

So called socialists fall prey to the special pleading of well heeled elites even more than so called liberals do. Senator Ryan's successful opposition to Senator Walsh's universities fees proposal entrenched an advantage, typical of those so often enjoyed by elites. But by placing quotas on foreign enrolments in Australian subsidised university courses, she did a little better by the Australian taxpayer. (Their may be adequate diplomatic reasons for subsidising foreign elites.) I think that in the long run her correct decision made at the same time that, "...institutions will be able to offer places at full cost in courses, separate from their normal degree and diploma courses..." will have profound beneficial consequences for the whole Australian education industry.

There has been a marked lack of enthusiasm for a proposal to establish a Western Australian International College by academics and by the WA minister. As the arguments advanced by these rational men and women in opposition to the college have been less than convincing, we should look for an ulterior motive.

This International College proposal is really quite simple. Professor Bean-San Goh, of the mathematics department at the University of Western Australia wants to educate some of those South East Asian students, already paying for an education in Canada, the United States and Britain or who are willing to pay. The proposed college will be entirely financed by private investment, most of it raised in Malaysia and Singapore, and costs will be met from students' fees. There would be no cost to the Australian taxpayer. Instead Australia is being offered a profitable export industry selling education as the Jackson Committee recommended.

Initially the overseas students would be offered courses for the Degree of Bachelor of Business in Accounting and Computing and the Degree of Business in Accounting of the Western Australian College of Advanced Education and the Degree of Commerce of other existing tertiary institutions in Perth. The existing tertiary institutions would set the courses and examine the students, thus maintaining the academic standards of the fledgling college and conferring recognised degrees on those good enough to pass their exams. The tertiary institutions would be paid for all the expenses they incur in providing educational opportunities for the overseas students. The International college would employ lecturers, readers and tutors providing money and employment for Australian academics - a group who have been known to complain about a lack of funds for tertiary education.

The Foreign Affairs Department, has been enthusiastic about Australia's overseas student programme. A spokesman giving evidence to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence described the programme as 'the single most identifiable means of establishing durable personal contact and enhancing understanding of Australia by leaders of ASEAN countries'. Foreign Affairs is naturally enthusiastic about this new opportunity. This must be particularly the case at a time when our strategically placed ally, Malaysia, is getting stroppy about quotas placed in the way of Malaysian students attending our taxpayer funded institutions.

Except for New Zealand whose economic performance is even worse, Australia is the laggard of the generally dynamic East Asian region. Australians, as Lee Kuan Yew pointed out to Mr. Fraser, seem Hell bent on becoming the poor white trash of Asia. Many reports and academic papers have pointed to advantages, approaching upon necessity, of trading those goods, services and ideas in which we have a comparative advantage, with our own corner of the world.

We still have a comparative advantage in education. The English language is itself a comparative advantage. Educational facilities have not kept pace with the rapid economic development of the ASEAN region. Some 50,000 Malaysian students study overseas, about one fifth of these in Australia, and our standards, relevance of our courses and proximity appeal to Malaysians. Australian taxpayers spend some \$50 million each year educating ASEAN students and ASEAN parents are prepared to buy more. To them our reluctance to sell must seem somewhat strange; however it is but a sample of those Australian attitudes which are allowing ASEAN living standards to catch up on us.

Lack of co-operation by Australian tertiary educators will not necessarily stop the development of an Australian fee funded International College. Such a college always has the option of co-operating with an overseas university of standing - possibly London University, which has considerable experience with similar arrangements. Never the less, and although they are unconvincing, the two reasons advanced as to why Australian tertiary institutions should not co-operate with an international college should be answered.

The emotive argument that the college will take places from Australian students may have a rational purpose, but it is not honest. The places at the proposed International College are additional places fully funded by a quite different source from that which is currently paying for Australian students.

The second argument: that as an International College will cater for only wealthy foreigners it is therefore bad has two obvious problems.

As the Australian system of 'free' higher education involves quite massive transfers from poorer people to richer and few student from 'lower socio-economic backgrounds' attend our Universities; and as this inequitable arrangement is apparently supported by those who now oppose the International College; opponents of it must explain what is wrong with educating similarly wealthy foreigners, who will get no similar subsidies.

The second problem with this second argument is the inherent one of a trade policy to sell services to only those who have little money. Should such a policy be extended to goods, our wool and metal ores trades must almost cease. There could be no advantage to the world's poor in having us join their number but that would be the result.

Since the arguments advanced against the International College are red herrings, what rational explanation for opposition to it can we deduce? Two hypotheses, which are not exclusive, suggest themselves. First, it may be that people who wish to see the subsidised education of Australia's young elite continue, but who are aware that the wealth transfers and inefficiencies involved are criticised, do not wish to run the risk that a fee paying campus might be seen to succeed.

Second, since it is proposed that students at the International College sit the same examinations as students in Australia's publicly funded institutions any marked disparity in the results could be embarrassing for someone. Of course academics opposing the college are confident of their own skills or diligence but they are too good natured to willingly embarrass others.