

A Public Address System — the “Blahwah”

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

THE events quoted herein are ‘for real’! This apparently fictional account really did happen, in 1947 and 1948. Father James Tierney was actually there for the Monster fête in 1948, his first year in High School (now called Year 7), and his father was there all through it as the English Master, and one of the characters in his own book, which he called the *Blahwah*. The publisher changed the name to *Hopeton High*. Some later chapters, woven in from elsewhere, are embellishments of the story-teller.

You can buy it on internet second hand books: *Hopeton High* by Brian James, pen name for John Lawrence Tierney, father of The Rev. B.J.H. Tierney.

Hopeton High was published in 1963, but the events described mostly happened 15 or 16 years before, at Homebush Boys’ High School. Publication had to be delayed till three key characters died... What follows are excerpts from Chapter 1 on a **Parents and Citizens Association** meeting. They are being persuaded, or conned, by the Science Master, fictitiously named Mr Stingo.

Excerpts from *Hopeton High*

THERE WAS CLAPPING at the announcement. Mr Stingo stood. Mr Stingo was forty and distinguished looking (he had a clipped black moustache) and alert (he wore big horn-rimmed spectacles). He spoke with a clear metallic voice.

“We are not strangers to each other,” began Mr Stingo, and there was something remarkably like a groan from Mr Skelter, which was drowned in a recurrence of clapping. “And I know you will bear with me in a short survey of modern thought as it impinges upon the educational problem. Not many years ago education was a matter of hit or miss —”

“Hear, hear!” from Mr Skelter. “Hear, hear!” ignored.

“Education was a matter of crude imitation and an onerous conning of words and cramming of facts. Children did not *think*. They were not trained to think. The system was psychologically unsound and scientifically absurd. We have altered that. We now know exactly how the mind works...”

“Hear, hear!” from Mrs Wilton who had once done six months ‘sike’ at the University.

“We now know exactly. The receptivity of the mind works entirely upon the visual and the auditory. The mind is really nothing more than a modern factory, and in its economy the visual and auditory sensations are the raw materials that come in at one end and the finished product of thought comes out at the other. It is really as simple as that — but hitherto it was not realized. But, thanks to modern scientific method, the factory can turn out the perfect product.”

“But—but—Mr Dingo—”

“Really, really, Mr Skelter, I must proceed. Now,

you people have seen the light: Last year you purchased, at the cost of many hundreds of pounds, the latest and most efficient of movie projectors. That is now part of our modern equipment and does much to provide for the Visual in our school work.”

“But you don’t use it” — Blast the fellow! There goes that Skelter again.

“Mr Skelter.” Mr Stingo was metallically severe now in his tones. “Mr Skelter — you must know that we have no means of blacking out this hall, and how can we use the projector if the hall is not blacked out?”

“Whose fault is that? Couldn’t we...?”

“It is no one’s fault. The Department is responsible for the blacking out. It is strictly a departmental responsibility. We cannot possibly undertake anything of constructional activity. In September the Department sent two officers of the Architectural Branch. In December two officers of the Repairs Branch. In February four officers of the Building Branch. The reports of these are now in departmental hands, and we were advised early in March that the matter is receiving consideration.”

“Still — in the meantime — as I say — the projector is not being used —”

“It *will* be, Mr Skelter, rest assured, just as soon as departmental sanction is obtained. And knowing the Department as I do that should be in the future. However, we have now provided for visual education, so that lessons in geography, physics, chemistry and economics can be given with full profit to all. Even, if necessary, history, literature and sport can profit immensely. The big thing is—we have the projector.”

“Where, Mr Dingo?”

Mr Grimwade [the chairman] sat up straight — with no little difficulty — and said “E-r-rh!” And then, “Order-ch-Mr-ch-Skelter!”

“I asked where is it now?” Mr Skelter rose, his moustache bristling like the cat’s whiskers when confronted by the next-door’s terrier. “I have reason to believe, Mr Chairman, that the projector is not in the school, but is at Mr Snagg’s place and is being used for...”

A momentary glimpse of rage... a gleam of white teeth...

“I need hardly remind you of the seriousness of the matter. The projector is now the property of the Department, and any unauthorized abstraction of it can lead to prosecution... and we should inform the police at once...”

[Mr Snagg] ...“Mr Chairman. I must interpose... The projector is at my place at present. I have the Headmaster’s permission — needed at a charity fête — a children’s session, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and all that. The machine was idle pending the darkening of the hall... All rot talk of prosecution...”

In such a spate all flotsam was carried forward

as in a floodwater channel in a thunderstorm. But Mr Skelter was not carried forward, though shaken at the base a little. "It'll look funny just the same if there is no departmental sanction."

That revived Mr Stingo's metallic ease and aplomb. He was an authority on departmental matters. "In a case of this kind, Mr Skelter, you know as well as I do that the Headmaster acts *in loco*."

"Pity he's not here tonight then, Mr Dingo."

"He is ill, Mr Skelter, and I am deputizing for him." As a matter of cold hard fact the Head was so ill that he was attending a bridge party as a means of recovery. Mr Stingo didn't see fit to mention this circumstance.

... Mr Stingo took up his theme and his scheme with all his wonted metallic enthusiasm. "My proposal is briefly this, ladies and gentlemen. Since no modern scheme of education can meet the demands of modern life without due and adequate provision for exploiting to the full all the advantages of the visual and auditory, and since the visual side has been catered for by the installation of our movie projector — unfortunately not at the moment being fully availed of pending the departmental provision of blacking-out for this hall — all that remains is the installation of a public address system."

"Hear, hear!" from Mr Scroggie, and a shuffling of awakened interest in all but Mr Skelter...

"As you know," whirred on Mr Stingo, "a public address system allows for full and clear communication by the Headmaster with every part of the school, and a pick-up attachment makes it possible to broadcast and relay programmes from every important radio station in the world. In a word, then, your boy, sitting in his classroom, with no move or effort on his part, can listen-in to the parliamentary debates in Canberra, a concert in London, a presidential address in Washington or an opera in Paris. In like manner important announcements by the Headmaster — or myself — can be heard. Your boy is therefore in direct touch with all that is going on in the world around him — he becomes truly a citizen of the world and an integral part of the march of human progress. And — oh yes" — he glanced at Mr Skelter — "I should say that a perfectly streamlined programme of lessons will be co-ordinated with the address system. For example: your boy will be in the hall, watching, say, a picture of peach-picking at Leeton while a specially selected departmental lecturer will be giving a talk on, say, the Murrumbidgee irrigation system. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the proposal I put before you for your enlightened consideration."

Mr Grimwade announced that the matter was—eh—open for—eh—discussion. There was a deal of this, liberally mixed with admiration for Mr Stingo. Mr Skelter, hunched up in his overcoat, was almost forgotten. Mrs Wilton and Mrs Upjohn agreed that Mr Stingo was "*Wonderful!*"

"What will it cost?" asked Mr Bullock. "Yes, that's a consideration," said Mr Sims.

"Cost!" said Mr Stingo. "I have discussed the cost with Mr Scroggie." (Mr Scroggie was an expert on such costs, being a salesman, on commission, for Winter and Slide, the big electrical and radio firm.) "Perhaps Mr Scroggie would like to say a word on that."

Mr Scroggie had a lot of words to say. Fittingly, too, he was a live wire. "A little tinpot show," he said, "would run to a hundred and fifty. No pick-up or anything like that. Out of date, really. Outmoded." Mr Scroggie mixed the homely metaphor and the patter of the street with his shrewd calculations. "Then there is the job that picks up local stations only, panning out at three hundred. Not a bad job, really, but hardly up to the dignity and importance of the school. Then there is the Warwick Peerless — a regular sooper-doooper — that does all and more than Mr Stingo has said. And cheap at eight hundred." He himself was "easy", but the Warwick Peerless was the only outfit he'd consider himself.

Eight hundred pounds! A lot of money, certainly. But still a little thing beside the education of the young. Mr Puddle, on request, gave the financial position. The movie projector, said Mr Puddle, had cost three hundred pounds. It was now paid for. Monthly dances averaged, spread over the year, two hundred pounds. In hand at the moment was one hundred and twenty pounds. That would lead to finding another six hundred and eighty pounds if the system were installed. Could it be found? He thought so.

Mr Stingo looked hopeful... Mr Scroggie looked enthusiastic.

Mr Grimwade cleared his throat and said "E-r-rh". In face of all this Mr Bullock proposed and Mr Sims seconded that an address system be installed. That was carried unanimously — but for Mr Skelter. He said nothing.

More discussion. It was decided to leave the final decision of type of system to Mr Stingo and Mr Scroggie. Couldn't be left in more capable hands. But the Warwick Peerless was the only possible system. Mr Stingo and Mr Scroggie had already decided on that. There was only the detail of paying for the thing. A small detail. Mr Skelter unhunched himself. Mr Skelter said "Ah!" When Mr Skelter said "Ah!" there was generally something behind it. Mrs Wilton proposed holding a monster fête — at the school. Monster fêtes, she said, could easily rake in (the phrase was clearly owing to the Scroggie influence) — could easily rake in seven or eight hundred pounds. It only needed organizing properly. The motion was promptly seconded by Mrs Upjohn. Supported by Mrs Snagg. Supported by Mr Templemore, who always supported anything popular...

The above is excerpts from Chapter One of *Hopeton High* as in the CNCC Newsletter n. 153 (end of 1997)