

EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2008 SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE BILL 2008 Second Reading

[Mr ROBERT](#) (Fadden) (4.56 p.m.)—I rise today to express significant reservations regarding not only the education revolution, which I find now dashed indeed on the Bay of Pigs, but the [Schools Assistance Bill 2008](#) and the [Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008](#) before the House. I understand the passage of these bills is required before the end of 2008 to provide the quadrennium Commonwealth funding for non-government schools from the beginning of next year—funding amounting to \$28 billion attributed to the bills. Whilst the bills apparently preserve the total funding available to non-government schools, consistent with the Labor Party election policy, the bills introduce four key changes which were not announced as part of their policy—discussed later on and of significant concern.

My concerns are further raised when, at the exact same time as these bills are being debated, the Australian Education Union is campaigning on national TV for greater funding. Furthermore, last week the member for Throsby, a former secretary of the ACTU, stated in her speech in this place that ‘the current scheme’—referring to the SES model—‘lacks integrity’. This would all seem to point towards the real agenda—perhaps a wolf dressed in sheep’s clothing—of the bills: to abolish the SES model and return to a resource based model rather than a needs based model.

Historically, the federal government has taken responsibility for funding non-government schools and the states have taken responsibility for funding government schools. Non-government educational institutions, though, relieve enormous pressure from what we all know is the ailing state government education system presided over by moribund Labor state governments. Yet non-government schools have been growing at an enormous rate of some 20,000 students a year. In fact, in the last decade the public system has grown by one per cent—that is it. That is the faith the Australian people have in Labor state government schools: the public system has grown by one per cent, yet the private system has grown by a staggering 126 per cent. The question is: which schools do you think parents actually prefer? It would be interesting to do a snapshot of the Labor frontbench in this place, and indeed the backbench, as to which schools they prefer to put their children in.

By way of background, in 2001 the former Howard government introduced a measure called the socioeconomic status, or SES, which measures the socioeconomic status of parents whose children are enrolled in non-government schools. SES uses census data to link the student’s home address to determine the relative income of the student’s family. The school is then allocated an SES score, depending on the socioeconomic status of the families that attend the school. The higher the SES score, the lower the Commonwealth funding available to the school.

This model introduced a fair and equal playing field for non-government schools. It ensures that schools in less affluent areas that are unable to charge higher school fees due to surrounding demographics receive a higher rate of funding than schools in more affluent areas. The model has worked exceptionally well, acknowledging that any reduction in the overall funding to non-government schools has the ultimate consequence of negatively impacting Australia’s public education system. A reduction in non-government school funding would force non-government schools to increase fees and, as a result, force struggling parents to turn to the state education system—which, like everything else Labor state governments’ touch, is not in particularly good shape.

Unfortunately, the Labor Party has not always been the friend of Australia’s non-government independent schools. In 2004 the Labor Party, which included many of the

present frontbenchers, went to the election with a schools hit list—planning to reschedule to remove funding from many private schools. That same year the Senate held an inquiry into Commonwealth funding for schools. Submission No. 33 was from our great friend the Australian Education Union—it is certainly a great friend of the Australian Labor Party. The Australian Education Union's submission states:

The AEU has long opposed any funding to private schools.

If you want to know what the view of the Education Union is, and indeed that of their close compatriots the Labor government, there it is: the AEU has long opposed any funding to private schools. I guess their position cannot get any clearer than that.

Furthermore, the Australian Education Union's Federal President, Mr Angelo Gavrielatos, was quoted on 17 March this year saying that the current SES model was unacceptable:

"I am not embracing the SES funding model as it currently exists," he said.

"It has serious flaws. It does not measure the individual wealth of parents; it measures the wealth of the census area."

I guess no-one has told Mr Gavrielatos that there are only 225 homes in a CCD or census area and that by world standards it is a very effective manner to recognise and measure the wealth of an area and the individuals in it. I think the real problem for the union and Mr Gavrielatos is that they go back to their position in submission 33—that is, they actually oppose any funding for private schools—and the SES model does not suit their ideological bent and dislike for private education.

At least this is absolutely consistent with Labor's left-wing hardliners in the form of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Assistant Treasurer. They are both on record numerous times as strident opponents of the SES model. On 4 September 2000 the current Deputy Prime Minister was scathing in her attack on the proposed SES model, outlining a five-point attack on why it is deficient. This of course begs the question: why is it that everything Labor does has five points? One could surmise that it is because there are only five fingers on the left hand. On 20 August 2001 the current Deputy Prime Minister continued her ideological assault by saying:

... the last thing that this government does is distribute education moneys on the basis of need. This government—

that is, the Howard government—

for its funding for private schools, has adopted a flawed index, the so-called SES model, which does not deliver on the basis of need. We know that model is flawed, because it disproportionately delivers to category 1 schools—that is, wealthy schools.

When the SES model was rolled into its second quadrennium funding in 2004, this is what the now Assistant Treasurer had to say:

The regime established by this government and continued under these bills for determining the funding arrangements for schools is the socioeconomic status index—the SES index. This is a fundamentally flawed index. It replaces the Education Resources Index, which was much more based on the needs of the school and the capacity of the school to reach educational standards. I put this to the House: any regime which produces an outcome where the King's School has more needy students than Fairvale High School is a deeply flawed calculating system.

Why, every time the Labor Party speak about private schools, non-government schools and the SES model, do they always find the time to give the King's School a kick in the

guts? What is it about the King's School that so infuriates the government and the other side of politics? What is it that annoys them? Is it that they actually could not get into the school when they were being educated or is it simply part of their ideological hatred of non-government schools, of the politics of envy we saw rolled out with the budget?

What it does clearly show, through the various speeches of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Assistant Treasurer and through what the Australian Education Union has said publicly in inquiries and media statements, is that this Labor government wants to get rid of the SES model. And part of this legislation is to prepare the way for that to occur. It would be nice if the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education stood up and levelled with the Australian people—to take a line from the current Prime Minister; although I fear that my three-year-old on a seesaw is more level than he and his government.

These bills seeks to make four changes which differ from the 2004 model. Firstly, the bills seek to make it easier for the minister to refuse or delay payments to schools—I am sure non-government schools are very pleased to hear that! Secondly, the bills introduce new requirements in school funding agreements to comply with the national curriculum by 2012. Thirdly, the bills alter the reporting requirements for schools, particularly introducing new requirements relating to information about financial viability. Fourthly, these bills remove the previous government's new non-government schools establishment grants. These changes are paving the way for reduced support for non-government schools from the federal government. It is as simple as that.

I turn now to ministerial refusal. Currently, funding is administered from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, with the Minister for Education at its head. Section 15 of this bill gives the minister the power to refuse to authorise or to deny payments to non-government schools. The current subsections allow this to occur in the instance of an institution being wound up or if the institution is unable to pay its debts. The addition of subsection (c) of the bill gives the minister new reasons to refuse or to delay payments to non-government educational sectors with respect to auditing. I understand the reasons for introducing this clause to ensure the financial viability of an institution, but the clause also seems to suggest that if an institution is audited then it may, by virtue of the audit, be in a precarious situation.

The fact that the minister can base a decision on a presumption should not be justified cause to withdraw or refuse payment. The term 'qualified audit report' is also a very broad basis for assessing the financial viability of a school. Any time an auditor audits a school for reasons not related to financial viability, it appears the minister reserves the right to delay or refuse payment in cases where financial viability is not in question.

With respect to complying with a national curriculum, section 22 relates to the new requirement for non-government schools to comply with the national curriculum standards before 31 January 2012, yet the national curriculum has not yet been released and there is very little information regarding its make-up. We know it will cover areas of maths, science, history and English as the basics, yet section 31 of the previous legislation required compliance with curriculum related activities such as statements of learning in five areas. The different approach to these statements gives schools individual identities and gives parents a choice of different institutions. Currently the only information available regarding the national curriculum is the initial advice on history and science. The final documents will not be available until some time in 2009. While 2012 is the last year that the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 and the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 will support funding for non-government schools, it is also the first year that non-government schools must adhere to the national curriculum.

I contend it is irresponsible to introduce compulsory compliance to a measure in this bill when the curriculum is not even drafted in any way, shape, form or means. Section 22 also has the potential to severely damage schools offering an alternative curriculum. A parent should have the absolute right to determine which school their child will go to. Steiner and Montessori schools currently represent 17,500 students and offer alternative education philosophies. I have a Steiner school in my electorate, and it was a great pleasure to welcome them here to Parliament House and to show them around recently, yet this legislation would appear to put in jeopardy their philosophies and their integrity. Essentially, it may disallow the majority of the principles of these schools from being acted upon. Passing section 22 is akin to putting the horse before the cart in every sense, and that section should be deleted from the bill.

With respect to additional reporting, the requirements in section 24(1) of the bill bring into question the government's commitment to maintaining non-government school funding for the four years following this bill. The new term 'funding sources', which schools would have to publicly report on, has the potential to pave the way for a remodelling of the current fair SES, which, at the beginning of my speech, I showed the Education Union, the Assistant Treasurer and the Minister for Education, the Deputy Prime Minister, simply despise.

Qualified audit reports can include reporting on everything from parents' and friends' lamington fundraising—certainly it will change lots of things in the SES, I imagine—right through to bequests. Every cent that can be associated with the school must be brought not just to the minister's attention, as is currently the case, but to the public's attention. The minister will have substantial powers to intrude on the finances of any non-government school and to spray those across the internet. I can only assume—with the minister's and the Education Union's pathological hatred of private schools and the SES funding model—that this information will not be used for the greater good of schools. I can see the financial support to schools from private sources being used against a school to reduce government assistance. I bring us back to the statement by the Education Union in Senate inquiry submission 33:

The AEU has long opposed any funding to private schools.

One has to question what the minister and indeed the Assistant Treasurer have against non-government schools that would make them want to spray all of their sources of income into the public arena. How will that add value to the SES process? How will that add value to schools funding? The only thing it does is provide the information to the Education Union because the government's union mates want payback for an electoral win.

Finally, section 100 relates to the abolition of new non-government schools establishment grants. The previous legislation, the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act, allowed the minister to make grants available for the establishment of non-government schools where there was community and private sector support. Section 100 in this bill only allows for grants approved in 2008 to be received in 2009. The removal of these grants will cripple many attempts to get new non-government schools off the ground. That is, perhaps, exactly what the intent is, as this entire bill's intent is to frustrate, harry and harass private schools and the SES funding model at every quarter. The bill also removes additional choice for parents in communities who choose non-government schools over government schools.

As I stated earlier, the enrolment in non-government schools is growing at a rate of 20,000 children per year. In the last decade government schools have grown by one per cent. Withdrawing federal government support for the establishment of new non-

government schools will not only deny parents a choice of education but force parents to enrol their children in an overcrowded, underfunded state system. The Rudd Labor government needs to withdraw this section of the bill immediately.

The immediate impact of this measure on my electorate is that the federal government will withdraw any funding for the establishment of the Lutheran Ormeau Rivers District School—LORDS—that the current Queensland premier, Ms Bligh, approved when she was the education minister but is now not approving by hiding behind her farcical regional plan, which will not allow the school to be zoned appropriately. What is ironic is that before the moribund Queensland Labor government scuttled this school by hiding behind its regional plan, the school had already received capital funding from the federal government, and now this legislation before us today will take that source of funding away.

Considering all the available evidence, considering the public statements, considering statements at inquiries and statements in this House, only one conclusion can be reached: the Education Union does not like private schools and, as it stated in its submission, it does not like the funding of them. The current government does not like the SES model. The majority of this Labor frontbench went to the 2004 election with a schools hit list, because there are certain schools in the non-government sector that, frankly, they do not like. While this series of bills is important to move \$28 billion to support the non-government system, the four changes that have been proposed have been insidiously inserted so Labor can commence the dismantlement of the SES funding model, so they can get as much information about non-government funding sources and give it to their mates at the Education Union. This Labor government, through these bills, speaks with a forked tongue. It seeks to give with one hand over the next four years, but, hidden within the fine print of the legislation, it certainly seeks to take with the other.