

Miss Laura Ingram M.B.E., J.P., 1912-1994

Laura Ingram must surely be one of the longer serving members of the NZFKU executive and spanning the significant years of kindergarten postwar expansion. She was elected in 1955 at the first AGM she attended, representing the new Motueka Free Kindergarten Association. She was the Infant Mistress at Motueka District High School. It was in this role she established the association in 1954, and remained its president for 25 years. The Laura Ingram Kindergarten in Motueka was named in recognition of her pioneering work for education in the district as well as her powerful presence in national kindergarten politics. In 1966 Ingram was elected President, and like Helen Downer was noted as coming from the regions rather than an established city kindergarten association. Ingram held the position until 1975. During her term as president, 152 of the 402 kindergartens in operation, were built, many of them in small towns such as Motueka. As a farewell gift she was presented with a colour TV set. Technology had improved since Helen Downer's black and white TV farewell gift in 1966, although Downer also received a colour TV in 1977 when she finally retired from her kindergarten work. Thereafter, there is no record, as times changed, that the practice of lavish gifts continued.

Ingram was a larger than life personality and presence who belonged to numerous community organisations and usually in a leadership role, including the long time president of the women's section of the Motueka RSA and as drum major for Motueka Ladies' Highland Pipe Band where 'tall, robust and resplendent in her father's black busby hat, scarlet jacket and red tartan kilt and plaid, [she marched] in front when the band paraded in competitions or on ceremonial occasions.'¹ Stories abound about her 'fiery use of language' 'fearlessness' and 'sense of fun'. One of her Motueka school pupils recalled how on the day the Second World War ended, she climbed 'onto the old Post Office Hotel balcony dressed as Winston Churchill, complete with cigar and all – waving a flag and giving the V-for-victory sign'.²

Ingram aptly applied such bravado to her role as President of NZFKU where her frequent presence in Wellington political circles and the kindergarten hinterland regions was reknown, 'leaving no stone unturned to advance the cause of Kindergarten Education.'³ Ingram herself recorded that she crossed the Cook Strait 400 times during her presidential term and drove many times from Kaitaia to Bluff.⁴ At Ingram's retirement function, Isobel Christison, Preschool Officer in the Department of Education, recalled her many visits to the Department 'to do battle, gain support or simply to say hallo... the sound and pace of Miss Ingram's footsteps in the passage indicated ... the exact purpose of her visit!'⁵ Departmental officers presented her with a mohair knee rug and a piece of antique china, a practice that was surely a one-off gesture of respect. Ingram was tenacious and persistent in her dealings with Ministers, politicians and departmental officials. Department of Education kindergarten archives of this time are littered with her letters of concern, or arrangements for meetings and documenting follow-up from meetings.⁶ She was known as a tickler for detail and process. Ingram's confidence and fearlessness were possibly due to the fact she was the sister-in-law of Keith Holyoake who was Prime Minister briefly in 1957 and from 1966 to 1972. She often made recourse to sending off terse telegrams particularly where she was displeased with an announcement or the tardiness of an expected decision. Her displeasure would be telegraphed to Department of Education heads, Ministers and even Prime Ministers, who duly bade their officials to deal promptly with Miss Ingram's concerns. She was not someone to upset.

Ingram's strong leadership covered the kindergarten movement's heyday years, during which time much of the flagship infrastructure of kindergarten was established. Many kindergarteners probably saw the stern 'brook no nonsense' side of Ingram, who did not deal kindly with feminist activism or the rising politicisation of kindergarten teachers in the 1970s, but it was the same fierceness that ensured that on the political front kindergarten education was taken seriously. At the conclusion of her retirement Mrs Pat Lockhart, as incoming President, proposed a toast which was accompanied by a rendition in song of 'Tell Laura I love Her'.

¹ Carol Markwell, (2000) 'Ingram, Laura May Cook 1912-1994', *Dictionary of NZ Biography*, Vol. 5.

<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5i3/ingram-laura-may-cook>

² Obituary, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 10 December 1994.

³ 'Farewell function for Miss Laura Ingram' *Kindergarten Education*, October 1975.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Archives NZ – Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington holds 73 files from the Department of Education files concerning NZFKU.

<https://www.archway.archives.govt.nz/SimpleSearch.do?keyword=+Kindergarten+Union>