

THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASHLEY, YOUTH JUSTICE AND DETENTION MET IN THE LAUNCESTON TOWN HALL ON TUESDAY 13 MARCH 2007.

Mr DENIS COLLINS WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Hall) - Mr Collins, we do not have a written submission from you but we understand you are a former teacher, is that right?

Mr COLLINS - Yes, I had 14 years of full-time teaching in South Australia and the Northern Territory.

CHAIR - Did you teach at Ashley at some stage?

Mr COLLINS - I had one day relief teaching at Ashley. I have done relief teaching in the general area.

CHAIR - I think you have seen our terms of reference?

Mr COLLINS - Yes, I did get a letter but you had better keep me on the straight and narrow if I wander a little.

CHAIR - I invite you to address the committee and you might recount your experience as I believe it was very short.

Mr COLLINS - Yes, it was short.

Can I start by saying that last night I went to visit a friend who is a teacher. He came from South Australia and did relief teaching work when I knew him. He has a full-time job and when I mentioned I was coming to the committee he said some things which were, I think, very pertinent. After I had finished he looked very serious and he said to me, 'I hope you don't expect to get any more work at Ashley'. Then he said, 'You've got to understand the culture. From the Education department's point view Ashley is seen as a stepping stone. A few people like it but if you are going to take it on and provided you don't rock the boat then you are likely to do rather well'.

He gave me the example of a man whom I have never met but his name has been in the paper - Steve Reissig - who apparently was principal at Ashley at once stage. I didn't know that but he told me he is now the principal at Scottsdale and he has been in the paper and I think you know the story about Steve Reissig.

He also went on to say, 'What you have to understand is if you are having problems in the school with children in your class you don't go to the people higher up to seek assistance because you will get branded as someone who cannot control the class so you have to sit there and take it'. So the children are really running the education system.

Getting back to Ashley, I was rung up by Manpower to say would I consider going to Ashley because they needed someone. I got a call from the principal on an answering machine and I got back to him and he gave me directions and spoke a little bit about it.

I get there, go through the security and there is a man that I had seen before but I couldn't figure out where as I had been to so many schools, and he was the same. We knew the face but - we eventually worked it out and it was down at Campbell Town. He was a teacher there who had pretty good rapport with the students. He greeted me very well and he said something which I think is pertinent, having listened to what was on ABC Radio. He said we were having an easy day that day. There was another relief teacher in as well who told me he had been in several times. I forget his name; it would be a good two years ago and names go in one ear and out the other.

We started the morning and there was a number of staff there. There were only about nine or 10, I'll call them inmates, and in the first session we were making scones, which is a useful sort of thing to do, and having been a pastry cook between year 10 and going back to school two years later to Leaving I knew a bit about it so that I could talk about the science of self-raising flour and acid on a carbonate and carbon dioxide, what makes them rise, so that was one little - only to those who were interested, you know. It was only three or four but they were quite interested. So the scones were duly cooked and there was jam and cream and they were shared around and generally enjoyed, and there was coffee. They had a coffee-making machine to learn how to make coffee.

At lunchtime I went around the perimeter with a couple of staff to get a bit of exercise and that was good. Then the afternoon session they were allowed on the computers. The principal said, 'We are having a bit of trouble blocking'. As you may know, in schools they are supposed to have ways and means to block certain pornographic sites and so forth from getting on. I just remember him saying they had a bit of trouble getting the blocks in place. I am not madly computer literate and at one stage one of the inmates at a computer turned, and I do not know what started it. He jumped out of his chair and virtually flew at the principal. He was a big man, bigger than me height-wise at least, and he jumped back. Whoa, whoa, whoa sort of thing. He tried to appease the inmate and it seemed to me rather funny that a kid of this size should be virtually frightening the teacher back but it makes more sense that when you come in you do not rock the boat.

Virtually it looked like the students, as happens I am afraid in so many of the schools, are really running the show because the teachers have no power. They are not getting the support from above that they ought to have. Now there have to be some schools where you do get support but there are a lot where you do not and it shocked me to see him go back like that. What the incident was over I really do not know but there's the culture bit, you do not want to rock the boat.

CHAIR - So your perception was in that one day you were there that very little meaningful education was being achieved?

Mr COLLINS - I would have said I suppose that making scones is a useful sort of thing but as far as I was concerned, I did not do any teaching at all. There was one other incident. The kids were on the computer, mainly the boys. There were a couple of girls there, one who was due to get up because I had no idea what they were in for and I did not really need to know but she was wanting to go to Drysdale College. Having worked to get

through university for two years by making pies and pasties at Victor Harbour for the summertime, I found it very helpful getting me through university and so I could talk to her and encourage her and we found something in common. I thought that was one small way I might have been of some use by encouraging her to get out and do her best. But one of the lads sitting at the computer stood up and said to me, 'Are you into drugs?' I do not remember the exact words but that was the gist of it. I replied, 'I never ever felt the need'. He then sat back down at his computer. They were lost in their own computer world but I happened to glance at what he was looking at and as best as I can remember, it was an absolute shock. It was a drug site that was not just saying all the bad things about drugs but actually where you could procure the same, so help me God. He got up out of his chair a bit later on and sidled up to me and whispered, 'Do you know what happened to the last relief teacher we had here?'. 'No, I don't know'. 'Well we hacked him up in pieces'. 'Yeah, really?'. He said, 'Yeah, first degree murder'. I said, 'Only first, what's wrong with second and third?'

I mentioned to one of the staff, not the principal person, that to me seemed like a little bit of joke because he was a squirt of a kid and, even though I am old, I think I could have managed. That was part of the reason; having heard on the *ABC* the experience of the wife of a former person in there, it made me think, 'Who knows?' All I got was from the *ABC*, I was not there to know what was actually said but if the report was right, well there it is. I said to one of the staff who did not take it too seriously at the time. At the end of the day I felt I had really done no teaching whatsoever, certainly no maths and science which were my fortes. Having that insight from my friend last night about the culture, Ashley is a stepping stone.

CHAIR - Has your friend taught at Ashley?

Mr COLLINS - No, but he did know the principal because they both apparently started doing relief teaching at the time. I do not want to give his name. As he said, 'Well, that is the way it is if you take on Ashley'. They use education at Ashley as a stepping stone. It is a job nobody wants but if you do take it on and providing you do not rock the boat, no matter what in the hell is going on, then the chance is that you will get a promotion.

Mrs JAMIESON - How long ago was it that you did your one day?

Mr COLLINS - It is about two years. I do not keep a diary.

Mrs JAMIESON - What was your previous involvement with youth offenders when you were teaching in South Australia and the Northern Territory? Any at all?

Mr COLLINS - No.

Mrs JAMIESON - Do you have any thoughts about the educational processes that could go on within Ashley or that should go on?

Mr COLLINS - I could give you a few thoughts on the education system in general. Mind you, that is off your terms of reference, I know.

Mrs JAMIESON - Did you have any experience with the education of youth offenders in South Australia or the Northern Territory?

Mr COLLINS - No, I cannot say I did. As an assistant principal at Alice Springs High, we had Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal children who were getting ABSEG to help them go to school. I think the money was often getting diverted but I made a habit of going to the homes of these people to see the parents. Rather than trying to call the parents in I went to their homes and I think that was greatly appreciated.

Mrs JAMIESON - Have you been teaching in Tasmania?

Mr COLLINS - Oh yes, I have been here for about six-and-a-half years.

Mrs JAMIESON - Have you come across any student who has been at Ashley?

Mr COLLINS - You do not get told. The first school I went to, Queechy High, had a science class which was my forte, I thought. When I was talking around a class I asked a girl if I could see her work. She refused to show me. She would not tell me why. I said, 'If you're not going to cooperate I think you should go out'. One of the students said, 'You're going to let her back in again' and I said 'Why? She didn't give me any answer'. The truth was the poor kid could not read or write and was embarrassed. It had never happened to me before. I think that no primary school system should allow someone to get through who cannot read or write. I've bored you all probably.

Mrs JAMIESON - No, you gave us a different insight.

CHAIR - Is there anything else you might like to add?

Mr DEAN - You were only there the one day, but what would you see is required for education within Ashley? How would you see the curriculum? What would you see as a good option?

Mr COLLINS - There did not seem to be any curriculum. There might have been but I didn't see any sign of it. I knew I was not going to have an easy day; what prompted me to come here was the ABC saying there was a concern that not much teaching was going on. I thought at least I could put in my small experience of one day. As far as I am concerned neither I nor the other relief teacher really did any work and our hands were shaking as we took our money.

Mr DEAN - I suppose I could be facetious and ask whether you were inspired by your day there never to go back again.

Mr COLLINS - Not really, no.

Mrs JAMIESON - Were you only employed to do that one day?

Mr COLLINS - Yes, that was the original intent. Maybe they were summing me up to see whether I fitted into the culture or not.

Mrs JAMIESON - How much information did they give you on the culture of Ashley and what was expected of you as a teacher and as a staff person?

Mr COLLINS - Virtually nothing. Normally as a relief teacher you are contacted in the morning and asked if you can go to a particular school. I have taught preschoolers at Campbell Town, quite a bit at Queechey, Launceston College, in George Town, across to Lilydale and all over, even in Deloraine, your area, Mr Chairman.

Mr DEAN - When you come in as a relief teacher you are normally given their curriculum, aren't you? You are normally given what the day's programmed lessons and sessions are.

Mr COLLINS - Are you joking?

Mr DEAN - Pardon?

Mr COLLINS - Are you being facetious now?

Mr DEAN - My son is a teacher and I am only going by what he tells me. That is interesting; were you not given that?

Mr COLLINS - I was given absolutely nothing. I went down and the cooking session went on, some of the students were involved and others were virtually doing nothing.

Take Brooks High School which is under new management. It is amazing how many schools there are whose principal is unknown to relief teachers. Am I allowed to tell you something humorous? I was at a private school in this town for several weeks and happened to say to the man who organised reliefs, 'Who's the principal here?' He smiled and said, 'We call him God because we're told we have to believe that he exists'. That cracked me up too, but this seems to be an endemic problem. Often you do not know who the principal is. They sit in their ivory towers and as long as they do not get bothered, they are happy.

Mr DEAN - Can you take that a bit further; I might have missed it. Did you meet the principal when you were at Ashley on that day?

Mr COLLINS - Yes.

Mr DEAN - You met him?

Mr COLLINS - Yes. He was the man I had formerly seen at Campbell Town. He had a good rapport with the kids and the kids seemed to have quite a regard for him.

Mr DEAN - Did you ask for or look at the weekly program?

Mr COLLINS - No, I am at fault there. I did not. I do not even know if there was one.

Mrs JAMIESON - If you were doing relief work in the usual fashion, in the main system, would you expect to have something given so you had something to follow on with?

Mr COLLINS - This has come from Manpower, which organises relief. It says that you have to be prepared. You can get anything from matric physics, which I would know how handle, to the kindergarten. You have to be prepared and you are not to rely upon the teachers to provide you with material. Commonsense is, unless the teacher is so

deadly sick, that you at least ought to know where you are up to, what work you are doing so you can carry on and have continuity. But, no, the union has organised, and, Mr Chairman, you might like to have a look at that. You are supposed to have stuff of educational value prepared for anybody that you are prepared to take on. It is rather interesting.

CHAIR - Denis, thank you very much for your cooperation.

Mr COLLINS - I am interested in education because I had 14 years and a term in the South Australian/Northern Territory system before I had 14 years of this in the Territory Legislative Assembly. I did some farming, and then I decided to try to do some relief teaching, and I was absolutely shocked at the change that had happened in schooling - absolutely shocked.

Might I tell you, I looked at the local paper a year or 18 months or so ago and it had what happened 100 years ago when the cane had been taken out of the school. People were saying it would cause problems. Well, somewhere in between it apparently came back again. At Alice High as a senior master and an assistant principal in charge of discipline I had the legal right to use the cane. I used it very sparingly. Of 900 kids, the average would be about 12 a year, and mainly for bullying. I was caned a couple of times myself at school, somewhat unjustly, in my opinion of course, but I stood up for when the teacher had it wrong. I got caned for putting my bib in.

When I caned, I did not cane until I had the student agree that they had done the wrong thing, and sometimes it might have taken half an hour. I reckoned when I got caned, the slate was wiped clean and you started off again.. Anyway, for what it is worth, I talk too much; it must have been 14 years in Parliament, I think.

CHAIR - Thank you.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.