



Speech by

**Mr S. SANTORO**

**MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD**

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Hansard 17 November 1998

### TRAINING FOR MATURE-AGE WORKERS

**Mr SANTORO** (Clayfield—LP) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House calls upon the Government to reverse its intention to discriminate against mature Queensland workers in employment who seek to enhance their vocational skills through accessing traineeships."

Last week, in his ministerial statement and accompanying media release, Mr Braddy made a very selective use of statistics from the departmental report produced for him by Dr Larry Smith, one of his departmental officers. Dr Smith prefaces his report with a disclaimer as to the veracity of statistical evidence collected and cites the existence of pervasive problems with the consistency, validity and accessibility of statistical information relating to apprenticeships and traineeships. Similar disclaimers appearing elsewhere in the report include—

"On almost every statistic collected for this report, there was significant variability across industry areas. Indeed, summing data into one overall training perspective frequently presented a picture that did not reflect the situation in most industries.

...

The precision and scope of this Report have been limited by difficulties in obtaining valid and reliable statistics that can be compared across time.

...

Existing data relating to apprentice numbers attending TAFE Institutes is not sufficiently reliable to allow detailed analysis."

As Dr Smith was one of the most senior officers in TAFE Queensland for most of the years covered by his report, this is the first of several surprising

admissions and/or omissions in this report. I will continue with Dr Smith's disclaimers relating to the data upon which he bases his report. It states—

"Older data has been coded using a different set of criteria from that used for 'newer' data and this does not necessarily mean the same thing. A similar problem arises because of the introduction of the A VETMISS standards around 1995."

It is important to note that this date is critical, as the coalition came to power in Queensland in February 1996. Dr Smith goes on to state—

"Inconsistencies exist across and within the three major data bases."

...

"There are no up-to-date, readily available and comprehensive statistical reports on trade training which provide a single set of regularly updated and defensible information for policy developers and decision makers."

These admissions about the lack of rigour in the report's statistical database, when combined with its frequent use of anecdotal evidence and reliance on informal findings of internal research projects, research by the department's own director-general and extensively quoted reports based on VET in Victoria rather than Queensland, lead to internal inconsistencies in the document and greatly limit its credibility. Despite his own clear warnings about the quality of the statistics, frequent mentions in the report that information being considered is "anecdotal" and warnings that not too much reliance should be put on short-term, fluctuating figures, Dr Smith completely ignores his own advice and begins his report with a generalisation that struck a responsive chord with his no-doubt appreciative Minister. He states there is—

"... clear evidence that people in the 15-20 year old age group and particularly early school leavers are increasingly being locked out from structured training. The situation is far more obvious with respect to trainees but the trend is also obvious with apprenticeships."

Further in his report this statement is attributed to a 1998 report by the Office of Training and Further Education in Victoria, which coincidentally has the title Apprenticeships and Traineeships: Victorian Trends. Unfortunately, Dr Smith shoots part of his authoritative sounding argument to bits when on page (vii) and again on page 16 he states—

"There has not been a dramatic change over time in the proportion of apprentices in each age group."

In fact, the actual decrease in the apprentice age group of most concern to the Minister and Dr Smith, the early school leavers, the 15 to 16 year olds, if we make the obviously heroic assumption that the figures are reliable, has been 1% over four years, two of which were Labor years.

I will return to completely discount the other parts of Dr Smith's opening generalisation later—I refer to the bit about traineeships—suffice it to make two points. From the data given in the report concerning the percentage of trainees in each age group and the annual number of trainee commencements, it can readily be calculated that the number of 15 to 16-year-old trainees commencing in 1997-98 is approximately 1,000 more than commenced in 1994-95. So much for the myth that the early school leavers have been locked out of training. There has been a five-fold increase in numbers within this age group.

My second and major point is that Dr Smith's data on page 21 is not comparing like with like. I refer to his own point about changing criteria. When the national system of traineeships was introduced, the national focus was on limiting traineeships as much as possible to 16 to 19-year-olds, and the earlier figures reflect this. This initial rigidity in the system contained two potential injustices for mature workers already in the work force. These workers were called upon to teach work-related skills to new recruits but under the system were denied the opportunity to receive formal accreditation for these same skills. In addition, if older existing workers were excluded from a traineeship and therefore denied the opportunity to attain the qualification involved, the youngest workers, having been provided with the training and having achieved the relevant vocational qualification, could leapfrog or displace their older colleagues.

Mr Braddy appears totally unconcerned with these issues of natural justice and attacks the coalition for softening the unconscionable rigidity of the initial bias against mature workers seeking

recognition for and the opportunity to extend their vocational skills. As a lawyer, Mr Braddy should consider whether he is breaching anti-discrimination legislation as he sets about penalising older workers by using age as a primary criteria for deciding who will receive vocational training and qualifications.

Oblivious to the many limitations in this report, Minister Braddy has plucked a few negatives out of the mass of admittedly invalid, inconsistent and unreliable figures and attempted to make a convincing-sounding story of coalition-inspired decline and destruction of apprentice and trainee programs. From page 15 of his departmental report, Mr Braddy could have told the Parliament—

"Apprentice completion rates in many of the trades have improved quite significantly over the last three or four years. In the period 1994-98:

Automotive completions have risen from 593 to 918 (a 55% increase);

Construction completions have risen from 859 to 1,561 (an 82% increase);

Electrical/electronics completions have risen from 639 to 729 (a 14% increase);

Food completions have risen from 432 to 548 (a 27% increase); and

Mechanical and fabrication engineering completions have risen from 842 to 1,020 (a 21% increase)."

These figures would not have suited the Minister's negative and destructive purpose. From page (v) of his departmental report, he could have told the Parliament that the decline in apprenticeships, though significant, is not as marked in Queensland as in other parts of Australia. As Dr Smith says—

"Indeed with 18.3% of Australia's population, Queensland currently has 19.7% of the nation's apprentices in training."

Again, such a positive statistic and the mass of other positive material in this report would not serve Mr Braddy's purpose. He could have encouraged those considering a career in the construction industry by pointing out that in the industry over the past 12 months new apprentice approvals have improved by a significant 29%, to 1,682. Instead, he hunted down the most negative statistics he could find to discourage would-be apprentices.

His warped creativity in focusing on the most negative statistics can be best illustrated by his reference to what he believed was an unhealthy growth in traineeships under the coalition. Anyone with minimal mathematical skills can put a ruler on the section of the graph in figure 13 on page 18 which represents the Labor years. By extending the trend line it can be seen that, had the ALP

remained in power, it would have created about 20,000 traineeships by 1997-98. Why, then, according to Mr Braddy's report, was it so bad for the coalition to create about 25,000 traineeships by the same date? Did those extra 5,000 Queenslanders not deserve to be trained? On page 17 of his report, Dr Smith indicates—

"Between 1994 and 1997, Queensland's proportion of the nation's trainees rose from 22.3% to 26.8%, the highest for any State".

The phenomenal growth Mr Braddy considers so unhealthy or bad increased Queensland's share of the nation's trainees by a mere 4.5%. Braddy, a perpetual critic, would obviously prefer Queensland's share of national traineeships to have declined by 4.5%.

On page 14 of his report, Dr Smith describes as a conundrum the fact that Queensland simultaneously has both one of the nation's highest apprenticeship completion rates and the nation's highest cancellation rate. Which part of the conundrum was of interest to this destructive Minister? Well, it was not the higher than average completion rate. Not wanting to give much credit to the previous Government, the report's author indicates that this completion rate indicates that good things may have happened in the department in 1994 to cause it.

The Minister's antipathy to mature workers and traineeships shines through when on page 3 of his ministerial statement he decries the fact that there are now more trainees than apprentices in Queensland. Why should there not be? According to 1996-97 figures I have just received from NCVET, the same situation exists in all other States, contrary to information in Mr Braddy's report. As the average traineeship is one year in length as against four for an apprenticeship, it is logical that there would be more traineeships—up to four times as many.

In addition, traineeships were developed to provide training in new, growing areas of the economy where no formal training already existed; for example, in information technology, service industries, horticulture, and administrative, managerial and paraprofessional areas. It is within these areas that growth in traineeships for mature-age workers—existing workers who need them—was occurring.

We in the Opposition totally reject the false emphasis that Minister Braddy is seeking to place on his new, and what he calls progressive, training agenda. We believe that mature-aged workers within the work force deserve as much access to training as anybody else, because unless some of them retrain they will drop out of the work force as the result of a lack of such retraining. And what the Minister may gain from his new-found zeal and emphasis for employees at the other end—the youth end of the training market—will certainly be counteracted by those dropping out at the other end. The system that the Minister is criticising is the very system that I inherited, which provided precisely the same results as those that were provided when I was the Minister for Training and Industrial Relations.

Time expired.

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