



Speech by

Mr LEN STEPHAN

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

Hansard 20 October 1998

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

Mr STEPHAN (Gympie—NPA) (4.14 p.m.): It gives me a great deal of pleasure to join in the debate this afternoon on the Building and Construction Industry (Portable Long Service Leave) Amendment Bill. The creation of jobs is one of the most important roles that Government in Australia can play at this point in time.

Mr Purcell: Hear, hear!

Mr STEPHAN: It is important. Gone are the days when, upon leaving school, we could choose where we wanted to work. Gone are the days when we could safely say that we had a job for life. We must also remember that just a month or two ago the Beattie Government was elected on the back of a plan to reduce unemployment to 5% over three years.

Mr Braddy: Over five years.

Mr STEPHAN: Yes, it stretched a little after that, but that is what the Government was talking about. Depending on who the Premier was trying to impress at the time, he would mention one or two different figures.

The Premier's mantra was, "Jobs, jobs, jobs." He said that every morning he would wake up obsessed with jobs. However, I believe that the Premier has had some bad nights. It is not only that the Premier's obsession with jobs has been wanting, but he is not doing a very good job of lowering the rate of unemployment. For a man so obsessed, the Premier shows little enthusiasm and innovation. Members need just look at his Budget—the one that he ripped off from the coalition Government. In this Budget, unemployment is predicted to be around 8.75% at the end of the 1998-99 financial year, that is, the same level projected by the coalition. And what of the monthly unemployment figures? The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that unemployment in September was 9.2%, which is 0.6% higher than it was the previous month. That means that an additional 16,000 Queenslanders are out of work.

Regardless of how passionate it is, an obsession cannot in itself produce results. Actions themselves speak louder than words and in the case of job creation, the Premier needs to take action to ensure that he has good, workable policies. Unfortunately, the Premier's obsession for jobs does not extend beyond his commitment to the union movement. It does not extend to accepting the reality that the coalition's industrial relations policies were worked out to create jobs.

During the two years that the coalition was in office, more than 91,000 jobs were created. More than 91,000 Queenslanders were given the opportunity to work and earn an income during the term of the National/Liberal coalition Government. Let us compare that with the Labor Party's achievements during its term in office.

Mr Schwarten: Three months.

Mr STEPHAN: Yes, three months.

Under Labor, unemployment in Queensland rose to more than 11%. That is more than one in 10 Queenslanders unemployed and unable to earn an income. The Beattie Labor Government has already started to head down the path of economic failure and high unemployment.

Let us take a look at the development of the Construction Training Centre at Salisbury. It is fair to say that the previous Minister for Training, the honourable member for Clayfield, received a great number of complaints from TAFE Queensland staff concerning the development of the Construction Training Centre at Salisbury. It was because of these complaints and others from the building and construction industry, and the fact that they were being ignored by Construction Training Queensland, that the previous Minister was motivated to employ Coopers and Lybrand to assess the extent to which the project was meeting current training needs and its capacity to meet future needs.

The complaints received specifically from TAFE fell into two major categories. The first was a perceived conflict of interest. The legislation setting up ITABs—Industry Training Advisory Bodies—quite clearly indicates that their role is advisory: to assess training needs in their respective industry, advise Government of those needs and provide suggestions as to how those needs could best be met. TAFE staff felt that the Construction Industry ITAB, by insisting that TAFE students attend the Construction Training Centre at Salisbury, was exceeding its legislatively defined role.

Yeronga TAFE teachers were particularly incensed when it was suggested that they and their students should all move to Salisbury, unnecessarily pay \$8,000 of public moneys in rent, leaving behind purpose-built workshops and buildings at Yeronga that the taxpayers would need to spend millions of dollars gutting and refurbishing before they could be used for other vocational education and training programs. The Minister now wishes to extend what many TAFE staff and others already regard as a serious conflict of interest situation by the ITAB, by using clause 8 of the legislation to appoint the ITAB as the legal entity to administer the public moneys being siphoned from the building workers' long service leave funds.

How does the Minister justify this in terms of the legislative role of the ITAB as a purely advisory body? Will he extend these additional responsibilities to other ITABs? For example, if the tourism, fishing or transport industries came to him with proposals for the State to keep diesel fuel taxes in place once they are reduced by the Commonwealth, will he entrust the ITABs to set up training centres and utilise the funds from taxing diesel fuel to stimulate employment and training in their respective industries? No wonder TAFE staff view the current issues at Salisbury as a major cause for concern.

The second major area of concern by TAFE staff and industry groups that stimulated the decision to commission an external review by Coopers and Lybrand related to doubts as to whether the Construction Training Centre concept, as originally conceived, was currently relevant to training needs and likely to meet future needs in the industry. These doubts are shared not only by critics of the current centre at Salisbury but also by many keen supporters of the centre who are committed to its development and future relevance.

In their September 1997 report they had this to say about the new training environment that had developed since the Construction Training centre concept was first established—

"... the introduction of competitive tendering/user choice. This was not around when the decisions were made to build the Salisbury Training Centre. Both these features (user choice and competitive tendering) are the biggest obstacles in determining the organisational role and direction of the Centre.

... more on the job training as part of training packages, easy entry to the training market without the huge overheads associated with building colleges/skills centres by new entrants into the training market, perceived advantages of on-the-job training, the use of new training mediums, such as CDROM, CDI, Internet, Computer Based Training allowing flexible on-the-job training.

...

A clear distinction between Government as purchaser of training and as a provider through TAFE.

...

The most dynamic change that has affected training delivery is that construction companies and builders, large and small, have a new management and workplace structure. The major effect of this is that the concept of grass roots employees is diminishing along with the direct employment of apprentices and trainees.

...

Both the employee and the apprentices/trainees are being replaced by labour-hire arrangements on a needs basis and the rapid growth of group training arrangements. A recent paper for ANTA revealed that this type of employment structure is widespread across those industries which have traditionally employed apprentices. These changes are rapidly becoming the norm. The main reason given by contractors surveyed for not being involved in training was that they could not provide continuity of employment."

It is ironic that, having abolished TAFE head office in order to decentralise vocational education and training decision making, the Minister is prepared to embark on a process which is designed to centralise all metropolitan building and construction training at one centre in order to fulfil a purely political commitment.

In the face of such well-founded concerns, the Minister is acting in a most negligent and deceptive manner in attempting to push this legislation through the House and pour more public moneys into this venture before members are provided with copies of the report. The Minister continues to refuse to make the Coopers and Lybrand report available to the shadow Minister and the Parliament. Every member of this House has an obligation to be fully informed about issues upon which we are required to vote. In light of this, the Minister needs to provide us, as members of this House, with sufficient information to assure all and sundry that the sums of money that have been earmarked for this initiative are not going to be used to prop up some form of educational white elephant.

Furthermore, the Minister has been deceptive by omitting to indicate in his second-reading speech that, while Western Australia has a training levy in the building and construction industry, it has failed to meet expectations. This failure has been so severe that a drastic overhaul of the WA levy has been required. There is no evidence that the Minister and his advisers have learnt anything from the interstate experience.

Another relevant point concerning the situation in Western Australia is that the training levy replaced the apprentice requirement in State Government contract work. This information was in an information paper entitled Experiences with Construction Industry Training Levies in the Various States, prepared in September 1995 for the Minister's predecessor. Minister Braddy has either not done his homework or has chosen to omit from his second-reading speech any reference to this rather inconvenient fact. Premier Beattie and Minister Braddy have promised their supporters that this levy will be in place within six months of their ascent to power. There is adequate argument for this amending legislation to be delayed for a reasonable period of time.

Time expired.
