

20 October 2008

EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2008 SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE BILL 2008

Second Reading

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (6.20 p.m.) — I rise to speak in support of the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 and the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. Before I address some of the points that I was intending to make, I will pick up on the comment by the member for Mallee about his supreme confidence in the conservative nature of auditors. I must say that, in the current climate, I find that somewhat surprising. Notwithstanding that, I think the point that needs to be made is that the powers to be given to the minister in relation to schools that have received a qualified audit report obviously only trigger the capacity for the minister to then undertake certain action. Whether or not that would occur obviously would be a matter for the minister to consider in the circumstances, and obviously it would be something that the minister would address with great care and diligence at that point. So I do not think that the degree of concern expressed by speakers from the other side is warranted, but these new powers are an important component of the underpinning principle of transparency that is also incorporated within the philosophy of the bills before the House.

This of course is a case of Labor implementing and honouring an election commitment. The then shadow minister for education and also the opposition leader at the time, on 9 October 2007, made a very clear statement in relation to the future of school funding under a future Labor government. That statement said:

As part of its Education Revolution, a Rudd Labor Government has committed to:

- Adopt the existing Socio-Economic Status (SES) funding model for the next funding quadrennium, from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2012; and
- Make the four year 2005-2008 Funding Agreement and the current schools indexation formula its minimum starting point for the Commonwealth's negotiations with the States, Territories, Catholic and Independent school systems.

The bills before the House implement those commitments. There can be no question about that. Indeed, notwithstanding the protestations to the contrary from some on the other side, I do not believe that anyone has seriously suggested that that is not the case. These bills do implement that commitment. That is something that I think is an important part of the Rudd government's education revolution. One of the commitments that we made as part of those specific commitments was that we wanted to ensure that schools of various persuasions—whether they are government or non-government schools, in the form of Catholic or independent schools—were very much able to plan ahead with some certainty in relation to the levels of funding that they would expect to receive under a Rudd Labor government.

Clearly, matters of certainty are important. Schools that are not government schools have to operate in a fashion where they can make the various decisions that they need to make in order to pay the various bills that come in and to raise the revenue that is necessary. That funding certainty is something that is essential to allow them to continue to provide the service that they provide to students, and indeed to parents, and to do that in a way in which they do not have to start increasing fees in order to compensate for a lack of funding or an inability to plan for the future. So it is important that we deliver on this commitment.

One of the first things that I chose to do as the member for Lindsay was to organise a forum of school principals. In fact, I had two forums. The first forum related to secondary school principals and the second forum related to primary school principals. Approximately 20 principals attended the first forum of secondary school principals. It was a very interesting opportunity for us all to get together. A number of comments were made on the day. One longstanding principal who had taught at a number of schools within the area indicated that this was the first time in his many decades of teaching in the area that he had been invited to join in a gathering and discussion of that sort. That surprised me because, frankly, I felt that one of the first ports of call as a new member was to sit down and discuss with principals and various school communities the challenges, the needs and the aspirations that they have for local students within the community.

One of the points that I was at great pains to make was that I had deliberately chosen to invite the principals of all of the schools. It was not a case of having separate meetings with the principals from government schools and then a follow-up meeting with the Catholic school principals and then the independent school principals. I wanted to meet with all of the principals together, in large part to demonstrate that my commitment is to the educational future of all of the students within my community. So, too, the Rudd government's commitment is to the educational opportunities and futures of students right across the spectrum. One of the important points that the Labor Party in opposition consistently made is that we believe that, ultimately, funding decisions need to be made on the basis of need. Sometimes there may be a correlation between need and whether or not schools happen to be government or non-government schools, but in my experience I would have to say that that is not always the case. Indeed, sometimes there can be schools—and I have seen many of them throughout Western Sydney—that may be low-fee, non-government schools that do not necessarily have the resources and funds available that some of the private schools in other parts of New South Wales have. I confine my comments largely to New South Wales because that is the extent of my direct knowledge of these matters. Some of the local schools that I have encountered that are low-fee-paying private schools do not have the same resources that many others have. In fact, there are some government schools, and in particular some selective schools, that I have observed that have some educational opportunities available for students that are not necessarily on offer at non-government schools. So I think it is important that when we are allocating funding we do so on the basis of need and that needs should be properly assessed in respect of individual schools.

There has been some consternation on the part of those opposite in relation to some of the transparency requirements, but I think it should be a given that, where public funds are expended in relation to non-government schools, there should also be an expectation that certain key measures are delivered upon in relation to the performance, reporting and ongoing compliance with broader objectives that the government might set for schools right across the spectrum that are in receipt of government funds. I do not believe that any of the requirements that are being proposed in these bills are in any way oppressive

or unreasonable. Certainly in the discussions that I have had with principals and educators within my local community, none of those discussions have yielded any real concern about these matters. These are matters of accountability, and I think it is right that they are to be introduced as part of these bills.

I think it is important to reflect on the role that these measures play within the broader agenda of the government. We obviously talked a lot before the election about the education revolution and, now that we see the government approaching its first year in office, we have already begun to see some of the tangible results of that education revolution. I have to say that, in my local community, I was very pleased to see over 2,000 computers being funded under the first round of the digital education revolution computers in schools initiative. The fact that so many schools within my local community were funded under the first round—and, of course, the first round of funding gave preference to those schools that did not have such a high ratio of computers for students currently within their schools—and received such a significant complement of computers is evidence of the fact that the initiatives of this government are making some real gains in providing greater opportunity for local students within schools in my electorate.

I have to say that those computers was spread across the spectrum. Funding decisions out of that first round meant that government, Catholic and independent schools were recipients of funding. In one sense I think that that too is evidence of the fact that need is not always able to be ascertained in a very simple and crude way by having a look at whether or not the school happens to fit within the ambit of being a government or non-government school. One of the aspects of my particular philosophy in relation to educational funding is that I think it is important that we do respect the desire of parents to send their children to particular schools for a particular faith based reason. I think the strong history of not only the Catholic school system but also other independent schools within our education system that are very much focused on providing an education within the context of an individual's faith is something that should continue to be supported. Indeed, that has been largely a matter of bipartisan policy, at least for many decades, and I am certain that that will continue.

In relation to the fruits of the education revolution, I mentioned earlier the digital revolution, which has been of great value to many local schools in my community. I also note the focus of this government on trade training centres. Clearly, education is one of the most significant areas of policy that we in this place are engaged in determining. That is the case because for so many people educational opportunity can open doors to future prospects in life that they may never have otherwise been able to realise. The Labor Party of course historically, and this continues to be true today, has been the great party of delivering opportunity to people. When it comes to educational opportunity, one fact that I reflected upon recently, if I can just turn my thoughts to tertiary education, was that in my local community approximately two-thirds of all of the students that graduate with a university degree from the University of Western Sydney are the first in their family to have received a degree. That is a significant figure in really demonstrating the fact that opportunities over the last few decades have been expanded to more and more people within our community, allowing them to go on and broaden the extent of their education.

One of the things that I like to try and stay focused on in this debate is that, whilst university education does provide people with tremendous opportunities, universities are not the only place where young people—or older people, for that matter—are able to receive the opportunities that they may need it order to realise their potential. I think one of the great things about the Rudd government's commitment to building trade training centres in schools is that it sends a very clear message to people within the

community, particularly young people and students, that the pursuit of a trade is not in any way less respectable or less desirable than the pursuit of a university education. This is particularly the case when we consider the current climate we have been in for the last few years where emerging skills shortages have been such that tradespeople have been increasingly in great demand. It is important for us as a nation not only to skill ourselves up in our universities but also to ensure that we have the tradespeople and the other skills that are necessary to provide for our economic prosperity. That is why I think our commitment to trade training centres is very much a key part of the overall education revolution.

The education revolution begins in early childhood education but it does not operate only in a direct line through school directly to university and TAFE; it also provides other opportunities that might branch out in other directions in order to allow individuals to realise their potential by harnessing their respective talents. As a measure that is put in the context of the overall education revolution, I think this commitment, delivering on our election promise to maintain levels of funding for non-government schools, is something that will provide the ongoing reassurance to many parents, particularly in my local community, that this is a government that is committed to continuing to govern for all Australians and to providing educational opportunities to all Australians.

I note from the comments of those on the other side, and in particular some of the comments of the shadow minister, that there have been certain amendments proposed. Indeed, the moving of these amendments even potentially threatens the passage of this legislation. I think it would be a great shame if those on the other side were to vote against these proposals, because in doing so they would be blocking the funds that we are looking to make available for non-government schools—indeed, the \$28 billion of funds that we are looking to make available over the quadrennium to non-government schools.

I saw in the Sydney Morning Herald this morning an article under the heading ‘Private school funds at risk, union warns’, and in that article Mr Watt, the Federal Secretary of the Independent Education Union of Australia, was quoted as saying that the delay—he was referring to the potential delay that could be caused by the coalition choosing not to support the bills—would ‘put funding for teaching jobs in the private sector at risk’. In the article he went on:

“The IEUA has long supported the need to reform the current Federal Government SES funding model,” he said.

“The previous Federal Government’s approach to the funding of schools was not transparent—it was a tragedy that a proper and open review was not conducted by the Howard government in 2007.”

I think those comments should be borne in mind, and certainly I hope that those opposite reflect upon them, because to do what it appears they are attempting to do—that is, to make political points that frankly are without substance, because we are delivering on the election commitments that we made, and those commitments provide for a sustainable and prosperous future for non-government schools—would be a great shame and would really throw into question the opposition’s ongoing commitment to working with this government to deliver educational opportunities for all Australians. So I call on those opposite to have a good hard think about whether or not they want to block these bills. Certainly I am very pleased to stand up and speak in support of these bills and I commend them to the House.