tell me how much more it would cost compared with last year’s fees or what increase in fees this government has thrown up, but it did mention the upper limits. The upper limit for a certificate IV course is \$2 500 per course, per year. Those of us like Hon Col Holt who have children in the education system know that we have to spend a lot more than that; that is just the course fee. There are usually further costs, such as books and things like that that have to be bought as well, not to mention travelling to and from campuses, which in my electorate can be quite a distance.

The Great Southern Institute of Technology in the south west has campuses in Mount Barker and Katanning. The last thing the Katanning community needs is another kick in the guts. A lot of its citizens have disadvantaged, low socioeconomic and migrant backgrounds and find it even more difficult to further their education and, as the parliamentary secretary pointed out, invest in their future; goodness me, it is almost impossible to do so when a person comes from those backgrounds. I urge members opposite who are in some way trying to support and rationalise this idea to visit some communities like Katanning, Northam, or Rangeway in Geraldton, to meet the people and spend half a day with someone from a disadvantaged background—learn what it is like—and their view will soon change.

The government is out of touch. It does not understand what it is like not to be rich. The government does not really understand what it is like not to live in the city. These changes will not affect middle-class people who have a good income and live in the city, but what about everyone else? I have heard some great stories about the Learning Engagement and Participation program that is funded by Youth Connections, which was alluded to earlier, that has engaged disengaged students who are not going to school or attending any form of education and who have dropped out. We all know where those kids can end up. They come through the Learning Engagement and Participation program and over half of them go on to TAFE. How will they afford that? They are often from broken homes and totally disengaged from society. They live off their own means and often rely on others for help. It is a great story when kids from that set of circumstances go to the LEAP program and get into TAFE. They get some skills, they get work and they become contributors. Joe Hockey should be encouraging this—they become “lifters” not “leaners”, which is his big thing. There are programs to do that but the government is cutting them out. How can they possibly become contributors and lifters and gain the self-esteem they need to contribute to society when the government keeps blocking them at every single turn?

I will not talk about the increasing fees, because they have already been mentioned, but I wanted to touch on Youth Connections, as I have already briefly, and the changes to Newstart. These are a double whammy for kids who are underprivileged. Maybe government members should go and meet one one day. I hope the National Party and Hon Col Holt will finally stand up to the Liberal Party. It is a coalition government by definition, so I hope that the National Party members around the cabinet table will have some input into this and

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

do something about this inequitable situation the government has created for TAFE training in Western Australia.

HON AMBER-JADE SANDERSON (East Metropolitan) [11.11 am]: I, too, rise to support the motion moved by Hon Sally Talbot that this house condemns the Barnett government for undermining vocational-based training through its changes to state training providers, including the harsh rise of course fees. We have seen that over the last few months, with students attempting to re-enrol in their courses having a very nasty shock, and a number of those have opted to not continue their studies because of that. The changes put through in the last budget will see maximum course fees rise up to \$7 500 for diplomas and advanced diplomas, with no concessional rates for those. There are some small concessional rates for all the other certificates, but there is still \$2 500 that applies. The parliamentary secretary today was asking people to invest in their future, and that is perfectly reasonable, but it is also the government's job to invest in education. That is the government's role and it is the view of this side that governments should invest in education and people should be given equity of access to quality education. It is not reasonable for the government to put up significant financial barriers to that. That is the view of the Labor opposition that has always been committed to providing equity of access to quality education and health care.

One course in an area of considerable need is disability services. By 2017, fees will have gone up by 580 per cent for a certificate IV in disability. There is a context of an increasing need for carers and support workers, in particular with the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Way WA. We will need more of those people. The same applies to aged care services. There is a growing ageing population that will require care. Aged care courses will be up 155 per cent by next year. Fees for enrolled nursing courses will be up by 390 per cent by then. Fees to complete a certificate III in health services assistance will go from \$621 to \$2 874 in 2017. The health and social support sectors are growing sectors, but they are low-paid sectors. Let us be honest, these people will not be earning big wages. By the time they finish, an aged-care worker will earn probably \$30 000 to \$40 000 a year and they will have to pay a chunk of that back for TAFE fees. Similarly, disability support workers will only earn up to \$30 000 to \$40 000 a year, perhaps more if they are lucky, but not much more. These are low-paid sectors that are being whacked.

We have also seen a significant reduction in apprenticeships. In the other place the minister responsible for this area, Minister Hames, admitted that it was a problem that there were 5 200 fewer students. I know that Hon Col Holt acknowledges the problem as a member of the government and I would like to see other government members acknowledge that 5 200 fewer students is a problem.

Hon Alyssa Hayden: I acknowledged it.

Hon AMBER-JADE SANDERSON: No, Hon Alyssa Hayden did not. I would suggest to the parliamentary secretary that rather than calling TAFE students marginal or minorities, step out of the golf club or the vintage car club and go and talk to them. The mainstream is impacted by this; there is nothing marginal about this at all. Hundreds of thousands more people go through TAFE than university. The government is impacting on the mainstream and it is the lifeblood of our services sector. We require these people to care for us, to provide jobs in hospitality, to support small business and to support big business. There is nothing marginal or minority about it. That is the first mistake. Essentially, these fee increases are a blunt cash grab to cover up for poor economic management. They have the very odd name of Future Skills. That, if I have ever seen one, is an exercise in Orwellian doublespeak—Future Skills when actually it is “Future Unskills”. I suggest the honourable member look up “doublespeak”. It means disguising the real definition of a word by using the complete opposite.

We have seen a very small amount of commonwealth assistance for some fees. Childcare qualifications are exempt because there is a chronic shortage of childcare workers across the country, but it is not enough. Hon Sally Talbot pointed out that the budget papers show that even if this is being looked at in an economic rationalist fashion, which the government attempted to do, it has failed in that this revenue will also be down.

I want to point to an article in *The West Australian* from January this year that highlighted that people are in genuine distress and shock at what it will cost them to finish their education. The article states —

Students were in tears yesterday when they enrolled for TAFE and found the cost of many courses had more than trebled—even surpassing the cost of similar courses at university.

There are concerns the new costs will discourage many from vocational education, fuelling shortages in key areas such as child care and technical roles ...

...

Photography student Kyra Hepton said she cried when told of the new fees and initially left without re-enrolling. She returned later after reluctantly accepting a student loan with a 20 per cent administration fee.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

That is astounding. This is affecting people, it is distressing people and it is not a marginal issue; I will say again: this affects a lot of people.

I want to touch on youth unemployment, as Hon Sue Ellery did, because when we look at this, we look at the overall policy setting, we look at where we are at nationally with employment and youth unemployment and also at what the federal government is doing. The state government does not operate in a vacuum; commonwealth policy settings have to be taken into consideration. I want to refer to the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which does some fantastic statistical work on youth unemployment. I quote from its most recent snapshot —

Youth unemployment has been marching upward in Australia in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis ... The unemployment rate nationally among those aged 15 to 24 at March 2014 stands at 12.5 per cent—more than double the overall rate of unemployment.

The experience of being young and unemployed is also changing. The inexorable rise in the incidence of youth unemployment has come alongside an increase in the length of unemployment —

So there are more of them and they are finding that they are unemployed for longer —

In January 2008, the average duration of unemployment for a young person ... was ... above 16 weeks ...

In February 2014 it was 26 weeks. This group of young unemployed people has tripled since 2008. There is an impact on those people. The Brotherhood of St Laurence snapshot also states —

A growing number of Australian youth are in danger of being locked out of stable employment for the long term. While the dynamic Australian economy offers immense opportunities, it also comes with great risks especially for young people. With employers now placing a premium on education, skills and work experience, securing that first step on the job ladder has become ... harder ...

Employers want education, skills and work experience, and this government is making it harder for those people to gain that education and those skills. It continues —

THE experience of unemployment hurts a young person's financial and psychological well-being, and these effects are felt more severely by those who experience long-term unemployment.

The federal Abbott government has cut off the Newstart allowance for people under the age of 30 years. A lot of people under the age of 30 have families to support. If the average age of cabinet members in the federal government is 53, I suppose 30 seems very young, but it is not. Those people have families to support and lives to get on with, and their benefits are going to be chopped on and off. The federal and state governments are creating a big poverty trap with these cuts to TAFE—one big black hole for people to fall into and not get out of. Once they are in there, it is very hard to get out. When they have no money and cannot pay their bills, it is very hard for them to scrub up and look good and apply for 40 jobs a week—or whatever the ridiculous number is that the federal government is aiming for. It is creating a big poverty trap. Members on the other side of the chamber should be ashamed of themselves, frankly, for not only not doing anything to improve youth unemployment numbers, but also imposing policies that will make it worse.

HON ALANNA CLOHESY (East Metropolitan) [11.20 am]: I also welcome the opportunity to debate the important motion that this house condemns the Barnett government for undermining vocational-based training through its changes to state training providers, including harsh rises in course fees. It is an important motion for many reasons, not the least of which is that thousands of people will be disproportionately affected by these harsh increases in TAFE fees. However, it is not only the immediate effect of the harsh increases in TAFE fees, but also the long-term impact on their lives because of the lack of access to TAFE and other educational opportunities. What has happened? Of course, we know that the Barnett government, in its scramble to patch up its bleeding budget and to cover up its mismanagement and wrong priorities, has chosen to fiddle with some of the ways that subsidies are provided. The effect of this is that TAFE fees will rise dramatically.

Let us look at what that actually means. Last year, the fee for a diploma of nursing was \$1 862. This year the fee has risen to \$9 131. That is a 390 per cent increase. For many people in that sector, \$9 000 for a TAFE course represents about one-third of their wage. Let us look at aged care, for example. Last year the TAFE fee for a certificate III in aged care was \$621. This year it is \$1 585. That is a 155 per cent increase. There are more. I talked about a diploma in nursing, but there is also an enrolled nursing course. We need enrolled nurses as much as we need registered nurses in our hospitals. They are the staff who keep the hospitals ticking. In the past 12 months, there has been a 295 per cent increase in the fee for that TAFE course from \$1 862 to \$7 355. I do not know where the government expects people to find \$7 355 to pay a TAFE course fee. I will get to the issue of subsidised loans in a moment, but I want to stay on track with this. The fee for a certificate IV in disability has

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

risen from \$621 last year to \$2 744 this year. However, it will get worse, because there will be a further increase and the fee for a certificate IV in disability will cost \$4 235 a year by 2017. Again, that is approximately one-quarter of the wage of someone who works in the disability services sector. Where the government expects someone to find \$4 235 on top of the already increasing cost of living—electricity charges have increased by 80 per cent, and public transport fees, water charges and insurances across the board have increased—is beyond me.

I also want to look at who has been affected. I have focused mostly on the human services sector in the examples of the increases in TAFE fees, but it is not only those people in the caring professions who have been affected, which of course will affect the availability of skilled and trained staff in those sectors in the short and long term. It is not the marginal people who have been affected, it is the mainstream people. It is not only young people who have been affected. We have heard a lot of discussion in the debate today about the ways in which young people will be affected negatively by this decision, and I am very pleased we have had that debate. It is not only school leavers who have been affected. TAFE is also a training provider for people who want to change jobs, whether they be middle-aged, younger or older people getting towards the end of their working life and, for whatever reason, have been made redundant. These people are not on high incomes; they cannot fetch \$7 000 out of their back pocket to pay these fees. These people should be supported by this government, but they have been left high and dry.

Women who want to return to the workforce after time away to raise a family have also been affected. These women want to learn new skills and get a foothold in the employment market, but they have been left high and dry by this government. They cannot find \$5 000 to \$7 000 a year—that is for just one year—to pay these fees. It is not only the mainstream people—not the marginal people—who have been affected; employers have also been affected by this decision. Many employers who are looking for apprentices and trainees to be engaged in their businesses are small businesses. They have been directly affected by this, because they cannot afford to assist the apprentice or the trainee to pay the \$5 000 to \$7 000 TAFE fees either. Those employers cannot support their employees to access TAFE, so they will not be able to afford to employ apprentices and trainees. Of course, that means that they will not have skilled staff to staff their businesses and they will not have staff who grow as the business grows; they will not have staff whose skills will develop in concert with the business. Small business has been left high and dry by this government's decision.

As Hon Sue Ellery mentioned, it is not only the increase in TAFE fees that will seriously affect the mainstream of our community but also what I call the domino effect—it is not only the increase in TAFE fees, but also the effect of cuts to income support payments and the increased prescribed way in which a person has to access income support payments.

Another thing that impacts on this is the decision by the Abbott government to cut tool allowances. This story started a long time ago when Treasurer Joe Hockey offensively spoke about how apprentices were using their tool allowances. I can tell him that a lot of apprentices are now using their tool allowances to try to pay for their TAFE fees so that they can continue their apprenticeships and do not have to leave because they and the businesses that employ them can no longer afford to pay the fees. They are the people who are being left high and dry. They are the people who are being ignored by this government. They are the people who will be worse off because of this government.

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [11.31 am]: In the short time that remains in the debate, I want to thank my colleagues on this side of the house for their eloquent and passionate contributions to the debate on this important subject. Every single one of them, even those opposition members who have not spoken, is a fantastic advocate for the people in their electorates who are badly affected by the massive increases in TAFE fees. I have no thanks at all for the two contributions from the government. If there is one thing that the south west is blessed for, it is not having Hon Alyssa Hayden going around the electorate mouthing those kinds of offensive sentiments.

Several members interjected.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: She suggested that the 5 200 people who have not been able to afford to enrol in TAFE are somehow marginalised people, that they are not prepared to—what was the phrase she used—“invest in their future”. I dare Hon Alyssa Hayden to come down to the south west and talk to the people of Pinjarra Senior High School, Harvey Senior High School and Collie Senior High School.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! We do not want the last two minutes of this debate to degenerate into a slanging match.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I ask the parliamentary secretary would she —

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Darren West; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson; Hon Alanna Clohesy

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! I know you are restless, but there are only two minutes of this debate left, so let the member have her say. She is on her feet.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Would the parliamentary secretary dare show her face in Collie, Manjimup and all around the south west, and mouth those sentiments about these poor, marginalised people who can no longer afford TAFE?

Hon Sue Ellery: She talks as though she does.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Yes; and I feel that the people of the East Metropolitan Region are being poorly served by this particular example of the silver spoon.

I warned Hon Col Holt that I was onto the analogy about the knight and it being only a flesh wound, yet he got up and said, “But there are still lots of people who can afford to go to TAFE; therefore, we haven’t got a problem.” That is such a nonsense argument, particularly when Hon Sue Ellery used her time to give such a cogent explanation that the problem at this stage in our economy is that TAFE enrolments should be increasing, but instead they are going down. To argue that there are still people, including Hon Col Holt —

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Members should have patience and say it in the appropriate way at the appropriate time.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: To say that there are some people who can still afford to go to TAFE is just a nonsense and completely misses the point of this argument. The Nationals and Liberals are complicit in having reduced access to affordable, quality education and training in this state. They have shifted the cost of education and training from government to individuals. That is not acceptable.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.