



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**SEX DISCRIMINATION AMENDMENT**  
**(TEACHING PROFESSION) BILL 2004**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 14 March 2005**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 14 March 2005  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Macklin, Jenny, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms MACKLIN** (Jagajaga) (10.10 pm)—We have had this debate in the parliament before. The Senate rejected the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004 but, as we will get used to, we have a government that just intends to play politics rather than fix a problem. That is certainly the case when it comes to this issue. In my understanding of the numbers in the Senate, this bill will not get through before 1 July. Undoubtedly the government will try again after 1 July and use its numbers in an arrogant way to push it through. What the government wants to do is create a statutory exemption to the provisions of the act in order to offer teaching scholarships to students of a particular gender. Ostensibly this is all about redressing an imbalance in the ratio of male to female teachers in our schools. The exemption would apply to an imbalance, as the bill says:

- (a) in schools in Australia generally; or
- (b) in a particular category or categories of schools in Australia; or
- (c) in a particular school or schools ...

This government's attempt to amend the antidiscrimination act is a triumph of ideology over logic, let alone evidence. The government claims that, by changing the act to allow advertisements specifically for male teachers, a new generation of young Australian men will decide that teaching is the profession for them and that this will turn around years of decline in the number of male teachers in our schools. If only it were so easy! The reality is that the government has had nine years to do something about the shortage of male teachers in our schools. Of course, it has done nothing about it, but it has now come up with this change to the Sex Discrimination Act and a series of statements by people ranging from the Prime Minister through to the Minister for Education, Science and Training on the importance of attracting more male teachers.

We know that the Prime Minister certainly has never been very keen on affirmative action policies. If we go back to the original third reading debate on the Sex Discrimination Bill 1983, the now Prime Minister said:

... I certainly have major reservations about the concept of affirmative action legislation and I certainly do not regard support of this legislation as being indicative of support for that.

So it seems the Prime Minister has had yet another change of heart and another change of mind about all this. He has decided now that affirmative action policies can actually be a good thing, particularly in this case, if they are undermining our sex discrimination laws. In reality this is just an attack on an act which does at the moment protect all Australians from prejudice. The Prime Minister has, I am afraid to say, shown that he has been prepared to abandon previously held convictions or to develop new ones if there is an opportunity to exploit community intolerance.

I have to say that one thing this bill is not about is getting more male teachers in our classrooms, because it does not tackle the real reason that so few men teach in our schools. All the evidence—of course, the government does not actually want to look at the evidence—shows that the real barriers to men becoming teachers and staying in our schools are pay, career structure and status compared to other professions. They are the issues that have caused the proportion of male teachers in our schools to fall from almost 26 per cent in 1992 to about 21 per cent in 2003. The government has had years to do something about it but, as I say, it has not bothered to do anything except use this political tactic to try to gain some political advantage but not to actually end up with more men teaching in our schools.

We need each and every one of our school sectors—the state governments, the Catholic Education Offices and the independent schools—to be involved in improving the status of teaching. That is what will make the difference. But this bill does not do any of that. The bill also will not solve the issues that are holding back the education of some boys. The government knows that. In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged it in the *Australian*. He said:

Amending the Sex Discrimination Act will never solve these problems, nor will it deal with their symptoms.

So he knows that this has nothing to do with improving the education of boys who are having difficulties within our schools. The government also knows that, because it has a report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training that looked into boys' education. In fact, the Minister for Education, Science and Training was at one time the chair of that committee. The committee's report, which was called *Boys: getting it right*, found that there are major problems facing boys in our schools but that the major cause of boys' educational problems—this is from the report of the parliamentary committee that the minister once chaired—is the decline in the extended family and community and structural economic change. They are the issues that have been identified by the committee's own report. The report did not recommend changes to the Sex Discrimination Act. I am sure that the minister would remember that, given that he chaired the committee.

**Dr Nelson**—Read the *Sydney Morning Herald*; read Rod Sawford.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)**—Order! The minister will cease interjecting—especially from out of his place.

**Ms MACKLIN**—He is well and truly out of his place, and he is well and truly off the mark, as he well knows. He chaired this committee, and the committee report did not recommend changes to the Sex Discrimination Act. Instead, it recommended that the Commonwealth provide scholarships for equal numbers of males and females to undertake teacher training and that these scholarships should be based on merit. The minister is having a good old laugh. He thinks the idea of merit based scholarships is a joke. He wants to play politics with this issue, and that is why we are debating this bill. We do not see any additional scholarships being offered by this minister, by the Commonwealth, to men and women on the basis of merit to encourage them into teacher training. That has not happened.

Offering equal numbers of scholarships for men and women was also suggested by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and, I am pleased to say, was agreed to by the Catholic Education Office in Sydney—the body whose application to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was the Prime Minister's stated motivation for this legislation. The Catholic Education Office responded to the parliamentary report by offering 24 additional merit based scholarships—12 for men and 12 for women. We are fortunate that the Catholic Education Office responded with this concrete commitment, unlike the Howard government—and unlike the education commission—which has only managed to implement one or two of its recommendations, which shows that the government lacks sincerity on this issue. The Catholic Education Office has been prepared to get out there and offer the merit based scholarships; the government, by contrast, is just playing politics with this bill.

Where is the acknowledgement of the problem that we have with boys? We have the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the Catholic Education Office and the House of Representatives committee all agreeing that scholarships for men and women represent a responsible and effective approach to this problem. It seems that only the government, the Prime Minister, this education minister and other instant evangelists on the male teacher issue think that changing the Sex Discrimination Act is the way to go. In fact, they are the only people who have even mentioned it. During the election campaign, the minister did not say anything significant about educating boys—

*Mr Pearce interjecting—*

**Ms MACKLIN**—I will get to that—or about providing incentives to bring men into teaching. During the election campaign, we did not hear anything from the minister about these very important issues. There certainly was not anything about merit based scholarships for teachers or any programs to bring more male teachers into our schools. During the election campaign, the Prime Minister offered to spend millions of dollars a minute in a single speech but could not find anything for this particular issue. There was no specific initiative from the Prime Minister or from the minister for education in the election campaign.

By contrast, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer at the table asks, 'What was Labor's policy?' I will tell him. We included a \$9 million commitment to a 'buddy-up' mentoring scheme in schools and \$220 million for the quality teaching initiative. We also committed \$300 million to provide incentives and rewards to get the best teachers working in our struggling schools. These were serious commitments designed to attract the best teachers, including male teachers, to work in professionally challenging and rewarding school environments. They were all about making teaching an attractive profession—making sure that the education system produced

more male role models for boys. This government wants to attack this act only because of its ideological objection to it, which goes right back to 1983. We should not be playing politics with this very important act but focusing on enhancing the status of the teaching profession and making sure it has career opportunities and salaries that make it attractive to graduates. The Attorney-General, who is here in the chamber at the moment, is another of the instant evangelists on this issue. Last year in the parliament, he said:

The figures speak for themselves.

Only 20.9 per cent of primary school teachers in Australia are men.

The problem is only getting worse.

... ..

Research shows that teaching is not an attractive career option for men for reasons including concerns about salary and the perception of a risk of allegations of abusing children in schools.

Of course, this bill does not do anything about those issues. The Attorney went on:

The government's acknowledgement of the importance of both men and women in teaching in our society, and the government's commitment to encouraging men into the profession, will help to change people's perceptions about the role of men in the profession in the future.

There is no question that boys' education is of course a serious issue, but it is very unfortunate that ideology is preventing the Attorney and the Prime Minister from looking at effective responses. Rather than just playing around with this bill, playing politics, why doesn't the government get serious and do something that might have some effect? Like many in this parliament, I have boys, and of course we all care about what happens to our boys at school. We know that for many of them it can be a very tough place. Each and every one of them knows that we should not have a government playing politics with this issue, a government trying to change the Sex Discrimination Act to allow discrimination on the basis of gender for teaching scholarships.

There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that this will work. It is just a quick-fix attempt by a government that have ignored the problem for many years. They have had a very long time to do something about it and here we are, nine years later, still debating this very important issue. Anybody who knows anything about schools knows that it is not entrenched discrimination. I really would ask the Attorney whether he can demonstrate that there is entrenched discrimination that is stopping men entering the teaching profession. Of course there is not. Men who want to be teachers are not discriminated against in their employment. As the Catholic Education Office has said, there are multiple and complex reasons why men are not becoming teachers. From my point of view, discrimination is not one of those reasons.

This bill will not work. All it does is legalise discrimination, and that is why Labor opposes it and will continue to oppose it. Getting more men into schools is one of the priorities of Labor. As I said earlier, we put forward a comprehensive program before the last election to get more males into our schools. We had a five-point plan to encourage more men into schools. There are two issues here: one is to get more men into teaching, and the second and quite different objective is to address the educational needs of boys.

The plan that we put forward included a national campaign to attract quality entrants to teaching, targeting young men at school. I think it would be a very effective measure for the government to initiate the targeting of young men while they are still at school, by using young men and women who are at university to go into our schools and encourage young people to go into teaching. We know that some states have already embarked on these sorts of campaigns and are having some success.

Secondly, we want not only to encourage more young men into teaching but also to encourage more male mentors to work with schools and with parents. We want to involve fathers in a range of activities in our schools, whether it is reading to students, using technology, vocational education, music, drama or sporting activities—all of the things where male mentors could make a great contribution. This was behind one of the initiatives we had in our election campaign to encourage more male mentors to come into our schools and to work with boys not just in the classroom but also in outside activities, especially in sport.

We also want to make sure that we see incentives for quality teaching, including for teachers who have the skills necessary to improve the learning outcomes of boys. This is the critical point. We need to concentrate

on skills that teachers need to have, that they learn in their teacher training and that they learn through their professional development to make sure that we improve the learning results for boys who are having difficulties. So we want to see improvements in teaching skills for both male and female teachers because, of course, boys are not going to be taught only by men. They need to have men and women who are skilled at engaging, especially with those boys who have difficulties. That is why Labor's plan was putting additional support into professional development for teachers.

We know that student discipline and welfare programs are critical, and this was the fifth part of Labor's program. Many of the boys who are currently struggling at school are located in areas with concentrations of social and economic disadvantage. Once again we do not have the government proposing to do anything about those concentrated areas of social and economic disadvantage where boys are really doing it tough. We just have a government that has decided to introduce a discriminatory law and that thinks it can play politics rather than do something about it.

We also have a government that has perpetuated a funding system that gives the biggest funding increases to the schools that need it the least. So, rather than making sure that the additional professional development money is going to those schools, whether they are government schools, Catholic schools or low-fee independent schools where we really do need to invest more in professional development for teachers, we have a government that is giving the biggest increases to the wealthiest schools in the country. When you look at the actions of the government rather than at what it says, it is clear that it is not concerned about boys' education; otherwise it would do something and pick up some of the initiatives that Labor has put forward. It would do something about making sure that the teachers in our schools have the resources they need and would do something to help make teaching a more attractive profession.

Unfortunately, what we also have from this government is a shortage of teaching places at our universities. Many young people trying to get into university to study teacher education cannot. They cannot get in to learn to become professional teachers. All we have is the government amending the Sex Discrimination Act rather than addressing all of these important issues.

So let us go back not to 1983 when the Prime Minister first set out his views on positive discrimination but to 1992 when the Prime Minister said that nondiscrimination was an impeccable liberal principle. He added in the same debate that 'people ought to be recruited on the basis of merit and merit alone'. This is another conviction that the Prime Minister has decided to abandon for political purposes, because in this case the merit principle is at odds with this government's attempt to play politics. It is not prepared to do something real to get the best teachers in our schools on the merit principle, to get adequate funding and to get comprehensive mentoring programs to make sure that those boys who are having difficulties in our schools really get the support they need.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Randall**) adjourned.