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New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Apprenticeship and Traineeship Amendment Bill 2017

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Alongside my Labor colleagues—including the fabulous member for Londonderry and shadow Minister for Skills, Prue Car—I denounce this latest attack on TAFE by the Berejiklian-Barilaro Government through the Apprenticeship and Traineeship Amendment Bill 2017. Like many legislative changes brought by this Government, this bill attempts to disguise one egregious development with a handful of benign or unremarkable legislative reforms. This Government is hell-bent on destroying the publicly funded training sector and breaking the back of TAFE NSW—a public skills institution. It is bewildering to members of the Labor Party why the Liberals and Nationals are so devoted to undermining and diminishing TAFE.

TAFE is an institution that has always had a stellar reputation among students, teachers and industry. That reputation was well deserved. Students knew that TAFE was the best place for a quality education; teachers knew it was an employer that would respect their expertise and support their long-term career goals; and employers knew that an apprentice or an employee with a TAFE qualification would bring with them skills and knowledge in their field that were among the best in the world. Not only is such a reputation good for students, teachers and businesses; it is also good for New South Wales. A skilled workforce underpinned by quality public education puts us in the best position to attract investment from across Australia and overseas. But do the Liberals and Nationals join the dots? They do not. They would rather pursue an ideological crusade against public education than recognise the crucial role that only TAFE can play in futureproofing our workforce and preparing people for careers in emerging or changing industries.

The bill before the Parliament today is yet another example of the wolf in sheep's clothing approach of the Berejiklian Government. There are increased penalties for noncompliance and improved accountability measures, and these would be a good thing on their own. However, we see this bill for what it really is when we look at the proposed abolition of the Vocational Training Review Panel. The current panel provisions are very strong. The panel is made up of industry representatives and the Commissioner for Vocational Training. Crucially, it includes TAFE representatives on the panel. In my experience, TAFE teacher representatives have two key interests at heart: the quality of education that they and their colleagues can provide to their students and the protection of the institute of TAFE.

These are noble and worthwhile interests and outcomes for students, and New South Wales can only be improved whosoever our TAFE teacher representatives are given a seat at the table. The only reasons a government would seek to remove TAFE teachers from an advisory or review panel would be to reduce accountability or if it otherwise sought to further diminish the status of TAFE and give private training providers a greater influence over the vocational education and skills training sector. Look at how well that has worked.

In the view of Labor members, these are very damaging outcomes and the Minister for Skills should be ashamed of himself. But he is not ashamed; he has no shame whatsoever. Sadly, he lacks the capacity for it. This is a Minister so guilty of doublespeak to the point of outright dishonesty on these issues in the past, so doggedly committed to undermining public education and so completely indifferent to the impacts of his decisions that he would express no shame whatsoever. Indeed, when pressed, he has said that these changes represent "red tape reduction". If making sure that students receive quality education, that industry, students and teachers can work together to ensure that qualifications remain relevant and useful for future workforces and that TAFE and public education is supported and improved is red tape, then so be it. That sort of red tape is necessary, beneficial and worthwhile—and only a very foolish person would seek to remove it.

Before voting on this bill we should remind ourselves of what this foolish Minister has so far presided over. Yearly enrolments are down by more than 175,000 compared with 2012. Is that red tape reduction? There are 14,567 fewer students with a disability enrolled in TAFE compared with 2012, some 5,700 teachers and support staff have been sacked since 2012 and \$1.7 billion has been cut from education and training since 2011. Is that red tape reduction? At this rate the only red tape left by the time of the 2019 election will be the foolish Minister for Skills himself. He could do us all a favour and reduce himself out of a job. That would be the most beneficial reform for TAFE right now.

Tonight my Labor colleagues and I reiterate our party's commitment to TAFE. Let the 2019 election be a referendum on the future of TAFE in New South Wales. Labor is committed to making TAFE affordable and accessible for everyone. We will not sell campus after campus out from underneath students. We will not allow any attack on TAFE to go through this Parliament without the strongest possible opposition. That is why we will seek to amend the bill to protect the Vocational Training Review Panel. If the amendments are not agreed to in this House, we will vote against the bill and refer the amendments to the upper House. The Berejiklian-Barilaro Government will soon learn the lesson of the Napthine Government in Victoria. If it attacks TAFE and public education it is taking on the electorate in a battle it cannot win. Minister Barilaro and Premier Berejiklian will not win this war on TAFE, and at the rate they are going they will not win the next election. Save TAFE. Bring on 2019.