



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

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SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Hon. J. C. SPENCE (Mount Gravatt— ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Women's Policy and Minister for Fair Trading) (10.31 p.m.): I am sure that all of us who are frequent attendees at parents and citizens' meetings know that nothing elicits more debate than a discussion over uniforms. I am sure that those who have been at a P & C meeting late at night when the uniform debate has come on have felt some regret over their attendance, because these debates frequently take the meetings into the wee hours of the morning.

Obviously, from the extensive speakers list we have fairly late on a Wednesday night, the whole issue of school uniforms is one that is quite emotive and of interest to members of Parliament. What I think we all agree on is that environments with school uniforms are preferable to environments without them. I guess that is because most of us come from fairly middle-class and provincial or regional schools where the school community has made an active decision to adopt a school uniform.

I bring to the debate my experience not only as a teacher but also as Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. I can talk about some communities where school uniforms are not the norm and should never be the norm. As Minister for Aboriginal Policy, I get to visit the remote communities throughout the State and in the Torres Strait. One thing that strikes me when I visit these schools is that there is no school uniform on show at all.

Recently I was up at the Doomadgee school and I addressed the students there. I am very impressed with the educational opportunities being offered by that school. As I talked to the 200-odd students as they were on parade, I noticed that only about five of those 200 students had shoes on. A similar story would be found in the Torres Strait or in any of the remote Aboriginal communities in Queensland. I thought that was quite unusual, because that would not occur in any school in the Mount Gravatt electorate. Indeed, students would be sent home if they came to school without anything on their feet. They would be told that they breach workplace health and safety standards and that they need to come to school in shoes.

Most recently I visited the Murri school at Acacia Ridge—a wonderful school. I urge all members to go and have a look at it. That school has over a couple of hundred students. One of the features of this school is that it is surpassing the State average in the Year 3 and Year 5 standardised tests. It is achieving extraordinary results with a group of students from very poor socioeconomic backgrounds, yet they can achieve at school. I talked to those couple of hundred students when they were on parade. More than half of those students were at school without any shoes on—in the middle of winter. Nor was there any school uniform in evidence, because they do not have one.

We sit here in Brisbane or in our own electorates and think that what we see in our own schools is the norm. We forget that this is a huge State and we forget about the cultural and socially appropriate needs of people throughout this vast State.

Obviously in most schools in Queensland school uniforms have become the norm now more than ever. I guess that people of my vintage remember going to primary school without shoes and without a school uniform. My parents were not wealthy enough to provide any of their children with a school uniform and we simply did not wear one until it became compulsory in high school. Over the years, school uniforms have become the norm in primary schools. My own children would not go to school without a uniform, even though it is not necessarily compulsory at their schools.

We have seen the trend to school uniforms and we think that is the norm, but in fact it is not. In the 1970s, when I was teaching at Woodridge high school, school uniforms were a huge issue for us as teachers. Teachers were continually told that we had to try to make the students wear school uniforms. The students resisted furiously. I think more damage was done over this whole issue of school uniforms in terms of those students' education than over any other single issue. The principal and the Education Department at that time deemed that school uniforms were necessary and the school community did not. While we sit here tonight and agree that school uniforms are beneficial, I think we all need to remember that in many communities they are simply not appropriate.

Tonight we are not arguing for or against school uniforms but about who makes the decision on whether or not a school should have a school uniform and what is an appropriate uniform for that school. That is where the Government and the Opposition differ. The Government is saying that it should be the responsibility of the P & C to prescribe the school uniform and the dress code for that school. Once the P & C has made that decision, it then relays it to the school principal, who then writes it into the behaviour management plan and it becomes the norm for that school.

We have heard the Minister tonight say that the principals do have the capacity to sanction students for non-compliance once the school uniform has been written into the behaviour management plan of the school. We believe that is the appropriate way to establish a school uniform at a school.

On the other hand we have the Opposition, which put forward a piece of legislation that basically eliminates the P & C from this decision making. It has put forward a proposal which allows the principal to determine the school uniform and to have that ticked off by the Director-General of the Department of Education and made a regulation of this Parliament. In our view this is overkill. Principals should not be allowed to have that decision-making power alone. Nor should the director-general be involved in reviewing the behaviour management plans, or indeed the school uniform or dress codes of the 1,300 schools in Queensland.

What I find amazing is that the shadow Minister for Education, who was responsible for the Leading Schools concept when he was Minister—through that program he purported to give all power of decision making over to P & Cs—has now done an about-face on something as simple and important to parents as school uniforms. On this very important decision he wants to write parents out of the equation. In relation to the one thing parents are very interested in determining and they currently have a lot of control over—what their kids wear to school—the shadow Minister wants to write them out of the equation and give that power to the principals, to the director-general and, indeed, to the Parliament.

It is a ludicrous proposal that members are debating tonight. Basically, the Government is standing up for the parents and citizens. We are putting our faith in the parents of this State, because we believe that they are the most appropriate people to determine the uniforms of a school. As I said before, the schools in Queensland are all very different, and I think that we lose sight of that in this place.

Mr Santoro: Do the schools in Mount Gravatt actually believe what you are saying?

Mr Schwarten: Don't take any notice. He never takes an interjection.

Mr Santoro: I did. The one interjection from the Minister, I took.

Ms SPENCE: And that is the one interjection that I am taking tonight. I am happy to respond to that one, because I know very well the P & Cs of the schools in the Mount Gravatt electorate. I am a frequent attendee at their meetings, and they will vouch for that. I know how often school uniforms get debated at those P & C meetings. It is frequent.

Mr Santoro interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! The member for Clayfield will cease interjecting.

Ms SPENCE: Because of my experience of visiting P & Cs, I know that this is a very important issue for those bodies. That is why I am very happy to support the Government's proposition that the P & Cs are the best group to decide school uniforms and the code of dress for a school. The member, on the other hand, is proposing that the principal and the Director-General of Education have the wisdom to make those decisions.

Mr Schwarten: He wants to write parents and citizens out of it.

Ms SPENCE: He absolutely wants to write parents and citizens out of this very important part of the decision making.

For many reasons, the Government supports P & Cs. The Government has confidence that the path taken by the Minister in allowing principals and P & Cs to write their own code of dress into their behaviour management plans, and giving the principals the power to sanction students who do not wear that code of dress, is the best path to follow.