

September Council Meeting: 1 September 12:20-12:30pm, held at Ross House and by ZOOM.



The speaker prior to the AGM was Dr Deborah Towns OAM. To celebrate 150 years of Public Education in Victoria, her keynote was ‘A lively history of 150 years of the government’s education system, and its schools, teachers and students in the Victorian community’. Deborah is an award-winning historian and sociologist and shared the Victorian Community History Award with co-author Dr John Andrews for ‘A Secondary Education for All?’ Deborah was the pioneering manager of the Equal Opportunity Unit in the Education Department in the 1980s. She is President of the League of Women Voters Victoria and State Convenor of NCWV’s Standing Committees. **Excerpts from her keynote:**

The **1872** Act introduced the Victorian legislation for our state schools to be ‘free, secular, and compulsory’ was radical and born by George Higinbotham from the belief that for full participation in Australia’s democracy all people should be educated. Until 1872, the government had been funding denominational and national schools but fees were required. Hundreds of new schools needed to be built and houses or annexes provided for teachers. Male teachers got a part-time work mistress as needlework was compulsory! Female teachers did not. In the 1890s Depression, all teachers treated badly but women teachers were even worse off. The Victorian Lady Teachers Association, an early member of the NCWV was established in **1884** to protest against their poor treatment.

Frank Tate, the first Director of the Education Department in **1902**, stayed in position until 1928. His organisation of the department remained much in place until the late 1970s. Charles Long started the *Ed Gaz and teachers Aid*, retained until 1994. He also edited the *School Paper*, providing reading and learning activities for children from Grade 1 to 8. He was keen to include Australian literature with writers employed to write original material including women.

Dr Leach, a nature study, environmental expert, taught teachers and students to respect the environment through studying Australian birds, other wildlife and the unique flora. His book *An Australian Bird Book*, an illustrated catalogue of every Australian bird, is still published. Jessie McMichael, a teacher in Hopetoun, suggested to him about starting the Gould League in 1909, which continues today as a national environmental association.

Clara Weeks, an infant mistress of a large elementary school was considered an educational leader and in this non-teaching role she had her own office and was in charge of the infant department. On the headmaster’s absence she would be in charge (Women were not able to be principals until 1970!). She was a prominent suffragist, feminist, equal pay activist and unionist. Weekes and her sisters were leaders of the Victorian Lady Teachers’ Association (VWTA) which was ‘Australia’s first permanent teachers’ union’. Upon retirement in 1913, she was sent a letter from the Director acknowledging her service. Bitterness at her treatment was not held back: *“Dear Mr Tate, I am deeply gratified by the letter which I received from you expressing the appreciation of the Minister and yourself for my long and faithful service. While I shall consider the letter one of my most valued possessions I cannot but feel, that for the past 26 years of my service, neither the department nor my country have benefitted as they might have done had I not been for all those years in a subordinate position, Yours faithfully, Clara Weekes.* She continued her activism, often working with Vida Goldstein in the Women’s Political Association.

Florence Johnston, a president of VWTA was the first woman secretary of the Women’s Divisions in the Victorian State Services Federation (VSSF) in **1919**, being one of the first women in Australia to hold a paid union officer position.

During a deputation with Tate he said that women were increasing while men were decreasing in the teaching service. He said he was worried the male teacher would be extinct. In response to the Director’s perceived problem, Melvina Ingram, a teacher union representative from Geelong, another articulate, suggested to the Director *“The remedy for the state of affairs is to hand over all the primary schools to women teachers’. The men teachers would then be available for the technical and high schools for boys.”* Tate’s thoughts about her suggestion are not on the public record. Johnson argued for higher salaries for all teachers and equal pay for women. If paid better, teaching would be attractive to men.

High Schools: Victoria’s first government secondary school, the Melbourne Continuation School opened in **1905**. It was ‘co-educational’ until **1928**, led by a headmaster with a headmistress for the girls’ department. It split into separate boys and girls schools: Melbourne High and MacRobertson Girls.

Secondary Technical Schools first opened in 1870s. New techs today appear very like the earlier techs, which worked with local industry. Techs were closed in **1989** when high schools became secondary colleges. Forward to today:

Victoria’s 10 new Tech Schools are centres of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) excellence, help students think creatively, work together to solve problems, and help prepare them for the future by delivering advanced education and STEM skills. They link secondary schools to industry to deliver innovative learning programs that challenge students to solve problems in a real-world context. Department of Education and Training, 2022

During the Depression and WWII no secondary teachers were trained. Then the chaos of the baby boom. During and immediately after World War II, governments and the community took a greater interest in education and training in the context of an expanding economy and an 'education explosion'. Teachers' numbers increased and, by 1963, they had reached 67,000 in Australian government schools. Women still comprised approximately 50 per cent of the total, had limited promotion roles, but continued to take advantage of unique leadership opportunities. Hettie Gilbert was the first woman president when she served as the Victorian Teachers' Union's president from 1941 to 1942.

Domestic Arts: Education departments invested significantly in domestic science training for girls for most of the 20th Century; seen as limiting and problematic by some feminists but it created leadership opportunities for women. In 1949, Jean Pollock, foundation principal of the Home Economics Teachers' College, Victoria, made her one of the first woman principals of a teachers' college in Australia. In **1958**, Pollock and others began the Home Economics Teachers' Group, which continues as Home Economics Victoria (HEV). Isabel Horne, who followed Pollock as the principal, was Australia's first president of the International Federation of Home Economics (IFHE) in 1973. A NCWV member in the 1950s she represented it overseas. The IFHE has consultative status with the United Nations; HEV hosted IFHE's 2012 conference. We lost a great opportunity when boys did cookery/food technology but not the home management part of program.

Beginning in the **1960s**, a radical change to the systemic educational milieu was the development of an increasingly influential national education system, re-funding of non-government schools and an expanding federal education department. The first Commonwealth minister of education was only appointed in **1966**. The Commonwealth Schools Commission in the **1970s** drew attention to the educational needs of a wide range of Australians, including Indigenous people. The need for formally trained Aboriginal teachers gained momentum. Earlier there were pioneering Aboriginal women teachers. Principal of Australia's only Aboriginal girls' boarding school, a leading voice in the education sector, and speaker at NCWV, Dr Peeler has created a resource for the Victorian curriculum called 'Aboriginal Change Makers'.

The Schools Commission's landmark report, *Girls, School and Society*, 1975 and United Nation's International Women's Year (1975) drew attention to girls' and women's inequitable educational experiences and outcomes, as students and teachers and in employment. Despite equal pay since the 1960s and all positions opened to women since the early 1970s, women occupied only 20 per cent of principal positions. As the 20th century advanced, policies and attitudes reluctantly changed, eventually all promotion positions were opened to women. Deborah Towns was employed as Coordinator for the elimination of sexism in schools in **1977**. But it was **1985** before there was a woman head of an education department. Helen Williams was appointed secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Education by former teacher Susan Ryan, the first woman minister of education. There have been few women heads of the Victorian Education Department over 150 years. In **1988**, Ann Morrow was appointed by then Minister for Education and later Victoria's first woman Premier, the former teacher, Joan Kirner.

The low numbers of teachers is a huge problem; and women teachers in leadership in mainstream government schooling continues as a social justice issue in the 21st century. The Victorian govt is offering free tertiary training for nurses. Why not for teachers like the studentships/bursaries of the past?

The Department of Education and Trainings Act, 2022 begins with *'all providers of education and training, both Government and non-government, must ensure that programs and teaching are delivered in a manner that supports and promotes the principles and practice of Australian democracy, including commitment to: elected Government; the rule of law; equal rights for all before the law; freedom of religion; speech and association; values of openness and tolerance'*.