



Speech by

Mr R. QUINN

MEMBER FOR MERRIMAC

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MOTION OF CONFIDENCE

Mr QUINN (Merrimac—LP) (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party) (3.53 p.m.) It does not matter the political colour of a Government, one of its overarching aims is to provide the economic and social advancement of the people of Queensland. Underpinning that goal would be the provision of a high-quality education system. Unfortunately, during Labor's previous six years in office, it did not really come to grips with what it means to provide a high-quality education system. Education is the single biggest department in Government. It has a budget of approximately \$3.4 billion, over 43,000 staff and some 1,300 schools across Queensland working for the benefit of over 460,000 students. So really, the Education Department touches the life of every student from preschool or kindergarten right through to university in both State and non-State schools.

During the election campaign, we had from the ALP a large number of commitments—or alleged commitments—in relation to education. As usual, its performance in Government has made a mockery of its rhetoric in Opposition. We can now see that the words have no substance at all. Under the coalition, Education's seniority in the ministerial pecking order was highlighted. By the end of the term of the coalition Government, Education was No. 4 in seniority. Under Labor, Education has sunk to No. 12—it has zoomed to the backblocks out to No. 12. Three years ago, the Minister who has been appointed was not up to scratch. He was dropped from the Ministry because of his poor performance. Yet, under this Government, he has been brought back and given the Education portfolio. Such is the Government's regard for the Education portfolio in giving it to this Minister who is No. 12 in the pecking order. Obviously, in the past he failed and I have no doubt that history will repeat itself in the future. Again we will see another failure by this Minister in the not-too-distant future.

Nothing can illustrate that more than his actions in his first couple of weeks in office. He has demonstrated that he has been at the beck and call of the Queensland Teachers Union. Within the first couple of weeks of his appointment, the Minister is supposed to go out and meet all the stakeholders, consult with the various interested parties and find out what they want in terms of education policy—where they see the problems and what ought to be done by a new Government in correcting some of the mistakes that have been made by the previous Government. As I understand it, within the first couple of weeks of his appointment, on about five occasions this Minister met with the QTU. I wonder on how many occasions he met with the other key stakeholders in education. I think that he might have been too busy with the QTU to even manage to put an appointment in his book for any of the other stakeholders.

So we are not really talking about consultation by the Minister with the key stakeholders, simply a Minister who is kowtowing to one particular interest group within the educational fraternity. We have a Government that puts political pragmatism before excellence in education, industrial favours before good management, union interests before student interests and QTU officials before parents and principals. It is the grand old traditional Left Wing politics: all stakeholders are equal, except some are more equal than others.

I believe that it is also of concern that, within the first couple of weeks of this Labor Government, one of the greatest advancements in public education in Queensland was substantially derailed. The Leading Schools program has been recognised widely as breathing fresh life back into our State school system. There would not be an electorate in Queensland that has not benefited by the move to the

Leading Schools program. It was a program based on incentives—asking schools to come in and perform additional duties but at the same time giving them more authority, more flexibility and more resources with which to carry out those additional responsibilities. We had in place a program to provide additional funds of \$56m on an ongoing basis after three years to all of those schools that came into the Leading Schools program.

It was not an elitist program. I will repeat that: it was not. The former Government had opened up the program to all schools in Queensland. Even if only the larger schools, the Bands 8 to 11, came into the program, about 90% of our students would have been in a Leading School within three years. So to label the Leading Schools program as elitist is wrong on two counts. The vast majority of students would have been in the program within three years and it was open to all schools. No school was barred. So the tag of elitism is simply wrong. More importantly, the previous Government had allocated an additional \$56m per annum on an ongoing basis to these Leading Schools at the end of the three-year period.

We have had from the Minister a rather confusing mishmash of statements by him and then directives put out by the department. The Minister said—and it was repeated here by the Premier—that all schools would be Leading Schools. Yesterday, the Governor in his address said that the Leading Schools program was abolished. Is there any wonder that there is confusion in the educational community? They do not know whether they are a Leading School and they do not know whether they are going to get ongoing or recurrent grants. The Minister says yes, but the Education directive says no, that it is a one-off grant.

There is a confusion out there that needs to be resolved. More importantly, the issue of funding needs to be resolved. The Leading Schools program provided for an additional \$56m on an ongoing basis, on a recurrent basis, to go into the schools. To date, the Minister has said that the ALP will be providing an additional \$20m. That is far short of the amount of funds we were going to provide to the schools within the three-year time frame. I think a lot of schools are concerned about the move from the Leading Schools program. There is policy confusion and funding confusion out there at the present time. That is another reason why we ought not have any confidence in the ability of the ALP Government to manage and administer the education system in the foreseeable future.

The issue of teacher numbers is also of critical importance to our schools because it has to do with class sizes, providing additional human resources to manage students with disabilities and providing additional resources for literacy and numeracy programs to pick up those kids who need additional help.

Over the past couple of years we have seen a substantial increase in the number of teachers in our schools. In fact, 1,900 teachers have been added over a two-year period. That stands in stark contrast with the Labor Government's record of the previous six years. It provided a net addition of only 867 teachers. That is a 3.3% increase. It did not even keep pace with enrolments, which increased during that period by some 4.3%.

Six years of Labor Government saw a lot of rhetoric about commitment, but when it came to funding and to the number of teachers in classrooms, very few of those commitments were kept. It was not until the coalition came into Government that the focus was really put on schools and the additional resources our schools needed were provided. I am pleased to say that, over the time we were in Government, schools certainly saw an increase in teacher numbers, over and above the enrolment increases, to take account of a whole range of additional programs that were put in place.

In fact, during six years of Labor teacher numbers actually fell, despite enrolment increases across-the-board every year. There were two years in which numbers fell—by 569 in 1992-93 and by 85 in 1994-95. That is the level of commitment we have seen from Labor in the past. Is it any wonder that we on this side of the House have no confidence in Labor's ability to provide those additional teacher numbers to our schools in the foreseeable future?

I think our lack of confidence can be easily demonstrated by a statement from the now Treasurer when he was Education Minister some years ago. When he was justifying the expenditure of money, he said—

"We doubled education spending from \$1.8 billion ... to \$2.7 billion ..."

Anybody could tell that that is not a doubling; it is a 50% increase. That statement was made by the person who is currently serving as Treasurer. He is in charge of the Budget.

During the six years of Labor Government very little was done in terms of behaviour management and improving standards of discipline in schools. The cane was abolished and nothing else was put in its place. Our schools, our principals and our teachers were crying out for help for a number of years, yet not one dollar was spent on providing additional resources to help them manage those problems at the school level.

It was not until the coalition came to Government that the legislation was changed. We gave principals more authority and more flexibility, and then we provided a special program for funding behaviour management specialists and a range of other specialist teachers in our schools to assist teachers to come to grips with some of the problems such as theft, bullying, serious behavioural problems and so on. In our first two Budgets we provided an additional 200 behaviour management specialists and we provided for more in our last Budget. Those resources were aimed at allowing our schools to come to grips with these issues and to put in place the sorts of programs which improve discipline within schools so that the vast majority of students can get on with their work and get a decent education and not risk being disrupted by a very small number of students.

One of the other great things we did when we were in Government was to introduce school-based constables. This initiative was opposed by the ALP at the time. If anyone goes to the schools in which those constables are now working they will see an outstanding success. Those police constables were not allocated on the basis of political priority; they were allocated on the basis of need. I believe there are about 22 school-based constables operating around Queensland now. Most of them are in Labor electorates.

If anyone asks the schools whether they want to give their police constables back, they will find that the schools want to keep them. They want to keep them because of the tremendous work the school-based constables are doing in terms of working with students, reducing truancy and talking about drugs, behaviour management and minor misdemeanours and so on. That is another significant program that I hope does not suffer any sort of damage now that the Labor Party has assumed office.

We now have in place a national agreement for testing students' numeracy and literacy skills at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. That has been arrived at on a national level after a lot of discussion among Ministers from all States of the Commonwealth, with representatives from across the political spectrum. All States are now committed to it. From some of the comments I have heard from the Minister recently, it seems that that is at some risk. I suggest that we should not look to go backwards. We have arrived at this point after a lot of discussion nationally and after a lot of conjecture among the Ministers.

For the first time, we have a system in place whereby we can collect hard data about literacy and numeracy levels at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. That hard data is necessary because it can in fact drive policy and resource allocation within the schools. If we move away from that, we will go back to the touchy-feely program we had before. We did not have any empirical evidence on which to base our decisions. I think a move away from this system would be a retrograde step. We really need to keep that program in place.

I am heartened by the fact that the Queensland Schools Curriculum Council has taken this system on board. That council is where all the key stakeholders are and if we allow that sort of body to work through the issues we are more likely to come up with a system that is acceptable to all the key stakeholders rather than have a ministerial directive that "this will be done". I think that issue needs to be clarified and supported.

The recent announcements about technology in our schools have led to many of the schools really being opened up to a wider horizon of resources and teaching styles that were not available before. The Connect-Ed program deserved its gold medal award at the Government Technology Awards in Canberra. This has given many of our students, particularly those in rural and remote Queensland, something that was not available before. It has brought things into focus in an equitable way, because the cost of Internet access has been substantially reduced by means of the Connect-Ed program.

I wish to comment on the capital works program. I think the coalition's actions in the last two years really did address many of the issues that it was left with when the previous Labor Government vacated office. I instance the Building Better Schools Program. I think we ought to focus on it because there has been much debate this afternoon about the capital works program.

Let me tell the House what the capital works program in the Department of Education was like at the change of Government. We had a budget of about \$150m, a large proportion of which was allocated to what was then called the Building Better Schools Program—a \$44m program. I will tell honourable members how much the former Labor Government spent of its budget in eight months. For new schools it had allocated \$8m, but it had spent only 3% of the budget in eight months. For classroom upgrades \$12m was allocated, but it had spent only 1% after eight months. For school security \$5m was allocated, but it had spent only a quarter of it. For accelerated maintenance \$7m was allocated, but it had spent only about half of it. For a program to create shade \$3m had been allocated, but only 0.3% of that budget had been spent after eight months. For vocational education \$6m was allocated, but nothing had been spent after eight months. For students with disabilities \$2m was allocated, but only 1% was spent after eight months. For asset relocation \$1m was allocated, but only 12% had been spent after eight months.

The ALP's claim that it will manage the capital works program much better than we did is a claim that falls on stony ground, because its record gives us no confidence at all that it will do so. Its record was shameful. Our school system was crying out for more schools, enhanced classroom upgrades, new shaded areas and so on. The former Labor Government's pathetic record was that, after eight months of its budget, it had spent only a fraction of the money it had allocated. It was not until we came back into Government and got the program on track that in all areas 100% of the budget was being spent.

In relation to the capital works program, the best the Labor Party could achieve after six years in Government was a capital works program of \$150m. Our first capital works budget was in the order of \$271m. Our second budget was \$279m. We had a cutback in the third year because of the mix of funding and that brought the budget back to \$201m. So even our worst budget was \$50m better than the Labor Party's best budget after six years in office. Our schools look so good at present because of the additional capital works money that we pumped into the budget.

After six years in office, Labor left us a maintenance backlog of some \$100m. Its record in respect of schools is a maintenance backlog of \$100m, yet Government members claimed proudly that they had a commitment to education. What a furphy! It was not until we came in and ramped up the capital works budget that we really saw some progress in our schools, with upgrades and maintenance getting up to scratch. Over the past couple of years, more money has been spent on maintenance in our schools than was spent in the past six budgets put together. That is why over the past couple of years we have seen some progress with respect to painting, restorations and a whole range of projects in our schools.

A range of other issues also need to be addressed. We are not confident that this Government can deliver the additional resources it said it would provide for students with disabilities—one of its keynote election promises. That is because its record in Government is absolutely pathetic. It moved to close special schools and to integrate students into mainstream classrooms, but it failed to provide the resources. Again, when we came into Government we trebled the amount of money going to students with a disability. All of those issues are at risk again as we go back to the old Labor Government, which tries to manage interest groups through the QTU network. That has never worked in the past. We cannot lock out all of the major stakeholders and take one source of advice, as this Minister has done.

As I said before, going back to the past in education simply will not work. We have now put in place a Leading Schools program that in many respects was the envy of a lot of schools around Queensland and in some other parts of Australia. It was a move in the right direction. To attempt to scuttle the program and create a lot of fear and confusion is to hold back a tide that cannot be held back. Schools want authority and flexibility. I hope that we will see the program supported as it was in the past and that we will not see it scuttled.

Time expired.
