



Speech by

Hon. P. BRADDY

MEMBER FOR KEDRON

Hansard 29 April 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Apprentices and Trainees

Hon. P. J. BRADDY (Kedron—ALP) (Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations) (9.46 a.m.), by leave: Since coming to office the Government has been concerned about aspects of the operation of apprenticeships and traineeships in Queensland. We were concerned that apprentice numbers had fallen over a three-year period at a time when apprenticeships were never more relevant for young Queenslanders. We were concerned that while young people could not find jobs in the trades, skills shortages were building up in a number of industries and regions. These shortages were becoming critical in the building and construction and engineering industries. We moved quickly to address the problem by announcing incentives for the employment of additional apprentices and trainees in industries with skills shortages. The results have been impressive, with apprenticeship approvals up 59% in the first four months of the year and big gains made in industries with skills shortages. This result has been achieved with great support from Queensland employers, and the dimension of the increase has not been replicated anywhere else in Australia.

We also were concerned to find that the previous Government had administered the traineeship system in a way which locked out young people and unemployed people. A report by Dr Larry Smith commissioned by this Government into apprenticeships and traineeships raised serious concerns about the traineeship system, particularly that it was in fact working against 15 to 20 year-olds. The system encouraged existing workers to access publicly funded traineeships at the expense of those who needed it most. So while the growth in trainee numbers is, at first glance, encouraging, we must be concerned at the composition and quality of those traineeships. I stress: traineeships. The growth in apprentice numbers stands on its own as a huge success.

Last year, I gave Parliament examples of clear abuses of the system, including a RAAF squadron leader and warrant officers and a police superintendent who were registered as information technology trainees. Other examples have come to hand, including a church which engaged the pastor, the pastor's wife and the pastor's son as trainees. Late last year we moved to change the system to redirect the public funding dollar to those who needed it most. And it is a complex system, involving both State and Federal Governments, as well as private providers. But the Queensland Government is determined to ensure that taxpayer funds are used responsibly and with a view to achieving the best results for unemployed people and new job seekers. Still more needs to be done to ensure these goals are met. And that is why the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations has been collecting data for some time to use in an attack on other abuses of the system.

The department was concerned at anecdotal evidence collected since last year that indicated that some alleged traineeships actually involved little or no training at all. Dr Smith was commissioned to prepare a second report, this time into the impact of user choice on the Queensland training market. He found evidence of some trainees not knowing that they are in traineeships and where some employers were using incentives and training support more as wage subsidies.

The Queensland Government shares these concerns and will be stepping up its scrutiny of the traineeship system to ensure that support is provided where it is needed—for the young and for those re-entering the work force. I have asked the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Commission to undertake an immediate investigation of the quality and effectiveness of the traineeship program. VETEC has agreed to the investigation and will be engaging a highly regarded independent person to carry out the task. This person will be assisted by an independent reference group to be chaired by Mr Barry Smith, the Chairman of VETEC.

Issues which will be covered in the investigation include: the level and quality of training occurring within workplaces; the quality of training plans; the assessment of trainees' competencies; and the range of work and facilities available for training in the workplace. Let there be no doubt that the genesis of the problems that we are facing today with the traineeship program was the blind, ideologically driven rush of the previous Government to competitive and user choice funding at a rate up to four times faster than that of any other State. In its hurry to curry favour with Canberra, the Borbidge Government failed to put the appropriate administrative, assessment and audit arrangements in place to guarantee the integrity of the traineeship system. Regrettably, incentives administered by the Commonwealth Government for traineeships have actively worked to compound the problem.

The Commonwealth continues to pay huge amounts of public funds to employers who enrol existing workers in programs which best serve young job seekers. The rush to capitalise on this goldmine has stretched resources and led to training which in many cases is at best questionable in quality. In other cases, employers may be trying to do the right thing but are making inappropriate use of traineeships. The Queensland Government is committed to increased skills training for the work force. However, this should not be done through the traineeship system, which is designed to help young people and those returning to the work force.

Honourable members will be interested to hear that a number of States have returned to the traditional descriptions of apprenticeships and traineeships. Those States understand that all "new apprenticeships" have done is create unnecessary noise and confusion for both employers and employees.

The investigation of the traineeship program is taking place against a background of substantial growth in traineeship numbers, and specifically in fully on-the-job training. With the active promotion of registered training organisations, new apprenticeship centres, industry bodies and Government agencies, traineeship numbers jumped by 200 per cent between March 1997 and March 1999.

I recognise that most registered training organisations are making a valuable contribution to quality training, and I will be inviting them to take advantage of the VETEC investigation to ensure that all traineeships are of the highest possible quality. This Government is determined to both protect and raise the quality of traineeships in Queensland. We are also determined to return the program to the target group for whom it was designed—young Queenslanders entering the work force and those seeking to return to the work force.
