

Helen Pedel
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Secretary of the Committee
Joint Standing Committee on National Capital and External Territories

27 August 2005

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find following a copy of a letter I recently sent to Grant Tambling, Administrator of Norfolk Island. Mr Tambling kindly gave me your contact details as my concerns with education on Norfolk Island may fall within the terms of reference of your inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of Current Governance Arrangements.

I cannot comment at length on many of the key issues the committee will be addressing as I don't believe I have the background knowledge but I do have a strong understanding of some of the issues in regard to education on Norfolk. The quality of education on Norfolk is under threat once again by the current Minister for Education who is on record with his negative attitude to the cost of the service provided, salaries and Years 11 and 12. The financial difficulties the island is facing once again focus negativity on the cost of education. The school is in need of significant funds to maintain technology requirements for our students and there is of course, very little money available for such an important area. Our students should not be educationally disadvantaged because of their isolation but I fear that is what is happening. We do not have access to technology roll outs as other NSW schools have, all resources and teacher salaries are paid for by the NIG.

Generally speaking, I do not feel the Norfolk Island Government has managed their finances particularly well as they have constantly looked for short term solutions to what will undoubtedly be a long term problem, perhaps in part due to the lack of expertise to manage such responsibilities on the island, the downturn in revenue from the tourist industry and escalating costs in general.

As an external territory of Australia, I would hope that the Commonwealth Government would look more favourably on Norfolk as a recipient of much needed funding for education and health as two of the high cost responsibilities that are ongoing and escalating. Australia provides a significant amount of foreign aid to near neighbours, particularly in the close Pacific and Asian regions. Would it be possible to extend more aid to Norfolk Island?

Our government of course is trying to address the problem of lack of funds through various means but as the island has taken on more and more responsibility, it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet their ongoing responsibilities. Short term strategies to reduce spending mean that many administration workers are encouraged to take leave

without pay, vacant positions are not filled, temporary staff have been let go and services are obviously reduced. The business sector naturally suffers as well with many job hours reduced, staff made redundant and many families leaving the island. Rumour has it that the government will “ be broke by April” unless things improve drastically.

People are concerned that by receiving aid from Australia, there will be many strings attached and our unique way of life will be forever changed, diminished and our independence lost. I don't know if that will be the case, I don't have solutions but I do not we desperately need help.

Thank you for your time.

Regards,

Helen Pedel

Grant Tambling
Administrator
Government House
Norfolk Island

19 August 2005

Dear Grant,

I am contacting you in regard to my concerns with the continuation of a quality education system on Norfolk Island. As you are aware, Education is currently a Scheduled matter between the Norfolk Island Government and the Commonwealth of Australia. You will also be aware that there are presently two Memorandums of Understanding, one between the Commonwealth re the provision of education and one between the NSW Department of Education re staffing.

Unfortunately, the Norfolk Island Government is having great difficulty meeting their overall financial commitments – this is a matter of public record. There is a looming deficit in excess of 2 million dollars for this financial year. There is concern of late that the government could well be “broke” by the end of this year. The greatest concern with expenditure seems to continue to be teacher salaries, an area that the NIG has no control over, health and social services. Teacher salaries have continued to keep pace with mainland wages whereas generally speaking, local wages continue to be suppressed, not keeping pace with those in Australia due in part to the economic difficulties the government faces. The Norfolk Island Government cannot continue to sustain their education responsibilities at this rate and the whole island is fast reaching crisis point.

Once again, the Minister for Education is looking into alternatives to reduce the cost of education for Norfolk – mainly through a reduction in teacher salaries. He is aware that the cost of supplying teachers through NSW also includes the curriculum package and guarantee, external examinations – HSC, SC BST, ELLA, SNAP and Computing, Distance Education facilities, specialist consultant access, system monitoring, policies etc. This difficult issue with salaries raises its head time and time again when the NIG is trying to reduce costs.

I do not believe there is any short term solution to this problem. All governments have a commitment to providing education for their community and some do it better than others. The current arrangement has been in place for in excess of 100 years so I am told, and has served the community very well. Parents and students can be confident that they are receiving a quality education system that is recognised world wide and will give them access to all higher education facilities if needed.

The NSWDET package is purchased by a number of other countries at far greater cost than the NIG currently pays. (Other countries also pay their teacher salaries on top of the educational package, offering extremely attractive wages to entice teachers into their systems.) Many independent schools within NSW also attract their teachers from the NSWDET by paying significantly higher wages as an incentive to leave the Public Education system. This is also a matter of public record.

I would be interested to know of the Commonwealth’s views on the possibility of relieving some of the financial pressure on education by taking ongoing responsibility for the cost of teacher salaries. This would allow the NIG to continue to pay for all other running costs of the school, retain a quality NSWDET system and maintain the school as a joint responsibility. I believe you

have a similar joint arrangement with KAVHA whereby the Commonwealth pays approximately 75% of costs and the NIG the remaining 25%. NICS educates many students from the mainland who arrive with their parents and return to Australia when their working visas have expired. Many of our students are fully educated at NICS and continue their tertiary education in Australia or provide well developed skills to the workforce at minimal cost. Is it naïve of me to think that this could be a viable solution to a difficult situation, allowing Norfolk to maintain a degree of independence with the additional support they desperately need?

I am not a politician and of course I have no answers to the ongoing problems facing Norfolk now or in the future. I am simply a teacher, committed to seeing the best possible public education system for Norfolk that is possible. If cost cutting decisions are made that force a withdrawal of the NSWDET package, I fear for the future quality of education on Norfolk and the future of Norfolk Island itself. What would happen next time the government decides that they cannot afford whatever alternative package they come up with? All I can envisage is a continual downward spiral in the quality of education offered to future students if the NIG's efforts to offer lower salaries to teachers and move away from the NSWDET are successful. Norfolk does not have the system requirements, expertise or funds to run an independent school. Will we end up with another version of the now defunct Greenwich University whose educational credibility was rightly questioned by the Australian Government? If parents do not have confidence in the education system on Norfolk, they will have little hesitation in moving their whole family away to ensure their children are guaranteed an education equal to that on the mainland, adding further to the difficulties Norfolk faces. Some families are already returning to the mainland due to the economic difficulties the island is experiencing.

Two independent studies on education on Norfolk have concluded that the current system is the most viable option – financially and educationally. With escalating costs and lower income, the NIG is looking to save money, even at the expense of the quality of services, in many areas, including education. My fear, and that of many community members is that in desperation, they will destroy what is most vital to their continued existence and future prosperity – a quality education system which helps develop the future leaders of this community.

Your thoughts and advice on the situation would be greatly appreciated. I would also appreciate you forwarding my concerns to the appropriate person within the Commonwealth Government that has responsibility for education and Norfolk Island. Alternately, could you supply me with the contact details so I may do so myself.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Pedel

