



# Legislative Assembly

## Save Hunters Hill High School Bill

### Hansard

### Extract

19/09/2002

#### Second Reading

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI** (Lane Cove) [10.17 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The purpose of the Save Hunters Hill High School Bill is to preserve this school as a public secondary school, which would then prevent its closure and subsequent fire sale by the Government. This bill seeks to translate into legislative action a report from the upper House inquiry that recommended that the school remain open. When the Government first announced that it proposed to close Hunters Hill High School the reaction of members of the local community was immediate, emotive and passionate. Their anger and disbelief were clear. Our tight little community was shocked that the Labor Party, headed by the self-described want-to-be education Premier, wanted to put a "for sale" sign over our strong, successful and vibrant local school.

Parents, teachers and students asked, "Why would a government close such a successful school? What did we do wrong and how on earth could this happen?" Perhaps initially some people thought that the Government had just got it wrong and would be convinced on the basis of a good argument and, in good conscience, it would simply reverse the decision, apologise and move on. The community had some faith in the process that had been put in place by the Government. They made formal submissions, held rallies and organised petitions. But all of that was to no avail. Promising full consultation the Government had already decided that its decision to close the school was a fait accompli. It was, in the words of the Minister, not negotiable.

**Mr Moss:** If only the locals had sent their kids to the school it might have stayed open.

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI:** They do send their kids to the school. If the honourable member for Canterbury visited that school he would see that kids attend that school. He would then be aware that the comments he has just made would have insulted the children at that school. The children who attend the school are from the local government area, as is required by the Department of Education and Training.

**Mr Moss:** No doubt there has been a concerted effort over the last six months.

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI:** No, over the last six months kids have had to be moved out of that school because the Minister for Education and Training is closing it. That is the level of emotion in this debate. If the honourable member for Canterbury continues to incite me, it will get worse.

**Mr DEPUTY-SPEAKER:** I can assure you it will not.

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI:** The consultation was a farce and nothing more than a slick public relations stunt. In my 11 years in Parliament I have never been struck by a more cynical, more damaging campaign than that inflicted by Labor on my local community and, indeed, the rest of New South Wales. As I have stated emphatically, Hunters Hill High School is a strong, vibrant and successful school. Under the leadership of the acting principal, Judith Felton, it was a growing school, in complete contrast to the assertions of the Government that the enrolments were falling. Parents, teachers and residents know how wonderful the school is. As the local member I have often visited the school and been impressed with the fabulous education environment. I have been proud of the many academic, social, cultural and sporting accomplishments of the school. The successes of the school are also recognised outside of our community. For example, Maree O'Halloran of the New South Wales Teachers Federation stated:

Hunters Hill High School is clearly a thriving and successful local comprehensive high school, clearly successful on anybody's terms.

In 2000 the school was the third most successful comprehensive co-educational school in the State on academic grounds. As Bev Baker, former President of the New South Wales Federation of Parents and Citizens, remarked:

That school is a celebration. Hunters Hill High has got wonderful grounds, it has got superb teaching staff, and it has got facilities in the school to allow for expansion. It has the opportunity of being a lighthouse school.

It is time for a pop quiz. Can anyone tell me who said this in this very House a few years ago:

I also want to mention Hunters Hill High School and Epping Boys High School. Though they are outside my electorate they draw a substantial number of students from within. Both have ensured their students are well prepared for the higher school certificate and that the years the students spent at the schools have

been happy, creative and valuable for them academically and socially. All these government schools have provided quality education based on ideals of equity and egalitarianism that value the unique individuality of each student.

**Mr Debnam:** Was it a Labor MP?

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI:** The honourable member is getting close. Yes, it was a Labor MP.

**Mr Debnam:** Someone on the front bench?

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI:** It was someone on the front bench.

**Mr Fraser:** It wouldn't be Johnny someone?

**Mrs CHIKAROVSKI:** Was it Johnny someone? It was, in fact, John Watkins, the Minister for Training and Education, the Minister who is now closing this school. What incredible hypocrisy! What an incredible double standard! Shame, John, shame! It is no wonder that Labor is so much on the nose. Hunters Hill High School and the land on which it is located are of major significance. One of the early uses of the land was that it was part of Mary Reiby's farm in the 1830s. For 75 years to just before World War II the site was used as a major picnic area for the people of Sydney. During the war it was utilised by the RAAF, and it was then set aside for public education. In 1958 the school was established. Apart from Parramatta High School, which was dedicated to serving a semi-rural community, Hunters Hill High became the first co-educational high school in the metropolitan area.

Many former students, including Labor's former and acclaimed Attorney General, Jeff Shaw, can attest to the fact that since then the school has been at the forefront of public education. Let me turn to the specific arguments proffered by Labor, which has officially argued that the school should close for one reason, enrolment numbers. Of course, that is not the real reason but I will come to that shortly. Enrolments are not falling; rather they are increasing. As the *Daily Telegraph* reported in August 2001, there were more than 800 expressions of interest from primary school students for 2002, and 90 enrolments confirmed for year 7 for 2002. This was despite Labor ignoring the needs of the school, discouraging enrolments and undermining confidence in the school. The school students are there. Some 46 per cent of students live within three kilometres of Hunters Hill High, a figure comparable with most other comprehensive schools.

The Government has also speculated that the demand for school places is down in the local Ryde area. If that is correct, why are parents from Hunters Hill High telling me that for 2003 they cannot get their sons and daughters into Epping Boys, Riverside Girls, Cheltenham Girls, or even Mosman High. That, more than anything, is indicative of the demand for school places. The Government knows the reality: in five to 10 years demand for school places in the area will increase. Coupled with the swing back into inner-city living by families, which is implicitly encouraged by Planning NSW and local councils, young families will want the choice of sending their children to a local comprehensive high school. Dr Nick Parr from Macquarie University made projections of a significant increase, estimated to be 12.4 per cent by 2020 in the school-age population in the local catchment area. Closing the school is a gamble. As Gerard Noonan wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

But making a call on whether the drift away from public schools in an area such as Marrickville or Hunters Hill is likely to continue unabated over the next two decades is far harder. Once the property is sold, it's London to a brick that it can't be retrieved. Buying a suitable property to establish a new school in an established but newly revitalised suburb is a virtual impossibility.

Hunters Hill High has been singled out for special attention. The reality is that 81 other high schools have lower enrolments than Hunters Hill, but they are not targeted for closure. Honourable members can be assured that few of these schools would reside on such valuable land as Hunter Hill High School. That is the real reason why the school is to close. If the current or previous Minister were honest, they would simply admit it. They want to close Hunters Hill High School because they want to sell off the land on which the school is located. As Marilyn Parker, education writer for the *Daily Telegraph* correctly concluded, the decision to close the school was "never educationally based".

Real estate estimates are as high as \$60 million for the site. When the estimate went before John Aquilina, the then Minister for Education and Training, one can imagine how his eyes lit up with the promise of so much money, regardless of the educational value of the school. The Minister would have reacted with glee, knowing that he could try to make up for seven years of neglect by racing around and promising a lot of money for capital works to upgrade schools in Labor's marginal seats. As Kathy Prokhovnik, Vice-President of the Hunters Hill High Parents and Citizens, stated:

The school's closure has nothing to do with enrolments or educational opportunities. All that the Department of Education is desperately hiding is the fact that Hunters Hill High is a thriving school with an enviable academic record. What they can't hide is that the money from the sale of the school is to go from this Liberal electorate to boost schools in the surrounding Labor electorates.

That is not my quote; that is a quote from a parent from the school. Kathy goes on to conclude:

This is politics at its most cynical, its most destructive. If a thriving school can be sacrificed for political gain, what else are we about to lose?

The Government said it is not about money. Why, then, was the department instructed to carry out land valuations on

a variety of schools in 2000, all of which have been suppressed from the public? We on this side of the House do not believe that you should close the school simply to fund Labor's re-election campaign. The New South Wales Coalition is a strong believer of choice in education, that parents and students should be afforded the choice between, on the one hand, a vibrant and public education system or, on the other, a non-government alternative. Closing Hunters Hill High is denying choice to parents. With places already chokers at other local high schools the choice for a local comprehensive school is severely limited. This, in turn, could force parents to send their kids to non-government schools, continuing the exodus from public education. As the Chair of the upper House inquiry, Reverend the Hon. Fred Nile, stated:

The closure of the school seriously reduces the choices available to students on the lower North Shore. The loss of the site will have ramifications not only for the provision of education now but also for the future provision of schools.

If Hunters Hill High closes there will be no provision for public secondary education for boys in my electorate. For girls, Riverside is already well over its capacity of 840, with 950 students crammed into the existing school. I would ask honourable members to think about this: Hunters Hill High is not just about bricks and mortar, and land value. It is about real people, students and teachers and parents, coming together as a school community and moving forward in the pursuit of turning out fine young men and women. This is Hunters Hill High's finest achievement. Students who leave that school are well-rounded members of the community. It simply does not seem fair to close it down, turn off the educational tap, and destroy a school community, all in the name of a few bucks. I urge all members of the House to consider the merits of Hunters Hill High, and to talk to current and former students and listen to their passion.

A few weeks ago I went to a school reunion which was attended by more than 3,000 people. The goodwill that emanated for the school on that occasion was fantastic. Ask Jeff Shaw, who shared the platform with me on that day. We both agreed that Hunters Hill High was, and remains, a fantastic educational institution. I am sure the former Attorney General would share my view, the Opposition's view, the community's view, and the teachers', students' and parents' view that this wonderful school should not be closed. I urge every member of this House to support the bill on its merits, to understand that it is a bill about people, not about dollars, and to vote accordingly. I commend the Save Hunters Hill High School Bill to the House.