



Speech by

Hon. R. SCHWARTEN

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard 18 August 1999

SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Hon. R. E. SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton— ALP) (Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing) (10.32 p.m.), continuing: Nothing has changed since we last considered this matter to convince me that the shadow Minister for Education is any closer to reality than he was a couple of weeks ago or, indeed, when he was the Minister. I have spent a lot of time in the schools in my electorate and I have asked teachers and principals whether they were hanging out to get the legislative power to enforce school uniforms, and they have resoundingly said to me, "No." They say that because they believe it is necessary to consider what is the best outcome for the school. Who is best to make that decision? It is the school community.

As I said on the last occasion when I spoke on this issue, here we have a shadow Minister who, when he occupied the ministerial position, stated that he thought it was best to have a situation called Leading Schools. That concept was empowered to make decisions closest to the school community, on behalf of the school community, and that power would lead to commonsense decisions. Suddenly we find that the shadow Minister is on the other side of the House, where he should be, and as a result he does not have any confidence in the ability of the school community and the school principal to make decisions. I cannot work out that piece of logic at all.

What we see in this proposed legislation is a distinct reaction to being in Opposition—nothing more and nothing less. This former Minister did not think that the situation with regard to the question of uniforms was so bad that it warranted legislative changes when he occupied the office of Minister. Suddenly it is warranted. The shadow Minister can plead that the Ombudsman had not made a report about it, but he, as a former schoolteacher—and he was not much chop at that, I have to say; he could not teach a pig to be dirty, as I said once before in this place—should have known that this has been an issue for a long time. A legislative arrangement has not been required to fix the problem. Why is that? Because there is no legislative answer to it.

If we pass legislation we bind the feet and the hands of the school principals and the school communities. We say, "Thou shalt." We say that this must happen on every set of occasions in every situation in the school. To suggest that this cannot be challenged at law is the greatest load of claptrap I have ever heard. I do not understand how any member in this place—let alone someone who has been a Minister—can believe that by simply running legislation through this place it somehow fireproofs it from any legal challenge through the courts. It shows an abysmal understanding of what the laws of this country are all about.

The Minister for Education, Mr Wells, has received departmental advice. If I was in the Minister's position, I would reject the option to go to a legislative model. I would go for the solution that Mr Wells has adopted in this regard. I would do that because it offers the principals of schools and the school communities the option of developing a set of guidelines that best fit their circumstances. Circumstances change from school to school.

The other day I was at the Rockhampton State High School and the principal said to me, "Well, I could have a real barney with that kid over there because he hasn't got a school uniform on, but I choose not to." Why did the principal do that? To confront that student would only reinforce the kid's desire not to conform. It is far easier to work the kids through the process rather than to say, "There is the gate. You have not got the right school shirt on."

As I said previously, my kids go to State schools and they both wear school uniforms. My oldest boy goes to the Glenmore State High School, which does not have a uniform, but a dress code has been introduced. Honourable members would find that 99.9% of the kids voluntarily adopt the dress code. So the wearing of a school uniform is not the huge problem that people say that it is and want to whip up a storm about. For example, this issue does not necessitate taking up the time that has been taken in this House. As a result of what this Minister proposes to do, I would like to see that we understand what school discipline is all about. It is not just about wearing a uniform; it is not just about saying that kids who do not conform to a certain dress standard are any lesser beings than those who do have uniforms, it is about encouraging kids to do the right thing.

I do not think that placing a sledgehammer over a kid's head and saying, "The law says that you have got to wear a school uniform or else", translates into a very sensible outcome for our kids. For heaven's sake, if a kid turns up at a school without a school uniform, the world will not come to an end. If a new option is found to encourage that kid to wear a uniform, all the better. But for heaven's sake, we are nearing the 21st century and we want to go back to the days of compelling people to wear school uniforms because we think that is going to change their behaviour. What rot!

The issue is far deeper than just saying to a kid, "Conform to a uniform." This issue is about teaching people self-respect, it is about getting into their homes and their minds and saying that the world is a wonderful place and that if people extend to one another the hand of friendship, the hand of understanding and the sympathy in plight, it is a wonderful place. School uniforms will never teach kids that. The member opposite can pass all the laws in this place that he likes, but he will not make a better kid as a result. So let us not try to scramble onto this pinnacle of self-righteousness that this gentleman opposite has managed to scramble onto and suggest to ourselves that somehow that is the answer.

I just saw somebody flicking a paper aeroplane. Having been a former schoolteacher, I can say that that was once a punishable offence. The kids used to do that and say, "I did not do it, sir." Is anybody saying: if those members were wearing a uniform, they would not be engaging in that sort of behaviour. That is nonsense!

Of course, anybody with any sense would know that the wearing of a school uniform is the sensible outcome that we would all want. However, we should not kid ourselves into thinking that if we pass a law in this place suddenly we are going to give principals a bulletproof ability to enforce discipline in schools. That is just not going to happen.

The Minister has passed the power to where it is best able to be delivered in the interests of the kids of the school. That delivers the best educational outcome for those kids. In the former Minister's own words, the principals and the school communities are the ones who are best placed to know what is best for their schools. Suddenly, that is not good enough anymore. I disagreed with Leading Schools; I thought that they were elitist nonsense. However, one thing is certain, and that is that principals and school communities understand what is required in their schools. They know what the best outcomes are and, if a school community determines that a uniform code of conduct needs to be enforced, then that is what will happen and they will have the full backing of this Parliament and every other legal protection available to them. That is the fact of the matter. However, that also gives them the flexibility to make the best decision in the best interests of the kids and the school community.

I reject the statements of the former Minister, the anti Q-Build Minister, the anti day-labour Minister. Thank goodness he is sitting opposite, even though he has tried—

Mr Wilson: Anti-school cleaner.

Mr SCHWARTEN: He did get rid of the school cleaners. That was another of his little treacherous acts. What sort of example does he set for the children of this State, with his deceit and his lies about Q-Build people?

Mr Quinn interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: The member was caught out. He should not shake his head and sit there mute and absurd. The member knows jolly well that—

Mr Quinn: The same old claptrap.

Mr SCHWARTEN: It is not the same old claptrap. The member did not have the decency to apologise to those families whom he hurt with his disgraceful attack upon the day labour force in Q-Build. He did not have the decency to apologise.

Mr Quinn: Tired, old, worn-out union warrior.

Mr SCHWARTEN: That may be, but I say to the member that, when I am wrong, I admit it; and when I hurt people, I apologise. However, the member has not done that. He has a heart the size of a split pea—and he knows it—and he has the decency of a dingo.

The truth of the matter is that the legislation proposed by the former Minister will not work. It is not in the interests of Queensland kids, it is not in the interests of education in this State and it is certainly not in the interests of the wellbeing of our students.
