

Bill introduced, read a first time and ordered to be printed.

Second Reading

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK [11.56]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I introduce this bill on behalf of the Liberal-Nationals Coalition and congratulate the shadow Minister for education on her initiative in preparing and following through with this legislation. This bill requires the Director-General of the Department of Educating and Training to keep a register of government school assets. The bill defines assets as all buildings, including demountables. The register is to comprise reports on the status of the capital assets of government schools, to be known as school status reports, and three-yearly plans on building and maintenance work in those schools, to be known as school building plans. School status reports and school building plans are to be prepared by the director-general, included in each of the annual reports of the Department of Education and Training, and made available for inspection, free of charge, on the web site of the department. In due course I will outline details of these two components of the register, but first I will explain why the Coalition is introducing this legislation. This legislation is necessary because Professor Tony Vinson, who conducted the inquiry into the provision of public education in New South Wales, states at the beginning of his report when explaining the reason for his examination of buildings and amenities:

The ways in which buildings impact upon human life range from the purely functional to the aesthetic. These qualities are as important, if not more so, to a satisfying and productive life within schools as they are in other institutions.

The Vinson report suggests:

The maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed.

The report also refers to "substandard conditions in which teaching and learning are being attempted". During the course of the inquiry Professor Vinson and members of the inquiry team visited 140 schools. Of those visits the report states:

So far as the majority of teachers, students and parents are concerned, the maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed for such an extended period that the tag povo aptly describes its standing relative to the private sector.

That tag, of course, relates to the impoverishment of the government school system. The direct observation of conditions in more than 140 schools and numerous—

Pursuant to sessional orders business interrupted.

Debate resumed from an earlier hour.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK [2.48 p.m.]: Prior to the interruption of this debate I was referring to Professor Vinson and members of his inquiry team who visited 140 schools. Of those visits, the report states:

So far as the majority of teachers, students and parents are concerned, the maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed for such an extended period that the tag "povo" aptly describes its standing relative to the private sector. The direct observation of conditions in more than 140 schools and the numerous submissions received on this aspect of school life have left the inquiry in no doubt about the frequently sub-standard conditions in which teaching and learning are being attempted.

The report accepts that the Department of Education and Training uses building standards for new and extensively refurbished schools that are consistent with international standards. It notes that the presumption of the authorities:

... appears to be that a combination of two things, a sustained application of the new standards and the continuance for a decade of current levels of budgetary support, will bring the system to an acceptable standard.

The report continues:

The Inquiry has no reason to doubt that if the aforementioned two conditions are fulfilled, there will be a major improvement to school buildings and amenities. However, that judgment rests on informed surmise rather than any quantification of the backlog of capital works in terms of explicit criteria.

The report notes that the measure of unmet needs would be possible using existing data. It states:

Essentially, what would be involved would be the aggregation of information about individual projects that have been found to have a degree of merit short of gaining the priority needed to access available funds. The use of such information for budgetary planning purposes would enhance the rational consideration of the portfolio's claims for asset acquisition and improvement funds at both the State and national levels.

In other words, unmet need data could be used for policy purposes and monitoring progress towards the currently stated goal of bringing buildings and facilities up to an acceptable standard. In support of the bill I also summarise several points made in earlier chapters of the Vinson report. They include the observations that: teaching and learning can be enhanced or retarded by the presence or absence of appropriate physical conditions; the school community's spirits can be uplifted or depressed by the presence or absence of well-designed and well-maintained buildings; good building quality and maintenance are associated with improved academic results; the quality of physical space affects self-esteem, peer and student teacher interactions, parental

involvement, discipline, attention, motivation and interpersonal relations; and the quality of school buildings and their surrounds can also be a potent symbol of the regard, or otherwise, in which public education is believed to be held by governments and the community.

There are numerous examples of neglect and unfairness that are the result of this Government's politicised and irrational policies for allocating capital and maintenance funding. It is timely to note that I have been contacted by the outstanding Coalition candidate for Dubbo, Jen Cowley, who is furious about the conditions in which students in the Dubbo electorate are expected to learn. Jen has been meeting with the families of these students and has particularly requested that a number of issues be raised in Parliament in the context of this bill that show how badly our schools need the bill before the House today. The first issue is airconditioning and the inequitable and unfair way in which schools have been omitted from the list of priorities to have airconditioning installed.

Parkes High School ought to be at the top of the priority list, but because of politics it is not even on the Government's radar for assistance. Parents at the school are participating in the hot watch program launched by the shadow Minister in order to obtain the temperature data the Carr Government does not want to know about. I have been advised the data shows that on 11 February this year temperatures at Parkes High School were recorded as follows: sewing room, 41.5 degrees Celsius; playground, 52 degrees Celsius; tennis courts, 50 degrees Celsius; science laboratory, 36 degrees Celsius; staffroom, 40 degrees Celsius; mathematics staffroom, 39 degrees Celsius; canteen shelter, 40 degrees Celsius; room C4, 39 degrees Celsius; room C9, 38 degrees Celsius; and room D4, 39 degrees Celsius.

I acknowledge, and thank, the president of the Parkes High School parents and citizens association for providing us with this important data, which ensures that the truth about what is happening at the school can come out. But the truth is dreadful! Those temperatures are not indicative of a school; they are indicative of a sweatshop. A school is a place where children learn. How could anyone expect people to teach and children to learn in such conditions? When the mercury is soaring beyond 37 degrees there is no way that place can function properly as a school. What a disgrace it is that Ministers and their head office staff sit in airconditioned splendour in Sydney, yet expect children to tolerate such conditions! What more evidence is required to prove the need for urgent action, especially as another summer approaches and students and their families in Parkes again brace themselves?

Jen Cowley tells us that many schools in Dubbo are frustrated and hamstrung by the maintenance backlog that so characterises the Carr Government's infrastructure policies. She has raised the issue of the infants school toilets at Narromine Primary School. How symbolic is that of a problem that is as endemic as it is disgraceful? The Carr Government is well aware of the problems in infants school toilet blocks. It propels me back in time to the bad old days of the Unsworth Government when children as young as five were so horrified by and afraid of the smell and disgusting conditions of their school lavatories that they were trying to get through the day without going to the toilet.

Put the two problems of high temperatures and disgusting toilets together and the

conditions become very cruel. A decrepit and malfunctioning toilet block is surely at its worst on a hot day. Teachers trying to protect overheated young students must ensure those students consume as much water as possible to prevent dehydration, which is a serious threat to young children in summer, particularly those in un-airconditioned classrooms. The image is a dreadful one, and it ought bear heavily on the conscience of every Government member. Why do you not fix this problem, which is so upsetting to these school communities? Every year this Government is deluged with complaints of this kind. And every year the Department of Education and Training does a huge mail-merge standard reply to all those complaints. The standard letter reads:

I am advised that all funds have been allocated for the 2002-03 financial year—

just substitute the relevant financial year—

The issue you have raised will be considered along with other priorities across the State when finalising the next year's capital works program.

That is the letter that everyone gets! The computer contains a macro for the phrase to go at the end of letters to do with requests for maintenance or capital works. Imagine the frustration of principals, teachers and parents! I turn to several examples of problems in my Northern Rivers region. These issues were raised in another place by the member for Lismore, who I should think is respected on all sides of politics as a fearless and relentless advocate for his local area—a person who genuinely tries behind the scenes to solve problems. If Thomas George is speaking out, you know something has gone dreadfully wrong. And when it comes to schools in our area, Thomas has been forced to attack the Government repeatedly for major shortcomings.

He has raised the following matters: Richmond River High School having a large range of continuing physical problems and deficits that simply are being ignored by this Government; the Wyrallah Public School being in need of a multipurpose unit; and the Casino Public School, with one of the most disadvantaged student populations in the State, having had a list of priorities for some years. It has been working towards dealing with those priorities, but it needs a great deal of support to secure funding to do the necessary work. Very few schools in our region have a school hall. This means that students are out in the hot weather that we experience in the Northern Rivers, especially inland parts of the region, where the infrastructure is oldest, as opposed to coastal areas, where temperatures are lower, there is population growth and the schools tend to be newer. Thomas has spoken about Manifold Primary School, which recently celebrated 75 proud years of education. A letter from the school states:

Our school, Manifold Public, has experienced an ongoing problem of termite infestation in our toilet building over a number of years. The termites have caused extensive damage to the structure of the toilet block as well as other buildings. The termites have been treated a number of times by professional pest control companies at a cost of several hundred dollars so far, but obviously the treatments have not been overly successful with the consistent return of the termites.

It has also been stated by a number of parents that they feel it is a health hazard and do not agree to the positioning of the toilet block onto the only covered area that our

school has. This is the only area covered for the students ... when the weather is hot or raining.

That is the only covered area in which students can eat during recess and lunch. The letter continues:

One suggestion to resolve these problems would be for the demolition of the current toilet block and a less termite affected building to be built as a replacement. We have recently heard of a school that has a demountable building as their toilet block.

Another very instructive case is that of Bonalbo and Old Bonalbo schools which, like Parkes High School, are in dire need of airconditioning. However, the department requires that the average temperature be 30 degrees before it will be installed. The average temperature recorded at the schools is 0.05 degrees below that. Because the schools do not have an official temperature recording station, the readings taken at Casino and Tenterfield are averaged. Staff at the schools and parents in the towns have been recording the temperature daily and have produced a graph of their readings. I understand that is about to be presented to the Minister by Mr George. The graph proves that the area is often hot and humid and that the temperature is well above the required average for airconditioning to be installed. In fact, on one day the temperature exceeded 45 degrees.

Greg Aplin, the member for Albury, has pointed out that just outside his electorate and across the border in Victoria, and particularly in north-east Victoria, 17 schools are to be upgraded with airconditioning prior to summer. That is painful, he says, to the students and staff of Billabong High School, who have been waiting for airconditioning on the upper floor of the school for many years. The president of the Culcairn Public School parents and citizens association, Mr Webster, has written to Mr Aplin detailing the association's concerns. The letter makes these two points:

Toilet bowls now permanently rusted with the many years of Culcairn hard bore water.

Cisterns, the same vintage, now chipped and rusted ...

The honourable member for Bega, Andrew Constance, has referred to a public meeting held in his electorate organised by the parents and school community of Merimbula Public School. The honourable member quoted from the *Merimbula News Weekly* of 31 March this year regarding that public meeting:

The parents in attendance at the meeting spoke about the school grounds being a dust bowl when it does not rain and a mud heap when it does rain. They said the toilets are so dark and dingy that some students refuse to use them. One parent said that when contractors were brought in to clean up a disused toilet for disabled students they discovered a rat's nest.

I do not need to remind honourable members what it can mean when little boys use toilets for 40 years that are on a concrete slab. The odour would turn most people away from the toilets. Mr Webster continues:

Due to age, the floor has a permanent odour in the cement surface especially in the

urinal area. In addition to this sorry state of affairs, only one toilet is provided for male and female staff and visitors. Clearly the existing toilets and cisterns must be replaced with new dual-flush toilets. The urinal should be replaced with privacy stalls and the area must also be washed, and hot water should be provided for that purpose.

When the former Coalition Government was elected in 1988 it inherited a disastrous backlog of capital works and maintenance defects from the then Unsworth Government. We introduced a \$100 million cyclic maintenance program, which meant every school was attended to over a seven-year period. It was a fantastic injection of funding, in addition to major and minor capital works. It coincided with a slump in building activity and as a result the building price index fell. In other words, the value obtained from the cyclic maintenance program climbed massively in real terms. It really was a golden era for rebuilding and securing our government school infrastructure. Because we were in office for seven years every single school throughout the State was attended to.

The priorities list for minor and major capital works was apolitical in those days, and thus credible in the eyes of the department, schools and the community. This Government, having axed the cyclic maintenance program, now experiences daily political pain in administering the meagre funding it has made available for school capital works. To address its political problems it began to fiddle with priorities in the program. That dabbling has degenerated to full-on rewriting of capital works planning and it is now all about meeting the political needs of the Government. It has nothing to do with student needs and for this reason confidence in the process in the whole capital works program has collapsed. Community anger about the state of our schools is palpable and cannot be repaired under the current regime.

Under the Greiner and Fahey governments, when "transparency" was our watchword, a publication was brought out each year at budget time explaining our capital works program. I have here an example from 1991-92, which outlines in precise detail how \$315 million, a huge sum 12 years ago, is to be spent. It explained the method of determining priorities, the breakdown of the budget and the differences between the programs. Even funding for site acquisitions and gas heaters was explained. The document lists hundreds and hundreds of capital works programs. Every school in the State was able to see who was being funded, for what reason and where they were being funded. For example, in the Dubbo electorate we listed separately the minor works programs and the maintenance works programs. For minor works, Peak Hill Central School received \$37,000 to upgrade its facilities. Under the maintenance program, Coonabarabran Public School received \$250,006 for internal and external cyclic maintenance, and Dubbo South Public School received \$479,509 for cyclic maintenance.

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods: Is this 15 years ago, all these wonderful improvements?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That is right, and it was a lot of money then. I thank the Hon. Jan Burnswoods for drawing attention to the fact that these large sums of money that I am outlining were allocated 12 years ago. In real terms they were phenomenally large outlays at the time. Orana Heights Public School received \$248,760 for cyclic maintenance. During our time the electorate of Dubbo received \$1 million for one year, which in today's terms would be phenomenally large. I must

thank the Hon. Jan Burnswoods for her interjection, which draws attention to how significant, in real terms, these sums were. In today's dollar terms we would find that even fewer dollars were allocated to these schools.

Every single electorate in the State is listed in the document, which explains in transparent terms who is getting funding for what. Over a period of years, as result of the publication of this document, everyone knew what was going on. One of the first acts of the Carr Government when it was elected in 1995 was to axe the cyclic maintenance program and the document that spelled out clearly who was getting how much for what projects and how it was to be funded—transparency, fairness and accountability. The first three casualties of any Labor government are transparency, fairness and accountability. We are now looking at the results of nine years of no transparency, no fairness and no accountability.

The bill is important because it will establish a requirement for the Director-General of the Department of Education and Training to keep a register of government school assets. It will comprise reports on the status of the capital assets of government schools, and three-yearly plans on building and maintenance work in those schools. The school status reports on school building plans will be prepared by the director-general and included in each of the annual reports of the Department of Education and Training. The bill was not needed in 1995 when the Carr Government took office, but nine years later it is needed desperately. Neglect has eaten into the very physical foundations of our government school infrastructure. But even worse, the politics of cover-up and the politicisation of priorities for capital works funding have destroyed utterly public confidence in the capital works and maintenance program.

It is a great tragedy, because the program had been held in high regard. It required a good deal of confidence and trust for people to have the patience to wait, and they did wait patiently and they were rewarded for their patience. The program has been replaced by the squeaky-wheel approach, which has resulted in irrational funding across the system and created havoc in the entire government school community across the State. Education once had a great and global method of allocating resources. As I said, equity, fairness and transparency is now a distant memory. The credibility of the program is a smoking ruin thanks to the stupidity and mismanagement of the Government. It is typical of the Labor Party. As is typical of our system, it will be left to the Coalition to clean up this mess when we are elected to office. It will be costly, but it must be done. The bill is the framework for doing it. Again, I thank and congratulate the shadow Minister, Mrs Jillian Skinner, on the bill and the wonderful start she has already made to tackling the problems. I commend the bill to the House.