



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (3.03 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Vocational Education, Training and Employment and Other Acts Amendment Bill. This bill is aimed at addressing the looming shortage in tradespeople. The Beattie government proposes in this bill to change a number of factors surrounding vocational education and training. A centrepiece of those changes is that which is aimed at shortening the length of apprenticeships and traineeships. This is explained as allowing industry needs to be better met and to address the significant trade skills shortage.

While accepting the shortage is already serious and getting worse, I am not convinced that shortening apprenticeships is the right answer. I had many years of personal experience in the building industry which gave me a good understanding of the apprenticeship process. The apprenticeship system has been tried and tested over many decades and has been proven to work and work well.

What we need is not shorter apprenticeships but many more apprentices. The existing incentives are simply not making it attractive enough for small employers to take them on. That is not likely to change if the length of the apprenticeship is a little shorter. An unattractive deal is an unattractive deal, no matter if it is three years or four years.

I recognise the government's willingness to make changes to try to address this issue. But I believe they will not make enough difference to matter. We in the far north have just experienced firsthand, since Cyclone Larry and Cyclone Monica, the importance of good qualified tradesmen and the importance of being able to access them in a reasonable time frame, especially when one needs a roof over one's head or some all-important plumbing fixed. We all know how much damage water can do to a building if it is not fixed early.

Even now when this government has legislated that all homes must have fire alarms installed by 1 July 2007 I am advised that it is difficult to engage an electrician in less than three months. As with anything else, such as doctors, when there is a shortage the price goes up. It does not matter whether it is a product or a service.

Learning a trade, any trade, whether it be nursing, law, medicine, mechanics, carpentry, plumbing or whatever all takes time. Each has its own lingo and structure, so time is of the essence for an apprentice to learn and become proficient. The past has produced some very wonderful and clever tradesmen across-the-board who left school after grade 10. Certainly times have changed in some ways but not in others. I would rather see our youth, who are good with their hands and not university material, get an apprenticeship after grade 10 and become tradesmen by the time they are 20.

Tradesmen in small business have told me that they would rather put on a young person, train them how they want them and keep them for four years or more. However, the incentive threshold and other conditions have not changed in years. Small businesses have shown their dissatisfaction by not putting on apprentices in the numbers that they otherwise might. We do not want to import tradesmen, like doctors for example, for the sake of giving small business a little more incentive to train our own youth. In closing, I would like to recognise the good work being done at the TAFE facilities on the tablelands and the agricultural college at Mareeba.