



Speech by

Mr R. QUINN

MEMBER FOR MERRIMAC

Hansard 1 June 2000

TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT BILL

Mr QUINN (Merrimac—LP) (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party) (4.21 p.m.): In 1997-98, when the coalition Government undertook extensive consultation in the preparation of new training legislation, we found that one of the key concerns of people in Queensland was how quality in the training system would be assured. At that time, we listened to those concerns and we put in place the 1998 Bill, which contained provisions necessary for a quality system.

Although most training organisations do a fine job, expecting to be in business for the long haul, unfortunately there are a few that transgress, that do not live up to the requirements of their registration and that give the other providers a bad name. I am sure all honourable members would agree that those training providers need to be weeded out. The reputable ones who maintain their credibility in the industry and with the public through the provision of quality services should be supported. However, those that jeopardise the training, the employment and the futures of Queenslanders need to feel the full weight of quality control and the consequences of their actions.

In the coalition's 1998 Bill we were concerned that training providers operating in Queensland that had been registered interstate and that had contravened the conditions of their registration should be subject to cancellation by Queensland training authorities. We did not want, and still do not want today, any of those operators exploiting the people of Queensland.

Although we support mutual recognition under a national framework, we wanted to be sure that the appropriate action could be taken to deal with training organisations that did not meet the conditions of their registration. Therefore, we included a provision to cancel the registration of interstate providers found to be contravening the conditions of their registration. I note that this approach has been followed in the Government's legislation that we are debating today.

Consumers must have a choice in who delivers their training—a choice from a wide range of public and private providers. But the system must be a strong one, with appropriate checks in place, including penalties for non-compliance with the law. Quality cannot and must not be compromised.

There have been problems in the implementation of the national framework, as States have attempted to implement it within outdated legislative frameworks. This is true of Queensland. The Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 1991 is simply inadequate as a means of maintaining quality under the agreed national framework. It does not provide sufficient legal underpinning for the new system to operate in Queensland. The member for Clayfield, the then Minister, acknowledged this deficiency and drafted legislation to overcome it. The legislation before us today largely reflects the intent and the work of the then Minister, Mr Santoro.

However, the new training system has been under full implementation without any attention to the policy and legal frameworks required. Because of this it is not surprising that there have been a few problems in the transition phase. The Beattie Labor Government has been most negligent in not bringing this legislation forward before now, particularly given that two years have elapsed since the legislative framework was essentially ready to go. I understand that there are inconsistencies across States and Territories in the implementation of the agreed national policy.

I note that the Federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr Kemp, recently called for State and Territory cooperation in the development of model legislation that will facilitate the

implementation of agreed national policy. Amendments to Queensland's legislation will more than likely be necessary when this proceeds. All Ministers have agreed to the need for a fully integrated system and consistency across borders. We will be watching progress towards this goal and encouraging the Minister to work constructively towards its achievement.

Quality assurance systems are necessary and it is good business practice to have them in place. But we still need to have a sound system of ongoing monitoring and audit. The 1998 coalition Bill improved on the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 1991 by making arrangements for inspections of training organisations and workplaces much clearer. We wanted to give some teeth to the inspection process so that the people of Queensland could be assured that training was meeting the required standards. It is good to see that the Government has taken our lead and seen fit to include similar provisions under the enforcement section of this Bill.

Although we support the pursuit of unscrupulous operators and believe they deserve to have the full sanction of the law thrown at them, audits should not be used as a form of harassment of training providers. The conduct of audits and monitoring of compliance requires highly skilled operatives. There is no place for bias, badgering and incrimination in the conduct of audits. Impartiality, professional ethics and adherence to due process are required. Audits should not be conducted on the pretext that there are crooks out there who need to be caught. It is incumbent on the Minister to ensure that the departmental staff receive adequate training and support in performing the enforcement role and that only fully trained staff will be used. The last thing the system needs is undertrained and overzealous investigators wielding a heavy hand.

The competitive training market has changed the face of training substantially over the past five years. However, quality need not be compromised in this competitive environment. High standards in delivery and assessment are absolutely necessary. Organisations concerned about keeping their market share in this highly competitive environment are taking an active role in building the system's integrity and maintaining a strong commitment to quality outcomes. Market forces are at work, with the introduction of user choice arrangements for apprenticeship and traineeship training. And these market forces are, in the main, working to improve the VET system. Where employers were once obliged to seek training support from TAFE for their apprentices' or trainees' off-the-job instruction, they are now at liberty to choose among TAFE institutes and private training organisations for the training organisation that best meets their needs.

The array of flexible delivery options for employers has seen market specialisation and the expansion of niche markets within the training sector. This serves the goal of quality training well. If industry does not value the products and services delivered or does not hold the provider in high regard, market forces will drive the provider into extinction. Employers and apprentices must have available to them the flexibility to change training providers during the term of a training contract if circumstances change or if service delivery is not up to the desired standard.

But market forces alone cannot be relied upon and we need to make sure that an effective system of monitoring and auditing is in place, and that it is evenly applied to all training organisations, both public and private. While standards can be set and criteria met in initial audits, it is a different story to maintain quality efforts when the heat is no longer directly applied. Vigilance in the scrutiny of provider operations is required. The monitoring process must identify those training providers falling short of expected standards and remedies must be applied to address those situations. A targeted schedule of audits keeps everyone on their toes.

The Bill before us requires the up-front check of training providers to include checks into the "character" of an individual and the business "reputation" of the organisation. Further to this, the council will check the current financial position and financial background of the organisation and whether it can provide the resources and services to deliver the training. But even with these checks things can go wrong. Such a heavy emphasis on the front end of the process can succeed only if there is adequate follow-up monitoring and audit. A heavy reliance on enforcement as a solution to the "quality" problem is not the only or, indeed, the best solution. With so many players in the system, enforcement by highly trained officers becomes a very expensive proposition. A more efficient approach is to manage the risks.

With several years of experience in the competitive market of training—a policy introduced by the Labor Government in 1992—the department must surely have at its disposal a mountain of data on the types of events or characteristics that might signal which training providers are at risk of non-compliance. The department's recent campaigns of aggressive auditing and public exposure of certain training organisations must also have yielded substantial data. This data should be put to good use. An approach that identifies those "at risk providers" for audit is a more efficient way of approaching the problem.

There is an alternative to tarnishing the image of the entire training industry by constant and sensational quoting of bad cases, such as the Minister has done in the this Parliament. The excellent

performers must not be tarred with the same brush as those who are shonky. This brings the whole system into disrepute. Risk management must work hand in hand with enforcement in maintaining the integrity of the system and public and industry confidence in it. It is critical that the national system works effectively and consistently.

The reforms of the past years were designed to deliver flexible, responsive and accessible training arrangements for business and, in particular, small business. We must do everything possible to ensure that, when businesses choose to train, they get a quality product. This is why it is essential that Queensland's arrangements guarantee quality outcomes. We must have a legislative framework and an administrative framework that ensures that quality remains at the heart of the vocational education and training system in this State. Businesses and individuals expect and deserve quality training.

In conclusion, the Opposition would warmly welcome real commitment to the principle of quality in the system. We would welcome a real effort on the part of the Government to work towards a fully integrated national system so that quality issues impacting on Queensland's system are uniformly addressed.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the Gold Coast Institute of TAFE. As many members in the south-eastern corner may very well know, this is a high quality institute. It has had some management problems in the past. I understand that they have been overcome and that there is a more stable management regime at the present time. It has continued to provide quality training for young people on the Gold Coast. It specialises in the area of tourism and hospitality.

Indeed, it has made a number of strategic alliances in recent years, most notably with Griffith University. I think there have been significant efforts in terms of cooperation, sharing of facilities and sharing of staff not only between the TAFE institute and the university, but indeed with the school systems as well. I think that is where some real progress has been made over the past 5 to 10 years: we have been more amenable to putting in place a flexible system that allows students from Years 11 and 12 to have experience with TAFE college subjects which may, in fact, involve some university resources as well. From a young person's point of view, this system in which we have been able to allow students to move easily between different modes of education has been a real advance in the past couple of years.

Allied to that is the recognition of prior learning, the fact that, hopefully in the future, students will be able to take a TAFE course, complete a certificate or diploma and have that recognised when they go on to university to undertake a degree. I think that is the way forward. For too many years now barriers have been set up between schools, TAFE colleges and universities, each one protecting their own turf. What is happening now is that we are moving to a more integrated approach where there are multiple pathways between these different institutions, and that is a great advance and one from which our students will certainly benefit a lot.

I know from talking to TAFE teachers, high school teachers and university people that they recognise the need to break down some of these barriers so that we can put in place a more flexible system that can better meet the needs and the desires of young people. The GCIT on the Gold Coast is certainly one of those institutions that is working towards this. I have much pleasure in supporting the Bill.
