



Speech by

BRUCE DAVIDSON

MEMBER FOR NOOSA

Hansard 1 June 2000

TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT BILL

Mr DAVIDSON (Noosa—LP) (4.05 p.m.): I rise to speak on the Training and Employment Bill. It may be difficult for members to find it, but hidden away at the back of this Bill on page 107 are provisions relating to TAFE institutes and TAFE generally. This in itself sends a strong signal about the Government's view of the importance and significance of TAFE in the training system.

In 1998, the coalition Government tabled a TAFE Institutes Bill, giving TAFE institutes the prominence they deserved as a long-established—indeed the major—provider of training in Queensland. The coalition, in Government, wanted to make TAFE Queensland more accountable by giving it a very well defined legislative base.

Clearly, the Beattie Labor Government has no concern for the status of TAFE institutes for it hides the TAFE provisions in the back of the Training and Employment Bill. TAFE institutes are instruments of Government policy, but they are also places where Queenslanders are receiving, and expect to receive, education and training to qualify them for employment. The symbolism of this treatment of TAFE institutes belies the rhetoric pumped out by the Labor media machine. The Labor Party does not care about moving TAFE forward. It certainly has not moved TAFE forward through this Bill. It is the tail of the training dog that Minister Braddy has cloned.

During our term in office, the coalition Government was committed to improving the capacity of TAFE to operate in the competitive market. We supported TAFE in its efforts to become a key player in the State's vocational education and training system. We were committed to giving TAFE the autonomy and the flexibility it needed in order to make effective business decisions in an increasingly competitive training market. To do this, we were in the process of establishing business boards in the institutes. Those boards would have focused on the strategic business management of the institutes.

The boards would have approved the institute's business plan, monitored the implementation of the business plan and advised the institute director about industry, business and market needs and trends. The boards would have monitored the outcomes of courses, programs and services. In short, they would have been boards with a real job, unlike the institute councils which are proposed in this Bill. The councils will have a support and advisory role only.

It is regrettable that one of the first actions of the Minister and his chief executive officer was to scrap the practice of institute council reports coming into the offices of the Minister and the CEO. Who are the councils advising if the Minister and his senior officers are not interested in listening to what they say? They are toothless committees without a real job. That is the Government's proposal. That is what this Government wants. The Government will have up to 20 people who will support and advise. That will really move TAFE forward!

We proposed the appointment of persons to the business boards who had knowledge of, or experience in, business or commerce, vocational education and training, and industry and community affairs. Their role was to be focused on the strategic direction of the institutes. We wanted qualified and experienced people in the local community steering the institutes. We also provided for local colleges within the institutes to have a voice through their own councils. We were committed to moving TAFE institutes into a position of business strength. We wanted to raise the status of these institutes and of vocational education and training in Queensland so that individuals, parents, business and industry would truly value TAFE's products and services.

A recent report about small business and training entitled Big Business from the Small End of Town, looks at what will work in terms of getting small business involved in training. It recommends that training providers— particularly TAFE—need to behave and respond more in the way of businesses. This affirms that we were on the right track. This is the sort of vision that we had for TAFE. We wanted TAFE to conduct the business segment of its interests more in the way of a business. But not this lot opposite! It was this Government that pulled the rug out from under TAFE by dismantling the small, efficient and strategically important State office almost overnight. TAFE simply was not ready for this dramatic shift.

The coalition's commitment was to move TAFE institutes towards autonomy in a carefully managed and staged process. We had already started down that path. The sudden restructuring by this Government two years ago destabilised the organisation. The effects of that are still being felt today. The Government's so-called 10-point plan for TAFE which is supposed to "settle the system down, to bed it down and get some sensible administrative arrangements underneath it all" was nothing but a transparent hoax. How did they do that? They created mass upheaval, they ripped out the support for TAFE institutes and said, "Work it out for yourselves." The institutes and their staff are still trying to work out for themselves which past era this Minister, this Government and this Bill are leading them towards.

On 13 April this year when introducing this Training and Employment Bill, the Minister referred to the Government's 10-point plan, claiming that this plan has ensured that TAFE takes its rightful role as the major provider of training in this State. The 1998-99 annual report of the Minister's department, in which this 10-point plan was promoted, also stated that every year one in 10 Queenslanders— 300,000, or about 10%— pursue study or training through a TAFE Queensland institute. One can only hope and assume that this number has been maintained and improved.

In the coalition's 1997-98 Budget, an allocation of \$2.4m had been approved for the construction of a TAFE facility at Tewantin, which is in my electorate. Its curriculum was to provide enhanced training in the hospitality industry for the growing needs of the region. On 7 October 1998 in the Estimates committee hearings, Minister Braddy, in justifying his decision to scrap this Tewantin TAFE project—a project promised to be completed by Premier Beattie in his now deflated election promises—said—

"What we are determined to do is spend it"—

referring to public moneys—

"in the best places and for the best reasons. We are proceeding on that basis. As the project"—

referring to the Tewantin TAFE project—

"had not been formally approved, new investment priorities reduced the total at this time."

That occurred, despite the approval for the project by the coalition.

It is interesting to note that the Labor candidate at the 1998 election, a Mr Sfiligoj, who also committed himself and the Labor Party to the Tewantin TAFE, is now an adviser on the Minister's staff. I am absolutely astounded that Mr Sfiligoj has not been game to put his head up in the Noosa electorate over the past two years and make a statement about the Tewantin TAFE as a former Labor candidate, as a member of the community, or as a member of the Minister's staff. I do not know whether the fellow still lives in town, but I can assure the Minister that he has absolutely no credibility there, and nor does the Labor Party.

A Government member: Neither do you.

Mr DAVIDSON: I certainly do, because the people know that I am committed to ensuring that training is provided for all of those young people in my electorate. During that Estimates committee meeting, the Minister went on to state—

"The population is growing at a rapid rate, with by far the largest growth occurring in the southern part of the catchment area. Accordingly, the VET capital works program for the Cooloola Sunshine Institute is to be reviewed."

All that that gobbledegook really meant was that the Premier had lied to the electorate when he said during the election campaign that he would honour all coalition Government commitments. More than anything else, this vacant site at Tewantin is a monument and testament to the election lies of the Labor Party and the Premier of this State. With this decision to put the Tewantin-allocated funds towards the Cooloola Institute—a TAFE already operating at Nambour—the Premier is doing nothing more than rewarding the member for Nicklin for his support in this House.

The one truth in the Minister's Estimates remarks was that the growth of population being experienced in south-east Queensland was his reason to relocate the approved funds from Tewantin. In the past 20 years, the population of the Noosa Shire, let alone the electorate, has grown from

11,000 people to 42,000 people. Currently, there are 13,000 children in schools in my electorate—all potential future TAFE students. The electorate of Noosa now has a total population of 66,000 people living within its boundaries. If the Minister's figure that one in 10 Queenslanders is now being educated in a TAFE college is accurate—and we have no reason to doubt that—and if he really believes, as he said in his second-reading speech, that Queenslanders need quality vocational education and training, then I can only ask him and his Government, as they blow their trumpets for presenting this Bill to this House: when are they going to acknowledge the Premier's promise to complete this approved coalition project? When are they going to acknowledge their own commitment to a very urgent need for a TAFE college at Tewantin/Noosa, given the population growth in my electorate—a factor that the Minister agrees should be the basis for establishing this form of education and which he highlighted again in his second-reading speech?

On the Minister's own one-in-10 figure, 6,000-plus people in the Noosa electorate are in need of a TAFE college now. In the Noosa Shire, where land is forlornly awaiting the establishment of a TAFE facility, more than 4,200 people are potential students—4,200 people are anxiously waiting for this Government to recognise their immediate needs and waiting impatiently for this Minister to provide them with this facility. Until this Government and this Minister recognise those people's needs and act constructively upon them, the rhetoric in this legislation is nothing more than a cheap attempt to cover up the dismal performance of this Government and this Minister in the vital area of vocational training—an area vital to the employment prospects of many people living in the Minister's acknowledged growth area.

Let us not hear from the Minister how he has thanked the member for Nicklin for his support and at the same time looked after the needs of the people in my electorate with the upgrading of the Cooloola Sunshine Institute. He and his Premier have failed in their quest to improve the employment position of many unemployed Queenslanders. They claim that this Bill will rectify the situation. However, it will not. They seem to be oblivious to the fact that, for many, the cost of accessing these courses of learning makes it too difficult for them to attend.

Currently, it costs those students from Noosa and the surrounding areas who attend the courses at the Nambour TAFE more than \$70 a week just to travel to Nambour. I cannot believe that in this day and age, when all Government departments have staff who have the expertise to identify where population growth is occurring and where people's needs are greatest, the Minister can continue to fund the Cooloola Institute and continue to build facilities there for the people on the Sunshine Coast. The growth is occurring at Noosa, Coolool, Maroochydore and Caloundra. The public transport system from Pomona to Nambour is shocking. To travel to Nambour from Noosa, people catch a bus to the railway station, catch the train, and from there walk to the TAFE college. The public transport system does suit the needs of those people. It costs students in many parts of my electorate \$70 a week to get to Nambour.

The hospitality facility that the coalition Government proposed for Tewantin fits in with needs of the local community, it fits in with the employment prospects of the future generations of my electorate and it fits in with the training needs of all the restaurateurs and hospitality facilities that employ staff. However, many of those people find it impossible to access the training for those jobs that is provided at Nambour and the \$70 transport cost that goes with it. Many of those young people are working 10 hours a week for \$10 an hour, or 20 hours a week for \$10 or \$11 an hour. Their income is \$100 or \$200 a week. They cannot afford to pay \$70 a week to travel to Nambour.

Let me recognise firstly that the previous Minister and my colleague, Mr Santoro, understood that there was a need to locate a TAFE facility to provide that training at Tewantin, because that is where the people live and that is where their places of employment are. There is not a hospitality industry as such in Nambour; it is all based on the coast. I get frustrated because many young people come to my office, or stop me in the street, or talk to me in shopping centres and say, "I would love to get to the Nambour TAFE, but how do I transport myself there? I cannot afford the \$70 a week. On a rainy day, I cannot get from the train station to the institute." Those issues should be addressed.

The coalition Government proposed to offer some environmental studies and some fashion studies at that TAFE facility at Tewantin. Those courses fit with the needs of the Noosa community. Noosa is an environmental/ecotourism destination. Hastings Street is one of the fashion streets of the world. It is also one of the restaurant streets of the world. It is absolutely vital that we have a TAFE facility at Tewantin. For the Minister to pull the money out of that proposed facility at Tewantin and to give it to his little mate from Nicklin, Mr Wellington—who has no understanding of the training needs of the people in the region—for his own political purpose is a disgrace. The Minister and his department have neglected and misunderstood totally the needs of the people of my electorate. I am not just talking about the Noosa area; I am talking about Kin Kin, Pomona, Cooran and Cooroy—all of the people in those country areas who can access facilities at Noosa but who find it much more difficult to access facilities at Nambour.

The public transport of that area is another issue. Over the years it has improved enormously, and today it is much better than it was five years ago or 10 years ago. However, it does not suit the needs of the potential TAFE students in my electorate. My son is a carpenter by trade. He spent many days at Nambour TAFE—the Cooloola Institute. We had to get them there by our own means. Many, many other students and young people are under that same pressure. It is okay if mum can lend them the car or they have their own car, or they have a mate going to the institute, or whatever. However, the public transport cost excludes many people from attending that facility.

I know that the Minister is a reasonable man, so I ask him to reconsider the long-term future of that project at Tewantin. I know that he understands the needs of our youth. I know that he understands the role that TAFE has to play in communities such as those in the Noosa electorate. I would like him and his departmental officers to reconsider this matter, because I believe that the facility would have an enormous role to play in training many of the young people in my area for industries and jobs that are in existence now and will continue to grow.

The area is a major tourism destination in this State. The tourism market is focused on the environment, that is, ecotourism. It is also focused on the dining and culinary experiences of Noosa, its fashion stores and so on. A great opportunity would be presented by having such a facility at Noosa or Tewantin. It would provide training opportunities for young people in partnership, in many cases, with businesspeople in my electorate. Mr Santoro and I held a number of meetings with businesspeople who were only too willing to be involved in that facility at Tewantin on behalf of the community and to offer their services and expertise to provide appropriate training for all of these young people in my area.

I was appalled by the Minister's unbelievable decision. It was a political decision in the interests of the member for Nicklin. It has come at a cost to my community. Recently, there have been many reports in the media about people being dissatisfied with the level of service at restaurants not just in Noosa but throughout Queensland. If we read some of the food magazines, we see that there is a concern that service standards are dropping in many of our food outlets and restaurants. Noosa, with Hastings Street and now Gympie Terrace, and Coolumb, to the south, are growing culinary destinations. This is complemented by the fact that they are fantastic ecotourism destinations. It is vital to provide such a facility in this part of the world. We have to ensure that we are providing the best possible learning facilities and, as a result, the best service levels— something that tourists from all over the world are looking for.
