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ASSOCIATION OF HEAD MISTRESSES
(INCORPORATED 1896.)

MEMORANDUM TO BE LAID BEFORE THE ROYAL COMMISSION
ON THE CIVIL SERVICE.

The majority of the girls who enter the Civil Service at the ages of 16 and 18 do so from schools which are under the headship of members of the Association of Head Mistresses, and women who enter the higher posts have, for the most part, received their education up to the age of 18 in the same schools. The Association of Head Mistresses is, therefore, intimately concerned with methods of recruitment into the Civil Service and with the nature of the opportunities which employment in the Civil Service affords. It is for this reason that leave has been sought to lay evidence before the Royal Commission under paragraph (a) of their Terms of Reference.

1. The Secondary Schools provide a continuous course of education up to the age of 18 or 19. The first, or more general stage of the course, is completed at about the age of 16 or 17 when a First School Examination is taken; this is a public examination conducted by the Universities. The second stage is somewhat more specialised and leads up to a Second School Examination which is taken two years later. All pupils are expected to complete the first part of the course, and the Board of Education encourages schools to demand from parents an undertaking that they will keep their girls and boys at school for the full period required for the first part of the course. Many Local Education Authorities demand such an undertaking from the parents of all pupils in their maintained schools and of scholarship holders in the independent schools. Though the details of the examination vary in some respects according to the examining body, a pass in the First School Examination has, through the efforts of the Board of Education, come to represent on the whole a fairly uniform standard of attainment. It is being increasingly used as the means of entry to various courses of professional training and has also acquired a definite value when pupils seek remunerative posts in offices, commercial undertakings and so forth, immediately after leaving school. If a pupil leaves before the stage of a First Examination she cannot be said to have completed a Secondary School Course, and it is important that she should neither be induced to break

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her contract and to leave before the end of the school year in which she attains the age of 16, nor, by preparing at the same time for another examination on different lines, imperil her chances of gaining her certificate.

2. There are two means of entry into the Civil Service for a girl who is obliged to begin to earn her living at about the age of 16, the examination for Writing Assistants and that for the Clerical Class. The examination for Writing Assistants is of a definitely lower grade than the First School Examination, and the positions in this grade should, we think, not attract the Secondary School girls. The work usually required of a Writing Assistant is deadening in its monotony, and prospects of promotion are small. Those who enter for this examination from the Secondary Schools do so under the pressure of difficult financial circumstances at home, and because parents believe success in it to be a means whereby a girl may put her foot on the lowest rung of a ladder which she may climb if she will. Unfortunately the hope of promotion is most often doomed to disappointment. Only a small proportion are able to qualify by examination for the clerical grade in spite of the age allowance which is given. This is partly because the first year of employment is as a rule too trying to make possible substantial progress in academic subjects, partly because some find themselves unexpectedly cut out of the competition altogether by age on account of the irregularity of the examinations, partly, perhaps, also on account of lack of ambition on the part of those who enter at this stage. Promotion by any other means than examination is so slow that the mind may be already dulled by monotony before the opportunity of more interesting work arrives. We think that a greater effort should be made to transfer girls in this grade from one type of work to another from time to time, to relieve the nerve strain to which monotony not infrequently gives rise.

3. The examination for the Clerical Class is roughly of the same standard as that of the First School Examination, but owing to the large number of applicants it is highly competitive. Those who compete but who do not achieve a place have gained nothing of value, and may have lost the chance of gaining the School Certificate which would help them in obtaining a post in the business world. In spite of the large number of applicants we have reason to believe that the ablest and most enterprising even of those who leave school and begin to earn their living at 16 do not enter for this examination. Enquiries which we have made seem to point to certain objections to trying for entrance to the Service at this stage, some of which we believe are removable.

They are :—

a. The difficulty of taking the Civil Service Examination in the same school year as the First School Examination, especially as in some subjects the syllabuses are on different lines from those which ordinarily govern the Secondary School Course. Notably is this the case in Science.

Consultation between the Civil Service Commissioners and the Secondary School Examinations Council would help to eliminate examination requirements which are not in accord with present educational practice.

A slight raising of the age limits for the Clerical Class from 16—17, as at present, to 16½—17½ would enable the First School Examination to be taken first.

b. The known monotony of a great deal of the work that is allotted to girls. In this connexion we would point out that in the Post Office, which is the largest employer of girl clerical labour, the boys and girls are segregated, and, on the whole, the work needing most intelligence and initiative is definitely allocated to boys and men. The fact that transference from one department to another is infrequent, and, generally speaking, entails loss of seniority, means that there is comparatively little change in the kind of work to be done such as may occur from time to time in businesses outside the Civil Service.

c. The slowness of promotion.

4. We greatly welcome the examination for the Executive Class at the age of 18 and feel that if it should be withdrawn, the loss to the Service of the more able and alert of our pupils would inevitably follow.

We regard it as of great importance that every girl who has the ability and mental alertness to profit by education after the age of 16 should have the opportunity of work in the Sixth and Upper Sixth Forms of the Secondary Schools. Here the school life and work enters on a new phase; there is more scope for initiative and responsibility; character development and increasing independence in work are very marked. We feel convinced that the workers recruited at 18 will be of permanently greater value to the service than they would have been if they had left school at 16. We further believe that the better type of 18-year-old recruit who is at present being enlisted will not seek admission to the Service unless her further period of education finds recognition, as is

the case at present, in improved status, quality of work and prospects.

In connexion with the examination for the Executive Grade there are again certain points to which we wish to draw attention :—

- a. The irregular recurrence of these examinations makes it impossible to set entry for them as an aim in front of individual pupils. If it is found impossible to hold the examinations at regular intervals we suggest that the age limit should be so extended as to enable those who are too young at one examination to enter for the next.
- b. Consultation with the Secondary School Examinations Council would, we believe, in this examination also probably lead to some modification of syllabus, for instance in the case of mathematics, and also to a change in the type of question asked in certain subjects. Some modification in these matters would in our view, result in a surer selection of the best candidates.

5. Of the entrants for higher departmental posts we have not such exact knowledge, but we would point out that the small number of posts which are known to be given to women results in a much restricted field for selection. In the world of business, in medicine and in teaching, women are increasingly found filling responsible positions. Such women will not be attracted by the very limited scope offered, for instance, by the position of most Women Inspectors under the Board of Education. It is particularly unfortunate that in the realm of education where women have rendered such signal service and in which they are so intimately concerned, women inspectors should not be given the same full measure of responsibility which they are accorded in other departments.

6. We welcome the increased number of posts as inspectors under the Home Office which have been recently opened to women, the fact that men and women are being recruited through the same examination, and that a common seniority list will be framed for promotion. We urge a similar opening of all grades of work in the Civil Service equally to men and to women throughout the Service, not excepting the grade of Writing Assistants, and the selection of the best person for each post irrespective of sex, that women may be given the opportunity to contribute to the State the full value of the service which they are capable of giving.

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