

## Teacher housing: battle of the bush

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Accommodation has consistently been a problem for teachers in rural areas.

In 1977 Barham Teachers Association members took industrial action to highlight the lack of appropriate accommodation for teachers in their area.

The problem of accommodation at Barham was demonstrated by the fact that three young male teachers had to share a room in a boarding house, living in a sleepout with power coming via an extension cord and a trip up the backyard to the 'dunny'.

There was a story that an inspector, after visiting a teacher in a one teacher school in the association district, asked the teacher whether he had any wants. The teacher requested a larger desk so that his legs did not extend over the end of the desk when he was sleeping on it!



After the usual beginning of the year accommodation debacle, the matter was on everyone's mind at the March Barham Teachers Association meeting at the Tattersalls Hotel, commencing at 5.30pm to allow members from Barham, Tooleybuc, Balranald, Wakool and smaller surrounding communities to attend.

The first motion in the general business section came from Graeme Minnis basically stating that the association should strike over the inadequate and unsatisfactory accommodation.

As President I had a crisis on my hands, realising that the motion was likely to be carried. I noted the time and suggested we stop the meeting for a meal break.

During the break I canvassed members with regard to the motion. At the reconvened meeting I asked Vice-President Steve Goldberg to take the chair. Steve was well known for his willingness to take industrial action.

I spoke about the variety of options that could be taken to highlight the issue of lack of suitable standard of teacher housing.

The mover, Graeme Minnis, in his speech in reply noted that everything had already been tried and that nothing had changed as a consequence. His motion was overwhelmingly carried. We were on the way to a strike!

No one had a clue what would happen. The motion went through to Sussex Street [Federation's head office]. What happened with regard to the Senior Officers and Executive members discussions is a mystery. One can only assume that our local Organiser played a major role in those discussions. He had certainly kept the

Association members informed and had checked out our commitment to pursue the matter by strike action.

Senior Vice-President at the time, Van Davy, toured the area with the ABC's *This Day Tonight* crew.

The meeting conducted before the strike action was due to commence was held at Balranald's Shamrock Hotel with TV crew in tow. Van Davy advised me to 'play it cool'. John couldn't help himself and spoke about members' need to follow the collective decision.

Kevin Heffren, principal of Barham High, responded to the challenge and said he would not be going on strike! He refused to speak to a reporter. The night prior to the scheduled strike the *This Day Tonight* program was aired on ABC television. It evoked immediate empathy.

There were 24 teachers in Tooleybuc where there were just 26 houses for the total population. The deputy principal carried out his ablutions at an outdoor tankstand.

At the conclusion of the report then-Education Minister, Eric Bedford, was interviewed in the studio.

He stated that the Teacher Housing Authority had approved plans for houses and flats at Barham, Moulamein and Tooleybuc but *not* at Balranald because there was no land. As someone from Balranald observed the next day, 'That's all there is!'

The strike meeting took place the following day at the Tattersalls Hotel in Moulamein.

Federation's General Secretary Max Taylor was present. Max certainly revved up the troops as only he could. Land was found at Balranald and teaching housing was firmly on the agenda.

One cannot stress enough the impact that the presence of the two Senior Officers, Van Davy and Max Taylor, had on the campaign. It also drew their attention to rural issues. Out of this came many other initiatives including the locality allowances. The strike illustrated the effectiveness of an active Association.

A federal election was looming. The Association had campaigned for some time to achieve greater funding for rural students to access educational opportunities. The campaign this time was largely organised by the Secretary of Barham Association, John Sim. John had been a first-year teacher at Barham, had moved away and then returned in a promotions position. He had local credibility and knew the communities that made up the association.

To commence the campaign John invited the local federal member to address an Association meeting. This was in November, a month prior to the election date. The meeting was once again held at the Tattersalls Hotel in Moulamein. There were 38 members in attendance.

The local member was barely out the door when the Secretary put forward his plan of action; a leaflet drop and advertisement in the local paper. John knew the right buttons to push.

Strictly non-partisan and stressing the fact that we wished to give the rural students equal opportunities, the leaflets were letter-box dropped by members and the Association took out a quarter-page ad in the local paper, the *Barham Bridge*.

The local member lost the seat by 70-plus votes and we rightfully claimed some of the credit for this result. This campaign was to be a factor in bringing about the federally funded Country Area Program which was to benefit many rural and regional school students.

John Ayers is a Federation Life Member