

**SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (SCHOOLING REQUIREMENTS) BILL 2008
Second Reading**

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (1.14 p.m.)—Whilst not rising to oppose the [Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment \(Schooling Requirements\) Bill 2008](#) I do seek to raise a range of significant concerns I have with the bill. Primarily, the bill seems to lack any degree of substance or indeed concern. One could even go as far as to say that the bill is somewhat of a charade, that it was announced in the media to take the focus off a declining economy, perhaps. Not even Labor revisionists—and indeed the Labor storytellers—could spin some of this. Growth figures for the previous quarter announced yesterday of 0.3 per cent compared to 0.7 per cent the quarter before is something that a bill like this cannot cover up. New South Wales growth was in negative territory at minus 0.1 per cent.

The Labor caucus did not even know this bill was coming up. The majority of Labor members of parliament found out about this bill—and I assume this includes you, Mr Deputy Speaker Bevis—through the media when the spinmeisters put it through. When caucus met, 38 speakers lined up to speak on the bill—35 against and three for. The Labor members did not even know the bill was coming. They heard about it in the media and the majority disagree with it. This is the genesis of this bill that this government seek to bring forward—a bill that is disingenuous, a bill that is designed to hide an economy that is going downhill because of a lack of confidence of Australian people in the Treasurer and, indeed, the Rudd Labor government.

Furthermore, the bill is steeped in duplicity. It seeks to force parents to make children go to school and then to punitively punish them if the kids do not go. Yet the Minister for Employment Participation has previously written to the Job Network providers and to Centrelink saying: 'Go soft and have compassion on those looking for work. Go soft and have compassion on those who are seeking work for the dole and those responsible for mutual obligation.'

The government released the new employment services discussion paper on 16 May 2008 which said that negligent job seekers on the dole would not face automatic suspension after three strikes; rather they would be referred to comprehensive assessment. Furthermore, on 16 May the *Age* reported that the minister said, 'We are not going to allow children to be affected adversely because of a breach by a parent.' In the workplace participation area, we have a minister saying: 'Don't go hard on the parents if they do not want to go to work. It's all right; they do not have to go to work. Show compassion. We are not going to allow children to be adversely affected because of a breach by a parent.' But on the other hand, in a hypocritical and duplicitous manner, the government say about the same parent: 'It's all right if you don't go to work. We don't want to adversely affect your kids. But, if the kids don't want to go to school, we're going to punish the entire family by taking away welfare payments.' The duplicity is outstanding even for this 'hollow man' government.

In the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007, the Howard government said it permitted welfare payments to be quarantined in the event of bad behaviour by welfare recipients—that is, not sending their children to school or neglecting them. This struck the right balance. There was no need for any further act of parliament. This again reinforces that the only reason a government would bring this to the parliament without telling any of their Labor members, and letting them find out about it in the news, is that it is a charade. It is an act to cover an economy that is slowly going downhill because of an incompetent frontbench. This bill goes to quarantine, suspend and potentially cancel welfare payments to those parents who apparently do not properly do their job. It is not a problem if the parent does not want

to get a job—no drama at all—but if they do not do their job at home the family will be punished. I think the average Australian can work out their hypocrisy in that.

The cancelling of welfare payments includes, of all things, social security pensions, social security benefits, service pensions and income support payments but does not adversely affect family tax payments. So this government is happy to say to veterans, 'You can do everything you can to help your kids go to school, but if they don't go we're going to hit your service pension.' The hide of this government to look men and women in the face who have faced bullets and war and danger and suffering, and say, 'We're going to take the pension away because your child doesn't want to go to school'—without offering a range of incentives, support and help, they are going to say that to veterans. But I guess this is in line with what this Labor government put through in the budget—it took away \$110 million of veterans entitlement. I guess they are consistent in their seeming dislike for veterans.

I agree with the government that bad behaviour should have consequences—

Mr Bowen interjecting—

Mr ROBERT—as the Assistant Treasurer nods his head. Bad behaviour should have consequences. However, the Labor 'nanny state' should not be telling families how to raise children. It should be following the previous Howard line to permit welfare payments to be quarantined in the event of poor behaviour by welfare recipients. This bill is rushed, and anything rushed that has not been thought through will have unintended consequences. The unintended consequence of this bill is that it will be completely, utterly and totally ineffective.

Punitive actions are not always the best responses. That is difficult, I know, for a party controlled by unions to understand. Punitive actions do not always work. Some argue that you catch more bees with honey than indeed with vinegar. This bill lacks a range of support measures needed to attract kids to school. Some schools are doing things like providing free breakfasts for kids from families where they are not getting fed, providing a range of extra support and tuition, and offering a range of activities that connect more with the culture of the day. These things are appropriate and relevant.

The bill singles out needy families for punishment. If you are a wealthy family and your kids are going to school, 'We're not going to do anything,' says the Rudd government. But, if you are hurting, if you are needy, if you require support, 'We're going to kick you so hard in the guts, it will give you a nosebleed'—that is what this legislation says. For a party that stands up here and purports to represent working families, this is an appalling piece of legislation that has not been thought through.

Firstly, this is a state responsibility. The two ministers at the table should understand by now that this is a state responsibility. There comes a time when the federal government has got to stop bailing the Labor states out—difficult, I know, for a government that is putting aside \$40 billion in slush funds to help their Labor mates out. But this is a state responsibility.

The *Courier Mail* reported on 7 April that in my home state of Queensland hundreds of Queensland students are skipping classes undetected and are not even enrolled in school. Yet only one parent was prosecuted in 2007 for failing to ensure their child attended school. The parent pleaded guilty but no conviction was recorded and they were placed on a six-month good behaviour bond. Minister Welford, the education minister for Queensland schools, said that a system was in place which involved phoning parents and holding meetings with them to ensure their children returned to school. Yet a report the Labor state government of Queensland refused to release actually showed

that 800 students at Logan High School alone were absent for a third of the school year. Education minister Welford also admitted there was a problem.

The government believes that taking all of the parent's money is one of the answers. Labor is looking to remove, at its worst, the funding from 800 families in Logan, one of the most socially disadvantaged areas between Brisbane and the Gold Coast. I believe it is held by the member for Rankin—has anybody told the member for Rankin that the parliament is looking at passing legislation that will take away the very support that 800 families in one of the most socially disadvantaged areas of Logan need? Has the member for Rankin been told that 800 families will be suddenly thrust onto the poverty line if this continues, based on current statistics?

Minister Welford, whilst admitting there was a problem, said that prosecuting parents was not the answer to combating the truancy problem. Has anybody told Minister Welford that, apparently, the Rudd government is actually going to take away their very means for survival? Based on this, and based on the comments that Minister Welford has made, I doubt very much whether the states are likely to agree to the collection of data. Minister Welford would not even release this report on truancy. The *Courier Mail* had to uncover it through the ways and means that the press gallery is used to. He would not even be upfront with the people of Queensland to say that these are the problems with truancy and kids not going to school. He was not even will to engage the people of Queensland in a discussion on the issue. It is farcical—almost comical—to think he is happy to engage with this Labor government to publish these figures and to remove welfare payments. On the data right now, 800 families in Logan, one of the most socially disadvantaged areas in South-East Queensland, would have their payments removed.

Considering that, I doubt whether schools are likely to report. Why would schoolteachers and school principals start reporting data to Centrelink when they do not think they ought to report that data to their own head offices—and which their head offices have shown they are not willing to report to the people of the state? Why would they report this data when the consequences of that reporting would mean the family about which they are reporting would be totally without income? Many of these schools are running programs like providing breakfasts, extra tuition assistance, and phoning parents and other siblings to find out where schoolkids are. They are running these programs because teachers genuinely care about the children. Why would a teacher, who has gone out of their way to run a range of programs, who genuinely cares about children, make that phone call that would see that child's family thrust into impoverishment? What will the schools in Logan do? What will they do about 800 families with children who have missed a third of the year? If the two ministers opposite think those schools will call Centrelink and say, 'You know what? Eight hundred children from the most disadvantaged homes in the state are not coming to school. The best thing we can do is knock out all their money—that will get the kids to school,' then I think they are on a planet different to mine.

The final point to consider is: as this government moves to punish a family for the failure of one child, what will the impact be on the other siblings? Let us take a hypothetical situation of mum, dad and three kids, with two children working their guts out and mum choosing to stay at home to take care of the kids. There is little support from the government—this government believes in supporting mums who go out to work with a 50 per cent childcare rebate; but if you want to stay at home and take care of the kids, there is nothing in that respect. Dad is out working, mum stays at home, there are three kids, and they are doing it tough with the mortgage. One of the children does not want to go to school, not matter what assistance, love, care or support is provided—and it is reported to Centrelink. There are two children busting their guts at school—studying hard with a vision for what they want their lives to be, a plan for how they see their futures—but one of their brothers just does not connect with the schooling system. It

goes to Centrelink, and Centrelink speaks to the family resulting in 28 days and a range of things in place. The kid still does not want to play. Suddenly this legislation will take away the entire family's income. It will punitively push the two siblings that are busting their guts onto the poverty line because of one other sibling. And you have the hide to look me in the eye and say that you know what it is to be a working family, and to stand up for working families.

This bill is a charade—it is a disgrace. It is an absolute cover-up for an economy that is hurting. This bill will be so ineffective and will not achieve anything because the reporting will not be in place, the states will not play, Centrelink will not play and the schools will not play. We will not oppose the bill, because Labor needs to understand the consequences of their own poor legislation. It is not the coalition's responsibility to save a rudderless Rudd government from itself. Minister, it is not my responsibility to save you from your own decision-making and from your own poorly, rushed-through judgements. It is up to you save you from yourself; it is up to you to face the consequences of moribund legislation.

This bill needs to be referred to a Senate committee. It needs an enormous amount of scrutiny because that scrutiny has not occurred. The Labor caucus was not informed. No-one on the Labor Party back benches knew about it. It was announced in typical Prime Minister Rudd style to catch a media headline without thinking it through. I only hope a Senate committee will go through it, point out the range of egregious errors of judgement that the bill is predicated on and seek to bring back to the House a bill that makes a lot more sense and is in the nation's greater interest.