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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Australian Education Bill 2012

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 12 February 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Hayes, Chris, MP

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Mr HAYES (Fowler) (17:39): I rise to support the Australian Education Bill 2012. This bill outlines the government's national plan for school improvement. It is fundamentally the start of reform to our education system, which will ensure quality teaching and provide transparency and accountability at our schools. We want every Australian child, no matter where they live or which school they attend, to receive the best quality of education. We want to ensure that every child gets the best start in life and that no Australian child is left behind.

This legislation represents the first step in adopting the recommendations from the Gonski review into school funding. These recommendations are based on providing adequate funding for the needs of each individual student to help them reach their full potential. This is not only an exercise in delivering quality education but, very importantly, also an exercise in delivering real equity in our education system. Besides equity, one of the main goals of this reform is to ensure that our education system is competitive globally into the future. The fact that we are setting ourselves the target of being in the top five nations of the world in academic outcomes in reading, science and maths by 2025 very much indicates that we will achieve productivity in the future. Providing our young people with the highest possible levels of education and training will ensure our international competitiveness and prosperity for the future.

This is not something that should be subject to politics. This should be something that both sides of the House wish to champion. Equity and fairness in the education sector is very significant for disadvantaged areas of the nation. Regrettably, my electorate of Fowler is one of the more disadvantaged areas in the country. The unemployment rate approaches twice that of the national average while income is about two-thirds the national figure. Much of my electorate relies on inadequate public transport to travel large distances to work. Here again, this is where a good education is vital to improving people's opportunities and to enable them to aspire to and acquire secure, well-paid jobs. It all starts with a good education.

Besides being one of the most disadvantaged electorates, my electorate is the most multicultural in the whole of Australia. Two-thirds of the constituents in my electorate were born overseas. That is 2½ times the proportion for Australia as a whole. Australia as a nation is only second to Switzerland among the OECD countries in the proportion of population born overseas. Three-quarters of my electorate speak two or more languages; therefore, my electorate is one in which this has an impact on the lives of migrants and refugees. For migrants, access to a good education is the most significant advantage that a new country can offer them. Education provides them not only a pathway to a better life for themselves but, more importantly, better opportunities for their children. It explains why so many of those who excel in education at all levels, primary or tertiary or vocational, are from first or second generation immigrant families. They understand the difference between success or otherwise in an economy such as Australia's is a good education.

There is no denying, and much has been put about it in newspapers to date, that the western suburbs of Sydney will become a major battle ground, a contest of ideas, as we approach the 14 September election. I am still very confident that once people in my electorate and in Western Sydney generally start to think about what a change in government will mean they will realise that only a Labor government can deliver on education and other services that are important to their wellbeing and their children's wellbeing.

People will think long and hard about the wisdom of taking a chance on the Liberal Party in Western Sydney because their counterparts are already in at the state level. They came to power two years ago with airy promises to do a range of things for Western Sydney and, indeed, made the Premier the Minister for Western Sydney. Instead, what did we get? A state government that has set about carefully planning to carve up existing education arrangements in New South Wales by savagely cutting \$1.7 billion from state, Catholic and independent schools and from TAFE colleges. If you want to see a government that is not committed to Western Sydney look at what they are doing and look at what that means for the communities that the minister at the table, Minister Bowen, and myself represent in Western Sydney. These cuts will inevitably involve larger class sizes, fewer learning resources and an increasingly demoralised teaching workforce. This is a stark difference in philosophy. We are

committed through this bill to looking at greater funding going into education while in New South Wales Liberal Party is taking money out of the system as fast as it can.

New South Wales voters will judge for themselves the actions of the O'Farrell state government—actions that clearly run directly opposite to the promises they made at the last election. They will certainly come to the realisation that the same fate awaits them but on a much larger scale should the country ever be saddled with a government led by Tony Abbott.

The Liberal Party clearly does not care about Western Sydney. Nothing demonstrates this more than the recent plan to dump 5,800 tonnes of hazardous radioactive waste from Hunters Hill to a facility in Kemps Creek near my electorate and certainly very close to that of my colleague the member for McMahon. Barry O'Farrell himself admitted in the past that this radioactive waste was seven times the acceptable limit. The waste was certainly too dangerous and too unsafe to be kept and stored in the North Shore where it originated, but it was considered appropriate to dump it in Western Sydney—to dump it in our backyards.

While the Liberal Party is looking for ways to cause additional grief to the already disadvantaged parts of Australia, this Labor government continues to invest in fair access to vital resources such as a good education. This year alone the Gillard government will invest \$13.6 billion in our schools, which is almost double the spending of the Howard government in its last budget and a more than 50 per cent increase over that period in real terms. The Digital Education Revolution has now seen computers for every Australian student between years 9 and 12. In my electorate alone that represents an astonishing 8,500 computers. The National Broadband Network will truly revolutionise the delivery of education at all levels across Australia, particularly in regional and rural areas, by giving students access to quality resources and technologies no matter where they live.

The Gillard government is the first Australian government to seriously tackle inequity in the social composition of those students who are attending university. It is doing so by rewarding tertiary institutions that make genuine progress drawing students from disadvantaged areas and social groups. Labor is the only party that has shown any interest in building vocational education and training systems to be delivered for people from all sectors of the workforce. Compare that to the Liberal track record. Do not forget it was John Howard's government that abolished the Australian National Training Authority, slashed funding for skilled vocational training and tried to set up its own National Training Agency in competition with TAFE. In doing so it could only be established provided it followed the principles of Work Choices—in other words, it implemented individual contracts for teachers. He sought to politicise the TAFE system merely for industrial relations purposes.

This was coupled with severe cuts to vocational education and training, a move that the Liberal state governments in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have been all too quick to follow. Deputy Speaker Murphy, do you see a pattern here? Under Liberal governments we see the curtailment of opportunities for ordinary workers to progress through skills training. It took a Labor government to reverse this haemorrhaging of funds to the VET system. This Labor government has put more than \$18 billion into vocational education and training since 2007. This figure dwarfs the commitment made by any previous government.

In contrast, the Liberal Party in various states, including New South Wales, is destroying our once internationally renowned vocational education system. As quickly as the federal Labor government put the money in, the state Liberal government is promptly taking it out. Our TAFE teachers are currently facing job cuts and redundancies due to widespread casualisation. It is more than likely that we will see the loss of 800 TAFE jobs in New South Wales alone. TAFE students have already seen a 9.5 per cent increase in their fees and an astonishing price being allocated to some of the courses. This will capture your imagination, Mr Deputy Speaker. I only found out last week that if you studied fine arts—

Mr Tudge: I rise on a point of order in relation to relevance to this particular bill. It concerns federal funding for schools and is nothing to do with state based funding for TAFEs.

Mr Bowen: On the point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the member for Fowler is being particularly relevant. He is talking about education funding. He is being more relevant than the shadow minister was in his contribution.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is that the amendment be agreed to. I call the member for Fowler.

Mr HAYES: With respect to those opposite, I know it is embarrassing to hear the fact that the Liberal government in New South Wales, in the face of an education revolution, sees fit to take \$1.7 billion out of the system—

not only for the state schools, Catholic schools and independent schools; it is right across the whole education system, including TAFE.

People are entitled to see the difference between the philosophies of the respective parties, particularly as we are moving toward an election later this year. As I was saying, they have a track record, whether it is in this place or with their counterparts in state and territory governments, of acting in a way which has been deleterious to education.

It is quite clear that in terms of these cuts, in terms of politicising education, they are taking the view that this is not something they see as clear and vital for the future as we on the Labor side of politics do. We know, as many in my electorate know, that the difference between success and otherwise in a society and country such as Australia starts fundamentally with a good education. On our side of politics we are totally unapologetic about that. Not only is what we invest in our schools developing children now but it is those kids, who will benefit from those resources from the education that they receive—hopefully, 2025 will see them within the top five per cent of the globe—who are going to steer the prosperity of this nation. Those opposite should get out of the way and let us get on with the job. I commend the bill.