



Speech by

GARY FENLON

MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES

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SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Mr FENLON (Greenslopes—ALP) (8.46 p.m.): I have great pleasure in rising to oppose the School Uniform Bill. People want to know to what use these private members' Bills are being put. People wonder just what purpose they serve. After hearing private members' Bills debated for some weeks, I have reached the conclusion that they do provide a very important community service for the State of Queensland because frequently—

Mr Hamill: It keeps them off the street at night.

Mr FENLON: Apart from keeping them off the streets at night, we continue to get these harebrained schemes coming from different groups at different times. We hear these crazy schemes and we wonder what is the best way to refute them. What is the best way to politely explain to someone that this is a harebrained scheme and it has to be disposed of? I find the best way to do it is to say, "Look, this has been dealt with." I give these good citizens a copy of the debate. They take it away and they read it and they can very clearly see that it is a harebrained scheme and that the House has defeated it after sound debate and that it is not worth considering any further.

Mrs Lavarch: And then they wonder why we waste so much time.

Mr FENLON: I take the interjection. It is a complete waste of time for this House because it is a harebrained scheme. It is a stunt. What we are debating here tonight is not whether there should be compulsory uniforms. We should take this matter back to the real debate. What we must debate is the best way to deal with the problem within schools, at a school level, of getting kids to wear school uniforms.

That is the principal issue in this debate. I hope all members agree with that first point. We support the importance of wearing uniforms because that is what the community wants. That is what the mums and dads generally want. School uniforms fulfil a very important social function. They provide a degree of social neutrality for the kids and families in our community.

I went through poor Catholic schools in Rockhampton with kids who came from some of the poorest families in the town and kids who came from some of the richest families. When they sat behind the desks they all looked the same. They were all treated the same and they all looked the same. That is a good reason for having uniforms. We did not need a law to make the wearing of uniforms compulsory.

I ask members opposite to wake up to themselves. We have not had a law of compulsion because for decades this has been effectively done by the community. The irony is that, suddenly, those opposite are saying that we must have a law. This has occurred because we have had some narrow, legalistic interpretation provided by the Ombudsman. It is not technically incorrect for the Ombudsman to provide that interpretation, but it is something similar to talking about the emperor's clothes.

Suddenly, it is revealed that we do not have a law which would make the process work. We are told, "Yes, we have to work this through the community. How do we do it?" We are told that we need a law to do it. That is just not on.

I commend the Minister for proceeding in the way he has proceeded in terms of providing a legal framework which will ensure that this system works—as it has worked for decades—by communities working it out. When I was at school these matters were always worked out in the community. There was social pressure. There was consensus within a school that, if a student went to the school, that student wore a school uniform. Everyone knew that. The families knew it. I was conscious of it, even when I was at school. Even when I was a little kid at school, I was conscious of the reason why I wore a uniform. It was explained to us that it was one of the great social levellers.

Mr Lucas: The great irony is that those who don't want to wear uniforms often wear a uniform in that they'll often wear the same sorts of track tops or Nikes.

Mr FENLON: That is right. That is the sad alternative. We are left with a variety of uniforms but they are uniforms that reflect the social strata.

Mr Lucas: Of non-conformity or wealth.

Mr FENLON: Of non-conformity or wealth or, for that matter, lack of wealth and homelessness. One of the things that we need to get through to those opposite is that they should go back to school and see the sorts of kids who are at schools today. We have kids lining up at our schools who do not have the traditional mum and dad at home. When I was at school, the non-nuclear family—those without mum and dad at home, not sending the kid off each morning with a packed lunch—was a great rarity. During my whole schooling, I can remember only one kid who did not come from a non-nuclear family. Now, over 50% of the population of schools and high schools come from non-nuclear families, the non-traditional mum-and-dad-at-home nuclear families.

As a society, we have made great changes. We have to have a system in place that will ensure that the communities within schools, the mums and dads within schools, get a chance to actually say what they want to put in place. They are working that out very nicely thank you very much. The reception that I have had in my schools is overwhelmingly positive. They have mechanisms in place to make it work now. They have such things as a uniform room. If in the morning a kid turns up without a uniform, that kid goes and gets sorted out with a uniform for the day. The schools work it out. They do not need a law for that.

Finally, this proposal gives no recognition to the social diversity of this State in terms of trying to deal with a policy that reflects schools from Holland Park to Aurukun, nor does it recognise the fact that social values change. They have changed completely from my generation to this generation. I commend the Minister's position and I urge members to firmly reject this harebrained scheme of those opposite.
