



Speech by

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (9.09 pm): I am really pleased to speak to the Vocational Education, Training and Employment and Other Legislation Amendment Bill because I think vocational education and training is so important. There has been a shift in emphasis in recent years regarding technical and trade training that I think has been welcomed. I was probably one of the first members in this parliament to speak about the need to concentrate more on technical trades in about 2001, when I could see a trend developing where so many kids were encouraged to go to uni and do a course but it did not always lead to employment or worthwhile employment. I saw a lot of young people I knew in Toowoomba who had done arts degrees end up working at drive-in bottle shops and places like that, whereas some of their colleagues who had done a carpentry apprenticeship or electrical apprenticeship and so on had developed into young businesspeople.

I think one of the important things to remember about technical and trade training is the status of the training that is being provided. I have often said that a component of manual arts training at school should be to provide a very basic, not complicated, stream of education—teaching them about the fact that if they become a fridge mechanic or a hairdresser or a chippie or an electrician or a plumber there will be a time when they have to run their own business, when they will have to go home at night and quote, when they will have to do some advertising for business, where they will have to employ apprentices and other staff, where they will have to attend to workers compensation, finances and borrowing and all the rest of it, that it is a very complicated but worthwhile business enterprise and very important in maintaining the way we live in our communities in our society.

It is important to teach young people when they are doing these courses at school that they are not just making a wooden teapot stand made up of eight quadrants of wood glued together; they are working towards something bigger and better in the future. Some of the young people who got their apprenticeships in three or four years have got themselves a decent utility, ladder racks and toolboxes and they are out there earning good money. They are building houses, they are repairing equipment, they are doing very worthwhile things. That is the sort of thing that should be taught to young people at school.

One of the problems we have in our society at the moment has been this imbalance. Too many people are doing uni courses when they should have been looking at doing a trade. I strongly believe that everyone should be going through to grade 12. Whether they are going to be a technical person, a tradesperson, work in retail or hospitality or whether they are going to be a professional person—a doctor, physio or whatever—everyone should have the right and should go through to grade 12 to get the proper development at school. Everyone should aspire to play in the footy team or the netball team. Everyone should aspire to be in the school musical, to be a school leader, to be a grade 12 leader, to go on the various camps and do all the things that are offered in grades 11 and 12. That is an important part of development and growth.

For that reason I have always believed that the development of school based apprenticeships has been a great thing. Students can be at school, can be a part of the school, can achieve growth and

development and by the time they finish grade 12 they can have at least one year of apprenticeship up their sleeve so that they are attractive to employers. There is a lot of pressure on employers today. It is highly competitive out there. Employers cannot afford for their apprentices to be away for large periods of block training and so forth. If they come out of school with up to one year of credit—good credit, well trained both at school and from work experience, say, on a Wednesday afternoon each week—that makes them employment ready, which is the most important thing. It makes them disciplined to turn up on time and to take direction from their employers so that they are employment ready and skilled.

One of the important things about being employment ready is the way in which schools can provide some of these services. I have spoken to some very interesting and dedicated teachers in my electorate. They have talked about this issue of being employment ready and about wanting to provide interesting projects so that young people want to get into the trades. I mentioned before the typical thing that most kids who have done this sort of work at school have brought home—the wooden teapot stand made of eight quadrants of wood glued together. Young people have to get excited about things like motors, engines and trucks, and putting up the frame of a house—doing some real projects.

My colleague Ted Malone, the member for Mirani, has done a great thing in his area. Along with some of his friends and in cooperation with the school, I believe that he has undertaken what should be an example all across the state. They have constructed a large shed, which they all helped build. It is on some acreage adjacent to the school. They provide not only a little school farm set-up but a big shed where the kids can pull down tractors, cars and machinery. We have to excite some of these kids. If you take kids into a classroom and say, 'By the end of this year you are going to make a little wooden clock,' that is not going to excite them greatly. But if you said, 'We are going to pull a John Deere tractor down and rebuild it and paint it green,' you are going to get some of the boys excited. If you say to the girls, 'We are going to do this particular project and it will stretch you out a bit, you are really going to have to work hard at this,' that challenge will excite them. That is the sort of thing that is important for young people in technical and trades training. At the same time they are going to learn their trade and be wonderful leaders and businesspeople in our community.

One of the problems we have in our society at the moment is that our economy in Australia is so strong that we just simply do not have the population to match our economy. We have all heard the story that we have the lowest unemployment we have seen for many, many years. In my own area of Toowoomba we just do not have the people to fill the jobs. There are pages and pages and pages of jobs in Saturday's *Toowoomba Chronicle*. There is so much work abounding. We have one of the lowest unemployment rates in Australia. We are not a place on the coast where there is tourism and all the rest of it. We are a solid, strong town. We are benefiting from the mining on the western Darling Downs. By the time a young person gets their apprenticeship they are gone—off to the mines, or down to the coast or off overseas or somewhere else. We are not like America where they have a Mexico or a Cuba where there are people who want to work. We have run out of people in Australia.

I have helped some of the businesses in our area, with the help of a cabinet minister—not one of the ones who are here at the moment. We had to bring some Chinese people out to work for a particular company because this expert company, which builds feed mills and roller mills—it is highly professional and has been going for many, many years—could not for love nor money get people to work there because we do not have the people. I heard the AMA saying the other day that we need 13,000 more health professionals in rural Australia. Where are we going to find 13,000 people? We do not have the people. Our economy is so strong. So we have brought Chinese workers out. They are on the correct award wage and so forth. We cannot get people to do the work, and so without them we cannot build the equipment. There are Brazilians driving cattle trucks and other people from overseas working in Pittsworth in fabrication and transport, at the feed mills, abattoirs and so on.

The point I am trying to make is that it is absolutely important to be training our young people in the trades, but we do not have enough. I heard the member for Stafford before criticising the federal government in relation to the technical colleges. He said that they are not going to turn anybody out until 2010. Of course they are not because they have to be trained. Every course is about two, three or four years, so we are not going to say, 'We have a college here and we will turn someone out overnight.'

It is important that we train every person that we possibly can. With the size of our economy we still do not have enough people to actually do the work. There are schools in my electorate where the staff are desperately trying to get boys to stay on to grade 12. Those boys know that they can leave at the end of grade 10, work as a builder's labourer and make big money and within a year or so buy a car. It is essential that those boys stay on until grade 12. It is essential that they get a rounded full education and hopefully get a school based apprenticeship. That is the issue that we face in this nation.

It is all very well to say, as I have heard Rudd and Swan wander around saying, that we just have to train more people. Train who? There is no-one to train. Everybody has a job. We have to make sure that all of our young people who come through school are actually being trained the correct way—that those who should go to university are going to university and those who should be getting a technical or a trade

position are going to TAFE or one of the private providers and are getting the best quality training that they can get. We have to train them in as short a time frame as we can because there is a critical need. That is one of the reasons I am such a strong believer in school based apprenticeships and boys and girls finishing grade 12 and being employment ready. They then have a year or two up their sleeves and they can get into their trade and get places quickly.

I know one young fellow about 24 years old who was a head stockman around Birdsville. He came into Toowoomba and walked the streets and got himself an electrical apprenticeship which he finished. He told me of the money that he can earn if he goes to the Kimberleys and works in the diamond and goldmines as a mine electrician. It would blow your mind. It is probably almost as much the Prime Minister of Australia gets. That is what we are facing in regional cities. I know Mackay has a problem in the agricultural area because of the mines. It is something that we have to put our minds to.

This bill looks at a way of making the TAFE system more flexible. That is important. If we go back to when Bond University started up it was quite radical and thought outside the square. University courses had been five and six years and structured with holidays and terms and so on and all of a sudden Bond University came in with a different type of system. Universities are now more flexible and people can get their degrees in a certain period of time instead of that standard four or five years. They are out there working in their profession earlier. I think that this bill will do a lot towards assisting TAFE colleges to meet the challenges and the competition that they face. I feel that TAFE colleges have gone through a difficult time. There have been times when TAFE colleges did not know whether they were betwixt or between, whether they were government run organisations or whether they were private organisations. They have been in a limbo situation. They got through that period of time. The challenge is now there for TAFE.

In Toowoomba we have a wonderful facility based at the old showground. We have some very dedicated senior staff and lecturers who are dedicated to turning out young people who are great in hospitality, hairdressing, computers and IT. One of the interesting trends of TAFE has been to work with the university in the town to provide some credit towards a degree course.

I notice in the announcement made by John Howard yesterday in relation to Australian technical colleges that they are looking at a partnership not only with TAFE colleges, private institutions or businesses that have the ability to train people, but also with universities. It makes sense. Why should we not make use of the buildings, talent and organisations whose whole ethos and core business is teaching and training? It is time to move away from the them-and-us mentality.

It all gets back to what I was talking about at the start of my speech and that is giving status to people who are undergoing technical or trade training so that they feel just as valued and just as important as someone who might go on to be a doctor or a lawyer. I welcome this particular bill. It is giving the flexibility that is required to meet these challenging and changing times and to provide as many people with skills as soon as possible. If members try to ring a plumber or an electrician at the moment to get a job done they will have to join the queue. The worst thing a person can do is ask for a price—it is better to just grin and bear it. I have always admired people who are able to do things with their hands and do them well. These people are a very important part of our community.

I want to comment on a couple of schools in my area that have been working very hard on this aspect of trade. Concordia College recently held a night for a number of people from around our city who might be interested in helping students or in being on a committee to provide input into how trade training occurs at the school. I also mention Centenary Heights High School, which is working very hard at trying to develop a system whereby it can offer more to those who are doing trade training and perhaps involve their parents. Wouldn't it be good for young boys or girls to be so excited about their course that they could go down to the school on the weekend with their parents and undertake some of the projects that they are doing in a nice big shed with a bit of space. As I said, it builds up the status, but more importantly it builds up the interest in those particular courses.

Ms Struthers: Come on, Mike, tell us about the bill.

Mr HORAN: I have been talking about the bill from the start. It is the background to the bill. The member missed the point. The point about the bill is its flexibility and its ability to move with the times. It probably indicates that the Labor government has been a little bit behind the mark and this is a little bit of catch-up football. I support it because I admire the TAFE college in Toowoomba. If the TAFE college in Toowoomba has the flexibility that has been incorporated into this bill then I am sure that the good work that it does will continue. I am also sure that it will be able to meet the competition and the challenges that I have talked about in relation to the shortage of trained people and the need for more of our young people to be able to undertake training to acquire skills. With that succinct summary of the bill, I will call it quits.