



Speech by

SHAUN NELSON

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (9.32 p.m.): Like most members of this House, I support the wearing of school uniforms—there are many good reasons for wearing school uniforms—but that is not what this Bill is about. I concur with members of the Government when they say that this Bill is about building up legislation to do all sorts of wonderful things. I simply cannot agree with it.

It has been nine long, long years since I left high school. I went to a school that did not have a school uniform policy for a certain period and I did not see kids going around dressed in Levis or whatever. When I was at school, maybe it was interesting for the first couple of days to not wear a uniform, but by the end of the first couple of weeks we just went about our business. Nobody really cared what anybody else wore. I just cannot grasp the whole concept of people having to wear a uniform to make them somebody.

Mr Lucas: You did join the Army.

Mr NELSON: One of the greatest armies ever to march on the face of this planet was the Confederate Army of northern Virginia. The Confederate Army of northern Virginia—

Mr Lucas interjected.

Mr NELSON: Members opposite should let me give them a bit of a history lesson. Soldiers of the Confederate Army of northern Virginia tried to wear grey when they could, but most of the soldiers who went in to fight at places such as Bull Run and Gettysburg did not have shoes, had different coloured pants and had all sorts of different types of hats. The simple fact is that—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! I am finding it very difficult to hear the member speak.

Mr NELSON: Bloody rude!

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I remind the member to speak through the Chair.

Mr NELSON: The simple fact remains that these troops were the best fighting force in the world. They did not need a uniform. They beat troops who wore a uniform that had a wonderful pattern on it and so on.

As the honourable member for Lytton said, I did join the Army. The Australian Army is renowned worldwide for not having a strict uniform policy, so to speak. I actually got into trouble three or four times for the state of my hat and so on. My skills as a soldier were not in question; the uniform was in question, but being in an army that had a pretty lax attitude towards uniforms at the best of times, that did not really matter.

Points made by speakers from the Opposition side of the House about this wonderful world in which kids will be much better off and will learn better if they wear uniforms are simply not true. I think those arguments are a fallacy, to say the least.

I firmly believe—I have always believed and I will always believe—that these sorts of decisions are best made by the people who are affected by them. This decision should be left to the P & Cs. The P & Cs should have the ultimate say and—

Mr Dalglish interjected.

Mr NELSON: I will get to the point.

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mr NELSON: I find it incredibly hard to support the Labor Party at the best of times. I think I should be given a little bit of leeway.

Mr Turner: It's out of the goodness of your heart.

Mr NELSON: Trust me: I will have a Dettol shower later on.

Members of parents and citizens associations have to deal with the issue of clothing their kids—getting the uniforms and paying for them—so I think the decision is best left to them. After all, who would know the socioeconomic standing of a school better than the parents and citizens associated with it?

In relation to the point of having protection through legislation, I really think the way to beat the trend of people suing each other and trying to get back at each other is to make sure we do not encourage it. Let us look at this realistically. If a kid does not want to wear a uniform and the principal says, "You have to wear a uniform," and the student says, "I'm going to sue you," what is the student going to sue the principal for? I am not a solicitor—maybe some of the Labor lawyers can help me—but what sort of case does the student have? How could he possibly sue? How much money could he really get? I know that the Ombudsman may have a few concerns about the whole issue, but legislation to deal with it is totally unnecessary. It perpetuates the trend of going to court.

Yes, there are many good reasons for having a school uniform but, conversely, I think there are many more good reasons for that decision to ultimately be left with the people it affects the most. I do not think we should be passing these sorts of laws in this House. I do not think we should be forcing anybody into a decision of this magnitude and then putting laws on top of it. In saying that, I must say that every school in my electorate does have a school uniform. I stand to be corrected if someone knows better. Most of the kids wear that uniform on most occasions. Those uniform policies are set up in the first place by the P & Cs and they are followed through by the P & Cs.

I state again that I am the youngest member in this House. I am not the youngest member to ever be here. I went to a school that did not have a uniform policy. There was no anarchy. There were no gangs of coolly dressed kids. I do not believe that kids have changed all that much in the nine long, long years since I left high school, but I honestly do not believe that we should be putting that huge onus on young people and saying, "If you are not uniformed, you are going to go nuts." It simply does not happen. I went to one of the worst schools in Queensland at the time, which was the Kingston State High School. We had a terrible record for all sorts of wonderful things, but the kids there—

Mr Schwarten: Was Kev Lingard the principal?

Mr NELSON: No. I got the cane from a guy whose name I cannot even remember now.

The point is that there was no mad slide into anarchy because we did not have uniforms. As best I can remember, our teachers were comfortable with it and the P & C was comfortable with it because, let us face it, in that area there was not much money to go around. There was a colour system we could adhere to, but it did not make much difference. It grieves me not to be able to support this Bill, but I honestly believe that this decision is best left to the P & Cs.
