



ADDRESS TO THE NEW ZEALAND FREE KINDERGARTEN UNION
ANNUAL CONFERENCE - 21st JUNE, 1991

Clare Wells
National President
Combined Early Childhood Union of Aotearoa

Tena Koutou
Nga mihi mahana kia koutou
E nga mana, e nga iwi, e nga reo
Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

I extend greetings to you Vivienne, to the Executive and to members of the NZFKU from the Combined Early Childhood Union of Aotearoa. I thank you for the invitation to address your conference and welcome this opportunity to participate.

The kindergarten service has been regarded as a "thorn in the side of the system" for many years. As the only early childhood service benefiting from a substantial level of government assistance and therefore certain requirements, a number of people infer that we have had it "too sweet, for too long". The kindergarten service, being under the auspices of the Department of Education has found a place that straddles the "private" operation within the early childhood sector and the "state" operation within the education sector as a whole.

It is a fine balance and not an easy position to maintain and some would say, at this point in time, we're facing our "comeuppance". Fairly harsh remarks but fair enough given the course of events over the past few years. A course of events that, regardless of the government of the day, or our amalgamation (as I have heard reported by a number of commentators), set out to remove government's influence on, and responsibility for, the kindergarten service.

It is no accident that the kindergarten service is confronting some of the most significant challenges in its history.

As part of a wider agenda, we have been manipulated by a complex but clever plan, aimed at reducing government's responsibility for education and establishing a pure form of self management - ultimately privatisation.

This plan has largely been developed by Treasury and wins favour with the Business Roundtable, the State Services Commission and with the current administration.

Phase 1 of the plan starts in 1987. Treasury argued in its Briefing Paper to the Incoming Government, that there should be a greater degree of choice for parents and that a voucher system of funding would increase the diversity of services and parental choice. It further argued for a reduced role of government in setting requirements - that is, regulation for staffing, the physical conditions and so on. With the advent of the Labour Government's reforms in education, we did see a shift in focus towards self-management. However, Treasury's plan was thwarted at the end of the day. Failure to convince government on economic grounds did not prevent Treasury from pursuing its agenda. The next attempt came from an administrative angle under the guise of the State Sector Act. It is 1988 and Phase 2 of the plan emerges.

The State Sector Act required all the conditions of service to be codified into an Award document, introduced the State Services Commission as employer party, and required employers in the education sector to be "good employers". Furthermore, the Act allowed the SSC to delegate their powers of negotiation. Although this provision has lain dormant, the SSC can activate it at any time.

What has resulted, in the kindergarten service, is a model very similar to that of the private sector. The scene is set for Phase 3.

October 1988 and the release of "Education To Be More", the founding document for the current early childhood policy. I remember vividly, a comment made to me by a Treasury official on the morning the report was released - "Kindergarten will be out on their own within two years", he said. A signal that the plan was on track.

"Education To Be More" was heralded as a major achievement for early childhood. It paralleled quite closely the reforms suggested for the compulsory sector. However, by the time the Report's recommendations were considered and reworked by government, the parallels were beginning to fade. The resulting document provided the framework for the current policies. At this point, we noted two critical changes to the original recommendations and to those that applied in the compulsory sector. One, that the Board of Trustees model was not accepted, and two, the fact that funds would be allocated as a bulk grant, with no separation for salaries and operational costs.

The "Before Five" policy was released in 1989 and prompted an extraordinary response in the Working Party Syndrome. Numerous groups were set up to develop and give effect to the policy framework, in a flurry of activity over a very short period of time. We note the presence of Treasury and the State Services Commission in this exercise.

August 1989, and the results of the working parties' reports were presented in the Management Handbook - affectionately known to some of our members as the "Purple Peril" !

The Handbook set blanket requirements in place across the early childhood sector. The setting of blanket policies did not go unnoticed and served to further develop the plan. With the release of detailed policy requirements come another round of frenetic activity - the Charter process. We consulted, discussed, "clustered" and organised around a set of principles which were yet to be determined as binding requirements, all within a strict timetable.

At the same time, the Education Act, with its notable Amendments, came into being. One of the most significant provisions of the Act was the requirement for kindergarten teachers to be registered. The SSC was violently opposed to this requirement and tried on a number of occasions to change government's decision. This provision did not fit in at all with the overall plan.

By 1990 the kindergarten service had been set up to resemble the private sector through the provisions of the State Sector Act and had been removed some distance from the rest of the education sector. Via the Award system, kindergartens stood alone and the SSC pursued the streamlining - or "slimming down" as they put it - of the employment conditions of teachers. Via the policies in place and blanket requirements across the Sector, kindergartens were generally subject to the same provisions as those required of other early childhood services. The plan was emerging and had been largely successful.

However, there were still three areas which prevented the completion of the plan towards total self-management and a reduction in the responsibility of government. Phase 4 of the plan was blocked by one, the de facto separation of bulk funding of teachers' salaries; two, the requirements of Teacher Registration; and, three, a national award system negotiated centrally. These three distinguished the kindergarten service from the other early childhood services and ensured government responsibility for the service, although the relationship had become somewhat tenuous.

Going back, then, to the Treasury official's comments in 1988, the two years was up, and kindergartens were not "on their own". The situation provided a temporary respite from the timetable set down, but the plan was back on track by the end of 1990, when a new government commenced its social and economic initiatives for the country.

Treasury was in its element, having found a fertile ground to sow - once again - the seed of their ideology. Instead of voucher systems, this time, it's user payers and targeting. The argument for less government involvement still persists - this time including training, funding, qualifications, and so on. The Briefing Papers to the Incoming Government in 1990 not only from Treasury, but also from the SSC, suggest that regulations in early childhood are "restrictive and excessive"; that current policies will "reduce the contribution of volunteers"; and that government does not have a responsibility to ensure quality provision - in fact, market forces or competition will govern standards. It is interesting to note here that SSC's involvement in early childhood relates only to the kindergarten service.

The Government, accepting Treasury's analysis of the economic state of the nation, set up 19 reviews in the education sector, primarily to identify cost savings.

The nature of the Reviews prevent our involvement and, therefore, monitoring of the information being analysed and the conclusions being reached. Lockwood Smith told us that the reviews were being carried out by officials because the Government needed objective advice on which to base any decisions. If this objective advice is based on the agenda set out quite clearly in Briefing Papers, it is very easy to predict the final outcome.

The areas I identified as distinguishing the kindergarten service within the early childhood sector and, therefore, ensuring the continued responsibility of government, are three of the areas being considered within the review process.

In order to complete the plan, and successfully manipulate the kindergarten service into being "out on its own", three more changes would need to occur as a result of the Reviews. The first is to make teacher registration voluntary; the second, to introduce the bulk funding of teachers' salaries as part of the operational grant; and the third is for the SSC to delegate its powers of negotiation.

Accepting these responsibilities will result in the ultimate demise of the kindergarten service - noting that they do not stand alone in the greater scheme of things.

Given this analysis, our reaction as a Union, to particular initiatives becomes clear. Not without its critics, our attempts to foil the "grand plan" have resulted in our consistent approach focussed on the areas that threaten the provision of quality early childhood education and the conditions of those who provide it. We strongly oppose any moves to compromise the quality of the serve we collectively provide.

As employers, you might think that any resistance to current initiatives is pointless and, indeed, under the State Sector Act you need full control of resources.

However, accepting responsibility and thereby removing government involvement, along with the added bonus of the provisions of the Employment Contracts Act, exposes kindergartens to regionally based services, competition and the ultimate demise of an affordable, accessible, quality, national provision. This combination would be exacerbated by financial constraints.

Remove compulsory registration and the door is opened to the employment of untrained staff. Accept bulk funding of teachers' salaries and the decision regarding the employment conditions and levels of remuneration are yours. Accept bulk funding, and you will also be charged with the negotiation process. Given that, under the State Sector Act, you are required to be good employers, you might welcome full control. On the surface it might seem fair enough. The implication is that once charged with these responsibilities, there is no obligation for the government to provide the current level of funding, indeed any funding, to the service. The government will be able to say, "Pay for it yourself" - after all, you can charge fees. Once responsibility is devolved to such a degree, there is little recourse if we don't make ends meet.

If government's role is reduced to that of a silent partner, these issues become your problems, with far reaching consequences.

I know that many of you, as employers, are considering the future of the service and have already identified options that you believe will maintain the current standards within the service. From a pragmatic viewpoint, we must take the initiative and not wait for a situation to arise that we are not prepared to deal with. And rightly so.

However, the full short and long term implications must be considered. Any move now, would be extremely difficult to retract later on. I believe options that relate to bulk funding of salaries, voluntary registration or the negotiation of salaries on an individual/regional level, would be playing right into the hands of those who have been advocating for a reduction in government responsibility. It would be you, as employers, who would complete the final phase of a plan concocted years ago.

The successes of the kindergarten service have largely been due to the fact that the service is provided and administered nationally on a universally funded basis.

Any move away from such a system would undermine national standards, reduce quality outcomes, question the viability of the service and lead us ultimately on a regressive path back to the days of knocking on the government's door seeking help and recognition for the value and benefits of the service provided by the kindergarten movement. A unified approach on numerous issues in the past has achieved many successes. Any move to act independently at this point is politically naive and dangerous.

The decision is yours. For our part, the Union will continue to advocate the retention of current provisions and requirements administered on a national basis, as being those to achieve the aims of the service.

Of course, there are an enormous number of issues affecting the kindergarten service currently, and the fact that I have focussed on certain issues by no means diminishes their importance.

However, given that the nationally provided, accessible, affordable quality early childhood service that we know the kindergarten service to be, is under threat of becoming obsolete, it is vital that we concentrate on the key areas. We cannot allow the kindergarten service to be compromised or jeopardize the provision for the future.

I wish you well in your deliberations and extend best wishes for a successful conference.

Kia kaha. No reira.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.