

Notes on Meeting with Mr. Gray, Area Director of Education, on Friday,
29th June, 1973.

Persons Present: Mr. Gray, Mr. Beard, Mr. J. Davis
Mr. W. Mackie and J.B. Lean.

Mr. Gray was asked, firstly, what action had he taken subsequent to the meeting held at Girl's High, and the resolution passed at that meeting. Mr. Gray indicated that he had written to the Minister on the day after the meeting setting out the resolution that had been passed, stating that approximately 400 people had been present and the voting had been, in his opinion, 75% for the resolution, 10% abstaining (who could be considered against) and 15% against. We disputed this statement of voting percentages and indicated that the vote of 500 persons, in our opinion, had been almost unanimously in favour of the motion. Mr. Gray criticised the slowness of the Boy's High P. and C. in forwarding to the Minister their statement concerning the meeting.

Mr. Gray also stated that he had forwarded to the Department of Education and the Minister, regularly, copies of letters appearing in the press on the subject of the Selective Schools. He specifically stated, however, that he had made no reference to the occupation or standing in the community of the persons contributing such letters. Mr. Gray was careful to emphasise that he considered our committee to represent a minority in the community. This was agreed with him. We stated that we did represent a politically aware minority, and that we could not expect to be other than a minority, in the light of the proportions in the community of persons of the interests that we represented; that we did represent a concerned group of parents; and that we felt that our view point with respect to the upper quartile of children with ability should be expressed very forcibly by his Department to the Minister.

Mr. Gray was then asked what action had the Minister taken in the light of his correspondence to the Minister, and the resolution passed. Mr. Gray indicated that he had received no official reply from the Minister. The Minister was out of the country and would not return until July, 23rd. In the mean time, Mr. Fife was the relevant Minister. (Note: It would be desirable for the groups concerned about the retention of Selective Schools to approach the Minister on his return from overseas.)

Mr. Gray was queried concerning what action he would recommend to our committee in the coming period, since we felt that he had responsibility to help those parents who currently were convinced that, in future, Newcastle children would not be properly catered for by the system.

Mr. Gray indicated that he felt that there would be no advantage to the committee in continuing to press his Department with respect to the Selective School issue, it was his responsibility to implement the wishes of the Minister and he confirmed our impression that the Department of Education in Sydney was strongly convinced of the virtues of the Comprehensive Schools and would not assist appeals towards retention of the Selective Schools. He stated that the only avenue effectively remaining open to us was through political action.

Considerable discussion ensued concerning specific issues which had been raised at the public meeting. These included a statement from the Department that a greater number of electives were open to children in the Comprehensive Schools than in the Selective Schools; this was denied by the deputation who pointed out that this was only true if it were accepted that subjects traditionally taken by girls, such as Needlework, became open for boys and, similarly, that subjects traditionally taken by boys, such as Metalwork, were accepted by the girls. And, also, that the level at which a subject was attempted would be depressed for children of equivalent ability or, alternatively, if the children took this at the same level the number of teaching periods available to the child at the level would be drastically reduced. We reiterated that we considered that this situation would continue to be unsatisfactory for gifted children even if changes in the number of subjects to be attempted at higher levels were introduced.

Mr. Gray raised the issue of the bussing of children associated with the proposed plan for the Comprehensive School system in the Newcastle area; we pointed out that we thought this had been introduced in order to ensure a normal intelligence distribution and a normal potential for attainment in each school. This was largely denied by Department Officers who indicated that it was largely to enable children from one particular Primary School to go to the same High School. We believed this statement to be incorrect and pointed out there are great weaknesses in the Comprehensive School system at the Lake,

in particular at Swansea, Gateshead and Cardiff, due to the inequality of parental opportunity or "ghetto" effect in the area school concept. We stated, however, it was not our intention to publicly debate this issue, since we believed it to be damaging to the children of the Lake area.

Mr. Gray enquired whether we would be satisfied if selectivity could be organised within the Comprehensive School system. Since we were uncertain what this would imply, but believed this could be the bussing of children to form particular selective classes within Comprehensive Schools similar to the system currently in force for handicapped children, we stated that just as he, himself, was tied by his requirement to enforce the Minister's resolution, we also had a responsibility to carry through the resolution passed at the public meeting at Girl's High and, therefore, this would not provide an acceptable answer to ourselves. (Furthermore, any selectivity set up within the Comprehensive School system could be removed at the stroke of a pen and we did not trust this situation.)

Mr. Gray claimed that the information given to parents at Boy's High could have been biased on the occasion of the P. and C. poll vote concerning their wishes with respect to the announcement made by the Minister. We do not believe this to be so and promised to send to him a copy of the information sheet sent to parents; we also promised to send to him a copy of the card sent to Mr. Askin protesting the situation with respect to the Selective Schools in Newcastle.

Mr. Gray then raised the issue of the proposal by the Minister to form school Councils and asked our opinion concerning this proposal. We stated that the proposal itself, as set out in the consultative paper entitled "The Community and Its Schools", was not unsatisfactory to ourselves. However, the statement of its inception made by the Minister on the occasion of his TV broadcasts on Monday, 4th June, had clearly limited the immediate applications of the last major point in this programme which was- Advising the Principal and the Regional Educational Board on the needs of the schools including the Educational Programme - we stated that we considered this to be the more important function of such Boards and that the hiring and firing of non-teaching personnel, for example, we felt not to be of prime interest to parents. We felt that the situation would be that the Parents and Citizens Association should reject the plan unless there were greater possibilities for

involvement of these groups in matters concerning the education of their children. Mr. Gray was clearly very concerned that the school P. and C. committees should forward their recommendations to the Minister within the time limitation proposed by the Minister.

Finally, Mr. Gray stated that he was concerned that his Department had not adequately presented the case for the electives available to children within the Comprehensive School system, and proffered the services of his officers and information to ensure that we had correct figures on this matter.

We thanked Mr. Gray for the access to his officers and accepted his proposal on the basis that we would query any matters which we considered to be dubious, stating that we felt that many half truths had been presented in this particular area.

Mr. Gray stated that a number of parents had used false addresses in the area in order to ensure that their children attended the Selective Schools and that this evidenced intellectual snobbery in the region. We pointed out that, in our opinion, the Selective Schools systems had done much to eliminate either intellectual or social snobbery in Newcastle because parents from a broad range of families sent their children to the Selective Schools and were happy to do so; and that, perhaps, it might equally be an indicator of the inadequacy of the Comprehensive Schools if people were seeking false addresses in order to ensure that their children went to the Selective Schools. We also stated that we felt that this applied only to a very small proportion of parents. Mr. Gray replied that whenever the standard at which children were accepted into the Selective Schools was raised, even slightly, very large numbers of children were withdrawn from the State system and were sent to private schools. We pointed out that this alternative would be much more expensive in the future and this, again, was a cause for concern.

We thanked Mr. Gray for his courtesy in talking to us; pointed out in conclusion that we had no personal gain, either for our children or ourselves, in presenting these matters to him, that we did represent a very large and very concerned band of parents and would ask that he seriously consider promoting our case to the Department.