



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 30 July 1998

MOTION OF CONFIDENCE

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Education) (4.14 p.m.): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I take the opportunity to congratulate you on your elevation to the high office that you have now assumed. May I also take the opportunity to pay a tribute to the honourable member who has just spoken. From time to time, and indeed perhaps during the course of this speech, I will offer some criticisms of the performance of the honourable member while he was the Minister for Education. However, I wish to begin by saying that during the whole of the time that he was the Minister for Education he always behaved like the former teacher that he is, like a man who had a vocation for teaching and who was desirous of delivering a better education system. Indeed, his desire to deliver a better education system was exceeded only by his incapacity to do so. The situation in which he found himself today is illustrative of the reasons why.

The honourable member's whole philosophy is found in his first put-down. His first put-down in his speech was along the lines that education has been demoted because now it is being handled by somebody who is No. 12 in the pecking order, whereas under the previous Government he was No. 4 in the pecking order. Does that not sum up the whole philosophy of Leading Schools—it does not matter how competent they are as long as they are leading, as long as they have the label or the tag? According to the former Education Minister, who has just spoken, the correct way to compare people is to see whether they are No. 4 or No. 12, and not whether they have better policies. We take a somewhat deeper view of these matters on this side of the House. I wish to acquaint the House with some of the considerations that we take into account.

One of the considerations is equity. Another one is justice and another is fairness. That was what was singularly lacking from the Leading Schools concept. The Leading Schools concept was a concept concerning glitz and glamour. It was a concept about managerial claptrap. It was a concept about training the mums and dads to be management consultants after dark instead of educating our children. It was a concept which was, despite the shadow Minister's denials, an elitist concept. Leading Schools was all about pitting schools against each other and making schools competitive with one another. However, education is not about competition, it is about human development. If we turn it into a tawdry capitalistic contest between State schools, we cut out the vitals of an education system that would otherwise be capable of enabling young people in this State to maximise their human potential.

Leading Schools was all about hierarchies. There were 104 phase 1 Leading Schools. Then there was to be another phase 2 Leading Schools set consisting of 300 schools. Where were the others going to come? Much further down the track! Where were the Leading Schools concentrated? One hundred per cent of the band 8 to 11 schools in the honourable member's electorate happen to have been Leading Schools. One hundred per cent of the schools in the electorate of the honourable member for Surfers Paradise happen to have been Leading Schools. In the electorate of Cook, for example, almost none were Leading Schools. In the electorate of the honourable member for Brisbane Central less than a third were Leading Schools, as was the case in my electorate. It was an elitist program and it was concentrated in particular electorates which happened to suit the demographics to which the honourable member opposite found himself drawn and in which he found himself comfortable.

Mr Gibbs: The silvertail electorates.

Mr WELLS: The silvertail electorates were those which benefited most obviously.

The honourable member also went on to say that I was the ideological captive of the QTU, because I happened to consult with it. I consulted more with the QTU in the first week—indeed in the first two days—of my Ministry than he consulted with it in the whole of his two years as Minister, that is, in the first two days I consulted with it once. The fact is that the honourable member opposite went around to his Liberal Party branch meetings and said, "What I am all about is destroying the QTU." What a foolish objective! Fancy making the school kids of Queensland the ping-pong balls in an industrial game that he was playing against the teachers. That is not an appropriate way to run things.

I was determined not to have gratuitous industrial fights with the teachers or the cleaners either, as the former Minister did. I was determined to maximise the possibilities for a good education for the kids. I am not going to be spending \$1.2m on conferences about Leading Schools, which he budgeted for. I am not going to be spending \$800,000 to send the mums and dads away to learn how to become nocturnal management consultants. I am going to spend that money on education; it is going to go to the schools.

The former Minister had tagged \$10.92m to go out to the schools in his so-called Leading Schools grant. That was going to go out the Monday after the Labor Party came to Government. One would think that \$10.92m is a lot of money. I sent out \$20m. The Labor Government bestowed \$20m on the school system at the same time. That \$20m will be recurrent. It was paid one semester at a time, but it is always paid one semester at a time. To say, "How do you know that there will not be any money next semester?" is a bit like saying, "How do you know that you are not going to walk out of here and step under a bus?" Of course, it could happen. One of us could step under a bus. But we are talking about that degree of improbability. The money is recurrent. It goes out one semester at a time. It is always going to go out one semester at a time because that is how the school system is run.

The former Government was putting \$10.92m into its Leading Schools program and that was going to the favoured schools. Those schools were not chosen according to any rational criteria. There were schools—and the former Minister knows this—which jumped through all the hoops, which set up their school council, but still did not get funded because they were not part of the club. However, all band 8 to 11 schools are going to be funded and have been funded in the last round.

As for the honourable member's \$56m—we heard much about that from honourable members sitting opposite. Let me tell honourable members about that \$56m. It is unfunded. It has never been to Treasury. It is not in the departmental forward plans. It was not in the Ministerial Program Statements. It was not in the Budget papers. It does not exist, except perhaps on the back of an envelope. The way the member worked it out is by multiplying \$30,000 by 1,300, which is roughly the number of schools. If one adds it all together and multiplies it all and puts in the \$11 per student, one can get to \$56m. The trouble is that the figure of \$56m is merely a fantasy. It does not exist in any departmental records. It does not exist in Treasury. The money is not there. The member has not got the cash in the bank and he is saying, "I was going to do this." I applaud his good intentions. I suppose it would be churlish if I said, "He was saying \$56m. Why not \$156m?" If he is just pulling rabbits out of a hat or just pulling figures out of the air, why not \$1,056m? It would be just as real whichever one he said.

The truth of the matter is that all he put up was \$10.92m and we put up \$20m. As I said, that \$20m is going to be recurrent. It will, however, have to be subject to a process of consultation with school communities as to how that recurrent \$20m is divided up. Let me be perfectly clear about this. There are inequities in the school system. At the moment the school system is not one which is based on perfect justice. The funding base of the school system has been skewed by the Leading Schools program. Some schools have been left out completely and others have been given privileged status. Those equity considerations will have to be taken on board.

Over the next few months we will have a process of consultation with the school communities throughout Queensland. We will run this through the 36 districts in Queensland, which were set up by my predecessor. In the course of that consultation, we will ask school communities a number of interesting questions. We are not going to lay down the law to them. We are not going to go and get some management consultant from Wisconsin to prescribe how we should make human beings fit into the straitjacket of some managerialist ideology. We are going to ask the school communities what level of school-based management they want. We will ask them instead of telling them. We will consult with them instead of bossing them and ordering them around.

Mr Springborg: 100 days of consultation.

Mr WELLS: No, we will have a swift period of consultation. We are not going to keep people talking just for the sake of talking. We will give them the opportunity to give us an indication of what they want, so that the school communities can address the equity issue as well as the issue of what aspects of school-based management they want to undertake. It is absolutely ridiculous for a Minister to sit up on the 22nd floor of Education House, as the former Minister did, and hand out decrees about how schools should run their business. The people who know how schools should be run and what

degree of school-based management schools should appropriately adopt are the people who are in that school environment themselves. We are going to let them speak.

Mr Speaker—I did not see you resume the chair. With your usual unassuming humility, you resumed the chair in complete silence. I would like to interrupt my remarks, Mr Speaker, to congratulate you on your elevation to the honourable position that you now hold. Your election to the position of Speaker honours not only your own constituents in Redcliffe but also mine who regard you also as a representative of the city in which they live. On behalf of all of them, I say congratulations and best wishes.

To conclude, I would just like to say that the former Minister really had \$10.92m; \$56m is pure imagination. It never existed. We are talking about his \$10.92m and the Labor Government's approximate \$20m that we put into the school system. That \$20m is recurrent. For the former Minister or for any other person to go around spreading fear that that sum of money is not going to be recurrent is irresponsible, mischievous and damaging to the school system. The school communities themselves have got to have some say in how this much larger cake is divided up. We will also take into account the views of school communities as to how the new ingredients in the growing cake will be divided up.

Prior to the last election, we entered into commitments for new behaviour management programs for cooler schools, for enhanced capital works programs and for literacy and numeracy programs, and it is important that these should be targeted in order to have the maximum effect on a needs-based criterion. Education funding is now going to be about a needs-based criterion. It is no longer the criterion of leading and of hierarchy; Leading Schools is finished and in its place is going to be just schools—schools funded according to distributive justice under the principles of distributive justice.

It is pretty obvious what members on the other side of the House stood for in Government and in the school system and what we stand for. We stand for equity; they stand for inequality. They stand for some Leading Schools and some presumably receding schools, following schools or at least second-rate schools in comparison. We stand for, as far as is humanly possible, giving each child in Queensland a good opportunity and an equal opportunity for a valuable and improving education.

I have been to schools which were not among the Leading Schools. When I said to them, "You are not a Leading School but you are now up there with them because the Leading Schools program is abolished and here is the funding which makes you a Leading School along with the rest", those schools enjoyed the money. They could use that money for all sorts of useful purposes. But mostly that was not what they wanted. What they valued most was the self-esteem. They were no longer being subjected to the put-down of the Leading Schools concept. They were no longer being subjected to the humiliation of being told that somebody else was leading and they were following. They were no longer being subjected to the kind of denigration which goes with that kind of hierarchy. The people to whom this was being done were the young and the innocent.

I visited a special school and at that particular special school—which was a Leading School—there was a child who was intellectually handicapped and was confined to a wheelchair. He had a touch-screen computer. He would touch the screen of the computer and he could turn a teddy bear into a golliwog or into a frog and so on, and his little face lit up with a smile when he was able to do that. Not many miles down the road there was another special school and it happened to have some children with the same disadvantages. There was a child at that school who was also intellectually handicapped and was also confined to a wheelchair but he did not have a touch screen computer. He did not smile, whereas the child at the Leading School did smile.

That is what the Leading School's concept eventually came to. That is the hard edge of the Leading School concept: that one little intellectually handicapped and wheelchair-bound child had a touch-screen computer and another child did not. That is not fostering an education system. That is not equity. That is not justice. That is not fairness. That is not the Australian way. The abolition of the Leading Schools concept—the abolition of the notion and its substitution with a funding policy based on needs is a substitution which follows the correct path in education. It is the path which will lead to the maximisation of human potential amongst the next generation.
