



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 9 November 2000

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Commonwealth States Grants (Primary and Secondary Assistance) Bill

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Education) (9.53 a.m.), by leave: As honourable members know, the Commonwealth States Grants (Primary and Secondary Assistance) Bill is currently before the Commonwealth Parliament. There is substantial opposition to the Bill.

If it is passed and fully implemented, there will be two clear effects. Firstly, the Commonwealth Minister will have significant new powers to interfere in Queensland schools. These powers are designed to implement narrow views on testing and benchmarking and allow for State education systems, and therefore the students in those systems, to face financial penalties for non-compliance. Secondly, the relative funding allocations provided by the Commonwealth to State and non-State schools across this country will be fundamentally altered from 2001 onwards.

While the Bill will increase the total funds provided by the Commonwealth to Australian schools, the share of funding going to non-government schools will increase dramatically relative to the share going to State schools. My department estimates that in Queensland alone the relativities will be altered to the extent that Queensland State schools will be short-changed by approximately \$52m per annum.

The State Government has a vision for public school education in this State— Queensland State Education 2010—which was released earlier this year. It complements the Queensland Government's Smart State initiatives that are based on the view that education is a fundamental driver of future economic growth in this State.

However, the States Grants Bill will seriously threaten the capability of State schools to progress these fundamental reforms. Queensland students who choose the State system or who are unable to access non-State schools for financial reasons will be significantly discriminated against by the new funding arrangements. They will not have equality of opportunity to achieve those skills necessary to participate in the future knowledge economy.

The Government is committed to the maintenance and development of a strong, rich-textured and comprehensive public schooling system in Queensland catering to a diverse student and parent body. Although the rhetoric of the Commonwealth Government is that the Bill will promote choice, geographic location and income levels clearly limit choices for many. Young people in some parts of Queensland will be particularly disadvantaged where State schools are the backbone of many regional, rural and remote communities.

We will not simply stand by while the Commonwealth coalition Government seeks to reduce State schools to the role of safety-net providers of schooling. The Premier has actively campaigned against the Bill in national forums and we support the efforts of the Federal Opposition parties to amend the Bill to make it more equitable. We will continue to work on behalf of all young Queenslanders in seeking to undo the damage that is being done by the Commonwealth coalition Government.

This Bill is fundamentally divisive. The relationships between the State, Catholic and independent schooling sectors in Queensland have been harmonious and productive. The Bill threatens these relationships. Some independent schools attract increased proportions of Commonwealth funds relative to State schools. The Bill threatens to drive a wedge between

independent and Catholic schools, as some independent schools secure increased growth funds comparative to Catholic schools.

Let me also assure the House that the State Government strongly supports the non-State schooling system in Queensland and values the key role of Catholic and independent schools in providing quality educational programs to students across Queensland. We welcome the increased funds to the non-State schools. We demand that the State schools receive a proportional increase.

The inequities of this legislation should be addressed by ensuring that the Commonwealth treats State schools equally. Equitable funding arrangements should be restored so that students in State schools have a fair go relative to opportunities available to students in other systems. I seek the support of all members of this Parliament to redress the many flaws in this legislation.

I have had many productive meetings on a number of subjects with the Commonwealth Minister the Honourable David Kemp in the past. The jointly funded Queensland School for Travelling Show Children was the product of one such meeting. On this issue, however, he has not only refused to see me, but he has also even refused to return calls.

This legislation is being rushed through Parliament by a Minister who does not fully realise the impact of this Bill on Queensland schools, and who does not want to realise it. It is an ideological drive to impose an economic rationalist market culture on our school system driven by a Minister who is choosing to be blind to the effects of his Bill on the futures of our children.
