

Tertiary Fees & Community Values

Zoe Morrison, May 25, 2009

Barnaby Joyce has said he will block a plan to reintroduce student services fees unless universities are restricted to spending the money on sport. This bizarre threat typifies a national obsession with sport that is exclusive and limiting, and can be linked to male sporting heroes feeling they can do whatever they like.

The statistics on who actually participates in organised sport in Australia make clear that if implemented, Senator Joyce's amendments are likely to result in the channelling of university money for students services to the people who need it the least. Joyce said "soccer, rugby, cricket, netball are directed at the greatest possible participation with no exclusion to anybody else". Rubbish.

ABS data from 2007 shows only a quarter of Australians participate in organised sport, and these people are most likely to be young, male, Australian-born or from English-speaking countries, and employed. So if we're talking about social inclusion, money for student services would be better spent rebuilding affordable child care, health services and welfare support, which were gutted by voluntary student unionism.

But this isn't only an issue about what gets funded on university campuses. This speaks to a broader theme about the status of sport in Australia, and what that means for our culture as a whole.

Sport can be a positive social and cultural force in many ways. It can create social inclusion — witness the participation of some young indigenous men in the AFL. It has obvious benefits for physical health. It can create social connections, and a sense of identity and belonging. But the exclusive support of sport is just that — socially and culturally exclusive. And our culture is saturated with it. Lengthy sports announcements at the end of every ABC radio and TV news broadcast inform us who won the footy, and what player is injured. Some of us don't care. Prime-time TV shows are devoted to footy and rugby hosted by men dressed in suits, as if it is a deeply serious and important activity. We have a former prime minister who was embarrassingly sycophantic to cricketers, and at least two cricketers who have been awarded "father of the year" (aren't those guys usually overseas?).

Sport is inflicted on us even if we don't want it, and we treat our male sports stars like gods. And some of them clearly think they can behave like gods — beyond the rules of the rest of us. Which, as the latest revelation of the sexual degradation of a woman by rugby players has shown, can have appallingly harmful results.

But back to the issue of student services at universities and Barnaby Joyce. When I was an undergraduate, before the introduction of voluntary student unionism, I benefited from a whole range of student services. I did plays and revues (in university-funded theatres), I did debating (in a university-funded competition), I did student politics (in the students' association). OK, so I was a geek, but I think I was lucky. I was young, had a casual job, and lived at home with supportive parents. I was educated on a university campus that was lively, argumentative and culturally rich.

Sure, university helped teach me how to think, but it also helped teach me how to live. My outlook on life changed at university. Certainly that might have turned me into someone who would never in a blue moon vote for Senator Barnaby Joyce. But contrary to his fears about university politics and student culture, not everyone at university thought like me, voted like me, or did what I liked to do — not by a long shot. That was

the nice thing about it. Even in the small world of the university campus, there was a rich diversity of people, and an appreciation of that.

We need a greater imagination when it comes to Australian culture. Our culture isn't just about two teams of mostly white men clashing in violent adversity on the sporting field. Our culture is more than that. It's about stories and painting, music and dance, talking and listening and debate. It's about cooking and eating, and how we live with the land. It's about loving, and failing at loving, and bringing up kids. It's about looking after people, and being looked after ourselves when we need it. In short, it's about different things for different people at different times.

So let's see money for student services at universities and let's see it used in genuinely socially inclusive ways: services for less-privileged students, and money for arts as well as for sports. And let's see a bit more of that in our national culture too. Sport should have its place, but this should be in proportion. And maybe if we start getting that right, young men with social status might learn that there are lots of perspectives to a situation to respect, not just the one they like.

Dr Zoe Morrison is a research fellow at the school of social and political sciences, Melbourne University. This article appeared in The Age on 25 May 2009