



Speech by

ELISA ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

Hansard 28 November 2002

DISCRIMINATION LAW AMENDMENT BILL

Miss ELISA ROBERTS (Gympie—Ind) (11.09 p.m.): In rising to speak on the Discrimination Law Amendment Bill 2002, I wish to state at the outset that whilst I received—no doubt like every other honourable member—a plethora of correspondence regarding this bill my concern is only for those within my electorate who contacted me. The content of 99 per cent of the correspondence I received was categorically against the section of the bill relating to the employment of either gay teachers or a teacher in a de facto relationship.

A large proportion of my electorate is conservative and adheres to strict religious values. The resounding disappointment in regard to the pressure being put on private schools in particular is overwhelming. The argument presented most fervently is the fact that parents make a conscious choice to send their children to private schools as opposed to public schools for a number of reasons. But primarily it is to ensure that their children will be taught in a certain way and also in an environment where other children and the staff share like-minded views and values on life. These people, whether their children attend Church of England, Catholic, interdenominational, Jewish, Muslim or Greek Orthodox schools, expect that their children will be taught in a manner which is representative of the standards as set out in their specific religious ethos.

Fortunately, up until the introduction of this bill, parents and schools were given the freedom to educate their children accordingly. The fact that private schools could be penalised for choosing not to employ someone who does not reflect the lifestyle and beliefs specific to the religion of their school is reminiscent of a dictatorship. Contrary to popular belief, we do not live in a completely secular society. Many of the people who have contacted me strongly believe in living their lives according to a strict Christian ethos. It is therefore understandable that they wish to employ like-minded people to convey this message to their children in their respective schools.

None of the people who oppose the section of the bill regarding the employment of people who are either gay or in a de facto relationship wish any harm to either group of people; they are just adamant that these people do not reflect the values which they choose to live by. What I do not think some members in this House realise is just how important many of the literal meanings of the Bible are to some people. They should be given the religious freedom to continue to live according to those beliefs. Why is it discriminatory for a private school to choose to employ a person who has the same qualifications as another person but lives a heterosexual lifestyle rather than a gay lifestyle? Let us face it, there are only a handful of private schools compared to state schools where one's lifestyle is not relevant. Parents of children at most Christian and non-Christian private schools want their children to be taught what is set out in the Bible.

Mr Terry Sullivan: The new act will allow them to choose that.

Miss ELISA ROBERTS: My constituents have not been able to contact me, because they have not been made aware of these new amendments so I will continue to say what they wanted.

I attended private schools for both primary and high school, the former being a Church of England school and the latter being Catholic. My parents and the parents of my friends chose to send us to these schools because they knew that we would receive strict religious training on a daily basis as well as fairly strong discipline. These are the things that our parents valued as an integral part of our education. For example, we were not permitted to leave the school grounds without our hat and gloves

on, we all had to wear stockings all year round, and we were not allowed to leave the school premises without wearing our school blazers. We could be made to do lines if we were seen shopping after school with just a jumper on without a blazer. All our hems were checked so that they met the required length standards and we had to pray before our lunch.

Other honourable members may find this type of schooling does not meet their criteria of what is important to a child's education, but our parents did. The whole point is that parents pay for a specific type of education for their children, and if a person is employed who represents a lifestyle which is not acceptable, who are we to tell them how they should think and who they should accept? Why is it that if this government is so concerned about discrimination it allows, for example, a Jewish school to choose not to employ a Catholic teacher or a Muslim school not to employ a Buddhist teacher? This government has no problems with that type of religious discrimination, but it seems to have something against Christians and who they wish to employ. I notice the chamber is very quiet at the moment.

The author of one of the letters I received from outside my electorate supporting this legislation completely destroyed his case when he wrote to me about the fact that Muslims, Bahai supporters and Hindus were all 'crackpots'. Obviously it is okay for gay people to knock people and institutions who do not support gay lifestyles, but if others choose to stand up against them they are bigots and persecutors. I am afraid that this person completely shot his argument down in flames when he indulged in the same form of vilification and intolerance of which he was accusing others.

What this government does not seem to appreciate is that by forcing private schools to employ teachers who are either gay or in de facto relationships they are pitting one group within society against another. The government has chosen, with this bill, to put gay rights above the rights of devout Christians. As one parent said in a letter to me regarding this issue, 'Such an attack on religious freedom is surely not a reflection of community values which promote tolerance of all faiths.'

Honourable members interjected.
