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Dear Minister

I write to ask you about the tertiary student services fee [you announced earlier this month](#).

Last week, the Murdoch University Guild President received a letter from the university's chancellor with a thinly veiled threat about [the university administration's powers under the new fee arrangements to withhold funding from guilds](#) if they are unhappy with the way the student group conducts its activities.

The story was in [The Australian's Higher Ed Supplement](#), and I wanted to know about your reaction to it. I heard you speak on Triple J's Hack about how university guilds should be politicised and such, but I was wondering if you could give me your reaction to the Murdoch story.

I also want to share a story with you.

Last year I was the editor of the (now defunct) student magazine at the University of Notre Dame. Previously, I had been Vice President of the Student Association (2005) and a member of the executive committee (2008). The ND Student Association has a very different funding approach (the legacy of the ideology of founder and ex-Vice Chancellor Dr Peter Tannock) where no student fees are collected and the university itself financially supports the association at their discretion. It is run on a threadbare basis with all elected officials volunteering their time and energy. Its activities are self-funded, with things like diaries and merchandise sales used to prop up sports, the uni magazine, etc. The university provided office space and part time administrative support. Student services such as counselling was provided by the university.

In late 2006, after several conflicts between the university administration and the editors of the magazine, the Student Association was advised by the Head of Academic and Student Services that the administration would withdraw their cash grant if an equivalent amount was going to be spent publishing material which was at odds with the administration's perception of the university's best interests. Those interests essentially related to the public perception of the university that was required to attract further students.

Discussing student complaints about everyday matters that affected them as students was not seen as conducive to maintaining the glossy PR image the university had spent tireless efforts on.

While there was already significant vetting and authorisation requirements in regards to the publication of the magazine, publication was only allowed to go ahead in 2007 following the implementation of further review and control mechanisms.

The magazine ended up folding after one issue. One reason was that the team that put it together could no longer justify volunteering the amount of effort that went into producing it only to have to be part of the university's PR machine rather than being the voice of the students.

When I was told about the story at Murdoch, I was dismayed to hear that what happened at Notre Dame, a private institution that was, frankly, run as an oligarchy (I do not know if that has changed since I graduated in December last year) may happen at other universities following the implementation of the new student services fee structure.

Will there be mechanisms put in place to ensure that students' voices are not muffled by the authority of administrations which are often so removed from their students that they do not understand basic concerns? How will the Government prevent that from happening?

I would really appreciate your comments on this matter, both as a private citizen and a Labor Party member who is very concerned about rebuilding tertiary education in this country following those horrible years of the Howard regime.

Kind regards

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