



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

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YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING BILL; TRAINING REFORM BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (2.51 p.m.): I thank the member for Mudgeeraba for allowing me to speak ahead of her. I applaud the aims of this legislation which are really about appropriately equipping young people through education or training so that they get the best head start in life. I believe the objectives of the bills are laudable and their principles are ones that we must strongly support.

I have a number of issues I want to cover. In regard to the Youth Participation in Education and Training Bill, there are some questions I would like to ask of the minister. The challenges we face as legislators are that there are also social issues that we are trying to address at the same time. Some of these issues can be handled within legislation, but there are many complex social issues which legislation in itself is unable to bring resolution to. I have some concerns about some of the social issues that overlap with the objectives of this bill. They have been raised by some other members, and I will outline them.

Sixteen-year-olds probably live a vastly different life today than 16-year-olds 20, 30 or 40 years ago did. We are seeing an interesting demographic in that some children coming into adulthood are opting to stay at home with their parents for longer and longer. There is also a significant proportion of that age bracket that has already left home. That may be with the approval of parents but many times it will be a decision of that 16-year-old made totally independent of their parents. There may have been a breakdown in that relationship and that breakdown may have been there for some time.

However, looking at where there has been dysfunction in a relationship, I am amazed at some young people who go on with training and education despite their parents, not because of them. They may be the minority, but they deserve to be applauded. They have a vision of where they want to go despite their circumstances and they choose to go on. One example I am thinking of is that of a young 16-year-old woman who is in a relationship still attending high school but living very independently of her parents. She experienced domestic violence and took refuge with a parent. The parent in question refused to hand back that child's assets—a laptop computer and other goods. This young person is in an invidious position. She really wants to go on with education and training but she does not have parental support. I am only using that as an example of some very different living arrangements which young people have these days. The majority may be living in healthy family relationships despite the pressures of growing up and parents learning how to deal with adolescents and teenagers. There are also relationships which are very different.

One of the concerns I have with the complexity of the social arrangements these days is that there will also be parents who would genuinely like more input into the direction of their children at that stage in their lives but who find their children are making decisions quite independently of them. We are not looking at children who are under the direction of their parents the way they might have been 30 or 40 years ago. I do have concerns about the compulsion in this act and the ability to bring quite significant fines against parents. I acknowledge that there are exemptions, but if the relationship has already broken down to the extent that a teenager is not taking direction from a parent after the age of 16, while they are still in that compulsory phase it can be a very difficult relationship. I note there are exemptions for parents who can prove they are not in a position to force that young person into training or further education, but I would certainly welcome the minister's explanation in regards to these provisions.

Let us step aside from that at the moment. The main intention is the raising of the compulsory age limit and putting in place a two-year period after the age of 16 where it is a compulsory participation requirement to undertake further training or work. For the young people who are most vulnerable and who are not seeking further training or further work or who are having difficulty staying in work or further training, the chances are that in the majority of cases they already have very poor family relationships. No legislation can fix that particular issue. It is a social issue for which other intervention strategies from government and community are the more likely pathway to success—though there is no one solution to these issues.

I have an emergency youth shelter in my electorate which deals with children who experience homelessness or dysfunction in their family relationships. I would not recommend that shelter for a child who is needing emergency accommodation only and who has not experienced a certain amount of street craft. These young people have experienced a lot in their lives, and it is not a place where you would drop a young child without some other form of significant adult mentoring.

What I am saying is that there are some children or young adolescents who require a lot more intensive intervention strategies, and I believe that would involve mentoring. There are some very good intervention strategies with very active adult and youth mentoring programs, but not like the ones we have seen available to date through schools. There is a need for something that goes beyond that. I believe there is a need to work in with our emergency accommodation shelters and those children who have experienced dysfunction in their lives and who need more intensive intervention. We have to do something different. This legislation will not fix that.

Some of those kids are already on a pathway to a life of crime. What I am saying here is not rocket science. They are chroming, they are into alcohol and drugs, they have in many cases experienced abuse in their home relationships and there has been dysfunction—that means they are in what I would call a high-risk category. Just putting them into a school or training alone is not the answer. There need to be other intervention strategies. A more cohesive approach needs to be provided from Family Services funding but primarily through community agencies which are able to work in with that.

These are the kids most of all who need those interventions. These are the kids most of all who we need to ensure receive appropriate training, but it goes beyond just the training formats that we see. It means intensive life skills and intensive parenting of a different kind which they may not be getting through their home life because they are not living at home anymore.

I believe that is a significant issue. I would welcome any additional assistance through the Families Department, working together with the Education Department, to address this. We know that there are training courses out there. This talks about flexible school arrangements, but there are social issues that sit alongside these things. To keep these kids in a meaningful form of employment and a meaningful form of training actually means providing them with life skills that some of them do not have anymore. It is very different from the average home life, but it is something that is a growing issue in our community which we need to acknowledge.

I want to talk briefly about school based training. Some of the largest numbers of young people in the state going through school based training are on the Sunshine Coast and in my electorate of Maroochydore. I strongly support the mixing of options available to young people to make school and training more attractive and applicable to their lives. The building industry and the hospitality industry are an example. They provide wonderful pathways for young people to combine both the school and the vocational elements of their training.

As the Education Minister is in the House, I mention again that we would very much welcome the replacement of the manual arts building at the Maroochydore State High School. We welcomed the provision of funding for the roof, which is leaking. The school wants to roll that into the overall building program rather than build a new roof and have to replace it.

Ms Bligh interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: I would appreciate that, and I welcome the minister's support in that regard. It is providing those sorts of facilities at schools that is going to make a difference.

I want to reiterate some other comments about equity of access. Queensland is a huge state. There are some places where it is easier to get access and there is a range of choices as regards the types of training that may be available. I am perhaps fortunate that in our area we do have a range of choices, and hopefully those choices will continue to expand. Queensland is a large state. In lifting the compulsory age of education we want to make sure that young people in rural and remote areas still have access to good choices in education and do not find themselves taking the compulsory choice that leaves them frustrated and in a learning environment that is not where their skills and gifts and abilities may lie.

I will leave my comments at that. As I said, I commend the principles of the legislation. Obviously there are some issues of equity. I also commend consideration of some of the social issues and how we address those as a community. I believe that is something which sits outside the

legislation. It is harder. It is tougher. It can be done better by communities in partnership with government. It is getting harder and tougher. It is about how we as a community effectively step in and provide some additional support to children who have dysfunctional family relationships so that they do not find themselves leading a frustrating life of illiteracy, a lack of skill or potentially, unfortunately as statistics show, a life of crime. That is what can happen if they do not find their way into a meaningful form of occupation or calling early in their lives.