Speech by

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EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (3.40 pm): I rise to speak to the Education (General Provisions) Bill 2006, a substantial piece of legislation some 336 pages long. However, the bill itself predominantly aims to re-enact in more contemporary terms provisions that this House has passed recently. I note the support given by the shadow minister for this bill, given the amendments moved by the minister about the religious education clauses.

The Education (General Provisions) Bill 2006 will replace the Education (General Provisions) Act 1989 and the Youth Participation in Education and Training Act 2003. The explanatory notes state that it has been drafted with the objective of ensuring that the legislative regime supports the broad strategic direction of education in Queensland and the effective establishment and operation of state education institutions. A system of universal, free, secular, state-provided education was established as a desirable principle for Queensland some time ago. The recognition of a child's right to an education is indeed one of the highest duties government is responsible for providing. As the coalition shadow minister for education, the member for Cunningham, said last time this House sat, providing a good high-quality education for our young people is the best possible investment that we can make for the future of our state and indeed our nation.

It has also been long established that statutory obligations should be imposed on parents and the state to ensure children attend school in order to receive an appropriate education. This bill, amongst its many clauses, imposes obligations upon parents to ensure their enrolment and attendance at a state or non-state school or their participation in an eligible option. This includes, with corresponding exemptions in chapters 10 and 11, the requirement to ensure young people participate in a period of education or training after they turn 16 years or complete year 10. I think that exemptions from compulsory training so students can participate in apprenticeships and traineeships is a sensible amendment and I look forward to working more on policy options for that in my new role as shadow minister for employment and training. It is one that I have seen practised at Benowa State High School in my electorate of Surfers Paradise.

Breach of these provisions is an offence carrying modest maximum financial penalties. These provisions, namely clauses 180 and 243 of the bill, are reasonable. Parents must accept a level of responsibility to ensure their children's involvement and attendance at an appropriate school or option program, and these provisions merely act to enshrine reasonable obligations in relation to this. The obligations of parents are complemented by this bill's obligations on the school itself. Like its legislative predecessors, this bill contains provisions authorising a range of controls upon the behaviour of people on school grounds. I am referring to clauses 160, 227, 228 to 308 inclusive and 339 to 355 inclusive. The regulation of students' conduct, the ability to suspend and exclude students, put students on detention, refusal to enrol prospective students and prohibit the entry of certain persons onto school premises are not unreasonable provisions. These provisions merely recognise the heavy burden schools hold to ensure the safety and welfare of students. However, the government is also responsible for providing more facilities for students who repeatedly behave badly to go on to continue their education rather than simply be refused enrolment and get taken out of the existing education system and have their education compromised. This requires further consideration.

This bill will also introduce the non-compulsory full-time prep year for 2007. In 2008 the bill raises the school starting age by six months so that children who turn six by 30 June are in year 1. That brings Queensland in line with the school starting age in the majority of other states and territories. However, this section of the bill should not pass without amendment. The starting age of the prep year continues to cause confusion and anxiety in many parents in the community. The concerns relate to the dates provided for students starting prep or year 1 in the next couple of years.

Clause 160 is too strict. Flexibility and balance must be afforded to the starting age as it currently makes children born in a six-month period in 2001 ineligible for prep. This restrictive date cut-off must be made more flexible in recognition of the supposed universally available nature of the prep year out of respect for parents' choice at this time and that some students—albeit a small number—are excluded from attending prep even if their parents want them to if they fall outside the rigid date range.

It will not be out of line with the other obligations contained in this bill to allow the school, through its principal and the parent, to decide whether it is appropriate for a child to begin prep or year 1 based on the individual nature of the child. I note that the minister has made concessions in this regard. It is the parent with an intimate knowledge of the child's prior development and the principal with experience and knowledge of the curriculum who are in the best position to determine starting age in particular when the only reason a child is not able to attend prep or year 1 when the parent wants them to is a result of inflexible regulation.

The law already affords flexible discretions to judges, as the law recognises that judges hold the best information in regard to the situation. Parents and principals should be granted a similar discretion in respect of the information and unique judgement they hold. If it is in the best interests of the child to start them in prep, hold them back in prep, start them in year 1, that should be allowed. Let us keep in mind that a child may not be ready emotionally, socially and developmentally to start year 1 without prep and not allowing this goes against the overall objective of this bill and the prep year.

Any amendment should allow for circumstances where a parent and/or the school believes that the child's maturity and/or learning capability may necessitate their early or delayed commencement into the prep year or year 1. Certainly other concerns for prep year linger. Teacher aide time is still a concern, composite classes complicate a teacher's teaching objectives, and whether facilities will be ready for next year are issues that continue to raise eyebrows and concerns in the community.

Undoubtedly one clause in this bill raised the most eyebrows in the community. It is a clause that is now to be removed by amendment after the government backflipped on its inclusion. I have only been in this House for a short time but what I can say is that this single clause has resulted in my office receiving a record amount of correspondence expressing concerns—more than any other single clause in any piece of legislation.

Mr Copeland: More than any other bill.

Mr LANGBROEK: More than any other bill—I take that interjection from the member for Cunningham. Certainly the backlash from the community drove the government's backflip on its controversial religious instruction clause which the coalition was planning to oppose if it was given the chance. The coalition had concerns over the opt in, opt out provisions, the diminishing respect shown by this government to the worth of a solid grounding in morals that still underpins our legal system and way of life and the possibility of bizarre and extreme religious instruction being available in a state-sanctioned environment and the resulting responsibility that the state would have had if it promoted these beliefs.

I feel compelled to comment on clauses like that one, which was removed only a couple of months ago. I was pleased to see the government perform its backflip and adopt the coalition's position on this matter, but the people of Queensland should be warned about what Labor will do if it retains the majority in this House after the next election. This push to diminish the value of religious education is yet another example of political correctness going too far, in the same way as the banning of Bibles from hospital bedsides which were removed for fear they would offend those from other faiths. Just as allowing the presence of Bibles hardly qualifies as the promotion of religion in hospital wards, nor should religious education be seen as anything but the promotion of morals and principles that underpin the principles of law in Australia. The push to diminish the value of religious education has come from the Far Left faction of the Labor Party. Those same members will push for this clause to be passed in the future. This backflip happened because Labor backbenchers were nervous that they were going to lose votes in the upcoming election.

After the election, if Labor is returned to power, I suspect this clause in relation to religious education will again be raised and pushed through. One would assume that those opposite would be more intelligent to rush this clause through straightaway and not risk any voter fallout in the lead-up to an election. Those opposite cannot regard this argument as a conspiracy theory. The minister himself has indicated the intention of Queensland Labor to follow through with its intention to diminish the role of the current religious instruction in our schools.

On 23 May the minister was quoted in the *Courier-Mail* as saying 'the appropriate course of action is not to proceed with the amendments at this time'—note that carefully: 'at this time'. I submit that this is an implied intention that these changes will happen 'when we are more popular' or 'at a time when we are not worried about potential votes'. Once again we will see this Beattie government dogged by its Far Left trying to impose their views and political correctness on the rest of the community. It should not be up to the government to be imposing its humanist views on the community.

Before I move on from this issue, I think it is important to point out what will happen after these provisions are brought in, allowing religions to apply to the department for the ability to teach our children. On 24 May the *Courier-Mail* ran the headline 'Unholy Challenge: Non-religious Group Hits Education Policy Backflip'. The report stated that the Humanist Society of Queensland was considering taking the state government to the Anti-Discrimination Commission after it did not push through its changes to religious education. If we can take anything out of this reaction it is the probability that if groups like the Humanist Society of Queensland applied to teach 'religious education' and were rejected by the department they would take the government to the commission anyway. I think we can all accept that it is not a desirable outcome to have groups using the commission as an argument to gain access to our children.

This bill will enable state schools to charge for specialist programs such as the international baccalaureate and other high-cost specialist programs. I believe that, just as the government is responsible for providing for students who have learning difficulties, we must ensure that we provide opportunities to gifted and talented students which this part of the bill seeks to achieve.

I appreciate the development of dress code and distance education provisions contained in this bill. I note that enrolment into special schools is dealt with also, but the government must look at the broader issues in our special schools—namely, access by students to specialists as a part of the service at special schools and also the better allocation of teacher aides to special education units.

This is a big bill, and many of the provisions re-enact accepted good policy from previous bills. I have foreshadowed some concerns and I am aware that they will be brought up by the coalition shadow minister for education in due course. I warn those opposite about the consequences they may face if Labor retains its majority and pushes reforms to religious education through this House.