



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

Hansard 11 March 2003

EXPERIENCE PAYS PROGRAM

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeria—ALP) (11.44 a.m.): I have stated many times in this House that experience pays, that job seekers over 45 years of age have a lot to offer workplaces. The 45-plus Experience Pays campaign launched in November last year on the south side of Brisbane aims to generate 45 jobs in 45 weeks for the over 45s. The program is delivering the goods. I am very pleased to report to the House today that over 30 people have now gained jobs. Those 30 people have gained jobs in less than 15 weeks. We are well on track with this program.

The program is a cooperative effort between the Department of Employment and Training, the *Southern Star*, a Quest newspaper—in particular, many thanks to the editor, Ray Goodey—Geoff Wilson, the President of the South Side Chamber of Commerce, and the Mount Gravatt Training Centre. When I initiated this program last year and sought the support of these organisations and people, none of them hesitated. They saw the merits of the program and they have been critical to its success. The program worked so well because of three key elements: the cooperation among the employers, the local newspaper and the agencies involved, the \$4,000 wage subsidy offered by the state government through the Experience Pays program as an incentive to employers, and the great support offered by Sheila Orr at the Mount Gravatt Training Centre. Sheila was an unemployed person over 45 herself until the Department of Employment and Training provided a grant to the Mount Gravatt Training Centre to support job seekers over 45 and match them to employers.

There are times in our role as an MP when we know that we can make a positive difference to people's lives. I felt this very strongly last Wednesday when I visited Rocklea Spinning Mills with the Minister for Employment, Training and Youth and Minister for the Arts, Matt Foley, to see three successful job seekers at work. The minister is a keen supporter of the over 45s program, and both he and I wanted to meet some of them in the workplace and have a talk directly to them to see how the program is going. To our delight, three men, all in their 50s, who had been previously told that they were past their use-by date, had been working full-time for three weeks. Stephen MacRae and his two workmates said that their lives had been saved by Sheila Orr and they were grateful to the program. Their words and the joy they felt in showing us around their workplace indicated to me that this program is very worth while. They said that Sheila had understood their skills and problems and commitment to work and within a short time she was able to place them with employers. They said also that they were now keen to get up in the morning; previously, they had been very depressed and miserable about their work prospects. I congratulate Rocklea Spinning Mills and the other employers who have been getting behind this program. The management at Rocklea Spinning Mills had said they were after people over 45 because of their long-term commitment to the workplace and their stability. They also said that the \$4,000 wage subsidy is important. That was a key point.

I have read critical literature and I have been at seminars on these issues where a lot of academics and others have said that wage subsidies from government do not work. I have seen first-hand from this program that wage subsidies do provide an incentive. Wage subsidies, probably as an offset to training costs and other costs of the employer, do work. I am very pleased to see that, with the cooperation of the agencies, the wage subsidy is a very important element in the success of the program.

There are about 31,000 over 45s around Queensland who are unemployed. Although the rate of unemployment among this age group is lower than the average of all ages, the problem is that most

of these people are long-term unemployed. They are unemployed for much longer periods than others. They average about 78 and a half weeks as compared with 48 weeks for other age groups. This is a very long time to be without a decent income. This is a very long time to live with the fear that they may never find secure work. It is a very long time in which they can dig themselves into a hole and feel they will never get out of it.

I am very pleased that this program is working well. I have asked the minister to replicate it in other parts of the state. I think that will be the case, probably in four other locations. I commend it to employers. It really is benefiting employers. It is important for them to know that these people are not past their use-by date; they have a lot to offer their workplaces. I know from meeting these employees that they are very grateful to be back in the workplace.

We are living longer, which is a great thing. We are retiring younger, though, which can be a bad thing. We need to be employed for as long as we want to be and can be in order to survive into our retirement and not be a burden on the state. This program is working well.