



Speech by

Mr R. QUINN

MEMBER FOR MERRIMAC

Hansard 9 November 2000

APPROPRIATION BILL [No. 2]; APPROPRIATION [PARLIAMENT] BILL [No. 2]

Mr QUINN (Merrimac—LP) (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party) (4.50 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Appropriation Bills, I want to make a few very brief comments about education. I do so because I am concerned about the level of underfunding of education in Queensland over the past three years. Queensland has a long history of underfunding education compared with the national average. To illustrate this point, one only has to go back to the change of Government in 1989. There was a large campaign by the Queensland Teachers Union to raise education funding in Queensland to the national average. If my memory serves me correctly, one of the policy promises of the Goss Government at the time was to achieve that feat. Sadly, that was never achieved in the six-odd years of the Goss Labor Government.

It was not until the coalition came to office in 1996-97 and 1997-98 that education funding in this State rose above the national average for the first time ever. It was a tremendous achievement to find the available resources to ensure that happened. Benefits were achieved and a range of innovative programs developed and put into schools across-the-board, no matter where they were located around the State. Sadly, the latest statistics indicate that in 1998-99 Queensland had slipped below the national average again, and that is to be regretted. Even though the expenditure per student is small in terms of the decrease, when it is added up across the system the results are quite profound.

In 1997-98 Queensland was \$132 above the national average for per capita spending on education. Under the Beattie Labor Government, that funding slipped to \$75 below the national average. So it slipped \$200 straight away. Since that time, indications in the next two Budgets have shown that underfunding has continued. In fact, the 1999-2000 Budget barely kept pace with inflation and enrolment growth. There is a view that there was a cut in real terms in the Education budget. In my mind, the last Budget, which came down some months ago, again cemented the fact that education is underfunded. In the Budget Papers, there was a real cut in terms of per student expenditure. Although there was a small increase of \$34 per student in high schools, primary education suffered a cut of \$22 per student, special education was cut by \$428 per student and distance education was cut by some \$72 per student.

The quality of an education system is not judged solely on the funding available to it. In fact, there are many instances throughout history where funding for education in a number of States has been well above the national average, but the results have been well below national expectations. However, funding is a critical component in ensuring a quality education system. It again comes back to how Governments spend the funds and what policies are in place, but funding is critical. In a State such as Queensland, which has a large number of smaller schools, the cost of education is higher than in more densely populated States such as New South Wales and Victoria. Therefore, when Queensland slips below the national average, we are in real trouble. That is the problem we have at the present time.

For the past three years the figures quite convincingly show that the funding needed for education in State schools has not been delivered. It is all very well for the Minister for Education, Mr Wells, and the Premier to embark upon a bout of Canberra bashing, saying that the Federal Government is shifting funding from the State Governments to the non-Government schools or whatever it may be, but those opposite cannot mount that argument when they themselves are

underfunding State schools in this State. That is a hypocritical stance to take. The figures quite convincingly show that funding in Queensland has fallen below the national average in 1998-99 and, by all measures, looks as though it will continue over the next two Budgets.

Mr Sullivan: That's a bit rich from a coalition that for 30 years had it well below the national average.

Mr QUINN: I point out to the member for Chermide that there has been only one Government in this State which brought education funding above the national average, and that was the coalition Government in the Budget periods 1996-97 and 1997-98. The independent figures show that the first Budget the current Government brought down reduced it below the national average again. Those opposite did their old trick. They cut funding and we slid below the national average. Those figures are not in dispute. How can members opposite come in here and mount the argument that the Commonwealth should supply more funds for schools when they themselves are underfunding State schools? That is the most hypocritical stance those opposite have taken.

However, the Opposition is not the only one to say this. The Queensland Teachers Union is no friend of the coalition, yet it supports what we have said. It recognised from the independent figures that there has been underfunding of education in 1998-99. It makes the point that the two Budgets since that time have not repaired the damage. In fact, they have taken funding even lower than the national average. So we are not alone in saying this. The Queensland Teachers Union is right beside us on this point, because its policy for quite some time has been to get funding above the national average. That is one of the points I wanted to make about funding for education today.

The Minister has mounted the argument that cost effectiveness and economies of scale make no difference. The economies of scale argument comes back to a number of issues. Economies of scale are achieved in two ways: larger schools and larger classes can be created, which reduce overheads, or programs and services to students can be cut. They are the only ways to create economies of scale, and that is what underfunding of education produces in this State—larger schools, larger classes, cuts in programs. Take your pick! I think we are starting to see evidence of that in our schools at the present time, because there is now a mid-year census. Whereas previously there was only one per year, there are now two per year. However, larger classes and therefore larger pupil/teacher ratios cut flexibility from schools. My office has received quite a number of phone calls about classes which have been constructed or "deconstructed" mid year because of a change in staffing in a school. That is causing enormous angst and problems not only in schools but also amongst parents. That is one outcome of underfunding in education.

There are other outcomes. For a start, the programs that need to be put in place sometimes cannot be put in place. For example, I refer to the lack of serious drug education programs in our schools. An independent analysis of the amount of money spent on central drug education budgets across all the States shows that Queensland is simply not in the ballpark. In fact, we are right out the back door. Queensland spends something like 50c per student compared with Victoria, which spends \$10 per student—the highest amount in Australia. The Government can mount all the arguments it likes, as the Minister has done, about teachers in classrooms teaching drug education programs, and that happens in other States as well. However, an analysis which compares centrally held drug education funds right across the nation shows where there is serious underfunding. As I said, Queensland is the lowest with 50c per student, whereas Victoria is the highest with \$10 per student. Again, the figures speak for themselves.

I turn to the school cadets program. It is true that more students have entered into the program over the past three years, but it is also true that there really has not been a significant increase in the funding. If the Government really had a commitment to programs such as school cadets, police in schools and so on—those programs for students who really need some assistance in self-discipline and those programs which create self-reliance, self-esteem and a whole range of social outcomes for students—in the three Budgets we have had so far from this Labor Government there should have been more money allocated. That more students are participating while the funding has remained static really shows no commitment to the program whatsoever. I know from my discussions with and visits to schools that this is one of the programs that the high schools really see as having positive benefits right across-the-board for all students who enter into it.

I will touch on something that has come to light just recently. It concerns information technology grants and allowances. The previous funding mechanism allowed schools to receive payments in February and October. Schools would get 50% of their allocation in February and the other 50% in October. By and large, that allowed schools to plan with confidence. I am now made aware that from next year, 2001, there will be one annual grant. One hundred per cent of their allocation will be made in October. The problem with that is that in October this year schools got 50% of their IT budget. It will be another 12 months before they get their next IT allocation. So for a 12-month period they really have to make do with 50% of the money they normally would have had. I know that some schools are looking

at some quite serious cutbacks in terms of programs and at ways they can supplement their IT programs to try to get them over that six-month period in which they will not have any money at all.

The effect of this, of course—besides the effect at the school level, as I have mentioned—is effectively a saving for the budget this financial year. It is 50% of the program that is not being paid out as it would come due in February. Instead, the Government is rolling it over into the next financial year. Effectively it has saved itself 50% of the program in this financial year. That is a symptom of underfunding, as are all the other cases I have mentioned. That is why I am concerned.

Over the last three years, as I have said, there really has been an underfunding of education. If we want to be the Smart State, if we want to have all the benefits that flow from an educated populous and work force, we cannot continue to deny education the funds that it needs. Whilst we do not judge the quality of the system purely on the funding available, it is a key component in overall terms.

I make the point again: Queensland, because of the larger number of smaller schools, has a relatively high-cost system. We cannot be compared with the more populous States of Victoria and New South Wales that have a larger number of larger schools. They have the economies of scale, if it can be termed that way. It is very difficult to make a judgment as to what level of funding is correct. The best approach is to look at the national average. We were above the national average for a couple of years. We have now slipped behind. The last two Budgets at least look as though they have taken us further behind. I am concerned—and I am quite sure that parents and teachers are concerned—about this underfunding that has gone on over the last three years.

If the Government is going to address this problem, the next Budget really should see a significant increase in education funding in this State. No longer can we afford to keep on cutting in per capita terms across certain sectors—mainly the primary and special education sectors. I understand why there needed to be an emphasis on the high school programs, in light of the way the funds were distributed before. In 1997-98 and 1996-97 primary education funding was above the national average and secondary was below. I understand the need to redress that, but overall we simply cannot continue to underfund and redistribute funds from a small pool of money. That is not the way to have a quality education system. While it is equitable, it is equitable in a declining fashion. What we should be looking at is increasing funding, getting it above the national average, where it ought to be, and then, if we need to, redistribute funds. I am satisfied that the issues I raise have been addressed. However, I get back to the point I made before: it is not the quantity always; it is the quality. But quantity is also important in terms of funds.
