



Speech by

Mr TERRY SULLIVAN

MEMBER FOR CHERMSIDE

Hansard 21 July 1999

SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

Mr SULLIVAN (Chermside—ALP) (10.06 p.m.): A number of concerns have been raised in this debate. I will address some of the things that the previous speaker has referred to. A number of schools in my electorate are very strong supporters of a school uniform.

Mr Schwarten: Hear, hear!

Mr SULLIVAN: I hear from the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing that he has schools in his electorate that are also in that position. In fact, we all have. The key question to ask is: how do we give the parents and the schools the best solution for enforcing a school uniform if their community so wishes? There is nothing in the letters that the previous speaker, Mrs Sheldon, read out that I disagree with. However, I disagree with her conclusion that, to achieve what these parents and schools want, we should vote for the suggestion of the member for Merrimac. To achieve what those parents and schools want, we should vote for the Minister's solution. We do not want an unnecessary waste of resources within the Education Department as people check through 1,300 behaviour management programs to see whether a particular decision at a school matches that and then undertake all the administrative follow-up and review. That will drive the Ombudsman and everyone else absolutely crazy.

This was brought to the attention of the Ombudsman and we are all aware of the concerns that he raised in the 1997-98 annual report. It is well to note what he said and how the current Education Minister, Mr Wells, has responded to help school communities overcome the problems identified by the Ombudsman. The report states—

"It might be argued that if a (behaviour management) plan makes uniforms compulsory and a student knowingly refuses to comply, that at least is disobedience. However in my view this would only be the case if the requirement to wear a uniform were within the objects of the plan as delineated (in the Act)."

In his report, the Ombudsman went on to say that school dress codes or the mandatory wearing of school uniforms were not consistent with the objects of any behaviour management plan at that time. The solution provided by Minister Wells to school communities allows the placing of a school dress code within the objects of a school behaviour management plan as proposed by section 37 of the Act and, in conjunction, puts the decisions into the hands of the school communities, where it belongs.

Mrs Sheldon, the concerns that you raise are being directly—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! I ask the member to address the member by her correct title and to address those comments through the Chair.

Mr SULLIVAN: The member for Caloundra would be well advised to know that the proposal of the Education Minister, Mr Wells, to place the school dress code within the objects of a school's behaviour management plan puts it into the legislation. It achieves what the member for Caloundra says the schools want to achieve. It gives the school communities that decision-making process within the legislation. I see that the member for Caloundra is listening extremely intently! It is within the legislation, because it is covered by proposed section 27. It is a legislative solution.

We should all be reluctant to legislate for student dress code policy, because the more we use legislation to regulate every detail of people's lives the more we erode the capacity of people to invest in what we might call the social capital of their community—what they want to occur in their community. Everyone would agree that excessive legislation destroys the bonds that give our community some sort of coherence—the flexibility for people to come together and agree to do things.

The Bill proposed by the shadow Minister is similar to using a steamroller to crack a nut. Governments should avoid getting into the business of unnecessarily regulating the details of people's lives unless there is a very good reason to do so. It is better to let people regulate themselves. The Minister's proposal is a much better way to deal with the concerns identified by the Ombudsman than the Opposition's plan, which seeks to impose increased legislative burdens on schools. We are going to get more paperwork, courtesy of the shadow Minister. All members should be reluctant to impose further legislation on our schools if another solution to a problem can be found. The Minister has done that. He has found a good, practical solution. Many of the schools are well on their way towards implementing the solution he has proposed.

The solution proposed to the school community for implementation by the principals is viable and it is less burdensome on our schools than the blunt and heavy-handed proposal of the Opposition. We should reject the Opposition's plan, which will waste valuable resources on unnecessary bureaucratic supervision. The Minister's plan gives parents and principals the choice they asked for. His choice should be supported.
