

NEW ZEALAND FREE KINDERGARTEN UNION (INCORPORATED)

ANNUAL MEETING - HAMILTON.

PRESIDENT'S OPENING REMARKS.

Delegates who attended the Annual Meeting in Timaru at this time last year will recall that it was a Conference of lost reverts. Of the twentyfour presented only six survived debate and, of these, four required reference to the Department of Education. When I met the Director he remarked on the small number, the smallest he could remember, and added that he regarded it as a sign of stability and maturity in the Union. This compliment implies, of course, that there was a time when we were young and still had much to learn.

I have been looking back over my own experience in the Union to decide when it was that we began to grow up. I am drawn to the first Conference I attended, a fateful meeting in Christchurch in 1951. I say fateful because, in the light of the knowledge I have gained in the last nine years, I believe it was from this meeting that the Union, as we know it, began to grow in strength and stature. There are only eight people here today who will recall that time and, as one of those has intimated that, for personal reasons, this will be her last Union Conference, I think it might be fitting if I gave a brief outline of the events which I consider paved the way for many of the benefits we now receive and which set us on the path towards our present state of maturity.

It is true that there was a Union long before 1951 which worked untiringly for our welfare, but changes in Government policy in 1948 and 1949, which provided for liberal subsidies on capital expenditure and grants for teachers' salaries had awakened many communities into action. New associations grew apace. Enthusiastic endeavour raced ahead of full realisation of responsibility. The rate of training teachers was outstripped by the need for their services.

The Union then consisted of 31 associations controlling 101 kindergartens. But it was not a union of all associations and therefore did not represent all kindergartens, because one large association was not part of it. Another large association had tendered its resignation, not because it did not want to support a union, but because it was not satisfied with the Union as then constituted. It seemed to me, a very raw recruit with little knowledge of the kindergarten movement and its history, that it was a Union which lacked unity. I was conscious of a barrier between training and non-training associations which appeared to border on mistrust of each other's motives. But because the delegates were mature and kept their sights firmly on what they were working for - the establishment of kindergartens for little children - out of this meeting came objective thinking and long-term planning. Let no one doubt the value of conference or try to reckon its value in terms of money. The 1951 Conference was beyond price.

At this meeting a sub-committee was set up to re-draft the Constitution and, although amendments have been made and further changes may come out of this meeting, the broad basis remains. The thought in the minds of all who worked on that sub-committee was to find a way in which all associations might be happily united in a common purpose, so that one voice might speak for all on matters of kindergarten policy. It was essential, therefore, that the Constitution should be acceptable to all. You who are here today are the best judges of how successfully the task was accomplished and your presence is evidence of your support of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union.

We have gone a long way since that time. We have, in fact, grown up. That we are mature in our thinking and judgment I have no doubt. I am not so sure that we have really achieved stability. At the 1957 Conference in Hastings, Mr Beeby, then Director of Education, traced the changes he had noted during the years of the movement's greatest expansion. They are every year more apparent. No longer are there

numbers of older philanthropic members prepared to give long service in many associations, but, rather, the parents of pre-school children accept, for a short time, the responsibility of administration. All too quickly comes the time when office bearers move on. Too often a new group must learn the manner in which this responsibility must be discharged. This is not stability.

To Mr Beeby the answer seemed to lie in some form of amalgamation of associations where this was geographically possible. We have made some progress in this field. But what is also important, I believe, is for more mature members of the community to realise that their co-operation is needed in a service which seeks to help the youngest citizens; that their wisdom and experience could make a most valuable contribution to the kindergarten movement and that there are no richer rewards than those which come from work for little children. This complex modern world makes increasing demands on young children and their families and any service that can be given should be generously supported by the community.

The trend today in all organisations is to let someone else do the job. It is not confined to our movement. In my position as your President I am privileged to feel the pulse of the Union and I am concerned for its future. I have nothing but admiration for the achievements of all associations, but I would be blind if I did not see that there is not a firm foundation for leadership in the future. If administration is left to a willing band of young parents, who, quite naturally, serve only during the period while their children attend kindergarten, where will we find the leaders in ten or fifteen years' time? To hold Executive positions in the Union there must be experience, knowledge and self-sacrifice. Those blessed with all these qualities are not numerous and grow fewer.

I would urge all who have served the kindergarten movement to carry on as long as they are able, to make their experience and knowledge freely available and to remember always that "He who helps a child helps humanity". We are not alone in believing that the attitudes a child develops towards himself and to others during his early formative years are the ones that will persist as he grows older, and in these times when the nation's complacency has been so severely shaken by a series of unhappy events in many places our service takes on an added meaning. Let us not be among those who seek to place the blame for anti-social behaviour on someone else. Rather let us resolve to think of our contribution to its solution and to give unstinted support to strengthening and extending the activities of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union in order to safeguard all that it represents.