



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Education

SPEECH

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Speaker Owens, Julie, MP	Question No.

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (17:01): I am very pleased to rise to speak on this matter of public importance because it is, indeed, a matter of great importance. Education is the great enabler. I, myself, came through a public housing community into very good state schools. There were many children that I went to school with who had to leave school well before their 15th birthday because their parents could not afford to keep them in school. So, while I have been one of the lucky ones who managed to get a complete education and go on to university, I went to school with some very bright, articulate, witty and delightful children who will not have had the lives they could have had, because their educational experience was curtailed. So when we talk about education, we need to keep in mind that we are talking about perhaps the single thing, other than good parenting, which puts a child on a pathway to prosperity.

In my electorate, I have schools that carry considerable burdens. There is a delightful little primary school—which is now, since the last redistribution, just outside of my electorate—that has 150 children, and 75 of them come from African refugee camps. An extraordinary effort by that school is required to bring those children into what, in Australia, is considered quite normal, which is attending school every day and participating in education. I have schools in the south of my electorate that take the children that come out of Villawood. So they are constantly accepting new children that they have to find a way to bring into the school community. And then those children move on and new children come, so they have a continuous churn. There are schools that have extraordinary additional burdens—I use the word 'burdens', but I am not using that in any sense about the children. The children of course are not burdens; they are a delight, but they add considerably to the schools' workload because of the communities that the schools serve.

We have heard from the Leader of the Opposition over recent months—in fact, probably over recent years—on a daily basis, an extraordinary scare campaign. Every day he finds something to be outraged about, and if he cannot find anything that he can actually be outraged about he makes it up, and on more days than not he makes it up. The sky will fall! The world will end! Life as we know it will be over on Sunday! You name it. If there is not something to be outraged about, if he cannot find something, he will make it up—and does.

The extraordinary thing about the announcement by the state Liberal government yesterday is that it actually is scary, and it is factual. It has been put out in the words of the New South Wales Liberal government itself. It is probably one of the scariest things we have heard in a while, this extraordinary attack on our education system through our school system and our TAFE system—an extraordinary attack. If the Leader of the Opposition wanted to go out on his scare campaign tomorrow he certainly would not have to make any of this up. We have heard really clearly what the cuts will be. In New South Wales, thanks to the state government, we are looking at 1,800 jobs cut in education, 800 TAFE positions axed, TAFE fees increased by 9.5 per cent, an overall three per cent cut in education funding, a four-year education funding freeze on all government and non-government schools in New South Wales, and the dropping of subsidies for certain TAFE courses as well—a decimation of the system that provides our young people with the best possible opportunity to build a good life.

We heard the previous speaker on this matter, the member for McMillan, talk about the pressures on the state government. He was actually talking about the Victorian government, I think, and the Queensland government, as well as that of New South Wales. There are very few governments in the world at state or federal level at the moment that are not facing revenue shortfalls relative to what they would have had a number of years ago. The global financial crisis is still working its way through the global economy. The commodities prices are currently lower than they were in Australia. We also have the Australian dollar. There are forces at work, internationally and within our own economy, that make things tight for governments of all persuasions at the moment.

You can tell the character of a government not by what it does in the good times, because in the good times they can do lots of things—and that is great, that is terrific, in the good times. But when things get a little bit tough what you look at is what they decide to keep, because that is where their priorities are. Look at what we kept, under

incredibly difficult circumstances: the biggest pension increases in 100 years; paid parental leave; increasing the tax-free threshold to \$18½ thousand; the doubling of education funding, and the biggest investment in schools that we have ever seen in this country; massive increases in health, including the building of cancer centres right across this country; the National Disability Insurance Scheme; and the dental scheme. These are the things that we chose to keep, in the face of having nearly \$250 billion cut off our bottom line by the global financial crisis. They are the things we chose to keep.

In contrast, look at what the state Liberal governments choose to throw away. The knife comes out for health, the knife comes out for front-line personnel across a range of sectors and the knife—remarkably, given the debate going on in this country at the moment about the future of education—comes out for the education system, our schools and our TAFEs. I say it is remarkable given the current debate because, as all of us in this House know, the federal government has in the last year undertaken a review of education. It was the biggest review in 40 years—something well overdue and something we need if we are going to position our children, our young people, for the future.

We were one of the best countries in the world when it came to education. We were actually second in reading and we have slipped to equal seventh. The average 15-year-old maths student in Australia is now more than two years behind a 15-year-old in Shanghai. We have slipped from equal fifth to equal 13th in maths. We still see Australia as a country of opportunity, but the gap now between disadvantaged students and advantaged students in reading, maths and science is more than two years. Something needs to be done about this and this government is committed to doing it.

I know that most people on the opposition benches know this is something we need to grapple with. We can argue about the details, but I know in my heart that the vast majority, if not all, of the people on the other side know that we have to do something about this. I know the opposition are in a bind. While we, as a federal parliament, are talking about lifting every school, their state colleagues are running around punching holes in the bottom of the bucket, putting a dish under it and trying to siphon off whatever money they can for other things. The opposition know that. This is as much about the politics of cost shifting as it is about anything else. It is being done in the context of a federal government which is committed to raising the standard of every school.

I understand the bind the opposition is in. We have been in opposition when there were seven state and territory Labor governments. Both sides have been in the position the opposition are now in. But the opposition know as well as we do that our education system is falling behind and that there are schools carrying extraordinary additional burdens because of children with disabilities, drug and alcohol addicted parents, low socioeconomic status, generational unemployment and poor parental English language skills. The opposition know that we have massive amounts of work to do and that doing that work requires an increase in funding, not a decrease in funding—an increase in funding at the federal level and an increase in funding at the state level. It requires us all to get together.

I was incredibly gratified when I received the media release from Greg Whitby, who is the executive director of schools in the diocese of Parramatta. That diocese covers not only my electorate but also Greenway and it goes right out to Penrith. Mr Whitby is with the Catholic Education Office, which deals specifically with Catholic schools, the schools which last week were seriously under threat of a \$24.5 million cut in funding. In his press release, Mr Whitby has made it really clear what we should all know—that this is about all schools.

Let's not let the state governments shift the focus from one sector to another. We are talking about all schools. All schools need to be lifted and every level of government needs to get behind this. The very future of our children is at stake. We are living in a world where our northern neighbours are advancing rapidly—the Asian century. We cannot fall behind. So I am urging you all to say what is in your hearts, which is that it is time for us all to get behind education and increase the funding. (*Time expired*)