



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR GAVEN

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EDUCATION AND TRAINING LEGISLATION (SKILLS QUEENSLAND) AMENDMENT BILL

Dr DOUGLAS (Gaven—LNP) (5.37 pm): In some ways this is a timely bill with an implicit ambition of the creation of a new education skills commission. I say 'timely' because week after week for two months now we have been seeing well-known education service providers falling over. This, of course, is mainly amongst those private providers of education services to primarily overseas students. Overwhelmingly, the aim of these students has been to obtain a permanent work visa and later citizenship. For the providers and their staff it is a viable business and for the nation it means a skilled and enhanced workforce. Due to immigration changes this has significantly moved the goalposts. This issue today is primarily about Australian based people and current Australian citizens.

National unemployment stands at 5.1 per cent. Most view this as near full employment since there is generally a hard-core group for whom work remains a challenge and for others something to be avoided at all costs. What has not really been said is that the key skills required to fill the economic engine that will drive recovery in Australia are being ignored by this Labor government focused entirely on its own long-term survival. What is the evidence to support that claim, members might rightfully ask? There is no money allocated for the creation of this new entity, Skills Queensland—and to quote the minister in his second reading speech—'an independent skills commission to lead the state's skills and workforce development'.

I wonder whether the minister falsely believes because the skills commission is independent then the commission has to be self-funding—that is, funded by employers and their staff. Yet the government seems to be able to find hundreds of millions of dollars for pie-in-the-sky computer programs that do not work in Health, \$15 million for advertising for QR asset sales and \$5.1 million on the Gold Coast to tell people how to catch a train or a bus. This is called the Travel Behaviour Change Program.

Who is fooling who here? There is no money for the skills commission—no seed funding nor the said stipend. This is dopey and reflects a complete lack of understanding of how to develop, deliver and drive a successful business strategy. It is because the minister and most of his colleagues have utterly no business experience that the message conveyed to the wider business community is one of insincerity regarding ambition, incompetence in professionalism and an obsession with window dressing when a comprehensive solution is required.

The minister has stated this about his lofty ideals—

Skills Queensland's key function will be to advise government on skills and workforce development and skilled migration. It will develop a skills and workforce development investment plan, a five-year plan with a ten-year whole of economy outlook that will be renewed annually.

The minister clearly understands how potentially important this proposal may be, especially in a state in which our own economic prosperity is critically dependent on mining and agriculture. This commission is being entrusted with the overall planning and supervision of the skills that both industries require, yet the state is not proposing to contribute significant funding. I am not suggesting that this organisation has been set up to fail, but what sort of financial straitjacket is this very insular Labor

government delivering here? It will impede progress and it reeks of platitudes over provision of service, yet simultaneously the Labor government wants a voice at the table.

In his second reading speech, the minister proposed that to the seven independent business and government appointed stakeholders he will add the directors-general from the employment and training portfolios. Has it occurred to the minister that a passive government appointee is not independent? Not only do you only get what you pay for, but also if you contribute nothing—and read that as money—then one can expect little in return. Their concerns will also be given lip-service. The government has got to get it into its head that it has to buy its seat at the table, and that does not mean buy either exclusivity or a mortgage over the outcome. I acknowledge that the minister has stated that—

Government will continue to play a key role in funding, implementing and administering skills and workforce development strategies. This implies no diminution of the supply and application of those funds to those areas now to be under the director of Skills Queensland. This is a worthy aspiration and will supply some succour to Queensland's 1,140 active training providers in the VET sector—that is, the vocational education and training sector. With a \$2.4 billion value to the economy, this is big business. However, you do only get what you pay for, and the government needs to understand that if it appoints people who are effectively drones then it will have an organisation that goes backwards, not forwards.

The current concern is that training is lagging behind business needs and demand in Australia. Specifically, it is skills shortages both in emerging and nascent industries here in Australia that have prevented business expansion as credit, although more expensive as it has now become, is easier to obtain. This has allowed business to attempt to get itself moving. Of course, it is restricted by the skills shortages. The shadow minister has highlighted that Queensland has the highest level of state based training at 40 per cent. It is pitched against a lower level of industry involvement in skills training, but the imbalance is amplified further due to the slow delivery of trainees, lower standards in Queensland and higher training costs and inputs from the Queensland state based education sector.

We lag behind other states even though the minister seems to want to brag that Queensland trains 45 per cent of the nation's school based apprentices and trainees. Whilst school based vocational training is to be applauded, schools must have a significant focus on producing students whose skills and knowledge learned at secondary schools will equip them for success in their lives after exiting school. It may be equally said that if NAPLAN is to be accepted as valid, Queensland is a long way behind the other states in its school based performance. This could imply that Queensland is being relegated somewhat as an academic backwater in relative terms but that in Queensland trades may become a strong potential labour and skills supplier. This does not necessarily follow, because in the other Australian states VET courses in a post-secondary school environment have been very successful in delivering well-trained, albeit mature, timely trainees and apprentices. It is a false sense of security on one hand to direct non-OP score students from years 10 to 12 in Queensland schools into VET courses to maximise the outcomes of other OP course students continuing on and, on the other hand, further providing that VET training earlier will have a greater impact on employment and capacity of the skilled workforce providers. It needs to be emphasised that students must be pushed to succeed since the qualities of appropriateness and excellence of education are what children here in Queensland will need to build a successful and happy future for themselves and their own families when they have them.

My immediate concern, and a concern expressed by others, is that we appear to be consigning too many of our young people to careers that may have a potentially short life span, be remunerated at a low level, and possibly be eradicated by globalism and technical innovation. It also follows that there may be serious faults in our primary and middle schooling standards that might be too difficult to repair within this generation. Are we really all missing the point here and not accepting that a generation could be lost by virtue of an intrinsic failure of our public education system? Not only did Education Queensland allow its eye to be taken off the ball, but also the Bligh Labor government took too long to intervene and do something. Is that truly the lesson of this bill regarding a skills commission? I accept that the skills commission is being delivered after being recommended by the Queensland Resources Council, but what the minister is not saying is that the council is foreshadowing much greater industry involvement in the way the skills system in Queensland operates. This leads to the third aim of the bill and the setting up of the commission to allow direct intervention by Skills Queensland where there is market failure in training.

Skills Queensland is to be reactive, proactive and flexible, mainly in purchasing training places. What we know is that Skills Queensland's approach is to start small and later expand. That expansion must be difficult to predict since the government is proposing it is to be delivered on the basis of industry contributions. Of course, this consigns the board of Skills Queensland to be always reactive and bereft of what is called 'doing money' or 'doing funds'. They may be unable to move forward and it is likely that that is the most probable situation. In other words, they are treading water.

If that is truly to be the case, then the minister's stated aim that employers must take responsibility for skilling their workforce probably means that the government is moving towards a user-pays philosophy. Because of the paralysis of the Bligh Labor government's hopeless balance sheet with a fixed structural budget deficit, Labor in government is now transferring responsibility to employers. How does the Bligh

Labor government expect to reduce full-time unemployment beyond where it is at the moment? As at August 2010, it still had 86,200 real jobs to go before it reaches its 100,000 new jobs target. As I say, these are real jobs—jobs providing a sustainable income, with growth for the individual for the future.

The user is paying by virtue of company tax, GST, levies, registration fees and generous internal employer and, in certain cases, company sponsored training schemes. This offensive Labor government is double dipping here. Labor needs to reappraise its priorities and allocate a very substantial, untied capital grant and probably the same amount in annual recurrent funding with yearly CPI increases. Industry needs to act unimpeded by lack of access to adequate funding to pursue the aspirational goals of this bill, that being in the minister's words—

... to lead reform to Queensland's skills system to create a more flexible and demand-driven system that meets the needs of industry, communities and the economy.

I expect that by 30 November 2010, when the first skills and workforce plan is to be delivered to the minister, we will all know how the experiment went and how high the bar has been set. Like many others, we will want to see that—and it is my hope—it does work.

There are also other amendments in this bill such as those that amend the Education (Queensland College of Teachers) Act. Specifically, it amends provisions relating to teachers who are convicted of disqualifying offences. It has two major objectives, one relating to teachers themselves, the other ensuring the Queensland College of Teachers is notified of the outcome of an investigation of a child harmed by a teacher. Regarding the teachers, the bill aligns the case of a teacher convicted of a disqualifying offence to the provisions of the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian legislation. The three education sectors all support the changes. The shadow minister has covered them in detail, and they are to be supported.

Teachers are critical people in all of our children's lives. When those teachers in very rare cases take advantage of their access to and trusted position with children, we must take action both in terms of prevention and to do something about it—in other words, a form of redress. If this amendment does make children safe then it will always be supported.

My electorate of Gaven has 1,083 15- to 24-year-olds, out of 7,434 people between the ages of 15 and 24, engaged in this type of training, which is 14.5 per cent. The state average is 13.1 per cent. When this is compared to the state average of 15- to 24-year-olds who are currently unemployed—and that gives a good idea of the true situation regarding the impact of training that can be estimated—approximately three times as many unskilled workers of comparable age are unemployed. This is the evidence that these things will work. This demonstrates the real horsepower of appropriate skills training.

I must also congratulate all of those fine tradesmen and contractors who are training apprentices in my electorate of Gaven, and they are certainly doing it tough at the moment. Skills Queensland also has the capacity beyond the current aspirational goal to show and highlight those courses, training colleges, trainees and amounts expended that yield better results. This is the true power of using statistical analysis to optimise results beyond normal performance reviews, testimonials and course results. Successful employment is a very good measure of success in a skills environment. When added to the physical and financial outputs together with employer and worker satisfaction and finally high-retention rates of employees, there is the successful formula delivered outcomes of such a structure as the skills commission. It must be real, it must not be a double-dipping approach and it must not be smoke and mirrors.