



Speech by

BILL FELDMAN

MEMBER FOR CABOOLTURE

Hansard 25 August 1999

SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Mr FELDMAN Caboolture—ONP) (8.52 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise to join this debate. However, before I do I want to comment on something that occurred earlier in the 6 o'clock debate. It is something that I thought that I would never hear in this Parliament. We are used to the constant name calling, but to actually hear a racist slur from the bastions of multiculturalism really, really surprised me. To hear the member for Archerfield call the member for Clayfield a Mafioso was quite surprising indeed.

I also recall the words of the Minister for Education back on 21 July this year as he sought to debate a point with the member for Caloundra. I also find myself feeling very, very sad about the fact that, out of that little tirade, the Minister who represents the educational standards of this State made fun of the illiterate by making a joke about illiteracy in this State. No wonder those who cannot read or write the English language are too frightened to speak up, to put up their hands or to go forward and be recognised as someone devoid of this ability. After seeing the Minister for Education in action—treating this handicap as a bit of a joke and seeking to ridicule the very people he should be reaching out to help—it is no wonder that illiteracy is such a problem in this State. I feel that that is somewhat of a disgrace. With such a shoddy disregard for illiteracy from the Education portfolio, where will education go in this State?

That was not the first time such an offence was committed by the Minister for Education. I recall the very same comments— sad comments—about join-the-dot books, colouring-in books, papers and pens as he sought to ridicule the members of One Nation when we first entered this Chamber. The Minister must have felt that the handicapped people of this State, some of whom I remind him live and work within his own electorate, are worth only a passing joke. I hope that the percentage of people who are handicapped by illiteracy is a sufficient percentage to have him no longer representing his electorate. I remind him that, by making such a nasty, pointed joke, he has alienated the 23% or more of his electorate who voted for One Nation. I am also at the point of putting out a press release to advise that the Minister for Education calls 23% of Queenslanders illiterate. If the Minister retains the audacity to insinuate that the member for Caloundra is illiterate, then I, too, would be proud to stand by the member for Caloundra in the same denigrated state.

In common with other speakers in this debate, I, too, must reiterate what the Ombudsman had to say in his most recent annual report, which was—

"If schools are imposing sanctions on students not in uniform, then they are doing so with no legal basis."

Unfortunately, we live in litigious times. I feel sure that, with no legal basis upon which to fall back on, it will not be long before some parent brings a teacher or a school principal to task in the legal arena over poor little Johnny who has suffered some deep psychological trauma through somehow being sanctioned for non-compliance with a school uniform policy. With no legal basis upon which to fall back, this is a very distinct possibility.

Our school system deserves better protection from litigation when the school seeks only to protect and educate the major proportion of our students. The Ombudsman went on to state—

"The position, therefore, is that putting inappropriate dress codes aside, a student who is reasonably dressed cannot be punished or treated differently in any way for not wearing the official school uniform. I know that this view is unpopular with some principals and P. and C. associations but the position can only be changed by legislation, not by administrative stealth or low level coercion."

I agree with the Ombudsman's opinion. After all, he has been challenged by complaint after complaint for at least the past two successive years. He has called for legislative intervention, because he has also stated publicly that there is no legal basis for the mandatory wearing of school uniforms.

We cannot box people into the two categories that this debate has raised. The general school population cannot be categorised so simply into either liberal freethinkers or strict disciplinarians. We all know these categories exist, but the majority of people fall between the two extremes. The vast majority of the school population, including those in those two categories, desire the uniform code for a whole range of very positive reasons other than to punish or discipline students.

Today, we are more conscious of our image, and so are schools. Even in my own community of Caboolture, parents school shop. They search for an appropriate school, especially in the area of higher education, in particular between Years 8 to 12. The high schools that present themselves well, that is, have pride in themselves and reward their achievers—both students and teachers—come across in the community as schools that are worthy of travelling those few extra miles to attend. I am saying that these types of schools actually attract parents and students. A uniform code goes a long way in the presentation of this corporate image of neatness, pride and success.

In my own electorate, for example—this is a subjective issue—I know of parents who transport students from Mount Mee and Woodford to the Tullawong State High School. I also know of parents who transport their children from Kilcoy to the Bribie Island State High School. Each school comes with its own levels of acceptance and credentials, most passed on by word of mouth through association and appearance. Recently, I responded to an invitation to the Tullawong State School to speak to the Year 7 students about the Westminster system prior to their visit in Parliament House. We had the opportunity to engage in a debate about school uniforms.

Mr Hamill: Hope you learned something.

Mr FELDMAN: This debate was to give some insight into the presentation of views on the floor of Parliament. I must admit that there were no rude interruptions in the school situation, unlike what we see here from both sides of the House. The incredible part of that short debate was that we could not find any student in the four Year 7 classes involved who wanted to present a case against the wearing of school uniforms. However, we had a whole room of takers who wanted to speak for the benefits of a school uniform policy. In the end, I had to develop some arguments against the wearing of school uniforms to enable the debate to continue.

I digress for a moment to speak of schools and their needs. Never being a shrinking violet, I take this opportunity to remind the Minister of the needs of several of the schools in my electorate.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr Clark): Order! That is not relevant to the debate tonight. We are discussing a Bill about school uniforms.

Mr FELDMAN: Neatness and school uniforms are very important, and that is what I want to highlight to the Minister.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member will beware, because I will listen carefully to the member's comments and then make a decision.

Mr FELDMAN: For over six years the junior section of the Caboolture State School has been crying out for a new toilet block. The Minister is well aware of my consistent lobbying for a new facility, due to the extreme health risks that the old facility now poses. I look forward to seeing that facility as part of the 1999-2000 capital works program for Education. There is no point in having a tidy school and neat uniforms if the students have to wait to attend to their duties—if I can put it that way—until they get home.

At the Elimbah State School there is an urgent need for an additional classroom—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! We are not debating capital works. This legislation relates to uniforms. If the member has anything more to say on that topic, he will proceed. Otherwise, he will resume his seat.

Mr Wells: I did take the names.

Mr FELDMAN: I thank the Minister. I realise that he has been looking into those matters and I appreciate that. I was also going to highlight the fact that the Elimbah State School needs an extra classroom for the preschool.

Mr Wells: I got your point about the Caboolture State School.

Mr FELDMAN: I thank the Minister. I was going to ask the Minister about the Caboolture State High School's need for a major covered area, which has been on the list since 1996.

I thank the Minister for the funding that he has granted to the Wamuran State School. That school is looking for a little bit of extra help in providing an entrance to the school that will prevent children from being injured when walking to or from the school, where they will be wearing their school uniforms with pride and humble dignity. The school needs a little help in the provision of an entrance to the school off Spillane Street at the back of the school, rather than having an entrance off the D'Aguilar Highway.

Mr Wells: We're working on that.

Mr FELDMAN: Again I thank the Minister. As I said, the \$2.5m grant was greatly appreciated by that community and it will be utilised extremely well.

One Nation supports the concept of State schools being able to develop and apply mandatory dress codes for their students. Considering the conflicting advice of the Minister for Education and the Ombudsman's report with regard to the authority of principals to apply dress codes within their schools, I agree that the legislation is necessary to ensure that schools have a formal right to adopt and to enforce school uniform policies.

The majority of students, parents and teachers favour school uniforms because they promote unity within the schools and give schools an identity. Most students take pride in the wearing of their school uniforms, because it encourages discipline in their personal grooming while providing uniformity amongst their peers. Students today are constantly under peer pressure to fit in and be accepted. Cigarettes, alcohol and drugs are probably the main issues that face our youth every day. The last thing that they need to cope with is the added pressure of having to decide what to wear. Some may not think this would be an issue, but when one takes into consideration the fact that most children aspire to wearing expensive brand-name clothes and shoes, those who cannot afford such items are often looked down upon by their peers. Of course, it is upsetting that something so trivial can impact so greatly on a child's self-esteem, just because they are deemed to be not a part of the in-crowd. We are all sycophants, but sometimes we just do not make the grade. For example, members of the Labor Party are wannabes—they want to be members of One Nation—but they just cannot make the grade. School uniforms would eliminate the desire to be part of a trend setting in-crowd because all children would be seen as equals. I consider this to be a major advantage to our youth, especially in today's society.

Another advantage of having school uniforms is the safety aspect. Schoolchildren participate in school excursions outside the school, quite often into heavily populated city centres. This is done very frequently. Even here in Parliament House we frequently have visits from schoolchildren. They visit places such as the museums, South Bank and the art galleries. I can imagine the nightmare that teachers would face if students were not wearing uniforms, because they would not be very easily identifiable in crowds. A student could wander off without the teacher noticing and then there would be a frantic teacher with one less child in their care. Can members imagine the chaos if several schools without uniform codes attended the same venue at the same time? It is easy to see that it would be very difficult for teachers to keep track of their students, which would definitely compromise the safety of those students.

Some may argue that implementing a mandatory school uniform policy would cause families considerable expense, and we have heard that from members opposite. However, I take the view that if parents can afford to buy Adidas sportswear, surf clothing such as Billabong or Quicksilver, or Nike shoes, it would be safe to assume that they can afford a uniform as an alternative, especially considering that these days uniforms are ultimately cheaper than expensive brand-name clothing.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr FELDMAN: When the rude people have finished interjecting, I will continue.

Families that face difficulties in purchasing uniforms need not be forced into financial hardship. I am aware of several schools that have separate funds allocated to help families in genuine financial need. Those funds may cover the purchase of uniforms or school books. As the member for Merrimac advised the House in his second-reading speech, schools that choose not to have a uniform still need to set a minimum dress standard for student safety and personal modesty.

A school in my electorate has set aside washing facilities within the school and has uniforms on tap so that all students can go into the community displaying a corporate identity. As a result, the students look as though they belong together.

With the passing of this Bill, Queensland schools will have the legal authority to make their own decisions about a dress code for their school, with the school community being a major contributor to the setting of that standard. Most importantly, principals will have the power to enforce that code on the students on behalf of their parents and the school community. Members seem to be missing the point

that the P & Cs and the school communities as a whole actually want the children to wear uniforms. The code needs to have some teeth so that the Government can protect teachers and principals in our very litigious society. People have a natural tendency to turn on others and that is something that we need to prevent. We need to protect our principals and teachers.

Ms Nelson-Carr: What do you do with kids who don't wear a uniform?

Mr FELDMAN: As I said, some schools are going out of their way, with the support of and funds raised by the P & Cs, to provide such children with uniforms so that they can be like all the other students when attending functions that are held outside the school. Principals need the power to enforce that code on students on behalf of the parents and school community that wants that uniform code in place. One Nation supports school uniforms, and I commend the Bill to the House.
