



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (8.37 p.m.): I rise tonight to speak on this Bill because it is a topic that has been debated for years. I believe there would not be a family dinner table that has not heard a discussion at least once as to whether or not school uniforms should be compulsory.

There are many issues which add to this debate. Some are serious, some are a little lighter, but all are important, and all need to be aired, discussed and debated. This is a question that I have polled extensively in my electorate. During the polling of the question as to whether or not school uniforms should be compulsory, I found that there was an overwhelming desire in the community for it to be so. The first consideration for many was perhaps a selfish reason put forward for pure convenience. It is so easy to be able to not have to choose what has to be worn every day. The children also know what they have to wear. The second consideration was perhaps the most important, that is, that with the wearing of a uniform all children feel equal, no child feels disadvantaged and no child is singled out because they look different. When starting school or transferring to another school, if a child is in the same uniform as the other kids, they feel like they belong, and most children find it much easier to blend in and not look like the new kid. Looking like the new kid was often a terrifying prospect for many children. I know that from experience, as I attended many schools over the years.

Having travelled overseas and having friends there who have children attending school, I have often asked what their views are in regard to the wearing of school uniforms. Most have stated that they thought it was a good idea; but not having experienced the situation, they felt that they could talk more on the fact of not having a compulsory uniform.

A Government member interjected.

Mrs PRATT: I wrote this speech myself, and any person who does not believe that can go jump.

Most parents mentioned times when their children were subjected to offensive taunting and teasing from classmates who ridiculed the child's clothing—not because it was poor quality, not because it was over the top, but because those doing the taunting just did not like what was being worn.

The child was made to feel alienated because of his or her taste in clothing. As everyone knows, we do not have the same tastes in clothing. To be ridiculed at the tenderest of ages when we are at our most vulnerable is not something to which we would have our own children subjected. I would hope we would not allow future children to be subjected to such ridicule.

Having mentioned the taste of a child in relation to clothing, I remind honourable members that we all know how difficult it is to get children to wear something reasonably sensible and reasonably protective. I refer particularly to the wearing of hats. Let us look at the difficulty in clothing a child.

One of the arguments against uniforms is the cost. One thing upon which we can all agree is that some school uniforms are very expensive. Some uniforms are fashionable and we know that young people prefer to be fashionable. When we say "young", we are referring to children as young as five years of age because they, too, have their own views on clothes and they can be quite demanding when it comes to wearing something that they do not wish to wear.

Young people like to belong; they like to dress like their mates and they like to be one of a gang. This was a major problem that was brought home to me by parents I spoke to when I was overseas. In schools where there is no uniform, children quickly gravitate to their like. This was recognised by the style or quality of clothing. A class distinction was made about an individual at first sight. Children were judged not for their ability, not for their personality and not for themselves; they were judged on appearance alone. This can often be devastating to children who are at the lower socioeconomic level.

The apparel a child wears attracts the attention of certain other children—as the saying goes, like attracts like. So schools with no uniforms found that gangs were forming. There were wealthy gangs, poor gangs, the nerds, the bullies, the gothics, the bovver boys and the in-crowd. Children wanted to fit in and wanted to be part of the in-group. They wanted it so badly that they would steal to achieve the look of the gang into which they wanted to be welcomed. First they would steal from the mother's purse; later on they would steal an article from a shop that stocked the particular article.

Children are so easily moulded and so easily persuaded to be something other than themselves that many start on petty crime. No, they do not all go that way, but if one child feels that it has to go that way, that is one child too many. It is ridiculous to say that this sort of thing does not happen in our schools today, because it does, but it is not so obvious and the children feel compelled to behave in a manner befitting their gang. They will breach the boundaries and judge people more for who they are instead of what they look like or dress like.

Each and every one of us knows that children can be the cruellest of individuals. With a gang behind them, they will be coerced into doing things that they would not normally do. School uniforms are usually modest, protective and serviceable. In this country we are continually promoting protection from the hot sun to preserve us from suffering with skin cancers. I cannot imagine too many young people really taking that into consideration in the fashion stakes of what to wear to attract a member of the opposite sex.

Let us talk about attracting the opposite sex. As we are all well aware, attracting the opposite sex is, perhaps, on the minds of the vast majority of teenagers in schools. With hormones running rampant during adolescence, it is not necessarily the most prudent thing to have young girls parading around the school grounds in revealing outfits.

A major consideration for parents is the safety of their children for it is difficult to spot a child who is playing truant. It is equally difficult to pick up the presence of a person who should not be on the school grounds, including drug pushers. All these things are possibilities if uniforms are not compulsory. These things are possible right now. I have often noted the number of children who do not wear uniforms to school at the present time. If one child is permitted not to wear a uniform, why should the rest wear a uniform?

How long would it be before action was taken by a student because that student felt he or she was being discriminated against in being forced to wear a uniform? It is difficult enough for headmasters and teachers to encourage discipline and self-worth in children today. How much more difficult would it be as more and more children learn that they can defy the school directive to wear uniforms because it cannot be enforced under present law?

Children are free to wear or not wear a uniform, as the case may be, and it would not be long before the scenario mentioned earlier would be played out all over the country. Who is to be the judge of what is acceptable and what is not? Yes, the parents and the parents and citizens associations should be heard. They also want to know that the wearing of uniforms in schools is enforceable. I have seen that indicated very strongly in the polling I have conducted in my electorate.

As the Premier and his Government have been made fully aware, the unemployment figures in Barambah are abysmal, and the level of poverty associated with that unemployment makes very few other electorates as qualified to speak for poorer students who may not have the resources to comply with the dress codes. I feel that there is enough humanity within all persons to address these situations. Most schools have a pool where children can obtain uniforms.

As I said, there is overwhelming support in the Barambah electorate for this Bill. Therefore I commend the Bill to the House.
