



Speech by

Mr R. QUINN

MEMBER FOR MERRIMAC

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MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

Mr QUINN (Merrimac—LP) (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House expresses its growing concern at the way in which the Minister for Education is handling his portfolio responsibilities."

The Minister for Education was the first member of the Beattie Government to miss a division, the first member of the Beattie Government to be caught misleading the House, the first member of the Beattie Government obliged to apologise for doing so and the first member of the Beattie Government to be referred to the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee. Is it any wonder that our schools, this House and the wider community are beginning to ask whether he is up to the task of running Queensland's largest department? It is no secret that many Government members privately share the same concern.

On top of his other transgressions and misadventures, the Minister has shown flagrant disregard for established procedures and due process in the approval of new non-Government schools in Queensland. This morning the Minister claimed that he was only doing what I did as Minister in asking the Planning Assessment Committee to give its prompt consideration to the application by Kimberley College. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I have never asked the committee to consider an application out of round. I have never asked the committee to reassess an application which had been right through the agreed process. I have never asked the committee to reassess an application which had been twice rejected. I have never asked the committee to reassess an application which had been the subject of a formal appeal process. I never asked the committee to approve an application just two months ahead of a school opening.

I have never received a letter from a highly reputable organisation, such as the Association of Independent Schools in Queensland, accusing me of ripping up the rule book. For the benefit of members opposite, I will read the letter sent to the Minister, condemning his outrageous intervention in due process. The letter of the AISQ dated 6 October states—

"Dear Dean, I write at the request of the Association's Executive Committee to express strong disappointment and disapproval of any intervention in the due process of the New Schools Planning Assessment Committee.

This particularly relates to out-of-round request by proponents of Kimberley College for a review of their Application, and your calling the Planning Assessment Committee together to consider this.

Understandably schools on which Kimberley would impact are angry that a different set of parameters seems to exist for Kimberley than for others. Deadline dates for the submission of Applications, Appeals, etc. should be universal for all proponents.

After all, Kimberley College was unsuccessful in both its Application and Appeal!

Minister, this Association is not impressed at suggestions of intervention in the due process at any time, but is particularly disenchanted when such action could very directly impact on member schools."

These are not the rantings of a lunatic fringe group. The AISQ is one of the most highly regarded organisations in education in Queensland, and it is certainly not given to making false or frivolous allegations.

The case for Kimberley College was considered and rejected in the 1997 round of applications. Unlike a number of other schools which were also rejected in the 1997 round, Kimberley College failed to submit a new or revised application for consideration in the 1998 round. This year's round was all but finalised by the end of August, but the committee did not even meet to reassess Kimberley College's application for another couple of months. In fact, according to the information supplied to my office, the committee chairman went on holidays rather than rubber-stamp this shonky approval process. I understand that the committee was to have met in September but did not, because no-one else wanted to participate in the shonky approval process, either. And even when the Minister did manage to corral the committee members on 30 October, they could not bring themselves to recommend approval for Kimberley College, so they had to go back again just last week.

If nothing else, one must admire the Minister's determination. Most Ministers would have taken the hint and advised Kimberley College to apply again next year in accordance with the established procedures and due process—but not this Minister. As I understand it, he finally succeeded in extracting a very reluctant and heavily qualified recommendation for approval from the committee meeting of 11 November.

I am advised that the committee's appointed chairman returned to Brisbane from holidays before the October and November meetings but still chose to absent himself from both of those meetings. In my view, his continuing refusal to be a party to this shonky process is a screaming indictment of the Minister's actions. So are the letters of other highly regarded individuals, such as the principals of John Paul College and Sheldon College. Again, their words—not mine—are a damning indictment of the Minister's disregard for due process. This is what the principal of Sheldon College had to say in her letter of 6 October—

"Why is it ... that Kimberley College is being permitted to break with normal policy of the Office of Non-State Schooling and submit an application for approval to open in 1999, eight months after the closing date, particularly given that schools have already been notified of applications approved for opening in 1999 and 2000 and those which have not?

Kimberley College was not amongst those listed."

That, of course, is the million-dollar question, but we have yet to receive a satisfactory answer from the Minister.

The principal of John Paul College is equally concerned. This is what he had to say in his letter of 2 October—

"It is with some surprise and concern that I have received correspondence regarding an Application for Planning Approval to establish a New Non-State School, Kimberley College, in 1999.

Earlier this year, I received notification of those applications approved to set up new non-state schools in 1999 and 2000.

Kimberley College was not one of these schools.

Furthermore, the Application Form completed by Kimberley College applies only to new schools intending to open in 2000 or to significantly change from 1999.

Kimberley College is clearly applying as a new school for 1999, not 2000, in clear contradiction of the provisions of the application.

A second concern is that the application in question was not submitted until September 29th 1998, seven months after the deadline for submission.

It is indeed difficult to understand why this has been allowed to happen.

The question then is: why has this single application been accepted and processed, such a long period after the closing date and outside the published due process?

On what grounds was due process overlooked?"

Again, I remind the House that the writers of these letters are highly regarded apolitical community leaders who are not given to making extravagant claims or baseless allegations. Their concerns cannot be swept aside with a dismissive flick of the ministerial wrist. The Minister owes them a proper explanation, and he owes it to them tonight. His actions have set off alarm bells throughout the entire non-Government school community. What we have now is a Clayton's process based on ministerial whim, whereby approvals are traded for political favours. A deal has been done, and the Minister has to deliver.

The Minister's outrageous disregard for due process has seriously undermined public confidence in the whole system. And his attempt this morning to suggest that he is simply doing what I did as Minister proves once again that he is a master of the misleading statement. He selectively quoted from a letter I had written to the member for Redlands to give the impression—that is, the Minister was giving the impression—that I was trying to push the Kimberley College application through the assessment committee. This is not true. A full reading of the letter shows that I was suggesting that the college proponents should provide the necessary documents to departmental officers as soon as possible so that the committee could consider the application under the normal due process conditions. That was again emphasised in the letter which I wrote.

I shall read the full context of the last paragraph of that letter so that members get an idea of what I was trying to convey. I said—and this is the part that was quoted by the Minister this morning—

"I have directed my departmental officers to expedite Kimberley College's application to enable the earliest possible consideration to be given to their application. Accordingly"—
and this is the rest that the Minister did not read—

"I would ask you to assist their application by requesting they meet all departmental requirements for further information as quickly as possible to ensure no unnecessary delays occur."

Throughout that letter I outlined the process. I also made the point that Kimberley College's application for planning approval would be considered through a process agreed to by peak Queensland non-State school representative bodies. This process is the same as that which will be followed by all applications for new non-State schools. That is identified clearly in the letter. I made the point that this process is being applied to all schools. Kimberley College was tardy in some respects. It had not provided some of the information that the department was requesting, and I was simply trying to reinforce to both the college proponents and the member for Redlands that, if they got their information in on time, the application could be processed much more quickly.

Time expired.
