

‘The present depression has brought me down to zero’

Northcote High School during the 1930s

Karin Derkley

“The present depression has brought me down to zero”: Northcote High School during the 1930s, *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 7, 2008. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Karin Derkley.

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Abstract

The Great Depression hit just as state secondary education was becoming established in Victoria. At Northcote High School, which opened as a boys-only school in 1929, the effects of a 26 per cent unemployment rate in the suburb were particularly hard felt. During 1931 and 1932 the school received dozens of letters from parents pleading for leniency on fees they could not pay. The problem was compounded further when in 1933 the Victorian Government, under pressure to cut its education expenditure, decided to increase high school fees. The resulting decline in enrolments was dramatic. From 516 in 1930, student numbers at Northcote High School dropped to 406 by 1934 and the number of year 10 students more than halved. Distressed by the loss of its students, the school sent deputations to the government in 1933 and 1934 asking that fees be cut. The request was to no avail, dashing the educational hopes of many young students forced to leave the school. Enrolment numbers at Northcote High School, as in the rest of the state, did not fully recover until after the Second World War when fees for secondary education were finally abolished.

As a former schoolteacher, John Burrell’s father knew the value of a good secondary school education. But in December 1931, as the effects of the Great Depression were beginning to bite hard, he had to admit he was finding it difficult to keep John at Northcote High School. In a letter to the school’s acting headmaster, Sidney Kitson, he wrote that after having been unemployed for over eighteen months he was ‘quite unable to pay any fees ... The present depression has brought me down to zero’.[1]

Mr Burrell wasn’t the only parent at Northcote High forced by the ‘present depression’ to beg for leniency with school fees in the early 1930s. His letter is one of several received by the school in 1931-32 from parents explaining why they hadn’t yet paid their third-term fees. On 3 July 1932, Mr Dickson wrote that he hadn’t been able to pay his son’s fees for the term ‘owing to being unemployed for several weeks recently and on a very reduced wage’. Mr A Phillips of Westgarth Street explained in a letter on 3 August that ‘our present position (working part-time on reduced wages) will not allow me to pay for Keith’s school fees’.

For musician Mr HJ West of Dennis Street, Northcote, the Depression compounded the havoc wreaked by the ‘talkies’ on his profession. The small orchestras that accompanied silent films in picture theatres in and around Northcote were the main source of employment for musicians like Mr West, but that had all ended when synchronised sound was introduced to movies in 1929. He had just completed, he explains in a letter written in beautiful copperplate, ‘about three years out of work’. This is the first term he had not paid his son Stanley’s fees, he notes, adding ‘You will agree with me under the circumstances I have done very well.’ Given that, he wrote: ‘I would deem it a personal favour if you would be so kind as to allow this matter to stand over until the new year.’[2]



Northcote High School Orchestra, c. 1930s. Courtesy Northcote High School.

The names of Stanley West, John Burrell, Norman Burrell and Keith Phillips appear on a list of around a dozen students that Mr Kitson and headmaster Mr FW Johnson spent months chasing for fees outstanding for term 3, 1931.[3] As at December 1931, 25 boys had fees outstanding, the parents of whom had been interviewed by the headmaster at least six times, Mr Johnson reported. His instructions from the Department were clear: none of the pupils should be re-admitted in 1932 unless all fees were paid or the Department received their application for free tuition.[4] It was a chase that dragged on through much of 1932, with stern letters from the school being replied to with pleading and apologetic letters from parents desperate to keep their children in school despite their inability to pay the fees.

Most of the students on the list owed just £2 for the term, but it was an amount that would break the financial backs of many parents and stymie their children's educational future. For the four boys, along with many others, it spelled the end of their secondary education. 'Left School' is the handwritten annotation alongside their names and those of six others on a carbon copy of the list held in the same file.

The Great Depression hit just as state secondary education was becoming established in Victoria. Victoria's first state secondary school, the Melbourne Continuation School (later Melbourne High School) had opened in 1905. Over the next twenty-five years a dozen more secondary schools appeared across the city.[5] Northcote High School opened in 1926, first as a co-educational school and then as a boys-only school when it moved to its current location on St Georges Road in 1929.[6]



Northcote High School, 1926. Courtesy Northcote High School.

It didn't take long for Northcote High School to become fully enrolled with students. By 1930 the school boasted 516 pupils, despite the fact that it had only opened in its permanent building the year before, that the Depression was starting to have an impact on employment figures in the city, and that students in forms higher than year 8 had to pay school fees of £6 a year.

Fees were a part of the state secondary school system right from its inception. Free state education, so hard fought for during the late 1800s, only applied to primary-school-aged children initially. It was extended to years 7 and 8 when the compulsory school age was raised to 14, and in many cases those students were accommodated at the local primary school, which now offered the extra two years of classes. But increasingly students moved to the new high schools where they had the opportunity to stay on, theoretically at least, to year 12. But if they stayed beyond year 8 they had to pay – at a rate of £2 a term.[7]

Neither the Left nor Right of politics was particularly supportive of the idea of extending free education past the compulsory years. The Labor Party had something of an ambivalent attitude to high school education, regarding it as for the elite: 'those who could afford the fees, the uniforms and the books.' It supported technical education as the proper sphere of the working class, and was concerned that educating children in academic high schools would give them middle-class values that would turn them against their working-class origins. [8] Those of a more conservative bent (the Nationalists) argued that extending the years of education for children of families from less wealthy homes might produce children who were 'misfits', over-educated for their proper station in life.[9] If children from such backgrounds did continue their secondary education, their parents should pay for it.



Northcote High School, 1930. Courtesy Northcote High School.

For bright children from impoverished families there was a safety net in the form of a fee exemption their parents could apply for on the basis of their need and their merit.[10] Until the Depression hit, it was a system that seemed to work well enough: numbers of enrolments in high schools across the state nearly doubled in the ten years between 1918 and 1928, growing from 4,959 to 9,774.[11] But by 1931 it was already evident that local families in Northcote, as elsewhere, were struggling to afford the cost of sending their children to high school.

Unemployment hit Northcote as hard as the rest of the state, where in 1931 the figures for those who were out of work were around 26 per cent.[12] Andrew Lemon writes in his history of Northcote, *The Northcote side of the river*, that more than 1500 people in the municipality were registered as receiving sustenance. Taking their families into account, Lemon estimates that around 5000 of Northcote's 42,000 residents were reliant on sustenance handouts. But, he adds, many more were affected than the bare figures suggest. Even for those in work, average full-time weekly wages dropped from £5 to £3/17/10 in 1931. 'Thousands more were in insecure or rationed employment, had received pay cuts, were not eligible for assistance or did not take the dole!'[13]

Things were clearly already bad in early 1931 when the secretary of Northcote High School, Mr HF Tulloch, wrote several letters to the Education Minister to inform him of the enormous hardship the fees were causing to the school community. He recommended that 'in the present state of finance all pupils receive free tuition at least until things become somewhere near normal'. The next day he wrote again, asking that 'serious consideration be given to the question of lightening the burden of parents anxious to provide for the future well-being of their children'.

Mr Tulloch and the anxious parents were smartly put in their place by a reply from the Minister's office a week later. The request could not be agreed to, the Minister pointed out, 'because the government will have great difficulty ... finding the necessary money for the work of the department'. The amount it would lose out on by eliminating fees would be about £25 000, he estimated, 'and this is too serious an item to forgo'. Mr Tulloch made one more attempt in February, adding that 'I am only asking for assistance owing to the present state of depression!'[14]

In fact, by 1931 the government was under increasing pressure over its expenditure on state education. The previous year, Sir Otto Niemeyer, a representative of the Bank of England to which the Australian Government was heavily indebted, had visited the Premier's Conference in Melbourne to give guidance on how the country's leaders could steer the country out of the Depression. His advice was clear-cut: the states would have to cut their public expenditure by around 25 per cent.[15]

State education was an obvious target for the spending cuts. After the railways, it was the biggest single item in the government's budget – representing 10 per cent of expenditure. And, unlike the railways, it didn't produce any direct returns or revenue.[16] In the light of the financial crisis, the ever-present, but until now distant, grumblings against state secondary education became a din.

In November 1932, Dr Clive Shields of the United Australia Party wrote an opinion piece in *The Age*, declaring that free (sic) secondary education had caused 'grave economic harm' to the state. Over-educated children expected jobs in the public service, he pointed out, where they would further drain the public purse.[17]

At Northcote High School, where many parents were already suffering the financial burden of fees on increasingly meagre incomes, enrolments at the school had fallen from 506 in 1931 to 449 in 1932. They were about to suffer a further onslaught. The bad news had clearly begun circulating by late 1932 when a Mrs J Street wrote to the school to check whether 'it is proposed to charge fees to High School students under 14 years of age'.^[18] Yes, came the reply from the Education Department's secretary. 'Parliamentary approval is now being sought to charge a fee of £3 per annum to pupils of Form F (Year 7): Those students who stayed on past year 8 would now have to pay £9 in tuition fees a year.'^[19]

Parents who had found it difficult to find £6 a year for their children's education now found it impossible. Those who previously could have sent their children to the high school for years 7 and 8 for free were now forced to consider other options. Mr AJ Stanton of Preston wrote to the school on 17 January 1933 saying that while his twelve-year-old son Keith was ready to move on to the high school, there was no way he could afford the fees. 'My whole income last year was only £197/141, and will be less this year.'

There were no fees for children who stayed on until year 8 at the local primary school, but this was not an option that Mr Stanton was enthusiastic about. His letter voices the frustration that many families no doubt felt at the time: 'I would like to know if my son is to return to the State School for another two years to learn nothing, or will he be allowed to wander the streets for the next two years until he is eligible to work according to the law of the State of Victoria?'

What was most frustrating was that over the border, in New South Wales, children could continue to attend high school for free. Jack Lang, the feisty Labor premier who vowed to renege on loans to England rather than cut back on public expenditure, refused to charge fees for education. William Henshall, who had recently arrived from New South Wales when he wrote to the headmaster of Northcote High on 24 July 1934, pointed out that there 'they were educated by the State, no school fees, all text books and writing materials supplied', whereas 'we will have to make great sacrifices to educate our children in this state'.

Of course those who suffered financial hardship could always apply for a fee exemption, the Education Department pointed out.^[20] The new Act allowed for fee exemptions for students whose parents were in 'necessitous circumstances' and who were, in the opinion of the Director, able to profit from their education.^[21]

'Necessitous circumstances' as defined by the Department meant an average weekly income of less than £4, with an extra 10 shillings allowed for each school child under the age of 14. The income of any working children was added to the weekly family income. Parents had to prove their financial hardship on a form provided by the Department that required them to set out exactly how much they earned, their expenditure on rent or mortgage, the value of their home and any other savings or investments (with grave warnings of punishment for false declarations). Then they had to prove that their children would profit from their education: the child's teacher was required to detail the child's academic results thus far and give any other supporting reasons as to why the child deserved assistance to stay on.^[22]

No doubt many parents did fill out the form: according to a report by the Chief Inspector John Seitz to the Minister of Public Instruction in 1934, approximately one-third of students who were liable for fees received fee exemptions.^[23] But, whether out of fear of being branded needy by the Education Department, or not wanting to jump through bureaucratic hoops, many others wrote directly to the school to request leniency with the fees. The correspondence files for 1933 and 1934 are littered with letters to the headmaster – many of them asking for extra time to pay the fees because of financial difficulties. Mr Kaufmann, for instance, writes on 19 February 1934 to ask for an extension of time to pay the fees for his sons Norman and Ronald because his wages had been 'considerably reduced owing to the depression'.

Others asked for fee reductions rather than an exemption. Mrs Olive Greig of Shaftsbury Parade, Thornbury asked for a reduced fee for her son Edward, explaining that her husband was unemployed, leaving her and her children to support the family. Ignoring her request for a reduction, the Department curtly refused free tuition.^[24]

In many cases, however, parents responded by withdrawing their children from the school altogether. As Wendy Lowenstein points out in *Weevils in the flour*, an oral history of the Depression in Australia, it was often easier for teenagers in a family to get jobs, at a fraction of the adult wage, than adults.^[25] To have children at school at this time thus represented a double sacrifice: not only were the parents required to come up with a considerable amount of money in fees, books and uniforms, they were also sacrificing the possible income these children could have earned at the time.

Given that the term fee of £3 represented as much as the weekly wage for many families, it is unsurprising that much of the correspondence during 1933 and 1934 consists of parents asking for refunds for children who had left school. Few requests were granted. In early 1933 Mr JJ Jeffrey of Ivanhoe asked for a refund when his son, who had 'only returned to school as he could not get employment', left again within weeks when he 'secured a position'. His request was refused on the grounds that the school was required to employ teachers on the basis of its enrolment figures and could not be expected to give refunds to students who left once the school year had begun.[26]

Other times the school was more generous. In June 1934 Samuel C Burgess of Croxton wrote that his son had obtained a position and thus requested a refund of his £2 fee, as 'I have had very little work for the last months and I have had difficulty getting the amount'. In this case the headmaster recommended refunding half the fee, 'as Mr Burgess is a boot employee and his work is not continuous'.[27]

By 1934, enrolment numbers at Northcote High School had dropped to 406, with just 98 students in year 9 – half as many as in 1931. In year 10, student numbers were 68, down from 154 in 1931.[28] In May 1933 the situation was serious enough to warrant a deputation from the school to the inspector of secondary schools, Mr Seitz, 'to obtain relief regarding the present scale of fees because of cases of children being withdrawn from the school'. Mr Seitz, while sympathetic, the council minutes reported, could not grant exemption from the fees.[29]

Another deputation in December 1933 was informed that there was very little prospect of such a reduction for at least twelve months. In March 1934 the headmaster Mr FW Johnson reported that 'there had been a falling off of new scholars from the state schools due to the difficulty of parents in meeting the increased fees'.[30]

Between 1930 and 1934 the number of secondary school enrolments across Victoria is estimated to have fallen by more than 10 per cent.[31] At Northcote the drop-off was more like 22 per cent.

According to some commentators, the Depression put the cause of secondary education in Victoria back by around fifteen years.[32] It wasn't until after the Second World War that fees were finally abolished in Victorian secondary schools and secondary education became available to all children.

For children like Stanley West, Keith Stanton and Edward Greig, the Depression spelled the end of their, or their parents', hopes for their further education. Like the thousands of other students from Northcote High School and other secondary schools across the state, their lives would be affected forever by the combination of one of the harshest financial periods in history and a system that preserved secondary schooling as a privilege rather than a right.

Endnotes

[1] Letter from AE Burrell to Northcote High School, PROV, VA 714 Education Department, VPRS 10249/P0 High Schools Inward Correspondence Files, unit 160 Northcote High School 1931-1939, 14 December 1931. All correspondence discussed in this article (including copies of outwards correspondence) is contained in this file. On the Depression see LJ Louis and I Turner (eds), *The Depression of the 1930s*, Cassell Australia, Stanmore, New South Wales, 1968.

[2] Letter from Mr HJ West to Sidney Kitson, 9 December 1931.

[3] Undated list in 1932 correspondence file.

[4] Letter dated 18 December 1931.

[5] AM Badcock, 'The secondary Division', in LJ Blake (ed.), *Vision and realisation: a centenary history of state education in Victoria*, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne, 1973, vol. 1, pp. 473-80.

[6] A Lemon, *The Northcote side of the river*, City of Northcote in conjunction with Hargreen Publishing Company, North Melbourne, 1983, p. 198.

[7] Badcock, pp. 473-80.

[8] B Bessant, 'Education and politics in the development of the education systems of N.S.W. and Victoria 1900-1940, with particular reference to post-primary education', PhD thesis, Monash University, 1971, p. 435.

[9] *ibid.*

[10] *ibid.*, p. 504.

[11] *ibid.*, p. 505.

[12] W Lowenstein, *Weevils in the flour*, Hyland House, Melbourne, p. 15.

[13] Lemon, pp. 213 and 221.

[14] Letters from Mr HF Tulloch to Minister of Education, 21, 22, 28 January, 2 February 1931.

[15] Bessant, pp. 291-2.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 295.

[17] J Bessant, 'An examination of public criticisms of schooling during three periods of economic crisis: the 1890s, the 1930s, and the mid 1970s to 1980s', PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 1988.

[18] Letter from Mrs J Street to Mr Sidney Kitson, 5 November 1932.

[19] Reply to Mrs Street's letter from the secretary, Education Department, 9 November 1932.

[20] Letter from the Minister to HF Tulloch, 28 January 1931: 'The Education Department has always given sympathetic consideration and assistance to parents who are anxious to have their children provided with a good education.'

[21] Badcock, p. 504.

[22] Pro-forma Application Form for Fee Exemption issued by the Victorian Education Department.

[23] Badcock, p. 504.

[24] Letter from Mrs Olive Greig to Northcote High School, 16 March 1933.

[25] Lowenstein, p. 3.

[26] Letter from Mr JJ Jeffrey to Northcote High School, 27 March 1933.

[27] Letter from Mr Samuel Burgess, 23 June 1934.

[28] Northcote High School archives, Inspector's Reports, 1931, 1934.

[29] Northcote High School archives, Council Minutes Book 1932-38, 18 May 1933.

[30] *ibid.*, 5 December 1933, 6 March 1934.

[31] Badcock, p. 505.

[32] Bessant, 'Education and politics', p. 434.