




Speech By
Hon. John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT (SKILLS QUEENSLAND) AND ANOTHER ACT AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. JH LANGBROEK** (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Minister for Education, Training and Employment) (5.04 pm), in reply: I thank all contributors to the debate this afternoon. I especially want to thank the government members and, of course, the chair of the Education and Innovation Committee, the honourable member for Burdekin, for her contribution in leading that committee in what has been another good committee response to a proposal of the government. I also want to thank opposition members who made a contribution, and I will come to their contributions in a moment.

It was interesting to hear some of the statements made by the honourable member for Woodridge. We heard this morning from the opposition about the role of the executive in the parliament and the committee system, and we have heard something similar from the honourable member for Woodridge this afternoon—that is, in reference to the bills introduced this morning, we heard from the Attorney-General that of course there are times when the government may seek advice, as we have done in training and education in establishing a task force, but it does not necessarily mean that the government executive will accept those recommendations.

On the one hand, we hear the honourable member for Woodridge arguing that supposedly the Commission of Audit had made a recommendation about how we should be getting advice about training. So one part of the honourable member's dissenting report was that the Commission of Audit did not recommend that we set up a ministerial industry commission but that we should have an independent statutory body. Once again, we see the lack of knowledge of those opposite about the system that we operate in and the distinction between the executive and the parliament, where sometimes people give advice to government but the government then has to consider that advice, as we did with the Commission of Audit and as we did in my department with the Skills and Training Taskforce that was set up and which did have industry representation on it.

Once again this morning we heard that about the bills that have been introduced and declared urgent because of the issues that we have seen in the community over the last couple of months. They are not necessarily going to go through the parliamentary committee system, and that is something that has been decided by the government as a priority. The committee can make recommendations. In the nine years that I have been in this place I remember a number of times when we had reports, reviews and recommendations made by independent people and independent bodies that the previous Labor government did not necessarily enact. Sometimes they were particularly significant—such as coronial reports—and yet when there were recommendations made that governments or ministers should be considering, those things just gathered dust.

By contrast, we listen to those particular recommendations and then we as a cabinet decide on the important priorities, weighing up the advice that will have been given in good faith by the people who make those recommendations but then deciding on what we believe is best for the people of Queensland in the particular areas for which we may have control—and in this case it is about training

dollars. We have had an independent statutory authority—Skills Queensland—which by their own admission have not necessarily been as focused on their job as they might have been. Distracted by the floods of 2011, instead of giving advice about training, Skills Queensland were subsequently directed to provide some of their resources to the disaster response which took their mind and their eye off their own job. Who was it who that made that concession? It was Skills Queensland themselves.

In their own submission to the Skills and Training Taskforce they themselves acknowledged that they had become sidetracked by worthwhile but resource intensive programs such as the development and implementation of the 2011 Natural Disasters Jobs and Skills Package. Even when additional resources were made available with the transition of apprentice and trainee regulation following TERC losing that particular power, Skills Queensland was unable to maintain a central focus on its role as an industry led body providing advice on skills needs and funding priorities. Why were they unable to maintain a central focus on their role as an industry led body? I will tell you why, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is because they had too many unionists on their board. They had representatives from the AMWU, representatives from the AWU and representatives from the QTU.

We are not going to be taking advice from them. The representation on that board led to Skills Queensland having to acknowledge that they themselves had failed in the job with which they were tasked. Those opposite love to rail about whether we on this side understand the needs of working people. The member for South Brisbane is an absolute glaring example of someone who has marched out of the suburbs, into the inner city. She walked away from the lathes and walked towards the lattes. That is how relevant she is to old-style Labor.

Ms TRAD: I rise to a point of order. Notwithstanding that he is misleading and incorrect, those statements are incredibly personally offensive and he should withdraw them.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Ruthenberg): Order! Minister, would you please withdraw those comments.

Mr LANGBROEK: I am happy to withdraw—

Mr Newman: Suck it up.

Ms TRAD: I rise to a point of order. The Premier just told me to 'suck it up'. I ask that he withdraw that interjection. He is a disgrace and he is not fit to hold that high office.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for South Brisbane, you are allowed to make a point of order, but you cannot stand up and debate it. Premier, would you please withdraw those comments?

Mr NEWMAN: Happily.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Minister, you have the floor.

Mr LANGBROEK: 'Bring up the curtain,' it sounds like. We have the member for South Brisbane on her feet and performing. No wonder the Labor Party is seen as being so irrelevant. It is no longer the party of chippies and plumbers, but of the self-appointed self-righteous.

It is pretty clear what we want. We want more jobs in better facilities. We want a publicly provided system as well as a private system that acts for the customers, for our students, and that is sufficiently nimble to be able to deliver people what they want in facilities in which they wish to train. We do not want more money being delivered for worse outcomes, and that is what we have seen over a number of years from a number of prime ministers who were not interested in what was actually happening but who were happy to outsource their decisions to a statutory authority that, by its own admission, was not able to do the job with which it had been tasked.

That is why when I respond to the honourable member for South Brisbane and her class-war rhetoric and when I respond to the member for Woodridge and her statements and her dissenting report I want to make the point very clearly that this government, with recommendations from the Commission of Audit and the Skills and Training Taskforce, is very clear about what we are trying to do. During this debate we have heard from government members about what they want for their constituents. They want alternative learning and training pathways for students, some of whom may not go to university and some of whom may. In our attempts to make education a more horizontal pathway instead of one that is based on whether you have gone to TAFE or university in a tiered way, we want people to be able to consider going from a certificate or a diploma all the way through various levels of degrees—bachelors, masters—to a PhD and be able to get on and off that educational pathway. Vocational education and training is a very important part of being able to do that to give people more options. It is imperative that there is proper focus on what is important to Queenslanders and not to have union-led domination of boards of statutory authorities, which then leads to that authority's own admissions that they are not able to do the job. That is why we have

made the decisions that we have. That is the focus of the Vocational Education, Training and Employment (Skills Queensland) and Another Act Amendment Bill.

The member for Waterford made a very good point about what was actually happening with Skills Queensland. It had about 29 staff who were centrally based. The honourable member for Hinchinbrook, my ministerial colleague, acknowledges that in his region in North Queensland if it was a training issue, the local DETE—Department of Education, Training and Employment—officials would be almost subcontracted to Skills Queensland to do the work on the ground. So bringing this back to the department in terms of the regulation of apprentices and trainees is not out of this world. In fact, it has been done in a couple of other jurisdictions. Western Australia has done it and, as I understand it, Tasmania has as well. They are things that have worked very successfully in Western Australia, which has not seen it taken out of the department and then brought back in as we are doing here.

I want to refer to some of the comments of the honourable member for Woodridge, who spoke about supposed cuts to training and higher education. We have just completed a federal election campaign. I recall, as will other members, that I had to stand in this place to condemn the then Rudd government. While, on one hand, Kevin Rudd, the then Prime Minister, wanted to talk about taking over TAFE, in August he took \$242 million in training dollars from the training sector. There were 14 cuts to training dollars during the term of the Labor government, the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd government. That comes from ACPET as well, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training to which the honourable member for Woodridge referred. There we see selective amnesia from the honourable member for Woodridge, who spoke about these cuts. However, it was the federal government which also brought in this two per cent efficiency dividend for universities. That was a major reason why we said that we had a significant problem during negotiation of our future education funding given that we in Queensland were putting in a significant amount. An amount of \$110 million was cut from the Education Investment Fund. That is money that I know has funded a new announcement in Gladstone and significant announcements for Central Queensland University, which is merging with nine of our TAFEs in Central Queensland to become our first merged university. With that merger, we know that we can have that good mix of practical skills that come from TAFE with the theoretical skills that come from university—something that the people in Central Queensland said very clearly that they wanted to see. However, the federal government was cutting more money from those EIFs—Education Investment Funds. That happened also during the election campaign with no comment from those opposite. They are supposedly the party of education, yet it was the previous federal Labor government that cut funding on 14 separate occasions.

ACPET, of course, are very happy that they and private training providers are going to be able to access another \$42 million of contestable funding from 1 July. The only delays that happened in training in Queensland were due to the recalcitrance of the federal government in signing off on a national partnership which the Premier signed as one of his first acts as a premier in April 2012, just after the election. We signed a national partnership with the federal government and then the federal government, under four successive ministers, failed to sign off on the implementation plan. We in Queensland were going to ensure that we would conform with everything that was in the national partnership. In other words, 'The feds have asked us to do something. We agree to do it. We sign off on the national partnership.' We then waited for funding. Until June or July this year the implementation plan was never signed off on. So we lost a program called the Productivity Places Program which was worth \$50 million. For another 11 months we lost money that we should have put into the training system. I can tell honourable members that ACPET and other providers were not too happy about that.

That is an example of what was happening in terms of those opposite. Federally, they were the ones who were affecting training in this state and yet we did not hear anything from them about the fact that we had signed off on a national partnership. Julia Gillard, the Prime Minister at the time, had signed off on the deal with our Premier, but then four ministers—Chris Evans followed by Chris Bowen followed by Craig Emerson and then at the death it was Brendan O'Connor—all had to get up to speed with what was happening in their portfolio and then come to an arrangement with Queensland. To his credit, it was the former trade minister who became the training minister when he held the 'superportfolio', Craig Emerson, who finally signed off on the implementation plan to allow that money to flow for the national partnership.

Those opposite can say whatever they like about issues, but let us get the facts on the table. It is obvious that they have no idea what they are speaking about when it comes to real outcomes in training in Queensland. On the other hand, we only have one agenda. As we often hear from the Premier about fast-tracking and supercharging the Queensland economy, that is all about increasing

productivity, and productivity is all about getting people into the workforce who may not have been there before.

That is why we have announced \$42 million for people who are disadvantaged and who are not necessarily receiving other government funding. They will be able to access training dollars so that they can become part of our economy, and that is something to which we have made a significant commitment in the last couple of weeks. The members for South Brisbane and Woodridge obviously missed the announcement that we made \$42 million available for community learning to highly disadvantaged and marginalised groups. They are things that we are actually doing instead of just railing about things that are completely irrelevant.

I have mentioned that Skills Queensland has not been effective in addressing the fundamental strategic skill needs of industry. The Skills and Training Taskforce recommended that we establish a truly industry led vocational education and training, or VET, sector. The Commission of Audit recommended that an industry led skills authority be established with the responsibility of developing a competitive skills market through a clearly defined purchaser role in the VET system. Whilst we did not follow those recommendations to the letter, I will outline what we are going to do with our ministerial industry commission, which will be led by the assistant minister, the member for Mount Coot-tha, to ensure that we have a significant reporting mechanism. We will be happy to be judged by our results.

The reason why we decided not to follow that particular recommendation was because the same approach of outsourcing to a statutory authority has not been successful. Let us have a look at the jurisdictions in which it has not been successful: Victoria and Tasmania. The Liberal Party in Tasmania, under the opposition leader Will Hodgman, is hopefully going to be successful at the next election, but I know that as a result of the last election there has been a Labor-Greens alliance. Having created a statutory authority and purchasing VET that way, that government realised that it is not the best way to achieve the objective of creating better alignment between training and the needs of employers, and so they brought it back to their respective departments. We all know what happened to TAFE in Victoria when there were significant changes to allow too much contestability too quickly, and that is why we have taken a very measured approach to contestability. We do not believe the private sector could ramp up enough if we were to make it open slather, and we want to make sure we maintain quality. Some of the reforms that we have made include having a TAFE board to ensure we have a strong and vibrant TAFE with better infrastructure and better assets. The industrial arrangements in those other states need to be brought up to date too, which will, in conjunction with the private sector, result in better training outcomes. They are the things that we are focused on.

Other concerns that we had about establishing an independent industry led skills statutory authority were that we would have a loss of government control over purchasing decisions and reduced public accountability, while retaining the financial risk and responsibility for the outcomes of the training system; the real and perceived conflicts of interest for industry leaders making funding decisions; the disincentives for industry to invest private funds in skills and workforce development; and the lack of impartiality in advice received and heeded by a skills authority. A simple example of that was after the floods when even Skills Queensland acknowledged that they were advised they should have been doing something else, and so they lost focus on the main part of the job they were supposed to be doing.

Let us now have a look at why the Ministerial Industry Commission will succeed where Skills Queensland have failed. We will ensure that the Ministerial Industry Commission creates a genuine partnership between industry, employers and government through a new strategic engagement framework that will give industry and employers genuine input into how public training and investment is made, identifies the skills needed for economic growth and directly advises the government on the priorities for funding qualifications that match training with job opportunities. There will be no more training for training's sake. Here it is: accountability! The commission will prepare an annual skills priorities report and an annual skills highlights report on the departments responsible for analysing training investment and employment trends, implement a new industry engagement strategy and prepare policy advice and implement strategies taking into account input from the commission and other sources. The commission will be supported by a secretariat within the department and will receive information and advice on a range of skilling and employment matters from the department as needed. The commission's advice will inform an annual vocational education and training investment plan developed by the department. The investment plan will ensure public investment is in prioritised training that industry indicates is linked to employment outcomes. The commission's advice will be based on consultation with industry and employers to identify the state's skill priorities and training market issues affecting small, medium and large enterprises. Existing market oversight arrangements

within the department will also be expanded to support the commission in advising me, as minister, on the effectiveness of government purchased training in meeting the needs of employers.

I would hope that I have dealt with many of the concerns raised by those opposite. It is important that we get on with the job of making sure that we do have training available for Queenslanders, wherever they are in this state, but we have to acknowledge that some of our infrastructure is out of date and tired and our utilisation rates are not what they could be. For all of us who know TAFE in our suburbs but don't know what happens in them, we want to make sure that they are vibrant places full of students getting great jobs and great opportunities as they move into the economy. I know the Premier speaks all the time about supercharging the economy, and we are all committed to that. This is an important part of that strategy, and this is another milestone on the road to making sure that we achieve better outcomes. On that note I once again want to thank honourable members and commend the bill to the House.