



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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Hansard 19 February 2002

**EDUCATION [QUEENSLAND STUDIES AUTHORITY] BILL**

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (5.08 p.m.): It is my pleasure today to talk to the Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Bill. Members would be aware that I have raised the issue of airconditioning in schools on numerous occasions in this House. It is certainly the single greatest issue in my electorate. There are always education issues such as health and so on, but this is an issue which has really grabbed the people. They really believe they are not getting a particularly fair go.

The explanatory notes list the following policy objectives of the bill—

To contribute to higher levels of completion of year 12 or its equivalent to improve the social cohesion and the social and human capital of Queensland;

...

To provide statutory arrangements that will operate to enable schooling sectors and individual schools to achieve their common and specific objectives to meet the needs of their clients ...

How on earth can our students achieve those levels given the conditions they have to learn under today? Schools west of 148 degrees longitude were airconditioned in 1988, nearly 14 years ago. In the meantime, school P&Cs have been fundraising and looking at options for airconditioning schools. Some of the very small schools are already airconditioned, where enough money has been raised. A lot of the Catholic schools are airconditioned. P&Cs have been looking at airconditioning one or two rooms or the library so as to provide some comfort for the children.

Today, our houses, cars, buses and prisons are airconditioned. In north Queensland, reverse-cycle airconditioning is nearly always necessary due to the high humidity levels. However, reverse-cycle airconditioning is not necessary in western areas; evaporative cooling is sufficient. It is also a lot cheaper and better. In many instances, the cost would be even half or a quarter of the cost of installing reverse-cycle airconditioning. Therefore, a lot more schools could be cooled.

People are doing all sorts of things to raise money to aircondition schools. For example, the week before last a full-page *Sunday Mail* article reported on the airconditioning efforts of people at St George and highlighted the problems experienced by students, such as bleeding noses and so on. Councillors John Stone and Robert Buchan are two weighty gentlemen who have sponsored each other \$100 a kilo for every kilogram of weight they lose, with the funds raised going towards airconditioning for the school. They have a maximum of \$3,000 each; by the same token, the minimum, if they do not reach the maximum, is still \$3,000. Of course, we hope they will reach the maximum, which I am sure they will. They are putting personal effort into raising funds for the school. In the *Balonne Beacon* Robert Buchan is reported as stating—

I'm on a 'More or Less' diet ... I exercise more and eat less. I've been doing some weights as well, lifting less food to my mouth in more mouthfuls.

Dr Stone said he was exercising more. 'I walk to work each day now. The kids are at home and I can't get a car to drive!

The whole town is watching us, we've both had lots of people asking us how we are going ... So to keep us honest Dr Don Harvey and his wife Sandra are the official weighers and judges.

They are making light of this, but they are putting a real effort into raising funds for that school. The article continues—

'The primary school really needs airconditioning,' Councillor Buchan said. 'It's hard to expect the children to study successfully in the torrid heat we have here. The fundraising committee is doing a great job, we just thought we'd like to help the funds along.

Quotes for the school project are around the \$75000 mark and it is hoped to have most of those funds in by June 30, 2002—

so they have a target to aim for—

That's when the challenge finishes, but we would love the whole town to get into the spirit of the thing and join us ... We don't expect everyone to pay \$100 per kilogram, maybe \$1 would be realistic. Perhaps people could even gather sponsors like the children do with readathons.

Think how much healthier the town would be if everyone got into the act,' Dr Stone said.

I am prepared to put in \$10 a kilogram for whatever they lose. I am prepared to put up my money. I really do not mind how much they lose; it is a great cause.

When we examine a map of Queensland showing airconditioned schools under the Cooler Schools zone, we see that the zone starts at about 24 degrees latitude and goes up to about 20 degrees latitude. It does not really cover a lot of Queensland. Importantly, the heat discomfort map shows areas by their number of discomfort days per year. A line runs from just below Cairns and Townsville right down to Bundaberg, just misses Taroom and goes out to Charleville and around to the border, coming in somewhere around Bollon or Dirranbandi. In other words, the heat discomfort is exactly the same in places such as St George, Roma, Goondiwindi and Tara as it is in Townsville, Mackay and so on, even though those places have higher humidity. Why shouldn't those people be included in the same zone? They have the same, if not greater, levels of discomfort. It is hotter out there, but I do appreciate that the coastal areas have high humidity, which can be overbearing.

I wish to read into the record a list of schools that are still eligible and which do not, in some cases, have airconditioning—and these are in my area alone: Arcadia Valley State School, Auburn River State School, Brigalow State School, Bymount East State School, Chinchilla Christian School, Chinchilla State High School, Chinchilla State School, Condamine State School, Cockatoo State School, Drillham State School, Dulacca State School, Guluguba State School, Grosmont State School, Injune State School, Hopeland State School, Miles State High School, Miles State School, Muckadilla State School, Peek-A-Doo State School, Roma Junior State School, Roma Middle State School, St John's School, St Joseph's School Chinchilla, Wallumbilla State School, Yuleba State School, Begonia State School, Bungunya State School, Dirranbandi State School, Dunkeld State School, Meandarra State School, Moonie State School, Rocky Crossing State School, St George State High School, St George State School, St Joseph's School Tara, St Patrick's School St George, Surat State School, Talwood State School, Tara State School, Teelba State School, Thallon State School, The Gums State School, Westmar State School, Wycombe State School, Yellowbank Junction State School, Glenmorgan State School, Hannaford State School, Hebel State School, Kioma State School and Lundavra State School. All of those schools are still looking to be airconditioned. In a lot of instances they have raised funds and have started to install airconditioning as best they can.

**Ms Bligh:** They're not in the zone.

**Mr HOBBS:** I know they are not in the zone. That is exactly my point.

**Ms Bligh:** They are a lot closer to the zone than they ever were when you lot ran the show.

**Mr HOBBS:** No, that is not the case. We committed to include all of that area in the zone.

**Mr Bredhauer:** That is not true.

**Mr HOBBS:** We did.

**Ms Bligh** interjected.

**Mr HOBBS:** No, that is not true. Our commitment was to go from 151 degrees west to 26 degrees north.

**Ms Bligh:** When did you commit to that?

**Mr HOBBS:** At the last election. The honourable member should not forget that we have committed to airconditioning those schools and she has not. I am not sure whether the minister was here earlier when I pointed out that the heat discomfort levels are almost the same for the coastal areas as they are for the western areas. Why aren't they included?

**Ms Bligh:** I appreciate that.

**Mr HOBBS:** As the minister mentioned, I have asked the minister on several occasions, and every time I have received an answer along these lines: '... but at this stage the government has no plans to extend the current zones' or—

The current policy and guidelines associated with the implementation of the Cooler Schools Program does not allow an expansion of the Cooler Schools zone to include schools in south-west Queensland. A separate policy decision by government would be required to enable this to happen.

Can the minister do that? That is the issue. These schools need airconditioning. However, a lot more schools could be cooled using evaporative airconditioners. That is something that would be appreciated and is desperately needed in those regions.

**Mr Lawlor:** Why didn't you do it when you were in government?

**Mr HOBBS:** We did a lot when we were in government, as a matter of fact.

**Mr Lawlor:** Rubbish!

**Mr HOBBS:** The member was not even here. In fact, in my former electorate of Warrego every school was airconditioned. The boundaries have since changed, of course. We have a very strong policy on this. We have been in government for two and a half years of the last 12 years. The Labor government has been in power for the rest of that time, yet we still do not have airconditioning in all Queensland schools.

**Mr Lawlor** interjected.

**Mr HOBBS:** The member is part of the government, and I am pointing out to him that there are schools that desperately need airconditioning. As I said, people are trying desperately to raise funds to help those kids.

**Mr Bredhauer:** You could have used the \$14 million from the Connolly-Ryan inquiry.

**Mr HOBBS:** The minister could have used some of the \$29 million on that footbridge. Was his department involved in that?

**Mr Bredhauer:** No.

**Mr HOBBS:** Maybe it should have been. There are many examples of how money that has been spent on various projects could have been rechannelled. But the airconditioning of schools is a particularly important and serious issue. I certainly hope that the government is prepared to put a genuine effort into that.

I also want to raise another issue relating to the increase in the criteria for two-teacher schools, which I understand is going from 26 to 28. This is causing some concern in my electorate. Members would understand that, if there is a change of criteria and we lose one of 10 teachers, we lose 10 per cent.

**Mr Bredhauer:** You're a veritable Einstein, aren't you?

**Mr HOBBS:** Absolutely. But if we have only two teachers and we lose one, that is a bigger problem.

**Mr Lawlor:** That's 50 per cent.

**Mr HOBBS:** Absolutely, 50 per cent. What I am saying is that this creates a more serious impact on a community. That is something that we really need to consider. If we are going to change the criteria for two-teacher schools from 26 to 28 students—is the minister not doing that?

**Ms Bligh:** I'm not aware of any proposal, but I'll get back to you on it.

**Mr HOBBS:** I am pleased that I mentioned that to the minister.

**Ms Bligh:** I'll get you something accurate on it because I want you to have good information.

**Mr HOBBS:** If that is the case, that is fine. But the criteria should not impact on those two-teacher schools because of the effect on those communities.

While the Minister for Transport is in the House, I think it is important to raise another issue. I spoke to the minister late last year in relation to school bus runs. When school bus runs are not operating properly we have problems keeping schools going. The minister might recall the case of Drillham State School, which was to have five children, including one preschooler, in 2002 and nine children in 2003, including four preschoolers. There would have been some real problems in getting that school going again if the school bus was unable to operate. It was quite clear that student numbers had dwindled because of the exceptional circumstances of drought in that region. People who had been working on various properties had left their farmhouses because there was no work. As well, there was no water. But it was evident that as soon as it did rain they would come back. We went through a torrid time. Families were unsure about whether the school would operate. I attended meetings that were held up to December last year and in early January. There was a great deal of uncertainty surrounding that school when it was quite evident that all that was needed was a stay. Next year, the year after and the year after that everything was right; the numbers were there to enable the school to continue operating. But there was one thing that really hurt the most.

A meeting was held in January, and it was decided by the departmental people present that, 'Yes, we will try once more.' In fact, the bus driver even offered to receive less than his normal rate because he was very confident that he would get enough students using that service. Whereas the community was told that the departmental people were going to try to negotiate their way through this, the very next day another departmental group rang to say that they were coming out to measure the school bus route to try to cut it back because there were two school bus routes in the area.

There was no coordination or compassion in relation to this issue. No genuine position was taken by the department to consider these issues compassionately and maintain some flexibility. We cannot cut off services at a particular number. For instance, if one of those school buses had been lost, the kids would not have been able to get to the nearest pool at Miles for swimming lessons. The preschool would have closed down. A combination of events would have occurred. Members would not believe the add-on problems associated with that. That was a stressful time for those people, and it was disappointing because it did not have to be like that. There were ways to overcome that. The minister needs to reconsider the school bus policy because it is very important. It is also important that the Minister for Education is made aware of that.

Education obviously is a very important issue for us all here in Queensland. We strive to do our best to achieve the best options for our kids. In many ways this is very difficult because we have a very diverse state. We have a huge area to cover, and in many instances we have some very difficult conditions. But I believe that we can work towards improving this situation genuinely. We can have our political argy-bargy but, at the end of the day, we have to educate our kids in the best way we can. We need to take notice of the issues that have been raised, because they have been raised with the most sincere intent to make sure that we can get the very best for our kids here in Queensland.

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