

Closed-shop varsities: A fight from the right

By: ARMSTRONG Grahame

OLIVER IBBETSON is a member of a union, even though he does not want to be.

He wanted to study accountancy and insisted he did not want to join the Victoria University of Wellington Student Association. But he had no choice. To enrol for study at the university is to become a union member.

The \$125.40 union levy is compulsory. If a student refuses to join the union or pay the "membership" fee it is impossible to enrol.

Ibbetson was forced to join the VUWSA and to pay the fee. But he hopes a bill sponsored by Act MP Sir Roger Douglas, which passed its first reading in parliament last week, will mean he won't have to keep fighting for the right to not belong to an organisation.

The Education (Freedom of Association) Members Bill seeks to amend the Education Act 1989 to ensure no student is compelled to join a students' association.

Only Auckland University has voluntary student union membership, after a majority of students voted in a 1998 referendum to abolish the compulsory regime. Just over half of all Auckland University students are today members of the union. The government has agreed to support the Act bill only at the first reading stage. It has been referred to the Education and Science Select Committee.

Eventually, Ibbetson gave up his fight, believing it was not worth the time and trouble. Even if he managed to "opt out" he would not get his levy refunded because the union donated it to a charity of its choice.

The union told him he could leave only as a conscientious objector on moral, philosophical or religious grounds, where he must "clearly demonstrate a deeply held philosophical conviction that compulsory membership infringes on his rights in ways and for purposes that are demonstrably offensive".

"I disagree very strongly about compulsory membership of VUWSA," Ibbetson told the Sunday Star-Times. "However, I could not extend my conviction under the banners required (moral, philosophical or religious grounds) so chose to just let my membership continue." He said it was not about the money and was more to do with the unrepresentative nature of the union, with only 5% of students voting for their president.

Douglas said the existing law was based on coercion and force. He said the argument that students could opt out on conscientious objection grounds was a bit like saying the military draft was OK because you could conscientiously object.

He said student associations should organise themselves like all other unions and persuade students to join. The existing law, he said, simply guaranteed student associations a stream of money and it was questionable whether the money was properly spent.

VUWSA president Jasmine Freemantle said all students could stand and vote in the association's elections. "It is a very democratic process. All that is required is for a student to say 'I object to membership because it conflicts with my philosophical beliefs'."

Labour, Greens and Maori MPs spoke against the bill on the grounds students were opposed to it and it would lead to reduced funding and services for students.

CAPTION:

OLIVER IBBETSON

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Biography: IBBETSON Oliver

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