



Speech by

Mrs J. SHELDON

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

Hansard 18 November 1998

BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY (PORTABLE LONG SERVICE LEAVE) AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs SHELDON (Caloundra—LP) (5.13 p.m.): This amendment Bill, sponsored by the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations, seeks to modify the Building and Construction Industry (Portable Long Service Leave) Act 1996. I note particularly his belief that an amendment of the Act and the introduction of a training levy are necessary to ensure the necessary quantum of skilled tradespeople to take us into the next millennium. We certainly need the numbers to make this necessary quantum leap so that the people of Queensland are placed in a position where they can enjoy the genuine fruits of a bounteous 21st century.

As usual, the only argument is how to achieve this and also, as usual, sadly the tired old comrades of the Labor Party have got it wrong. One does not stimulate the private sector by filching private funds; one does it by keeping regulation to the absolute minimum and by creating the optimum environment for productive private investment. With those facts in mind, I would like to briefly remind the House of the less than impressive record of the previous Labor Government when last in power and then provide some comparisons with the coalition's record when recently in Government.

I suppose the Minister needs to be congratulated on the rare glimpse of sincerity that he displayed in his second-reading speech when he identified that the period between 1993 and 1996 was a tragic performance in vocational education and training, particularly for the building and construction industry. It would not have escaped the notice of honourable members, and I hope sincerely those opposite, that the demerits of the period referred to by the Minister were the demerits accumulated by a Labor Government.

Just before the coalition left office a little over four months ago, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research released statistics of which the honourable Minister could only dream. Those statistics showed that Queensland employed and trained 23.9% of the nation's apprentices and trainees—an excellent achievement for a State with 19% of the nation's population. In comparison, Victoria, with one third of the nation's population, generates only 25% of the nation's apprentices and trainees. The Minister wants us to believe that the coalition Government achieved all this without policies and programs of substance.

I take this opportunity to remind the Minister of some of the other achievements of the department that he now heads when it was under the leadership of my colleague the honourable member for Clayfield. The coalition Government reviewed capital infrastructure to align investment decisions for faculties and infrastructure that required VET services. I note the Minister's previous criticism of the coalition's competitive tendering processes and their impact on TAFE. Therefore, I was astounded to read his recent media release in which he bragged about the release of \$10m of competitive tender, indicating registered training organisations, including TAFE, were eligible to apply. We reviewed development processes for the annual VET plan to make the State training profile easier to understand and a more effective strategic planning tool. We also reviewed our social justice policy and the Queensland adult education language, literacy and numeracy policy. We developed the VET quality management policy and the VET disability and access and equity policy. We separated the purchaser/provider functions of the department in line with the issues raised in the Wiltshire report of 1996 and the State Commission of Audit of 1996. We amended the State Purchasing Policy, developed the employer assistance program, and introduced the Australian recognition framework, which is a comprehensive approach to the national recognition of VET. In addition, the coalition

conducted the highly successful International Year of Training conference, small business and rural training conferences, an access and equity forum and many regional forums aimed at expanding vocational education and training throughout the State.

It is beyond doubt that the training system must adapt to the needs of industry. It simply does not work the other way around. It bears repeating that the needs of industry exist, and genuinely exist, throughout the length and breadth of Queensland. They are needs that are not necessarily closely apparent to a Government that is guided by the apparatchiks now back in residence in George Street in the brave new world of old, tired Labor.

The coalition Government introduced vocational subjects into the school curriculum. That provides young people with the opportunity to attain real, practical skills whilst still attending school. This is of great importance—overriding importance—in regional Queensland and in country Queensland. What is more, this policy was developed in a true partnership, not the shotgun marriage sort of partnership we so often see from Labor between Government and industry and, in particular, small business. It offered real training for real jobs, without raiding anyone's piggy bank. That is an important element that needs to be underlined in this debate on the amendments to the long service leave scheme. The real issue in training is not finding new ways to tax people, but finding a way around the skills shortage problem that is facing this industry.

There are many more examples of the energy and innovation of the previous Minister and the coalition Government, but I think that the point has been made. When one puts those achievements in the context of their coinciding with the unprecedented growth in vocational education and training, the Minister's comments are also put into context. At best, they reflect the Minister's depth of understanding of his portfolio when he was shadow Minister; at worst, they are cynically deceptive.

It is worth going back to some of the detail of what the Minister had to say in his second-reading speech. One key element of his strategy is to match Queensland to the practice of other States in terms of a training levy. The Minister notes that South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania have all established training funds, but he does not canvass for us the patent failure of some expensive aspects of the Western Australian experience. This is disingenuous. It is all very well to promote a scheme as beneficial if, in fact, the evidence points clearly towards benefit. It is little short of political skulduggery to propagandise the basis of something that clearly has problems elsewhere, more especially when the advent of the scheme here is tied to the commencement of frenetic activity by the Government to realise the Premier's high-five unemployment target. Neither is there anything wrong with a training fund as such. However, what is at risk in the scheme proposed by the Minister is the fund from which building workers finance their long service leave. As another speaker pointed out to the House earlier in this debate, there is never any sense in robbing Peter to pay Paul.

As the Minister rightly averred in his second-reading speech, every Queenslander will support the creation of additional jobs and real training opportunities, but the jobs have to be genuine, long-term, sustainable, career-building jobs and the training has to be real, too. It has to be training that actually fits the employer's requirements and matches the availability of jobs in the future. No-one disputes that this is an unpleasant dilemma. Everyone would cheer genuine progress towards solving it, but certainly fiddling the books of the Building Workers' Portable Long Service Leave Fund is not the way to go about achieving this end.
