



Speech by
**Hon. BRIAN
LITTLEPROUD**

MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS

Hansard 31 May 2000

TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT BILL

Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD (Western Downs—NPA) (3.48 p.m.): In rising to make a contribution to the debate on the Training and Employment Bill, I point out that, fortunately, there has been a realisation that about 20-odd years ago we were perhaps putting too much emphasis on tertiary education. People were being encouraged to look for a white-collar job rather than get technical skills. Fortunately, we have turned that around. I pay tribute to Mike Ahern, as the then Premier, because he decided to split the portfolios of Education and Technical and Further Education. Under the member for Keppel, Vince Lester, and his director-general, Barry Reid, we laid down a network right across Queensland and we vastly expanded the amount of technical education available and the locations at which it was delivered.

We have moved on from there. It is always going to be a hell of a challenge for Governments to maintain relevance in what they are training because we are going through a time in history when the needs of the workplace are changing at a tremendously rapid pace. There is always a lag between identifying a need and meeting it. Very often we put lots of money into some sort of training only to find that it becomes obsolete. So it is an ongoing challenge.

I commend the efforts of the member for Clayfield, who was the Minister in this portfolio when the Borbidge Government was in power and continues in this portfolio in Opposition. He is a hardworking person who has put an enormous amount of time into his portfolio, and that was obvious today from his presentation to the House.

I want to take this opportunity to talk about some things that are relevant to my own electorate, because this is probably the last time that this piece of legislation will be debated in the House before the next election and, as members would know, I am retiring.

Mr Mickel: You could always come back.

Mr LITTLEPROUD: No, I have no intention of coming back, thanks very much.

First of all I want to talk about the Dalby Agricultural College. Members would know that there are four agricultural colleges across Queensland. They were the brainchild of the Bjelke-Petersen Government. They did not all come on stream at once. I took a particular interest in the establishment of one which dealt with broadacre agriculture. At that particular time I was active in party politics, but I did not represent the people of Western Downs in this place.

I saw what happened after the decision was made. At that time it was set up under the Department of Primary Industries and was answerable directly to the Minister himself, because the Government of the day saw that there was a need to have a very sharp focus and be absolutely in tune with the need for training out there in the agricultural belt. It worked extremely well until the Goss Government came to power in 1990 and it chose to do otherwise and merge it with TAFE. There was no real reason to do that. In fact, I still hold the view that it has now become just another sector of a department rather than a specialised section. I think we have lost some of the sharper focus in that regard.

Only a couple of weeks ago the Dalby Agricultural College held a big reunion. It is now 20 years since its first intake of students. I find it interesting to read about the graduation ceremonies from year to year in the local paper and also to follow what has gone on. The college boasts something like a

95% success rate in placing its graduates in employment. It offers a range of subjects, and I will speak more about them in the moment.

An unbelievable number of young people have gone into that place, some from a rural background and some from Brisbane and Sydney. While they are there, they take advantage of the expertise of the college and come out well equipped to take their place in agricultural industries across Queensland, be they individual enterprises or large corporations.

I pay a big tribute, first of all, to the board that was put together. I think the first chairman of the board was a fellow called John Brimblecombe, who stayed for quite a few years. A very good friend of mine, Max Middleton, was a member of the board. He was also there for quite a few years—probably 10 or 15 years—and ended up as chairman. Currently the chairman of the board is Neville Wirth of Dalby, and the Minister would be aware of him. Those three gentlemen were all vastly successful in their own field as practical farmers, but they also had the mental capacity to lead a board that was made up of very talented people. They lay down the foundations of the college with the depth of their planning.

The campus itself speaks volumes for the quality of the place. So, too, does the quality of the graduates. Anyone who goes to Dalby should venture out and have a look at the campus. The improvements that have been made are first-class. It is very neat and shiny and shows a well-organised mind. It is all round a well-organised campus. I am sure that many people from elsewhere in the world who specialise in agricultural education come away most impressed after a visit to the Dalby Agricultural College.

The first director of the college was John Lovelace. It is interesting to note that in New Guinea he worked very closely with a former Treasurer of this place, Keith De Lacy. They remain friends to this day. John Lovelace was in agricultural education in New Guinea and was selected by the initial board to act as the foundation director. He left a great imprint on the way the place operated. He was dedicated to high quality organisation with a good understanding of the academic needs of training and yet was very pragmatic and able to work with men with field experience. He left some years ago to retire and we now have a new director, Glen Smith, who is fitting in and probably doing things his way but is still enhancing the quality of the graduates.

I also pay tribute to Rod Plumb. He has been the secretary of the board and probably the chief honcho of the figures ever since its inception. He is going to retire soon. He can look back on his 20-odd years of sterling service to the Dalby Agricultural College. He also serves the community as a member of the Dalby Rotary Club and is to be commended for that service.

While I am speaking about the make-up of the board, I should point out that during the period of the Goss Government it was decided that some educational input was needed. It was decided at the time to appoint the regional director. I think the present Minister was the Education Minister at the time when it was decided that the regional directors should be on the boards of those regional colleges. I think that, in fact, it worked all right. They were able to maintain a tie between academic education and technical education, and they probably made a valuable contribution to board discussions, and continue to do so.

I will now mention just some of the courses that are available. To the credit of the director, his staff and the board, they have always kept in tune with the changing needs of agriculture. They recognise that as well as those taking up initial skills there are many people who want to keep upgrading their skills. So there is a blend of internal courses and external courses. The internal courses are of two years' duration. Originally young people would go there after completing Year 10, but I think members will find that now it is always post secondary education.

In 1998 the courses included Certificate III (Agricultural Production) and Certificate IV (Agricultural Production) or a Diploma of Applied Science (Agricultural Production). There is also a prevocational course in engineering and a certificate in farm skills, which is delivered to St Mary's College, a Catholic college in Dalby. So it is good to see that a Statewide institution such as this liaises with a private school that is servicing an agricultural district.

The external courses are much more extensive than the internal courses. Obviously they are of shorter duration, but they fill an identified need for those people who are trying to upgrade their skills and keep their enterprises up to date. The external courses include Certificate III (Fruit Processing into Wine)—that is up to date—Certificate in Small Business Management, Certificate in Rural Business Management, Certificate in Farm Management, Certificate in Farm Business Operations, Certificate in Land Care, Diploma of Applied Science and Agricultural Production, dryland cropping, horticulture, engineering traineeships, rural skills and Certificate in Meat Processing.

It is also worth while putting on record that each of those four colleges across Queensland has to fulfil a specific niche in agricultural education, and the Dalby Agricultural College is all about broadacre farming, intensive agriculture with some irrigation that has been added over the years—they have a ring tank on the place and irrigate quite a few acres of land—and also intensive animal

industries. The pastoral industry is obviously focused on Longreach and Emerald, but such is the diversification of farming across the Darling Downs and the western downs that lots of people are into not only grain production but also animal production. Because of the high value of the land in that area, people get into intensive animal husbandry with feed lots, etc. Anyone who graduates from the Dalby Agricultural College comes away with the necessary skills in those three fields: intensive agriculture with irrigation, broadacre grain farming and intensive animal husbandry.

To date something like 2,000 students have benefited from the college. I would hope that the Ministers of the day continue to recognise the important role that the college is going to play in keeping our agricultural industries viable. Unfortunately, there is a tremendous change going on in rural Australia at present. We are producing more and more, but about 80% of all the agricultural products we produce are being produced by only 20% of the farmers. So the farm units are becoming bigger, lots of places are becoming available for those people who have specific skills, but they are going to be salaried people rather than self-employed people. The college is aware of that. Nevertheless, there is a need for the Government to keep on injecting money into the Dalby Agricultural College and the other three agricultural colleges to make sure that rural people can remain viable in terms of efficiency of operation and all the other skills that are necessary to look after the rural sector. The importance of rural agriculture and rural production in our overall State productivity might be diminishing, but it is still going to be the main industry for people west of the Great Dividing Range.

The next topic that I want to mention is not quite so pleasant. I refer to the provision of TAFE facilities in Dalby. It is a pretty sad situation. I became the member for Condamine in 1983. It became obvious to me after I had been in this place for some time that Dalby was the largest town in Queensland without its own freestanding, dedicated TAFE college. I set out to do something about it. By 1989 I had an agreement with the Minister in charge of TAFE colleges at the time, Vince Lester, the member Keppel, that Dalby should be next in line to get a college. It took us something like two and a half years working with the council and the then Lands Department to find a block of land in Dalby that would be suitable, because so much of Dalby is flood prone. We found 80 acres on the western extremities of the town. So it was planned to build the college and have it operational by 1991.

The election in 1989 brought about a change of Government and the Goss Government decided that Dalby was not going to get a TAFE college. The local people were shattered. We were provided with some courses. Those courses were operated from an old office block, which was not at all suitable for that purpose. The courses on offer did not compare very well with the courses that were being offered by TAFE colleges around Queensland. Nothing of any consequence was done until the change of Government in 1986. I place on record that the people of Dalby and I started to complain to the Goss Government and the Minister at the time, Nev Warburton, that we missed out badly in not getting that college. Nev Warburton was silly enough to say that the site was unsuitable and was flood prone. The people of Dalby knew that that was not true; they knew why we agreed to put the college on that particular site. That was a pretty lame excuse from Nev Warburton and a good indication that the Goss Government never intended helping the people of Dalby, even though it was the largest town in Queensland without a freestanding TAFE college.

When the Borbidge Government came to power I set about trying to overcome the deficiencies that were being suffered by the people of Dalby. I approached the then Minister, the member for Clayfield. He was very understanding of the situation and what was needed. He commissioned a report by the department into the need for technical training on the Darling Downs and in the western downs. He engaged the services of Mr Dennis Long. Dennis Long was a former regional director of education in the Darling Downs region who had gone into retirement. He had already sat on the board of the Dalby Agricultural College at one stage. Dennis Long went to the region and conducted surveys and talked to the people in the Dalby/Chinchilla area. He liaised with the Minister and prepared a report in early 1997 which showed that there was an enormous unmet demand. The then Minister, Mr Santoro, made sure that the funds were going to be in the next Budget to provide a freestanding college.

By that time, the planners in TAFE had decided that a large college on 80 or 90 acres was no longer the go. They believed that it was more appropriate to have a college in the CBD. With the help of the Dalby Town Council and Mayor Warwick Geisel, a block of land was selected and a design was put together that suited the block of land and which also meet the needs of the TAFE planners. After all that time and after an enormous amount of paperwork had been done and the college was about to become a reality, along came the election in 1996. The Beattie Government came to power. That Government immediately dropped the plans for that college. That was the second cruel blow for the people of Dalby.

An Opposition member: Dreadful.

Mr LITTLEPROUD: It was a dreadful blow to the people of Dalby. I protested to the present Minister and the Premier. When challenged, they said, "Oh, we've upgraded the number of places at Dalby." They may have done that, but it still did not meet the need that exists and it still did not get the region the facilities that are necessary. One of the plans that they did put in place was a \$500,000

machinery training and engineering shed at the Dalby Agricultural College. It appeared in the Budget papers of that year. Nothing happened for 12 months. It was back in the Budget papers last year. I kept on making inquiries about it. After talking to people such as Rod Plumb of the Dalby Agricultural College, I found out that that project had blown out to something like \$900,000 or maybe even in excess of \$1m. The last I heard is that it is soon to be commissioned in order to take in students in the next semester. The Minister has not been out there to open it, so I imagine that it is not in use yet, but it is certainly on site.

I draw to the Minister's attention that the people of Dalby still feel cheated by that. They still feel that we should go ahead with the freestanding college as planned by the member for Clayfield. The site in town is ideal. We have to remember that Dalby is the largest manufacturing sector in inland Queensland, and that is really saying something. Dalby does not only have a steel fabrication industry. There are enormous skills in the region in terms of hydraulics and electronics, all of which are being used in various types of agricultural machinery. To think that Dalby has the largest manufacturing base in inland Queensland but does not have its own dedicated—

Mr Hayward: Do you seriously believe that the member for Clayfield intended to build that? He had two and a half years mucking around there.

Mr LITTLEPROUD: He did not have two and a half years. I can take members out there and show them the land and the plans. This Minister even denied that the report from Dennis Long was in existence. That is how lame those opposite were. The Government can come good and deliver this facility to the people of Dalby down the line. The people of Dalby have made an enormous contribution to the agriculture industry in Queensland. They are doing it in facilities that are not up to scratch. When I retire from this place, I will always remember that the people of Dalby were let down extremely badly by two successive Labor Governments.
